



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 9 Meitheamh 2026

Tuesday, 9 June 2026

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

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

An Ceann Comhairle: I welcome everyone back as we head into our last session of the term. I call Deputy McDonald to commence Leaders' Questions under Standing Order 38.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: On Friday, the EU migration pact comes into effect. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have decided to opt Ireland into that pact. It was the wrong decision to hand over powers on migration to the European Union. We in Sinn Féin have made it clear that this pact undermines Irish sovereignty. We have told the Government that decisions on migration should be taken - must be taken - by the people of this country. We have also told it that the pact ignores our unique challenges and circumstances, especially that our country is still partitioned and that we share a common travel area with Britain. This pact will not fix the problems that the Government presides over in the international protection system. It will not end the outrageous level of profiteering that has made millionaires of a small number of people or address the Government's failure to engage with communities and protect social cohesion. It will not deliver the robust, fast, enforced system that we need and it certainly will not provide respect, dignity and a human rights based response for those who flee war and persecution for safety.

Over the last year, the Minister for justice has spent a huge amount of time and resources preparing for the commencement of this pact and rushing the International Protection Bill through the Oireachtas. This was intended to give the impression that progress is being made in tackling the dysfunction in Ireland's international protection system, but the facts tell a very different story. In April, there were 20,469 appeals pending. That is up 8,000 from the same month last year. Between applications and appeals, there were over 33,000 cases pending in April 2026, so while the numbers of applicants for international protection made in 2025 dropped from the previous year, the number of cases pending has increased. That tells us that the system is clogged up and is not working. It is still taking 16 months for standard cases to be processed and a further 16 months for appeal. That makes it all the more incredible that it is only today that the Government is considering the appointment of a chief appeals officer. It

is utter incompetence and it does not stop there. When it comes to those refused permission to remain, the Government does not know whether the majority have left or not and, scandalously, it has done nothing to secure a bilateral agreement with Britain.

The truth is we do not need an EU migration pact to get on top of processing times, to stop the profiteering or to carry out deportations. What we need is a competent government and from the figures I outlined earlier, we can see that this Government is not that government. Ba bhotún mór é don Rialtas síniú suas do chomhshocrú an Aontais Eorpaigh maidir le himirce agus tearmann. Ba chóir go ndéanfaí cinntí maidir le himirce anseo in Éirinn.

The Government's decision to opt into the pack to hand key decision-making powers to Brussels is wrong. Does the Taoiseach accept that this has consequences for Irish sovereignty? Does he accept that the absence of a bilateral agreement with Great Britain compounds this problem? Does he accept that his Government's handling of these issues undermines public confidence letting down both communities here and, crucially, those who come here in need of protection from war and persecution?

The Taoiseach: Tá an méid atá ráite ag an Teachta dochreidte. Níl sí macánta faoin cheist seo in aon chor. Níl sí ceart ach an oiread. Caithfidh mé a rá go bhfuil cúrsaí polaitíochta i gceist aici. Níl sí i ndáiríre in aon chor maidir leis an gceist seo.

The Deputy is being very dishonest in her presentation of this issue. She is being deliberately manipulative and is endeavouring to win votes on the back of the migration issue. The problem for Sinn Féin is that it is flip-flopping all over the place. Sometimes when the far left and the far right unite against legislation, I think we have hit the right spot. Sinn Féin does not know which way to turn or which way to jump at any given time on this issue because Deputy McDonald's assertion that her party has opposed the asylum pact from the very beginning is simply not true. Sinn Féin voted in favour of opting into two parts of the pact in the European Parliament in April 2024 through its MEP Chris MacManus - the asylum and migration management regulation and the Eurodac regulation. Eurodac is the EU's asylum and migration database and is the corner-stone of the implementation of the EU pact on asylum and migration. Of course, Sinn Féin turned tack again and changed its position when the International Protection Act came before the House. It was not rushed through the House. There was pre-legislative scrutiny, a long debate on Second Stage and it went through Committee Stage. It is a very comprehensive piece of legislation.

We are not ceding any sovereignty. We are not giving away any decision-making powers. Irish officials will still make decisions on whether applicants are granted protection status, An Garda Síochána will still police our borders and Ireland will still control our deportation process, so the pact does not result in Ireland giving up its sovereignty in the area of immigration and no amount of empty, shallow, soundbites will change that reality and that truth. That is all Sinn Féin is about - all its postings and the online stuff. It is as if this Act was never debated in the Dáil. A flurry of activity was created last week by all sorts online and filling everyone's emails about something desperate that is going to happen in the next week because of this pact coming in. The Act has been signed off on by the President following its passage through the House. We have never had a situation where legislation was passed and an attempt was made to try and fool the people into believing that it is all going to happen this week, when in fact this has been debated at great length in the House already. The Act the

Minister brought through the House provides for faster processing, including a border procedure for applicants to have all decisions and appeals concluded within three months.

The Deputy referenced the chief appeals officer to the tribunal for asylum seekers as if it was the first time ever. How dishonest is she prepared to be when she is talking about these issues in the House? She knows that the new Act is bringing in a new appeals process, but the existing appeals process under the old framework continues apace to deal with all of the cases that were applied for prior to the introduction of this Act. The Deputy knows that and the Sinn Féin spokespeople know that, yet you come in here and deliberately distort the truth in terms of the legislation. It is about time you stopped playing these kind of games because we are dealing with people here too - human beings - and all Sinn Féin is interested in is exploiting it for electoral advantage.

However, Sinn Féin's problem is that when the far right start shouting, it goes over there and genuflects and when the far left does it, it throws in a few things about human rights and so on.

Deputy Máire Devine: Stop it.

The Taoiseach: Sinn Féin does not know which way it is on this issue. That is its problem.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach. Deputy Mary Lou McDonald to respond.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I am very, very sure of our ground on this and I am very sure where we are.

(Interruptions)

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, afford the same respect. Allow the leader to respond.

Deputy Noel Grealish: Wits' end.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Let me spell it out for those at the back who maybe have not heard it clearly enough. Decisions relating to migration, justice and home affairs are rightly decided in Ireland by those elected by the Irish people. That is why we had a special provision. That is why there was a necessity for the Government to opt this country in. The Taoiseach says he has not conceded sovereignty. Of course he has, by the very act of opting Ireland into this pact he concedes that point.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Hear, hear.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach is happy not alone to be incompetent in his role but he goes a step further and hands those decisions away to people in Brussels. We think that is wrong. We have consistently argued that is the wrong approach.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Let me tell the Taoiseach that he is in geographic denial as well. This country is still partitioned and the Taoiseach has not secured an agreement with Britain.

An Ceann Comhairle: The time is up, Deputy. I call the Taoiseach to respond. Deputy McDonald, the Taoiseach is to respond.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: What way is the wind blowing?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: That is a dangerous, dangerous place to walk us into.

An Ceann Comhairle: Respect the Chair. I call Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: I must say one more time to the Deputy that the pact and the Act the Minister introduced does not, in any shape of form, give up our sovereignty in the area of immigration.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: That is a contradiction in terms.

The Taoiseach: Irish officials will still make-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: That is a contradiction in terms.

