



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoín, 14 Bealtaine 2026

Thursday, 14 May 2026

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell) i gceannas ar 8.40 a.m.

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

International Protection

1. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration the preparations that have been made for the ending of the temporary protection directive in March 2027; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35912/26]

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Government has been verging on the negligent in failing to plan in an orderly way for the winding down of the temporary protection directive. Since it announced that all measures relating to the directive will come to an end next year, there has been confusion heaped upon confusion. Will the Minister outline the preparations that have been made for the ending of the temporary protection directive?

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): Deputy Carthy has raised the issue of temporary protection. At the outset of all these debates, it is important that we understand and emphasise the reason temporary protection was initiated in 2022. The reason, of course, was the unlawful and illegal invasion of Ukraine by Russia. It was because of this that it was agreed across the board in the European Union that temporary protection would be initiated. It was the first it was initiated. Temporary protection is designed to provide protection which is temporary, while an issue such as an invasion or human rights violation is happening in a country.

Unfortunately, I am not in a position to tell Deputy Carthy when the war in Ukraine will come to an end. Obviously, a decision has to be made at European level in terms of what is going to happen from March 2027 onwards. Certainly, at domestic level, the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, and I are making significant progress with it. We put forward a proposal to the Cabinet committee on justice, migration and social affairs in respect of what we say should happen in respect of proposals dealing with temporary protection. I am pleased to say that on

Tuesday week I will be bringing that proposal to Cabinet. The Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, and I will be elaborating on the detail of it afterwards.

What is clear from the results of the subcommittee is that we will be ending the State accommodation that has been provided since 2024.

However, it will remain in place for vulnerable groups of people. It is also the case that we will be reducing the accommodation recognition payment, ARP, from €600 to €400. It is important to emphasise that we have to ensure we do not have any cliff-edge ending of these supports. We have been exceptionally generous in terms of temporary protection. I welcome the fact that Sinn Féin was very supportive of the measures that were introduced in 2022. We are now going to have to taper them off in a measured and considered way.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I recall that the House was virtually unanimous in support of the emergency measures that were brought in at the outset of Russia's war against Ukraine. The temporary protection directive was an emergency measure, as the Minister quite rightly said. I do not think anybody envisaged that it would be in place for five years.

As the Minister knows, I have been arguing very strongly that we need a roadmap, not only for policy areas and to be able to plan in an appropriate way in the interests of this State but also to provide certainty for beneficiaries of temporary protection. I have argued that the outline of such a roadmap should have been made clear long before now. The approach of the Government has been shambolic and chaotic. Even at this point, there is no clarity about what will happen to Ukrainians in Ireland or what the impact on public policy here will be come the end of temporary protection. Whatever about the accommodation, which I will come to in a minute, can the Minister outline what the ending of the temporary protection directive is going to mean? People deserve to know.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: As the Deputy knows, temporary protection will continue until March 2027. A decision will have to be made by the European Council in respect of what will happen after that. My view is that it will likely be extended, but on a restricted basis. In terms of what the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, and I are doing, the proposals which we have outlined and which will hopefully be confirmed by Cabinet on Tuesday week will provide an opportunity for people to transition to other legal statuses before the end of temporary protection. We are also recognising that, in fact, very many of the Ukrainian people here will want to go back to Ukraine. We want to facilitate their reintegration. That is something that is being sought by the Ukrainian Government as well. We will also ensure that information is provided to displaced people and that there is co-ordination, monitoring and exchange of information between member states and with the Ukrainian authorities. Nothing is going to be done on a cliff-edge basis. There will be adequate notice provided to individuals. The very generous response from Ireland to date in terms of people availing of temporary protection will continue, but we need to taper off measures and support provided.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I find some of those responses incredibly interesting. When Sinn Féin suggested that ending the temporary protection directive should include provision for a voluntary return scheme, members of the Government absolutely pilloried both my party and me personally for even suggesting that. It now appears that this is going to be part of the

Minister's plan. Likewise, when it comes to the ARP and the various accommodation schemes, when Sinn Féin raised the impact that these were having on the private rental sector, for example, we were lambasted, not only by Government but also by other members of the Opposition. It is now virtually taken as read that the ARP in particular has had an impact on the rental accommodation sector. What engagements is the Minister having with the Department of housing and State agencies in respect of ending the accommodation supports and ensuring that we do not end up with unforeseen or unplanned for impacts on a housing system that is already dysfunctional and under huge pressure?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: The Minister for housing, Deputy James Browne, was very much part of the deliberations of the Cabinet subcommittee on migration when the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, and I presented the proposals. That is an issue that has been carefully considered. I think Sinn Féin is supportive of the measures I have announced.

Deputy Matt Carthy: You have not announced them; you have leaked them.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I am giving you an answer here and now. I am very pleased to note that he described my reply as "incredibly interesting". That is the first time anyone has described a response of mine as incredibly interesting. It is important to note that there will be measures put in place and there will be engagement with the beneficiaries of temporary protection to ensure there is no cliff-edge. When we look at the level of supports that have been provided to date by the Irish Government, we can see that they have been extraordinarily generous. The amount of money that was spent in 2024 was €1.2 billion. This year, we will be spending €600 million. We have reduced expenditure by 50%. Even Deputy Carthy must welcome that.

Local Community Safety Partnerships

2. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration his views on the representation of areas in Dublin Central within local community safety partnerships; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35929/26]

Deputy Gary Gannon: The number one issue that comes across for me in my constituency of Dublin Central is community safety. Large portions of the constituency are not represented on the community safety partnership. Cabra, Drumcondra and Glasnevin do not have a Garda superintendent. The purpose of my question is to ask the Minister about the structure of the community safety partnerships.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: The local community safety partnerships are extremely important in terms of what the Government and I are trying to do within local communities. I commenced the operation of these partnerships in April of last year. Throughout the country there have been a number of meetings of the local community safety partnerships. I think they will be a major improvement on what was there before, namely the joint policing committees.

I am very pleased to note that the Dublin Central local community safety partnership had its first meeting on 26 January. Councillor Cieran Perry was elected as chair and Gerry Breen

was elected as vice chair. I worked with both of them on Dublin City Council. They are two fine public representatives. Gerry Breen is no longer a public representative, but I certainly have great confidence in Cieran Perry and, indeed, Gerry Breen. There are currently 26 members appointed to it. The purpose is to try to ensure that we get across-the-board representation of youth services, the business community, older persons, and addiction and substance misuse support services, which are very important in Dublin Central. The constituency encompasses Cabra, Glasnevin and the north inner city.

The issue the Deputy is concerned about is in respect of the superintendents. It is my understanding that there are superintendents from Mountjoy, Store Street and the Bridewell on it. The Deputy's concern is that Cabra and Glasnevin superintendents may not be on it. I want to emphasise that there is flexibility in terms of the attendance of superintendents. My information from An Garda Síochána is that if information is required in respect of Glasnevin or Cabra, that can be provided. There is good Garda representation there. What we want to do is to try to change the local community safety partnerships from joint policing committees, which sometimes just had a phalanx of senior gardaí sitting there listening to councillors. We need a broader representation and that is what I think this committee will provide.

Deputy Gary Gannon: It was not just councillors; TDs were also eligible to go to the joint policing committee structure. I was a regular attender at meetings of my local joint policing committee. Here is my issue. We constantly hear about a large Garda presence in the city centre. This is something the Minister has championed. I will possibly discuss that again later. However, I will give the example of communities like Cabra or even Drumcondra, which is actually covered by Ballymun Garda station. In Cabra last week, a constituent of mine was going around the Bogies roundabout. A load of lads wearing balaclavas came past on scooters. The man in question tried to ring the local Garda station in Cabra but he got no answer, so he had this innovative solution. He rang the Garda station in Rathmines. The call was answered but, obviously, the gardaí there could not process the complaint. The man's action was born of frustration. We are not getting gardaí in Cabra. We are not getting gardaí to respond to burglaries in Drumcondra. I am sure the Minister is hearing this on the same doors in the same way I am. They do not have representation on the community forum structures set up to address these issues. We are in a bit of a quagmire here in the sense that Garda numbers are not reflective of what we are being told in the communities outside the commercial city centre. The prospect for representation on the structures does not exist because the superintendents are not there.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: In terms of the narrative the Deputy outlined in respect of his constituent, I repeatedly attend meetings of residents' associations at which, very appropriately, members of An Garda Síochána turn up. The message I consistently hear is that if you want to get the assistance of An Garda Síochána, the most appropriate thing to do is to phone 999. I know that we sometimes think we should only phone 999 if it is an emergency. In fact, the most effective way of having a complaint processed expeditiously and efficiently is to phone 999. I urge people such as the Deputy's constituent to do that.

On the previous occasion I was in the Dáil speaking about Garda numbers, one of Deputy Gannon's Opposition colleagues - not someone from the Social Democrats - said that he cannot leave Leinster House without tripping over gardaí. There are a lot of gardaí in Dublin Central

at present. As Deputy Gannon knows, we have initiated a high-visibility policing campaign. That is still operating, and there are very many gardaí in the city centre. I want to see more gardaí deployed in suburban areas such as Glasnevin and Cabra, and I think that will happen as numbers increase.

Deputy Gary Gannon: No more than the Minister, I cannot speak for a member of a party that is not my own. I do not doubt for a second that when I walk outside Leinster House, I will see a number of gardaí. When I leave RTÉ if I am doing an interview in the morning, I see a lot of gardaí in the Donnybrook area. I cannot escape the fact that when I am walking around my constituency, certainly the parts of it outside the O'Connell Street area, it is very difficult to find gardaí. This comes up constantly. I attended a residents' association meeting in Drumcondra recently at which there was a discussion on the increasing number of burglaries and the fact that gardaí are not arriving until two or three days later to investigate. The issue in Cabra is that people are being directed to call 999 - I have issues with that - but they still want to have a sense that they can call their local Garda station if something is happening in the immediate vicinity. The problem is that because of the level of high-visibility policing in the commercial city centre, the residential communities surrounding it feel they are being left behind. This is a matter I would like the Minister to address, perhaps through the structures of community safety partnerships. Maybe he will make a comment on it.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Residential areas are not being left behind. What is happening is that increased Garda resources are being placed in areas that require high-visibility policing. We are starting in the inner city. As stated, this will be rolled out to more residential areas and throughout the country. The recorded crime statistics released on 26 March 2026 are quite revealing. They report a reduction in recorded crime in nine categories for 2025 in the Dublin metropolitan region, DMR, north central and north Garda divisions. These categories include damage to property, the environment and burglary-related offences. I am informed the Central Statistics Office, CSO, reported a reduction in recorded crime in eight categories for 2025 in the DMR west Garda division. High-visibility policing is having an impact in reducing crime. The only basis I can go on to assess whether crime numbers are going up or down is that of the recorded figures coming from the CSO. Based on these, high-visibility policing and the work of An Garda Síochána are proving effective.

Victim Support Services

3. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration if he will review the operation of section 8 of the Criminal Justice (Victims of Crime) Act 2017, which relates to information connected to investigations and criminal proceedings, to ensure that the rights of victims under this section are applied in a consistent manner and that the provisions it contains meet the needs of victims; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35913/26]

Deputy Matt Carthy: Section 8 of the Criminal Justice (Victims of Crime) Act includes provisions for information to be shared with victims of crime. It is ten years since the legislation was enacted. Does the Minister have plans to review the operation of this section to ensure that the provisions it contains are being applied on a consistent basis?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank Deputy Carthy for raising this matter. This provision was very novel when the legislation was enacted nearly ten years ago in terms of that fact that it set out statutorily the information that victims of crime are entitled to. Deputy Carthy's question refers to section 8. In effect, the 2017 Act transposed Article 6 of the EU victims directive into domestic law. It established minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims. Section 8 relates to a victim's right to receive information about their case.

I am pleased to tell Deputy Carthy that political agreement has been reached between the Council of the European Union and the European Parliament on an amending victims' rights directive. The text in this regard is being finalised for formal adoption. This is expected to happen shortly. Ireland has actively engaged in the negotiations. In many respects, the enhanced provisions reflect practices that are already in place nationally under existing legislation. The aim behind the revised directive is to address existing gaps in protection and support by introducing higher and more consistent standards for victims of crime throughout the EU, including in relation to access to information and support services, reporting mechanisms, data protection, individual assessment of victims' needs, enhanced support during court proceedings, access to legal aid and compensation.

The direct answer to the question is that there will be a review of the rights to which victims are entitled. As Deputy Carthy knows, however, the 2017 victims Act was a transposition of an EU directive. That directive is being amended. Once the directive is agreed by us and our European partners, I will introduce proposals not too long afterwards, hopefully. As a matter of standard practice, officials in the Department review victims' rights legislation. It is anticipated that this process will include consideration of whether additional guidelines or protocols are required.

Deputy Matt Carthy: To be clear, there is no requirement whatsoever to wait for an EU legislative process to conclude before we change measures in domestic law, particularly in terms of enhancing support for the victims of crime. The justice committee met in recent days to discuss the victims of crime civil protection orders Bill that I am trying to progress through the House. We heard moving testimony from Sonya Stokes, who the Minister is aware of. Sonya was the victim of horrendous crimes committed by a man who had previously committed several other horrendous crimes. Following his release, Sonya highlighted how traumatised she was and how fearful she was that some form of retribution would be sought. She found out on 30 April that her attacker had deceased in a nursing home on 5 December 2025. She was not informed of the fact. This is one anomaly that we could look at changing. It would only take a technical amendment to the legislation. Would the Minister be open to that?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank Deputy Carthy for referring to the committee's hearing. I was aware of that the civil protection orders Bill was being considered. I am also aware of the case of Sonya Stokes. This is an area I will look at. Providing information to victims about a person convicted of an attack upon them is something that is understandably useful to victims of crime. There is also the issue of exclusion orders. One thing people find very traumatic is the prospect that they could bump into their attacker after he is released from prison. It is certainly the position that in the case of people who have life sentences imposed upon them, the Parole Board, because of legislation that has been introduced, can restrict their movements

or develop exclusion zones in order that they are prevented from going into certain areas and have to stay away from their victims.

This is something I will consider. I must also take into account the need to allow people coming out of prison who have served their sentences to get on with their lives. There is a mechanism in that regard.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I might not have been clear. I specifically asked about victims being informed that their attackers have deceased subsequent to release. In relation to section 8, the difficulty is that many of the testimonies we hear are inconsistent. Many victims have told me that they are incredibly happy with their engagement with the Garda or the Prison Service. Others are unhappy because they do not believe section 8 has been applied to the standard they would have expected in terms of their being informed of developments. I was told in one case by somebody who lost their partner, who was unlawfully killed, that the person responsible was to be released. They got a simple one-line email from the Prison Service informing them of the fact. We can imagine how disruptive it is if the person who killed the father of your children is going to be released and all you get is a cold email. The onus should not be on victims to pursue these things, and we all agree on that. The review of section 8 is crucial.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I am looking through section 8. There is a lot of information that must be provided to the victim in terms of an appeal, a parole application and the release of the individual. This is information that should be provided. Deputy Carthy's specific question is whether a victim should be told when their abuser or attacker who has been convicted dies. I need to consider that. Obviously, we could have a situation where somebody committed an offence in their early 20s and gets out in their early to mid 30s. If we were to impose this obligation, it could mean that 40 years later there would be an obligation on the State to inform a victim that the person who attacked them some 50 or 60 years previously has died.

I need to make sure that could operate effectively. I would have thought that if the person convicted dies in prison that should be provided. However, I am worried about putting it into law.

An Garda Síochána

4. **Deputy Roderic O'Gorman** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration for an update on the deployment of 1,000 additional gardaí to Dublin city centre, in line with the recommendations of the Dublin city task force; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [36142/26]

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I am seeking an update on the recruitment of an additional 1,000 gardaí for Dublin city centre. This was one of the ten big moves recommended in the Dublin city task force. Is it still Government policy to recruit these additional 1,000 gardaí and what is the timeline for delivery?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy for his question. It certainly is the Government's objective in the programme for Government to recruit 5,000 more gardaí during its term. We certainly want to achieve the objectives set out in David McRedmond's report that

there would be 1,000 more gardaí for Dublin. This is very much dependent on resources and the numbers that come into An Garda Síochána. I also have to be conscious that although we are both Dublin Deputies, other Deputies are understandably insistent that whenever new recruits come out some go to their areas as well. I do not get involved in directing the Garda Commissioner as to where recruits should go but I tell him that I want to see high-visibility policing. In order to achieve the objective Deputy O'Gorman and virtually every other Member of this House wants in their constituencies resourcing and numbers need to increase but they are looking good. Two weeks ago, the Minister of State, Deputy Collins, and I were at a passing out in Templemore and 193 new recruits passed out. More importantly, the following Tuesday 200 went in. We are consistently seeing 200 go in and come out for each intake. I need to see that continue. I was pleased the other day to launch the latest recruitment campaign for An Garda Síochána. Since September 2024, 728 probationary gardaí have been assigned to the Dublin metropolitan region, and I believe recruitment is gathering momentum. People are now realising that being a member of An Garda Síochána is an interesting job. There is a whole variety of units available. Today, there are approximately 14,661 sworn members. We are getting close to the highest ever. In fact, this year I believe we will beat the highest ever and I hope to come back to the House on that.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: The Dublin city task force report was published in October 2024 and there was a lot of fanfare about it at the time. It was presented as a definitive blueprint to reclaim the capital's streets after the events of the Dublin riots and a wider visible decline in public safety across the inner city. Big move number four of that report was the deployment of a minimum additional 1,000 gardaí within the city centre on a phased basis. That number was not pulled out of thin air. It was seen as the minimum required to meet average European policing standards for a city of this size. We are now well into 2022 and for the people living, working and commuting across Dublin the reality on the ground tells a different story. The net increase in garda numbers across the city centre district is 40 in the year and a half since the report was published. Will the Minister give me a timeline as to when he believes the additional 1,000 gardaí will be provided?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: We are committed to following what is set out in the task force report. I cannot give a date as to when there will be 1,000 extra gardaí in the city. What I can give is assurance from being around the city centre that we now have high-visibility policing in Dublin city centre. That has had a transformative effect. We are getting gardaí out on the streets patrolling who were previously in stations. It is providing a great sense of confidence and safety to people who come into Dublin. My view is that it has had a significant impact, and I commend the Commissioner in that respect.

Obviously, in order to keep that going and ensure that other aspects of Garda services are continued we need to get more recruits in. It is about getting the numbers up but it is a positive outlook at present. Not only is recruitment going well and we have had a new recruitment campaign but retention within An Garda Síochána is high. Less than 1% resign from An Garda Síochána annually, which is extremely low.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: To put the numbers in perspective we have seen approximately a 4% increase in city centre garda numbers. On the current trajectory, to meet the figure of

1,000 additional gardaí, it looks like we will meet that sometime around 2063. I hope the Minister understands the frustration people feel when governments announce big headline figures. The then Taoiseach and current Tánaiste wrote a big editorial in the *Irish Independent* after that report was published. I remember he used the line, "I'm up for it, are you?" It does not sound like the Minister and his Department are up for achieving recommendation number four of 1,000 extra gardaí. This is central to creating a sense of safety and security across the inner city and in the communities in the inner city. This is not just about, as the Minister said to Deputy Gannon, gardaí outside Leinster House. This is gardaí located in communities creating a sense of safety. Will the Minister give us some indication of when those 1,000 gardaí will be available?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I remain committed to recommendation number four. I want to see an extra 1,000 gardaí in Dublin. However, the Deputy was in government as well. He knows that things do not just happen with a click of the fingers or overnight. In order to get 1,000 new gardaí into the force in Dublin, I need to recruit them nationally. That cannot happen overnight. I am sure the Deputy can appreciate the challenges associated with that. The point I was making to Deputy Gannon is one I made about something said by a previous opposition spokesperson, that when you walk around Dublin and not just Leinster House, high visibility of gardaí is evident. That is the case. People say it to me and to lots of people in this House. It is apparent and it is making a dramatic improving impact on the city and people's sense of safety. I remain committed to recommendation number four but the most important priority is to get gardaí out on the streets, so people feel a sense of safety, not just in the city centre but in residential areas throughout the country.

Sentencing Policy

5. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration if he intends to extend the provisions of section 14 of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Human Trafficking) Act 2024, requiring that character references be given on oath to other criminal offences; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35914/26]

Deputy Matt Carthy: Does the Minister intend to extend the provisions of section 14 of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Human Trafficking) Act that requires character references to be given under oath, to criminal offences other than those included in the original legislation?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: It is important, and I commend the Deputy for mentioning section 14 of that legislation because sometimes it is forgotten about. It was commenced in August 2024, so it is only beginning to operate in the past year or so. In effect, it means that if somebody wants to give character evidence in respect of a person being convicted of a serious sexual offence, or of rape, which is the most serious, in order to give that character evidence, they have to do it on oath or affidavit. The former means giving evidence in the court. I think that is the most appropriate way for character evidence to be given in serious offences. Obviously, if people are convicted in the District Court for minor offences I do not think it a tenable requirement that anyone wanting to give character evidence has to give it in a District Court. Certainly, when it comes to serious offences, if you wish to give character evidence in respect of an individual, then the preferable way to do it is in the witness box or on affidavit.

Sentencing is a complicated issue and a difficult part of a judge's function. Not only are you sentencing the offence but you are sentencing the offender. You need to have information, if you are a judge, about the offender in order to determine what level of sentence should be imposed. If somebody has a series of previous convictions and there are other issues, a court will take that into account when imposing a sentence. Similarly, if it were a first offence or out of character that is something the court needs to take into account. The appropriate way to do it is not by writing a letter or doing an informal character note. The appropriate way to do it is to ensure you get into the witness box and stand over it.

Deputy Matt Carthy: In many respects the Minister has made the first half of the argument. My point is whether you move to the second logical part of the argument and expand the provisions of this section to include other serious crimes. I am thinking particularly of homicide. It has been seen in the courts that the distinction between somebody just writing a letter saying a particular man or woman is a sound person or whatever and knowing that is something that needs to be done on affidavit or potentially in the witness box is an important one. It sets out the importance of a character reference in any case but especially for serious crimes. Is there any examination in the Department of expanding the section even further?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: The Deputy mentioned homicide. Obviously it does not really arise in, say, a murder conviction because somebody is going to automatically face a mandatory life sentence. In terms of manslaughter, it does not apply at present. In general what happens in a case like that is the counsel representing the convicted person at the sentencing hearing will set out what he or she believes are mitigating factors the court should take into account. My view, which I spoke about even before the 2024 legislation commenced, is that it would be preferable if somebody wants to give character evidence in a serious offence - and I emphasise serious, as this cannot be happening the District Court or we would just clog it up - the most appropriate way to do it is on affidavit or by giving evidence in the witness box. That will also remove the informality of it. Sometimes people think they will just write a letter. Generally they are pointless and inappropriate but if you want to assert something about somebody's character you should do it formally.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Clearly when I talk about homicide I am not talking about murder but I have spoken to some victims who were in court for the sentencing of perpetrators who were convicted of actions resulting in the killing of their loved one and the introduction to the sentencing stage of unverified testimony not given under oath or by way of an affidavit really traumatised the family even further. This is often the case where somebody has pleaded guilty to an action that has resulted in the death of somebody else, so there is no trial as such. In many ways, the victims' families feel that perhaps the full truth has not come out about the actions of the person who is responsible and then ultimately, prior to sentencing, a number of testimonies are provided about how great a person this was. In that type of scenario I think the Minister is saying he recognises that type of testimony should be given on affidavit or in the witness box. Will he legislate to ensure that is the case?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: It is a complicated issue. Sentencing is complicated. When we discuss it here the emphasis is hugely on the situation of the victim, as it should be. For too long in Ireland the victim did not get the recognition in the criminal justice process. However,

a court also has to take into account the individual circumstances of the convicted person. That can be complicated and sometimes evidence of that convicted person - the offender - is necessary. How should that evidence be given? I certainly do not think it is appropriate for that evidence to be just a handwritten note or somebody who does not know the person that well providing that evidence. That is evidentially useless. If somebody wanted to give evidence and say this conviction was out of character, that they have known this person for 20 years and that there were circumstances behind it, then that should be done under oath.

I do not want to give the Deputy a commitment today about introducing legislation to that effect but it is something I will give consideration to.

Peace Commissioners

6. **Deputy Michael Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration if he will provide an update on proposals to introduce official identity cards, including photographic identification, for peace commissioners; the current status of engagement with his Department on this matter; and the timeframe for implementation. [30587/26]

Deputy Michael Murphy: I understand that under the Minister's predecessor, the Minister, Deputy McEntee, a review group was established to examine the provision of official identity cards for peace commissioners. Will the Minister provide an update on what work has been carried out, whether any recommendations have been made and whether the Department intends to move towards the implementation of an official identification system for our peace commissioners?

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Niall Collins): I thank the Deputy for his question. In line with the provisions of section 88 of the Courts of Justice Act 1924, peace commissioners are appointed, and may be removed from that appointment, by the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration and each newly-appointed peace commissioner is issued with a warrant of appointment. The Department informs An Garda Síochána of all newly-appointed peace commissioners in relevant areas and indeed the Garda has a role to play in vetting all applicants for the position of peace commissioner.

The warrant of appointment is an important document which should be retained at all times by an individual while they are in the office of peace commissioner. Where an individual or a body requires further confirmation that a person has been appointed as a peace commissioner, it is open to them to contact the peace commissioner unit in the Department. The warrant of appointment for a peace commissioner is a unique document and as such replacement or duplicate warrants are not issued. If a peace commissioner misplaces their warrant they may write to the Department requesting a letter confirming their inclusion in the roll of peace commissioners.

I can advise the Deputy that a review of the role and functions of peace commissioners, as well as of the appointment process, is currently under way in the Department and will include consideration of matters regarding identification of peace commissioners. Other areas of focus in the review include a review of the existing functions and powers of peace commissioners,

appointments, removal and complaints procedures for peace commissioners, as well as the updating and maintenance of the roll or register of peace commissioners and consideration of making the roll available online.

Deputy Michael Murphy: I thank the Minister of State. For transparency, I put on record I am a peace commissioner and a commissioner for oaths. I think we have approximately 4,500 peace commissioners appointed nationwide. As the Minister of State said, they carry out vital functions on a voluntary basis, including witnessing signatures, verifying documents and assisting citizens who may otherwise have limited access to such services locally. However, in carrying out these duties many peace commissioners are increasingly finding themselves in situations where they are required to provide their own identity and official status despite not having formal photographic identification issued by the State.

I welcome that the review is ongoing. When identity fraud is growing all the time, I ask the Minister of State to give serious consideration to such an identity card.

Deputy Niall Collins: I thank the Deputy. I agree with him on this. Part of the work of reviewing the roll of peace commissioners is with a view to making it as accurate as possible. Obviously there is a legacy of records and retained data. Given the roll of peace commissioners goes back nearly to the foundation of the State it is quite a complex and lengthy undertaking but good progress has been made. Once that work has been completed, consideration will be given to making the roll of peace commissioners available online and accessible to the public. That will give them the assurance they can search online to verify a person is a peace commissioner.

On identification, the issue is complex and involves a number of legal and technical considerations, including data protection and also appropriate confidentiality and personal safety.

Deputy Michael Murphy: I thank the Minister of State. This is a practical and sensible solution. It would provide reassurance not only to peace commissioners but also to members of the public engaging with them. A member of An Garda Síochána can produce an official warrant card yet a peace commissioner, despite exercising a very important statutory function, has nothing comparable to confirm their position.

I accept what the Minister of State is saying in terms of the initial letter of warrant, but I am talking about photographic identification. Given the relatively modest scale of such a measure, I again ask that the Minister of State give serious consideration to progressing it and commit the Department to a timeline for the next steps following this ongoing review process.

Deputy Niall Collins: I agree with the Deputy. It is my view that it should be progressed and it is also the view within the Department. I think the overall review that we are conducting will come to that conclusion also. I flag to the Deputy, though, that it is not provided for within the legislation at the moment, so we will have to come up with some kind of a system or an administrative fix to be able to manage that appropriately.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Legal Aid

10. **Deputy Paula Butterly** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration to outline the proposed changes to the legal aid scheme; how these proposals are consistent with the programme for Government commitment to restore legal fees; to clarify the extent to which relevant stakeholders were consulted prior to the publication of these proposals; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35591/26]

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank Deputy Butterly for her question. I fully recognise the crucial role played by legal practitioners in the effective administration of justice and, equally, that the criminal legal aid scheme is fundamental to upholding the constitutional and human right to a legal defence. The whole purpose of the reform of the criminal legal aid fee structure in the District Court is aimed primarily at improving efficiencies, speeding up case resolution and reducing unnecessary adjournments, while also ensuring fair remuneration for legal practitioners.

It is proposed to replace the current appearance-based sliding scale with a flat fee model. For cases in the District Court, regardless of the number of appearances, a generous set fee will be payable to solicitors. The proposed reform is intended to make the system work better for all concerned by making it more efficient, reducing unnecessary adjournments and speeding up case resolution. The new flat fee will be set at a rate that provides for full restoration of the so-called financial emergency measures in the public interest, FEMPI, cuts in line with the programme for Government commitment. I will, obviously, be reversing those cuts and restoring fees from 1 July as well.

My Department carried out a review of more than 350,000 District Court cases that took place during 2022 and 2023. A number of issues were identified during that review that I simply had to address. I am engaging extensively with relevant stakeholders, including legal professionals. Officials from my Department met with the Bar Council and the Law Society in May, July and October 2025, and again in March 2026. I offered further meetings and I will continue to engage with them.

Deputy Paula Butterly: I welcome the Minister's comments. I want to frame this as an opportunity to get reform right, to strengthen our justice system and to ensure, as the Minister said, that it works fairly for everybody. Nobody disagrees that change is needed and we all recognise that there are inefficiencies in the current system. Reform, though, must be done carefully and in a way that protects the core principles of justice. I know the Minister agrees with this point.

The move towards a flat fee model in the District Court may appear at first glance to be a practical and streamlined solution. It does promise efficiency and simplicity. If we look at it a little closer, though, we begin to see the risks that come with oversimplifying something as complex as criminal justice. Not all cases are the same. Some are straightforward and can be resolved quickly, while others are complex, sensitive and require significant preparation,

repeated engagements and time in court. Treating those different cases as though they are identical does not create efficiency but an imbalance.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I also have to take into account that the number of criminal cases in the District Court has decreased. Notwithstanding that, however, expenditure on criminal legal aid in the District Court has nearly doubled, from €19 million in 2015 to €37 million in 2024, despite the number of cases having decreased.

The review I looked at identified a series of structural issues in the administration of justice in the criminal legal aid scheme. For example, payment per appearance incentivises additional adjournments. I think this is just clearly the case. If we compare cases in the District Court that are not funded by criminal legal aid to those that are, we can see that there are many more adjournments in the latter context. Additionally, multiple certificates granted for related cases increase costs and complexity, multiple solicitors are assigned in the same firm for related charges and a highly complex payment processing system creates a significant administrative burden. I would not introduce this scheme if I thought it was going to undermine the rights of individuals to a fair defence.

Deputy Paula Butterly: I repeat that all of us recognise the inefficiencies that do exist and that there is scope there for reform. However, let me guide the Minister toward a practical example. In County Louth, my constituency, we have the drug treatment court, which has proved to be a very effective and successful operation for those people appearing before the judges. It involves statutory and non-statutory stakeholders, and the model of flat fee-only appearances could have a detrimental effect on the drug treatment court because it is very complex. It is about reforming and giving a person another opportunity to live a very successful life, and the flat fee-only appearance rule would possibly jeopardise the situation. If we get the balance wrong, there will be consequences for the person before the courts and the hard-fought outcome hoped for may not materialise. We also risk discouraging solicitors from taking on legal aid work and creating gaps in access representation.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Paula Butterly: Will the Minister have further engagement with the key stakeholders and take on board their concerns before he brings forward these proposals?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I have had engagement with the representative associations. In fact, I wrote to them previously saying I was available to meet again if they wished to do so. I have no doubt that I will hear back from them.

In terms of what the Deputy said about the provision of legal aid, it is a very competitive business among solicitors. I believe we are not going to lose that level of competition because of the reform I am proposing.

The Deputy gave an example of what happens in the drug treatment court, but the report I considered from the Department identified that the weighted average of the number of appearances for cases with criminal legal aid is five, while the weighted average of the number of appearances for cases without criminal legal aid is just over three. Something is happening,

therefore, when cases with criminal legal aid are having many more adjournments than is the case with those that do not. I think this proposal will make the system much more efficient and help the administration of justice.

Court Procedures

8. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration considering the rights of victims and survivors of sexual offences, if he will consider a ban on the use of counselling records as evidence in criminal trials; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35579/26]

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: As the Minister knows, the issue of counselling notes being used in gender-based violence trials has been a massive issue for survivors. Even the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, GREVIO, has talked about this being an instrument of secondary victimisation. The Minister was forced to amend his own amendments to legislation in this regard because he came back with something that just was not satisfactory. I have only caught sight of the amendments he is proposing, which will be a hearing on a real risk of an unfair trial in the interests of justice or where it is relevant to an issue in a trial. There will still be the chilling effect for survivors and raw records being passed on to judges and defence teams.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy very much for her question. I am committed to trying to ensure that the situation that operates at present, where counselling notes are routinely provided to the legal team of an accused, comes to an end. I brought forward proposals to the version of the miscellaneous provisions Bill on Second Stage and I am going to come forward with even further amendments in terms of that legislation. I have listened to what people in this House and some of the important stakeholders have said, and I am going to introduce a statutory form of non-disclosure for counselling notes.

The Deputy's question asks that I should ban them completely.

In listening to people, be they in this House or stakeholders, I also have to listen to the Attorney General and the advice I have received. The unambiguous advice I have received from the Attorney General and the advice that important stakeholders in this area have received is that a total ban on counselling notes would be unconstitutional. It would be very detrimental to the interests of survivors of sexual abuse if I was to introduce legislation that got me some plaudits here but was struck down by the courts within a year as being unconstitutional, so I will not do that. However, the proposals I am bringing forward will create a statutory form of privilege that will ensure that the only time information or documentation evidencing a counselling note is provided is if that note evidences something that is in the interests of justice and without it, there would be an unfair trial. I cannot categorise a group of evidence and say we can never look at that, which is what a total ban would effectively do. That would be unconstitutional. What I am introducing is that there will have to be a hearing and a judge will have to look at it. The only time that information will be disclosed is if a judge, having looked at it, says that is relevant to the guilt or innocence of the accused.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I appreciate that the Minister had to go further than he was originally intending. He says he listened but he did not listen, for example, to the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre. I spoke to its representatives yesterday and cannot believe that the Minister had not even met them before tabling his amendments. This is the front-line organisation dealing with survivors and it did a huge amount of work and put forward a very detailed proposal. In that context, I cannot accept the suggestion that the Minister listened.

The Minister says that it would be unconstitutional but we could argue that point because there are other constitutional rights that do not seem to be taken into consideration here, such as the right to privacy, to healthcare and so on. If our Constitution allows the damaging and harming of survivors, then there is something wrong and the Minister should come forward with a proposal for a referendum. In Tasmania, for example, they have managed to outlaw this practice and notes can only be handed over with the person's consent. This takes into account the fact that some people may want to use their counselling notes. It can be done if there is a will. What the Minister is bringing in is similar to what is in Canada and it has not really reduced requests for access to counselling notes.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: What I have to do here and what the House has to do, ultimately, is weigh up an area where there are conflicting rights. On the one hand, there is the right to privacy, which is an absolutely essential right, and on the other hand there is the right to a fair trial, which is also an essential right. Neither right is absolute but I have to ensure that I balance both of them. The legislation I am bringing forward and the amendments I have tabled will significantly tilt in favour of the right to privacy but it cannot make it absolute.

I hear what the Deputy is saying with regard to the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre. It sent a submission to me, which I did consider. I have engaged with people across the board but, ultimately, I have to do what I believe is in the best interests of the public and survivors while also recognising that there has to be protection for a fair trial. The proposals I am bringing forward will achieve that and, if this legislation is enacted, we will be in a position a year or two later where it will be much more seldom that counselling notes are disclosed in criminal trials.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The right to a fair trial includes the complainant as well. Does the Minister agree? I am assuming he does but that is never factored in. Gender-based violence is becoming a completely unpunished offence in this and other countries. That is the reality. Only 5% of people disclose to anyone or report it to gardaí. Why does the Minister think that is the case? It is because things like this remain on the books and are routinely used in our courts.

The Minister said he listened but one would think he would at least meet the group to discuss its proposal, into which it put a lot of work. Has he listened, for example, to the therapist who had her front door knocked on by four gardaí looking for counselling notes? How is this in any way just? The Minister used the phrase "best interests" of survivors. He could have laid down a much higher bar than he did. For example, it is very broad to say "interests of justice" or "an issue in a trial". That can be interpreted in so many ways and it is not dealing with the central issue, which is that people are having to choose between therapy and a trial. Nothing is going to change with this proposal.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I disagree with the Deputy when she says that sexual offences are unpunished offences.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: They are.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: That is not correct.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Only 5% report.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Every day of the week we read in our newspapers about people - men - being convicted of rape and serious sexual offences. That is happening consistently within the criminal justice system. Part of the consequence of that is that it should provide, and I hope it does, strength to other survivors and victims of sexual offences to know that if they come forward, they will get justice. I also know that An Garda Síochána is much more effective now in dealing with these complaints than it was ten or 15 years ago.

My job is to ensure that I provide as much support as possible for individuals to travel through the criminal justice process. I also have to take into account, however, the requirements of a fair trial. I agree that a trial requires consideration of interests. Of course, the interests of survivors, victims or complainants in a trial must be prioritised but I cannot completely negate somebody who is being accused. If there was a person whose political views Deputy Coppinger agreed with-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The Minister obviously does not understand the importance of this issue.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: -----who was being prosecuted, she would be the first to criticise conditions that made a fair trial not possible.

Gender Recognition

9. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration if he will clarify that an applicant for naturalisation who has changed their name through a gender recognition certificate does not need to show use of that new name for two years in order to have the name appear on the certificate of naturalisation; if he will ensure the naturalisation process is informed by the Gender Recognition Act 2015; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35578/26]

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I want to raise a flaw or a gap in the naturalisation process in the context of the Gender Recognition Act. I have been contacted by a constituent who last year changed their gender and name through the Gender Recognition Act. That process allows a person not just to register a change of gender but also to alter their name. They are a citizen of another EU state, working and living in Ireland. They applied for naturalisation but cannot progress that application because of the rule that people must be using a name for two years.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy for her question and would appreciate it if she would send on the details of the case because I was not able to identify the issues on the basis of the question. It is a complicated issue and I just want to give the Deputy the following reply.

Under the Irish legal system, a person's name is the name by which they are known or which they commonly use. For most people, evidence of their name is most commonly provided and accepted in the form of a birth certificate, which, for example, may be supported by a marriage certificate in the case of a change of name on marriage. The name by which a person is known by is acquired through use and repute. Where a person seeks to use a different name acquired through use and repute in the naturalisation process, my Department requires evidence that they have been using that new name for a period of at least two years. I am sure the Deputy can appreciate that establishing a person's identity is a critical part of the immigration and naturalisation process.

I want to stress that this two-year requirement is not contained in, and does not arise from, the Gender Recognition Act 2015. Rather, it reflects a broader administrative practice. It is important that a person seeking naturalisation is properly identified so that, among other things, appropriate checks can be undertaken. It is also important in establishing their new status as a naturalised citizen that it is done in a name that they are known as. Use and repute is a critical, non-statutory method for proving identity, particularly when a person changes their name outside of marriage or civil partnership. It acts as a bridge between social identity - who people know a person as - and legal identity - who a person's documents say they are. When proving identity at any stage of the naturalisation process, the citizenship division in my Department requires evidence that a name has been used consistently. This is the bedrock of proving a person's identity while also helping to protect against identity fraud. I understand that some other Departments are currently reviewing their requirements for use and repute for two years where a person is in possession of a gender recognition certificate.

Again, if the Deputy sends on the details to me, at least I will be able to consider the matter in the context of what has actually happened.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The problem is that the use and repute clause is not applied for a marriage certificate, for example. If somebody submits a marriage certificate saying they have now changed their name, it is recognised immediately. So, it can be done but it is not being done in the case of a gender recognition certificate. When people obtain a gender recognition certificate, it is assumed that it can be used straight away. There is nothing said about a period of time that must elapse first. This needs to be looked at in the naturalisation process because my constituent has been forced to cancel their application for citizenship and has lost their fee. They do not want to carry on with obtaining an important State document with their old or so-called dead name. It will be another year before they can have a passport in their new name. This has serious implications for transgender people who are constantly having to explain their gender when they interact with the State, services and so on.

It causes difficulty as well when travelling. This is something the Minister needs to look at.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: If the Deputy sends me the details, I will be able to look at the issue. The naturalisation process is different from the process, say, for obtaining a marriage certificate. At the heart of naturalisation is the need for the Department to be able to identify

the person who is seeking Irish citizenship. It is an essential part of the naturalisation process that people in my Department go back and examine the past of the individual seeking Irish citizenship to ensure that what he or she is saying is correct. There are factors that could preclude a person from achieving Irish citizenship. Let us remember Irish citizenship is not a right but a privilege we give to individuals based upon an application process.

On the issue the Deputy raised, it is important to emphasise there is nothing in the Gender Recognition Act that undermines or affects her constituent. The issue is the necessity for identification. If she sends me the application details, I will have them considered. Ultimately, even if the matter cannot be resolved, her constituent will be able to apply in a year.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I accept what the Minister is saying about needing to check out a person's past. I have helped many people with their naturalisation applications. However, if a person has been investigated and has demonstrated a change in gender and name under the Gender Recognition Act, surely the process is simple enough. It should not take two years. There is an anomaly and it should be reviewed. The Gender Recognition Act was meant to be reviewed in any case to also allow for recognition of non-binary status. That change was recommended and indicated. This is something that will impinge on many people's lives. As far as I know, we still recognise trans people in this country. We should allow them, if they are naturalised, to move to their new name as quickly as possible.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: The use and repute test is used across the board in the Department. It is not targeting any particular group of individuals. It is not too much to expect, when it comes to assessing identification, that people are able to satisfy the Department that their name is the name they have used for two years and how they have been known by repute for the same period. As I said, I will have a look at this case if the Deputy sends me the information in respect of it.

Court Accommodation

7. **Deputy Paula Butterly** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration the current status of funding allocated for essential repair and flood remediation works at Drogheda Courthouse following the recent flooding that resulted in the transfer of District Court sittings to Dundalk Courthouse in January 2025; the timeframe for completion of those works; the total amount of capital funding allocated for courthouse repair, maintenance and flood prevention works nationally in 2025; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35785/26]

Deputy Paula Butterly: I apologise for the confusion I caused earlier. Will the Minister outline the current status of funding allocated for essential repairs and remedial works at Drogheda Courthouse following the flooding that resulted in the transfer of District Court sittings to Dundalk Courthouse in January 2025? Will he also indicate the timeframe for the completion of those works, as well as the total amount of capital funding allocated for courthouse repair, maintenance and works nationally in 2025?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I acknowledge this is an issue of concern to the Deputy. I understand the flooding that occurred at Drogheda Courthouse on 13 January 2025 resulted

from burst pipes. Following the completion of initial repair works, a walk-through inspection of the facility was carried out during the week commencing 20 January 2025. It was agreed at the time that the facility could reopen to the public on 28 January, noting that certain areas, including courtroom 1, would remain unavailable. Further works to courtroom 1 were completed in April 2025 and it became fully operational on 2 May 2025. That marked the completion of all repair works.

As the Deputy is aware, Drogheda Courthouse is part of a seven-courthouse public private partnership, PPP, bundle, which was delivered under a 25-year concession period. Drogheda Courthouse was the first of the projects to be handed over in June 2017 on a landmark town centre site beside the River Boyne. The total cost of the PPP contract covers the design, construction, financing and, importantly, maintenance and repair of the facility. Those costs are met through a single annual unitary charge, which represents a composite payment for all services provided under the contract. It should be noted that the risk and costs of the repairs fell under the ownership of the PPP company, not the Courts Service. The entity that paid for the repair works was not the State but the PPP company.

The total capital funding allocated for courthouse capital works in 2025 amounted to €9.74 million. The total cost of the PPP contract is quite significant but, as I said, the State did not have to pay for it. I cannot give the Deputy an exact detailed breakdown of the charge because it is commercially sensitive and is protected under the terms of the PPP contract.

Deputy Paula Butterly: I thank the Minister for that update. I was aware that courtroom 1 had opened. As the Minister noted, Drogheda Courthouse is a modern building that opened in 2017 as part of a €9 million investment designed to serve the growing and busy county of Louth. Yet, in the space of 12 months, we have seen repeated problems, most recently with courtroom 1 as a result of burst pipes in the roof. However, that is not the only issue. Anyone going into Drogheda Courthouse today or tomorrow will still see buckets around the place and on the stairs. For this to be happening in such a modern building, the question must be asked whether we are investing in and building these structures properly. The investment in our courts is really important. How can we avoid having buckets lying around a modern facility?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I am disappointed to hear buckets are being used in Drogheda Courthouse. As already noted, it was built in 2017 on a landmark town centre site. If there are defects in the building, the owner or the constructor is liable for those defects. There is a recognition that any defects in the building must be fixed by the PPP company. It has done that and has paid for those works. If there are ongoing difficulties in respect of the courthouse, the company will have to meet that liability as well.