The Taoiseach: Deputy McDonald cannot even give a specific reason or area where we do. She has had four and a half minutes and it has been sound bite after sound bite with no substance behind it. The bottom line is that Irish officials will still make the decisions in terms of applicants. The Garda Síochána will still police our borders. Ireland will still be in control of our deportation process.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Until Brussels says otherwise. That is the point of conceding competence.

The Taoiseach: To be fair to the Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, he has brought in and is very focused on a firm, robust migration system with much faster times in terms of administration of the initial phase of the applications and on the appeal phase to get it done much faster. That is what we are doing.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: You are going the wrong direction.

The Taoiseach: We have also increased the number of deportation orders quite significantly over the past while. The importance of this is that it enables us to return migrants back to countries where they probably originated with their applications.

(Interruptions)

The Taoiseach: That is important. That makes sense. Likewise, on the common travel area, it will be here long after any scenarios on the constitutionality of the island or whatever. The Deputy knows that.

An Ceann Comhairle: The time is up.

Visit of US Delegation

An Ceann Comhairle: Before I move to the next Deputy, I have the privilege of welcoming the Mayor of Austin, Texas, who is with us in the Distinguished Visitors Gallery. I ask colleagues to join me in offering a warm céad míle fáilte to Mr. Kirk Watson, the 59th Mayor of Austin, Texas. The mayor and his delegation are guests of the Minister of State at the Department of Finance, Deputy Robert Troy.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí (Atógáil) - Leaders' Questions (Resumed)

An Ceann Comhairle: I now move to our second leader, Deputy Holly Cairns.

Deputy Holly Cairns: There have been a lot of questions raised about our-----

(Interruptions)

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry, could we have decorum, so the Deputy can be heard?

Deputy Holly Cairns: A lot of questions have been raised about our maternity services in recent weeks and there appears to be confusion about a hugely important issue. Which category of patient deserves continuity of care in our maternity services? Can I be absolutely clear about what I thought was obvious? Every woman accessing maternity services should be entitled to the highest quality care. It should not be an optional extra reserved for those who can pay for it. Public maternity services should not feel less safe than going private.

However, that is very much the feeling people have been left with because that is exactly what the master of the Rotunda said. He said the reason the hospital was breaching the public-only consultant contract by allowing consultants on that contract to treat private patients was "safety for women". He has not withdrawn that statement but in an interview with David McCullagh earlier, he attempted to clarify it. He said "nobody is saying it is about safety" even though that is literally what he said.

He went on to say that having consultants treating private patients at the Rotunda improved safety for public patients because if they happened to be around when a public patient needed consultant care, they could potentially pitch in. I cannot have been the only person listening to that interview in complete disbelief. Are we really saying that safety for public patients in maternity hospitals now depends on blind luck, in that if they happen to be giving birth when a consultant is on site with a private patient, then they will be taken care of? This is the type of two-tier care that the head of the busiest maternity hospital in the country is fighting for.

The Social Democrats fully supported the approach the Minister for Health took in relation to the Rotunda but this controversy has exposed deep flaws in our maternity services and the so-called choices that are available to women. The choice that is only available to women who can afford to pay for it is not a choice at all. What woman is choosing not to have continuity of care? Every woman should have that. It is the bare minimum we should expect in our public system and that is what the Government's national maternity strategy is supposed to deliver. The focus now needs to be on delivering this for all women in maternity services.

With regard to the particular consultant, will their previous patients be refunded? Are the eight current patients aware of the situation they are in? Does the Rotunda's statement draw a line under this for the Taoiseach, or is he aware of further concerns about the operation of public-only contracts in our hospitals?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising what is a very important issue. I appreciate her party's support for the Government's position on this and that of the Minister for Health because a lot was at stake here, not just for maternity services but for the entire edifice that should govern public health and the provision of public health into the future in our acute tertiary system.

The Government took a decision following negotiations in respect of the public-only consultant contract, which is a cornerstone of the Sláintecare framework and policy. In our view, our very clear reading of this was that it was an attempted breach of the fundamental position regarding the public-only consultant. We were very clear from the beginning. The Minister was very clear from the beginning and I was 100% behind her in respect of her position, having been in the last Government with the previous Minister, the former Deputy Donnelly, in negotiating this contract, which was signed off by the representative organisation of the consultants, the Irish Hospital Consultants Association, IHCA. People cannot sign contracts and then casually deviate from those contracts.

On the question of safety, in my view, the private model of care in obstetrics and maternity is not sustainable. It has not been sustainable for a long time. The State had to intervene a long time ago - well over 20 years ago - in terms of indemnifying obstetricians and gynaecologists in respect of maternity care, given that the insurance costs and so on were just not sustainable for any individual consultant.

I recall when we built the maternity hospital in Cork, which is actually a very good example. In fact, in Cork, you had a ridiculous situation where if you went to the Bon Secours Hospital, when it was private, and there was a complication, you were sent straight away to the Erinville Hospital, the public hospital, because it was the only hospital that had a neonatal. That was a fairly rudimentary neonatal at the time because I recall having to make decisions around all of that subsequently. When we decided to build a maternity hospital in Cork, the Bon Secours Hospital acknowledged that it would not be able to sustain as a private maternity hospital.

Deputy Holly Cairns: Can the Taoiseach answer the questions?

The Taoiseach: I will make my point generally. There is an issue here. We are very clear; we support what the Deputy is saying and, as far as we are concerned, a private model is not sustainable in maternity and, therefore, we want to build and develop hospitals where there is

universal access and where, eventually, we will move to public-only consultants. Some have opted out of that, and that is their entitlement under the agreement. The patient should be refunded because this should not have happened in the first instance. These contracts were transparently signed up to by all concerned, including the hospital with regard to its service level agreement with the HSE.

Deputy Holly Cairns: Like I said, I am glad that the Minister and Government held the line. The reason many people were surprised to see the Government coming out to bat so strongly for public health is that we do not see that with regard to all aspects of Sláintecare. I hope that we see more of that now. For example, 80% of home care is private now. That is just going up and up. There is no money behind the 2025 plans for Sláintecare. There are so many things that need to be addressed.

I asked the Taoiseach two questions and he did not answer either of them, so I will put them to him again. With regard to the particular consultant, will their previous patients be refunded and are their eight current patients aware of the situation that they are in, that their consultant who is providing this care has a public-only contract? Does the Rotunda's statement draw a line under this for the Taoiseach or is he concerned about other governance issues with regard to the public-only contract in hospitals around the country?

The Taoiseach: I did answer the question. I said the money should be refunded. I made that clear in my original reply. The Minister is concerned about the operation of the public-only consultant contract throughout the entirety of the health service and in all hospitals. There is no going back from the position that we negotiated fully, transparently and comprehensively. Over the last five years, there has been an extraordinary level of investment in our health service at a scale that has dwarfed anything the previous-----

Deputy Holly Cairns: Are the eight current patients aware?

An Ceann Comhairle: We do not allow a second contribution.

The Taoiseach: I made it clear that they should be refunded. The Minister has also sought assurances on that front.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I am asking about a different answer.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Cairns may have to write to the Taoiseach if she did not get the answer the first time.

The Taoiseach: The investment has been substantial in the last five years. In terms of the Deputy's question about Sláintecare, I do not think what she said about the lack of investment was fair. We could continue to invest more and more in health, but anybody looking at the last five years will see an extraordinary uptick and scaling up of investment in the public health service.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: After their great win against the Netherlands last week, I begin by wishing the Ireland women's team every success tonight as they play France.

Speaking of international sport, I raise the forthcoming Ireland-Israel football match. Football fans and all of us who are horrified by Israel's genocide in Gaza are concerned that this game will go ahead anywhere. We have been hearing from people who have contacted us in their droves with one message, that they want to stop the game in October. They want the Taoiseach and his Government to take a stand against the normalisation of genocide through sport. They want him to take a stand against Israel's war crimes in Gaza, the West Bank and south Lebanon. They want to stop the game from going ahead anywhere in the world.

This is about more than just one football match. Taking on Israel neither starts nor ends with this game. That is why Labour has been calling for full suspension of the EU-Israel trade agreement. That is why our party has called for the full passage of the occupied territories Bill to include a ban on both goods and services. We have been calling for stronger action to prevent US military refuelling in Shannon Airport. This is about whether states that are guilty of grave crimes against humanity can continue to enjoy normal and indeed preferential treatment while atrocities continue.

This is not just about Israel, Netanyahu, Ben-Gvir and their acolytes. This is about Vladimir Putin too. Ireland and the Government rightly condemn Russian aggression against Ukraine, as we all should, yet Irish-made alumina is being exported to Russia for use in weapons which are killing Ukrainian civilians. Indeed, exports from Aughinish Alumina have dramatically increased. They have doubled since the outset of Russia's brutal and illegal war. We have spent years in Ireland debating hypothetical military deployments under the triple lock. I deeply regret that the Cabinet is approving plans to abolish the triple lock today, despite strong national support for retaining it, even expressed in the Government's own public consultation. Despite that move, the Government is failing to take practical economic measures against Israel and Russia, which are states engaged in illegal wars of aggression.

Aughinish Alumina is undoubtedly a critical industrial facility for Europe and we are all conscious that hundreds of jobs are tied to the plant in Limerick. A solution must be found to protect those jobs and people's livelihoods, but also ensure a ban on deadly exports to Russia. Aughinish refinery is owned by a Russian company with links to the Kremlin through a sanctioned oligarch founder. *The Irish Times* has reported that 80% of Irish-made alumina went to Russia in the first three months of this year.

The trade Minister is disputing this figure and his own Department is investigating the ownership of Aughinish. At the same time, the Government is lobbying to keep Aughinish off sanctions lists.

It is easy to condemn war in Ukraine and Gaza. What is harder is taking meaningful action against Putin and Netanyahu and against bullies. Will the Taoiseach use our influence as a proudly neutral country to stand up for international law and protection of human life in Gaza and Ukraine?

The Taoiseach: I appreciate the Deputy has raised quite a range of issues. I will take Israel, Gaza, the West Bank and the Middle East first. Ireland has taken a stand against Israel internationally and that is well recognised internationally and within the European Union. We

continue on the humanitarian side to give very substantive contributions to the Palestinian Authority and UNRWA – close to €150 million at this stage. Of course we have also recognised the State of Palestine. We also intervened in South Africa's International Court of Justice case against Israel under the Genocide Convention. We made a submission, by the Attorney General, to the International Court of Justice on the legal consequences of Israel's actions in the occupied territories. Subsequently, we co-sponsored a resolution at the UN General Assembly seeking to implement the court's advisory opinion. We have been evacuating sick children, along with other countries, from Gaza. We have supported about 300 people to leave Gaza to travel to Ireland since the crisis began, and we have done much more than that.

On the match involving the Football Association of Ireland, UEFA and FIFA have their rules for members of their organisations. Their rules provide that the national football governance bodies must act independently and be free of political interference. A series of countries have been suspended from international competition in the past because of political interference. That is the reality of it. I am not involved with FIFA, or UEFA for that matter, but I believe the Deputy is correct in saying that, at EU level, we should be dealing in a more robust and stronger way in terms of suspending the EU-Israel Association Agreement. I have just met the High Representative for foreign affairs, Kaja Kallas, and have been making that point. I think she is appreciative of the very strong feeling of opinion in Ireland in respect of that. The challenge has been to try to win over a critical majority of member states to that opinion. We have written to the EU Council. I want the issue on the EU Council's meeting next week and we want to see if we can get a vote on the issue of the suspension of that association agreement. That is the Government taking its role.

The problem for the FAI and the football team, and it should not be on them, is that there will be consequences for the football team. To be fair to the Irish football team, it has made a lot of ground recently. It has had good success and is building on that platform. I do not control FIFA, which I think should deal with this globally, as should UEFA in its remit, but the bottom line could be that the football team suffers in terms of seedings and all the rest. That would have repercussions down the line for other competitions ahead. We need to act at European level. I think that is a far more effective way of dealing with the issue.

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up. I call Deputy Bacik.

The Taoiseach: I did not get a chance to deal with every issue but I will come back to the Deputy.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I would appreciate a response on my point on Aughinish Alumina. I acknowledge, as does the Labour Party, the strong steps Ireland has taken at international level in support of the rights of the people of Palestine. I welcome the Taoiseach's confirmation that he has been engaging with Kaja Kallas on the suspension of the trade agreement. That is welcome but there is more that can be done. I am looking at the recent report by Francesca Albanese, the UN special rapporteur on Palestine. She has identified Ireland as one of 63 countries which she says are complicit in the collective crime of genocide in Gaza. That is a devastatingly serious charge. Clearly, there is much more we can do, and I have outlined some of the measures the Labour Party is calling on the Government to take.

On the football game, of course there are complexities but it was a Fianna Fáil Government in 1999 that took a strong stance against Yugoslavia, and rightly so, after the ethnic cleansing it carried out in Bosnia and Kosovo. That was a strong stance taken in the context of an international football game. Many of us remember that. That is the stance that football fans and others are now calling on the Government to take in this case.

The Taoiseach: I reject what Francesca Albanese said. I have significant issues with much of what she has said on this issue, in terms of Ireland in particular.

We will work with the European Commission in respect of Aughinish. The Deputy said many jobs are at stake and a solution must be found. Let all of us be honest in the House. We will work with the Commission. We are conscious that there are about 1,000 people directly depending on it from a jobs perspective. It is not going to be simple. If a call is made one way or the other, the repercussions will be what they will be. I do not think the Deputy should try to sugar-coat it to say there is a magical way to find a solution to this, and everything will be all right on the other side. We are not in that space. We will engage with the European Commission because there was a view that Aughinish is important for the alumina supply chain in Europe. It is a European competency. Europe decides what gets sanctioned and Europe decides what we do not put on the sanctions list. Europe did not put alumina on the sanctions list, no more than it put-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy O'Donoghue.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Before I start my question, I give my sympathies to the Fossett circus family on the burial today of Marion Fossett. Their circus will have been in existence for 138 years this year. They have been going around the country and internationally. They come to Limerick every year and have always had a charity day where people come in for charity. On my own behalf and that of Independent Ireland, I give my respects to the Fossett family.