It is essential we have courthouses that are adequate and appropriate. That is necessary not for the benefit of judges or lawyers but for the benefit of people who are going through the administration of justice and seeking access to justice. I will ask my officials and the Courts Service about Drogheda Courthouse. Any issues with it need to be resolved immediately and the entity responsible for paying for that is the company that built it and from which the State is contracting it.

Deputy Paula Butterly: In County Louth, we have the good fortune of also having Dundalk Courthouse, which is an amazing facility that is potentially underused at times. Many of my former colleagues tell me the courthouses at a regional level across the country are in dire need of repair. Will the Minister outline the programme of repair and maintenance at a national level and how quickly those works can be facilitated?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: The courthouses of Ireland are very interesting buildings. Last Friday, I was in the courthouse in Armagh, which is very similar to the other courthouses we inherited from the British around the country. Some of them, because of their antiquity, are in need of significant work, but their antiquity means most are protected structures. I know Dundalk Courthouse well. It is a very fine building in the centre of the town. It has a wonderful location in terms of generating business for the surrounding community.

I have funding within the national development plan for the construction of new courthouses. It is an important part of my programme to ensure Courts Service facilities around the country are suitable. We have built many fine new courthouses over the years. I think particularly of Castlebar, which has a very fine new courthouse. Many of those buildings around the country were designed very effectively. There is money there to build them but when it comes to ancient buildings, there are issues in terms of what can arise.

Question No. 11 taken with Written Answers.

Legal Aid

12. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration to provide an update on his Department's engagement with the Law Society of Ireland and other stakeholders ahead of the changes to the operation of legal aid at the District Court; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34694/26]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Will the Minister outline his or his Department's engagement with the Law Society of Ireland and other stakeholders in advance of the changes to the legal aid system operating in the District Court?

10 o'clock

I am told by many there is unease in relation to the possibility of an exodus of those who engage in the system. We want to see it streamlined and efficient and getting the best bang for our buck but we do not want to see backlogged courts and it causing more hassle than it needs to.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank Deputy Ó Murchú for his question. I certainly do not believe that there will be an exodus of our criminal law practitioners from the legal aid sphere as a result of the reforms I am introducing. As I said earlier, it is a very competitive sector. There are highly efficient and professional solicitors providing services to persons accused of criminal offences. I believe that will continue. I would not propose the reforms if I thought it would not.

I looked at the criminal legal aid scheme and I am fully aware of the importance of the scheme in terms of protecting the right to a fair trial and ensuring individuals accused of serious offences have adequate protection. My proposed reform in the District Court is not intended to reduce the cost to the State in providing criminal legal aid. Instead, it is about improving efficiencies and reducing unnecessary adjournments while still ensuring fair and sustainable remuneration for legal practitioners. As the Deputy knows, it is proposed to replace the current appearance-based sliding scale with a flat fee model for cases in the District Court, regardless of the number of appearances. A set generous fee higher than the fee at present will be payable to solicitors. The new flat fee will be set at a rate that provides for full restoration of the FEMPI cuts in line with the programme for Government commitment.

I have to point out that part of the reason for my reform is because of a review conducted by my Department in respect of cases conducted in the District Court. On foot of that review, it was apparent to me that reform was required. It is also apparent that if we pay somebody per appearance, it is going to incentivise additional adjournments. Research was done that established that in cases where there was criminal legal aid, there would be five appearances where there was criminal legal aid and three where there was not.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I understand the argument the Minister is making. It is my understanding there are a considerable number of adjournments on the basis of the gardaí and the State itself. The fear is that we will have a number of solicitors who are not willing to engage with this system. We will obviously have those who need representation but beyond that, I am told that in many cases involving legal aid, and when the solicitor is given a sufficient amount of time, due diligence is done and this facilitates, when it makes best sense, guilty pleas or whatever, so we are not necessarily clogging up the courts more than they need to be. The Law Society and others will accept there should be nothing that gives an incentive in relation to solicitors demanding more adjournments on the basis of pay but I am told it generally happens on the basis of the State, whether that is due diligence not being done beforehand, issues in relation to evidence, etc. I ask the Minister about his engagement with the Law Society and the other stakeholders who need this to work.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: There are obviously a variety of reasons for adjournments of a criminal trial in the District Court. What is concerning me is the fact that if we have short adjournments, they have a very negative impact on the efficiency of the system because cases are listed every two weeks, every three weeks or however long it is on a continuing basis. If we are paying a person per the number of appearances, that is going to incentivise the adjournment. These reforms will have a positive impact because when it comes to applications for adjournments, practitioners will take into account whether or not they are going to be ready for the hearing or the next stage of the trial at the adjourned date proposed. People will be much more careful about agreeing to an adjourned date in circumstances where they do not think they will be ready on that date. There is a benefit to it.

In terms of engagement, I have had very good engagement with the Bar Council and the Law Society. I have received submissions from them and offered to meet them again. I will happily meet them again.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I welcome that the Minister will meet them again, particularly as the Law Society and many of its members, some of whom have contacted me, have stated they are incredibly worried about this. I agree with the Minister that we all want to see our courts system work as efficiently as possible. We have all seen that for too long justice has been denied. We have all seen cases which have taken an extraordinary length of time to make their way through the District and Circuit Courts. However, in a previous answer, the Minister said his Department reviewed more than 350,000 District Court cases, which took place between 2022 and 2023. I would like to know the detail and how that was done because that would seem like a significant amount of work to do. I call on the Minister to meet again with the Law Society. We all want a system that works. We do not want to see courts more backlogged than they are.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: That is correct. There was a detailed review carried out by my Department and what it established was that there were a number of structural issues which needed to be addressed: first, payment per appearance incentives adjournments; second, multiple certificates were granted for related cases which will increase costs and complexity; third, multiple solicitors assigned in the same firm for related charges; and, fourth, a highly-complex payment processing system creating a significant administrative burden. The review found that cases with criminal legal aid take an average of 313 calendar days to complete compared to 133 days for cases without. The weighted average appearances for cases with criminal legal aid is five, while the weighted average appearances for cases without criminal legal aid is just three. While cases with criminal legal aid take significantly longer than those without, the outcomes are similar. This is a system that needs to be reformed.

Question No. 13 taken with Written Answers.

Policing of Events

14. **Deputy Joe Cooney** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration the Garda resources that have been allocated to County Clare in respect of major events scheduled for 2026, including a tournament (details supplied); whether the staffing required for such events is being drawn from within the existing Clare-Tipperary division complement or from other divisions; the steps being taken to ensure that high-visibility community policing in County Clare is not diminished during periods of major event deployment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35405/26]

Deputy Joe Cooney: I raise the issue of resourcing gardaí in County Clare for the Irish Open in September. This is a huge event coming to County Clare and it will bring tens of thousands of visitors to our county. I ask the Minister what additional resources both human and financial will be made available by his department to Clare Garda division for this event.

Deputy Niall Collins: I thank the Deputy for his question. The organisation and deployment of policing resources for major sporting events is an operational matter for the Garda Commissioner and, indeed, local Garda management. As Ministers, we have no role as such in operational decisions, however, I am assured that the resourcing of policing requirements for high-profile sporting events is fully considered within the overall context of the needs of

the relevant Garda division. The Garda Commissioner keeps the distribution of resources under continual review and we engage regularly with him to ensure An Garda Síochána has the resources it needs to keep our communities safe. The Commissioner is committed to ensuring the policing needs of the Clare-Tipperary division are fully attended to, notwithstanding the obvious demands the hosting of the event referred to by the Deputy will place on An Garda Síochána.

As the Deputy knows, An Garda Síochána has extensive expertise in policing major sporting events, including previous large-scale sporting tournaments. I am sure he recalls the Irish Open was played in Lahinch in County Clare in 2019. There was a significant Garda presence and operation which helped the tournament run quite successfully and smoothly.

An Garda Síochána has a proven track record of successfully policing multiple large events on the same day. We see that particularly with GAA events, which take place in multiple locations around our country on the same day and, indeed, at the same time. Garda management will, as always, undertake a thorough risk assessment and put in place an appropriate policing plan tailored to the specific event, ensuring public safety and the security of all attendees.

I am satisfied An Garda Síochána has the necessary expertise, training and resources to discharge its duties in relation to the event the Deputy referred to, which is to be held in the Doonbeg golf resort in September of this year.

Deputy Joe Cooney: I thank the Minister of State. I congratulate everyone who has helped to bring this event to County Clare. It will provide a major boost to the local economy, particularly during the shoulder season of the year, but it will also place additional pressure on Garda resources, especially in west Clare. Gardaí will have to be reassigned from other duties, including community policing, to deal with crowd management, traffic and public safety. That will have an impact on communities across Clare that would normally rely on those Garda resources. Can the Minister of State assure me that this event will not affect Garda resources allocated to County Clare in 2026? Will the organisers make a financial contribution towards policing and public services? Will the overall cost to the State for this event be fully covered?

Deputy Niall Collins: I previously mentioned that the previous Irish open which was staged in Lahinch, County Clare, in 2019 was a successful event. I also put on the record that in 2019, President Trump visited Clare, in 2023, President Biden visited Clare and President Zelenskyy visited there last December. Those visits were all successfully policed and properly and appropriately resourced by An Garda Síochána at the time. The expertise and knowledge are in the organisation.

The Deputy asked about the recovery of charges relating to the policing of non-public duty events. The recent report of the Committee of Public Accounts on the 2023 appropriation accounts for Vote 20 - An Garda Síochána examined the cost of non-policing events. Ensuring value for money is a priority for the Department and the agencies under its remit. The Garda Commissioner is the Accounting Officer.

Deputy Joe Cooney: There is also a possibility of a visit this time by President Trump who owns Doonbeg golf club. We saw in previous visits the scale of the operation required for a

presidential visit, including road closures, major security arrangements, co-ordination with the US Secret Service and the redeployment of Garda personnel from across the region. An Garda Síochána in Clare simply cannot do this with existing resources without causing serious disruption to normal policing services across the county. Rural communities in Clare, where there are already concerns about response times and Garda visibility, would feel the impact sharply. Can the Minister of State give an assurance that if President Trump were to visit Clare, none of the cost of the resource burden would fall on the existing Garda allocation for the county? Does the State carry the full cost of such a visit, even where it involves a privately owned business such as Doonbeg golf club? Communities across west Clare should not lose out on day-to-day Garda services because of a high-profile international visit.

Deputy Niall Collins: I reiterate that President Trump, in 2019, and President Biden both visited County Clare and the visits were policed accordingly. In the Clare-Tipperary division, which the Deputy knows well, 661 gardaí were assigned to that division as of March 2026, which is a significant body of people. Every Garda division wants more and has its hand up for more gardaí to be allocated to it.

The Deputy is concerned about the resourcing of the Clare-Tipperary division being left exposed while the policing of this event takes place. When major events are policed, gardaí from neighbouring districts are asked to attend and are pulled into the adjoining district to police them. It will not be the case that everyone in the Clare-Tipperary division will be sucked over to Doonbeg to police that event.

Court Procedures

15. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration if he will consider changes in legislation in relation to the use of character references in sentencing hearings; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35581/26]

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: My question relates to character references. We have seen a spate of them recently from former TDs, many of whom seem to be hanging around the Fianna Fáil party. They do not have any understanding of how damaging this is to the victims of these crimes. Why are we still allowing character references from people who have absolutely no expertise in anything to do with any of these crimes? It is an outrage.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank Deputy Coppinger for her question. As she will be aware, the law was recently changed in this area in respect of sexual offences. Under section 14 of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Trafficking) Act 2024, it is now the case that people who want to give character evidence about a person convicted of a sexual offence have to do so either by affidavit or in the witness box. It has to be done on oath or affirmation. That is a positive change in the law.

Deputy Coppinger's question seems to ask why this is ever necessary. As I said previously, sentencing is one of the most complex aspects of a judge's function. The judge has to deal with the nature of the offence and its impact on the victim when determining the sentence. However, the judge is also sentencing the offender. It will be the case that the judge needs to know something about the offender for the purpose of imposing a sentence. For instance, I am sure

if a person were convicted of causing criminal damage to an American plane in Shannon, Deputy Coppinger would believe that person should be entitled to have some character evidence adduced for them at the trial. We can never say we should rule out any form of character evidence because it is essential for a judge to understand the offender in order to impose a sentence.

However, certainly in respect of sexual offences, including rape, people who want to give character evidence have to do so by going into the witness box or by affidavit. There is a lot to be said for extending that to other serious offences.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: We are not talking about writing a reference for a mother who took a packet of nappies because she is living in poverty. In most cases, these references are from relatives or former school principals who knew the offender 20 years ago, or from a GAA football manager or whoever. In the case of child sexual abuse and gender-based violence, they should be banned entirely because the people who carry out such offences are absolute master manipulators. They have groomed people, including adults and children, and fooled relatives. We have seen cases of femicide where the perpetrator fooled the entire family of the victim. No solitary thing can be believed about these people. No one knows what they have done in private, behind closed doors, in such a personal crime as child sexual abuse or gender-based violence. In a trial relating to two sisters, the last word was given to references for their brother who had already been found guilty of abusing them from relatives of the brother who knew nothing about him. The references need to go. They are very confusing and damaging.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I agree with Deputy Coppinger when she says abusers and people responsible for gender-based violence are manipulative. I met Naomi Long last Friday. She is the justice minister for Northern Ireland. She asked me to read the report about Katie Simpson's murder. I read it. It is a harrowing example of someone - the person responsible for her murder - who fooled the PSNI. It showed the level of manipulation that can exist.

Deputy Coppinger suggested we simply ban any form of evidence being given in respect of an offender. That would be problematic. As I said, an important part of a judge's function is to understand an offender. There will be varying degrees of manipulative or malign offenders. There will be people who deserve much longer sentences than others and for there to be some graded assessment by a court, it needs to know something about the offender. The alternative is to have mandatory sentences, as we do for murder, so the judge does not exercise any discretion.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I was particularly talking about sexual and gender-based violence because it is a particular type of personal crime. These people fool judges as well. Let us be frank. Judges are not exactly top of the class.

These references are designed to get people off. In the case of the two women I spoke to - and I know them - there were suspended sentences after character references were submitted.

I want to ask about this oath of affirmation. Where was the oath of affirmation for the person standing in the witness box when Jim Glennon, a former TD and a personal friend of the Minister, wrote a character reference for a person who had images of child sexual abuse? We all had to wait a week or so to find out who the former TD was. He did not stand up in the

witness box, so it does not seem like the oath is being applied. Former Deputy Marc MacSharry wrote a reference for a property developer who terrorised children. This seems to be a plague within Fianna Fáil. A former Ceann Comhairle wrote a horrific reference as well and has never apologised to the victims, despite being asked to do so.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: The Deputy may want to live in a country where guilt by association operates, but, fortunately, we do not live in such a country. If somebody the Deputy knew did something inappropriate or improper-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: They have.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: -----I would not hold her responsible for it.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I am not.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: We do not live in a country where there is guilt by association. To answer the question, the reason persons did not get into the witness box in the past is because the law has now been changed. If you want to give character evidence in respect of a person convicted of a sexual offence, you now have to do it by going into the witness box or on affidavit. The benefit of doing it that way is you can be subject to cross-examination, which means that the counsel for the DPP will be able to question you on the content of your evidence. My view is people should be entitled to give character evidence in respect of an accused but that they have to be prepared to stand over it. That is why sending in letters which are informally written or without substance is improper and inappropriate.

Questions Nos. 16 to 33, inclusive, taken with Written Answers.

Law Reform Commission

34. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration if, following the Law Reform Commission's 2026 report on compensating victims of crime, he intends to establish a new statutory body to administer victim compensation; the timeline in which such a body will be established; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35608/26]

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Law Reform Commission published its report on compensating victims of crime. Does the Minister intend to apply the recommendations in that report, particularly the one relating to establishing a new statutory victims compensation scheme?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I have read the report from the Law Reform Commission and the Deputy will be pleased to note I have already changed the criminal injuries compensation scheme. The change I have introduced is to remove the prohibition on damages being paid in respect of pain and suffering. That was recommended within the report of Mr. Justice Clarke but also in the ruling of the Blanco judgment from the Court of Justice of the European Union that came out last year. We will have to reform the criminal injuries compensation tribunal. It is on an informal, non-statutory basis but I would like to see it put on a statutory basis. I would like to see it called the victims tribunal and I would like to see it apply compensation to victims

of criminal acts, certainly covering pain and suffering, as it does now, but other factors will have to be discussed and considered.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Common Agricultural Policy

82. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will provide an update on negotiations in relation to the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, budget and the proposal to cut payments to farmers in receipt of the State pension and farmers with off-farm income. [35915/26]

Deputy Martin Kenny: I want to get an update on CAP negotiations in relation to the proposals from the Commission, which are very concerning for many farmers and people in the food industry. The Commission is talking about a major cut in the funding. We need to do everything to ensure that this does not happen for agriculture in Ireland and across the European Union. We also need to see a big push-back on the notion farmers receiving a pension, off-farm income or whatever else will suffer as a consequence of that. That would be totally inappropriate. I would like to get the Minister's views and an update on that.

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon): I thank the Deputy for raising a really important point. When I reflect on the key things throughout my term in this position, different issues will come up to be dealt with from day to day but I have always been clear there are a number of big things I will ultimately be judged on. Last year, nitrates was the key headline figure that you could never take your eye off. Throughout that time, I was building relationships with colleagues across the AGRIFISH Council in preparation for our Presidency at a time when CAP reform will be coming. It was a key part of preparing for CAP as well. Generational renewal is in that mix too; it is central to everything we are doing and a key part of this CAP.

In July 2025, the European Commission published its legislative proposals for the post-2027 CAP as a chapter of the proposed national and regional partnership plan framework. Negotiations on the CAP regulation are ongoing at EU level through Council working parties, the Special Committee on Agriculture, and the Agriculture and Fisheries Council of Ministers. I have been engaged actively throughout these negotiations and we are preparing for Ireland's role during our Presidency in the second half of 2026. We continue to carefully examine the Commission's proposals relating to the future structure of direct payments and income supports, including the proposals on pensions. The proposals suggest that member states should exclude farmers in receipt of a pension from direct payments by 2032. This proposal has caused significant worry and concern among older farmers, understandably. I assure farmers that I share their concerns, and I, along with some other member state counterparts, have raised those concerns at the Council of Ministers. My focus in negotiations will be to

ensure that Ireland retains sufficient flexibility to design a CAP programme that reflects the realities of Irish farming and supports family farms.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I appreciate that and understand that a great deal of work has to be done. Central to all this will be that period when Ireland holds the Presidency. We need to ensure CAP is properly funded. For many of these situations regarding off-farm income, whether a pension or whatever else, there needs to be a recognition that the vast majority of farmers need an off-farm income to make the farm viable. That is the reality of it. To suggest they would somehow be punished would mean they are punishing agriculture. They are doing the direct opposite of what the CAP is supposed to be about - enhancing the possibility of agriculture being prosperous, doing well and having a future. If they go down that road, it will be very difficult. We often come across farmers in our constituencies who are getting elderly. They come in and may be heading for 80 years of age but they have not applied for the pension yet because they prefer to farm. If they are punished from the point of view of CAP payments, it will be a very difficult situation to resolve.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I take those points of view on board. It is important to bear in mind and to explain to the public the process this goes through. There are three legs to the stool in terms of CAP and overall EU policy. The Commission puts forward the proposals around the CAP. The Council of agri ministers, of which I am a member and which I will chair when we have the Presidency from July to the end of the year, involves each of the 27 Ministers for agriculture and fisheries. In that AGRIFISH Council, we will agree our position, which will not be exactly the same and will be counter to some of the Commission's proposals. The Parliament is finalising its position with MEPs. When those three come together in trilogues next year, we will thrash this out. The Commission has proposed this measure around retirement. I have a different view and am building alliances with the other Ministers for agriculture that have a different view as well. It is the same with part-time farming. The approach to the active farmer proposed by the Commission is not one I agree with.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I appreciate that. We need to develop a strategy around generational renewal which recognises that the older farmer is part of the farm. The previous situations where farmers felt they had an exclusion order and could not go near the place any more if they went into any of these schemes is totally inappropriate. We need to find a way to do this in partnership so we have generational renewal to make farming more profitable and therefore bring more young people into it, while keeping the experience and the sense of being part of it among older farmers and the people who want to stay with it.

In regard to the CAP, there are a number of things that arise. Simplification has to happen. There has to be an allocation of funds for active farmers. We have to see the restoration of the two pillars. One of the things many farmers are finding very difficult to come to terms with is that the two pillars that served us so well for so long are being discarded. We need to look at that. However, the ring-fenced budget lies at the core of it. The budget we have in place for the CAP has to be maintained. In fact, it should really be extended.

Deputy Martin Heydon: The Deputy's points around generational renewal are very valid. We need to make sure that we have fairness and a balanced distribution of supports across the

board. We want to learn from the mistakes of the past. The old retirement scheme was a mistake. It banished older experienced farmers from farms completely and replaced them with newer farmers. There needs to be a partnership approach. I know from my family circumstances at home down through the years that, the corporate knowledge the older farmer had was really important as was the value they had to bring to the farming enterprise.

In regard to part-time farming, approximately 43% of farmers in Ireland are classified as part time. Part-time farmers are central to the structure and sustainability of Irish agriculture. No final decisions have been made on the future definition of "farmer" in the next CAP. We need to make sure that our approach involves fairness and balance and that any future model is workable in practice and will not disproportionately impact productive farms or undermine food production capacity and farm viability. At the heart of this, what I will be able to do is fight for maximum flexibility and for the maximum budget as well. If we do not have the latter, it will really curtail what we can do.

Horticulture Sector

83. **Deputy Robert O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will consider introducing a targeted support package to assist farmers with escalating gas and energy costs (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35916/26]

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: Supports have been provided to farmers in the main budget already. I have addressed this issue before but want to highlight again that the commercial growers have largely been left out of this. Unlike farmers who benefit for supports for green diesel, growers are facing significant increases in gas and energy prices, particularly those in horticulture sector. Given the rising cost pressures on growers and the vital role they play in our food supply chain, will the Minister consider introducing a targeted support package to assist them with escalating gas and energy prices?

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank the Deputy for asking this question. I reassure him that specialist horticulture has not been forgotten. The Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, and I have mentioned it when we talked about fuel support and securing the €100 million package. We talked about farmers, farm contractors, fishers, forestry and specialist horticulture. That will form a part of this support package. It is different because the producers do not use marked gas oil as the Deputy outlined in his question. After what has been a tumultuous couple of months, I reflect on the fact that this is the only question on the fuel support schemes during the hour and a half we have this morning, which I will take as an indication that the interventions we have made have been significant and impactful.

The Irish horticulture industry is an important economic sector in Ireland, with a farm-gate value of over €600 million. It contains a diverse range of sectors, including mushrooms, potatoes, field vegetables, protected fruit, protected vegetables, outdoor fruit and amenity crops. I fully recognise the impact of the Middle East crisis on the sector and, in particular, certain subsectors within it. Indeed, the announcement on 12 of April of a fuel support scheme made specific reference to the horticulture sector, as I have outlined. This fuel support scheme will provide supports equivalent to 20 cent per litre to farmers and contractors to offset increased costs in marked gas oil. Payments will be made through a single application process

with funding allocated based on green diesel usage in 2025. The main fuel used by growers of field vegetables, field salad crops, field-grown fruit and top fruit is marked gas oil, or green diesel, and these growers are eligible to apply.

Unlike other horticulture subsectors, the protected crop sector is dependent on natural gas and liquified petroleum gas, LPG, the cost of which has also increased significantly since March. Recognising this, my Department has engaged with relevant stakeholders to develop supports for this specialist sector within horticulture, within the framework of the Middle East crisis state aid framework and within the total budget of €100 million that I secured for agriculture and fisheries supports in April.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: As the Minister knows, commercial growers across the country are under enormous and sustained pressure. I am specifically talking about a very small subset of those growers who use gas to heat their greenhouses in order to grow certain vegetables. The soaring energy bills, higher fertiliser prices and transport costs they are facing due to the Middle East crisis are pushing them to the brink.

We are not talking here about abstract figures on a spreadsheet. These are family-run businesses that employ local people, produce Irish food and sustain our food security. Even as energy costs continue to spiral, we need supports that reflect the reality on the ground. Growers simply cannot continue if they are forced to operate on a month-to-month survival basis, constantly exposed to cash-flow pressures and squeezed further by supermarket pricing dynamics. It is a small sector, but it is certainly an important sector in north County Dublin. It is specifically those using gas to power their glasshouses. I see an ethical dilemma for some people, but there are not many growers left. We would like to keep them.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I agree with the Deputy that it is a very important sector. It is more important than just for the Deputy's constituency in north County Dublin. It is really important to the overall ecosystem of how our food is produced. It is a sector that is feeling real pressure, and I recognise that. It is a sector that has become quite marginalised and narrowed down and pressure from very large retailers has made it a very difficult space for people in the horticulture sector to be in. I and my Department are absolutely determined to support it, protect it and make sure it is thriving and viable into the future.

In the context of the changes I made around the Agri-Food Regulator and so forth, what was in my mind throughout all that time was that horticulturists are the most vulnerable in the sector. The extra powers and increased funding I was able to give the Agri-Food Regulator last year were to support those sectors that are the most vulnerable and the likes of that. I will also be meeting with representatives of the sector later this month to go through what is possible in terms of that element of the fuel support scheme, to support them in light of the small few who are dependent on natural gas and LPG.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: I appreciate that response. To recap, Irish growers are expected to compete with those in other countries in which gas costs are significantly lower. That creates an uneven playing field, as the Minister knows. Our growers have been asked to meet the highest environmental, quality and labour yet they are not always receiving the supports they might need. If this trajectory continues we will see a loss of more grower's jobs

and family-run businesses. Officially, we have 73 growers left in the country. If you speak to some of the growers, it is questionable as to whether the figure of 73 is accurate. Once those growers are gone, they are gone. I appreciate what the Minister has told me already and I believe what we need is a targeted intervention and clear financial package, and policies that genuinely support and sustain Irish horticulture.

Deputy Martin Heydon: Because of the importance of the horticulture sector, and specialist horticulture in particular, my Department already provides significant support measures to the Irish horticulture industry through a range of initiatives. We provided €15.7 million in supports to the sector in 2025, excluding supports under basic income support for sustainability, BISS, targeted agricultural modernisation scheme, TAMs, and organics. In addition, the protected crop sector can benefit from carbon tax relief for natural gas and LPG usage.

These measures recognise the continued Government support for the development of this important sector. I am committed to seeing this sector grow and flourish in the years ahead for the reasons outlined. I look forward to meeting the representatives later this month on those specific supports. It is not always just about money; it is about the structural support as well and that is why the extra powers we gave to the Agri-Food Regulator were very much with the likes of this vulnerable sector in mind. That we protect that position of the primary producer in that relationship between the producer, the processor and the retailer.

Fishing Industry

84. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will work with his ministerial colleagues and the relevant Departments to introduce a financial stabilisation scheme for inshore fishermen similar to the basic income scheme available to artists. [35020/26]

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: This is an opportunity for the Ministers to do something really important for fishing communities all around our coast. They have visited quite a few piers and harbours already around the coast where, until recent times, fishermen would have said they just want to fish and do not need financial supports. They are now telling us very clearly that they need those supports. This is a chance to do something radical and game-changing for those communities around the country, and for a not huge amount of money.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Timmy Dooley): I thank the Deputy for his question. I know of his significant interest in this issue.

I have met with representatives of the National Inshore Fishermen's Association and other representatives of the inshore sector and am very much aware of the challenges facing the inshore sector. I am also very much aware of the challenges facing the inshore fishery sector as a result of more recent quota drops, changes to their lives and livelihoods and the impact that climate change is having.

Ireland's €258 million seafood development programme for the period 2021 to 2027, which is co-funded by the Government and the European Commission under the European Maritime,

Aquaculture and Fisheries Fund, EMFAF, is the primary source of funding for the Irish commercial seafood sector, including the inshore sector. Our Department has reviewed all funding mechanisms available, either through the seafood development programme or through other state aid routes, to ascertain if there is a possibility of introducing a financial stabilisation scheme for inshore fishermen. It is clear from this review that the EMFAF regulation under the seafood development programme, which is aligned with the objectives of the Common Fisheries Policy, does not make provision for income supports to primary producers in the seafood sector. There is also little scope to implement funding supports of the type being sought by inshore fishers under other existing EU state aid regulations in the fisheries and agriculture sector as matters currently stand.

As regards to the basic income for the arts sector, the EU state aid basis for this scheme is what is referred to as the general *de minimis* regulation. This regulation may not be used as the basis for aid to primary producers in the fisheries and agriculture sector, with the specific fisheries *de minimis* regulation applying to these producers. Income supports to fishers are available from the Department of Social Protection through the specific category of jobseeker's allowance for them known as fish assist. Any inshore fishers who require such financial assistance are advised to contact their local Intreo centre.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I just cannot accept that the only source of funding we have has to come with the consent of the European Commission. We can talk about how, under the CAP, long-standing financial supports have been provided to primary producers who work on the land. We need an imaginative measure here. This could be a game-changer, and anything that is ever a game-changer requires somebody to take on the system. We spoke yesterday about Thomas McLaughlin, who pushed through the Ardnacrusha project. He was an engineer who pushed for that to happen. Look at what that changed in Ireland. He was resisted when he first did it. What I am talking about is crucial to keeping the fishermen on the water. We have to reflect the reality of their lives in terms of everything that has changed. In light of that, I am asking the Minister of State to push back against the guidance that tells him this cannot be done. I cannot accept that it cannot be done, particularly in the context of financial supports to fishermen.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: There are additional supports available through Bord Iascaigh Mhara. These are aimed at supporting both the commercial offshore and inshore sectors by means of the various schemes that have helped fishers to survive through difficult times. Shortly after my appointment, I tasked independent consultant Kieran Mulvey to engage with the entire fishing sector to look to see what potential supports could be put in place. I am awaiting his report, which I expect to have shortly. I expect there will be some recommendations.

In light of the significant quota cuts that came about as a result of last December's Council meeting, we brought in independent consultant Michael Berkery to look at how supports could be addressed in that regard. There are significant state aid rules involved. It is not so much the source of the funding that is the issue. Rather, it is about the capacity to spend State funds - our own funds - in a way that is not anti-competitive or that runs contrary to the activities of other states. It has to be done in a fair and balanced manner, and those are what are referred to as the state aid rules. I am certainly prepared to look at all potential measures.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Our inshore fishermen are a precious part of the heritage of coastal communities and are central to the piers and harbours that we have. There is a great love for them, not just in coastal communities but also right across Ireland. It is about keeping that going by means of what would not be a huge amount of money to subsidise and support them to stay on the water. The factors involved include energy costs, weather and climate change.

As I said to the Minister of State previously, five years ago, fisherman said they just wanted to fish. They have never asked for financial supports before. This is the first time they have come to the State. I have looked at their latest updated plan and I think it is really impressive. It is really thoughtful. They are looking to work in partnership with others around how we manage the precious resource of our waters beyond fishing. I plead with the Minister of State to seek an exemption from the European Commission. Are there grounds and special circumstances to protect this special heritage? With a will, this can be done. I appeal to the Minister of State to keep that will and desire to do it and to push back on anybody within the Department or permanent government that says it cannot be done because they have failed fishermen for long enough. I know the Minister of State is trying to change, so I ask him stay on his current course.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I am very conscious of the positive impact that small-scale inshore fishers have on their coastal communities. It is about maintaining, protecting and preserving that from a cultural and historical perspective. I know they are not looking for money. They just want to survive and they would much prefer to do that through fishing and the processing of fish. I am prepared to work with them, and I am conscious of the document. In the context of the work that Michael Berkery is doing and the report from Kieran Mulvey that will be published soon, there is an opportunity for us to work with them over the coming months and years to try to put in place a programme of supports that comply with state aid rules and EU directives and, insofar as we can, retain fishers until such time as fish stocks recover. There are also other opportunities emerging in relation to ecotourism and marine ecotourism and to act in support of the offshore renewable activity that is certainly coming into play and that will be there in the next three to five years.

Questions Nos. 85 and 86 taken with Written Answers.

Animal Diseases

87. **Deputy Joe Cooney** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the current herd incidence rate of bovine tuberculosis, TB, in County Clare; the steps being taken to support Clare farmers who have suffered financial losses due to TB reactor removals; whether the on-farm market valuation ceiling of €3,000 for non-pedigree cattle will be reviewed in light of the significant gap between that ceiling and the true market value of animals being removed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35917/26]

Deputy Joe Cooney: As the Minister is well aware, TB is an issue that is hitting farm families very hard across the county, including my county of Clare. Could he provide information on

where we are with the eradication strategy? Does he think eradication is a realistic goal? What are his plans to evaluate the current compensation cap?

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank Deputy Cooney for raising what is a significant issue, not just for farmers in County Clare but also for their counterparts across the country. The straight answer to a straight question is that I do believe eradication of TB is possible and is something that can be delivered. However, there was no way it was going to be delivered by means of the trajectory we were on up until last year, when we were seeing an exponential growth in numbers of reactors and herds impacted. The definition of madness is doing the same thing and expecting a different result. I was not willing to do that, which is why I spent all of last year engaging with farm stakeholders, representative bodies, vets, professionals throughout the industry and my officials to draw up a new plan based on science and to have that clear intervention that would give a very clear roadmap for those farmers in a perpetual cycle of bovine TB outbreaks and reactors who see no light at the end of the tunnel. A total of 94% or 95% of farmers who were free of bovine TB were petrified before the annual test every year and were hoping to avoid the disease. The new TB plan gives us the opportunity to move the dial, turn the tide, stop this significant increase and get it on that trajectory where we can get back to talking about eradication with real credibility. That is what I have sought to do here.

Regarding the TB herd incidents in County Clare, on a 12-month rolling basis as of 3 May this year, it has reduced by 4.2% in County Clare compared with 4.34% at the same time last year. This compares well with the national TB herd incidence, which has also shown a reduction on a 12-month rolling basis. As of 3 May, it stood at 5.4% nationally. Obviously, Clare is 1.2% lower than that. The 5.4% nationally compares with 6.29% at the same time the last year. Bovine TB is an ongoing challenge for Irish farmers. I am acutely aware of the emotional and financial stress it causes farmers, farm families and rural Ireland, which is why we are imposing the various measures.

Deputy Joe Cooney: I compliment the Minister on his great work on this issue, but, unfortunately, I hear from farmers in Clare every week who are losing thousands of euro in comparison with what they would get on the open market. Independent valuers assigned by the Department are valuing animals well above the Department ceiling of €3,000. With the high costs at the moment, this means that farmers, through no fault of their own, are losing real money out of their pockets.

The gap between compensation and value is causing serious financial stress and anxiety. Thousands of farm families across the country are affected by this. When will they get a compensation scheme that reflects the market value of the animals they are losing?

Deputy Martin Heydon: Budget 2026 provided an increased budget for the TB programme, with a record €157 million allocated for this reason in 2026. This will allow the TB programme to focus on driving down the disease through the implementation of measures laid out in my new bovine TB action plan. It will support and enable farm families who are currently dealing with the stress of a TB outbreak to navigate a way out of a TB restriction and protect those herds currently free from bovine TB to remain free. The objective of the new measures in the bovine TB action plan is to reduce the number of farms affected and decrease the costs for all stakeholders.

My Department provides a range of financial supports that focus on compensating farmers for both direct and indirect losses incurred as a result of a TB breakdown on the farm. The primary support scheme is the on-farm market valuation scheme, where animals removed as reactors are subject to compensation, subject to scheme ceilings equivalent to their market value in the event they were not disclosed as TB reactors. In 2025, of the 40,583 animals valued under the on-farm market valuation scheme, just under 90% of animals were valued below the scheme ceilings.

Deputy Joe Cooney: Compensation values are totally outdated and do not reflect the true value of animals in 2026. It appears that increased costs and values are being accommodated across many sectors except for farmers with TB. The defective concrete blocks scheme is one example, where we have rightly gone back to affected homeowners and increased compensation values for rebuilding their homes.

I appreciate the work the Minister is doing on TB eradication. The increase in the budget is very welcome and clearly shows a commitment to that goal. However, the compensation ceiling for farmers must be reviewed urgently and indexed to reflect current market prices. Anything less is asking farmers to subsidise a disease control programme through their own losses.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I understand the points the Deputy has made and the frustration he has expressed on behalf of his constituents. I would love not to have that ceiling in place; I would love the freedom to be able to operate outside of that.

Market prices of animals continue to be monitored. However, the focus at present is on reducing the levels of disease, which will reduce the impact of bovine TB on Irish farm families and reduce the cost of the programme, which rose to over €121 million in 2025. The only reason I got sanction for the extra money in my budget negotiations was because that money was to drive down the incidence rate and the disease. I did not get extra money for extra compensation. That is beyond the ceilings that are there. However, we continue to monitor this. It is something I would like to be able to move on in time, but I do not have the ability to do that right now.

In addition to the compensation package for eligible reactor animals that are removed during a TB breakdown, my Department operates three supplementary schemes that assist farmers with the indirect losses incurred as a result of a breakdown on the farm. These include an income supplement scheme, a depopulation grant scheme and the hardship grant scheme. We also have a financial working group, through which we have seen over the past two years rate enhancements to the income supplement scheme, the hardship grant and the depopulation grant, as well as enhanced ceilings for select animals being removed as part of the on-farm market valuation.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Agriculture Schemes

88. **Deputy William Aird** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine whether consideration is being given to allowing farmers who are currently below slurry storage compliance requirements to access support under the targeted agricultural modernisation schemes, specifically for the purpose of achieving compliance; the pathways available for young qualified farmers and newly established farm partnerships in such circumstances; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35068/26]

Deputy William Aird: I welcome the significant investment that this Government has made through TAMS in supporting farm modernisation, improving environmental sustainability and assisting farmers to meet regulations. However, I want to raise a practical case that is happening on the ground and causing real frustration for young farmers and new farm partnerships. A qualified young farmer operating a newly established family farm partnership recently looked for a TAMS grant to upgrade slurry storage and bring the holding into compliance. However, the application was ineligible because the holding was non-compliant.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy has gone past his time. The Minister to respond.

Deputy William Aird: This means a farmer is being asked to meet a standard before being allowed to access the support needed to reach it. Those willing to invest to comply are unable to access supports required to do so.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank Deputy Aird for raising the important matter of TAMS and the specific case of a constituent he has come across.

TAMS provides grants to farmers to build and improve a specified range of farm buildings and equipment on their holdings. All investments supported by TAMS 3 must be linked to climate, environment or animal welfare. To date, almost 2,500 applications for nutrient storage investments with a proposed grant aid value of €55 million have been approved. The investments made under this measure are an important tool to support the sector in improving water quality and underline the Government's commitment on this issue.

For these investments relating to farm nutrient storage, applicants must provide details of their compliance with nutrient storage requirements as laid down in SI 588 of 2025, the European Union (Good Agricultural Practice for Protection of Waters) Regulations 2025. Accordingly, applicants who do not have sufficient storage capacity to comply with these requirements are not eligible under TAMS 3 for slurry storage related investments.

In respect of applicants who have not had livestock previously, I confirm that they are eligible to apply under TAMS for storage facilities. I also confirm that new entrants to farming who, as a consequence, did not have any livestock over the winter prior to applying are eligible to apply for slurry storage, as they are currently compliant with the required minimum storage amounts. In addition, farmers who currently out-winter all of their stock, assuming they are compliant with out-wintering requirements, would be considered compliant and be eligible to apply for slurry storage.

It should be noted that, from 1 October 2028, the slurry storage capacity requirement for dairy cows of 0.33 cu. m per week will be amended upwards to 0.4 cu. m per week. Farmers who currently have sufficient storage capacity on their holdings will continue to be eligible to

apply under TAMS for farm nutrient storage facilities to bring their holdings into compliance with the amended regulations for a maximum of two years after 1 October 2028.

Deputy William Aird: The Minister knows that the farming community accepts the importance of improving storage capacity, and the farmers understand the need to protect water quality, reduce emissions and ensure holdings are compliant. I accept that significant progress in this area has been made through TAMS, especially with enhanced supports for young, trained farmers and new entrants.

However, situations like the one I have outlined to the Minister highlight a gap in the practical application of the scheme. This is especially the case for smaller family farms, holdings in transition to the next generation and newly formed partnerships, who can find themselves in a position where the old infrastructure means they are below compliance but the capital cost of reaching compliance is next to impossible, as the Minister knows, without the support of TAMS. What is needed is a workable pathway to achieve these standards.

Is there scope within TAMS for future schemes to consider targeted measures specifically aimed at bringing storage compliance standards, phased approaches for farms actively working towards compliance, and clear eligibility routes for young, qualified farmers and newly established partnerships in these circumstances?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy must conclude. The Minister to respond, please.

Deputy William Aird: These measures are needed, and match environmental ambition and political delivery.

Deputy Martin Heydon: To answer the Deputy's question, and as I outlined in my original answer, there is provision for many of those new entrant farmers to be able to avail of TAMS in such circumstances. It is important to note that, at a high level, EU funds cannot assist in bringing a farm into legal compliance. It has to be legally compliant before it can access the funds. Where that deviates is where we have the agreed change around the increased ambition from 2028 onwards. As part of our negotiation on that, where the storage capacity for dairy cows is to increase from 1 October 2028, farmers who currently have sufficient storage capacity but will be ineligible because of that increased threshold will have two years where they will be able to avail of TAMS to support them in that space.

There are plenty of caveats there to try to get around the issue. The particular issue the Deputy has highlighted is probably because it is a farm partnership, so it is not a new entrant farmer as such, which the Deputy described it as, but an entering into of a farm partnership. It is one I will discuss with the Deputy maybe offline afterwards.

Deputy William Aird: The objective should be to bring farmers into compliance through investment and engagement. It should not be to exclude those who are trying to do the right thing but are limited by financing conditions. I welcome the update from the Department that it is considering additional flexibility on targeted measures, but the Minister knows quite well that there are thousands of people out there from an older generation of farmer who would buy hundreds of cattle but would not buy a load of concrete. The next person in line for succession

wants to upgrade that farm and be compliant, but they are being told that they are not getting anything because of the sins of the previous person who was running the farm.

11 o'clock

A Leas-Cheann Comhairle, that is wrong. The Minister and everyone else will be getting that throughout their constituencies. I ask the Minister, if he can at all, to please revisit this and look at it again. We are trying to encourage young farmers to farm the land and they want to do it. The Minister is correct, in that if you had no stock or anything like that previously, you would qualify. I know people who are doing it. I ask the Minister to please look at the person that is taking over from his father or whoever it may be. As the Minister knows, down through the years, you had great farming fathers and the son would come along and might not be as good but they would want to improve the farm. I ask the Minister to please have a look at it.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I will talk to the Deputy about the specifics of this case afterwards because it may be the farm partnership that is the impediment here. New entrants to farming who did not have any livestock the previous winter are eligible to apply for the slurry scheme on that basis. That is probably an anomaly in one way. We have no shortage of farmers applying for TAMS. We had 8,000 applications in the last tranche. I got an increase in my capital budget for TAMS of €88 million for this year, but demand is off the charts.

Deputy William Aird: That is no good to the farmer who cannot get it.

Deputy Martin Heydon: From that perspective, it is there for the many who do and can avail of it. On a general level, you cannot have a situation where you are applying for TAMS to make yourself legally compliant when you are not compliant. That is the challenge of it, but new entrants can do it. If it is a partnership, maybe that is the challenge on this one.

Question No. 89 taken with Written Answers.

Animal Diseases

90. **Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to provide an update on the TB action plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35742/26]

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Question No. 90, in the name of Deputy Newsome Drennan, will be taken by Deputy Martin Kenny.

Deputy Martin Kenny: This question relates to the TB action plan. I would like to get an update on it. The new rules came in last month. A lot of farmers and farm organisations have been critical of the level of communication they have received from the Department in regard to the new rules, how it is set out, the new categories and all of that. We need to see very clear communications to ensure that farmers know they are going to be able to fit into this programme. Everybody in the country, particularly everyone in the farming community, wants to see TB eradicated.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank the Deputy. I am aware of the financial and emotional impacts and challenges for Irish farmers, their families and rural communities presented by a bovine TB breakdown. In recent years, there has been a significant increase in bovine TB levels nationally. To address these high disease levels, I have undertaken extensive engagement with stakeholders and farm organisations to agree measures to tackle them.

I launched the Bovine TB Action Plan: Addressing Bovine TB in Ireland in September. It includes five measures and 30 actions underpinned by scientific research, evidence and veterinary expertise. Those five pillars are: to support herds free of bovine TB to remain free; to reduce the impact of wildlife on the spread of bovine TB; to detect and eliminate bovine TB infection as early as possible in herds with a bovine TB outbreak and avoid a future outbreak; to help farmers improve all areas of on-farm biosecurity, and only this week I opened and launched a €6 million scheme whereby farmers would be available to avail of practical supports around fencing off badger setts on their holdings and raising water troughs as well; and to reduce the impact of known high-risk animals in spreading bovine TB.