My question is about Foynes and Uisce Éireann. For decades Foynes, the port in County Limerick, has been looking for a sewerage system. In Foynes, we are getting an upgraded sewerage system, for which we have been waiting decades. I welcome that. However, the problem is that the system that is being proposed only deals with secondary waste. Basically, it is to remove the solids and let the rest go to source. The Taoiseach is a person who loves to go swimming. He often says he goes swimming on New Year's Day. The discharge for this in Foynes is in the yacht club. I see people across the Chamber smiling at me. This is a health and safety issue. This is waste going back into the River Shannon and a health and safety issue with a yacht club next to it. All Uisce Éireann is going to do is remove the solids. I would welcome all of Members on the bench on the other side of the Chamber to come to Foynes to go for a swim in it. That will tell me how much they think of it when we bring it to them at source. Why is Uisce Éireann not putting in a tertiary system that removes all waste and treats it before it goes back to source? The tidal system has been investigated by professors in the field and they have shown that the waste goes off and returns two hours later to where it originated. However, all of this information is being hidden from Government when Uisce Éireann is putting in this system. We are talking about a waste of money. Why can a proper system not be put in in accordance with health and safety guidelines for everyone?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. We have made a lot of progress in the country with regard to wastewater treatment facilities. I am of the view that it should be tertiary and not secondary where possible. I am not aware of the specifics of the actual proposal for the wastewater facility earmarked for Foynes. I will check with Uisce Éireann on this. It may not be a waste of money because I presume it can be designed and constructed with a view to adding. Let us not look a gift horse in the mouth on one level. We need more treatment plants, particularly if planning has been secured and so on. We just need to get infrastructure in place.

There may be funding issues. There may originally have been cost issues, although we have substantially increased the allocation to Uisce Éireann now and into the foreseeable future through the national development plan. I will ask. The Deputy is absolutely correct that tertiary treatment is the optimal way to go to ensure quality of water, particularly where it is discharged into the river, which has implications for ecology, biodiversity and human health. We will respond to the Deputy's query. I will seek a response from Uisce Éireann on the specifics of the proposal.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I appreciate the Taoiseach looking into this matter. The concerns of the people of Foynes is the location. They welcome the system but the location chosen will prevent the future-proofing of Foynes. Anyone who knows Foynes will know there is hilly ground to the west. On the Limerick side, it is all flat ground. The proposed system will involve pumping it upwards and then letting it flow down with gravity. This is the perfect place for infrastructure for future housing but this will limit the amount of housing that can be put into Foynes. The town is to be connected by motorway by 2030 so it is going to be a vibrant place. We should do a bit of forward planning. The system should be put in on the Government-owned lands across the road. That is also on the side of the port. It would make sense and this infrastructure would allow for housing in the future.

The Taoiseach: I also pay tribute to Marion Fossett and the Fossett family for their extraordinary contribution to Irish life. I remember attending Fossett's Circus as a young child. Some might say I learned a few tricks from that experience.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Motion carried.

The Taoiseach: Our thoughts and prayers are with them on this sad day for the family. We thank them for what they do.

On the wastewater treatment plant, from what I can see, Uisce Éireann is now engaging in extensive works. The Foynes sewerage scheme will include a new wastewater treatment plant and 3.5 km of new pipelines to convey wastewater to and from the new treatment plant site and an upgraded terminal pumping station with storm storage and an extension to the existing marine outfall will be constructed. It is fairly significant in and of itself.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: It is secondary.

The Taoiseach: I will make the point that, on location, there may be people for or against any given location but someone has to decide on a location from an objective engineering and wider planning perspective. I know of a wastewater treatment plant whose location was decided by one vote but, 30 years later, no one has complained. It did the job and it was the correct decision at the time.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach. I am sure there will be further engagement on this.

The Taoiseach: There was a lot of heat around that decision.

An Ceann Comhairle: That concludes Leaders' Questions.

Before I move on, we have a lot of groups to mention. We have a full Public Gallery. I welcome everyone. I particularly welcome visitors from Ballinamore Men's Shed, who are here at the behest of Deputy Martin Kenny, and visitors from Déise Day Centre, Dungarvan, who are guests of the Chief Whip, Deputy Butler. They are all very welcome.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

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

Tuesday's business shall be:

- Motion to Instruct the Committee on the Guardianship of Infants (Amendment) Bill 2026 (*without debate and any division claimed to be taken immediately*)
- Finance Bill 2026 (Second Stage) (*to conclude at the end of the first speaking round; not to exceed 3 hours and 34 minutes*)

Tuesday's private members' business shall be the Motion *re* “Stop the Game” Campaign and FAI participation in matches against Israel, selected by Sinn Féin.

Wednesday's business shall be:

- Statements on Tourism (*not to exceed 2 hours and 25 minutes*)
- Israeli Settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (Prohibition of Importation of Goods) Bill 2026 (Second Stage) (*to conclude at the end of the first speaking round; not to exceed 3 hours and 34 minutes*)
- Motion to Instruct the Committee on the Criminal Law, Civil Law and Defence (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026 (*to commence no earlier than 8 p.m. and to conclude within 60 minutes; any division claimed to be taken immediately*)
- Criminal Law, Civil Law and Defence (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026 (Report and Final Stages) (*to conclude within 90 minutes*)
- Media Regulation Bill 2026 (Report and Final Stages) (*to conclude within 1 hour*)

- Air Pollution (Amendment) Bill 2025 [Seanad] (Report and Final Stages) *(to conclude within 1 hour)*

Wednesday's private members' business shall be the Motion *re* Exclusion of Israel from sporting fixtures, selected by Social Democrats.

Thursday's business shall be:

- Housing and Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026 (Second Stage) *(to conclude at the end of the first speaking round; not to exceed 3 hours and 34 minutes and with any division claimed to be taken immediately following Questions on Policy or Promised Legislation on Tuesday, 16 June 2026)*

Thursday evening business shall be the Second Stage of the Protection of Voice and Image Bill 2025, sponsored by Deputy Malcolm Byrne.

Proposed Arrangements for this week's business:

In relation to Tuesday's business, it is proposed that:

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders:

(a) the time allocated to Government business shall be extended in accordance with the arrangements for that business and the Dáil may sit later than 10.48 p.m.; and

(b) private members' business shall be taken on the conclusion of proceedings on the Second Stage of the Finance Bill 2026 with consequential effect on the commencement times for the items following in the ordinary routine of business;

2. the proceedings on the Motion to Instruct the Committee on the Guardianship of Infants (Amendment) Bill 2026 shall be taken without debate and any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately;

3. the proceedings on the Second Stage of the Finance Bill 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion at the end of the first speaking round and the following arrangements shall apply thereto:

(a) the first-round speeches shall be in accordance with the table below (to be read across);

(b) on the conclusion of the first speaking round or where speeches conclude before the 3 hours and 24 minutes have elapsed and no other member is offering, a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a speech in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes, whereupon proceedings shall be brought to a conclusion; and

(c) members may share time.