The aim of the action plan is to reset the TB programme by putting in place measures necessary to tackle the current disease situation. On 13 April, a number of changes were introduced to animal testing and animal movement requirements under the bovine TB programme to reduce the transmission of bovine TB from cattle to cattle. I recognise that this is a big change farmers and is the first real manifestation they are seeing of the new plan in action. I thank in particular the marts, which have tried to help in communicating this new understanding. Those changes on 13 April include: the removal of the post-movement test option for all cows and for males over 36 months of age; all dairy cows moved into a breeding herd now requiring a 30-day pre-movement test; a 30-day pre-movement test for contract-reared heifers; the gamma interferon, GIF, test in large breakdowns of breeding herds; and a restriction on the sale of exposed cohorts where GIF testing is carried out in larger breeding herds for a period of time.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I thank the Minister. I appreciate all of that and that there is work being done. The marts have been central to this because that is where a lot of farmers are coming into the situation. They are unaware of what category their cattle fall into when they are going to the mart, and that is a big issue because then they do not know who can buy them. A lot of farmers are finding it very difficult to navigate this whole process. Farm organisations have been very critical of it. The Department was supposed to set up a dedicated helpline that farmers could contact. My understanding is that they are getting no answer to any of the calls they make to that helpline. There is an issue in respect of that and I think it needs to be addressed as quickly as possible.

Farmers selling cattle are unaware of who can buy them and what category they fall into, and it makes them very reticent and concerned about the whole scheme and how it is going to work out for them. The risk of TB is a serious problem for a lot of farmers, particularly when they are in an area where there may have been a number of reactors on farms around them and they are very concerned about it. Of course they want to work with a system that will eradicate TB but they cannot do so if they do not understand it and if it is not clear and concise. That needs to change.

Deputy Martin Heydon: Being clear and concise is important. Change is a challenge for everybody but we had to change our approach. The approach needs to be targeted, and that is what this is. We have to recognise where the key challenge is. A reduction in bovine TB levels in breeding herds, especially in dairy herds, is a key element in driving down bovine TB levels nationally. I think of the constituency and the region that the Deputy represents, where it would be predominantly sucklers and not as much dairy. The purchase of breeding heifers from high-risk dairy herds and bringing them up to the Deputy's area, where there might be low-risk herds, has been a contributor in the past to the spread of this disease in a significant way. These changes are all based on science and are targeted.

The Deputy is right, in that there was much criticism of some parts of the plan last year. I met a lot of resistance here to tackling the area of risk categorisation, but risk categorisation of the high-risk animal is the right thing to do. The simple fact that we started talking about that all last summer is indicative of the reduction of numbers we had, which I will outline in supplementary.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I am not disagreeing with the Minister in that regard but the difficulty we have is that farmers who want to play ball and work with the system are finding it very difficult to do so because they do not understand it. It is not clear. The Minister said that being "clear and concise" was vital. It has not been made clear to farmers and they are very concerned that they do not know what impact this is going to have on them. That special line that was supposed to be set up needs to be working properly and farmers need to be communicated with. The Department has all the information. It knows every farmer and what their herds are. It knows what categories they fall into. It needs to communicate that across the board to everybody so that, similar to the marts, everybody is clear on where they stand. I know that the marts are vital to this but we should not be in a situation where the Department of agriculture is implementing a strategy and depending on what are private entities - the marts around the country - to communicate what that strategy is. We need to have another way of doing that. That is the difficulty people have. Everybody wants to co-operate and work with this. We just need a bit of clarity around it.

Deputy Martin Heydon: The helpline is up and running and has been since the middle of April. Communication has been a key part of everything I have done here. I will counter somewhat the Deputy's point that the message is not getting through. I refer to the encouraging progress of recent months in reducing bovine TB levels. Over the 12 months to 3 May, the herd incidence was 5.42%, down from 6.29%, the number of herds restricted was down by just over 5,400, or 14.8%, and the number of reactors was over 35,400, down 15.71%. We have seen significant reductions in herd incidence and reactor numbers in the past year. I believe that this reduction nationally is due to the combined efforts of all stakeholders in supporting farmers in reducing risk of bovine TB in their herds.

I am confident that the changes I have introduced will help drive the disease down further but I have no doubt that the discussions we had last summer, notwithstanding all of the reaction I got to them, made farmers in low-risk areas ask questions about what the risk category of the animal they were buying was. That is a conversation that needed to happen and it has definitely fed into these numbers.

Beef Sector

112. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the steps his Department is taking to reverse the decline in volume of beef exports to the EU and the UK; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35477/26]

Deputy Martin Kenny: I want to ask the Minister about the declining volume of beef exports, particularly to the UK and the EU, over the past 12 to 18 months and the impact it is having on the sector. It is very clear that many farmers out there are not producing to the same level they had been.

We also have the situation in regard to the Mercosur countries when it comes to beef, particularly. There is talk of banning beef from Brazil coming into the European Union as of September. That should happen now, not in September. I would like to get the Minister's remarks on that.

Deputy Martin Heydon: Ireland exported almost 458,000 metric tonnes of beef in 2025. It is an absolutely colossal figure when we think of the scale of the industry and what it is worth to our overall economy. Although the volume of exports was lower than in recent years, the total value of primary beef exports increased by €542 million, or 17%, to reach a record €3.6 billion, according to the Central Statistics Office, CSO. Whereas volumes to the UK were 6% lower in 2025 compared to 2024, the value of those shipments grew by more than €274 million, or 19%. Similarly, the value of consignments to other EU markets increased substantially by almost €313 million or 21% in 2025, while volumes recorded a modest 2% decline relative to 2024. The UK accounted for 46% of Irish beef exports by value and 42% by volume. Other international markets accounted for 11% of export volume but 5% of total value.

Food Vision 2030, the industry-led strategy for the agrifood sector, aims to increase the value of agrifood products, including beef. The ambition is to build on sustainable value growth by supporting agrifood exports and continuing to develop market opportunities at home and abroad. The figures clearly indicate the success of Food Vision 2030 in achieving that.

I have ensured that farmers can continue to improve the competitiveness and productivity of their suckler, dairy beef and mixed enterprises through a record level of national and EU co-funded supports. I am providing over €83 million in direct targeted supports for the suckler sector in 2026. In addition to the ongoing suckler carbon efficiency programme, which is worth over €51 annually to participants, the national dairy beef weighing scheme is currently open for applications and the 2026 beef welfare scheme will open in mid-August. The dairy weighing scheme, which supported 18,300 farmers last year, has a budget of €4 million in 2026. The beef welfare scheme, which supported 24,500 farmers last year, has a budget of €28 million in 2026.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I appreciate that the value of products has gone up because prices have gone up. The price that is returned for beef internationally, particularly for higher quality product, has increased over the past number of years. That is because of a reduction in the number of cattle across Europe and many other parts of the world. It is creating that buoyancy in the market. The reality from an Irish perspective is that the amount of beef we produce has

actually gone down. We need to look at that. I am not saying why that is. I do not know what the situation is or where we are at here. In the lamb market, we see a similar thing. I have met with people and I know the Minister has met them as well, namely, young farmers who want to get into lamb. Even the factories are asking what the future is going to be because production is going down. We need to be looking at how we are going to maintain that level of production.

The other point I want to get a view from the Minister on is in regard to the beef that is coming into the European Union from Brazil. Some 100,000 tonnes of product was imported, most of it beef, in the last year from Brazil. If the European Union is saying there is a problem with it, why are we waiting until September to do something about it? When it came to implementing the Mercosur trade agreement, they were able to do it provisionally immediately rather than wait. Why do we have to wait for this?

Deputy Martin Heydon: I welcome the removal of Brazil from the list of approved countries. It is a result of the pressure that my colleagues on the Council of Ministers and I have been bringing to bear. In January, we had a meeting with Commissioner Šefčovič, the Commissioner for trade, Commissioner Hansen, the Commissioner for agriculture, and Commissioner Várhelyi, who is responsible for animal health and welfare. We made it very clear to them, and we have always said, that the sanitary and phytosanitary, SPS, food safety standards of beef coming into Europe are non-negotiable. The challenges around Mercosur were environmental in terms of our difficulties with the agreement. From the perspective of food safety, antimicrobial resistance and so on, that is non-negotiable in Europe. We saw products being found and recalled. We now see this move being made, which is very important and I strongly support.

Deputy Martin Kenny: Why wait until September?

Deputy Martin Heydon: The removal from the list has been done straight away. That is how that process works. It is a clear indication to the Brazilians that the standards of they have been bringing in, and that we have highlighted in terms of our concern with them, are not acceptable here. Product being found here that has traces of antibiotics and beyond is not acceptable to us and will not be into the future.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I thank the Minister. I understand that and appreciate there is work being done by an awful lot of people across the European Union from the Government here and other governments in Europe, as well as farm and consumer organisations, to look at all of this and to recognise that the product that has been coming in from Brazil is way below standard. The big problem with it all is traceability. There is no traceability whatsoever in Brazil when it comes to the production of beef. A person can buy antibiotics or hormones across the counter and administer them to the animals and there is no traceability as to what they have had. It is open season. I know there have been suggestions that beef is going to come in from particular factories or farms that comply with European standards. The problem is that there is no way of judging or guaranteeing it. I welcome the European Union accepting that point and removing Brazil from the list.

However, I understand that product is still going to come in from Brazil until September. That is a problem that needs to be dealt with. We really need to accept that Irish farming is under pressure and beef production is absolutely vital to the Irish rural economy.

Deputy Martin Heydon: On the Deputy's question regarding the decline in the volume of beef exports to the EU and the UK, there are a few parts to this. It is a dynamic situation. Farmers vote with their feet in terms of the workload and the return they are getting for that work. Some of them change enterprises because they will get a better return for that. The increase in beef prices last year will make some farmers who had stepped back look at beef production again. I am determined to ensure that the good beef price, which increased last year, remains high for them so that they can continue to do that.

The UK will always be a really important market to us. Almost 50% of our beef goes to the UK. Europe, our nearest neighbours after that, is obviously a key market as well. We have worked really hard in my Department to open new markets in third countries, with a particular focus on south-east Asia and beyond. The Deputy dismissed somewhat the early figures I highlighted showing the increase in the value of the return on that, but that is real for farmers because we have pursued the higher value markets. We do not want to be fighting with Brazilian beef on commodity markets around the world, and 90% of our beef that is exported is not. We go for the higher value markets because of our traceability and our Origin Green quality assurance scheme, which farmers and food processors have bought into. That is delivering the real return here and will continue to do so into the future.

Animal Welfare

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: With the permission of the House, we will go back to Question No. 91 in the name of Deputy Ó Muirí.

91. **Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will provide an update on the upcoming report and recommendations of the high-level dog control stakeholder group, particularly in relation to upholding animal health and welfare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35779/26]

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: Thank you for your forbearance, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. My question relates to the review of legislation for dog-breeding establishments that is currently under way in the Department.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank the Deputy for raising a really important issue which we all take really seriously. Animal welfare is a key priority for me as Minister and for the Government. My Department has lead policy responsibility within Government for animal welfare and we take it really seriously. I am committed to the policy that animal welfare standards are vigorously applied in a fair and even-handed manner and remain committed to the continued robust enforcement of the Animal Health and Welfare Act 2013, which provides a modern framework for regulating and applying standards in the area of animal health and welfare. My Department keeps the Act under review in light of key developments in the areas

of animal welfare, the law and having regard to the practical lessons learned from operating the Act.

Responsibility for all policy and legislation in relation to the Control of Dogs Acts and the Dog Breeding Establishments Act 2010 transferred to my Department on 1 June 2025 and 1 August 2025, respectively. This fulfilled a programme for Government commitment, on which I was part of the negotiating team. I was keen that we would get a more consolidated approach to this area. It was to bring a coherent approach to dog control issues by ensuring all legislation and policy in relation to the control of dogs, dog welfare and dog breeding establishments rested with my Department.

Local authorities retain responsibility for operational and enforcement matters. Inspections of dog breeding establishments are carried out by dog wardens and by my Department.

With the transfer of functions, I took over responsibility for the dog control stakeholder group, which Deputy Ó Muirí highlighted. It was established by the then Minister for Rural and Community Development in March 2024 to review the Control of Dogs Acts and the Dog Breeding Establishments Act. Its remit is to consider policy and legislative matters in relation to those Acts, including any need for legislative change. The stakeholder group comprises members with a broad range of expertise, including academics, veterinary surgeons, local authorities, farming interests, charities working in the field and animal welfare experts. I expect to receive the report from the group shortly.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I thank the Minister for the update. Ireland is a nation of dog lovers and dogs hold a cherished place in our homes, well ahead of cats. However, it is clear we are playing catch-up on legislation on dog breeding. Dog breeding in Ireland is a growing industry. It is important to say that responsible small breeders do maintain very high standards, but as the sector is growing so too are animal welfare concerns. The Oireachtas agriculture committee heard last month that the number of dogs being put to sleep grew by 10% from 2023 to 2024. Even more alarmingly, this figure increased by 93% compared to 2022. This is a huge growth in the number of animals being put to sleep. The scale of abusive treatment is very concerning and we need to recognise it. This is a lucrative industry. We cannot leave it to look after itself, to self-regulate and to undertake its own enforcement. We have to get ahead of the issue.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank the Deputy. I will not fall into the trap of pitting the dog against the cat and which is more popular. I have Sammy, my collie, at home who keeps any cat away. The general public absolutely expects and demands of us the highest animal welfare standards. It is something I am passionate about. Coming from a farming background, I was raised, and I am raising my children, with the approach that if we treat animals well we will treat humans well. A society can be judged on how it deals with issues such as this. There are many different ways to do so. There is policy and enforcement, and the need to change policy as well. I look forward to receiving the stakeholder group's report. I am reviewing all legislation on dogs and I will be guided by the recommendations. At the same time, I am also due to bring the heads of a Bill on dog breeding establishments to Cabinet imminently. This is another area of work I am determined to progress.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: It is good to hear the Minister and the Department are taking the issue seriously and I look forward to hearing the recommendations of the stakeholder group. The set-up is a bit unwieldy though. The Department is responsible for annual inspections of breeding establishments but local authorities, such as Dublin City Council, are effectively responsible for enforcement. This creates a bit of a disconnect and a risk of issues falling between the Department and the local authorities. Local authorities may not perform their responsibilities to the same standard across the country. Has the Department considered merging responsibility for inspection and enforcement centrally, either under the Department itself or another agency that would take overall responsibility for inspection and enforcement as required?

Deputy Martin Heydon: A big change that happened with this Government, which was laid out in the programme for Government, is that all of the various elements of dog control have been centralised from previously being across three Departments, including in the former Department of Rural and Community Development. The programme for Government committed to taking this element from that Department and bringing it back to the Department of agriculture because we have responsibility for animal welfare. Local authorities are the employers of dog wardens and have the system in place. We work really closely together with them. I do not see an impediment to how we move forward and improve things further with the current structure.

The dog stakeholder group was set up under the previous Government by the previous Minister at the Department of rural affairs. It has a body of work to do, which it has almost completed. There will be legislative change coming out of its proposals and I look forward to receiving its report. I am not waiting for that in the meantime. I will bring the heads of a Bill to Cabinet imminently to improve welfare standards and strengthen enforcement in relation to dog breeding establishments. I am continuing this work because animal welfare and the protection of our dogs are so important.

Question No. 92 taken with Written Answers.

Animal Diseases

96. **Deputy Edward Timmins** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine for an update on the bovine TB eradication programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35737/26]

Deputy Peter Roche: I thank the Minister for this debate on TB eradication, which I welcome. In an earlier response, he mentioned that new TB measures came into place in April. I am anxious to understand the status of the new rules and their implementation.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank Deputy Roche for raising this important matter. The bovine TB programme has been a key priority for me since I took office. I am very aware of the financial and emotional challenges for Irish farmers, their families and the communities in which they live when there is a bovine TB breakdown. It is a difficult disease to control and eradicate, as we know, but it can be done and has been done in other countries.

I launched the Bovine TB Action Plan: Addressing Bovine TB in Ireland in September 2025, following extensive engagement with stakeholders. It includes five key pillars and 30 actions underpinned by scientific research and veterinary expertise. On 13 April, a number of changes were introduced to animal testing and animal movement requirements. These include the removal of the post-movement test option for all cows and for males over 36 months of age; all dairy cows moving into a breeding herd requiring a 30-day pre-movement test; 30-day pre-movement testing for contract-reared heifers; the introduction of mandatory gamma interferon test, known as GIF testing, in large breakdowns of breeding herds, which will apply to herds with a restriction on or after 13 April 2026; and a restriction on sale of exposed cohorts where a GIF test is carried out in larger breeding herds for a period of time, and this will apply to herds in restriction on or after 13 April 2026. These changes were introduced to reduce the transmission of bovine TB from cattle to cattle. A reduction in bovine TB levels in breeding herds, especially dairy herds, is a key element in driving down bovine TB levels nationally. In simple terms, every measure in this is there for a reason. It is backed by science and it is targeting where the spread of disease has been the biggest contributor.

I also established a new bovine TB helpline for farmers who enter a new TB breakdown. This helpline will provide practical support and advice to farmers on the bovine TB breakdown process. This week a new on-farm badger biosecurity scheme has been opened for applications. I have put €6 million towards it to support farmers with simple practical on-farm interventions, such as fencing off badger setts and raising water troughs. These will have a significant impact and I am financially supporting farmers to make these interventions. It will put a bit of power back in their hands as well because farmers regularly feel pretty powerless when it comes to a potential bovine TB outbreak.

Deputy Peter Roche: I get it and I absolutely understand the compassion the Minister has for the emotion, distress and anxiety an outbreak brings to farmers. Sometimes it could be dairy herd. In particular I would like to understand vaccination schemes and programmes. I know we have a vaccination programme for the badger. Are we looking at, or are we anywhere near, a vaccination programme for herds, particularly dairy herds? If there is an outbreak in a dairy herd it is financially crippling and the consequence might be that the farmer might not return to dairy. I am anxious to understand whether this is a plan going forward and how it might impact farmers themselves.

Deputy Martin Heydon: The difficulty is with identifying whether a vaccinated animal tests positive; animals that test positive and vaccinated animals cannot be differentiated. Some research has been done and we have collaborated with research projects on vaccination in the UK and beyond. Vaccination masks the presence of the disease and we need to find it to eradicate it. All of my measures are about identifying it and seeding it out. When I speak about the focus on breeding stock, it is because 6%, give or take, of our herds in the country have it. A lot of these young maiden heifers were sold to low-risk farms, so unbeknownst to those farmers they had brought in a high-risk animal, which was then seeding the disease. We need to identify these animals earlier in the initial herd and get them removed so they do not spread the disease. This is happening because we do not have one test that is 100% foolproof. The annual herd skin test that farmers are familiar with only has 80% efficacy.

One out of every five that goes through that tests negative but is positive, and that has been a key contributor to the disease. When we layer on the blood testing it increases our efficacy to over 90% but we do not have something that is 100%.

Deputy Peter Roche: The €6 million fund for preventative measures is most welcome. The compensation ceiling for someone with a pedigree in-calf cow, which we know the value of, is €3,000. Are we revisiting that because they are taking a huge financial loss, as well as the emotional loss and the upset caused as a consequence of the outbreak on that prize animal? I would like to understand whether that is something the Department will consider revisiting.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank the Deputy for his comment on biosecurity measures. It is fencing off a sett and keeping cattle back. It is not about keeping the badger back in from the cattle. The cattle nose in around the latrine where the sett is and that has been a considerable cause of the spread of disease. Having that practical measure where farmers identify the sett and fence it off will make a difference as will new water troughs. It was important to support farmers in those efforts.

We just finalised the tender process to increase staffing in the area of wildlife control. Most farmers affected by bovine TB only want to talk about wildlife. They are convinced that is it. This planned approach is identifying all elements of the cause and spread of infection. There is residual infection in herds as I referenced earlier. There is cattle and wildlife transmission, and we are addressing all parts of it. I received a record amount of money in the budget last year of €157 million for my new bovine TB plan. That was based on working towards eradication and turning the dial on the increased numbers and bringing them back. All of the focus of that money was to be on reducing the instances. It was not open to me under the conditions of that to open up compensation and ceiling caps. I would like to revisit it. I understand the challenge, but I have to focus the money I have on reducing that disease.

Questions Nos. 94 and 95 taken with Written Answers.

Agriculture Schemes

97. **Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the rationale for the exclusion of domestic dwellings from the TAMS solar scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35778/26]

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: My question is about the removal of domestic dwellings from the TAMS solar grant process. What is the rationale for the exclusion of domestic dwellings from that solar scheme and will the Minister make a statement on the matter?

Deputy Martin Heydon: The targeted agricultural modernisation scheme, TAMS 3, provides grants to farmers to build, improve, or both, a specified range of farm buildings and equipment on their holdings. The solar capital investment scheme, SCIS, is one of 11 schemes within TAMS 3. The number of applications and the level of funding provided to date under a number of TAMS 3 schemes, including the solar capital investment scheme, have far exceeded expectations. To date, a substantial proportion of the total TAMS budget, more than 20%, has been spent on SCIS alone. In order to ensure that the available budget for TAMS is distributed

fairly over the remainder of the CAP strategic plan programme period, it is necessary to limit the number of approved applications in recent tranches by applying ranking and selection criteria. In addition, in respect of SCIS, it is also necessary to concentrate the funding on on-farm consumption only. However, it is important to highlight that farmers can seek support through the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, for the installation of solar systems in respect of their domestic dwelling. The SEAI business grant is also available to the agricultural sector, including farmers, which is a further option for those keen to explore renewable energy generation.

In simple terms, I negotiated an increase in my capital budget last year and got €88 million for TAMS this year and next year. It is for the entire CAP strategic plan, so I have to manage the budget available to the end of 2027. I could accept every application that comes in now and not have any TAMS available in 2027. I cannot do that to farmers who need increased slurry storage or who want to invest under farm safety measures. There is a lot more than just the solar element to it. You see the significant drain on resources. I would love to be able to change that percentage and make it bigger if it were there, but this is about policy priorities and trying to design them. The SEAI is there from that perspective as well.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: It is positive that there is such demand for TAMS 3 and all the measures in it. It shows farmers are doing their bit in terms of energy and the future. Uptake of renewable energy programmes and mechanisms is hugely positive. Putting them through the SEAI for domestic is an opportunity lost. Maybe the solution is for the Minister to get his hands on some of that budget from the SEAI and move it to TAMS. Farmers are busy men and women. They have a lot to do. One application to cover all of this is still probably the most efficient way to do it. I go back to the fact that there is huge demand. It is positive that farmers are engaging and taking up the scheme. I ask it to be considered that a bit of that budget be moved across to fulfil that.

Deputy Martin Heydon: People will think I put the Deputy up to that question because he is singing my tune. The Department of agriculture and farmers have proved there is a demand to try to make their farms less dependent on fossil fuel energy. We have proved that if I have more money, I can spend it on that. This is in the context of an increased capital budget. The reason more people are disappointed now is that more people have applied. The average number of applications under TAMS 2 was approximately 3,000 per tranche. In the most recent application it was over 8,000, which was a massive increase in demand. You can see how resource heavy it has been on the overall TAMS budget. A total of 6,000 applications were received under SCIS and 3,425 approvals were issued allowing farmers to proceed with their investments. A total of €31.5 million was issued to farmers since payments commenced in June 2024. It is attractive and that is what made it very popular. There is no doubt that if we had more money we would spend it. If the SEAI wants to give me a slice of that budget or any other, we would spend it in that area.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: That would be positive. I have heard from farmers that the farm home can account for nearly 70% of electricity used, particularly those who are farming dry stock. Removing their homes from the process effectively means the TAMS system does not fulfil their needs. Another way to do it might be to get the SEAI to earmark some of its own

budget or have a clear heading for solar PV for farmers or a little more than the €1,900. In reality it is probably more for a farm building. I ask that we encourage ongoing uptake of TAMS and try to make sure domestic is covered in it, so it is efficient for farmers to get their entire job of work done at once rather than having to go through two processes.

Deputy Martin Heydon: The challenge is that if everything is a priority then nothing is a priority. I have 11 headings under TAMS and I have to try to manage that. It is the targeted agricultural measures scheme. When demand far outstrips supply something has to give. On that basis it felt fair to me that a residential house be taken out as opposed to farming activity. The intensive energy user on a farm benefited most from being able to apply for TAMS. It is a targeted agricultural measure. There are other ways for residential houses to get in there. I take the point that it would be better to have one central application process. I like that we were able to support farmers in reducing their energy requirements. TAMS is aligned to our climate and sustainability targets. That is renewable energy, but it is also low-emission slurry spreading, support for organic farmers, farm safety, increased slurry storage and improved water quality. All of those things are in the mix with TAMS, so it makes it competitive when demand is high.

Wild Fires

93. **Deputy Barry Ward** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the actions he is taking to prevent wildfires and encourage preventative measures by landowners as we enter the summer months; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34394/26]

143. **Deputy Barry Ward** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the position regarding any actions he is taking that seek to prevent wildfires, particularly any engagement he is having with State agencies as we head into the summer months; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34395/26]

Deputy Paula Butterly: Will the Minister underline the actions being taken to prevent wildfires and encourage preventative measures by landowners as we enter the summer months?

Deputy Martin Heydon: I propose to take Questions Nos. 93 and 143 together.

My Department implements a number of measures annually to raise awareness of fire risks among forest owners, managers, farmers and other land managers.

My Department monitors fire risk throughout the fire season in conjunction with Met Éireann and communicates high-risk fire weather phases in advance to the forest sector and other relevant stakeholders, including local authorities via fire danger notices. This enables preparedness and readiness of key equipment and personnel ahead of fire outbreaks. In the year to date my Department has issued two such notices. In 2025 my Department issued nine fire danger notices. Fire danger notices may be viewed on my Department's website.

My Department maintains a website with relevant information on fire risks, prevention and specific guidance on responsible use of fire by landowners. My Department also provides specific wildfire safety advice to the general public via the whole-of-government Be Summer

Ready campaign. My Department also co-ordinates on fire management with the European Union and other member states via the European forest fire expert group and also via the FORRISK forest risk facility coordinated by the European Forest Institute.

It is an offence to cut, grub, burn or otherwise destroy any vegetation growing on any land not cultivated between 1 March and 31 August in any year. Landowners found burning illegally could face fines, imprisonment and single farm payment penalties, where applicable. My Department monitors for activity closely and fires on agricultural land are investigated in relation to basic payments, or BISS, eligibility. My Department has no role in prosecutions under the Wildlife Act 1976.

That clearly outlines the work that comes under and the responsibility of my Department regarding wildfires and the challenges in that space. As I said, it is one of those issues that crosses more than just my Department.

Deputy Paula Butterly: We are always asking responsible landowners to act as custodians of the land and to act responsibly by following the regulations as set out by the Minister in regard to burning and taking those preventative steps. However, at the same time they are also exposed to the risks created by the actions of others with limited protection or recourse. In places like the Cooley Mountains we can see how quickly fires can take hold. There have been incidents where multiple gorse fires have broken out in a matter of hours. They have stretched the local fire services and threatened homes, farmland and forestry. These are not isolated risks. It is something the communities in north Louth have experienced directly. That is especially concerning and it is why I wanted to highlight there is a pattern in some of these fires. Too often they are not accidental but started deliberately and it is the landowner who tends to have to bear the burden of the financial cost. Very often when these fires are started, whether accidentally or intentionally, we have issues where people come on to land and set fire to bales of hay during the year and then disappear. If the fire brigade is called out its staff do their job and I recognise the services of the Louth fire brigade, which is absolutely exceptional in dealing with these fires. However, then the bill comes to the landowner and they are pursued by the fire services to pay a bill for something they were not responsible for in the first place. There is a perception in Louth that the financial and emotional burden can be unfair on landowners even when they have no role in causing the fire. That sense of injustice is deeply felt and landowners are doing their very best, as the Minister knows, day in, day out. We clearly need a more balanced approach.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I do not disagree. The Deputy articulated very clearly how her constituents in the Cooleys, and people in many mountainous areas countrywide, are deeply affected by wildfires that happen for a variety of reasons. Obviously some of what she described is criminal activity with very serious consequences for our wildlife, habitats and countryside and needs to be dealt with. It is important to recognise landowners may carry out controlled fires on uncultivated land from 1 September each year to the last day of February. This is only allowed if it is done in a controlled manner and provided the landowner follows the correct safety procedures. Uncultivated land is land that is not normally farmed or managed. That controlled burning is probably something that happens less now, for a variety of reasons. Farmers are older, there is less generational renewal on our hill farms and it is work for younger farmers but if that scrub and uncultivated land is not cleared it can be a tinder box

at a dry time of the year. There was an official fire danger notice issued only a few weeks ago and I was struck this had been necessary after the wettest winter we have had, a very wet early spring and before we are even really in the summer. It goes to show how quickly, with climate change, our land can dry with a very drying wind and the risk that creates for the high-risk period we are in. It is about enforcement of very clear rules where there is bad practice but also about supporting people so they are aware of the rules and what they can do in that important period.

Deputy Paula Butterly: I thank the Minister. The irony is not lost on me that the rain is bucketing down outside yet we are talking about fire notices but it is an important conversation to have. We have to be summer ready, as he rightly said. This is about protecting our farmers, our communities and our landscape. It is about ensuring those who act responsibly are not left to carry the consequences of those who do not. In Louth, even a small number of fires can have a disproportionate impact. We have a landscape that is very close to our communities and our communities are very close to their landscape and their nature. It is actively farmed and widely used for recreation. That is why taking preventative actions, getting the message out and educating people who come into our areas to enjoy the landscape so they are very well aware of the damage they may cause, whether accidentally or intentionally.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I again thank the Deputy for raising what is a really important issue. Sometimes we do not talk about these facts until after an incident when it is too late and the damage has affected our landscape, wildlife and farmers. It comes back a little to the relationship between landowners in the area and members of the public who maybe live in a more urban setting and love to share that amenity. That is where the Be Summer Ready campaign is really important. Obviously farmers are well aware, as custodians of the land, of what needs to be done, what their responsibilities are and what the penalties are if they are acting on the wrong side of the law but the public have to be acutely aware their actions have very real consequences. A lot of this is about communication and ensuring we communicate very clearly the risks and hazards people might not be as aware of, how quickly these fires can take off and, as the Deputy said, how they have a disproportionate effect on an area. I again thank her for raising those points.

Agriculture Supports

98. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the long-term measures being developed to protect farmers and horticulturists from fertiliser market shocks, including price volatility and supply disruption; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35766/26]

125. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to outline his strategy in ensuring stabilisation of fertiliser prices and supply for farmers and horticulturists; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35767/26]

126. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to provide an update on the availability, cost and supply of fertiliser in the State due to the

continued closure of the Strait of Hormuz; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34698/26]

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Farmers and horticulturists are being hammered by the price of fertiliser and supply uncertainty yet again. The conflict in west Asia has driven up fuel and fertiliser prices and disrupted key shipping routes. Fertiliser bills have shot up and vital deliveries are in doubt for so many. Farmers feel little has been done since the last fertiliser crisis and are getting more and more frustrated. They are very reasonably asking what long-term measures the Minister is delivering to shield farmers from supply shocks like this.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I propose to take Questions Nos. 98, 125 and 126 together.

Ireland is a relatively small market in respect of fertiliser sales and usage compared with many of our EU neighbours. No fertilisers are manufactured in Ireland, as the Deputy knows, and this results in indigenous fertiliser companies being price-takers. Those prices are dependent on global supply and demand. An estimated 35% of global urea trade passes through the Strait of Hormuz, plus 45% of sulphur exports and a significant volume of the ammonia used in nitrogen fertilisers. Overall it has been estimated 25% to 30% of global nitrogen fertiliser exports pass through the strait. The wider region is estimated to account for 45% of global urea exports, 27% of ammonia exports and 47% of sulphur exports. My Department continues to engage with fertiliser importers to monitor supply issues and concerns. Fertiliser product continues to arrive although challenges in supply exist, especially in the case of urea.

It should be noted that many farmers and other fertiliser users forward-bought fertiliser earlier in the year.

In addition, the Irish fertiliser industry purchased significant volumes of product in advance of the full introduction of the carbon border adjustment mechanism, CBAM. The national fertiliser database import figures show that fertiliser stocks increased significantly during the fourth quarter of 2025 with calcium ammonium nitrate, CAN, imports increasing by 55% and urea by 260%. Teagasc has a comprehensive information pack for farmers and their advisors, through a compendium of 20 fact sheets, to optimise the use of plant nutrients and to help farmers address the challenge of maintaining their farm outputs in the face of rising fertiliser costs and reduced availability.

One of the answers to this question is that we are reducing our dependency on artificial fertiliser because that is what we need to do in order to make our farming and food production system more robust on this island, particularly as we do not have domestic production of artificial fertiliser. The fact sheets supplied by Teagasc cover issues of soil testing, lime application, nitrogen usage, organic manures, fertiliser spreading and many other topics that will be incredibly useful for farmers. It is not just about what we spread on our land but also about the phosphorus and potassium, P and K, levels, acidity and composition of our land such that it can best take up those nutrients and be in the best condition to do so. This is where soil testing and lime application can, in the right circumstances and on the basis of those soil test results, make a significant difference. Depending on the type of fertiliser, increases in prices have varied. The price of CAN is estimated to have risen by about 20% since the beginning of March, while the price of urea has increased by as much as 60%.

My Department has no function in terms of fertiliser prices beyond the regulatory function of ensuring products placed on the market are in keeping with the fertiliser regulatory framework and that standards such as nutrient content are as described. However, I have continued to monitor the market situation given the negative impact that high fertiliser prices have had on farmers' expenditure and profitability. I will continue to engage with my EU counterparts regarding the impact of the Middle East crisis on the supply and price of fertilisers.

I have raised this issue on a number of occasions. The question was very much formulated on the basis of what we are doing to build our resilience and address the vulnerability we have in this space, but as a short-term measure, I raised the need to invoke Article 27a of the CBAM at successive AGRIFISH Council meetings. This allows for the suspension of certain elements under certain set criteria. I believe we are in this crisis period now where fertiliser should be set aside as part of CBAM. I had the support of a number of other member states on this request. We pushed for it but the Commission, to date, has not been minded to avail of it. What Commissioner Hansen has pointed to very clearly is the introduction by the Commission of a fertiliser action plan, and that is due to be published next week, on 19 May. I expect that fertiliser action plan to have a very significant series of proposals around the cost and availability of fertiliser and how that will impact us. That is something we await. The Commission is very clear on my views about the impact the conflict in the Middle East is having on the supply and price of fertiliser for our farmers and the knock-on impact that can have on food production into the future.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: It is hugely important to look beyond the immediate crisis and to set out a strategy for a more resilient supply. As the Minister said, the European Commission is about to launch its fertiliser security plan aiming at cutting dependency, boosting production and promoting alternatives. That is good and vital, but those solutions are going to take time to implement and farmers are under pressure in the short term. That will especially be the case next year. We are hearing that Russia, India and China, the main suppliers, will be looking to focus their supplies on their own farming sectors ahead of exporting fertiliser. That will really put pressure on next year. Is there a plan for possibly bulk-buying fertiliser? I note and welcome what the Minister said about CBAM. Possibly, at this stage, it is not really the time to be introducing CBAM, and I ask the Minister to press this issue further. Are there efforts to bulk-buy fertiliser to ensure there will be a supply for next year?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: The Minister spoke about price increases, including the price of CAN having risen by 20% and that of urea by as much as 60%. In the context of his engagement with importers and sellers of fertiliser, has any work been done with regard to ensuring that these price increases are based on a lack of supply rather than someone trying to make a profit on the back of fears that are out there? How has the Minister's engagement with the European Commission gone? It sounds as if it has not been utterly fruitful in relation to CBAM. What replies has he received?

In the previous question I posed to the Minister, he spoke in response about mid-April being crux time. We are well beyond that now. When is it believed that there will be a real issue? I agree with what was said earlier regarding our need to develop resilience. The Minister spoke about farmers engaging with their advisers. Where are we in relation to having a real

alternative to fertiliser? I accept that the Strait of Hormuz issue has been caused by others and has little to do with us, but we have to ensure that we build resilience.

Deputy Martin Kenny: The fertiliser issue is having a huge impact globally. Even the WHO has said that it is going to have an impact on food production and could lead to global food shortages. This is a real issue that we need to deal with here in Ireland with regard to resilience and to finding alternatives. The Minister mentioned that work has been done on this aspect and I welcome that.

One of the alternatives I would like the Minister to note is that there is an awful lot of poultry production in the North at the moment. As he knows, poultry litter is a very good fertiliser, particularly in the context of the tillage sector. I spoke to a poultry farmer yesterday in the North at the Balmoral Show. He told me he is applying for planning permission, but to get it, he has to show that he can get a licence to export the poultry litter to the South to be spread. He has been doing this for the past five years from his poultry farm, but he is having difficulties getting those things sorted out. It is not just him. There are several others as well. It is quite a problem because they need to get co-operation North and South in this regard. I ask the Minister to consider sorting out this problem because it is a very good source of nitrogen, especially for the tillage industry but also for other sectors. It is very clearly available and something I would like the Minister to deal with. On the broader issue, we really need to get to grips with putting supports in place for farmers to be able to get the adequate amounts of fertilisers they need to be able to develop their industry.

Deputy Martin Heydon: The geopolitical uncertainty in the Middle East is the key driver of this problem. It has put pressure on fertiliser prices and affected the likely availability of fertiliser over the course of the year. As I said, the EU Commission is bringing forward a fertiliser action plan next week. It is anticipated that this plan will focus not only on short-term crisis support but also on structural measures to reduce EU dependency on imported synthetic fossil fuel-based fertilisers.

Turning to Deputy Aindrias Moynihan's point, there definitely is not just a short-term reaction here. We need to learn from what is happening to ensure we are not back in this situation every couple of years whenever there is a conflict. In addition, there are proposals to provide a means of financially supporting farmers through targeted exceptional supports, which we also look forward to seeing the details of. It is expected that these proposals will contain measures to boost domestic production, promote sustainable practices and encourage the increased use of organic fertilisers and enhanced soil health to reduce dependency on synthetic products.

In the context of the blockages Deputy Kenny outlined, I am happy to talk to him afterwards about them. I am in Armagh tomorrow morning for a sectoral meeting of the North-South Ministerial Council, where I will be meeting my counterpart, Minister Muir. If the Deputy gives me further details, I will be happy to raise this with him tomorrow to see what the issue might be. I am not aware of impediments, they have not been raised with me, but perhaps the issue is on the Northern side. We can see what the situation is.

Deputy Moynihan referred to CBAM and that it is not the time to bring it in. Actually, inadvertently, CBAM has kind of been our friend in that because it was coming in on 1 January

this year, importers front-loaded and this meant there was an extra stock of fertiliser in the country. The national fertiliser database gives us very clear information around where we are. Imports of CAN have increased by 55% and urea by 260%, so we are definitely aided by the fact that there is a lot more product in the country and the fertiliser industry continues to import more stocks. My Department is in very regular contact with the fertiliser importer to assess supply issues and address them. Obviously, we have made a point around Article 27a, which we will continue to articulate to the Commission as well.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Has the Minister looked at the possibility of moving towards green sources of energy? We do not have a supply of fertiliser manufactured here at home because we do not have the gas, but we do have wind. Has the Minister looked at the possibility of using that type of energy in the context of developing green ammonia plants here?

12 o'clock

Second, there is a great opportunity in relation to recovered nitrogen from manure, RENURE, fertilisers, which have recently been approved. Europe should be looking at the possibility of becoming more resilient and self-sufficient, rather than having to reach out elsewhere, using those alternatives and moving away, as much as we can, from chemical options.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I ask the Minister to outline any progress made in relation to alternatives, be it supply or organics. When does he think we will have a crux in relation to fertiliser supply? Has there been any monitoring of prices and whether there is any price gouging going on? That would be utterly unacceptable.

Deputy Martin Heydon: The fertiliser database gives us good data in relation to where we are at. Fertiliser continues to be imported into the country and the database indicates that is sufficient fertiliser in the country at present. However, products such as urea may come into short supply. We continue to monitor the price as well.

To the broader point made by Deputy Moynihan about wind generation, one would not look at that in the context of Ireland alone. We will see what is in the European Commission's proposals in the action plan on fertiliser next week when it is published by Commissioner Hansen. We will see what the medium-term elements and supports are, but it is definitely a vulnerability for Europe that we are so dependent across Europe for this key component.

The Deputy made a point about RENURE. We supported the introduction of the RENURE measure, but it is not really of major benefit to us in its current form because of the lack of anaerobic digestion here. When the Deputy talks about us building our resilience, countries that have a lot of anaerobic digestion have digestate to go back out onto the land. From a water quality perspective, as well as our efforts to maintain the nitrates derogation, that would be greatly assisted if we had more anaerobic digestion in that space. That is where RENURE kicks in.

Deputy William Aird: I presume the Leas-Cheann Comhairle is not going to let me back in.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Unfortunately not. I was looking forward to the Deputy's intervention.

Deputy William Aird: Deputy Kenny, who does not even have a herd number spoke five times, and the Leas-Cheann Comhairle will not let me in.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Well said.

Deputy Martin Kenny: Will the Deputy give me his herd number?

Deputy William Aird: Will the Deputy come home and milk my cows this evening?

(Interruptions)

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please.

Is féidir teacht ar Cheisteanna Scríofa ar www.oireachtas.ie.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Is léiriú uafásach na figiúirí a foilsíodh inniu maidir le polasaí tithíochta an Rialtais. Sa chéad trí mhí don bhliain seo, tugadh 7,062 fógra díshealbhaithe do thionóntaí, an figiúr is airde a taifeadadh riamh. Tá sé seo suas níos mó ná 50% ar an tréimhse céanna an bhliain roimhe seo. Ní trí thimpiste atá sé seo ag tarlú. Tá na rátaí díshealbhaithe ag ardú as cuimse ó d'fhógair an Rialtas a chuid athruithe tubaisteacha ar rialachán cíosa an samhradh seo caite. D'oscail sé na geataí tuile agus dúirt muid caidé go díreach a tharlódh. An nglacann an Rialtas anois go bhfuil a chuid athruithe cíosa anois tar éis an ghéarchéim seo a dhéanamh i bhfad níos measa?

Figures published today are a devastating indictment of the Government's housing policies. Eviction notices are up by over 50%. More than 7,000 eviction notices have been issued to renters, the highest number ever recorded. These are real people, real lives and real families. They are workers, renters, young couples and older renters. Their lives have been thrown into turmoil as a result of the Government's policies. I am told of one couple in Galway who are in their 60s. They have worked all of their lives and have just been served with an eviction notice. The man told us that he has a pain in the pit of his stomach because they have literally nowhere to go. It is unconscionable what is happening to families like that at this stage of their lives. This did not happen by accident. The rate of evictions has skyrocketed since the Government announced its rent hike Bill last summer. The Government opened the floodgates. It was warned about what would happen. It was warned that weakening rent protections would drive up rents and that landlords would use these changes to force tenants out. It was also warned that renters would pay the price. Now, the evidence is in.

The figures to which I refer confirm that rents are continuing to rise. Rents went up again last year. At the very height of an emergency in housing, the Government decided to let

landlords charge full market rents from 1 March in respect of new tenancies. The result was predictable, and now we are going to see rent hikes of between 20% and 25%. Thousands of extra euros must be found by renters every year. That means more pressure on workers, families and people who are already at breaking point in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis.

What makes people so angry is the fact that the Government knew exactly what it was doing. It made a deliberate political choice to side with institutional investors, vulture funds and landlords over ordinary Irish renters in the context of what was a charter for rent hikes and evictions. The reality that people are facing now is brutal. Rents are off the scale because of the decisions that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have made. Even when people can afford to rent, there is literally nothing available. Young workers are locked out of ever owning their own home. Couples have been forced back into their parents' box rooms. Families are lying awake at night, terrified about getting an eviction notice. Workers in their 40s and 50s are wondering if they will ever have security and stability in their lives.

While all of this is happening, the Government continues to miss its inadequate social and affordable housing targets. Supply remains nowhere near the level of demand. What exactly are people supposed to do? For many, there is nowhere to go. Everybody knows what comes next, namely more homelessness, more families in emergency accommodation, more young people forced to emigrate and leave our shores and another generation locked out of the possibility of secure and affordable homes.

Today's figures expose the reality of the Government's housing policies, which is more evictions, more rent, more insecurity and more homelessness. It is not an accident. Will the Tánaiste admit that the Government's rent changes have made this crisis dramatically worse? Will the Government reverse its disastrous rent hike legislation that continues to drive renters out of their homes?

The Tánaiste: I am grateful to the Residential Tenancies Board, RTB, directors for the publication of their update today. When any report is published, it is very important not just to cherry-pick one figure in isolation and present it as the reality or, indeed, the totality of the analysis that has been carried out by the RTB because, of course, that is not the case at all. In fact, the report that was published a very short time ago shows that there was a 39% decrease in the number of termination notices issued in the month of March compared with the month of February. While the Deputy might be right and while he may wish to scoff, the reality also shows that there was a downward trend from February to March in terms of termination notices. That is also in the report, but perhaps it was overlooked.

The report also shows that there are clear signs of continued resilience in the Irish rental sector. We see more tenancies and landlords in the market than we did at the same time last year. That is a statement of fact. There are more tenancies, more tenants, more landlords and more homes. In many ways, this also tallies with the information we have seen from a recent market report on *daft.ie* which showed a modest rebound in the availability of rental properties. We have seen 16,548 new tenancies registrations in the first three months of this year. We have also seen 246,477 registered private tenancies in quarter one of this year, an increase on last year. A total of 105,847 private landlords registered in the first quarter of this year compared to the same quarter last year. This report shows there are more tenants, tenancies, landlords and homes than there were this time last year. That is not to say that there is not a very

significant housing challenge or that we are not still in the midst of a housing emergency, but it is to provide some fair and balanced analysis of the actual report that has just been published.

The Deputy referred to protection for renters. He knows, because he voted against them, that we took measures in this House to strengthen the rights of tenants. He knows that there are people in his constituency in Donegal who are now covered by rent pressure zones who were not covered before this Government brought in that legislative measure. He knows that since 1 March last, there is a rent increase restriction in place nationwide on all tenancies and that rent increases are capped at the level of inflation to a maximum of 2% for existing tenancies. He also knows that we strengthened tenancy protections, improved security of tenure, introduced tenancies of minimum duration involving rolling six-year tenancies and effectively ended no-fault evictions by larger landlords.

A point I would agree with the Deputy on is that it is about supply. We need to continue to build and provide more homes.

We are doing just that. We have built 241,000 homes since 2016, 36,000 of them last year alone. The Deputy talked about first-time buyers and people having the right to buy their own home. More than 27,500 people bought their own home in 2025, which was the highest number since 2007. More than 500 first-time buyers buy a first home every single week. When it comes to helping people in need of social housing, we have added over 85,000 new homes to the active social housing stock since 2016. We are building more social housing, with an additional 55,600 new-build social homes since 2016. Alongside that, we continue to keep supports in place, including the help-to-buy scheme, which the Deputy would get rid of, and the first home scheme, which he would get rid of as well.

We have serious issues when it comes to housing but we are now seeing more homes being built. We see more people being able to access tenancies. We are seeing more landlords in the market. We see encouraging figures when it comes to commencement of planning. We will continue to drive that agenda forward and get 300,000 homes delivered by the end of 2030.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Tánaiste can spin this whatever way he wants but it is black and white. The truth is that he is deepening the crisis because of the political choices the Government has made. The Tánaiste can shake his head all he wants. Does he know what is happening out there? His Government, his party, the Fianna Fáil Party and the Independent Members who support them have opened the floodgates. We warned them about what was going to happen. The Government is allowing landlords to drive up rent. We said they would use the legislation to evict tenants and that is what is happening now.

The Government is presiding over the highest rate of evictions since the Famine. In one of the wealthiest countries in Europe, families are being driven from their homes in their thousands. That is what the Tánaiste is overseeing. We have told the Government time and again that its policies are failing people. That is why so many are giving up. They do not believe they have a future in this country and they are losing hope because of the Government's failures. The Tánaiste talks about affordable housing that costs between €2,500 and €3000 to rent every single month. It is simply unaffordable. Does he accept that the Government's legislation has allowed a situation whereby we now have more evictions than was the case during the Famine and that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are presiding over that?

The Tánaiste: No, I do not accept it. Of course, Deputy Doherty wants people to give up hope and to give up on this country because his politics thrives on that negativity and divisiveness. However, the people are much more reasonable than him. They know we are building more homes than the EU average. They know that Ireland delivered the strongest rate of new housing completions across 19 countries in the EU in 2024. They can see the homes and the cranes. They can see the figures. They know there are more first-time buyers than at any time since 2007. They know there are more tenancies and that we are making progress.

The reality is that all Deputy Doherty does each and every week is hop on the latest headline. While we are making serious policy decisions across a spectrum of housing challenges, he has no sense of direction.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: What about evictions?

The Tánaiste: Whatever way the wind blows, Pearse goes. The problem is it does not add up. He wants to get rid of all the taxes and he wants more spending. He wants a mini-budget every week. Sinn Féin says it wants more affordable and available rental supply, yet Deputies opposite vote against every measure we bring forward. They are not even capable of responsible Opposition, which is why the people have never put them in government.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: The comments of former Taoiseach Bertie Ahern are deeply disturbing. Particularly alarming was the way in which he singled out specific ethnic, religious and national identities. More than being just offensive and irresponsible, his language was dangerous and inflammatory. For a politician who devoted so much of his career to finding a resolution to the Troubles - a conflict based on religious division - it was shameful to hear him refer to a child's religion, Islam, when he said he is worried about the next generation of Muslims.

In the context of the Dublin Central by-election, it was profoundly wrong to use language that could direct public anger towards migrants and minorities. We have already heard a candidate in that constituency make an outrageous call for internment of refugees. In the other by-election in Galway West, a torrent of despicable online racist abuse has been directed at the Labour Party candidate, Councillor Helen Ogbu.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy should not refer to by-elections.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Meta has failed to take responsibility for the hate speech it is facilitating.

The former Taoiseach, Mr. Ahern, remains a member of the Council of State. He is more than just a private person making ignorant remarks at a doorstep. As he should know, discourse around migration must be rooted in facts, humanity and respect. That is why the Labour Party, just last month, launched the Together We Thrive campaign. Our promotes the urgent need for a fair, fact-based national conversation on migration that highlights the enormously positive contribution made by those with migrant backgrounds to our society and our economy, and this is clear from the figures.

We know the health and social care sectors, in particular, rely heavily on migrant workers. The Tánaiste knows that nearly one in four nurses and midwives employed by the HSE comes from abroad. I met this morning with representatives of Nursing Homes Ireland, who confirmed that the nursing home sector simply could not function without the migrant workers who make up a huge proportion of its workforce. However, we are failing many of those migrant workers. I met yesterday with members of the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, INMO. They told me about the enormous delays in the system for nurses working here who seek to have spouses and children join them from abroad. I heard directly from those affected heartbreaking stories of family separation due to the delays in processing visas for family reunification. I spoke to a mother who works in cancer care in Rathgar, in my constituency, whose two daughters aged 4 and 7 have been living in Ghana with their grandmother for the past two years while they wait for permission to come here.

We are failing the people whose work is building our communities. We need to change our rhetoric and improve their reality. We must improve the family reunification process. Moreover, we need to be careful about our language. Does the Tánaiste condemn Bertie Ahern's comments? Will he call on him to apologise? Will he support my party's Together We Thrive campaign for a fair, fact-based and positive conversation about migration?

The Tánaiste: At the outset, while respecting the rules of the House in relation to by-elections, let me say that I absolutely deplore, condemn and abhor any racism directed towards any candidate in this democracy. I want to be very clear in relation to the comments of the former Taoiseach: they were not appropriate and they were wrong. It absolutely is perfectly legitimate in this country - in fact, I would even go so far as to say it is essential - that we debate migration policy. No one has an issue with that. It is important to debate it. We might have different views and perspectives on it, and that is okay. It is important that we debate the laws and systems around migration. No one has an issue with that.

The policy of the Government has been clear. Anyone who comes to Ireland seeking asylum from outside the EU or outside the EEA should be treated humanely and in accordance with international law. They have a right to be here and their application should be processed quickly. We have been trying to do our bit to ensure faster processing times. Of course, as per the point the Deputy is making, most people who come to Ireland do not come through the international protection system. They come through a whole variety of other ways, legitimately and legally, to play a positive role in our country. I take up the opportunity the Deputy has afforded, as I hope will everyone in the House, to recognise the very positive contribution those people make to Irish society and the Irish economy. Having people come here to work or study contributes to our country and makes our republic better and more complete.

Of course, as I said, we can have sensible and rational discussions on migration policy. The same is happening in every country in the world. That is different. However, it is never acceptable to single out an entire group of people based on their race, ethnicity or religion. That only serves to demonise or stigmatise a group of people and it is not a helpful contribution; in fact, it is hurtful. I was struck by the comments by the chief imam of the Islamic Centre of Ireland, Shaykh Dr. Umar Al-Qadri, that Mr. Ahern's remarks were offensive to all immigrants. He said it is important to discuss the challenges facing the country openly and honestly, that it is important to do so in a democracy and that we should always be willing to do it but that we should avoid the kind of rhetoric that would seek to scapegoat an entire community.

We benefit hugely from people who come here and make Ireland their home. They are working in our public services, including, as Deputy Bacik mentioned, as nurses, doctors and healthcare assistants. Hospitals would not function without people coming here. We are a better country as a result of people coming here. As I said, it is perfectly legitimate to debate migration policy and the systems we have. However, we should never group people based on religion, nationality or race. The former Taoiseach's comments have caused hurt and harm. I am sure that was not the intention. I certainly hope it was not the intention. I am sure it was not. It is important that everyone in this House, of all parties and none, is united in terms of being very clear on our views in this regard.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I thank the Tánaiste for his comment that Bertie Ahern's remarks were not appropriate and were wrong. Will he go further by calling them out and calling on Mr. Ahern to apologise? It is ironic, as the Tánaiste will appreciate as Fine Gael leader, that Bertie Ahern should have the temerity to fuel rhetoric that blames immigrants for systemic problems in Ireland. This is the man whose policies brought about the worst financial crash in the history of the State. Since that crash, migrants have played a pivotal role in rebuilding our economy. Let us acknowledge that.

We should look around this Chamber. We are dealing today with an outrageous slur made by a former Taoiseach against people of African heritage and descent. Yet, in this Chamber, there is no one of colour. There is no African voice to testify to the hurt those comments caused or to testify at first hand about the direct experience of racism.

My Labour colleagues and I very much hope that will change after the Galway West by-election. We know we have a candidate who exemplifies the new Ireland. I am not going to speak any further-----

(Interruptions)

Deputy Ivana Bacik: -----but we hope that will change.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Bacik should not make reference to the candidates or the by-elections. That was agreed by the House. She is showing poor example in what she is doing this morning.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: Are there by-elections on, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle? Sorry - I will certainly respect the rules of the House and take that point, but I also take the serious point the Deputy made because it is a serious issue. There are people feeling hurt today and we have to acknowledge that. I feel very strongly that we have to facilitate – the Deputy suggested ways we could do this and it is worth exploring those – ways of being able to debate migration in this country. That is a legitimate and important part of our democracy. We will all have different views, for example, on whether we should opt into the EU asylum pact. We believe we should, some people do not. We have different views and that is fine. That is politics and policy. It is evidence and debates that we will follow and work our way through. That is what we should be doing in this House. However, that is different to making comments grouping

people based on race, religion or ethnicity. I am quite sure it was unintentional but those comments have caused significant hurt to a significant number of people who make a very fine contribution to our public services and society. It is up to individuals what they wish to do, but I am quite sure, knowing Bertie Ahern, that he did not intend that harm and, therefore, he should reflect on it further.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Níl ganntanas gaoithe againn in Éirinn; tá neart gaoth againn. A windy island on the edge of the Atlantic, our potential for clean, cheap energy is immense. We could and should be a green energy superpower, exporting electricity to the rest of Europe. Instead, we are laggards. People are stuck paying the highest electricity bills in Europe. There are now more than 300,000 households in arrears. People are unable to pay for the basics in a country that is supposedly rich. Some €523 million worth of wind energy was wasted last year because of our crumbling grid infrastructure. That was 10% of all the wind energy produced. Meanwhile, the Government's insatiable appetite for data centres is cannibalising any increase in renewable capacity. The red carpet is rolled out for data centres while people freeze in their homes. It does not need to be like this and should not be.

Fine Gael has been in power for 15 years and there has not been one single offshore wind farm built in this country. We have had 15 years without proper investment in the grid and 15 years of being chained to volatile gas prices in a time of global uncertainty. Wholesale electricity prices in Ireland are nearly four times higher than in Spain. Spain is now producing enough solar and wind energy that electricity prices are no longer tied to gas. While the Irish Government has dithered and delayed, Spain has delivered. We can act quickly by rolling out solar panels. They are relatively cheap, easy to install and immediately bring down people's electricity bills. However, according to the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, the Government's grants are out of reach for people struggling to pay their bills. This failure to deliver is not abstract. It is felt by ordinary people every time they are hit with a bill. This is the legacy of the Tánaiste's party's decade and a half in government.

The Government has the resources to help people now while investing in our future energy security. We should have wind farms in our seas and solar panels on every home in the country. Our bills should be some of the cheapest in Europe, not the most expensive. Will the Tánaiste support the Social Democrats' solar for all plan to break our dependence on fossil fuels and give struggling households the clean and cheap electricity they need?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy O'Callaghan. I will come back at a time when we have longer than three minutes to debate my party's record in government, but I will debate it anywhere, with anybody, at any time in terms of the state we inherited this country in in 2011, the progress we have collectively made with our coalition colleagues since then, and the progress this country has seen across a whole variety of economic and social issues. Perhaps that is for another day, but I am not going to have a widespread, snide slur made on the record of my party.

The Deputy is right on the need to do more when it comes to renewable energy. I have already said in this House that, to be fair, the Deputy's party has put forward ideas that definitely merit consideration. Some of the Social Democrats' ideas around solar - I think I said this last week - merit further consideration. We as a Government will be looking at what more can be done in the budget in October to assist with what is an energy crisis for the world

and an energy affordability crisis for many people. We have taken a number of measures in the here and now to try to assist people with fuel prices. The Minister, Deputy Heydon's fuel support scheme for farmers is an example, with more than 3,000 people applying so far. There is the scheme for hauliers and the reduction in the cost of fuel at the pump. There have also been the changes made by the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, in terms of retrofitting grants, which we are seeing good responses to. There has been a very significant increase this year and last year in the number of people looking to get windows or doors replaced or to get solar panels. That is going in the right direction.

I am not suggesting that the Deputy is, but we can sometimes be fatalistic about climate, climate action and our ability to make progress. We saw the most recent emissions report of the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, in recent days confirming progress for this country. Ireland's recorded overall greenhouse gas emissions have reduced for a third consecutive year. We have managed to grow the economy and reduce our carbon emissions, proving that it is not a choice between economic growth and climate sustainability. We saw a decrease of 6.8% in 2023 and a further decrease of 2% in 2024. Ireland now has its lowest level of greenhouse gas emissions in 35 years, which is notable, given the fact that our population has increased by 1.5 million people in that time, there are 1 million new homes and there are 1 million extra vehicles on our roads. We are making progress. We have seen electricity generation from renewables increase fivefold since 2005. In February, which was only a couple of months ago, wind energy provided a record 50% of our electricity and Ireland has reached a record circa 8 GW of renewable generation capacity, up from only 4.8 GW in 2020. We are objectively making real progress in terms of our switch to renewables. That is true.

The Deputy is not saying it, but all too often, it is a question of do we want this or that. We have to continue to grow our economy and not suggest it is a choice between being on the side of the planet or of economic growth. It is possible to do both. This country is proof of that. The Social Democrats have put forward constructive ideas on what more we could be doing around solar power, and we will give consideration to them in the time ahead.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Fine Gael is 15 years in government. It does not have a single offshore wind farm to show for that entire time. Has the Tánaiste nothing to say for himself?

We should be a net exporter of clean electricity to Europe. Instead, we are one of its biggest importers of fossil fuels. We have the highest electricity bills in Europe because of the Government's failure to deliver in terms of renewable energy. It is fine for the Tánaiste to say repeatedly that the Social Democrats are putting forward good ideas, the Government will look at them and they have merit, but we need it to act. People in arrears on their electricity bills need it to act. Why is the Tánaiste just saying that our proposals merit consideration? Why does the Government not actually take our proposals on rolling out solar on the scale we need and bring down people's electricity bills by approximately 40%, break our dependence on fossil fuels and take the kind of action we need to be a world leader in renewable energy, not a laggard? Why is it taking the Government so long to act in these areas?

The Tánaiste: I have loads to say for myself, I can assure the Deputy. I am in a Government and leading a party in a Government that is managing to see emissions fall in this country for three years in a row while growing the economy, creating more jobs, seeing wages rise and seeing more homes built. It is entirely possible to do more than one thing at a time in

government. It is not fair to say that we are not making progress when it comes to climate. We objectively are. We are proving that despite the ideology of some, it is possible to grow the economy in a sustainable way. I have never bought into the view that it is a choice between one or the other. Yes, we need to protect the planet but we also need to make sure that people have jobs.

These data centres are not the bogeyman the Deputy likes to paint them as. They are a very important part of our economic model, literally fuelling jobs, economic growth and taxation across the country, and the Deputy will come in next week with an idea for how I should spend the taxes. Before we spend money in Ireland, we have to generate it. The National Treasury Management Agency, NTMA, gave a very significant warning to the Oireachtas today. When was the last time anyone came into the House with an idea as to how to grow the economy rather than just spend more money?

We will look at more ideas around solar in the time ahead. We have already taken action. There are more people qualifying for fuel allowance and household benefits than ever before. We are reducing the excise on diesel and petrol and there are support schemes for farmers and hauliers. We are not having a mini-budget every Thursday.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Those ideas-----

(Interruptions)

Deputy Seamus Healy: County Tipperary has more than 5,900 km of road and, based on the current pavement surface condition index ratings, it would cost more than €300 million to bring all the road network to a good standard, that is to the Department's rating of at least seven. According to Department of Transport guidelines, Tipperary County Council should treat 5% of the road network or 295 km under the road improvement programme annually and another 5% under the road maintenance programme. That is a total of 590 km. In the past five years, the council has only been able to treat an average of 300 km each year, or 5.1%, only 50% of the Department's target. To achieve the 10% target, a doubling of the Government allocation from €23 million to €46 million would be required.

The Department of Transport discretionary road grant has remained static since 2020 and the Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, grant has also plateaued. In the same period, from 2020 to 2025, costs have increased dramatically with road construction and road maintenance inflation of more 30%. The result is that the roads output has reduced by more than 20%. It also means that in a county with limited public transport where people need cars to go to school and work, roads have potholes and are substandard, with many stretches bordering on being unsafe.

On top of this bad situation, things have become significantly worse due to the illegal US war on Iran. As the Tánaiste will be aware, fuel prices have gone through the roof and this will cost Tipperary County Council roads department a further €400,000 in 2026. Bitumen prices have similarly soared, costing the roads department an additional €410,000 in 2026. The price of stone, concrete and Macadam have also soared sharply. A further significant cost has arisen from the damage done to the road network during the severe winter, which cost the council more than €600,000.

The council has lodged a submission with the Department of Transport seeking funding to cover this. Tipperary County Council roads department is urgently seeking funds to cover these unexpected costs of close to €1 million arising from the war in Iran and €600,000 for costs related to the severe winter weather.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Healy for raising the issue of roads, road maintenance, the quality of roads and, quite rightly, the implications that can have on road safety. The Government has increased the level of funding provided for roads. I will follow up specifically with the Minister on what the Deputy said about Tipperary and the council's submission to the Department.

The budget for regional roads is around €718 million, which is higher than in previous budgets, and I think we allocated to Tipperary County Council just over €49 million as part of that. Quite a lot of it is for the renewal and protection of regional and local roads.

However, the Deputy is not wrong to highlight two challenges that councils are facing through no fault of their own. The first is the significant periods of adverse weather we had. Some parts of the country were more impacted by that than others. On top of that, there is the absolute truth that when commodity prices rise, inflation rises and the cost of doing something increases. We have seen figures out today that show the consumer price index rising again. The war on Iran, apart from the horrific humanitarian consequences of war and conflict, is not consequence free in terms of economics and costs. I accept that local authorities through no fault of their own are having to deal with this as well.

As a Government, we will continue to keep these issues under review. At the moment we are working with local authorities specifically on the issue of storm damage and have asked for submissions to be sent in by local authorities. They will be assessed as speedily as possible. In my county, significant damage was done to roads as well. There is often a churn, if I can describe it as that, in capital spending, where there is often an ability to allocate and reallocate capital spending to these areas.

We will have to have an honest conversation. I do not mean this to be critical of councils at all but unfortunately rare weather events are not very rare any more. Therefore, as we set out our budgets each year for roads, we will need to be conscious of the proportion set aside or ring-fenced for the inevitability of some adverse weather. We need to get a bit better at doing that so we do not find ourselves somewhat surprised by the sadly more frequent adverse weather events. More broadly, on the issue of the impact of the war on costs, this is something the Government is having to review right across the system. We cannot chase inflation. We need to be careful that we do not do anything to worsen the situation but we will continue to do all we can to support State agencies and local authorities in the delivery of projects. On foot of the Deputy raising this, I will specifically ask that the Minister for Transport consider the submissions made by Tipperary County Council and come back to the Deputy directly.

Deputy Seamus Healy: I thank the Tánaiste. Good road conditions are vital for County Tipperary. It has limited public transport and is largely a rural county. People who work in any of our towns such as Clonmel, Tipperary town, Cashel, Cahir, Carrick-on-Suir, Thurles, Roscrea or Nenagh must drive to work and people who go to third level institutions in Clonmel or Thurles must drive. People who shop in any of those towns or go there for entertainment

must drive. Poor quality road surfaces contribute to road traffic accidents causing injury and death. As I already said, road conditions have deteriorated in the past five years because of static Government grants and inflation. The war in Iran has increased costs significantly. Will the Tánaiste confirm whether Tipperary County Council will be compensated for those unexpected costs, which it has no control over?

The Tánaiste: I can confirm this morning that we are working our way through the various impacts of the storm damage and we will continue to engage on that. I also acknowledge that the Government has been increasing public funding. I am not directing this at the Deputy but I hear public bodies speaking as though they are speaking at a time of reduction, while public spending has only gone in one direction and that is up. I absolutely assure the Deputy that Tipperary County Council has received more support across a variety of funding heads from this Government than it did in previous years. I also acknowledge the funding we provided for the main street in Tipperary town and the ongoing works on the N24 from Cahir to Limerick. I think €2.7 million was allocated to that.

However, the Deputy referenced specific issues, including storm damage and the impact of the war. We need to work our way through these in a methodical fashion. However, I have to make the point - and it is not specific to Tipperary - that we cannot have a situation where local authorities find themselves surprised by adverse weather, climate change and storms. Sometimes things can be worse than we expect but we need to get better at planning and factoring into our roads budget and other budgets that damage can happen to infrastructure due to adverse weather. I will ask the Minister to come back to the Deputy.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy James O'Connor: I raise the possibility of having nuclear energy in Ireland. As people across both sides of the House will be aware, I am bringing forward legislation to remove the prohibition on generation of power by nuclear fission. I would like to get an idea from the Tánaiste, the leader of our coalition partners in government, of his views on whether this is possible.

As we are in the House and it is being discussed by Members on both sides, Ireland now has the most expensive energy market in the European Union. We need to ask ourselves how we got here. Other parties on this side of the House have been in government over the course of the past 15 years. I just heard the leader of the Labour Party describe my proposal as a hare-brained notion.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Correct.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: Hear, hear

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Exactly

Deputy James O'Connor: Sometimes I wonder whether Róisín Shortall had a point but I will say this. We have the possibility to follow what other countries in the 27 EU countries

have done already by implementing nuclear power. We can look at Finland. The grand committee of the Finnish Parliament was in Leinster House two weeks ago. Finland has the same population as Ireland and 40% of its energy comes from nuclear power. As a consequence, its citizens, small businesses and the economy of Finland have the cheapest energy in the European Union. We have had lots of discussion about renewables. Looking at the potential of nuclear energy and understanding the strategic aims and objectives of decarbonising our economy, common sense will tell us from what other countries have done successfully, that nuclear energy is the way to go.

The technology is changing. It is safer in the era of AI and with what it can do for engineering it is now easier than ever to do this successfully. Is it time we looked at this as an option, as other countries have done successfully?

People here will always pick the worst examples of where nuclear has gone wrong. I understand that is for reasons of safety and because of debates we have had in times gone by, but can we not acknowledge 30, 40 or 50 years later that things have changed, it is safer and, as a consequence of our inaction and the mistake of putting that prohibition in place, we have put ourselves in a vulnerable position when it comes to energy security and energy sovereignty. We have the opportunity to become, as other countries have, a cheaper place for people to get energy and to bring down bills in this country once and for all.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for the question and I genuinely thank him for the positive contribution he is making to this debate. This is what politics is about. He made the point about the different views the Labour Party might have. It is a good thing to have debate on policy. We do not do enough of it in this House. Politics has become far too performative, shouty and headline-grabbing. The fact that the Deputy is coming forward with a Bill, has engaged with us on it and is asking people for their views on it is a good and positive thing that we should be doing as legislators. Comhghairdeas and gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta on that.

Energy security is an important point because we have found ourselves, particularly in Ireland but more broadly across the European Union, very exposed to what happens very far away from our country. We can all commentate on what leaders of other countries do - that is not inconsequential - but we cannot necessarily change that. A conversation about energy security is extraordinarily important. We have a tendency - I am sure none of us is innocent of this - to list everything we are against: we are against this interconnector, that or the other. There is an onus on all of us to stop saying what we are against in terms of energy security and start saying what we are in favour of. Different people will have different views on that but I take that point, too.

My gut feeling on this is I do not understand why we have a legislative prohibition on nuclear energy. There might be policy reasons why people do not wish to pursue it and practical reasons why it is not efficient. We can debate that, but I am not sure primary legislation in the 21st century needs to prohibit nuclear energy. Why can we not assess, consider and debate rather than having that legislative prohibition? That is my position. I do not believe we should have a legislative prohibition on nuclear technology and I do not think that serves policy debate well. In fact, it shuts down policy debate. Different people will have different views. That is my view and I am entitled to it.

The programme for Government is clear on renewables. That has been the path we have been pursuing as a country. We are making good progress on that and need to make more progress. Here is where we get to the evidence piece. I am not an expert on energy. In fact, I think we could do with more expert voices on energy in the debate. However, I am told that the development of traditional nuclear power plants can take many years and require the creation of an entire new regulatory system that does not exist in Ireland, and that there can be issues around construction, procurement, safe demolition and disposal of waste. I am not saying that I have fully bought into this idea but debating and considering ideas around energy security is not a bad thing.

I am told by the Department of communications and energy that nuclear power might not practically be part of our national electricity production in this decade or, indeed, the next decade. I say that just to put these opinions on the table. I believe the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, is leading on developing an evidence base - that is helpful - for a pathway to decarbonise the Irish electricity system after 2030 and reach net-zero emissions by 2050. The SEAI is considering a number of technologies, including small modular nuclear reactors, as part of that consideration of an evidence base. We need all the evidence and information. The first question is whether we want a primary legislative prohibition of that. There is some merit in debating that.

Deputy James O'Connor: The Tánaiste's comments are welcome and the fact that we are having this debate is a healthy thing. Input from all sides of the House would be welcome, and that is why I am proud to bring this forward. We need to discuss dealing with our future demand. We know we are looking at a 45% increase in energy need in Ireland up to 2034. That cannot be delivered by renewables alone. We will be heavily depending on carbon energy to do that. We need to face the fact that Ireland could be fined €3.5 billion to €8 billion of public money annually by the European Commission if we fail to meet our decarbonisation targets.

This is the great conundrum. We have a population that has grown by 1 million since 2006 and is expected to grow another 1 million in the same period of time in the future. We will have a 45% increase in energy demand.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: From data centres.

Deputy James O'Connor: We have a strong economy at full employment. We need to grab the bull by the horns and plan ahead because if you fail to plan ahead, it is much like politics, in that you could end up like the Labour Party - out of government for over a decade and irrelevant.

Deputy Mark Wall: Good man, James.

The Tánaiste: I was trying to pay tribute to Deputy O'Connor for being constructive but---

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: Did we get under Deputy O'Connor's skin?

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: What did the Tánaiste say about debates in this Chamber?

The Tánaiste: Nobody in this House is irrelevant and we should all play a constructive role in debating. There are different views on this issue. Everyone brings their view. I said we did not have enough experts. My constituency colleague, Deputy Whitmore, may be much more expert on this, given her professional background, than I am. We should be hearing one another's ideas. That is the point I am making. We do not serve the people well when we shut down debates around issues as crucial as energy security and reduce those debates just to what we can do in the short term and the here and now. It is important to help people in the here and now, but people also want to know where we will get to. I have given my view on the primary prohibition in legislation. I do not think that serves the debate well. I welcome the Deputy's legislation on facilitating that discussion on why that prohibition is there and if it needs to change.

I note that the International Energy Agency, IEA, looked at some of this and published in December 2025 an independent expert assessment of our energy system with a specific focus on the role of the power sector to 2035. It is called Powering Ireland's Energy Future. It said Ireland had an opportunity to be a global leader in integrating variable renewable energies, particularly wind, into our energy system. It did not consider nuclear technology as feasible for inclusion in the Irish energy system in the timeframe out to 2035. However, let us have the debate. The Deputy's legislation is a constructive part of that.

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

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Another day, another story of shocking waste on the watch of Fine Gael and Fine Gael. A public accounts committee investigation has uncovered that the Government has overspent to the tune of €40 million on IT projects in the past two years. This is crazy stuff, again and again. A DNA information system was supposed to cost €760,000; the final cost was €2.7 million. A childcare IT project was supposed to cost €7.1 million; its final cost was over €10 million. A new Garda case management system collapsed with €500,000 already spent - money wasted, down the drain. What in God's name is happening? What is going on here? Nobody in charge, no oversight, no accountability. From bike sheds to IT projects, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are serial wasters of the public's money. It is easy come, easy go, and people have had their fill of it. What is the Tánaiste going to do to put a stop to the serial wastage we are seeing under this Government?

Deputy Mark Ward: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy says "no oversight, no accountability", but is that not exactly the role of the public accounts committee and is that not exactly why that information is in the public domain? It is because we have oversight.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: To tell us it is wasted. We are trying to make sure it does not get wasted.

The Tánaiste: We have accountability. We have oversight as well. When the Deputy quotes selectively, it leads us to one view. When you look at the thing in the round, we see that many projects come in on time and on budget. Many come in under budget as well. We must continue to call out and highlight those areas where they do not and continue to ensure that they do better. The Deputy likes to create the view that every bit of investment in cycling or somewhere to park a bike is waste.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Who said that?

The Tánaiste: It is a little bit more complicated than that. It might not work for the old TikTok videos but it deserves a more considered response than Deputy Doherty ever gives here in this House.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Will the Tánaiste address the issue? Will he address the fact that the Government is wasting millions of euro while asking ordinary people to tighten their belts?

The Tánaiste: If the Deputy wants to talk about wastage, he should get a mirror.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We move on to Deputy Wall.

Deputy Mark Wall: Speaking on behalf of the still very relevant Labour Party,-----

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Hear, hear.

Deputy Mark Wall: -----childcare is a major cost of living for many working families across this country. In too many cases, parents are paying a second mortgage in childcare fees while others are struggling to even find a place for their children. Many community and small providers are barely getting by while educators are leaving the sector day by day. At the same time, we hear that a major childcare chain is being sold to a UK investment firm for €75 million, a chain that has come to Leinster House with its begging bowl and lobbied hard for an increase in fees and for funding increases. Ireland is sleepwalking into a corporate takeover of childcare. The Labour Party was the first party to propose €200 childcare fees, something that all parties seem to agree on. When will the Government get serious about delivering a fully public system of early childhood education and care that delivers affordability for parents, quality for children and fairness for small and medium providers, who are the backbone of this sector?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. I believe that a proper publicly supported childcare system that works and has enough places, access and affordability is key, not just as an equality issue or a social issue - though it is both - but as an economic issue. It is an important issue.

There is a consensus in this House, at least on the destination we want to get to. We have made progress. Any parent who uses the national childcare subsidy scheme knows that scheme provides more funding and support now than it used to. People know that core funding has increased. People know we are now investing more. For the first time, the State is now investing directly in publicly funded State facilities as well. I believe that with four budget left

to go for this Government, the next budget needs to deliver a roadmap to get us from A to B and show how we will make that progress. I want childcare to be a major priority in the forthcoming budget.

Deputy Rory Hearne: More than 7,000 notices to quit were issued during the first three months of this year, which is an increase of 51%. The Tánaiste's response to being challenged on the highest levels of evictions since the Famine was quite shocking and revealing in its lack of concern for the real-life trauma, stress and anxiety of thousands of households, many of them children, families and workers, who were evicted in the first three months of this year. The Government's new rental measures were brought in to benefit the vulture funds and vulture landlords. The Government caused this and allowed them to hike the rents, but refused to give the existing quarter of a million renters any new protections from evictions. Does the Tánaiste accept the Government's policies have caused this and that what we need is an emergency ban on no-fault evictions? How can the Tánaiste stand over it?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Time is up, Deputy.

Deputy Rory Hearne: He did not even respond in terms of this being trauma and people's lives being thrown upside down - thousands of them. Yet, the Tánaiste says, "Oh well, we will see what we can do." Why will the Government not put a ban on evictions in place?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy Hearne. The Tánaiste to respond.

Deputy Rory Hearne: The Tánaiste says he cares. He says he has compassion. This is what is needed.

The Tánaiste: I do not accept that at all. What I accept is that we are seeing more tenancies in this country now than we did last year. We are seeing more landlords in the market now than we did last year. Yes, we did see a spike in notices of termination. That is a statement of fact. There are other statements of fact in the report the Deputy has not mentioned, including the very significant-----

Deputy Rory Hearne: Does the Tánaiste accept the trauma?

The Tánaiste: I absolutely accept that when we live in a housing emergency people experience trauma. I also accept that we need to get private investment in to build houses and that not every house will be built by the taxpayer in this country. Private investment is a really important part of any sustainable housing market. We have a difference of view on that.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I have just received notice of what will be proposed for a massive increase in council rent in South Dublin County Council. It is looking to increase the basic rate of council rent by 25%. It will mean thousands of euro extra per year for many families at a time of a cost-of-living crisis that people simply will not be able to afford. It is not just South Dublin County Council. We have seen this in Dublin City Council where rents have been increased by almost 30% - there is huge resistance and opposition to that - and it has happened

in other councils across the country. This is not happening just accidentally in multiple places across the country; it is coming from the Government. Looking at the programme for Government and the Housing Commission report, there are references to merging social and cost-rental housing over time, and this new report from the Department of housing talks about changes to facilitate closer alignment with market rent. In other words, get rid of social housing, effectively, and have people paying these completely unaffordable rates. How are people meant to be able to afford massive increases in their rents at a time of a cost-of-living crisis?

Deputy Mark Ward: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: As the Deputy knows, the setting of rents is a matter for each local authority, quite rightly. We either believe in local democracy or we do not. We fund it well enough. We have set it up well enough. We have councillors elected right across the country and there are chief executives. It is up to each local authority to decide their situation.

There is also a need for fairness in relation to rent. We provide a lot of social housing in this country and there is a need to make sure people are paying a fair rent as well. That is an important part of the social contract. There are many people looking for a home and trying to buy a home. There are many people in private rental accommodation. There are many people who have scraped and saved to buy their own home too. There is a need for fairness and if there are some rents local authorities do not believe meet that fairness test, there is a case to make sure they are set at an appropriate rate.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: This coming Monday, the European Parliament will vote on a framework that will allow gene-edited foods onto Irish supermarket shelves with zero consumer labelling and no safety screening. While we have our own ban on the cultivation of traditional genetically modified organisms, GMOs, we cannot, under this legislation, ban the import and transport of EU-approved genetic material for food and animal feed. There is a real risk that Irish organic farmers, whose livelihoods depend on keeping their crops entirely new genomic techniques, NGT, free will actually be contaminated because trace amounts of wind-blown NGT can lose them their organic certification. My understanding is also that under this final law, because it allows for an earlier law to be brought in, it is making GMOs, in this context anyway, fully patentable. Therefore, corporations will have control over some of the material. In this context, given the Government allowed this to proceed to this stage, will the Tánaiste now instruct Government MEPs to vote against the legislation so we can have further scrutiny because this will pose a risk to Irish organic farming?

The Tánaiste: I have been at this long enough to know I never instruct my MEPs. They will each consider and scrutinise these issues well, but the Deputy highlights an important issue I will not pretend to be across all the details of. I will make myself familiar with it now on foot of the Deputy raising this and will engage with my own party MEPs in advance of that vote on Monday. I am happy to come back to the Deputy on this.

Deputy Tom Brabazon: I raised with the Tánaiste a few weeks ago the issue of the Irish Water works on James Larkin Road.

The Tánaiste: Yes.

Deputy Tom Brabazon: Those works continue at a snail's pace. I will raise today, in the context of the bank holiday weekend just gone, that DART services were suspended for maintenance works. At the same time, we also had the Dublin City Half Marathon take place in which 13,000 athletes were running. This caused transport chaos, particularly across the northside. I witnessed up to 30 people standing at several bus stops when the buses were caught up in traffic, we had no DARTs and the roads were chock-a-block. There was no alternative way for people to get around. I ask that something be done in relation to long bank holiday weekend works on the DART. The DART is absolutely necessary on those particular weekends.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Brabazon. I am a bit frustrated to hear they have not made progress more speedily on those Uisce Éireann works. I really appeal to Uisce Éireann, when Members of the Oireachtas, Government or Opposition, raise issues in this House to please take them seriously. Please, just take them seriously. Uisce Éireann is a State body and TDs raise issues here in good faith. When they raise them on the floor of the national Parliament, if Deputies could receive a comprehensive and meaningful response I would appreciate that.

In regard to DART works more generally, it is a statement of the obvious that upgrade works and the likes cause a level of inconvenience. I accept and acknowledge that. I know that traditionally Iarnród Éireann has chosen bank holiday weekends to undertake projects of significant scale because the extra weekend day allows it to achieve more progress more efficiently, rather than doing it over multiple weekends or inconveniencing weekday passengers and people who are going to work. Iarnród Éireann tells me it is standard international railway practice for bank holiday weekends to be used for works. I will ask the National Transport Agency, NTA, to work closely with Iarnród Éireann and Dublin Bus to see if any measures could be put in place to help mitigate that, including maybe increased capacity on bus routes. I will follow up with the Minister for Transport on that.

Deputy Peter Roche: I will raise the issue of the provision of public footpaths, and their maintenance, repair and infill. There is no dedicated funding for such within the local authorities. There is active travel funding, roads funding and all of the other streams, which are very often criteria-driven. For example, any engineer who is requested to have a look at the provision of new footpaths, maintenance or repair, the answer received is that there is no funding. I am looking for separate footpath funding to be dedicated to each council so they will be able to repair and maintain what they have.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Roche for raising this issue. It is an interesting point. The primary focus of investments in the regional local road network is on the protection and renewal of them, which obviously plays a crucial role for communities, local economies and the likes. We have very significantly increased our funding on that. There is a discretionary grant under the regional and local road grant that can be used by councils for a wide range of works, including footpaths. Local authorities have that discretion from that grant allocation. I know some local authorities decide to do footpath programmes from that grant. The broader point the Deputy is making, when we are trying to encourage people to be active and the safety issues

in rural Ireland in particular, is a valid one. I will certainly work with our colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and others on this to see if there is more we can pursue. I will come back to the Deputy on it.

Deputy Ann Graves: The much-needed additional gardaí announced for Swords and Malahide are very welcome. However it does not address the need for a fit-for-purpose station in Swords. The station we currently have was built when Swords was a village. We now have a population of over 41,000 and growing. It services the areas around it, including Portmarnock, Donabate and further afield.

I o'clock

The gardaí are doing the best they can with limited services, including working overtime to deal with antisocial behaviour, etc. An upgrade has been planned since 2005 and nothing has happened. We really need a fully functioning Garda station. I met the Minister for justice in October. He promised to visit the station. I raised it again on the floor of the Dáil and he promised to look at it again. Can we do something about it?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for her contribution and for acknowledging the additional gardaí, who are badly needed. We need to continue to increase the number of gardaí through Templemore. The Deputy is right that as we increase the number of gardaí, we need to make sure we have modern fit-for-purpose stations. The population of Swords is now much closer to the population of a city than that of a village. I welcome the fact that the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, said that he will visit. I certainly follow up with him on that.

Deputy Emer Currie: Fine Gael has always believed in rewarding hard work, encouraging initiative and aspiration and supporting people who try to build a better life for themselves and their families, but increasingly our tax system is sending the opposite message. Workers today are pushed into the 40% tax band at income levels that are no longer considered high by any reasonable standard. We now have one of the lowest entry points to the top rate of income tax anywhere in Europe. That means people who take on extra hours, who go for promotion, who build a career or try to earn a little more are seeing more and more of that effort taxed away. A tax system should reward ambition and not penalise it, making work pay and not making people question whether it is worth it. Does the Tánaiste agree the next four budgets provide an opportunity to take a more ambitious approach to widening the standard rate and strengthening the principle that work should pay?

The Tánaiste: I fully do and I thank Deputy Currie for raising this issue. People who work hard should be able to get ahead and not just get by. Work must always pay. There are far too many people in this country who feel they play by the rules, do everything they possibly can, spend long times commuting, have childcare costs and the like and at the end of the month, they say "Is that it?" when they look at their payslip. We need to do better on that. We have a proud record on this. In 2015, you paid the higher rate of tax at just over €33,000. It is now €44,000. I want to see a personal income tax package in the next budget and in the next four budgets.

Deputy James O'Connor: I will raise an issue of the utmost importance in Youghal, County Cork. Under the HSE capital plan, we were promised that there would be an exploratory look into Youghal in respect of a new ambulance training college by the National Ambulance Service. We need this in our community for the economic investment, the jobs coming from the State and because of how much work was put into this under the previous Government. I am asking the Tánaiste for his support in respect of that. What we also need in Youghal is a better and faster ambulance service and a full-time base that is funded and staffed, which is under that same capital plan. There have been some deeply sensitive cases in Youghal recently where people have been waiting too long for ambulances with tragic consequences. Will the Tánaiste speak to the Minister for Health to see if we can get this moved on as quickly as possible? I have done my utmost on behalf of the people in east Cork and Youghal to see that this issue gets the attention that it needs and deserves.

The Tánaiste: I certainly will. It is a very important issue. The National Ambulance Service plays a literally life-saving role right across our communities. I am proud of the work that we have done together in Government where we increased overall funding for the National Ambulance Service by 41% between 2022 and 2025. We increased staff, with 588 more staff to a total number of 2,655, and we invested €126 million in the ambulance fleet in those years as well. I will raise the ambulance service in Youghal and the commitment to the new ambulance training college there with the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, and ask that she come back to the Deputy directly.

Deputy Mark Ward: As the Tánaiste is aware, Saggart is the location of a State-owned IPAS centre. This was purchased by the State without any meaningful consultation with residents or Opposition TDs. Sinn Féin submitted an amendment to the recent International Protection Act for community consultation but the Government opposed this. Any area that has seen an increase in population like Saggart will see pressure on existing facilities. One of the measures that people in Saggart have been calling for is high-visibility policing. I welcome the recent announcement of the high-visibility programme in parts of Dublin and across the country, but residents of Saggart were extremely disappointed that they were not included in this programme. I submitted parliamentary questions to the Minister for justice that were ruled out of order, stating that the Minister has no responsibility for these actions, which I find a bit bizarre. What the residents of Saggart are looking for is a safe well-managed village environment for everybody in Saggart to enjoy and they are calling for high-visibility policing for Saggart and the surrounding areas. Is this something that Government can support?

The Tánaiste: The Minister for justice is not accountable in terms of where gardaí are deployed, which is only my best guess as to why that question would have been ruled out of order but, of course, the Government has an active interest in policing, Garda numbers and working with communities. I am very conscious that the community in Saggart - good decent people in Saggart - have asked Government for a number of investments in differences in their community, with high-visibility policing being just one. I will certainly follow that up with the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, and ask him to come back directly to the Deputy.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: In October 2024, the Tánaiste launched the report of the Dublin city task force. One of its key recommendations was to recruit an additional 1,000

gardaí for the city centre. He strongly endorsed the report. I am sure he will remember he wrote in the *Irish Independent*, "I am up for it. I hope you are too." Eighteen months later, only an additional net 40 gardaí have been recruited across the city centre divisions. I asked the Minister for justice about it this morning. He said that it is still Government policy but was unable to give me a timeline for when this would be delivered. He went on to say it was very much dependent on recruitment and retention in Templemore. He mentioned the fact that communities all over the country are calling for extra gardaí as well so he did not sound particularly up for it, to be honest. Can we take it that the policy of an additional 1,000 gardaí in the city centre is being moved to the aspiration column? Is there a clear set of measures that the Tánaiste can point to that this commitment the Government made for an additional 1,000 gardaí in the city centre will actually be delivered within a timeline?

The Tánaiste: I remember that day well. I think the Deputy was at the launch with me. It might be the day the Deputy suggested the date of the general election. I remember it was a busy day but I am very pleased we launched that report and that we have taken a number of decisions recently in terms of resourcing the Dublin city centre task force, including the appointment of Robert Watt to oversee the office to deliver that as part of Dublin City Council. He is a very experienced public and civil servant. The plan has been fully endorsed by the Government and by Dublin City Council. We are seeing Garda numbers increasing in Dublin. We are not allowed to mention the "B" word but I am sure as he is out and about in Dublin, the Deputy is seeing recognition from the community in Dublin around high-visibility policing and more Garda numbers. We need to continue to drive that forward. It is factually true that Garda numbers in Dublin city are increasing again and we remain committed to the target of 1,000 gardaí.

Deputy George Lawlor: There are four children's disability network teams, CDNTs, in County Wexford and none of them have a full team. Some are missing psychologists, some are missing occupational therapists and some do not have nurses or social workers available and it is not possible to cross cover. In other words, someone on the CDNT team in Wexford cannot provide the service to somebody who has a requirement in New Ross. It has been said to me that the CDNTs in Wexford are in chaos as a result of the lack of staff and full teams available to them. Children and their families are really suffering. Will the Tánaiste advise on the Government plan to ensure that the CDNTs across County Wexford and across the country have a full complement of the services required?