	Gov	SF	SD	Gov	SF
Mins	20	20	20	12	4
	Lab	Gov	SF	IPTG	Gov
Mins	20	12	4	20	12
	SF	ITG	Gov	SF	OM
Mins	4	20	12	4	20

					Total: 3 hours 24 mins
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In relation to Wednesday's business, it is proposed that:

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders:

(a) the time allotted for Government Business shall be extended in accordance with the arrangements for that business and the Dáil may sit later than 9.30 p.m.;

(b) in the event proceedings on the Israeli Settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (Prohibition of Importation of Goods) Bill 2026 concludes before 8 p.m., the sitting shall stand suspended until 8 p.m., when the order of business shall resume with the Motion to Instruct the Committee on the Criminal Law, Civil Law and Defence (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026; and

(c) the weekly division time shall be taken on the conclusion of proceedings on the Air Pollution (Amendment) Bill 2025;

2. the Statements on Tourism shall not exceed 2 hours and 25 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply:

(a) the statements, not including the Ministerial response, shall be in accordance with the sequence contained in the table immediately below (to be read across);

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

(c) members may share time;

	Gov	SF	SD	Gov	SF
Mins	25	15	10	10	3
	Lab	Gov	SF	IPTG	Gov
Mins	10	10	3	9	10
	SF	ITG	Gov	SF	OM
Mins	3	9	10	3	5
					Total: 2 hours 15 mins

3. the proceedings on the Second Stage of the Israeli Settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (Prohibition of Importation of Goods) Bill 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion at the end of the first speaking round, and the following arrangements shall apply:

(a) the first-round speeches, not including the Ministerial response, shall be in accordance with the table below (to be read across);

(b) on the conclusion of the first speaking round or where speeches conclude before the 3 hours and 24 minutes have elapsed and no other member is offering, a Minister

or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a speech in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes, whereupon proceedings shall be brought to a conclusion; and

(c) members may share time;

	Gov	SF	SD	Gov	SF
Mins	20	20	20	12	4
	Lab	Gov	SF	IPTG	Gov
Mins	20	12	4	20	12
	SF	ITG	Gov	SF	OM
Mins	4	20	12	4	20
					Total: 3 hours 24 mins

4. the proceedings on the Motion to Instruct the Committee on the Criminal Law, Civil Law and Defence (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026 shall commence no earlier than 8 p.m. and shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 60 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply thereto:

(a) the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be as follows:-

- opening speech by a Minister or Minister of State – 10 minutes;
- speeches by representatives of Sinn Féin, Social Democrats, the Labour Party, Independent and Parties Technical Group, and Independent Technical Group – 7.5 minutes per party or group;
- speeches by Other Members – 7.5 minutes in total; and
- a speech in response by the Minister – 5 minutes;

(b) members may share time; and

(c) any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately;

5. the proceedings on Report and Final Stages of the Criminal Law, Civil Law and Defence (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 90 minutes by one question, which shall be put from the Chair, and which shall, in relation to amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration

6. the proceedings on Report and Final Stages of the Media Regulation Bill 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 60 minutes by one question, which shall be put from the Chair, and which shall, in relation to amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport; and

7. the proceedings on the Report and Final Stages of the Air Pollution (Amendment) Bill 2025 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 60 minutes by one question which shall be put from the Chair, and which shall, in relation to

amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment.

In relation to Thursday's business, it is proposed that:

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, topical issues may be taken earlier than 7.24 p.m. with consequential effect on the commencement time for Second Stage of the Protection of Voice and Image Bill 2025 and on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil; and

2. the proceedings on the Second Stage of the Housing and Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion at the end of the first speaking round and the following arrangements shall apply:

(a) the first-round speeches shall be in accordance with the table below (to be read across);

(b) on the conclusion of the first speaking round or where speeches conclude before the 3 hours and 24 minutes have elapsed and no other member is offering, a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a speech in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes, whereupon proceedings shall be brought to a conclusion;

(c) any division demanded on the Housing and Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026 shall be deferred and taken immediately after Questions on Policy or Promised Legislation on Tuesday, 16 June 2026; and

(c) members may share time.

	Gov	SF	SD	Gov	SF
Mins	20	20	20	12	4
	Lab	Gov	SF	IPTG	Gov
Mins	20	12	4	20	12
	SF	ITG	Gov	SF	OM
Mins	4	20	12	4	20
					Total: 3 hours 24 mins

An Ceann Comhairle: Are the proposed arrangements agreed to? Not agreed.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I propose an amendment to the Order of Business under Standing Order 35(3) such that we would include in this week's Dáil schedule statements and questions on the EU Migration and Asylum Pact and the international protection system. A debate such as that would be useful, if only to fact-check the many misrepresentations the Taoiseach has made in this House, even today.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Matt Carthy: There is huge public concern about this issue. It is imperative that the Dáil have a debate.

Deputy Duncan Smith: We are reeling from the report of the Kenneally commission, which was released this morning. There are a number of serious outcomes from that. Will the Taoiseach give serious consideration to a debate on one particular aspect, the absence of an offence of misconduct in public office, an issue outlined in the commission's report? It is not the only thing to come out of the report but is an issue of ethics in public office that this Government has been dragging its heels on.

Deputy Jen Cummins: There are continuing problems in the area of special education in this country. We now have an issue with summer provision, which used to be called July provision. There are children who are still locked out of that. They will not be able to attend school by day because of staffing issues. They will also not be able to apply for home-based provision because that portal has closed. We need an urgent debate in this House about what is going on in special education.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Michael Collins.

Deputy Michael Collins: In June 2024-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Excuse me, a Cheann Comhairle, I was next .

An Ceann Comhairle: I am sorry, Deputy Boyd Barrett, I did not see you. Deputy Collins may proceed.

Deputy Michael Collins: In June 2024, the Dáil voted to opt Ireland into the EU migration and asylum pact, which comes into effect this week. We need an urgent debate in the Dáil as there is a national outcry against this. We need to find a way to overturn this decision, like Denmark, which opted out. Other countries are trying to get out of this. We need an urgent discussion in the Chamber to do that.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Government is speaking out of both sides of its mouth on the question of sanctions against Israel over its crimes against the Palestinians. It will not support the boycott, it is gutting the occupied territories Bill so it will effectively have no serious impact, and it wants to impose a guillotine on the debate tomorrow because it does not want to be exposed. There is a guillotine on the occupied territories Bill, and we have had this confirmed by the Ceann Comhairle. The Government is not allowing the many Members who would want to contribute to the debate about imposing sanctions on Israel and how the Government is gutting that Bill in the way it is. Please drop the guillotine and allow for a proper debate on that Bill.

Deputy Mary Butler: I will start at the beginning in relation to the motion that Sinn Féin and the Independent Technical Group have tabled. I will not accept that motion.

In relation to the International Protection Act, which will be commenced on Friday, we should all note, and the Taoiseach spoke extensively to this, that the only change on Friday is that the balance between the State and the asylum applicant will shift in favour of the State. It will become much harder for those claiming asylum who are not entitled to asylum to succeed in their claims.

We have no problem facilitating Deputy Duncan Smith's request and we can discuss it at the Business Committee on Thursday. The position is similar with regard to Deputy Jen Cummins's request on special education.

In relation to the occupied territories Bill, it will be taken tomorrow afternoon for a full round, which is three and a half hours long.

The Order of Business stands.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: You are imposing a guillotine.

Question put: "The amendment proposed to the arrangements on the Order of Business is hereby negatived and the proposed arrangements for the week's business are hereby agreed to."

The Dáil divided: Tá, 78; Níl, 69; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Boland, Grace.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Brennan, Shay.	Brady, John.	
Brophy, Colm.	Buckley, Pat.	
Browne, James.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Burke, Colm.	Cairns, Holly.	
Burke, Peter.	Carthy, Matt.	
Butler, Mary.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Butterly, Paula.	Collins, Michael.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Cronin, Réada.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Crowe, Seán.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Cullinane, David.	
Cahill, Michael.	Cummins, Jen.	
Calleary, Dara.	Daly, Pa.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Devine, Máire.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Chambers, Jack.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Clendennen, John.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Collins, Niall.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Connolly, John.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gannon, Gary.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Cummins, John.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Currie, Emer.	Gould, Thomas.	
Daly, Martin.	Graves, Ann.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Guirke, Johnny.	

Devlin, Cormac.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Dolan, Albert.	Healy-Rae, Danny.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Healy, Seamus.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Hearne, Rory.	
Fleming, Sean.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Foley, Norma.	Kenny, Martin.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Geoghegan, James.	Lawless, Paul.	
Grealish, Noel.	Lawlor, George.	
Harkin, Marian.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Healy-Rae, Michael.	McDonald, Mary Lou.	
Heneghan, Barry.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Heydon, Martin.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Keogh, Keira.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Kyne, Seán.	Murphy, Paul.	
Lawless, James.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Martin, Micheál.	Nash, Ged.	
Maxwell, David.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
McCarthy, Noel.	Nolan, Carol.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
McGrath, Séamus.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
McGreehan, Erin.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
McGuinness, John.	O'Hara, Louis.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Murphy, Michael.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Naughton, Hildegard.	Quaide, Liam.	
Neville, Joe.	Rice, Pádraig.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Sheehan, Conor.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Sherlock, Marie.	
O'Connor, James.	Smith, Duncan.	
O'Dea, Willie.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
O'Meara, Ryan.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Shea, John Paul.	Ward, Charles.	
O'Sullivan, Christopher.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmings, Edward.		

Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

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

Question declared carried.

Visit of Albanian Delegation

An Ceann Comhairle: We have some dignitaries in our Gallery. I wish to welcome the ambassador of Albania, His Excellency, Dr. Uran Ferizi, and his colleague, the Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs of Albania, Mr. Ferit Hoxha. They are most welcome.

We also have our very own Irish ambassador to Greece, Ciara O’Floinn. She is very welcome.

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

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Friedreich’s ataxia is a progressive and degenerative disease for which there is no cure. Until recently there was no effective treatment either but now there is. It is called Skyclarys and it is available elsewhere in Europe but not here in Ireland. People with Friedreich’s ataxia have been waiting since 1 August 2024, 677 days, for the HSE to make this drug available. Why is Skyclarys not on the agenda for the HSE drugs group meeting that will happen tomorrow? Further delay is intolerable and cruel because there is no pause in this disease.

3 o'clock

Every day lost has consequences. Emily Felix told me that delay so far has cost her permanent damage - loss of swallow, loss of speech - and she is not prepared to suffer any more. I would like the Taoiseach to tell Emily Felix, Oisín Pollard, Jodie Donovan, Emily Kerrigan and Niamh Herbert, all in the Public Gallery, all waiting and waiting for this drug.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. Your time is up.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I would like the Taoiseach confirm for them that the HSE drugs group will deal with this matter-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I call the Taoiseach to respond. Deputy McDonald, you know you are way over time.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----and that these fine people will have access to the treatment they need.

An Ceann Comhairle: Co-operate, please. I call the Taoiseach to respond.

The Taoiseach: I have discussed this with the Minister for Health. We want all those living with Friedreich's ataxia to have access to Skyclarys as fast as we possibly can. The company made its commercial proposal on 28 May-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: No, 21 May.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy.

The Taoiseach: On 28 May last-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: On 21 May.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I have documentation.

The Taoiseach: I am interested in getting this drug over the line.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach cannot mislead the House.

The Taoiseach: I am not interesting in playing games with this. The Deputy asked me a question. I ask her at least to allow me to answer because there are lots of families and people very dependent-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: They are here-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please.

The Taoiseach: -----on our getting this over the line. I have discussed this. I had an official with me yesterday when I met one individual who is living with Friedreich's ataxia and with his parent. The commercial proposal came in on 28 May.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: No.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy is referring to the original proposal in terms of 2024.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: No.

The Taoiseach: There have been engagements between the HSE and the company, Biogen Idec. It will not be tomorrow-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Why not?

The Taoiseach: -----but what we are endeavouring to do is to get this on-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach. There may be further engagement on both sides.

The Taoiseach: I will just make the point because things have been said here and there are lots of families-----

An Ceann Comhairle: But your time is up.

The Taoiseach: But they need to know the information.

An Ceann Comhairle: This is Questions on Policy or Legislation, Taoiseach. Your time is up. The next speaker is-----

The Taoiseach: Basically, we want to get it as quickly as possible from the July meeting.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Gibney.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach needs to give them a date.

The Taoiseach: That is shocking.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy McDonald. I call Deputy Gibney.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: They are in the Public Gallery.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Gibney. Would you please-----

Deputy Mary Butler: Stop playing games.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I am not playing games.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Gibney is on her feet.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: They want an answer.

An Ceann Comhairle: The rules are the rules, Deputy. Please co-operate.

Deputy Tony McCormack: Shocking.

Deputy David Cullinane: What is shocking about it is that they do not have access.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Gibney is on her feet.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Earlier, when the Taoiseach spoke about Stop the Game, I think he implied, basically, that sport is not political. I would have a litany of examples to show him that there are many ways in which sports and politics interact and have traditionally done so. What is political is boycott, and we have a proud tradition of boycotting in this country. It is a way of expressing our solidarity with a people who are being inflicted by a brutal regime with a genocide in Gaza, the West Bank and Lebanon right now. Multiple of the Taoiseach's Ministers have said they would not attend the game, which I find highly hypocritical when the Taoiseach then says he will not support the FAI in changing its decision to UEFA not to hold the game. Will the Taoiseach allow a free vote on the motion from Sinn Féin this evening and from us in the Social Democrats tomorrow, where we propose that the Government advocate for exclusion of Israel in all international sporting fixtures? Will he allow his TDs to vote freely on our motion tomorrow?

The Taoiseach: The exclusion of Israel from international competition has to be, by definition, a decision taken by the people who own, control and organise those competitions, namely-----

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: We are asking you to advocate-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please.

The Taoiseach: -----FIFA and UEFA. There is an issue here - of course there is - and the Government has taken a stand on a whole range of issues in respect of Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon and much more in terms of the international positions we have taken. There is an issue for the Irish football team in that it could be the main loser in all this, not anybody else - not FIFA and not UEFA. They continue on because those organisations have not, if we are honest, shown themselves to be very politically focused or conscious in what they do-----

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Will the Taoiseach allow a free vote?

The Taoiseach: -----and that is another side of the coin. I have to weigh that up in respect of-----

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Has the Taoiseach offered a free vote?

The Taoiseach: -----the Irish football team as well.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Ivana Bacik.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: It is welcome that the impasse with the Rotunda Hospital has come to an end, and it is important that the principles underlying Sláintecare are upheld. I was concerned, however, by some of the language used by commentators in the debate, with men on social media and in national newspapers using derogatory terms like the "posh push", which

is belittling of women and not helpful, especially given the shameful history in this country of women being failed by our reproductive health and maternity care systems. As my colleague Deputy Sherlock pointed out, the national maternity strategy is now ten years old, and almost all of the ambition within it has not been realised: no new midwife-led unit in ten years, less access now to home births, and Domino, the early transfer scheme, not available in every county. To ensure that women have decent choices and a decent maternity care system, we need to see progress on delivering a world-class, midwife-led maternity care model, as envisaged in the maternity strategy. What steps is the Government taking now to ensure that is the case?