The Tánaiste: I can quote a lot of statistics but that is not going to fix the challenge. We are increasing the number of people working in CDNTs. We are funding more posts and training more people but there are clearly real challenges in terms of fully staffing some of these teams. The Deputy mentioned specific issues with regard to the four teams in County Wexford and the inability - perhaps for very good reasons, I do not know - to cross cover. On foot of the Deputy raising this issue, I will ask the Minister of State, Deputy Emer Higgins, to take a look at that to get an update from the HSE and to come back to the Deputy directly.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: This week, I went to Clonsaugh in Dublin to see what was supposed to be the 199 bus, which was meant to go from Glendalough through Roundwood to Bray. The 199 service was announced in April 2025. In May, I was told by the NTA that it

was fully funded. In June, it went out for tender and in August, Nolan Coaches won that tender. It bought a bus and hired four drivers for that service. It was meant to start in September. September came and went - no bus. January came and went - no bus. March came and went - no bus. The Tánaiste can see where I am going here. There is no 199 bus, certainly none that is operating on that route. The funding would appear to have been pulled from this bus service.

Many people are making very big life decisions on the basis that they need that service, whether it is to go to college or work. They need to know when this bus is going to be up and running. Will the Tánaiste ensure the funding will be there? It needs to happen immediately. This has gone on way too long, with no answers from the NTA. The Tánaiste spoke earlier about how agencies should be responsive. I, and the community in Roundwood, have had very little information from the NTA. Could the Tánaiste please give an update on that?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Whitmore for raising the issue. I have heard the annoyance, to put it mildly, of our constituents regarding this issue. On foot of the Deputy raising it today, perhaps we could convene all the Wicklow TDs with the Department and the NTA to try to get some facts on this. I will certainly play any supportive role I can, and I will link in with the Deputy's office to set that up.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: We had no rail service on the northside the last bank holiday weekend, from Connolly to Howth and Drogheda. I get Iarnród Éireann's needs around the ability to do 76 hours of work across a bank holiday weekend and the benefits of that but, equally, we had 12,000 or 13,000 runners coming to the north city centre to run the Dublin city half marathon, and absolutely no rail service to carry them in or out of the north city centre.

I understand Irish Rail's position but if we are going to do that, the NTA and Dublin Bus need to be working twice as hard to ensure there is a bus service to cover that hole. I went past Bus Áras on Saturday morning where there were huge queues of people waiting to leave, and in Howth in the evening time, there were lines of people waiting to leave. The bus service was clearly not at capacity.

I endorse Deputy Whitmore's comment. I am trying to get information from the NTA on a whole range of issues but it is difficult to get information, data, clarity and answers from it. Can we get answers and work with the NTA and Dublin Bus to make sure these services are provided?

The Tánaiste: Again, I am annoyed and irked to hear about this. I am not annoyed with the Deputy or Deputy Whitmore. State bodies have to be accountable to the Oireachtas and the democratically elected people. That does not mean they are always going to give us all the answers - I get that - but you have to at least feel as an Oireachtas Member of the Government or the Opposition that you are getting a proper flow of information. I will certainly take that away.

Uisce Éireann was raised a few minutes ago, and we have the NTA now. I do not work for the NTA or Uisce Éireann and I do my very best to answer questions but the fact people are having to come into this House and raise these issues because they cannot get those answers from a State body is not acceptable. I will personally pursue this at every opportunity.

I thank Deputy Ó Muirí for raising the issue. He is right; there are good, international railway practices as to why they bank holiday upgrades. He gets that, as do I, but there is also that important thing called joined-up thinking and the NTA, Dublin Bus and others need to work together to make sure that if one service is going to be down, another service is ramped up. It is not rocket science. It is not splitting the atom but it needs to happen. I will follow up directly with the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, on foot of the Deputy raising this today.

Deputy Colm Burke: The South Infirmity Victoria University Hospital presented a proposal for the opening of theatre 5, which is vacant because the two new ophthalmology theatres opened were for orthopaedic treatment. There are currently 11 orthopaedic consultant whole-time-equivalents in the hospital, with two more coming in January. The proposal was that this theatre would open and work 12 hours a day and up to 10.30 p.m. for recovery of patients there, and that would include additional staff. The proposal was made, the hospital understood it was accepted and it was acknowledged that it was accepted. The recruitment has occurred but the hospital has now been told the money is not going to be provided for the additional staff.

At present, there are 7,382 patients waiting for outpatient appointments, 363 waiting for treatment and 233 waiting for day care. That has all been put on hold now because the funding has been withdrawn and the hospital is concerned about it.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Burke for raising the matter. I know the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, is committed to working with him on this issue, as am I.

Significant investment has been made at the South Infirmity Victoria University Hospital in recent years. The annual budget has increased significantly and staffing has grown significantly, with the former by more than a third and the budget by more than 64%. We have seen several significant capital projects completed with the relocation of the ophthalmology outpatient department from CUH to South Infirmity in 2022. However, there is clearly a need for those new developments and projects that were expected. On foot of Deputy Burke raising this today, I will engage with the Minister who will work with him closely on this.

Deputy Michael Collins: On 15 April, I raised with the Taoiseach this issue about patients of the highly respected Dr. Fiona O'Reilly in the greater Clonakilty surrounds, who are not being seen by SouthDoc after-hours services, due to Dr. O'Reilly discontinuing her membership with SouthDoc. On 23 April, I received what I would call an angry reply from SouthDoc management, telling me that I failed to seek clarification on the issue from the SouthDoc regarding the facts. What South Doc management does not realise is I am a TD and a servant of the people. It is my duty to ask questions in this Dáil on behalf of my constituents, and I will quote facts which are in this letter from SouthDoc management, sent to patients of Dr. O'Reilly stating that this doctor is no longer a member of SouthDoc and it is, therefore, unable to provide out-of-hours consultations or appointments to her patients. It goes on to say that if you have a medical emergency, ring 112 or 999.

The people who got these letters, and I got a number of them again today, in the greater Clonakilty area, some were over 80 years of age and more with small children, are extremely upset and worried to think that if they are ill overnight, they are not to contact SouthDoc. We need to find a solution here and it needs to be 100% patient-focused, as I am. The patient

should not be caught up in any disagreement between parties. Can the Tánaiste help Dr. O'Reilly's patients resolve this matter with the HSE?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Collins. We are now on the third example of an elected Member of the Oireachtas being frustrated by their inability to get answers from those who are accountable to the democratically elected Members of the Oireachtas. I thank him for raising the issue. The staff in SouthDoc in Clonakilty do fantastic work but I am aware of the issues the Deputy has raised in this House. I will speak directly with the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, and ask that she inquire with the HSE and come back to the Deputy directly.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: We all recognise the scale of the challenge facing the transport sector as we work to meet our climate obligations and, obviously, heavy goods vehicles are among the most difficult parts of that sector to decarbonise. Electrification is progressing but it is not yet a realistic option for the majority of those long-haul operators. It is in that spirit that I ask the Tánaiste to clarify what can be done from the Government's point of view with regard to support for hydrotreated vegetable oil, HVO, as a transition fuel for the haulage sector.

It can reduce emissions by up to 65% when it is sustainably sourced. It works in existing diesel engines with no modifications needed and is blended with diesel and used in heavy transport in the Netherlands, Finland, Italy and the UK. Major manufacturers like Volvo, Scania, MAN and Mercedes Benz use HVO in their engines. Hauliers especially face increased climate compliance costs, and HVO offers an immediate and practical pathway to lower their emissions without any new vehicles or infrastructure. Could the Tánaiste indicate what steps might be taken to encourage the use of HVO and to assist this sector in its decarbonisation goals?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Moynihan for raising this issue. First, as the Deputy knows, we have worked hard to try to support the haulage section and I praise the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, for his leadership on that and the engagement we have had with the Irish Road Haulage Association and others, which is right and proper. However, the Deputy's question is also quite important because it is harder for some industry sectors to transition, and what they do not need from us in this House is a lecture and attitude they get sometimes from the left and far left who are not here to hear this.

They are a crucial part of our supply chain and economy. We need them to work and we need them to function. Our policies need to get more sophisticated in recognising that, whether that is incentivising people to be able to make that transition or better support. People are good and decent; they want to work with us. We need to challenge ourselves as to how we can help them make that transition, and HVO is an important part of that conversation. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, is familiar with that, and we have had some conversations with the sector on that too. On foot of the Deputy raising it, I will ask the Minister to come back to the Deputy directly.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Before we finish, as Leas-Cheann Comhairle, I often have the task of going through parliamentary questions and refusing them, or asking that they be referred to the appropriate agency. I want to follow up on the complaints I have received, and a letter from Deputy Carol Nolan, to inform the Tánaiste again that the replies are inadequate, and

there is little or no response from the agencies. As Leas-Cheann Comhairle, dealing with these parliamentary questions and having to sign-off on some refusals or lack of information, I believe the Tánaiste is correct in saying they are responsible to the House and I agree with the approach he is taking.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle. I hope the agencies have looked in on today's proceedings. He does his very best to chair these proceedings, and I do my very best to answer as best I can the questions put. It is fair to say there is clear concern across this House about the lack of responsiveness of several unelected heads of agencies, which needs to be reflected on. Both this Oireachtas and the Government should consider how to ensure that because this is not about us; it is about the people we serve.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.20 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.20 p.m. and resumed at 2 p.m.

Industrial Development (Amendment) and Miscellaneous Provisions Bill 2026: Second Stage

Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Peter Burke): I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I am pleased to bring the Industrial Development (Amendment) and Miscellaneous Provisions Bill before the Dáil. This is a short but important Bill which further empowers IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland to accelerate investment, employment and regional development. My Department keeps the statutory framework of the enterprise agencies under review as the Government's enterprise policy objectives evolve. The purpose of this Bill is to ensure the enterprise agencies have the legislative tools they need to incentivise investments that underpin Ireland's strategic goals.

The Bill strongly supports a number of objectives outlined in the programme for Government and the action plan on competitiveness and productivity, namely job creation, regional development and reducing carbon emissions. The Government continues to support Irish-owned companies to grow and scale, along with providing direct investment towards each step of their decarbonisation journey. At the same time, as global competition for foreign direct investment, FDI, intensifies, Ireland need to say agile and ambitious to win investment.

This Bill introduces a dedicated environmental aid grant, allowing the agencies for the first time to assess projects on solely carbon emissions criteria under the grant powers of the Industrial Development Act 1986, streamlining the approval process and cutting red tape. The Bill also provides for agencies to support their clients in accessing external consultancy services, enabling them to obtain professional advice and guidance on the green and digital transitions. This support will help businesses to grow on a sustainable and competitive footing over the long term and will be particularly valuable for SMEs, which often do not have in-house expertise in areas such as digitalisation or decarbonisation. It also amends the Industrial Development Act 1995 to allow IDA Ireland to enhance its property and infrastructure offering by co-investing in projects with third parties. This amendment will allow IDA Ireland to

leverage its property budget, expanding its ability to provide property solutions in regional locations.

Currently, IDA Ireland can only invest by itself, although it collaborates with others, including local authorities. Once this new legislation is enacted, it will be able to partner with other organisations to deliver enterprise property solutions, once the terms have been approved by the Ministers for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment and Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation.

In relation to opportunities in defence, security and resilience, DSR, the Bill deletes section 8(5) of the Science and Technology Act 1987, which requires the enterprise development agencies to secure formal Government approval before they engage in, or promote, any activity of a primarily military relevance. The rationale for this is that Ireland's enterprise landscape is evolving in a rapidly changing European and global context. Increasingly, the Irish enterprise base needs to respond to DSR-aligned technology opportunities which are emerging. As the Department of Defence has noted to me, this area has developed to include fields such as cyber defence, space domain awareness, maritime security tasks and hybrid threat monitoring.

The European Competitiveness Fund, expected to begin operating in 2028, will consolidate and build on existing EU-level investment instruments designed to strengthen European industrial capability, including in defence and space. A key enabler to maximising our engagement in EU funding initiatives is the capacity to utilise the competence and capability of both Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland.

The section 8(5) provision is broad, open to varying interpretations, and creates ongoing practical difficulties in determining when - and to what extent - teams in Enterprise Ireland or IDA Ireland may engage with existing or prospective clients that might be considering opportunities in DSR technologies. It is outdated, given the comprehensive, multilayered regulatory environment that now exists in this sphere. The proposed amendment allows the agencies to support, financially or non-financially, enterprises in the DSR sphere as with other parts of the economy, subject to compliance with all existing controls and legal obligations governing the sector, including rigorous project appraisal, the export controls regime, ministerial powers and Government oversight and the defence procurement safeguards. It does not affect existing Government policy on military neutrality.

Furthermore, this Bill provides a vehicle for other unrelated legislation from my Department. First, it includes amendments to the Dangerous Substances Act 1972 related to flammable liquids to ensure that Ireland's dangerous substances legislation and licensing regime is fit for purpose and ensures a safe working and retail environment. The Bill will amend and bring the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005 up to date with the code of practice for the governance of State bodies, which recommends that board appointments be for a period of three to five years. The Bill amends the Chemicals Act 2008 to ensure, in the transposition of related EU legislation, that Ireland is not considered in default of its obligations under EU law due to the penalties being insufficient. The Bill also includes an amendment clarifying Enterprise Ireland's Freedom of Information Act responsibilities.

I will briefly outline the main provisions of the Bill, which comprises 11 sections in three parts. Part 1 is technical in nature. Section 1 contains standard provisions relating to the Short

Title, construction and commencement of the Bill, while section 2 is a definition of the Dangerous Substances Act 1972 and section 3 is a repeal and saver related to that Act.

Part 2 amends the Industrial Development Act of 1986, 1995 and 1998, beginning with section 4. Section 4 provides for the addition of a section 21A to the Act of 1986 which provides for the enterprise agencies, IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland, to make grants for environmental protection initiatives on terms and conditions at their discretion, including solely environmental conditions such as carbon abatement, once initial approval criteria have been met. In addition, this section provides for a new section 21B of the 1986 Act, allowing the agencies to support their clients in accessing external consultancy services for advice or studies in respect of technological innovation, environmental protection, or business development.

Section 4 also updates the technology acquisition grant thresholds to align with the individual and aggregate grant thresholds of other grant categories in the legislation. These are the thresholds which apply before specific Government approval must be secured. The threshold for individual grants will be amended to €7.5 million and the aggregate threshold will be amended to €15 million.

Section 5 amends the Industrial Development Act 1995 by the addition of a section 6A which allows IDA Ireland, either itself or jointly with Enterprise Ireland, to co-invest with third parties, such as other State agencies which make strategic investments, to develop property solutions for industrial or commercial activities, through the creation of jointly owned designated activity companies.

Section 6 amends the wording of Section 7C of the Industrial Development (Enterprise Ireland) Act 1998 to clarify that grants given by IDA Ireland under section 21A and 21B of the 1986 Act are not to be counted towards Enterprise Ireland's aggregate threshold in section 7C. This is the threshold which applies before specific Government approval must be sought.

Part 3, the final Part of the Bill, includes a number of miscellaneous amendments. Section 7 removes the definition of "petroleum-spirit" and consequential references to the latter from the Dangerous Substances Act 1972 and replaces this definition and references to petroleum-spirit with a definition of "fuel" that includes flammable liquid, as outlined in the EU classification, labelling and packaging regulation. The purpose of this amendment is to extend the scope of the requirements under the Act for anyone storing certain quantities of petroleum or other flammable liquids to hold a licence issued by the Minister or an appropriate local or harbour authority. This amendment also enables the summary prosecution by local or harbour authorities of a person who, in contravention of the provisions of section 21 of the Act, has in their possession or control fuel under the meaning of the Act without having a licence to do so issued by the appropriate local or harbour authority.

Section 8 provides for the deletion of section 8(5) of the Science and Technology Act 1987, which requires the enterprise development agencies to secure formal Government approval before they engage in, or promote, any activity of a primarily military relevance. The proposed amendment will allow the agencies to engage with and support enterprises in the defence, security and resilience sphere in the same way as with enterprises in other sectors, subject to compliance with all existing controls and legal obligations governing the sector. Section 9 provides for bringing the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005 up to date with the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies published in 2016, which recommends that

board appointments be for a period of three to five years. Currently, appointments to the board of the Health and Safety Authority are for a period of three years in line with the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005.

Section 10 provides that in the transposition of EU legislation on detergents, the Minister is not considered to be in default of obligations under EU law due to the penalties being insufficient. Section 5 of the Chemicals Act 2008 is amended to facilitate the making of regulations for the purpose of giving effect to obligations arising under the treaties governing the European Communities or under Acts adopted by institutions of the European Communities. In addition, section 29 of the 2008 Act is amended in relation to offences.

Section 11 amends Schedule 3, Part 1, of the Freedom of Information Act 2014 to ensure that Enterprise Ireland's disclosure obligations under the Freedom of Information Act are not overridden by the statutory confidentiality obligations contained in the Industrial Development (Enterprise Ireland) Act 1998.

I commend the Bill to the House and look forward to engaging with Deputies on the matters to which it relates on the floor of the House today and on Committee and Report Stages. I have a medical appointment in about half an hour, so I may have to leave early. I just wanted to make people are aware of that. I will be listening to everything that is raised during the debate.

An Ceann Comhairle: I appreciate the Minister telling us that. Deputy Bennett is next.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: Sinn Féin welcomes the overall intention of this Bill. We have been calling for the streamlining of enterprise supports for a long time now. Sinn Féin and I are glad to see the progress in this space. Measures that improve access to supports, modernise industrial development legislation and help businesses transition towards a lower carbon and digital economy are long overdue. There is no question that many businesses are facing enormous pressures. Rising energy and fuel costs, increasing operational expenses, insurance costs and the demands of digitalisation and decarbonisation are all placing huge strain on businesses across the State. Where this legislation seeks to simplify access to supports, reduce unnecessary administrative burdens, and improve the delivery of grants and consultancy supports, Sinn Féin supports these objectives.

The success or failure of this Bill will depend on one thing, namely whether SMEs are genuinely prioritised. SMEs are the backbone of our economy. They account for 99% of business and employ the majority of workers across the State, particularly in rural towns and villages and regional economies. Too often, enterprise policy in the State has focused heavily on attracting and supporting large multinational investment while indigenous Irish businesses struggle to access the same level of support and strategic attention. That must change. Environmental protection grants and digitalisation supports all sound wonderful on paper but they must not become schemes that are easily navigated by large corporations, while smaller businesses are left behind due to complex bureaucracy or lack of resources. For many SMEs, particularly family-run and locally owned businesses, the challenge is not willingness. Businesses want to invest in energy efficiency. They want to modernise, reduce emissions and lower energy costs. The problem is affordability and accessibility. Many small enterprises simply do not have the upfront capital or dedicated administration staff to navigate lengthy applications, consultancy processes or complicated terms and conditions. Supports must be

practical, accessible and responsive to the realities facing smaller firms. If a small manufacturer in Monaghan, a tourism business in Cavan or a family-run enterprise in rural Ireland cannot realistically access these supports, then they are not worth the paper they are printed on.

Sinn Féin particularly welcomes efforts to widen environmental protection grants, consultancy supports for sustainability and digital transition. Businesses need support to adopt greener technology, improve competitiveness and reduce long-term costs. This is not only important for climate targets, it is critical for future resilience in the indigenous sector. However, simplification must still go hand in hand with accountability and transparency. Public money must always be subject to proper oversight and deliver clear economic and social value.

On the provisions relating to strategic investment and designated activity company, DAC, structures, Sinn Féin believes there is merit in strengthening the State's capacity to deliver industrial sites and strategic infrastructure, but, again, regional balance matters. Enterprise investment cannot continue to be concentrated in Dublin and a handful of urban centres while other places struggle to attract jobs and investment.

This legislation must support balanced regional development and sustainable local employment across the State.

I will briefly touch on my constituency of Cavan-Monaghan. Last week, I visited Silver Hill Duck, which is marking the beginning of construction of a new processing facility in Emyvale in County Monaghan. It is a great Irish company that provides good employment locally. Enterprise Ireland was there, as was the Minister of State, as they should be. Silver Hill Duck is an example of tremendous success; a company that started with six ducks in 1962, now provides more than 6 million ducks worldwide.

Sometimes in the past we had issues with IDA Ireland and Ministers when things did not go to plan and with factories or sites where projects were not developed or where there were business closures or job losses. I ask the Minister to reflect on this and, in practice, to engage and be on the ground, even more so when challenges arise. That is even more important in communities in Cavan and Monaghan, which have seen not only a dearth of inward investment under successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments but sometimes a dearth of interest. In one case, IDA Ireland completed an advanced technology building in Monaghan business and technology park in 2021 but it still remained vacant last year. I would appreciate it if the Minister could provide an explanation for this as well as outline future plans for the site.

To address the proposed removal of section 8(5) of the Science and Technology Act 1987, while the amendment is intended to modernise access to EU defence and security-related funding opportunities, Ireland's military neutrality must remain fully protected.

Overall, Sinn Féin welcomes the intent of the Bill. We support measures that make enterprise supports more efficient, more accessible and better suited to the challenges businesses now face but we will continue to work to ensure SMEs, indigenous enterprise and regional communities are not treated as secondary considerations. This must be a priority. If our small businesses succeed, local communities succeed, regional economies grow and jobs are protected.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: As my colleague stated, we support anything that improves the lot of business from the point of view of streamlining systems, services and grant application schemes. There are concerns about this legislation that I will deal with. The intent can be fine but unless we have the resourcing and capacity, we will have particular issues.

At a meeting of the Good Friday Agreement committee recently, representatives from various chambers of commerce, including those in Dundalk and Newry, contributed. They were almost singing from the same hymn sheet about the work that needs to be done regarding cross-Border co-operation. I have raised this issue many times with Ministers and taoisigh in the context of the necessity of dealing with the taxation issues that exist across the Border. A particular issue exists whereby those who live near the Border cannot work remotely in the other jurisdiction. This creates a difficulty for them and, in particular, for the companies that employ them. I put on the record once again the necessity for this to happen. Their big issue is industrial development and enterprise in the area, and they spoke about the M1 Border corridor and the real benefits we have in the area, including the new relationship between Queen's University Belfast and Dundalk Institute of Technology to develop what will hopefully become Dundalk university college in the very near future.

What we really need is infrastructure. The first issue the representatives to whom I refer spoke about was wastewater infrastructure. We know about the need for this in the context of both future industrial development in the Dundalk area and housing. Decisions were made regarding a new development of 502 houses. The latter could not proceed because of insufficient infrastructure. This is an issue that cannot be dropped. In my area, there is a local enterprise office which is linked with Enterprise Ireland. There is also InterTradeIreland, and IDA Ireland has a huge footprint in the area. We need to see new industrial sites to allow for the possibility of having a new WuXi, medtech, pharma or tech of any sort.

When the development of housing is refused, industrial development will also be refused. I thought it was utterly shocking that, whatever about me, other elected representatives are bringing up the issue of Uisce Éireann and the need to upgrade the infrastructure. Everyone in Dundalk heard 2027 being given as one date for the upgrading of the pumping station on Coes Road in Dundalk, but now we hear it could be in 2029. The date for the completion of the treatment plant on Point Road in Dundalk has been put back from 2030 to 2033. None of that is good enough. Not only do we need to make sure we have serviced sites available for industrial development, we also need to make sure that we have the basic infrastructure required. We can have all the legislation the Minister brings forward, but it will not make any difference if we cannot get rid of wastewater. The latter is causing particular issues with regard to housing and flooding, particularly in the part of Dundalk where I live.

Sinn Féin has always had a great interest in supporting indigenous enterprise. When we see the measures in the Bill to strengthen this and help businesses transition successfully to a low-carbon economy, we all accept that it is the only way to go. Therefore, anything that facilitates it is to be welcomed. When we speak about local economies, we sometimes become fixated on the large operators and foreign direct investment. This is not to take away from their importance but we know that an awful lot of Irish-owned SMEs provide the backbone of local economies. We have all seen the issues with the economy being overly exposed and overly reliant on some of these big operators. We need to make sure we have State supports and

investment opportunities and that we see facilitation in relation to this. I do not think anyone would complain about any of this.

We need to see an expansion of enterprise grants. This means having clear pathways for SMEs to access funding. When we talk about funding schemes or grant schemes, the biggest issue we generally have is the difficulty in accessing them and a complexity that does not necessarily help. We are generally talking about people who run very successful businesses and have capacity. We need to look at this from the point of view of not only having the schemes available but ensuring they are streamlined as much as they can be. This is accepting that due diligence needs to be carried out.

What are we speaking about when we refer to SMEs? The latter are 99% of the businesses in the country, and they employ the majority of workers at in or around 68%. As much as I speak about the M1 Dublin to Belfast corridor and its importance for the economy in that part of the world, it is a part of the world where we need to see more seamless interoperability, which I spoke about earlier.

We need to see a greater level of balance. We know that this has impacted not only on industrialisation in particular parts of the country, but also on employment and other matters, for example, how we have not facilitated infrastructure like roads, wastewater, clean water, etc.

We cannot have a conversation with somebody who runs a small business without talking about the issues that exist for them. Some of those relate to the complexity of filling out grant applications and so on and navigating that system. We have an inability to accept that we are dealing with the most expensive electrical costs in Europe. It is all well and good having task forces and talking about taking action. I was disappointed when Deputy Pa Daly brought forward Sinn Féin legislation to give further powers to the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, to tackle this, as we had an element of Government support but not a sufficient amount to support the legislation. The Government said it was too early to deal with this and that it was looking at it. We were a long way into high energy costs long before the madness in the Middle East.

We need to make sure that we look after people as best we can. We cannot mitigate all the pain, but this Government could have gone further. I reiterate the need for a cost-of-living mini-budget. It is a necessity. While I welcome that there was a cost-of-disability forum and consultation and that they will affect next year, we are failing those with disabilities at this moment in time.

We all know the benefits we could be seeing with artificial intelligence. However, we have already seen issues. We can talk about Meta. While I was told that the recent job losses at PayPal were different, there has been huge displacement, particularly in the tech sector, as regards artificial intelligence. We need to have a considerable interest in job retention and getting the benefits of artificial intelligence. We also have to look at delivering further jobs even if they are different from the ones being displaced. The Government has to keep an eye on this.

It does not make sense that we are not reducing the administrative burden. The Minister of State, like many here, has spoken to businesses about the complexity and burden placed on those businesses by some of these schemes. We have to look at that.

I spoke about energy. We want to see that transition to sustainability, so we will need to see grant schemes that can deliver on same and reduce the long-term costs for businesses.

I turn to the amendment of the Science and Technology Act 1987 to remove the requirement of formal Government approval before enterprise agencies engage in activities of primarily military relevance. There is nobody who will not be worried about that, given the interoperability and close relationships of many companies, particularly with those engaged in illegal war. We can talk about the US regime but there is also what we have seen over many years from the genocidal Israeli regime. I am incredibly worried by these moves, which fit into the move away from our independent foreign policy of non-alignment and neutrality. I do not think anyone has an issue with making sure that we are sufficiently resilient as regards protections in terms of cyber and subsea cables, but I do not think that can be correlated. We know that there are companies we should not be dealing with, namely, ones dealing with those engaged in killing civilians by the thousands. That is in no way good enough.

When we talk about businesses, we also need to make sure that our services run well. I commend Debbie McCole, my colleague from the ambulance service, who is a Sinn Féin councillor in Drogheda. We should have seen the Government act quicker. We are glad that things are in the Labour Court. We need to see movement on that.

I will have a particular issue to take up with the Minister of State later.

Deputy George Lawlor: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill. It is substantial and wide-ranging legislation touching on everything from environmental grants to consultancy supports, from technology acquisition thresholds to the establishment of new joint venture property vehicles. There are even amendments to the Science and Technology Act, freedom of information, FOI, provisions and the governance of the Health and Safety Authority. It is, in effect, a legislative omnibus, and as with all omnibus Bills, it demands careful scrutiny.

At first glance, the Bill appears technical and administrative, even benign. However, beneath the surface lie important questions about transparency, accountability, strategic direction and the balance of power between the Oireachtas, the Government and our enterprise agencies. Our purpose is not to oppose for opposition's sake, but to interrogate thoroughly and constructively as to whether this Bill is fit for purpose and aligns with our national priorities or safeguards the public interest.

Before turning to the specific provisions, we must position this Bill in its broader context. Ireland's industrial and enterprise landscape is undergoing major change. The twin transitions of green and digital are no longer aspirations. They are urgent imperatives. Our commitments under the climate action plan require rapid decarbonisation across all sectors. Our competitiveness challenges, highlighted repeatedly in the Action Plan on Competitiveness and Productivity, demand innovation and technological adoption at a pace we have not previously achieved. At the same time, global industrial policy is shifting. The United States has embraced a muscular interventionist policy through the inflation reduction Act. The European Union has responded with a green deal industrial plan and revisions to the general block exemption regulation. International competition for investment, talent and technological leadership is intensifying. Against this backdrop, it is right that we examine if our legislative framework for enterprise support is modern, flexible and aligned with EU state aid rules. It is

right that we ask if IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland have the tools they need, but it is equally right to ensure that these tools are used responsibly and strategically.

One of the central features of this Bill is the creation of a new environmental protection aid grant category. On the face of it, this is a positive development. The Industrial Development Act 1986 does not provide a dedicated mechanism for environmental grants, forcing agencies to shoehorn decarbonisation projects into categories designed for employment creation or output expansion. This is clearly outdated. However, several questions arise. First, what safeguards will ensure that environmental grants deliver genuine emissions reductions? We have seen in other jurisdictions and in some EU programmes that environmental funding can be captured by projects that are marginal or already commercially viable without State support. The Bill allows the IDA and Enterprise Ireland to assess applications solely on environmental criteria, but it does not define those criteria. Will the Minister publish detailed guidelines? Will there be independent verification of emissions savings? Will grants be contingent on measurable outcomes?

Second, how will the Government ensure that environmental grants do not become a substitute for regulatory action? There is a risk that companies may receive public funding to meet standards that they should be required to meet anyway.

The Bill refers to supporting projects beyond mandatory EU requirements, but again, the definition of "beyond" is left to administrative discretion. We need clarity to avoid subsidising compliance. What is the scale of the funding envisaged? The Bill creates the legal basis for environmental grants but it does not commit resources. Without adequate funding, this provision risks being symbolic rather than transformative. The Minister of State should outline the expected annual allocation, the anticipated demands and the criteria for prioritisation. How will regional balance be ensured? Decarbonisation challenges differ across regions and sectors. Heavy industry in one region, manufacturing clusters in the west and data centres in Dublin all face distinct pressures. The Bill is silent on regional equity. We need assurance that environmental grants will not disproportionately favour large multinationals at the expense of SMEs or regions outside the main urban centres.

The Bill introduces a new provision allowing the IDA and Enterprise Ireland to fund consultancy services to support green and digital transitions. This intention is sound. Maybe SMEs lack the expertise to begin their decarbonisation or digital transformation journeys. Consultancy support can be a catalyst in this. However, we must interrogate the implications. For instance, what control would prevent the creation of a consultancy gravy train? God knows we have seen enough of that to date. We have a long history of over-reliance on consultants, and without strict procurement rules, transparency requirements and value-for-money assessments, this provision could become a lucrative pipeline for private firms with limited accountability. Will the Minister of State commit to publishing annual reports on consultancy spending, including the names of providers and the outcomes achieved? Why is this being done through the Industrial Development Acts rather than a dedicated transition support programme? The Bill frames consultancy support as an enterprise grant, but consultancy is a service, not an investment in fixed assets or technology. Should we not consider a more holistic cross-departmental approach to transition planning rather than embedding consultancy grants within industrial development legislation? Also, how will conflicts of interest be managed? Consultants who advise companies on transition strategies may also have commercial interests

in selling technologies or services. This Bill does not address that. We need clear, ethical guidelines. What is the expected duration and scale of consultancy support? Is this intended as a short-term intervention to kick-start transitions or a long-term structural feature of enterprise policy? The Minister of State must clarify all of these things.

The Bill proposes raising the thresholds for technology acquisition grants requiring Government approval from the outdated punt amounts of £400,000 and £800,000 to €7.5 million and €15 million, respectively. On one level, this is common sense because inflation, technological costs and the scale of modern industrial projects make the old thresholds obsolete. However, the question is not whether the thresholds should be raised but whether they should be raised to this level. What analysis underpins the new thresholds? The Bill aligns technology acquisition grants with other grant categories but alignment is not a justification in itself. Has the Department conducted a review of grant sizes over the past decade? How many grants would have required Government approval under the old thresholds versus the new ones? Without this data, we cannot assess the impact on oversight. Does this change reduce democratic accountability? Government approval is not a mere formality but a safeguard. Effectively raising thresholds shifts decision-making power from the Cabinet to agencies. That may improve speed but it will also reduce scrutiny. We need to ensure large-scale technology acquisitions, which often involve sensitive intellectual property, are subject to appropriate oversight. What mechanisms will ensure transparency? Will all grants above a certain level be published? Will the Oireachtas receive annual reports detailing the number, size and purpose of technology acquisition grants?

Perhaps the most consequential part of this Bill is the amendment to the Industrial Development Act 1995 allowing IDA Ireland or the IDA jointly with Enterprise Ireland to establish DACs with third parties, including the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund, ISIF, for the development of industrial and commercial property. This is a major shift in how the State develops strategic property infrastructure and certainly deserves close examination. Why is this change necessary? The Minister argued that joint ventures would allow the IDA to leverage its budget but "leverage" can mean many things. Does this reflect a shortfall in capital funding for the IDA? Is the Government moving towards a model where the State becomes a minority partner in strategic property development? If so, what are the implications for control, risk and long-term planning? What risks does this create? Joint ventures can expose the State to financial, legal and reputational risks. DACs in particular are designed to limit liability and restrict transparency. They are not subject to the same reporting obligations as public bodies. Will these subsidiaries be subject to freedom of information legislation? Will they publish audited accounts? Will the Oireachtas have any insight into their operations? How will the public interest be protected? If the IDA enters a joint venture with ISIF or any other partner, who determines the strategic priorities? What happens if the commercial interests of the partner diverge from the national interest? Will the Minister commit to issuing a public policy framework governing the establishment and operation of such DACs? What is the long-term vision for industrial property development here? Ireland faces significant challenges in providing serviced sites, advanced manufacturing facilities and green energy infrastructure. Are joint ventures a temporary measure or a permanent restructuring of the State's role? The Bill does not say.

The Bill will also amend the Science and Technology Act 1987, freedom of information provisions relating to Enterprise Ireland, the Health and Safety Authority's board appointment

rules, the Dangerous Substances Act 1972 and the Chemicals Act 2008. Each instance may be justified and worthwhile individually but their inclusion in an industrial development Bill raises questions. The first is why these amendments are bundled together. Omnibus Bills can and have obscured matters from scrutiny. The Minister of State should explain why these changes could not be introduced through separate, focused legislation. The second question is on what the rationale is for deleting section 8(5) of the Science and Technology Act. We are told this would modernise and streamline engagement with enterprises in the defence, security and resilience sphere but defence-related industrial activity is sensitive and removing statutory constraints without a clear explanation for that is extremely concerning. What safeguards will remain in this area? The third question is on what the implications of the freedom of information amendments are for Enterprise Ireland. As we all know in these Houses, transparency is essential in enterprise policy, so any narrowing of freedom of information coverage certainly must be justified. Why are technical amendments to dangerous substances and chemicals legislation included in this Bill? Are the amendments urgent? Are they related to industrial development? Again, the Minister of State must clarify this.

Beyond the specifics, the Bill raises broader questions about the direction of our industrial policy. Environmental grants, consultancy supports, technology acquisition funding and joint venture property vehicles all point towards a more active State role. That may be appropriate but it requires an absolute and clear strategy. Will the Government publish KPIs for decarbonisation, digitalisation and property development? Without metrics, we cannot evaluate impact. Much of the Bill appears orientated towards large enterprises, yet SMEs make up 99% of Irish businesses. As my colleague from the Louth constituency, Deputy Ó Murchú, stated, they must not be left behind. Industrial development must also support balanced regional growth. The Bill does not address this explicitly. As agencies gain more autonomy, the Oireachtas must have stronger reporting and accountability structures.

This Bill contains many sensible and overdue reforms. It modernises outdated legislation and aligns this country with EU state aid rules. It equips our enterprise agencies with tools to support the green and digital transitions. It seeks to accelerate decarbonisation and enhance competitiveness. Good intentions, though, are not enough. Legislation has to be robust and transparent. It must protect the public interest and ensure accountability, and it certainly has to be clear.

I urge the Minister of State address the questions raised today. How will environmental grants be safeguarded against misuse? How will consultancy supports avoid becoming a costly dependency, as we have seen so many times in this country? Why are technology acquisition thresholds being raised so dramatically? What transparency will apply to the new joint venture DACs? Why are unrelated legislative amendments bundled into this Bill? How will SMEs and regions be supported? What oversight will the Oireachtas retain, a topic so very important to all of us here?

If the Minister can provide satisfactory answers, then this Bill can be strengthened. If not, we risk creating yet another framework that is flexible for agencies but opaque for the public. Ireland needs a modern industrial policy. There is no argument against that. We need one that is green, innovative, regionally balanced and democratically accountable. This Bill can contribute to that vision, but only if we scrutinise it rigorously. I look forward to further debate on Committee Stage.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this legislation. I thank the Minister and his officials for bringing it forward.

This is a largely technical Bill. It updates the Industrial Development Acts and modernises the powers of the IDA and Enterprise Ireland. It removes an outdated restriction in the Science and Technology Act 1987 and introduces a number of sensible miscellaneous provisions on consultancy grants, property co-investment and the Health and Safety Authority, HSA. Fianna Fáil supports this Bill.

I will come to the detail in a moment, but this is a week in which we must step back and look at the longer arc of Irish industrial development. This is the centenary week of my own party, Fianna Fáil. It is also the week when, 55 years ago, former Taoiseach Seán Lemass died. While we debate a Bill to modernise the agencies he helped to establish and build, it might be appropriate to reflect for a moment on his contribution. Lemass was the architect of the modern Irish economy. He was the Minister who, in the 1930s, set up the Industrial Credit Corporation, supported the establishment of Aer Lingus, Bord na Móna and Irish Shipping, and built the spine of the semi-State sector. He was the Taoiseach who, in 1959, working with T. K. Whitaker, brought forward the First Programme for Economic Expansion 1958-1963, the document that opened our economy, ended the years of stagnation and laid the foundations for everything that followed. That decision was not a popular one at the time. It was against the orthodoxy of the previous generation. It required Lemass to argue patiently within our own party for the best part of a decade. He believed an open, outward-looking Ireland would be a more prosperous Ireland, and he was right.

Like Lemass, we live in turbulent times. Economic and social systems are being tested. The international order is shifting beneath our feet. Trade tensions, geopolitical uncertainty and the pace of technological change are reshaping the landscape for every open economy, and few are as open as ours. The challenges Lemass faced in the 1950s - a stagnant economy, a closed society and a country in danger of falling behind - were of a different kind to ours, but the test is the same. When states and societies are tested, those who rely on hope decline, those who adapt just survive, but those who are willing to transform lead. Lemass was a leader who believed in the power of transformative policies to improve the nation. Where clear direction is given, the public service can and will deliver. It worked with Lemass to establish the likes of Aer Lingus, Irish Shipping and, critically, the First Programme for Economic Expansion 1958-1963, which laid the foundations for the transformation of Ireland into a modern, open European economy.

We debate this Bill at a turbulent moment internationally, yet Ireland enters this period from a position of real strength. More people are at work in this country than at any other point in our history, the public finances are in surplus and Irish enterprise continues to compete and win on the world stage. This did not just happen by accident. It was the product of steady, serious Government policy that has guided this country through a pandemic, a war in Europe and now a more uncertain global outlook, with the calm and conviction the moment demands.

This Bill before us is part of that work. It does three substantial things. First, it gives the IDA and Enterprise Ireland a new power to award environmental protection aid grants assessed on environmental criteria. For the first time, our agencies will be able to support projects on carbon abatement grounds alone without having to force them through criteria designed for a

different purpose. That is a sensible and overdue reform. The IDA has described the current arrangements, quite bluntly, as an onerous constraint. The Bill removes that constraint.

Second, it allows the IDA, with ministerial consent, to co-invest in property and infrastructure with third parties, including ISIF. The availability of serviced industrial property is one of the deciding factors in major investment decisions. If we want to keep winning the competition on a global stage, our agencies need the tools to deliver.

Third, it removes section 8(5) of the Science and Technology Act 1987, which I mentioned previously, a provision written for an agency that no longer exists and that has had a chilling effect on the work of our agencies in defence, security and resilience. In a Europe investing heavily in cyber, satellites, maritime security and hybrid threat monitoring, Ireland cannot afford to have one hand tied behind its back. The substantive safeguards, export controls, ministerial oversight and Government approval of overall policy all remain in place.

The deeper point of this Bill, though, is in the first of those three reforms. It is in the recognition that the next phase of Irish industrial development is going to be defined by transformation in solar, wind, public transport, energy and the digital transition. That is where the investment and jobs are going. That is why Ireland needs to position itself to lead or it will find itself being left behind. Societies that transform do best, those that rely on hope decline and those that adapt just survive. If we want our children and grandchildren to inherit a country that is prosperous and secure, then we need to be the country that transforms. That means decisive investment in renewable energy - onshore and offshore wind and solar - and grid infrastructure. It means a public transport system worthy of a European capital and of every town in this country. It means honest investment in the housing and water and energy infrastructure that our economy and society need.

It also means giving clear direction to the public service, because when clear direction is given, our public service can and will deliver. It did it for Lemass in 1959. It implemented structural reforms in concert with social partners from 1987. It also delivered during the pandemic. The public service will do it again if we in this House are clear about what we are asking it to do.

Lemass once said that a rising tide lifted all boats. He meant it as a description of what economic growth, properly directed, could do for Irish people. A century on from the founding of Fianna Fáil, that ambition remains. This Bill is a modest and technical step, but it is a step in the right direction. It strengthens our agencies, modernises our framework and gives us better tools for the work of transformation that lies ahead.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this legislation. Broadly, we in the Social Democrats welcome the Bill and its efforts to modernise, align and work towards just transitions in the environmental and digital spaces.

I will touch on some of the positive aspects before I share some of my major concerns regarding the Bill. These positives include the increased grant thresholds, as well as easier approval and a stronger focus on the development of environmentally friendly initiatives. Sections of this Bill also give clarity to the IDA and Enterprise Ireland, allowing them to complete their goals with greater efficiency. Those measures are certainly welcome.

The farming land solar panel scheme had excellent take-up and demand but only enough funding for roughly 10% of the requests. We need to scale up the investment available in renewable energies, and this Bill works towards that goal. Further budgetary funding, though, is required to get to the green transition that Ireland needs.

3 o'clock

Other provisions in the Bill are also welcome but I want to focus my remaining time on a big issue that my party has with this legislation. Section 8 of this Bill is a disgraceful attempt to allow the IDA and Enterprise Ireland to invest in and promote military investments, despite our national policy of military neutrality. It would allow this investment to take place without governmental approval. It peels back checks and balances on the choices made by these agencies which use taxpayers' money. The Bill states that Enterprise Ireland and the IDA would be able to make investments and engage in partnerships without that oversight. The Bill does not make any regulations to replace the currently-required Government approval. In addition, it is important to mention that military applications of AI are not governed by the incoming EU AI Act. This is something that we have discussed in the past number of weeks at the Oireachtas AI committee. What that does is create a gaping hole in the regulations here as the IDA and Enterprise Ireland are facing no controls and no accountability. It is clear that when this goes wrong and an unconscionable investment is made, we will see the Government acting as if it had no role in legislation that allowed shame and scandal to come to our nation. This is a rapidly evolving space in so many different areas and the response from the Government is one of hands-off.

This decision to allow the IDA and Enterprise Ireland to make these investments is only explicable in the context of wider trends internationally. The Government seeks to allow this investment because at a time of war and uncertainty, it wants State agencies to essentially cash in. It is wrong to invest in weapons of war when Ireland could be a beacon of hope and peace. These agencies are not in need of those new markets to sell to. It is an ideological decision and a serious disservice to the workers in the IDA and Enterprise Ireland.

As I mentioned, we have been discussing this in the AI committee in recent weeks because much of the defence and arms industry is looking towards AI and the tools that are deployed in war. We have discussed how that governance happens and I want to read from the contribution of one of our witnesses, Ms Rosanna Fanni, a Belgian academic who is an expert in this space. She said, "The EU AI Act excludes any uses of AI for defence and security purposes, mainly because of the treaties and the non-responsibility of the EU to act upon these things. This also comes to the point I made about the importance of national approaches.". Commenting on the use of non-kinetic AI systems in defence, she went on to say that it "relies heavily on non-state actors, namely private companies. Those private companies may sometimes also have different interests or may not be 100% aligned with the national values, so to speak, especially with regard to Ireland's principle of neutrality."