The Taoiseach: I think the Minister is taking a strategic approach to the development of maternity services. There is a lot in what the Deputy says, although it needs to be discussed in more depth. As a former Minister, I have been through the home birth situation. It is not easy. There are a lot a complications, difficulties and challenges. Modern obstetrics has become far more complex and complicated but we need to strive for safety wherever a baby is and in whatever context a baby is delivered. Safety and a quality outcome have to be the number one priority for mother and child. The Minister is feeding into a new strategic direction. It seems to me that one of the issues this recent controversy has shown up again is that in health the institution seems to take precedence over the patient. I know I do not have the time to do so in this one-minute exchange, but we do need to reflect on that.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach's time is up. I call Deputy Paul Murphy.

The Taoiseach: Patients should never be put into the situations they were put into in the last number of weeks.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach's time is up. He knows that we must co-operate. I call Deputy Murphy.

The Taoiseach: I will take the Deputy's point on board. She knows what I am saying.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Family, friends and supporters of justice for Terence Wheelock were on the streets on Saturday. Terence was a young man who left his home 21 years ago. He was arrested by the Garda and brought to Store Street Garda station where he received fatal injuries from which he never recovered, and he never came home again. After that, his cell was completely renovated and repainted instead of being preserved for investigation. The photos show substantial bruising and cuts that were not on Terence's body when he was arrested. His clothes were heavily bloodstained. Changes were made to his custody record and there were significant problems with the timeframe between the supposed incident and an ambulance being called. The question for the Taoiseach is whether the Government will finally concede to the family's request to have an independent inquiry into the death of Terence Wheelock. Will the Taoiseach also indicate when his Minister is going to implement the regulations to allow the renaming of Diamond Park to the Terence Wheelock Memorial Park, as wanted by the community?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. I will discuss the issues he has raised with the Minister for justice. He called for an independent inquiry but, again, we would have to discuss that in terms of the type of inquiry. We have had many inquiries. They take an inordinate length of time. I will talk to the Minister and see if we can get answers. That is a more important point for the family concerned here. It has been a long period of time. I will talk to the Minister and come back to the Deputy.

Deputy Michael Collins: The Taoiseach has answered a question on this already. Perhaps he would give us a timeline. Will he urgently intervene to ensure that the drug, Skyclarys, is included in the HSE's drugs group agenda for tomorrow, 10 June? I raised this issue in the Dáil a number of months ago. I have also written directly to the Minister for health about it, yet here we are again with no progress and families left in limbo. I am speaking on behalf of Emma O'Shea from Bantry who was first diagnosed at ten years of age, and others who are living with Friedreich's ataxia, a cruel and relentlessly progressive disease where every single month lost means a permanent loss of mobility and quality of life. Skyclarys is the first treatment proven to slow the condition. It is already approved and being provided in countries across Europe and the United States, yet Ireland's patients are once again left behind because of delays in the system. Will the Taoiseach intervene today with the Minister and the HSE to ensure Skyclarys is considered immediately? Does he accept that families cannot continue to wait while time and their health slip away because of bureaucracy?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. I will very quickly go through it because I think he is looking for clarification. Basically, the HSE received an application for pricing and reimbursement on 1 August 2024 for Skyclarys, for adults and adolescents aged 16 years and older. On foot of a rapid review of the application by the National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics, the HSE commissioned a full health technology assessment, HTA, on 25 September 2024. Necessary materials were submitted by Biogen Idec on 2 July 2025, ten months after the HTA was commissioned by the HSE. The agency met with Biogen Idec on 12 February. However, despite several requests, a commercial proposal from the applicant was not received until 28 May. This is the information that I have available.

That said, we need to get this decided upon as quickly as we possibly can. My understanding is it would be on the agenda for the July meeting of the HSE's drugs group, but if we can bring it forward, we will, although I do not want to make any commitments on that.

However, there are many families out there who are very worried and stressed. I acknowledge that.

Deputy Tony McCormack: Antisocial behaviour in some local authority estates and approved housing body, AHB, estates is becoming a growing concern. Constituents regularly contact me regarding intimidation, harassment, bullying and serious criminal activity. In some cases, affected residents will not contact the Garda for fear of reprisals. I have zero tolerance for this behaviour. Too often, the same individuals are given chance after chance while innocent neighbours are left living in fear in their own homes. In many cases, it is the victims who are forced to seek transfers, often waiting months or years to escape the situation while those causing the problems remain in place without consequences. Will the Taoiseach ask the Minister for housing to examine the current legislation and consider giving local authorities

stronger powers to deal with antisocial behaviour and put more pressure on AHBs to deal with these types of issues quickly. The people causing these problems should be moved on, not the families who are simply trying to live peacefully in their own homes.

The Taoiseach: I agree with what the Deputy is saying. This has been an issue that has been raised on a number of occasions. I will talk to the Minister for housing to see if additional legislation or regulation is required. Very often, it is the enforcement of existing regulations and laws that is the issue. There is a great reluctance to move in relation to people who are behaving in a significantly antisocial way and who are making life almost impossible for all the other residents. I have always been of the view that a firmer position has to be taken by the councils and approved housing bodies in respect of tenants who are not upholding the tenancy agreement in terms of proper social behaviour and cohesion within a residential estate. I will discuss the matter with the Minister for housing.

Deputy John Clendennen: The summer programme or July provision scheme has proven an invaluable resource to families and provides a vital service over the course of the summer months. Since the turn of the decade, those numbers have quadrupled from 13,000 to almost 70,000. However, I have received a number of queries from principals in the past 24 hours whose special needs assistant, SNA, allocation for this summer scheme has been cut. One particular example is Ballinamere National School, which had nine SNAs last year. It has been allocated six by the Department. We have had many debates in relation to SNAs in this Chamber. I would like reassurance from the Government that there will be no cut to SNAs in relation to the summer programme and that it will ensure that this vital service can be provided from 24 June. It is only a matter of weeks away. I would like that reassurance from the Government today to ensure that it can prevail so that activities can be booked and families can be accommodated.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy kind of answered it himself when he said that the scheme has quadrupled. The Government is investing in this scheme and expanding it. We have to have some balance and perspective here too. We do not allocate individually to each scheme. The scheme has increased again this year and funding has increased quite significantly. I do not know whether the scheme has expanded beyond the original parameters. We should always be targeting our resources to those who need the resources the most. However, I will alert the Minister to the fact that the Deputy has raised this.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: I want to raise the case of St. Francis Junior School in Priorswood. It is a school that is at the heart of the community and a source of great pride to the area, yet it is losing a mainstream teacher for being one pupil under the quota back in September 2025. The school has had more pupils enrolled since then but its appeal has been rejected. There is huge anger in the community. This is a DEIS plus school. It serves a very disadvantaged area and 40% of the pupils come from a Traveller background. The Minister said that the appeals board is independent and that she has no ability to intervene. Back in 2020, however, the school was facing an identical situation and the then Minister for education intervened and the school saved its teacher. On one hand, this school is DEIS plus, so it can receive the increased supports while on the other hand, the Government is removing a mainstream teacher.