In his opening comments the senior Minister, Deputy Peter Burke, explained the change in regard to section 8 and said that it "does not affect existing Government policy on military neutrality". I want to see more detail on that. I have to be assured that this does not compromise Ireland's neutrality but I just do not believe that is the case. I appreciate that this fits into the broader European move towards a European defence union. Those are not hyperbolic words from me. That is the specific language that is used by the European Commission. Indeed, I

asked the European Commissioner for Budget, Anti-Fraud, and Public Administration, Mr. Serafin, about this at the Oireachtas European affairs committee and it is clear that the multi-annual financial framework is pivoting towards military spending. It will favour companies that spend money developing arms across Europe. As a result, it will favour the larger countries and member states in the European Union. For me, this is a move away from social cohesion, democracy and all of the values that we hold dear in the European Union. There is no reason for Ireland to play into that. We can resist it. We can hold true to our neutrality and to our values of human rights, solidarity and compassion and push back against this draw towards militarism in every way, in terms of our neutrality and defence policy but also when it comes to industrial development and enterprise. I will be tabling amendments on Committee Stage in relation to this. That said, I reiterate that we welcome the Bill overall and will be working closely to make sure we get those points in.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy Gibney. You are not next, Deputy Boyd Barrett. You are ahead of yourself. We have Deputy Clendennen-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: He just appeared.

An Ceann Comhairle: Yes and with your indulgence, we have a crowd of ladies from Wexford in the Public Gallery, the rural Wexford ladies. You are most welcome. You are in for a thrill when Deputy Boyd Barrett starts to speak but before that, we are going to have Deputy John Clendennen.

Deputy John Clendennen: I thank the Chair for giving me the opportunity to speak in advance of Deputy Boyd Barrett. I hope I will be as entertaining. I want to welcome members of Daingean Development Association who are in the House for a tour and who may be in the Public Gallery at some stage today. I acknowledge the work they do consistently in the town. They have a festival scheduled for 14 June and anyone who might want to attend-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Do you mind me asking, for the benefit of the Deputies following, will you be using all of your time?

Deputy John Clendennen: Yes, I will be there or thereabouts.

An Ceann Comhairle: Okay, thank you, Deputy.

Deputy John Clendennen: To get to the nub of the matter in relation to the Industrial Development (Amendment) and Miscellaneous Provisions Bill 2026, I will begin by acknowledging the work of the Government in relation to enterprise, tourism and employment in recent times. I welcome the constant references to simple, lighter and faster in terms of how we do business. We need to reflect that more and more in terms of what we see and in being competitive, not just in our domestic market but on the international stage and in how Ireland reflects itself right around the world.

I listened to various contributions in recent days in this Chamber and heard Deputies comparing Ireland to the 1980s, a time of high interest rates and unemployment when people

did not see a future on this island. We have moved on considerably from that. We now have more people in employment today than we had living here 50 years ago. We are an island that is at the heart of Europe and the centre of the world. If we look at our trading and relations with America alone, over 200,000 people wake up every day and go to work in Irish companies that have invested in the US. Where once that was one-way traffic into Ireland, with investment on these shores, we are now seen globally as a serious player in relation to investment, innovation and development. Long may that continue.

As a TD for Offaly and someone who has spent a lifetime involved in small businesses and international businesses, I have seen the variance in what it takes at the smallest of business levels, where it can be very difficult to know where the next cheque is going to come from, in terms of payment, or whether there is going to be enough turnover at the end of the day to actually make things work tomorrow. That is a severe stress. There are small, microbusinesses that still deal with those issues and concerns today. One of the issues I have highlighted in recent times is that businesses today have to close for two days a week in order to be viable for seven days. We have to get to a stage where there adequate supports for them from an environmental and digital perspective, or whatever the case may be.

This week the Minister, Deputy Burke, and I attended the AGM of the Vintners' Federation of Ireland. Whether they are butchers, bakers, candlestick makers or publicans, people are under real pressure in relation to energy, insurance, the cost of labour and making ends meet. There are proposals in relation to excise on kegs of beer that should be considered in advance of the budget. We have seen the benefits of enterprise supports, particularly green energy supports which are really helping business to transition at every level. It is important that we continue them and have a level of dynamism in our engagement with businesses. We need to make supports available without bureaucracy or a cumbersome approach.

When we talk about the IDA and Enterprise Ireland, it is important to also recognise the essential involvement of the local enterprise offices, LEOs, and the county councils. There is a shared ownership of our LEOs between Enterprise Ireland and our county councils. The work they have been doing has been commendable but we cannot take it for granted. This Bill in particular sets the scene in relation to legislative changes that are necessary in the context of the rapidly changing and evolving global economy to ensure that foreign direct investment continues on a balanced regional development basis.

This morning I attended the Bord na Móna energy conference in Tullamore in County Offaly in my constituency. It was great to hear about a level of innovation that has seen the company go from brown to green in less than a decade.

Ten years ago, we were talking about redundancies in that company and facing a cul-de-sac and an end of the line in terms of where it was going. Today, we are seeing innovation, progress in the whole area of renewables, digital technology advancements and the ecosystem all of that creates. We are seeing large multinational companies, but also start-ups that were former employees of the likes of Bord na Móna, taking advantage of this green opportunity. It is exciting but we need to be ready for it. I see this Bill playing an important role in that regard.

Historically, grants were really about a company's turnover, how many more employees it was going to bring to the table and how much more activity would be seen in the village, town or area. We need to change the dashboard slightly in that regard. That is what the Bill does in

its focus on sustainability, efficiency and emissions and also recognising the whole area of artificial intelligence and how it is playing such an important role in businesses today. Another area of action is accelerating decarbonisation. Looking at the grants that have been introduced in recent times, we can see an effort to ensure productivity and climate actions. It is important not just that we have the dashboard but that we report on this on a regular basis. Taking the example of local enterprise office grants, we can consider whether there are particular sectors that are ahead of others in the take-up of those grants and whether there is something we need to do to address a situation where there may be sectors lagging behind. That is something we need to monitor.

External consultants are very much necessary. We cannot expect every business to have all the expertise under its own roof. External consultants are essential in giving advice. Sometimes, however, when consultants come to the table, they give all the advice in the world but they do not actually push the business on one inch. We need to figure out how we can integrate them more into the fabric of a business rather than just have them come in for half an hour or two hours of mentoring or whatever it is. There should be a responsibility or onus on them to come back six or 12 months later to see how the measures they put forward have been introduced to the business and whether they have resulted in effective change.

Establishing and investing in jointly owned subsidiary companies with third parties such as the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund, ISIF, would allow Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland to work together to deliver critical industry and commercial property infrastructure. That is vitally important and it needs to be done on a balanced regional development basis. We cannot be all things to all counties or regions but we definitely need to establish key priorities for each region and each county. In my county of Offaly, we have a very ambitious plan for where we want to go with specific sectors. We want to ensure not only that we deliver for the county in that regard but, on the back of that, we see enterprise parks established in each municipal district. It is not just about generating commercial rates for the county; it is also about generating employment. It is important that we get the mix right. Enterprise Ireland, the LEOs and the county councils are integral stakeholders in leading this. Fundamentally, many businesses want to expand and diversify but the capital outlay involved in such an expansion plan makes the whole thing unfeasible. We need to see the likes of ISIF coming in as a financial pillar to support that type of growth.

Measures to modernise and streamline our engagement with enterprise projects in defence, security and resilience would be welcome. This is a reality of the world we live in today. Twenty, ten or even five years ago, there was hardly a debate in this Chamber around defence. The reality now is it is front and centre in all our minds. We live in a period of significant geopolitical risk and we cannot take defence for granted any longer. Action in this regard is very much welcome.

Whether it is a small or larger business, LEADER funding has been critical to the development of many micro-businesses, particularly in rural areas, over recent decades. If EU funding is lost as part of CAP negotiations, we need to find a new home in which LEADER funding can sit. It can give the impetus to ensure that where there are opportunities, particularly in rural areas, they can be followed up, materialised and go on to make a real, tangible and material difference in communities. Foreign direct investment companies and the jobs they bring to Ireland make the front-page news. Sometimes, we overlook and almost take for

granted the level of employment provided by small businesses. Incrementally, every year, such companies might add two or three more jobs until, within a decade, they are providing 50, 60 or 70 jobs. Such companies are key pillars of local economies. They are built up over time, have sponsored sports clubs and cultural events and are supporting their communities in many different ways.

This is an important Bill. It cuts to where we need to be in terms of the objective of doing things in a simpler, lighter and faster way. It ensures efficiencies and that we can push on with our competitiveness. Every business owner wants a commitment from the Government that we will try to reduce red tape, bureaucracy and the cumbersome aspect of many online grant application forms. We need to ensure the supports are readily available in a manner that supports businesses rather than putting an additional burden on them. That must be the fundamental approach. I welcome and support the Bill. I acknowledge the ongoing work in this area by the Ministers of State, Deputies Dillon and Smyth, and the Minister, Deputy Burke. The legislation is progressive and it is badly needed. It will be very much welcomed by the enterprise sector from the perspective of looking to remaining agile, competitive and fit for purpose both on the global stage and in every village, town and city across the country.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I want to ring the alarm bell in respect of this legislation. Its introduction represents a sleight of hand whereby an apparently benign and innocuous Bill that is supposedly about supporting enterprise and industry is, in fact, a Bill that is being used to smuggle in something much more sinister. That is what is happening with the Bill. If I am right about that, it proves the Government absolutely cannot be trusted with Irish neutrality, cannot be trusted not to engage in war profiteering and, even worse, cannot be trusted not to actively be complicit with genocidal crimes being committed by the likes of the Israeli state.

In making that fairly strong charge, I refer to section 8 of the Bill, which deletes the current requirement for companies engaged in defence and security technology to notify the Government and seek its approval to engage in such activity. That provision was not included in the draft scheme and nobody knew it was there before it appeared, all of a sudden, in the Bill. To be clear on why that should worry us, I refer to the following in the briefing document from the Oireachtas Library and Research Service: "There is a notable implication of the proposed Section 8 of the Bill which, if enacted, would allow the enterprise development agencies [that is, State agencies] to engage with and support industries primarily associated with defence, without Government approval."

We are debating this legislation in the same week that *The Currency* website published an article after 12 months of battling with the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment to get information about Government approvals for dual-use technology going to the Israeli military. Following that fight, we discover in Niall Sargent's article in *The Currency* this week, which people can read for themselves, that between 2020 and 2024, approximately €35 million worth of export licences to the Israeli military were granted by the Department because it had to get a licence and approval and so on.

Most of that happened in 2024, the year of the genocide committed by the Israeli military. In 2020, the export licences to the IDF were worth €1.5 million. In 2021, they were worth €84,000. These are not meaningless sums. In 2022, they were worth €1.8 million and in 2023, the year the genocide began, they jumped to €12 million. In 2024, they jumped to €20 million.

Why is it that *The Currency* has had such a hard time eliciting that information from the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment? It is of course because it is absolutely damning. The end user for dual-use technology is the Israeli military machine, engaged in a genocidal slaughter of the people of Gaza. In January of the year it is doing this - slaughtering tens of thousands of people in the most horrific way, levelling Gaza, some of its leaders, such as the deputy speaker of the Knesset, saying it is okay to kill everybody in Gaza and describing the Palestinians as human animals and everybody knowing what is going on - the International Court of Justice, ICJ, gave a preliminary ruling saying it believed there was a plausible case of genocide taking place. In that year, the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment approved a surge in exports to the Israeli military from this country. The Irish Government now wants to reduce the obligation on companies which might be engaged in the production of that kind of technology from having to seek Government authorisation. To me, that stinks to high heaven, particularly given the fact that this was not in the original draft scheme of the Bill.

When the Minister spoke he said the proposed amendment allows the agencies to support financially and non-financially enterprises in the DSR sphere. DSR sounds totally innocuous. It was not even spelled out in the Minister's speech, so we will just pass by it. What does it mean? Sure nobody is watching this debate and nobody is asking what that might mean. It was described in the most innocuous terms, although there was a giveaway line at the very end, which states "it does not affect existing Government policy on military neutrality." I wonder why the Government felt the need to say that. There is a connection between these two things.

In the wider context, Ireland does about €3 billion worth of trade with the State of Israel and is one of its biggest trading partners in Europe against the background where Israel is in the dock for genocide and the most horrific crimes. There are arrest warrants out for Netanyahu and Gallant. Israel is in the dock for apartheid, the annexation of Palestinian territory, and ethnic cleansing. It is not stopping; it is escalating what it is doing.

All of this happened in 2024 and then a Bill all of a sudden pops up with a section that was not included in the original draft scheme of the Bill, saying that from now on, the Industrial Development Agency, IDA, and Enterprise Ireland do not have to notify the Government if they are supporting companies doing business in this area. That absolutely stinks and it looks like a cover up of Government facilitation, although sort of hiding it, of industries profiteering from selling technology to people like the Israeli military and God knows who else. If it was just the Israeli military, which is committing the most heinous crimes, that would be bad enough. This is outrageous.

Deputy Devlin was quoting Seán Lemass and waxing lyrical about him, his development policy and so on. It would be very rare that I would favourably quote Éamon de Valera but I am going to quote something he did favourably. It may be of interest to people in this House and the wider public to know that possibly the first ever instance of this State sanctioning another state for war crimes was initiated by Éamon de Valera in 1935 because of what, at the time, were viewed to be the genocidal crimes of the Italian regime in Abyssinia, today called Ethiopia. The Italians used, in one of the first instances of chemical warfare, mustard gas and other chemical agents on Abyssinian combatants and civilians in violation of the Geneva protocol; bombed Red Cross hospitals, tents and ambulances; massacred approximately 30,000 people in Addis Ababa; targeted clergy and intellectuals; burnt villages; slaughtered livestock;

and destroyed thousands of churches. This happened in 1935 but it sounds familiar, does it not? It sounds very familiar.

What did Éamon de Valera do? I am not a fan of Éamon de Valera but he instigated sanctions and they were passed by the Dáil. He enforced financial, commercial and other sanctions against Italy because as a country that had come into existence in a struggle against imperialism, Éamon de Valera and it seems the Oireachtas of the time knew it was a duty of a State born of a struggle against colonialism, ourselves victims of colonial genocidal policies which lead to things like the Great Hunger and all of the horrors colonialism visited on us, to impose sanctions. They were not worried about whether there was going to be economic blowback, and we were a poor country then. Éamon de Valera and the Oireachtas of the time said we had to act against this. It was deemed at the time to be genocidal, with Africans, by the way. Take note, Bertie Ahern. African people were being slaughtered by Europeans and fair play to Éamon de Valera and the Oireachtas of the time, they imposed sanctions. What is this Government doing? It is approving licences for a state engaged in genocidal slaughter.

It cannot have been the case that the people who approved those licences were not aware at the time that it represented a massive surge to go from €1 million in one year, €85,000 in another year to €12 million and then €20 million. That is a massive increase in the exporting of that technology to the Israeli military. I debated with Deputy Barry Ward on the radio this morning and he was trying to make some sort of separation between technology that would go to the Israeli military that is complicit in the genocide, and technology that would go to the Israeli military that is not complicit in the genocide, in the midst of a genocide. Fair play to David McCullough who made the point that even they were contributing to the technology that helped them to pay the soldiers, they were complicit. If we were sending the Russian Government biros, it would be considered unacceptable complicity with what Russia is doing in Ukraine but we have a surge in exports from this country approved by the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment to the Israeli military while it is carrying out a genocide. That is absolutely shameful. In the same week, we have a Bill doing this.

Fair play to Niall Sargent from *The Currency* for chasing this story. It should be read. He says it took 12 months of battling to get this information. Why did he have to battle to get it? Because it is shameful. That is why.

The Government should explain this stuff. Here is the lesson I draw from it, as if we did not have enough evidence with the US military going through Shannon Airport, overflights potentially carrying weapons, etc., to the State of Israel and the refusal of the State to impose even the most minimal sanctions on the Israel. The Government simultaneously pays lip service to its solidarity with the Palestinian people and approves licences for the Israeli military while the Israeli military slaughters men, women and, most horrendously of all, children, babies and infants.

The defence minister who is presiding over the Israeli military, the so-called IDF - in reality, the occupation force - actually said that Israel was going to starve people and deny them the means to exist.

An Ceann Comhairle: I did not interrupt the Deputy previously and I am loathe to do so now, but I must ask him to qualify, for the purposes of the Official Report, whether he is

paraphrasing or quoting directly from speeches that have been made in the Knesset. He has made a few remarks. Will he qualify whether he is paraphrasing or quoting?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I am paraphrasing.

An Ceann Comhairle: That is all I ask. We just have to be careful. Thank you.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Since the Ceann Comhairle mentioned that, it might be worth quoting them directly. For example, Yoav Gallant, the defence minister, that is, the minister in charge of the IDF, described the Palestinians in the context of the assault on Gaza as "human animals".

An Ceann Comhairle: Does the Deputy have a document?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Yes, that was in front of the ICJ. It was part of the evidence submitted to the ICJ.

An Ceann Comhairle: Okay.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: This is very much in the public domain.

Members of the ruling party, Likud, made public statements calling for - I am now reading from Sadaka's document on the genocidal intent - a Nakba against the Palestinian people and talked about "erasing the Gaza Strip from the face of the Earth". The Prime Minister, Netanyahu, referred to the Palestinians as "Amalek". This is a well known biblical reference which refers to the Hebrew Bible. The reference is to a certain part of the latter, which states:

Now go attack the Amalekites and totally destroy all that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys.

That is what Netanyahu was referring to when he used the term "Amalek". There is a lot more evidence. I do not have it all in front of me. All has been submitted to the ICJ. This is what they were doing. They were saying they were going to do it and our Government approved a surge in licences for the military machine that was carrying out these atrocities against the Palestinian people. It is absolutely shameful.

I will conclude on this. I have made the point, but I feel the need to sound the alarm bells about this. In the context of all that, we now have a Bill, not flagged in advance, with a section in it that seeks to reduce the obligations on State agencies to notify the Government when they are supporting companies that are engaged in the production of technology in this area. That is very bad.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I welcome the chance to speak on this Bill because I can see the logic in the State being prepared for the way industry, technology, national security and environmental concerns are changing. I take on board what the Government said about this Bill giving our enterprise agencies the flexibility to operate in a globalised system that is more

competitive, more AI enhanced and more security sensitive than ever before. The Industrial Development Acts of the 1980s and 1990s - when I grew up - were not designed for an era of AI quantum computing, cyber resilience, cyberattacks or climate-driven industrial focus. Just like Ireland evolved, as was referenced by a previous speaker, from the 1950s policies of Lemass - and many tributes should go to T.K. Whitaker for those - the situation has again taken a massive leap forward. The pace is increasing all the time. However, when we modernise the machinery of the State, which is laudable, we have to make sure that checks and balances remain. We have to have that ambitious side, similar to the 1950s pioneering spirit, but we also have to make sure that we spend wisely in terms of how we invest.

I broadly support the direction in which the Bill will take us, but I wish to raise a number of concerns, in a constructive way, which I hope will be reflected in the strengthening of the Bill as it goes through the different Stages. The first has been referred to by a number of Deputies already, including Deputies Gibney and Boyd Barrett. It is the most headline-grabbing one from a lot of perspectives. I refer to the removal of the requirement for the Government to give approval before agencies engage in activities of primarily military relevance. The Government argued that the provisions in place up to now are outdated, that dual use technologies blur the line between civil and military and that Ireland needs to be able to participate in emerging European frameworks and so on. This is all true.

Across the EU, dual use research and development spending increased by 40% between 2018 and 2023, according to the European Commission's 2023 defence industrial strategy report. The European Defence Fund has been allocated €7.95 billion for the 2021 to 2027 period under the European Defence Fund Regulation (EU) 2021/697. That is a massive amount of money. It reflects a continent that, for its own reasons - we can see why the Poles and Germans would like this - is rearming technologically and militarily. Even if we are constrained in certain aspects due to our military neutrality, our membership of the EU is being pushed in that direction. We cannot pretend we exist in a bubble.

We are neutral, however, and as long as the population wishes it to be so, we cannot remove what is, in effect, a safeguard without replacing it with something, perhaps more modern, but at least of equal standing or better. This is where I have the concerns. Deputy Boyd Barrett referred to it quite eloquently a few minutes ago. Section 8 of the Bill being added at a later stage is worrying because, once the requirement for explicit approval is removed, the moment is also moved forward when someone in a position of power can ask what exactly we are supporting and whether it fits in with our military neutrality. Are we not, lads and lassies, actually supporting genocide? Where does the buck stop? It may not stop at the Minister any more. Who is accountable?

Cynics might say that is the reason, to get rid of that accountability, to give us - to borrow an American term, a weasel word - strategic flexibility. Basically, if it is a deliberate attempt to do something like that, it is an abomination. If it is an oversight, it needs to be fixed through the parliamentary process. If we are stepping into the defence security and resilience space - whether we say it explicitly or not - we have to have structures that reflect our neutrality. That means we still need a statutory reporting requirement to the Oireachtas, whether it is to the Committee on Defence and National Security, with regular updates by the Minister in the Dáil or Seanad, or something similar with the same level of agreed scrutiny that Opposition parties and Independents would be happy with. It means having a clear definition of what the phrase

"primarily military relevance" means in the current age. The meaning might change in five years' time, so we have to have good definitions.

We do not know whether this refers to funding that would create jobs while also facilitating the guarding of undersea cables. Does it have anything to do with Russian submarines or security equipment for EU Presidency events? Does it mean giving the Israeli armed forces a leg up, even if only to help them with their HR systems? We need an independent oversight mechanism.

I listened to the discussion on the radio this morning between Deputies Richard Boyd Barrett and Barry Ward. It was quite interesting. I want to put this on the record because I will not be here this evening for the debate on Deputy Boyd Barrett's Private Members' Bill. I acknowledge that the Government has valid points to raise on what the proposed legislation can do unilaterally in terms of whether or not we can override the European Union element. If, however, we are serious about being signatories in the context of calling out Israel for genocide, then we should bring this type of legislation as far as possible in order that the EU will be obliged to say, "Well, actually, you can't do this. It is illegal." At least symbolically, we will have shown we are serious about what we purport to care about as a country. We need transparency at all stages.

Another aspect of this legislation involves environmental protection and carbon abatement. The Bill allows projects to be assessed solely on environmental criteria; given my Green background, I fully support that. We have to accelerate the decarbonisation process. The Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, has made it clear that Ireland must reduce emissions by 51% by 2030 in the context of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021. Unfortunately, we are projected to fall short by a wide margin in that regard. That is on the basis of an EPA report from 2024. I have consistently called in the Dáil for these targets not just to be met but also to be exceeded, especially in terms of energy security, self-sufficiency and the related urgent requirements to upgrade our electricity grid. Again, we need financial transparency. Even if the goal is a good one and we are trying to do the decent thing in a world with lunatics like Trump and others denying that climate change is an increasingly dangerous reality, we need clear reporting on the types, number and scale of grants and on the expected outcomes and measured outcomes. We need to know that the money being spent is changing behaviour, whether individual consumer behaviour, industrial behaviour or through Government agencies, so that we are achieving our objectives, rather than just rewarding stuff we were going to have to do anyway, and that we are going back to the visionary idea of T.K. Whitaker in the 1950s. If this Bill is being brought in to create something more modern and to help us better achieve our aims, that is very welcome, but it should go above and beyond our existing targets.

Another angle I want to look at is the expansion of IDA Ireland's co-investment powers. I am not concerned about some of those relating to the more pro-business side of things. I am definitely pro business but I am not pro giving business a licence to print money at the expense of the consumer. Co-investment is a good idea, even if it crowds out some private developers. If a strategically important project requires to be pushed forward and if it strengthens things from a regional or decarbonisation perspective or provides more jobs, then the State should not be afraid to take the lead. We have seen too many cases where we have waited for the so-called market to solve a problem and let the companies come in and do it. That sometimes means the

problem either never gets solved or is not solved fast enough, or else it generates massive profits for private companies and little community dividend. Many onshore wind farms, for example, go into communities but very few in the communities would say they got a good share of the profits or the projects have enhanced their quality of life in return for the inconvenience. I am a huge supporter of wind energy, but we have to ensure that there is a community dividend.

This would also apply from a national perspective to offshore wind and stuff we have not pushed because we are depending on private companies, like wave, tidal, solar, to some extent hydrogen, battery storage investment and deep sea harbour development. All are areas where the State could lead the way off its own bat, or at least through co-investment, with the caveat that the State be the lead investor. Any State investment, including co-investment, carries a financial risk. Commercial property values and land values have experienced big swings over the years - 10% to 15% in recent years in the office and industrial segments according to the CBRE Ireland market outlook 2024. Construction cost inflation has averaged 7% to 9% annually since 2021, as we know from a number of reports like the Society of Chartered Surveyors Ireland tender price index for the period 2021 to 2024. That has only got worse since the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the more recent war in the Strait of Hormuz and related fuel price hikes, which also push up the price of doing business. We would want to be careful, especially in the scenario of these conflicts and the risk of a related global recession. We do not want to be holding property purchased at a peak price or paying over the odds in a bidding war unless we can guarantee we will get a return.

I am digressing slightly because I have a little bit of time available. The whole process of NAMA was a good idea, particularly in the context of buying all the property, securing it and then trying to get a return on the investment. We got billions back. If you index day-to-day prices, however, you will see we undersold things from the point of view of what we got for the State. That was in the context of a global economic crisis with the troika putting pressure on us. If the likes of IDA Ireland will take on more risk by getting involved, hopefully as the lead, in these co-investment projects, the Oireachtas has to have scrutiny, not to the level of micromanagement that will actually stop stuff happening, but definitely pre-notification of major co-investments above a reasonable defined threshold. It means annual reporting on the performance of assets and published risk management frameworks so we know the basis on which decisions are made in advance. We have had too many overspends and too few returns in the past. I wholeheartedly agree with empowering the agencies, but we need to ensure oversight.

That brings me to a broader point in the context of the Bill and possibly beyond it. The governance structures overseeing our enterprise agencies have not necessarily kept pace with the expansion of their mandates over the years. They are asked to do more than in T.K. Whitaker and Lemass's time, or the seventies, eighties or nineties. We now have the green transition, the digital transition, the so-called defence, security and resilience technology, growth and infrastructure. While co-investment is not new, it is new in this context, especially with the lead agency model I have been suggesting.

In 2020, the OECD published the principles of good governance for independent public bodies and set out international best practice standards for how semi-autonomous agencies like IDA Ireland, the HSE, ComReg, the EPA and Enterprise Ireland should be structured and held

accountable. This model is widely used by governments to benchmark whether agencies with significant operational independence can still operate in a transparent, accountable and democratic framework. Looking at this from the OECD's perspective, when agencies expand their mandates, as this Bill, to a degree, proposes, without parallel reform of how they are governed, there is a risk the accountability gap increases and the scrutiny decreases. We need, in every case above a certain amount, risk-weighted assessment aligned with best practice internationally, particularly at EU level and maybe looking at the UK specifically. It means a stronger as opposed to a weaker role for the public accounts committee in reviewing the activities of agencies and for the enterprise committee of which I am a member.

On the flammable liquid provisions, updating safety standards is necessary, but we also have to be mindful of the compliance burden on small operators, particularly those in rural areas. Industry estimates suggest it could cost up to €15,000 per site for upgrades and inspections, depending on the scale of the equipment involved. Those who came up with those estimates would say that because the information comes from an Irish petroleum industry association compliance costs survey from 2023. However, they do have a fair point to make to the effect that if you want to manage safety, you should try to do it in a way that does not potentially put companies out of business. I hope that clarification can be given as this Bill progresses as to how standards will be phased in, what sort of supports will be available and how we can ensure they do not undermine local businesses.

They are not related to the Bill specifically, but there are a couple of other matters I would like to talk about briefly, purely because they are relevant to where industrial policy goes. I have mentioned these matters previously, both at the committee of which I am a member and in other debates in the House. I am of the view that we should create something similar to Silicon Valley in the midlands, in the triangle comprising the lands between Tullamore, Athlone and Mullingar. My constituency has a high concentration of pharma and software industries. Some 20% of those who work in these industries come from overseas. They are all living in my area, which they are entitled to do, but they have very high-income jobs, which means that houses prices locally are being pushed up. Equally, because all of the companies they work for want to locate in the Dublin area, the increase in traffic does tend to add to the gridlock. It would make a lot of sense from an industrial perspective that an area the size of Silicon Valley would be covered by that triangle, a 20 km space in the middle of the country, where future policy would encourage or even specify that the companies have to go to those type of hubs. That is where they would be located. We would possibly need to build a new city to accommodate them and plan it properly in order that it would be a 15-minute city where all of the facilities and amenities would be within walking distance and where people could work in a much more modern way. That would also mean that if people living in places like Dublin Mid-West are going to be commuting for 50 minutes in order to get to work, it would make much more sense for them to westwards rather than adding to the gridlock eastwards and along the M50.

The other matter I want to reference is that of our ports, particularly in the context of co-investment funding. We need deep-sea ports on the west coast. We need battery storage and maybe hydroelectric, a Turlough Hill-type project, that would be capable of holding onto the energy generated by using offshore wind, the waves on the west coast and the tides in the Shannon Estuary and off the coast of Dublin. We have wave energy potential in the context of which we are way behind both Scotland and Denmark. All of this could contribute to massive

export potential in terms of electricity. I listened to a debate earlier today about the potential for bringing nuclear power to Ireland. I am not opposed this ideologically, but there would be a need to ramp things up and spend money on imported uranium or thorium, cheap as they might be in the current context. We could do that, but we have the potential, using battery and hydro storage, to be self-sufficient in electricity terms, to provide the energy for data centres and get an income from them and to export energy to the UK and France. If we do need a nuclear element, we could take some nuclear energy from France, if we ever the need to do so, during an off-peak period. With wave, wind, solar and tidal power, and also if we ramp up the grid and the private wires element, I cannot see why we would ever be short of energy at any time of the year, particularly as we have enough capacity to cater for our own needs, although our export capacity might slow down at different times. We need to look at strategic investment and partnership with companies in the context of that element of industrial policy, because it would be a win-win situation for everyone.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Alan Dillon): I thank the Deputies for their contributions and for their constructive and useful feedback, which I certainly welcome. Many supported the broad thrust of the Bill and its underlying objectives.

The Bill will further enhance the ability of the enterprise development agencies, IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland, to drive investment and employment across the country. It will also ensure the enterprise agencies have the legislative tools they will need to incentivise companies to accelerate their green and digital transitions. It will allow IDA Ireland to further enhance its property and infrastructure offerings. A key element of that will be supporting regional, balanced development. That is very much evident in its strategic plans and we can see that magnified in every corner of this country with some property banks, but also with advanced building solutions being developed and have been developed to meet client demand and support regional needs.

The Bill streamlines the ability of the agencies to support defence, security and resilience. In summary, it is designed to drive investment and support innovation in areas that are strategically critical for Ireland. Many Deputies raised concerns about the general scheme of the Bill that was published and approved in February of 2025. Over the past year, we have witnessed the growing challenges but also the opportunities in areas of our economy that are related to defence, security and resilience. They have become increasingly clear, given the extraordinary budget allocations for security, at national and European level. Looking at the challenges we face with regard to moving the level of ambition within our Defence Forces to the next level, significant investment will be required and it is against this backdrop that it is time to replace that blanket constraint.

What we are focused on doing is providing this amendment, which solely relates to the functions of enterprise agencies and their capacity to support Ireland's strategic objectives. It will allow the agencies to support, financially or non-financially, enterprises in the defence, security and resilience sphere, like other parts of our economy, but importantly it is subject to compliance with all existing controls and legal obligations governing these sectors.

For this Government, it is about ensuring that we can maximise funds from European programmes, such as the forthcoming European competitiveness fund. It is about ensuring

Ireland benefits from this. Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland must be able to engage confidently with potential partners, with companies and consortia operating in this sphere. If we do not do that, someone else will. These amendments in the Bill provide the clarity that is required for agencies to participate fully and appropriately in these programmes, supporting Irish researchers, supporting small to medium enterprises right throughout our country, and also ensuring the multinational firms that want to collaborate with the innovation, defence, security and resilience fields can actually do so. That is a good thing and one that would be welcomed. It does not impact the activities of enterprises themselves as activities in this sphere are controlled by a comprehensive, multilayered framework involving primary and secondary legislation under the Control of Exports Act 2023 and Ireland's obligations under international treaties, including in relation to human rights.

Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland are subject to overarching Government policy, ministerial policy direction and strict internal governance and compliance standards. It is very important to emphasise this because I have heard Deputies, including Deputy Boyd Barrett, make assertions regarding "sinisterism" and the charge that we tried to smuggle this into the Bill.

4 o'clock

This could not be further from the truth. The Government has a regulatory and compliance framework for enterprises operating in the State and that is not affected by the deletion of this section. All existing checks and controls remain fully intact, including the EU regulation around the Control of Exports Act, the provisions of which are unaffected. We operate export licence applications. These are considered by our officials in accordance with criteria set out within the relevant dual use and military EU and national regulations and in line with Ireland's international obligations and responsibilities as a member of non-proliferation regimes and export controls remit. That is an important point with regard to Deputy Boyd Barrett's accusation that we are in some way complicit in the ongoing genocide in Palestine. This Government has been very strong in upholding international law but we also ensure that each application is assessed individually, with detailed consideration of the nature of the items, the destination country, the identity of the end user, the intended end use and the potential misuse, using all reliable information available at the time from a range of different sources. That has to be factored in. All of this presents complex factors, which are considered in every application. If there are any concerns that goods exported will not be used for the specified end use or by specific end users, they will be detailed in the application. If the exporter does not provide enough information regarding the intended end use, our officials make an informed decision.

The bulk of dual-use items exported from Ireland, including those to Israel, are mainstream business ICT products such as software, hardware, networking, data storage and cybersecurity and have been categorised as so. We want to continue to support indigenous Irish companies. We see this Bill as an important vehicle for multinationals that are based here and IDA client companies to continue the good work they do and we look forward to progressing it through the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Industrial Development (Amendment) and Miscellaneous Provisions Bill 2026: Referral to Select Committee

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Alan Dillon): I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Enterprise, Tourism and Employment pursuant to Standing Orders 103 and 188.

Question put and agreed to.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): 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 Maeve O'Connell - To discuss urban broadband provision.

Deputy Michael Cahill - To discuss discrepancies in inheritance tax and capital gains tax.

Deputy Emer Currie - To discuss the regulation of loot boxes and chance-based microtransactions in video games.

Deputy Jen Cummins - To discuss supports for children and students with dyslexia.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne - To discuss an update on the planned new Courtown Coast Guard building.

Deputy Barry Ward - To discuss support mechanisms for families when their childcare centre withdraws from the core funding model.

Deputy Colm Burke - To discuss the establishment of a national radiation therapy equipment replacement programme.

Deputy Tom Brabazon - To discuss the disruption to DART services in north Dublin.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú - To discuss supports for those with frontotemporal dementia.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - To discuss the loss of medical card access due to age-based insurance restrictions on general practitioners.

Deputies Paul Murphy and Ciarán Ahern - To discuss the proposed move of the An Post sorting office in Edmondstown to Lucan.

Deputies Cian O'Callaghan, Barry Heneghan, Naoise Ó Muirí and Denise Mitchell - To discuss safeguarding, governance and resourcing at Belmayne Community Special School.

Deputy Paula Butterly - To discuss increasing the mandatory retirement age for retained firefighters from 62 to 65.

Deputy James O'Connor - To discuss the lack of playing facilities on Carrigtwohill school campus.

The matters raised by Deputies Paula Butterly, Maeve O'Connell, James O'Connor and Malcolm Byrne have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Fire Service

Deputy Paula Butterly: I raise this matter on behalf of retained firefighters of County Louth and all the regions of Ireland, particularly those who are approaching mandatory retirement at the age of 62 and who are not in a financial position to retire. Retained firefighters make up around two thirds of Ireland's fire services and are particularly critical in rural areas like County Louth and regional communities. For many retained firefighters, this is not an abstract policy issue. It is a very real and immediate financial one. These are people with mortgages still to pay, families to support and limited pension provision reflecting the parttime and oncall nature of retained service.

As it stands, approximately 300 retained firefighters are due to retire at 62 over the next year. When they leave the service, many fall into a gap where they are too young to access the State pension at 66 yet are no longer allowed to work in the role they are trained, willing and medically fit to perform. The outcome is deeply problematic. Experienced firefighters are effectively pushed onto social welfare for up to four years, not because they are incapable of work but because policy gives them no other option. That is difficult to justify socially, financially or ethically. These are people who have served their communities for decades, who have responded to emergencies at all hours and who continue to meet medical and fitness requirements, yet the system tells them "No". The system tells them that they must stop working at 62, with the State carrying the cost.

This discussion is not about lowering standards or overlooking safety. Firefighting is a physically demanding role and that must always be respected but we already acknowledge this reality through ongoing fitness, medical and capability assessments. Fitness and competence and not age alone are what determine safe service. I am, therefore, asking whether we should allow retained firefighters to continue working up to 65 years of age on a voluntary basis subject to strict and ongoing medical and occupational fitness criteria.

Importantly, I also want to raise the issue of timing. Even if there is agreement in principle, legislation takes time but these retirements are happening now. Without action, we stand to lose hundreds of trained, experienced retained firefighters in the coming months - people our communities depend on. Summertime is coming and, in Waterford, they will be out fighting all the wildfires. Look at times of flooding. These are the people we rely on. For that reason, I believe we should examine the possibility of an interim or shortterm measure to retain these firefighters while any permanent legislative solution is being developed. This could include a temporary administrative or regulatory mechanism allowing service beyond 62 on a yeartoyear basis, strict conditional extensions subject to enhanced medical and fitness assessments, and a clearly defined timeframe to act as a bridge to legislative reform, not a substitute for it. Such an interim approach would allow us to hold onto valuable, experienced personnel, avoid unnecessary reliance on social welfare, and ensure continuity of fire cover, particularly in areas already under pressure.

Above all, it is about fairness and dignity. It is about recognising that imposing forced retirement at 62 on retained firefighters - many of whom cannot afford to retire and remain fit to serve - creates real human and financial costs. I believe we owe it to these workers to at least examine whether a better, more proportionate approach is possible both in the short term and for the future.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Alan Dillon): I thank the Deputy for raising the issue and providing me with the opportunity to address it on behalf of the Minister of State, Deputy John Cummins.

The current mandatory retirement age of firefighters is 62, which was raised from 58 in 2024. It is the same for all uniformed services, including the Irish Prison Service, An Garda Síochána and the Defence Forces. A firefighter may retire upon attaining the minimum age of 55 years. If a firefighter wishes to serve beyond that age, the fire authority that employs them must satisfy themselves as to their medical fitness, having undergone the appropriate medical assessment. The firefighter may continue to serve while undergoing annual fitness tests but must retire on or before turning 62.

In 2024, the Courts, Civil Law, Criminal Law and Superannuation (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act amended the law in relation to the age at which certain public servants were required to retire. Part 11 of the Act provided that the then Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform could make orders enabling line Ministers - justice, defence and housing - to make regulations regarding the retirement age of uniformed services.

Regulations were made in August 2024, with the consent of then Minister for public expenditure, raising the mandatory retirement age to 62. The provision of fire services in a local authority's functional area, including the establishment and maintenance of a fire brigade, the assessment of fire cover needed and the provision of fire station premises, is a statutory function of individual fire authorities under the Fire Services Acts 1981 and 2003. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage supports fire authorities through setting general policy, providing a central training programme, issuing guidance on operational and other related matters, and providing capital funding support for equipment and priority infrastructural projects.

Engagement with staff-side associations, including on the mandatory retirement age and medical assessments, is a matter for each local authority as employer. The Local Government Management Agency, LGMA, will act on the local authority's behalf in industrial relations matters in the normal way. Following a Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, agreement with retained firefighters in September 2023, approximately 630 new recruits have entered service as fire authorities implement the mandated minimum crew number of 12 in each fire station. This is in support of the revised model of service provision rostering week on, week flexibility and four weeks paid annual leave.

I note that the recently enacted but not yet commenced Employment (Contractual Retirement Ages) Act 2025 does not apply to an employee whose employment is subject to the maximum retirement age required by law, at which the employee is obliged to retire or be retired. Therefore, this Act excludes firefighters and other uniformed services.

Given that this matter was addressed less than two years ago in consultation with staff representative bodies, the Department of housing has no plans to revisit this.

Deputy Paula Butterly: I thank the Minister of State for his answer, but it does not go to the heart of the issue, which is that these retained firefighters have to retire at 62. I am going to repeat much of what I said in my four minutes. These people have bills to pay and families to support. They are fighting fit and able to work. They want to work, and there is dignity in the fact that they want to work. They want to be of service to their communities, so the very fact that we have over 300 retained firefighters who are going to have to retire within the next year, a large portion of whom are in my constituency of County Louth, and are saying that they do not want to do so means that we cannot just shut the door and say that we reviewed this matter two years ago and, therefore, we are going to stop there and wait another few years. These are people's lives. This is people's work. This is their dignity. The gap is four years. Four years of having to rely on social welfare is not enough. It is not the right answer to give to people who go out there day in and day out to fight on our behalf.

When there is a flood, who do we call? When there is a fire, who do we call? This is not "Ghostbusters". These are valuable members of our community. We cannot just sit back and say "No" to somebody because of their age. I could go further and say that we could consider this to be age discrimination. Why is it 62? If you are medically fit and want to work, we should not be putting those barriers up. Think of the loss of knowledge and experience. We are constantly trying to employ and attract new talent into the fire services. If we continue to have this gap of knowledge and experience, who is going to pass that down to the new recruits? Who is going to be there?

I thank the Minister of State for his answer, but it is just not good enough.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I agree with the sentiment and point she has raised. I am taking this matter on behalf of the Minister of State with responsibility for local government, whose remit it is to engage with local authorities as those acting as employers for firefighters. In other uniformed services, a request is sometimes made to, for example, the Garda Commissioner as regards gardaí who want to work for an extended period above the normal retirement age. I feel that this is something that could be looked at for the firefighters. It could be utilised, reflecting on the level of knowledge, skill and expertise many firefighters have and the need to hold that in their respective fire stations so as to train those who are new entrants or need years to build up that capacity.

Notwithstanding that, the fire services had a significant campaign just two years ago. The issues at that time were very much focused on recruitment. There is an opportunity for further engagement on the extension of the retirement age that the Deputy is appealing for. How that can be supported, along with the adequate resourcing, is something that local authorities need to continue to review, ensuring that we have essential services delivered by firefighters, we have the infrastructure, training and equipment they need, and we have continuous investment into the sector.

I will certainly take all of this back to the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, and I will ensure that the Deputy gets the relevant information following the discussion here today.

Broadband Infrastructure

Deputy Maeve O'Connell: I wish to raise with the Minister of State today the issue of urban broadband. The national broadband plan has been hugely successful. It committed to connecting more than 1 million people to fibre broadband. When it was being proposed and introduced, it received a lot of criticism for its level of ambition and cost. Several years later, though, we can see how successful it has actually been, with more than 450,000 premises connected and another 492,000 premises available for preorder already on order. However, it has not covered all of the country, as the name "national broadband" implies. We have pockets of gaps. We have black spots or, as I prefer to call them, broadband islands. These are in our urban areas where you are surrounded by wonderful connectivity but your road or area has very limited connectivity. These have been bypassed by the traditional commercial providers, yet it was quite reasonable to expect that, as part of the national broadband plan, they would somehow be picked up.

My Fine Gael colleague, Councillor John Kennedy, and I have been repeatedly raising this issue in recent years on behalf of our residents in Kerrymount Rise, the Thicket, Stillorgan Wood, Torquay Wood, Westminster Lawns and other areas throughout my constituency of Dublin Rathdown. It is not just my constituency, but also other areas of Dublin. Deputy Grace Boland of Dublin Fingal West, one of the fastest growing constituencies in Dublin, has also had similar issues in her area, with her residents in Skerries, Lusk and Balbriggan also reporting connectivity and poor broadband issues.

This is not a trivial issue. I have had residents say to me repeatedly that they have jobs where they can work from home but they cannot do so because they do not have the broadband connectivity to enable it. A report published recently by Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Chamber of Commerce, developed by Sunstone, found that almost 20% of workers in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown worked from home - one of the highest percentages. However, it would probably be higher if more people had connectivity.

This does not just affect workers. It also affects our students, who cannot connect to their online resources when they go home, and businesses. That same report from Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown chamber also found that about 20% of businesses in the county did not even have an online presence. I wonder how much of that is due to the fact they do not have the connectivity where their businesses or homes are to keep an eye on their websites or online presence.

We have an issue here and I want to see how it is going to be addressed. We understand that there are legacy issues. For example, one of the issues is direct buried leads, which are difficult to get at and are not attractive for the commercial operators to prioritise right now. They will eventually get around to them.

Just as we have committed to fibre to the home for people around the country as part of the national broadband plan, the residents in my constituency of Dublin Rathdown are also entitled to that, and they should not just be expected to settle for fibre to the cabinet. Could the Minister of State please consider the issues my constituents and those in multiple other constituencies in Dublin are facing, and how will he work with the various Departments to try to address these broadband islands or black spots in our urban areas?

Deputy Alan Dillon: I would like to thank Deputy O'Connell for providing a debate on this important Topical Issue. I welcome the opportunity to outline the position on behalf of the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport.

As the Deputy has outlined, the national broadband plan, NBP, is the Government's initiative to deliver high-speed broadband to every household, business and farm in Ireland, ensuring all premises in the country are covered by a gigabit network no later than 2028. It is the largest infrastructural project in rural Ireland since rural electrification, spanning 96% of Ireland's landmass. The NBP is delivering high-speed broadband to over 1.1 million people in more than 23% of premises in the State. This includes over 64,410 farms, 26,350 non-farm businesses, 693 schools and 27 islands and it is fast transforming those communities.

As one of the largest public investments in the State's history, the national broadband plan is designed to address market failure, ensuring universal high-speed connectivity and supporting balanced economic growth, competitiveness and social inclusion across all regions. We are delivering strong progress on these challenging targets. Deployment momentum is strong and the main infrastructure build is scheduled to be completed by the end of 2026, bringing the project in ahead of schedule and running under budget. In addition, commercial deployments have also advanced strongly, with the latest figures released from the regulator showing that 90% of premises now have access to gigabit connectivity, which is a significant increase of 32% since 2020.

As part of the roll-out, the Government identified a need to deliver broadband services where commercial operators would not operate. National Broadband Ireland was appointed to deliver the wholesale broadband service to those parts of the country located in the intervention areas.

Already, over 1.5 million homes have been passed across the State, and this will complement the Government's priority around the digital connectivity strategy, ensuring Ireland has a multitude of connectivity in regard to fixed-line operators while also delivering the plan for high-speed broadband services in the non-intervention areas.

Actually, I want to correct that. In support of the national broadband plan, Eir has already passed over 1.5 million homes across the State. SIRO has reached a milestone of having passed over 700,000 premises for full broadband. Virgin Media has advised the Department that it has upgraded its services to over 700,000 premises with full broadband.

The Department is continuing to monitor upgrades by commercial operators to ensure that any unnecessary barriers to the availability of high-speed fibre broadband are addressed and the risk of any gigabit service-challenged areas is managed. Information gathering and detailed analysis is ongoing with the operators and it is understood that a full-scale risk assessment will ensure that any potential gigabit challenges are addressed. These data will complement the initial analysis already conducted by the Department. The Department is working closely with the commercial operators in reviewing all of the scenarios that the Deputy has raised in regards to direct buried leads. Analysis by the Department will continue to provide avenues to address and optimise policy in regard to other areas where black spots need connections.

Deputy Maeve O'Connell: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit for his reply. He mentioned a couple of things in his response about market failures, which is what the national broadband

plan sought to address. I would argue that what we are dealing with here in all of the areas I highlighted in Stillorgan, Foxrock and Cabinteely are market failures. They are, to use the Minister of State's own terminology, "gigabit service-challenged areas". People cannot work from home in these areas. The current service is completely insufficient.

I welcome that the Department is working very closely with the commercial operators. I would be interested to know what information is being gathered in that regard. Are all of these areas being identified and listed? Are they being measured and assessed?

On identifying all of those black spots, what is the plan around that? Is there a plan? The Minister of State said that the NBP was going to come in under budget. Will that budget be transferred to address the remaining black spots or will we be looking for a new plan, working with the commercial operators, or a sort of mini-national broadband plan or national broadband plan phase 2 to try to address these gaps?

These things are very important. The timeline is important to my residents. They have been listening to this story about roll-outs and the success stories, with towns and villages across the country being celebrated as great successes, yet they continue to have no service and they have no timeline as to when they are going to get a service.

The Minister of State works in the Department of enterprise. I refer him to my earlier comments about the percentage of people working from home in my constituency and the percentage of businesses there that are not online. Thus, there are opportunities that we are missing simply because we do not have sufficient urban broadband throughout Dublin Rathdown.

Deputy Alan Dillon: Regarding the Deputy's constituents and residents who have raised concerns with her, and anyone living in non-intervention areas or areas that are served by commercial operators - the likes of Open Eir, SIRO and Virgin Media - if they cannot get access to greater than 30 Mbps of broadband service after contacting their retail service providers, they should raise queries with the Department through its website under "Contact Us". There is a section within the national broadband plan. It is important that we escalate this issue to commercial operators. It is important that people have a service, that issues be investigated and that their services be upgraded to meet their level of need. Indeed, the Commission for Communications Regulation provides an online broadband checker on its website. This shows availability, allowing people, especially those with an eircode, to check. We want to ensure that the information checker reflects the lived reality in the network operator areas. If you cannot work from home because you do not have adequate connectivity, that is a problem and something we want to fix. We want to work with private operators to do that. We want to hold them to account, especially those that are currently providing services, and ensure that they are upgrading those services.

We are working on measures to make the process of accessing existing infrastructure easier, ensuring that new housing developments are designed and facilitated with telecommunications connectivity to address any potential gigabit service challenges. We need to continue to hold private operators to account in regard to their current licences. The Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, and I will work with the Deputy on the specific black spot areas she has raised here today.

School Facilities

Deputy James O'Connor: I wish to raise the issue of the Carrigtwohill Community College and the school campus in Carrigtwohill.

To give the Dáil a bit of insight in respect of this, this was the largest single school project ever undertaken by the State. It involved the construction of three schools on the one campus, a large secondary school in addition to two primary schools that went in together. There are approximately 1,500 students there at this moment in the town of Carrigtwohill, which was at one point the fastest growing urban area in the country. It also has plans potentially to host up to 2,000 pupils on the school campus itself. We fought very hard in the last Dáil term, alongside the then Minister for education, Deputy Norma Foley. After a very difficult two-year battle, we finally secured funding to advance the project, which was a long-running, difficult challenge. There is excellent school management and a fantastic principal in situ. I am very lucky to have a good working relationship and to be able to assist as the local TD for the area.

However, there is a problem. With that number of students in place, they do not have a proper playing area. I have asked about this for some time in parliamentary questions going back to November, trying to identify possible solutions so that the schools would have a suitable facility or play area for the students. To be fair, some analysis has been done. There are two sites adjacent to the school. Unfortunately one of them is an attenuation area to prevent flooding. Carrigtwohill is quite low lying and surface flooding is an issue there. With Storm Babet and so on, we have had serious flooding in the east Cork area in recent years. We need to see a workable solution being put forward. Through my parliamentary question to the Minister and the Department of education back in November, we identified a site of 1.09 acres sitting idle to the north of the site that is owned by the Department of education. There is an opportunity to solve the problem for these schools, the community in Carrigtwohill and the students from all over east Cork who attend the schools in the area and to put a solution in place. To their credit, the schools have been working very hard to get AstroTurf facilities. We have been able to assist in many cases in the constituency when it has come to getting grant aid. I really want to be in a position to provide assistance.

The question I want to put to the Department through the Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, who is representing the Minister for education today, is: can we finally get an answer? Will the Department devolve this land to Cork ETB to enable it to provide what is needed for the community and the school? I am really proud of the work they are doing in Carrigtwohill. In a relatively small number of years they have established a fantastic school. The students, pupils teachers and staff of the school all deserve this. It is required. We need to provide the facilities children need in order to go outside, get fresh air and exercise. We must try to provide them with the very best opportunity they can have in life to grow and develop.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Naughton, regarding the provision of sports facilities at the Carrigtwohill school campus in east Cork. Indeed, it is not the first time Deputy O'Connor has raised this matter in the Dáil. The Minister, Deputy Naughton, is aware of this issue and she recently met with Scoil Mhuire Naofa and local representatives on the matter. I am sure the Deputy is aware of that.

As the Deputy said, the Carrigtwohill school campus project is the largest single school building project ever undertaken by the Department, to serve some 2,400 pupils. The project was completed in Q4 of 2023 under the Department's design and build programme. It includes two 24-classroom primary schools for Carrigtwohill Community National School and Scoil Mhuire Naofa and accommodation, including 14 classrooms across the three projects, for children with special education needs. The project also delivered three general purpose areas, a PE hall in the post-primary school and 13 ball courts in total.

The schools on the campus have sought to use a green area, which forms part of the site, for recreation purposes. As someone with a sporting background, I can see how important the provision of green playing areas is for school activities and to ensure children get the best experience at the earliest stage possible. Being a keen sporting supporter, the Deputy will really work with the local public representatives but also with the Department in trying to formulate a solution to the problem. As the Deputy outlined, the area in question is not suitable for use as a formal playing pitch, as it is required as an attenuation basin for flood management. However, the Department is pleased to support the schools' access to the green area as an informal recreation space.

Planning permission was granted by Cork County Council for an entrance and access way to this green area, as a stand-alone planning application. The scope of works and associated costs to provide the entrance and access way has recently been reviewed by the Department. The Department's programme manager has been requested to carry out a further due diligence review to establish a more cost-effective option to deliver the access way to the green area south of the campus buildings. Once received, Department officials will further review the proposed scope of work and costs, along with the programme timeline for completion of the access and entrance way to the southern green area. Department officials will update the schools and patron bodies upon completion of that review.

In addition, the Department has agreed that the area of 1.9 acres to the north of the campus in the Department's ownership, to which the Deputy referred, can be used as a recreation area by the schools on a licence basis. Officials from the Department are in contact with the relevant stakeholders to progress this. Should the land be required to support school place expansion in the future, its use as a recreation area will cease. The Department of Education and Youth has had positive and productive engagement with the three schools and their patrons throughout all stages of this project and will continue to support the schools on the new school campus.

Deputy James O'Connor: I thank the Minister for the response. I want to highlight the Department has agreed the area of circa 1.9 acres to the north of the campus in the Department's ownership can be used as a recreation area by the school on a licence basis. Following on from those comments, I would like to get an insight into how long that is going to take. I welcome it; I really do. I wish we did not have to wait so long to get a reply in respect of that query. I am glad to hear it is progressing. I appreciate that processes sometimes take significant time but the ultimate goal here is to provide the 1,500 pupils in the school complex with the green area they need. This also recognises the fact that Carrigtwohill remains one of the fastest growing areas in the country. Cork County Council is expecting 40% of the county's population growth to happen on the Carrigtwohill to Midleton corridor in the next decade. We heard that recently at the briefing by the chief executive of the county council.

I welcome this response. All I would ask is that we would get insight into this as a matter of urgency. The schools are adamant that they would like to try to get an AstroTurf or all-weather facility onsite. There is obviously the need to ensure the Department of sport is happy to provide the grant aid required for these types of projects. We know complications arise when it comes to the conditions of ownership. The Department should not create any difficulty there if they come to a satisfactory arrangement with Cork ETB to allow this to proceed. Again, I want to express my gratitude. It is nice to see there is a way to resolve this.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy. It is positive to give some good news when we are taking Topical Issues. This is important for the 2,400 pupils attending the school without access to green space. It is positive that they have identified and agreed the availability of the green areas both the 1.9 acres to the north and the attenuation area to the south that will become now an informal recreation area. To the Deputy's point, it is important that the lease agreements are agreed, that the licences are put in place and he can work with the schools patronage and management on any sports capital projects that might accelerate the development of these playing pitches and, indeed, future-proof the campus at Carrigtwohill for the students and the staff and ensure further enhancement of the external playing space available on the campus.

It is really important that nothing is delayed. The steps agreed to date need to be worked through in the period ahead, and things put in place in the summer period leading into the next academic year, because without certainty people build up frustration and anxiety. Deputy O'Connor has worked very collaboratively with the patron, the Department of education and school management. The overall community will benefit from this. It is an investment in the community and not only in the campus itself. Having additional playing pitches and space for an area that has seen a rapid increase in population is very beneficial. I thank Deputy O'Connor for his work on this.

Coast Guard Service

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I thank the Minister of State for taking this on behalf of the Minister of State, Deputy Canney. I have no doubt the response from the Department will outline the rich history of the old rocket house station and the importance of the Coast Card to our coastal communities in north Wexford and south Wicklow. As the Minister of State comes from a coastal county, he is very appreciative of the work of the Coast Guard.

I will not go into the rich history of the Coast Guard but I will speak about the recent history. For over a decade there has been a demand for a much-needed coastal facility. When I was in the Seanad on 24 February 2022 I had a Commencement debate with the then Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, during which she informed us that six sites for a new Coast Guard facility had been identified by the OPW and that Courtown was on the priority list. On 23 November 2022, the Minister, Deputy Harris, came to the Seanad for a Commencement debate and told me Courtown was one of the key priorities for the OPW and that the OPW officials were giving the project every priority possible at the time. In the summer of 2023, the Minister, Deputy Chambers, met Wexford County Council and the Coast Guard in Courtown so there would be no issue with any potential site and it was resolved. On 10 October 2023, in a Commencement debate taken by the then Minister of State, Senator Rabbitte, I was told that Courtown was one of the key priorities for the OPW.

On 24 April 2024 when I raised it as a Commencement matter with the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, he told me he could see it was matter I had been raising for quite a significant period. He said that new accommodation for the Courtown Coast Guard unit was included in the Coast Guard building programme. He said it was worth repeating that it was one of the key priorities of the delivery programme. He said a preferred site had been identified, the OPW was in discussions, that it would then move to appointing a project team and, following this, planned and detailed design. This was in April 2024. I thought that was great and that we would see progress.

The general election happened and I ended up in this House. On 15 May 2025 I raised a Topical Issue debate taken by the Minister of State, Deputy Troy. He told me the OPW had identified a preferred site that was now awaiting approval of funding but the draft heads of terms, including the price, had been agreed on the new site. On 20 November 2025, in a written response, the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, told me a potential site had been identified after the 2024 appraisal process but the Department had requested there would be a further market trawl. He assured me it was still a priority for the Department. Come 14 April of this year, in a written response, the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, reassured me the provision of a new station for the unit remains a priority for the Department, and he pointed out a further market trawl had been carried out in Courtown.

We have known for a long time it has been a priority. We went from six sites to five sites to heads of terms to a further market trawl. A temporary solution has been found which is not acceptable. There has been no consultation with the local Coast Guard. Will the Minister of State tell us when the new Coast Guard facility will be constructed in Courtown?

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank Deputy Byrne for continuing his advocacy in regard to the delivery of the Courtown Coast Guard station. I am taking this matter on behalf of the Minister of State, Deputy Canney. The Courtown Coast Guard unit provides an important and valued service along a busy section of coastline, supporting maritime safety and search and rescue operations in the area. The unit is staffed by a dedicated group of volunteers who continue to deliver a coastal response and unmanned aerial system capability. Their contribution to the local community and maritime users is widely recognised. The Courtown unit operates from a parish-owned premises under a license agreement. This facility provides suitable welfare for operational accommodation and support, supporting the unit effectively in carrying out its duties. It represents a practical and functional solution which ensures continuity of service.

The Irish Coast Guard building strategy, developed by the Department of Transport in collaboration with the Office of Public Works, was launched by the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, in November 2025. This provides a structured and consistent framework for the delivery of Coast Guard infrastructure nationally. The strategy sets out a clear approach to ensuring that all Coast Guard units operate from a safe, modern and fit-for-purpose facility, while also ensuring the public investment is managed in a responsible and proportional manner.

Progress continues to be made across the wider Coast Guard building programme. A new Coast Guard station was delivered in Westport and officially opened by the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, earlier this year, while construction of the new facility at Greystones has commenced and is on track for substantial completion in early 2027. A number of additional

projects are also progressing nationally and are at various stages, including feasibility, site identification, design and delivery.

In the case of Courtown, the current premises aligns with the strategic approach set out in the building strategy. The facility is meeting operational requirements and providing sustainable suitable accommodation for volunteers. In this context it is appropriate that consideration be given to whether the existing premises can be secured but also enhanced on a longer-term basis rather than proceeding immediately to a more capital-intensive solution. The objective remains, which is to ensure that any solution delivered is sustainable, supports operational need and represents value for money for the Exchequer. This requires a balanced and evidence-based approach, taking account of local circumstances, available options and the wider Coast Guard infrastructure programme.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I thank the Minister of State but it is very clear the Department has not been listening or engaging with the local Coast Guard unit. The Minister of State said it himself. It is operating under licence, not even under a lease, in a local parochial house. By the way, in order for the vehicles to come out of that parochial house they have to go through the churchyard. When there is a wedding or a funeral or, at this time of the year, a confirmation or communion, you can imagine the difficulty. I cannot believe the Minister of State is saying to the House that it is suitable. He referenced the facility built in Westport and he is very familiar with it. Why are people in Courtown and across the coast of south Wicklow and north Wexford being denied a proper facility that was promised? We had been told by several Ministers that it was priority for the Department. It is not viewed as suitable. The case made by the Minister of State about a modern fit-for-purpose premises. There was no consultation with the local Coast Guard. Does the Minister of State really believe that a parochial house under licence represents a suitable building for a modern fit-for-purpose Coast Guard? I do not accept this is the case.

As a matter of urgency will the Minister of State ask the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, to meet with the local Coast Guard to talk to them about their needs as volunteers in the community? That is so we finally see the commitment that has been given by several Ministers, including the identification of a preferred site, to see a proper Coast Guard facility provided in Courtown.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I agree with the sentiment of the challenges the Deputy has outlined with regard to progressing this important critical infrastructure for the community in Courtown and the volunteers who go above and beyond every day. I will take that back to the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, and his officials in the Department to further engage with the OPW with regard to the realisation of the existing premises. They can continue to future proof the needs of the local community. I will mention what the Deputy has referenced with regard to intensive engagement with the local community on its needs and the focus of progressing a sustainable solution into the long term that continues to meet the operational requirements and needs of the locality and complies with the current Coast Guard building strategy. That needs to be reflected on an individual basis. I know the response I have been provided with today does not meet the needs of the people the Deputy represents, and the area that requires investment in its critical infrastructure. I will relay that back to the Minister of State.

Sanctions against the State of Israel Bill 2025: Second Stage [Private Members]

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I start by welcoming the many people who have come into the Gallery this evening to observe this debate. They are people who have been marching and protesting in some cases for decades or many years. Members of the Palestinian community are here to observe this and see how the Government is going to respond to it. I commend the Ireland Palestine Solidarity Campaign and other groups like Sadaka, which are here and have been campaigning for many years on the issue of solidarity with Palestine against the crimes being committed against the people of Palestine by the Israeli regime.

Although this Bill was proposed by People Before Profit, I thank Sinn Féin, the Labour Party, the Social Democrats and, hopefully, others, who have already pledged support for this Bill. I give special thanks to Senator Frances Black who is also here and of course has been campaigning to get her Bill passed, looking for sanctions on trade with the illegally occupied Palestinian territories. The Government promised in the programme for Government it would be implemented but it still has not implemented it. We will probably talk about it more. However, despite the commitments given by the Government, there is a clear statement that it is now diluting that Bill. Many of us frankly have doubts that it has any intention of passing it at all despite the promise in the programme for Government that it would do so.

Our Bill is saying that under the Genocide Convention, the Rome Statute against apartheid, international law generally and our commitment to international law and human rights we have an obligation to impose sanctions on the State of Israel because it is in violation of those legal commitments. We are asking, if this Bill is passed, which we hope the Government will agreed to, is that we should all break off all economic, trade and financial relations with the State of Israel because of the crimes we believe it is guilty of. They are genocide, apartheid, ethnic cleansing, collective punishment of Palestinian people and the systematic, ongoing, decades long violation of the most basic human and civil rights of the Palestinian people. We are morally and legally obliged to impose sanctions and we need to end the treatment of Israel as a normal state and recognise that it is a rogue pariah state.

If that were not clear before the events of the past three years, it is surely obvious now. The Israeli regime is not a normal regime. It has revealed itself in the past three years as a depraved murder machine hell-bent on a genocidal campaign of annihilation and mass murder against the Palestinian people. That is what it is. Such a regime in our view has no place in the community of civilised nations and in the international community and should be isolated economically and in every other way as happened with apartheid South Africa. Because of the resistance of black South Africans and the solidarity of people across the world, it was finally acknowledged that an apartheid regime like South Africa had no right to exist and be treated as a normal state, and that regime had to be dismantled.

Surely, we are beyond the point now where that is clear about the Israeli regime. We have seen in the past three years the genocidal slaughter of more than 75,000 people in Gaza, the levelling of Gaza, the destruction of all the schools, most of the housing, the infrastructure, the hospitals and the mass murder of men, women and children. That continues despite the claim that there is a ceasefire. While all of that is going on, we see the ongoing ethnic cleansing of

the West Bank. We see again the assaults and reoccupation of parts of Lebanon and the mass murder of Lebanese people. We see the attacks on Iran.

This is a death machine. It is obvious that is the case, and that the people presiding over it are criminals. Netanyahu, Gallant, Smotrich, Ben-Gvir are sick, sick people. When the minister of a government gets a present of a noose for his birthday to celebrate their plan to execute Palestinians, and they celebrate that for their birthday, you understand you are dealing with sick, depraved people. This is the mentality that is driving the Israeli State. Of course, all of this predates the current events. What we have seen in the past three years is the logical conclusion of the genocidal character of the Israeli State but its crimes predate the events of October 2023. I want to quote something written in 2021. I could quote many human rights organisations but I will just quote one because the impunity granted to Israel is what has led us to the genocidal horror we have seen.

5 o'clock

This was documented by many organisations, but I will cite one, namely Human Rights Watch, and a report it produced in 2021. The report in question states that for over seven decades, the international community has stood by as Israel has been given free rein to dispossess, segregate, control, oppress and dominate Palestinians. It also states that the international community has contributed to undermining the international legal order and has emboldened Israel to continue to perpetrating crimes with impunity. Human Rights Watch accuses some states of actively supporting Israel's violations by supplying it with arms, equipment and other tools to perpetrate crimes under international law and providing diplomatic cover, including at the United Nations Security Council, to shield it from accountability. It states that by doing so, these states have completely failed the Palestinian people and only exacerbated Palestinians' lived experience as people with lesser rights and inferior status to Jewish Israelis. That was just one human rights organisation in 2021. How prophetic are its words.

Decades of impunity have been granted by the international community, by the UN Security Council and by this country. That impunity has now led to the horror we have seen over the past three years. There was the failure to pass Senator Black's Bill, which was instigated in 2018. How many times did we stand up in this House and how many times did people take to the streets - long before 2023 - to plead with successive Governments to impose sanctions? How many times did we plead with those in government to raise the EU-Israel association agreement? This grants favoured trade status and is effectively associate membership of the European Union. Israel still enjoys this after the genocide and horror that has been imposed on the people of Gaza and there has been not a single, solitary sanction.

I will be interested to hear what the Minister is going to say about the next matter I am about to raise. I do not know if people are aware of it, but it is absolutely shocking. This week, because of a fight by *The Currency*, which, according to the journalist Niall Sargent took 12 months, we discovered that in 2024 the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment approved licences to the value of €20 million for exports from this country to the Israeli military. That was a surge in the value of such exports in the previous year, €12 million, when the genocidal assault on Gaza began. In the years before that, it was only €1 million, although that is too much, or €85,000 in another year. In 2023, however, when the genocidal assault on Gaza began, the figure jumped. In 2024, it went up to €20 million. This is the Government

signing off on licences to allow exports of goods to the Israeli military while it was committing these crimes. In the case of 2024, this was after South Africa had already initiated the case before the ICJ in respect of the genocide, which the Government later joined, although it had to be pushed to do so. We already had a ruling from the ICJ in January 2024 to the effect there was a plausible case of genocide being committed against the Palestinian people. Following that, the Government granted licences to export dual-use technology to the Israeli military that is carrying out the genocidal massacre. That is absolutely appalling.

I will conclude by reminding the Government what our obligations are under the Genocide Convention. I want to quote the ICJ ruling on the Bosnian genocide. It states:

...a State's obligation to prevent, and the corresponding duty to act, arise at the instant that the State learns of, or should normally have learned of, the existence of a serious risk that genocide will be committed. From that moment onwards, if the State has available to it means likely to have a deterrent effect on those suspected of preparing genocide, or reasonably suspected of harbouring specific intent ... [to commit genocide] it is under a duty to make such use of these means as the circumstances permit.

Thus, even if there is a suspicion of genocide the signatories to the Genocide Convention are supposed to act. I will not have time to quote it but the judgment goes on to state that even if a state does not think it will have a massive impact, it should do anything in its power to try to deter, prevent or impact on the capacity of the state committing the genocide. It also states that such action should be taken. Despite that, this State has not imposed a single sanction. Not one. Spain and Slovenia have. Other European states are still sending the Israelis arms and weapons and it is just deplorable. These are signatories to the Genocide Convention, which was put together, let us remind ourselves, after the Holocaust on the basis that "Never again" meant not just that we would punish a genocide after the fact but that we would try to ensure it never happens again.

Despite this, we have allowed three and a half years of this genocide, although, as we all know, there have been decades of ethnic cleansing. The entire Israeli state has been based from the beginning on the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians. There have been decades of ethnic cleansing and decades of illegal occupation and annexation of Palestinian territory. For 20 years now, there has been a siege of Gaza, which is a collective punishment of its people and which, according to the UN had, even before October 2023, reduced it to a state of permanent humanitarian crisis. And then there is what has happened since. There have been no sanctions despite our obligations. It is criminal.

I will finish with something I said earlier. I never, ever quote Éamon de Valera because I have nothing good to say about him. Now, however, I will because in 1935, Éamon de Valera instigated sanctions against Italy because it was engaged in a genocidal assault that claimed the lives of tens of thousands of Ethiopians. His Government imposed sanctions because it felt it was Ireland's duty as a former colony to impose sanctions on Italy for committing genocide against people in Africa. Surely this Government can do as well as Eamon de Valera and impose sanctions on the genocidal State of Israel.

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Helen McEntee): Across Gaza, the West Bank and Lebanon, civilians are living through devastation, fear and displacement on a scale that should shock the conscience of the world. Families are burying children. Communities

are being destroyed. Humanitarian conditions are catastrophic. We know this and I think we all agree on this. While international attention has shifted in recent weeks towards the broader regional crisis involving Iran, I want to say clearly that Palestine will not be pushed aside and will not be forgotten. The suffering of the Palestinian people is not secondary to other geopolitical events. It must remain at the centre of international attention and international action. I have advocated for this at every Council meeting I have attended since being appointed in November. We know there is no meaningful peace in Gaza and no real ceasefire in Lebanon while civilians continue to live under threat and violence continues. We urgently need de-escalation, diplomacy and a path towards a lasting political solution, not temporary pauses that leave civilians trapped in fear and insecurity.

Ireland remains deeply concerned about the conflicts across the Middle East and Gulf region. I continue to follow developments closely, but importantly I remain in close contact with EU and regional partners in responding to this crisis. I raised these issues directly again this week at the foreign affairs Council in Brussels. I spoke at length about the situation in Palestine and the urgent need for Europe to act with greater resolve. Ireland's position has been consistent and clear. I believe, as we all do, that Palestinians have the right to live in dignity, freedom and security in their own state. I believe Israelis and Palestinians both deserve peace and safety and I believe international law must apply equally to all states, in all circumstances. That principle guides my approach and that of the Government to this conflict and to the measures I will outline.

Ireland's position since the beginning of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been steadfast. We remain committed to working with key partners to end the conflict in Gaza, advance a sustainable peace plan and, most importantly, address the immense challenges facing Palestinians in Gaza and the wider implications for regional stability and security.

I remain committed to supporting a unitary Palestinian state consisting of Gaza and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. I remain committed as well to achieving a just and lasting peace where Israelis and Palestinians live side by side in two states, Israel and Palestine, in peace, security and dignity within the agreed borders. I have spoken directly with my Palestinian counterpart many times in recent weeks again and assured her of Ireland's full support for the Palestinian people and for the implementation of the two-state solution.

Since taking office, I have also taken a number of concrete actions which I will outline today. Although the ceasefire agreement reached in October 2025 offered a moment of hope and relief, the reality for civilians in Gaza remains unbearable. Since that agreement began, 834 Palestinians in Gaza have been killed and more than 2,300 injured in ongoing Israeli military operations. Those are not just numbers. We know they are children, parents, families and entire communities whose lives have been shattered. The humanitarian situation in Gaza has deteriorated even further since the outbreak of the conflict involving Iran. Border closures have intensified these already desperate conditions. One crossing remains the sole operational entry point for aid and commercial supplies, creating severe bottlenecks that continue to limit deliveries and deepen shortages. I saw this in my visit to the region at the beginning of the year.

Today, the people of Gaza continue to endure unimaginable suffering. Access to water, healthcare and shelter remains wholly inadequate. Diseases linked to overcrowding and poor living conditions are rife. None of us who hear these stories of parents trying to shield their

children from rats and infestation can remain untouched by the horror of what is unfolding. We are all feeling this and want to do everything we can to support them. Behind every statistic are human beings trying to survive and get through another day. I do not believe anybody can look at the humanitarian situation and conclude that the international response has been adequate. It has not. This is why I and the Government have consistently called for unrestricted humanitarian access into and throughout Gaza. Israel must immediately remove restrictions on aid access and facilitate the delivery of essential supplies and services throughout Gaza, notwithstanding the wider regional security situation. All crossings must be reopened.

When I travelled to Rafah earlier this year, my first bilateral visit in this role, I saw first-hand the scale of the suffering and the urgency of the need. Most importantly, I spoke to those engaging on the ground, doing a job there and who have lost colleagues in this conflict who were simply trying to help and protect those who need our help the most. That visit and those conversations and engagement that I had have stayed with me and reinforced my belief that we need to do everything we can collectively. We need a more unified and stronger response from Europe. It has reinforced my determination that we must speak clearly and act concretely but we need more happening at a European level. During that visit, I announced the Government will provide €42 million in assistance to the people of Palestine who urgently need that support. In particular, it will be ensured that funding is provided to organisations like UNRWA, the Palestinian Authority and many important organisations on the ground.

I have also remained focused on the extremely serious situation in the West Bank. We all know that this continues to deteriorate rapidly. Israeli military operations have caused widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure and homes. At least 40,000 people have been displaced since January 2025. The scale, speed and severity of displacement and demolitions are unprecedented and continues in an atmosphere of impunity. Settlement expansion, forced displacement and settler violence have accelerated dramatically. Entire Palestinian communities are being pushed from their homes while extremist violence continues with impunity.

In recent weeks, the Israeli security cabinet approved 34 new settlements in the West Bank, the largest number approved at one time by any Israeli Government. This represents a vast 78% increase in the total number of settlements. These are not isolated developments. They form part of an established pattern designed to create a new *status quo* in the occupied Palestinian territory. Let us call this what it is: these actions consistently contravene international law. I agree with the Deputy on this. We are not disagreeing on any of this. These actions threaten the viability of the two-state solution altogether, a solution that we absolutely support.

The Israeli Parliament also passed a Bill on 30 March mandating death by hanging as the default punishment for West Bank residents convicted of terrorist acts by military courts. I utterly condemn this law passed by the Israeli Parliament expanding the scope of the death penalty and reviving its implementation in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory. We oppose the death penalty in all cases and in all circumstances. The right to life is absolutely fundamental and universal. We are all particularly concerned by the discriminatory nature of this legislation as it relates to Palestinians.

I fully understand, and I share, the depth of feeling of many people in Ireland, in this House and in the Gallery about the ongoing suffering in Palestine. People want to see action. They

want to see accountability. They want to know that international law still matters and that civilian lives matter equally. This is why I want to explain clearly, despite sharing many of the concerns that motivate this Bill, that I do not believe this legislation is the most effective or legally sustainable path forward. The Bill before the House would, in practice, amount to a blanket prohibition on trade in all goods, and certain services, between Ireland and Israel. In effect, it amounts to a boycott, divestment and sanctions approach with respect to Israel. The Government does not support that approach, although we fully recognise the right of individuals and organisations to make their own decisions in this regard. We do not operate a unilateral domestic sanctions regime. Instead, Ireland implements EU sanctions and UN sanctions through the EU framework. This Bill would amount to a blanket ban without any exemptions or derogations. It is well understood that EU sanctions regimes are designed carefully to avoid and mitigate unintended consequences, including consequences for civilian populations and access to essential goods such as food, medicines and emergency supplies. Again, this Bill would amount to a blanket ban without exemptions for any of these elements. There are important reasons, therefore, that this approach has not generally been taken in modern sanctions regimes relating to other conflicts, and the Government does not believe that it is the right approach here. I and this Government believe that the strongest and most impactful route remains co-ordination at EU level, particularly in relation to the Israeli settlements and trade connected to the occupied Palestinian territories.

This is an area where Ireland has shown leadership. I have repeatedly argued for stronger action, including sanctions on extremist settlers, restrictions relating to illegal settlements and the suspension of trade provisions under the EU-Israel Association Agreement. Earlier this week, EU member states reached political agreement at our Foreign Affairs Council to sanction Israeli extremist settlers, entities and those enabling violence in the West Bank. I appreciate that step was overdue but it matters. On 18 April, Ireland, alongside Spain and Slovenia, wrote to the High Representative, Kaja Kallas, again expressing deep concern regarding Israeli Government actions and calling for urgent discussion of the association agreement. Ahead of that discussion, I was clear in calling for the suspension of the EU-Israel Association Agreement. The EU's review of the agreement in 2025 found Israel to be in clear breach of its obligations. That situation continues, and that is why, with my colleagues from Spain and Slovenia, we wrote to ensure that this matter was raised at the Council and that we would make progress and take action on it. At the Foreign Affairs Council this week, I again called on EU partners to suspend the trade-related provisions of the agreement. Europe still needs to go further, however, and we will continue to press for further action, because if the international community continues to issue statements without consequences, the credibility of international law for all of us is weakened.

The House will recall that on 19 July 2024, the International Court of Justice, ICJ, delivered its advisory opinion on the legal consequences of Israeli policies and practices in the occupied Palestinian territory - a case in which Ireland, alongside more than 50 other states, made written and oral submissions. Since then, Ireland has continued to push for meaningful action at EU level, including restrictions on trade connected to illegal settlements. At this week's Foreign Affairs Council, I and others again called on the European Commission to bring forward proposals ahead of the June Council meeting, with a view to taking a vote on this issue. It would not just be a vote to ban or suspend the trade element of the EU-Israel Association Agreement but a vote with a view to banning trade with the occupied territories. In Brussels

this week, a growing number of member states either joined this call, sought a vote or expressed a readiness to consider such a proposal. This is the first time I have seen this in the number of Councils that I have attended. Again, I appreciate that it is far beyond time for this to happen but it matters and it is progress. We need to continue, and I will continue to progress and to press for this approach.

Ireland has also consistently underlined the important distinction between the State of Israel and Israeli settlements, which are illegal under international law and are not recognised as part of Israel by the European Union, its member states and the overwhelming majority of UN member states. This distinction, again, is important.

At the same time, Ireland will continue to take action domestically. Here at home, work is continuing on the commitment in the programme for Government to progress legislation prohibiting the importation of goods from occupied Palestinian territories following the ICJ advisory opinion. In June 2025, last summer, the Government approved the general scheme of the Israeli Settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory (prohibition of importation of goods) Bill 2025.

The Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade subsequently held hearings, received submissions and represented a broad range of perspectives, all of which were then fed to me and my Department and Government. The primary purpose of that legislation is to prohibit the importation into Ireland of goods originating in illegal Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory. I thank Senator Black for her work in this regard and for her continued engagement with the Government.

Legally, the regulation of services is significantly more complex at an EU level than the regulation of goods. That is why I have been engaging with the Attorney General who has provided detailed and extensive advice on whether the inclusion of services would be permissible but also on how we would progress this legislation more broadly. We have sought clarification on a number of different elements of this legislation. We need to make sure that anything we introduce is legally robust and capable of withstanding challenge but also that we can advance our broader policy objectives effectively. What I and the Government have always said is that where we work with member states, with colleagues together, we are stronger. I am engaging closely with my Dutch, Spanish, Slovenian and Belgian Government colleagues regarding their own approaches. Other governments are now moving on legislation. I remain absolutely committed to taking meaningful action in response to breaches of international law, international humanitarian law and human rights. I remain convinced that action at EU level will ultimately have the greatest impact. We need to make sure that what we are going has an impact, that it changes the behaviour of the Israeli Government and above all, that it brings peace and solutions for those in Gaza and the West Bank and for Palestine more broadly.

I want to be clear that I distinguish between the actions of the current Israeli Government and the Israeli people. Ireland's goal has always been to focus on peace, security and dignity for both Palestinians and Israelis. This is a goal shared by many Israeli citizens themselves. Our own history on this island teaches us of the danger of division, dehumanisation and endless cycles of violence. It also teaches us the importance of political courage and international support in building peace.

This month marks two years since Ireland recognised the State of Palestine alongside Spain and Norway and later joined by Slovenia. I remain convinced that recognition was the right decision. It was taken against the backdrop of an intolerable humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza, the shrinking space for Palestinian life in the West Bank and the urgent need for injecting fresh momentum into efforts towards a just and lasting peace. At the time some argued it would make no difference but I disagreed then and continue to disagree now. Since that decision, international momentum behind Palestinian recognition has grown significantly, including across Europe. We have tried consistently to show leadership, not just in words but in action and to that effect, in January, following my visit to the region, I hosted a meeting of the global alliance for the implementation of the two-state solution, where Ireland shared lessons from our own peace process with regional partners and other states committed to peace. We will continue in that regard.

Finally, we must make sure our measures are effective, legally sound and capable of building broader international support. Nobody should mistake my opposition or the Government's opposition to this Bill for silence or indifference. I will continue to press for stronger international action and to advocate for accountability. I am committed to progressing the occupied territories Bill and will continue to speak clearly about the unbearable suffering being endured by civilians in Gaza, the West Bank and Lebanon because Palestine is being overlooked. The world cannot allow this suffering to become normalised.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I am sorry but I do not believe that the Minister is committed to progressing the occupied territories Bill; I just do not. She said, quite rightly, that it was June 2025 when it went through pre-legislative scrutiny. It is now May 2026 and there is no sign of it. Deputy Boyd Barrett, Deputy Gibney and I, and others, ask every Thursday at the Oireachtas Business Committee about the occupied territories Bill but there is no answer. We get silence or "we do not know". We know where the Government's emphasis lies because the Minister betrayed it in her speech, copies of which were sent around. It actually states where the "clip starts", which presumably is an instruction to her social media team, and where the "clip ends". The emphasis from this speech, which will go out, is on co-ordination at EU level. Co-ordination at an EU level is important but we have an opportunity to do things domestically on our own. The Bill, introduced by Senator Black eight years ago is that measure but the Government is not supporting it. I have no doubt that the Minister has mothballed that legislation. I am enraged that we are in this situation. I recall the honeyed words of the Tánaiste when he was Minister for foreign affairs and sitting in that very seat. He took to his feet in the debate over the flotilla and said that not only would he progress the occupied territories Bill, but he would do so by November 2025. That is what he said on the Dáil record. He made a promise, a promise that has been broken. That promise was in the programme for Government and was made to the people of Ireland before the last election. It carried across the water and across the continent to the Palestinian people. They knew that this Bill, if it was passed, would probably not save one life but it was a tangible symbol. Other states in Europe have gone ahead of us and actually delivered, including Spain and Slovenia. We are becoming a laggard in our support for Palestine.

What is the threshold for action against Israel? More than 75,000 people have died in Gaza in the past three years, 2,800 have died in Lebanon since March and more than 1,000 have died in the West Bank with the continued expansion of the illegal settlements. What is the threshold?

Is it because Israel is a white, western economy that it is getting away with this exceptionalism? If it was any other ethnicity or any other place in the world, it would be sanctioned beyond existence at this point. There is no other state that is as roguish, illegal or horrific as the Israeli state has been over the past number of years, if not decades. A new law was brought in by the Knesset in March, which the Minister referenced in her speech, permitting hanging and the death penalty. Israel has not carried out a judicial death sentence since 1962. It has carried out many killings, as we know, but it has not carried out a judicial death sentence since 1962. The United Nations is absolutely appalled by this law. I have not seen such strong language in a UN document. It states:

...the Knesset approved a bill ... Israel has not carried out executions nor imposed death sentences since 1962. This new legislation not only marks a significant regression: it also does so by imposing capital punishment on de facto ethnic or national grounds and by diluting basic legal safeguards.

It is the worst of the worst. This is where the State is at.

Where are we this week? We have boycotted the Eurovision. That is the right thing to do but it is a very, very small measure. That competition is still going ahead. Tens, if not hundreds, of millions of people are going to watch it and the vast majority of European nations are still taking part. We have a football match coming up in the autumn. That cannot happen. That has to stop. We have to go belt and braces on sanctioning Israel. There is no other state in my lifetime or in any of our lifetimes that has acted with such impunity, so illegally or so grotesquely in carrying out genocide. There are measures that we can take.

Sadaka launched a document this week, "Beyond Words", the most aptly named document because words is all that we have given from this Chamber and from this Government to the people of Palestine. We have not delivered any action. Sadaka sets out, in a fantastic document, well-referenced actions that we can take without having to go through collective EU sanctions because that, in essence, is a cop-out. We know the veto powers of the EU. EU states will not support any actions against Israel but we can do things here in terms of sanctions, visas, military and civilian flights, and dual-use technologies. We can do that now. We can support this Bill. This is a strong, robust Bill. It is the kind of Bill that meets, in so far as we can, the devastation that has been caused by Israel. We must support it. I am beyond frustrated. I am enraged and angered and so let down. The one thing that we could have done in the short lifetime of this Government was to bring Senator Black's Bill, or at least the spirit of that Bill, into some form of legislation. This Government has abandoned it.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I have said we will progress it.

Deputy Duncan Smith: No, I am sorry.

Deputy Helen McEntee: We will----

Deputy Duncan Smith: I am sorry but until I see the Minister standing there delivering a Second Stage speech on that Bill, I will believe in my heart that it has been abandoned because that is how it feels.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Minister's speech really encapsulates the cynicism of the Government on the issue of Palestine. The written copies of her speech include, in two places, references to the start and end of media clips. It is the first time I have seen that. It encapsulates the Government's approach. One of the clips includes the Minister talking about all the good stuff the Government is going to do at a European level and how hopeful she is about the things happening at EU level. The clip ends with a statement that the Government cannot support this Bill in its current form. However, there is no need to worry: nobody should mistake opposition to this Bill for silence or indifference. I do not think the Government is going to be silent in any case. It is part of its approach that we will keep getting lots of words. Ministers have no problem giving us words. What the Government has a problem with is action, and any action at that.

The Government is in a difficult political position. On the one hand are people like those in the Gallery and the tens of thousands who have come out again and again to protest for Palestine. That massive public support for Palestine is one side of it. On the other side is the Government's increasing integration into US imperialism, its connection with and reliance on US multinationals and, therefore, the massive pressure on it not to do anything to upset Donald Trump and US capitalism. The Government has tried to untie that Gordian knot by deciding on a strategy of rhetoric without action. It will call what is happening genocide, which is very good and very important, and it will condemn and speak out about it. In effect, however, it will refuse to do anything.

That is why eight years have passed without any progress on Senator Black's occupied territories Bill. The Minister tells us she is committed to progressing the Bill. That is a joke and everyone knows it is a joke. She cannot stand there and ensure us the Bill will come through when she has devoted her energies to watering it down, slowing it down and, in my view, trying to block it. That is being done entirely against the wishes of the all-party foreign affairs committee, which has said it needs to be enacted quickly and to include both trade and services. It is being done against the vote of the Dáil. Last year, the motion we brought forward on the occupied territories Bill was passed unanimously by the House. The Dáil voted for the Bill to be enacted by last Christmas and to include provision for goods and services. The Minister has used her position not to progress the Bill but to delay it.

The Government has supposedly been conducting an examination for two years into illegal flights through our airspace conveying weapons to be used by the Israel Defense Forces. I put down a parliamentary question about the progress of that examination every few months. It is apparently still ongoing and the Minister cannot tell me when it might end. The strategy of the Government is words without actions.

Before us this evening is a proposal for meaningful action but the Minister says it would amount to boycott, divestment and sanctions on the State of Israel. To this I say, "Yes, that is precisely what we need". How can anyone say that a state that is committing genocide, a state that is built on apartheid, forcible ethnic cleansing and throwing people out of their land, should not be boycotted, divested from and sanctioned?

I return to a point Deputy Boyd Barrett made. This strategy of words without actions is getting the Government into a very significant legal problem. It has a problem because it chose to use a particular, strong word, which we pushed it for a long time to use and which we welcomed. I refer to the Government's formal statement that Israel is committing genocide.

The Taoiseach first formally stated that in May 2025. The Minister cannot say she does not know Israel is committing genocide, because the Government has declared that Israel is committing genocide. We do not live in a world in which, legally, noticing that someone is committing genocide does not mean anything. It is meant to mean something and the Government is meant to do something about it. The International Court of Justice in the Bosnian genocide case stated, "A State's obligation to prevent, and the corresponding duty to act [not just to say words but to act], arise at the instant that the State learns of, or should normally have learned of, the existence of a serious risk that genocide will be committed."

We were well beyond that point by May 2025 because the Government had stated not just that it suspected genocide was happening or may be happening but that genocide was happening. Article I of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide states, "[G]enocide, whether committed in time of peace or in time of war, is a crime under international law, which they [states that are party to the convention, which includes Ireland] undertake to prevent and to punish." Article V states, "The Contracting Parties undertake to enact, in accordance with their respective Constitutions, the necessary legislation to give effect to the provisions of the present Convention." Why did the State recognise genocide and do precisely nothing to prevent and punish that crime?

Worse than that, it acted to delay and vote against legislation designed to prevent and punish that crime. If the Minister knows Israel is committing genocide and she opposes Bills that are proposed to try to pressure on Israel to stop the genocide that is ongoing, what does that make her and the other members of the Government? It makes them complicit in genocide. A former Minister, Paschal Donohoe, was deeply offended by anyone saying that. He thought it was a very bad thing to say someone is complicit in genocide, but how else does the Government want it to be spun? If Ministers know a genocide is happening but are against taking action to try to stop it, then what else are they other than complicit?

The other argument the Government makes is that it is, in effect, illegal for us to act unilaterally against Israel and that every action must be taken collectively by the EU. That is simply not true. Last October, the Parliament of the Spanish state passed into law a total arms embargo against Israel. It permanently banned the sale to Israel of all weapons, military equipment and, crucially, dual-use technology in response to the genocide in Gaza. That law formalises a de facto ban that had been in operation since Israel's genocidal war against the Palestinian people began in October 2023.

We can contrast that with the position of the Government and all its fine words. Yesterday, *The Currency* website revealed that the Department of enterprise approved €20 million in dual-use exports, that is, exports that could be used for military purposes, not just to Israel but specifically to the IDF and the Israeli Ministry of Defense. This was happening in 2024 at the height of Israel's genocidal slaughter of the Palestinians. That was revealed in heavily redacted freedom of information documents that cover up what the dual-use items were for. I heard Deputy Barry Ward on the radio earlier trying to suggest that this was perhaps some sort of HR software for the IDF. All the redactions mean we have no idea whether that is accurate. Perhaps the Minister can tell us what the goods were and which companies were exporting them to the IDF.

Even if we grant that Deputy Ward is correct that this was HR software and not any product that would be used in weaponry and so on, why would the IDF be buying extra HR software

during the slaughter of Palestinians in 2024? Maybe it was because it needed to expand its payroll because it was paying many more soldiers to shoot innocent children in the head, blow up whole families in apartment blocks, bomb hospitals and ambulances in double-tap attacks, leave babies to die in ICUs, and rape and torture political prisoners. That is what the IDF does. Any goods being sent to the IDF are used for those purposes. That is what it was doing on a daily basis in 2024 and it is still what it is doing today despite the so-called ceasefire.

The FOI documents show a belated development of conscience in 2025, with the start of the blocking of dual-use exports to the IDF. That inexcusable hesitation in taking action to prevent genocide as it was happening in front of our eyes shows we cannot trust the Government to comply with complicated trade rules and regulations. We need to take away all discretion from this cowardly, double-speaking Government and put into law a clear ban on all trade with Israel, just like the Government was forced to do when it banned trade with apartheid South Africa. There can be no more room for equivocation or delay.

I have a question for the Minister. The Government allowed a conscience vote yesterday on the Social Democrats' Bill on abortion rights. Why can it not allow a conscience vote on the question of genocide? Of all the issues of conscience in the world, surely it should allow its own backbench TDs to decide whether they want to do something to stop this genocide or to go along with the Government's complicity in genocide. Surely they should be allowed that choice. I ask Government TDs and those who support the Government not to hide behind any of the misleading waffle Ministers like to use about legal technicalities and so on but instead to examine their conscience. They know there is a genocide happening. Do they think we should be trading with this genocidal apartheid state or that it is time for Ireland to do whatever we can to try to stop it?

Deputy Máire Devine: We heard fine words from the Minister but Ireland's involvement and support for Palestine, on which she and the Government self-congratulate themselves, are but an embarrassing drop in the ocean of what is needed. The Government has been kicking around the occupied territories Bill and looking concerned for eight years. The silent tuts and concerned frown lines which come up when atrocities happen will not cut it; sanctions will. I thank the bold Deputy Boyd Barrett for introducing this Bill.

Tomorrow will mark the 78th anniversary of the Nakba catastrophe, 78 years of forced displacement that is continuous and ongoing. Some 66% of the Palestinian people are refugees following three years of genocide, multiple crimes and blatant breaches of international law. Israel has never been held accountable for its historical crimes or its more recent crimes against humanity. Indeed, the genocidal slaughter of more than 75,000 people, with hundreds of thousands seriously injured, and the levelling of Gaza, seem to be a natural progression of Israel's war crimes, as the world looks on and allows the Israeli regime to work faster towards its ultimate goal of stealing the maximum amount of Palestinian land without the Palestinians. It is doing the same now in Lebanon and beyond. The machine is operating at full throttle.

I will make a few points about more recent occurrences. A couple of days ago, in *The New York Times*, a journalist wrote about the sexual violence and rape of men, women and children in Israeli prisons. The world remains silent on this, allowing impunity to the bully, the murderous Netanyahu, who has taken a leaf out of the book of his friend, the other bully,

Trump, by suing *The New York Times*. The columnist in question is the respected and renowned Nicholas Kristoff. Our solidarity goes to him.

Regarding the soft influence of the Eurovision, how the hell did Israel get into the Eurovision? It confounds me. Maybe I do not understand it. Israelis are not Europeans. Eurovision is a musical whitewash. I do not often praise RTÉ but fair play to it for doing its public service and acting in accordance with the public's intuition that this is not on. The AI Israel is using to influence votes costs hundreds of thousands of euro and is skewing the vote. What is Israel doing in Europe in the first place? I guess Zionists are delighted with Europe's inaction, grovelling and meekness, which is further damaging the strength of the European Union.

On sportswashing, UEFA and football, the majority of Irish people do not want the games in September, either home or away in Israel, to take place. Imagine playing alongside soldiers when some of them have murdered your teammates. Some 500 Palestinian footballers have been murdered, as have some of their families. Imagine the atmosphere on the ground. Sport is supposedly not political; it is political. We need to stop these games and act on what the majority of the Irish people feel. I cannot imagine standing beside someone who is guilty of genocide against my people, my family, and my teammates.

Ireland will have the EU Presidency. I wonder if we could use it to influence sanctions and stand firm for humanity, as otherwise we are all lost.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire, who happens to be the target today. This is not aimed at the Minister personally, but the fine, well-meaning words she read out are hollow. Genocide is happening as we speak and has been happening for a long time. There has been no proper action which the Israeli state will pay heed to. It has ignored every supposed protestation by the Irish Government and other European Governments. We need to take action, which is one reason the Bill is before the House today. It is not the only reason, however. This Government and previous Governments have failed miserably to take action over the years as the Israeli state flouted international law. In 2004, I asked a simple question of then Minister for Foreign Affairs, Brian Cowen. I asked whether he would use the EU Presidency to propose a suspension of preferential trade with Israel on the basis of persistent and systematic human rights violations. Here we are, 22 years later, and I am still appealing to the Government to ensure the EU does exactly what it says in the tin.

Any preferential trade agreement or neighbourhood agreement with Israel, or, for that matter, any other country that is abusing international norms and human rights or engaged in slaughter and genocide, should be suspended immediately. Sanctions then need to be imposed where that continues. We have not done that. The EU was very quick to jump through hoops to impose sanctions on Russia. Israel's slaughter has been a lot worse than what Russia has done in Ukraine. That is not to say the Russians are right in any way. We were right to impose sanctions on Russia but we would be right to impose sanctions on Israel. It should have been done a long time ago. If this Government and other European Governments had paid heed to the calls made 20 years ago, maybe, God willing, Israel's ongoing slaughter in Gaza and Palestine, Lebanon and Iran would not have happened. Governments did not do so, however. By ignoring the rules in place in those trade agreements, rather than imposing those rules and suspending the agreements, we sent out a message to Israel that it is okay to carry on as it is

not going to be punished. Israel was not punished and is still not being punished. There is still nobody in the EU, other than those countries that have had the strength to stand up and impose sanctions, punishing Israel for what it is doing in Palestine.

We need to look at what we can do here in Ireland. We need to have cultural, university and sporting boycotts of Israel. I will come back to some of those in a minute. The University of Galway needs to cut its links to the Technion Institute of Technology, the university that refers to itself as a research and development wing of the IDF. What in God's name is any Irish university doing having any types of links with an Israeli university in this day and age, especially given that university's links with the IDF? Let us not forget the University of Galway is a public body. It needs to cut all ties with Israel. The message should go out, not just from the Opposition benches but from the Government, that all universities should cut ties with those involved in genocide. It is pure and simple.

This week, I published a Bill, titled the Comptroller and Auditor General (Due Diligence Complicity Audit) (Amendment) Bill 2026, to give effect to our obligations under international law to audit all of our cultural, diplomatic, economic, financial, political and military relations with Israel to ensure we are not contributing or otherwise assisting Israel's serious violations of international law. That Bill needs to be passed. I should not need to come in here to move it; this should have been a given. The Government should have immediately acted on that. This is not a call by me; it is a call by international lawyers and the International Criminal Court.

They are the duties we have when we know a genocide is happening, yet it is the likes of me, Deputy Boyd Barrett or Senator Black and others who are continually trying to appeal to the Government through legislation, questions and other debates to do the right thing, to stand up and be counted.

The Government has not even joined the Hague Group which is also taking action. Ireland has not stood up, as Spain has stood up, yet it goes around the world saying how great we are in terms of Palestine. Yes, we are better than some other countries but we are a lot worse than others because we have identified the issues and the stances we can take, yet the Government has failed to take them and that is on the Minister. That is why we need to take the actions in this Bill and other Bills. We need to be seen to act, not just talk, because by the time the European Union will act, the Palestinian people will be flung to the far corners of the world. That is the intention of the Israelis. They intend the clearances, as happened in Scotland and parts of Ireland. They want to ensure there is no Palestinian population left in Palestine. That is the intention. We have seen and heard it. We have seen the maps and the actions of the Israeli Government and we need to stand up and stand on the right side of this. We need to stand up and be counted and stand against the genocide that is happening in Palestine, and of late in Lebanon. We need to ensure those involved in those actions are punished correctly.

It is appropriate that this is the eve of the anniversary of the Nakba. We need to ensure we will not stand by and allow Israel to slaughter all around it and exile and displace hundreds of thousands or millions more Palestinians. We should stand proud. There are brilliant people in civil society in Ireland who have taken action, who are marching day in and day out, picketing and organising events and meetings, but they have been let down by the Government, which has made promises and has not lived up to those promises. I hope people will join us again this Saturday in Dublin at 1 p.m. at another march to mark Nakba day and stand in solidarity

with those who have endured the slaughter by the Israelis, not only in recent years, but for generations at this stage. I support this Bill. I support the intentions of the BDS movement. We need to act and there should be no prevarication on this.

Deputy Réada Cronin: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta Boyd Barrett as ucht an Bhille seo a chur os comhair na Dála.

We are here on the 78th anniversary of the Nakba. I have just come from the audiovisual room where I met Lubnah Shomali, who reminded those on the left in these Houses that our demands are far too moderate and that we should be looking for the world.

In May 2024, Ireland finally formally recognised the State of Palestine. Then Taoiseach, Deputy Harris, said then that a two-state solution was the only way for Israel and Palestine to live side by side in peace and security. The Minister said the same earlier in her lovely flowery speech, but the killing and maiming of innocent Palestinians has not stopped since then. Men, women and children are still being murdered and families are still being wiped out. The so-called peace deal ultimately has become political cover for the State of Israel as it continues with its genocidal campaign in Gaza and the West Bank.

According to ACLED, which tracks Israeli attacks in Gaza, Israel has escalated its attacks in Gaza since it stopped its bombing campaign in Iran. A total of 120 people have been killed since 8 April, 13 of whom were children. Still the international community responds with statements, hand wringing or silence. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael love to tell us all about what they are doing for the people of Palestine and how deeply they care. Certainly, the recognition of Palestine two years ago was welcome. It was overdue, but it was welcome. However, it came far too late. I had a Palestinian family with me who said they felt some kind of healing, and after they had escaped the war in Gaza, I felt it was not my place to take any of that healing away from them.

What has the Government done since then? Recognition without action is meaningless. While Israel has continued to do what it pleases, acting with complete impunity in Gaza, Ireland, along with the rest of the international community, has stood by and allowed it to continue. It is precisely that silence that has emboldened the Israelis. Our silence has consequences. Silence lets them know they can get away with their most evil deeds. Our silence tells them that international law is optional for them, that no consequences will come from their actions, that they can bomb refugee camps, starve civilians, flatten hospitals and schools and still maintain normal diplomatic and economic relationships with Europe. When there are no consequences for their war crimes in Gaza, why would they fear consequences for bombing Iran or invading Lebanon, levelling villages in south Lebanon to resemble Gaza, or attacking UN peacekeepers, including our own?

The passing of this Bill would be a strong stance for Ireland to take on the international stage to tell the world Ireland will not be complicit. It would be a demonstration to other nations that individual countries in the EU can and must stand with the people of Palestine. It would impose a series of comprehensive and lawful sanctions on Israel for its continued flagrant violations of international law. International law is clear. It places clear obligations on third states not to aid, assist or maintain economic relations that sustain serious violations of international law, including genocide, apartheid and illegal occupation. Ireland and other

states have legal and moral obligations to act. When will we finally stand up and meaningfully punish this sort of behaviour?

The Opposition has repeatedly put forward measures of real substance. Every week we see on our email of Dáil business for the following week that Sinn Féin and the Opposition are opposed to the absence of the occupied territories Bill. It still has not been enacted. Deputy Brady's Illegal Israeli Settlements Divestment Bill has still not been enacted. Today we have People Before Profit's Sanctions against the State of Israel Bill 2025. These are not just symbolic actions, they are Bills with real teeth. The Irish public overwhelmingly supports sanctions on Israel and meaningful action in solidarity with Palestine, yet the Government continues to stall, delay and hide behind pathetic excuses. I do not care if there is an issue with the Bill. I really do not care if we end up upsetting trading partners. I really do not care about the Government's pathetic excuses.

This is the Government's legacy. It will forever be known as the Irish Government that sat on its hands during an on-screen genocide. It will go down in the history books - history books our grandchildren will read - as a Government that chose cowardice over courage, a Government that mastered the word salad of sympathy while refusing to take the action real sympathy would demand. The Minister gave us another helping of the word salad today. It is spineless. The Government cannot stand up to its colleagues in Europe and speak up for what is right. It has failed the Palestinian people, and the Irish people because the Irish people do not like this. I take absolutely no pleasure in telling the Minister that.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I welcome, on behalf of Solidarity, this Bill. It is the first Bill to advocate for sanctions against Israel. What has happened to Palestine and what is now happening to Lebanon and other countries Israel is attacking is an absolute shame on the EU and world leaders. What an indictment of the EU that, almost three years into a horrific genocide, not only does it not sanction Israel, it continues to give Israel a favoured trade status. What an indictment of capitalism generally that household name companies we all know and were brought up on are directly complicit in the killing and genocide of the Palestinian people.

I always wondered as a child when I read about Nazi Germany how Braun and all these companies managed to operate, but I am seeing it now writ large.

6 o'clock

People say, "What would you do if you were in Nazi Germany?" It is whatever you are doing right now - that is the answer. What the Minister is doing on behalf of the Irish Government is absolutely nothing for the Palestinian people.

I take issue with stating it is just words - there are funds as well. Every time we stand up here and ask the Taoiseach or the Minister, or whoever is the foreign affairs Minister, about our stance and our inaction for Palestine, we get a mantra of all the different funds the Government is delivering. They would not need the funds if the genocide was not happening. It is just pathetic. It is guilt money at this point. The Minister says she thinks action at EU level is best, so can we not do anything until we get overall action by the EU? If that is what she is saying, it is extremely unlikely that will ever happen because of big powers like Germany, France, Italy and other countries who will veto that. It is a recipe for inaction. There is nothing stopping the Government acting alone. Slovenia and Spain, the countries Ireland was working with to

get the resolution recently, have brought in similar occupied territories legislation. What is so special about Ireland? I think we all know what is special about Ireland. Ireland is now the second biggest trader with Israel. The US is number one, China is number three and Ireland is number two.

What is the reason for that? Intel - one major company that the IDA bent over backwards to get into this country in the 1990s. The Government does not want to upset Intel; that is why it is not taking on this Bill. Some €3 billion of the €3.2 billion seem to be directly related to the electronic components, circuits and assemblies for the Intel operation with Israel - another company directly complicit in the genocide. The Government has a very difficult job because it has to walk a tightrope of publicly supporting Palestine but taking absolutely no action to upset the multinational companies it is in thrall to.

As was said earlier, Ireland's only action is the Eurovision, which was taken by RTÉ and not by the Government, by the way. Even a football match - get a grip here. A football match is not at all important. Even then the Government does not have the moral backbone to say it should not happen. Three thousand fans will come here from Israel, a team directly complicit and involved with the IDF. The women's team wear IDF jerseys for publicity stunts - absolutely dripping in blood, racism against Arabs and violence and they have breached all the rules of UEFA and FIFA but that is fine, business as usual. And the Minister tells us she cares about the genocide.

Bertie Ahern has been in the news this week for despicable racism. He has a rotten record and has been named in tribunals. Is it not gas that we are citing Bertie Ahern for taking action to prevent the Yugoslav team coming here during the Balkan wars in the 1990s? Because the Serbs attacked the Bosnians, he did not issue visas. Charlie Haughey was a similar character. He told the IRFU the game was up, literally, in terms of going to apartheid South Africa. The political leadership now has not even got the gumption to do that; they represent nothing when you break it down. We have to cite these people, not because they are good, but because the present leadership is so bad. The fact Ireland looks good internationally is because the rest are so rotten.

I want to mention the occupied territories Bill. I spoke on this already. It must be exhausting for the Minister to come up with all these reasons it cannot be passed, especially since Slovenia and Spain have done it. She said initially it was her political priority, then had to walk it back. In February, she said it should be okay. Here we are in May and we all know it will not be passed before the summer and we will go into another delaying tactic. It must be exhausting for her.

On Shannon and flights - and this is since the Minister came into the role - there was a 56% surge in US and military overflights last month as the US launched its attacks on Iraq.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Iran.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Iran, sorry. Iraq could be next; anyone could be next. The Minister sees no connection between the two events, of course.

Academic links have been mentioned. I absolutely agree. The Minister came out and criticised people for trying to break academic links; however, they are not academic links.

Tecnum is a laboratory for weapons for the Israeli genocide in the aerospace and engineering arena. The Minister said she does not believe in BDS and clearly she does not. How else does she propose Israel is to be isolated? She certainly supported it in the case of Russia.

People from the Palestine Solidarity Movement are in the Gallery. Ordinary people from all around the country, all genders, all nationalities, all races, all generations. It has been the most powerful and inspiring movement in the world over the past three years because it is an antidote to the rotten racism, militarism and hate that is being peddled. If it did not exist, the Palestinian people would be in an even worse situation than they are now. Unfortunately, it has not stopped the genocide. We have lacked workers' action to do that.

We have two focal points now. The national march on Sunday should be huge. I appeal to everybody to attend it. We also have the potential to shut down the Ireland-Israel football match in October.

Deputy Máire Devine: Hear, hear.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Just to make it clear, there are actually two matches. Many of us are saying "Stop the game" but it should be "Stop the games". I got an email back from Brian Kerr when I contacted him in relation to this and he made the point, which a lot of us are not emphasising, that we should not be playing Israel anywhere. We should not have anything to do with them. How can the Minister not see that? That was one solitary thing she could have done. We have to rely yet again on the ordinary people of this country to mobilise and stop that match. If it is not stopped beforehand, we have to gather and prevent it happening that day. I am confident we can do that because there are public meetings taking place around the country. We have launched a campaign which many people have signed up to - sports personalities, political figures and so on. Momentum is building around that. Every ordinary person in the country knows this should not happen. It is just not right.

It is a really poor reflection on the sports Minister and the Taoiseach who pushed the team to go ahead with that. Many of them are people of colour, from racialised communities and so on. I am sure they do not want to but the Government is nearly putting them in that situation. I appeal to the team to take a stand. It will have the support, I believe, of the vast majority of people in this country.

This Bill should be supported and should be campaigned for in the next week. I agree with Deputy Boyd Barrett that there should be a free vote. The Government allowed a free vote on women's rights and bodily autonomy last night in here and it should allow it on this as well.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I thank Deputy Boyd Barrett and his colleagues for working on this and I thank Senator Black, who is here in the Chamber, for her continued work on legislation in this area, which is what we are here to discuss.

The Minister's speech is, as others have said, hollow words compared to the lack of action of the Government. She talks about raising issues, she remains committed and she continues to have grave concerns. Some of the language is, "I condemn the law ... Ireland opposes... I am particularly concerned." These are all things that are not doing anything. They express a sentiment and I want to believe it. When she speaks these words, I want to believe the Minister

and sometimes I do. Then I look at the actions or, specifically, the lack of actions and I cannot believe what she is saying.

The people of Ireland who have campaigned so hard on this issue do not believe it either.

I want to take two examples of actions the Government has taken - one of them was one of the very first actions it took and one of them is the most recent action. I do not think a lot of people remember this but on 16 January 2025 the Government announced it was endorsing the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, IHRA, definition of antisemitism. It was one of the first things the Government did, as a Government, from its programme for Government. We do not talk about it much because I think people want to forget the fact this Government adopted it. What we have seen since then, 15 or 18 months later, is how that has been distanced from the people who drafted it in the first place and used in multiple jurisdictions to tackle activism, essentially, and criminalise activism in the name of the Palestinian people. That is what it has been used for. That was one of the Government's first actions. The Minister will appreciate, immediately, why we start to see distrust among everybody else in this House when the Government says it cares but that was its very first action as a Government.

The most recent action, which multiple people have spoken about, is in regard to the Technion issue and the University of Galway links. Since taking office, this was one of the first times she had to deal with something that was pressing and had to be dealt with. Her response was to say that it is a university and, therefore, not a part of the state. She said she had legal advice, which we believe relates to contract law, which says action cannot be taken. Contract law is superseded, as the Minister will know, by international humanitarian law. That, to me, is a clear cut action.

These are actions the Government has taken in the absence of taking what we should all be doing here, which is legislative action. The occupied territories Bill was sitting waiting for the Government. It promised an entire electorate it would deliver the occupied territories Bill immediately. When the Tánaiste was the Minister for foreign affairs about six months ago, he said it would be on Second Stage by November 2025 but I, and others, have been asking week after week: where oh where is the occupies territories Bill? The Minister will understand why trust on this issue is shredded and is on the floor because the Government has failed to do that and all we get are more and more messages about legal advice from the Attorney General and dropping services from the Bill, which no trade lawyer in the world thinks makes any sense. We do not have legislation to sanction Israel and that is what we need.

There is one reference in the Minister's printed speech, on page 7, to which I want to refer. It reads: "In effect, this amounts to a boycott, divestment and sanctions approach with respect to Israel." I think there is a typo in the next line because it reads: "The Government does support that approach [I think the Minister means the Government does not support that approach] although we fully recognise the right of individuals and organisations to make their own decisions in this regard." My question to the Minister in response is: what does Israel have to do for this Government to support a boycott, divestment, sanctions, BDS, approach? What does it have to do? What atrocities has it not yet done to the people of Gaza and now of Lebanon? What? I just cannot think of any more atrocities that Israel must commit for this Government to actually sanction it.

I will go back to the point I made again and again that this Government has squandered the will of this people. The Government talks about the European approach being the best way forward. I agree. It would be amazing if all of Europe agreed to this but we all know that is not happening today or tomorrow. I welcome the details the Minister gave about the progress she is making and I welcome the work she is doing in this space but we all know that is a horizon compared to what we can actually do here and now. There is no reason the Minister cannot pursue a twintrack programme on this. Look at what you can do with your European colleagues while you implement legislation here to sanction Israel. That is what we should be doing and what the Government should have been doing all along - it should have been goods and services all along. That is what this legislation offers the chance to do now.

Other European countries have much more divided populations and much more complex legacies and histories regarding this issue. We do not have that because we know what it was like to be occupied by an imperialist force hundreds of years ago and for that reason, since the beginning of this genocide and for decades past, the solidarity we have had with the Palestinian cause is palpable and the Government has squandered it. Ireland should have been the first to recognise the State of Palestine. We should have been the first to introduce an occupied territories Bill. We should have been the first to comply with the ICJ ruling but we did none of those things. We were not the first in any of them. To me, this is a tradition and a piece of our people and I just cannot understand why the Government cannot see it.

I want to quote from a recent book written by Francesca Albanese, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Palestinian occupied territories. I reviewed this recently for *The Irish Times* and recommend everybody reads it. When I read this passage I honestly got goosebumps. She wrote: "It began in Ireland in 1984, when Mary Manning, a twenty-one-year-old supermarket cashier, in accordance with the directives of her union, refused to handle grapefruit from South Africa." When Manning, and her union representative, Karen Guerin, continued to refuse to handle any South African products, calling on the other workers to do the same, they were suspended and started a strike that was joined by eight other colleagues. The strike lasted almost three years until April 1987 and set off a chain reaction that led Ireland to become the first western country to impose a total ban on the import of South African goods, thanks to public pressure aroused by the courageous gesture of Mary and her colleagues. The ban remained in place until the end of the apartheid regime in 1994.

Nelson Mandela himself recognised the value of their gesture in 1990 when he was awarded honorary citizenship of Dublin. On that occasion, Mandela declared that the strikers had shown South Africans that ordinary people, far from the scene, had played a pioneering role in their struggle against apartheid. This thought, he said, had also helped him to resist in prison but that is not all. When Archbishop Desmond Tutu was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984 and invited the Irish protesters to attend the ceremony, the anti-apartheid movement that was born in Ireland was hit by a wave of support that fuelled growing opposition to apartheid making a decisive contribution to bringing down this system.

I will read from one further paragraph from the next section. It read that to make them collapse, oppressive regimes must be struck at their hearts - that is, in their pockets, which is where they receive the proceeds of exploitation. This is the philosophy underpinning BDS, which undertakes to publicly expose international complicity, not only political but also economic, with the apartheid regime imposed by the State of Israel on the Palestinians. The

apartheid analysis of the Palestinian situation, which Ingrid Jaradat Gassner helped to develop, has also been taken up and strengthened by various human rights associations.

The reason I read this is that it cuts through the Minister's whole argument around waiting for Europe, not being the first, and that we cannot do it alone. That is exactly what this is. If we chose to boycott that FAI fixture, the Government would start to see that not only the people in the group that are selected with Israel, but the people who might be in the group that Israel would advance to, will start. It is the same domino effect. That is what leadership is. That is what Pedro Sánchez is demonstrating, by talking further action and by pushing this as far as he can.

The Government hides behind sweet words. When I started in this Chamber, the then Deputy Catherine Connolly, now President of the State, used to say that all of the time. She talked about the Government's "sweet words" and it really struck me as a new TD. Eighteen months in, I know exactly what she means because I am drowned in the Government's sweet words. Every single week when we ask about the occupied territories Bill and the Government's lack of action on Gaza, on Palestine and on Lebanon, I am so sick of these sweet words. We need action and I echo everybody else in saying that we should have a vote of conscience on this next week where the Government TDs are allowed to vote on this according to their conscience.

I have been tackled by a Government Minister, in fact, who once said to me how we are fanning online hatred against the Government because of our championing of the Palestinian cause. That is not us doing it. That is the people of Ireland seeing the inaction on these benches and coming at the Government online, so allow the Government TDs to vote.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I commend the Palestine solidarity movement. Over the past number of years, it has marched probably a couple of hundred of kilometres at this stage. It is a testament to the Irish people and their solidarity with the Palestinian people. I would like to thank Deputy Boyd Barrett and Senator Black. The occupied territories Bill has been ongoing for eight years. I remember it took 24 hours to bail out the bankers and the bondholders. When they needed the money, the Government was there. It was right there right beside them supporting them.

I am sorry the Minister has gone because last week, she spoke proudly on Europe Day about what the EU have done with regard to Russia. Within days of the illegal Russian invasion of Ukraine, the EU acted decisively and collectively. They were all together in this sanctioning of Russia but every time an occupied territory Bill comes before this Chamber, the Government says we are working together with the countries to build a coalition in terms of bringing sanctions against Israel. Let us call it what it is - a genocidal apartheid regime. It has been attacking Gaza for the last two and a half years while murdering in the region of 80,000 people. In Lebanon, it is currently ethnically cleansing entire villages and wiping them off the map in a tactic it learned in Gaza. A total of 80% of those in Gaza who have been displaced multiple times are actually refugees from the Nakba in 1948. There has been illegal and criminal use of food, water and sewage to spread disease and electricity has been cut. These are basic needs for human existence that are controlled by the Zionist regime. It has attacked and invaded Syria again murdering people and destroying their homes and villages. It has attacked Qatar, a US ally, killing the Hamas negotiating team while it was trying to negotiate peace. It recently

kicked off another war with Iran. How did it start? It killed many the Iranian leaders who were actually negotiating with the US on a peace deal to prevent war. The terrorist wing, Mossad, kills and maims people across the world whenever it suits it. In 2010, Ireland expelled an Israeli diplomat because the Zionist terror regime was using the passports of innocent Irish people in Dubai. The Israeli terrorist regime operates an apartheid regime while stealing land from Palestinians every day, bulldozing their homes and businesses and moving mostly foreign settlers paid for by the economic support the European Union has given it. The Minister of State may look away. I hope he is ashamed that he will not even look while I am speaking.

Palestinians have to use separate roads if they are even allowed on the roads following hours being held at checkpoints. Israelis have separate Jewish-only roads. Churches and mosques are closed at the whim of the Israeli murder machine to give Zionists the ability to walk through Palestinian communities. We see it every week on our social media. It is actually very similar to how our own citizens in the North were treated by the unionist regime during the marching season by being forced into their own homes and communities to facilitate triumphalist marches. I cannot even begin to describe the treatment of Palestinian women and children in Zionist jails. The reports of rape, torture, starvation and utter horror would make even the Nazis hold their heads in shame. This is only the tip of the iceberg of the abuse of the Palestinian and Lebanese people. Why? Because they do not let the media in. They have killed all of the journalists who were there and do not allow any journalists in.

To be honest, the Minister's words mean absolutely nothing. She states "It is well understood that EU sanctions regimes are designed carefully to avoid and mitigate unintended consequences, including consequences for civilian populations and access to essential goods" and so on. What does that actually mean for the people who are being murdered today or the villages that are being ethnically cleansed today? What does that mean for the homes, schools, churches and hospitals or to the ambulances driving to somebody when they have just blown a family up? They deliberately target the ambulances and the paramedics. What sort of society and people can do that but what sort of people can stand by and see it happening?

This is not the Germany of the 1940s and the Second World War where people opened up the concentration camps and saw the horrors of what was going on. We know this is happening now. We have seen it happen on a daily basis. We get it through our phones, media and newspapers. We see it every day and yet the EU can laud itself on how wonderful it is and the Minister of State as part of this Government can laud himself about how wonderful the Government is with regard to Russia. I tell the Minister of State that the Government can hang its head in shame when it comes to the people of Palestine, Lebanon and Syria; the people who are being murdered on a daily basis by that murderous regime.

There is one thing the Government can do. None of those Deputies, unfortunately, turned up today to listen to this but I hope they are listening and I hope that over the next few days, when the emails come flying through and the lobbying comes through, they examine their consciences. I hope they look at themselves, their own families, the homes they built, the communities in which they live, the churches, schools and hospitals they go to and everything that has been built up in their community and I hope they say "my God, am I lucky. I have this but the Palestinian people do not". I hope they look at their consciences next week, dig deep and say they are going to support this Bill because it is the right thing to do.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Gabhaim buíochas le gach duine a bhí ag caint inniu ar son an Bhille seo, agus i gcomparáid leis sin, gach duine a bhí ag labhairt faoi na rudaí atáimid tar éis a dhéanamh ar son na Palaistínigh. Tá mise ag iarraidh labhairt chun a bheith cinnte go dtuigeann an tAire nach bhfuil an méid ama atá caite againn ag déanamh athruithe don Bhille atá an Seanadóir Black tar éis obair na gcapall a dhéanamh air, maith go leor.

I am supporting this Government as an independent. I said multiple times that it is how I believe I can be as effective as possible. The programme for Government that I signed up to stated that it would:

Progress legislation prohibiting goods from Occupied Palestinian Territories following the July 2024 International Court of Justice Advisory Opinion.

Continue to oppose and condemn Hamas and other groups which bring terror [...].

Support UNRWA and advocate within Europe for increased support.

Work with partners in the EU to introduce further sanctions against [Israeli] settler activity in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

That is what we signed up to but that is not the case and I do believe that there is clearly a delay. We need to pass the occupied territories Bill in respect of goods and services on which Senator Frances Black has been working with her team. I have met her team and got the legal advice that it would withstand a challenge. When this Bill is being pushed down, we are constantly told that it would not. People, including lawyers and other professionals, came into our audiovisual room and said that it would withstand scrutiny. Even if it does not, do we not have that guts to show it and send it because the point is that we are doing everything we can?

I wish that the Minister had not left. There is a Palestinian in my constituency named Amir whose family is still in Gaza. I met him here. I have met him multiple times. How could I look him in the eye and say that I am not doing everything that I can? He is gorgeous man and his family are gorgeous. I have spoken to them. I have spoken to those in the foster house in which he lives. As for the Palestinian groups across Ireland, we have a clear mandate. I want to thank all the Palestinian advocacy groups and everyone who has relentlessly pushed and pushed but we have to give them something. I recognise the investments in care and State aid that we have given but we need to do this now.

A friend of mine named Mikey Cullen is currently on the flotilla bringing aid and food and trying to break that illegal siege on Gaza. I have spoken on FaceTime while on one of those flotillas to young children who were delighted to see that the West is listening to them, only for us to be illegally abducted and brutalised. I saw one of my colleagues on the boat getting rammed, thrown on the ground and spat at by Israelis.

This Bill is not anti-Israel. It not anti-Jewish. We had Israelis on the flotilla with us who were not happy with what the regime was doing.

This Bill is anti-genocide and anti-bombing of children. It is showing them that we are standing up to them and doing everything we can. Ireland's power has not been its size or great military. I welcome the work that has been done at an EU level in getting the coalition of like-minded countries, but looking at Spain, Slovenia and the countries that have brought in

legislative changes that we were talking to in those negotiations in the EU, why can we not take a leaf out of their books?

While I was on the flotilla, Eleanor Lanigan, who was there because she was working for me as my PA, came to the initial call when she had stage 4 cancer. She wanted to get on the flotilla and said, "Feck it, I am dying anyway". I said that, no, she had to go back. These men and women who are constantly campaigning, of all ages, genders and walks of life, are showing us up in here. We have seen the reports and the International Court of Justice. It is clear that we cannot pretend we do not have a role here. That is why I support this Bill. It does not break ties or shut down dialogue or diplomacy. What it does is very simple: it says that Ireland will not allow our money, our trade or what our country generates to fuel something the world knows is wrong. How many UN reports and independent reports have shown that this has been happening? We have been here before. I welcome the contribution by Deputy Gibney about what we did on apartheid in South Africa. We were ahead then. We are behind now, but it is not too late for us to catch up and run with the other people who are taking a stand.

I spoke to Farid, a Palestinian refugee, on the phone last night and asked him about it. I told him to watch this tonight, and he said I should come in here and tell the Government to do it. Now, he does not understand. He is a lot more eager than I would be. He is an amazing man. With everything he has been through, he still has a smile on his face and is still proud of his country in the way he speaks and the photos he has shown me, but they are clinging to rubble now.

To the people who say sanctions will not make a difference, doing nothing will not make a difference but sanctions will. Ireland's voice matters. When a group of small nations take a stand, history has shown that the big ones will follow.

Regarding the Bill and the emails I have been getting saying it is antisemitic and that I am antisemitic, I am not antisemitic. I am anti-starvation and anti using famine as a war tool. I am anti breaking every international law, and I am anti illegally abducting Irish citizens off the coast of an EU country and beating them. To the Israeli families who want peace and who have reached out to me, we hear you; the people of Ireland hear you and we want peace. To the Palestinian families, to Milad's mother, we are watching. I hope Milad is watching now.

Ireland's strength has never been its size, but our courage. The Minister of State has heard this a thousand times, but the same people who brutally abused our ancestors went over and did the same there. That regime is still in place. We have an international obligation to act when we know what is happening. The Geneva Convention did not fall out of the sky. It is time to be brave. It is time to do something and allow a free vote on this Bill.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Alan Dillon): I thank all the Deputies for their very sincere and heartfelt contributions to the debate on this very important and extremely complex issue. The strength of opinion and depth of feeling held across the House on the situation in Palestine is very clear and the Government fully acknowledges the desire to take action in response to persistent Israeli breaches of human rights and international law. The Government also understands the urge to do more, to move the dial and to bring an end to the terrible suffering of the people of Palestine, particularly those in Gaza.

Respect for international law is at the core of Ireland's foreign policy. Ireland has been consistently vocal in calling for Israel to comply with its obligations under international law, and Ireland continues to pursue action through the international courts to address breaches of international law and international human rights in Palestine. We condemn Israel's illegal occupation of the occupied Palestinian territories. As Deputies are aware, in July 2024, the International Court of Justice delivered an advisory opinion on the legal consequences arising from the policies and practices of Israel in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem; a case in which Ireland made written and oral submissions.

Ireland subsequently co-sponsored a resolution adopted by the UN General Assembly in September 2024 seeking to implement the court's advisory opinion. We have also welcomed the ICJ advisory opinion in October 2025, which automatically affirmed Israel's obligation under international law regarding the presence and activities of the UN under international organisations and third states in occupied Palestinian territories. We continue to urge Israel to immediately remove its restrictions on aid access and facilitate essential supplies and services into and throughout Gaza.

We are seeing long-overdue momentum at European level following co-ordinated pressure by Ireland and other like-minded states. Ireland strongly welcomes political agreement at the Foreign Affairs Council meeting last Monday to proceed with sanctions against volitant settlers in the West Bank and organisations that enable them. This is a crucial step in response to the accelerating expansion of settlement activities and settler violence in the West Bank in an atmosphere of impunity. There is clear, growing support for additional measures at an EU level in response to Israel's persistent breaches of international law, and Ireland has called on the EU to suspend the EU-Israel associated agreements or, at the very least, to suspend the trade element of the agreement, as previously proposed by the Commission President in September 2025.

The Government will continue to press for appropriate EU-level action in response to the egregious Israeli breaches of human rights and domestic principles. The viability of the two-state solution and the credibility of the EU is at stake if we do not act. At the Foreign Affairs Council in Brussels on Monday, the Minister, Deputy McEntee, called on the Commission to bring forward proposals to prohibit trade with Israeli settlements, with a view to agreeing a decision at the next meeting of the council in June. At EU level, a ban on trade with settlements would have had a significant impact and been necessary to ensure that the EU was compliant with its obligations under international law, as clarified by the advisory opinion of the ICJ. The Government will continue to press for this step, working with like-minded partners in the EU.

In parallel, the Government remains committed to progressing the Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories Bill of 2025. The Minister, Deputy McEntee, has set out the approach that the Government has taken in this regard. We believe the position we take and the actions for which we advocate must be grounded in law and capable of being effectively implemented. Regrettably, for the reasons set out by the Minister, this has not been the case for this Private Members' Bill. While we have fundamental policy differences with the present Government of Israel and with the actions it is taking, we must be very clear that Ireland does not have, nor does it support, a policy of boycotting Israel or any sovereign state with which we have diplomatic relations. This Private Members' Bill would amount to a full economic boycott of Israel.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I thank the people in the Gallery for sitting through all of that, particularly the comments of those in government. One thing I think they should know is that the senior Minister does not normally come in to take these Thursday debates. The reason she did is because the people in the Gallery are here and because there will, I hope, be tens of thousands of people on the streets again on Saturday, as there have been month in, month out for the past three years as a result of the slaughter being visited on the Palestinian people. After what they have heard today, I hope people will also mobilise next Wednesday outside the gates of the Dáil when the vote on this Bill is due to take place. We should not give up on exerting the kind of pressure that brought the Minister in here. Normally, as stated, senior Ministers do not come in for these Thursday debates. The Minister came in because of the pressure that people are exerting on the Government.

This Government is under pressure. I want to again thank Senator Frances Black, who also sat through all of this debate, and she has sat through a lot over the past ten years or so listening to promises about how the Government was going to progress her Bill, and it never happens. I do not know. Deputy Paul Murphy and I were debating whether the Government is ever going to pass it or whether it will just pass it and then dilute it to such a point that it will have no impact. That is the space we are in. The Government's tactic does seem to be to speak out of both sides of its mouth. There was a bit of the Minister's speech that was designed to make it look as if the Government is concerned and cares, but the bottom line, as has already been said, is that the Government will "not be supporting the Bill in its current form". It is not too late; if the Government is saying that the Bill needs a few amendments, the Minister of State should not call the vote now. The senior Minister has left because, at the end of this, the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach will ask if this Bill to impose economic sanctions and break off economic, trade and finance relations with the State of Israel because of its involvement in genocide, apartheid and multiple breaches of international law and human rights is agreed. Second Stage will be agreed unless the Minister of State says "Not agreed". That is what is going to happen. Despite all the 15 or 20 pages of the Minister's speech, and all the crocodile tears, the Minister of State is, I assume, going to say "Not agreed". If the Government does not say that, we moved forward towards the imposition of sanctions.

We have set out that we believe it is clear, from the ICJ rulings in previous cases and from the case law around genocide, that all signatories of the Genocide Convention have an obligation to act to prevent and punish the crime of genocide, the worst crime a state or anybody can commit. It has been committed, and the Irish Government has said - it took a while, but eventually - that it believes it has been committed and yet, it is refusing its obligations to do what is in its power to impose those sanctions.

Let us be absolutely clear. Israel will not stop killing Palestinians. It will not stop its genocidal campaign against them, its illegal occupation of their land and the brutal siege of Gaza. Millions of Palestinians live in refugee camps in Lebanon, Syria and all across the Middle East, whose forebears were driven out in the act of ethnic cleansing in 1948 known as the Nakba, the 78th anniversary of which is this year. The State of Israel will not stop committing the crimes it has been committing since 1948 unless it is stopped. That is clear. Surely, it is clear. It will not stop unless it is stopped. If we continue to treat it as a normal state, why would it stop? All the evidence suggests the opposite. All the evidence is that if

you allow it to act with impunity, it becomes emboldened. It goes further, and what it does gets worse. The genocidal horror does not improve, and being nice to Israel does not make it a little better. It gets worse and is emboldened by the impunity it enjoys. We are now at a point where there is no crime, horror, obscenity or atrocity that the Israeli regime is not willing to commit blatantly and flagrantly and to crow about the commission of these crimes.

Some of the stuff is just beyond belief. I refer to some of the statements these people have made. To give the Minister of State some examples, in February 2025, the deputy speaker of the Knesset said that all adults in Gaza should be killed. He described all Palestinians as scum. Imagine if the Leas-Cheann Comhairle said that about any group. What would we think? That is what the Leas-Cheann Comhairle of the Knesset said about Palestinians. This is not a normal regime.

The Government draws a distinction between the occupied territories and says, "Oh, we accept that is wrong". To trade with an occupied territory most certainly is wrong. It is prohibited under international law. Who directs the brutal, illegal occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, however? The State of Israel directs it. Who directed the illegal siege of Gaza that has gone on for 17 years, which leads them to even kidnap people bringing humanitarian aid from this country and around the world on the high seas and in international waters? Who directs that? The Israeli state directs it. Who directs the bombardment of Lebanon and the reoccupation of southern Lebanon? The Israeli state does it and successive Israeli governments - not just this one - have done it. They have been doing it since 1948. Every single Israeli Government has done it. I am not saying there is not a minority of people in Israel who are opposed but the opinion polls are clear. The vast majority of people in the Israeli state support what the Israeli regime is doing, and it always has.

I lived there. The reason the Minister of State has to put up with me in this House is because I went there. I was not political; I went there when I was 18 years of age and I stumbled into the first Palestinian intifada. I was horrified. When I was there, there was no armed resistance by Palestinians. They were young people protesting against the apartheid regime and against the fact that they had been living in refugee camps all of their lives. Their families had been driven out in 1948, and they were protesting on the streets. The worst act of violence they committed was to throw stones at the Israeli military, the fourth most powerful military in the world, and they were brutally shot down and beaten down. As for armed resistance, the development of Hamas even as an armed wing did not happen until years after that. It was the brutality of the regime. It was not willing to give an inch on the brutal system of apartheid. The Israeli regime had made it clear; it wanted to further expand the borders of Israel. It wants to drive the Palestinians out. The intent of the regime is genocidal. Are we going to do anything about that? If we do not, it is not going to stop.

What the Government is saying is that we cannot do it unless the European Union says it is okay. We know Germany, as we speak, is a major provider of arms to the regime committing this genocidal horror. I have not mentioned Daniel Tatlow-Devally, an Irish citizen who has been imprisoned since, I think, last September and treated as if he is a terrorist because he took direct action against Elbit Systems, the main provider of weapons from Germany to Israel to allow it to commit the crimes we have seen in Gaza and elsewhere. He is being treated like a terrorist, and his family are begging the Irish Government to send observers to the trial, which is a show trial, a travesty and a disgrace. The doublespeak is clear. The Government will not

send an observer. It will not call for a boycott of the football match, and we discovered this week that €20 million worth of technology licences have been approved by the Irish Government and are going to the Israeli military, which is carrying out all these atrocities. Then there is Shannon Airport and the US military, which is up to its neck in complicity with Israel, providing it with all the weapons - weapons allowed to go through Irish airspace by the Irish Government. We are up to our necks in complicity. That is why we are doing nothing.

I ask the Government to pull back. We have an obligation, as a former colony, to stand with people suffering this sort of genocidal horror and colonial oppression. I ask the Minister of State to end the complicity and not to stand up and say "Not agreed". Do the right thing.

Question put.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): Tá an vótáil curtha siar go dtí an tseachtain seo chugainn i gcomhréir le Buan-Ordú 85(2).

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 6.50 p.m. go dtí 2 p.m., Dé Máirt, an 19 Bealtaine 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 6.50 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 19 May 2026.