The Taoiseach: That is a very difficult situation if it is just one pupil short. The Deputy knows there are basic frameworks and rules governing the pupil-teacher ratio in terms of enrolment numbers. The previous September governs how many teachers we have in the subsequent September. Some schools gain teachers; other schools lose teachers. There is a clause there, in terms of developing school status if numbers are potentially going to increase in a given location, that can be used as a basis for upholding an appeal or suggesting that the school would retain its teacher. Again, the appeals process is independent but I will make the case to the Minister in respect of the school.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: It is a mainstream teacher.

The Taoiseach: To be fair to the Minister, there is an independent appeals process.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: However, it is DEIS plus. We are getting it on one hand and losing it on the other.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy knows she will have to engage further at another time.

The Taoiseach: They are getting a lot more than one teacher now in DEIS plus.

Deputy Michael Murphy: The State continues to fund an international protection accommodation services, IPAS, centre on the site of the former historic Dundrum House Hotel despite repeated concerns raised by me around due diligence, transparency, planning compliance and the protection of our built heritage. On the issue of planning compliance, a decision of An Bord Pleanála is imminent. In recent days, however, further evidence has emerged of the serious and accelerating deterioration of a protected structure on the site, that is, the manor house. What was once an important historic building is now being used as a dumping and storage area for the operation of the IPAS centre. There are broken and missing windows and stripped out interiors. It is a building left vacant, unsecured and exposed to the elements. Does the Government accept that public funds should never be used in a manner that facilitates the neglect of our architectural heritage? What immediate action will it take to ensure this protected structure is secure and preserved?

The Taoiseach: Is this the house itself?

Deputy Michael Murphy: Yes.

The Taoiseach: It has been providing accommodation under contract to the Department of justice since 2022 for people fleeing the war in Ukraine and people applying for international protection. A new contract commenced in April 2025 at this property to provide accommodation to people and families seeking international protection in Ireland. Then, a proper template must be completed and sent to the Department of justice. That requires details of accommodation services offered and regulatory matters like planning, building regulations, valid fire certification, insurance and staffing details. Once all that documentation is received, a contract may be offered. Confirmation of the required planning exemption for the local

authority was provided to the Department of justice as part of agreeing this new contract. Valid insurance details were also reviewed as part of this process. Tipperary County Council acknowledged in court proceedings during 2025 that the granting of a pending exemption to the property in January 2025 had an administrative flaw in the process.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: I wish to raise the issue of community safety in Kildare South. My constituents have reported serious concerns in both Kildare town and Newbridge, including violent incidents involving teenagers in public spaces as well as persistent antisocial behaviour, such as vandalism, intimidation and retail crime. While I welcome recent increased Garda presence on the back of public outcry, the visibility of gardaí is not yet sufficient and policing alone will not resolve these issues. It is important to acknowledge the lack of dedicated facilities and services for young people in these growing towns. Community infrastructure has not kept up with our growing population in Kildare. We cannot be surprised by these problems when young people are left without adequate supports or positive outlets. We need a plan for Kildare town and Newbridge for residents to feel safe in their communities again. Will the Taoiseach commit to a co-ordinated plan based on community consultation that combines effective policing with youth diversion and community services in rapidly growing towns like Newbridge and Cill Dara?

The Taoiseach: Both towns are rapidly growing and we do, at all levels and in a co-ordinated way, have to deal with antisocial behaviour. A lot of investment has gone into sporting organisations. A lot of investment is going into community-based organisations with a view to providing alternative activities, services and opportunities for people and young people, in particular. Then, along with that, we are getting increased throughput in Templemore, so we need more gardaí on the streets and we need greater visibility of gardaí on the streets. That is occurring but maybe not yet at the levels required in Newbridge and Kildare town. Hopefully, with the increased numbers coming through and out of Templemore, we will be in a position to increase the number of gardaí in the locations the Deputy has identified.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I understand that Cabinet today approved the domestic violence judgment register, or Jennie's law. It was only a matter of months after Jennifer Poole's death that Jason came to the House and discussed with me, the Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, and Senator O'Loughlin the shock of their family when they heard in court that the person who murdered their sister had previous convictions for domestic violence. They were not aware of that and nor was Jennifer. The legislation hopes to give families and partners access to previous domestic violence judgments. I appreciate the progress we have made on this. I ask the Taoiseach to do everything in his power to ensure the legislation is passed through the House as quickly as possible.

I hope the Chief Whip will be of assistance and I also hope that across the House and the justice committee, where there is a lot of agreement on this Bill, we will all work together to ensure that Jennifer Poole and her family will be the last to not know about previous domestic violence judgments against partners.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy and pay tribute to him for the role he played in advancing this issue and the work he has done with the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration. This is an issue the Deputy has championed for quite some time, with Jason Poole and others. The Government approved the Domestic Violence (Judgments) Register Bill 2026 today. The Minister brought it to Cabinet. It will provide for judgments in respect of those convicted of domestic violence against a former partner or partner to be included on a public register. We will seek to get the Bill through the House as quickly and efficiently as possible. The Chief Whip is very much focused on doing that. It shows that Members of the House and backbenchers generally can play a significant role in getting legislation through. This is one that matters to many families.

Deputy Peter Roche: The Courts Service owns a building in the heart of Tuam that has been derelict for the past 15 years. As part of the National Development Plan 2018 to 2027, reference was made to the possibility of it being refurbished at the end of that period. We are in the middle of 2026 and there is no sign of that. Dereliction should not be encouraged. In particular, State-owned buildings should not be left in that state right in the heart of the town of Tuam in east Galway.

The Taoiseach: I will talk to the Minister for justice. Obviously, there is a capital programme for the refurbishment of courts. The Deputy is saying this is a derelict building and I presume it is still owned by the Department. Therefore, it, along with the local authority, should work to get this resolved.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: The K district is one of the busiest policing districts in the State, covering Blanchardstown, Cabra and Finglas. Unfortunately, we were short-changed with regard to the number of Garda recruits we received until the last batch, when we got 20 new gardaí, which was very welcome. However, I am informed that 18 gardaí are being transferred to the city centre for the next six months for the EU Presidency. This is a shocking decision for the people of Dublin West. We have had a decade in which we lacked gardaí and just when we thought the numbers were being resolved, 18 gardaí are to be pulled out of Dublin West for six months. Does the Taoiseach not agree that this is a disproportionate number to be pulled from such a busy district and that it will compromise community safety in our area for the next six months?

The Taoiseach: The allocation of 20 new gardaí to the area is very good news and a manifestation of the progress we are making in recruiting more and more gardaí. The numbers applying to go into Templemore are in or around 200 now per term, so that is good news. I will engage with the Minister. It is primarily an operational matter for the Garda Commissioner but I will seek clarity on the background to what is happening here.

Deputy Seamus Healy: I again raise the boil water notice in place in Tipperary town, which affects over 5,000 people. It was implemented originally on 12 February 2026. For about ten weeks, the only information available to anybody was the initial post on the Irish Water website. I raised the issue with the Taoiseach and, through his intervention, an email was secured within a couple of days telling us that a new well was to be installed. There has been no further information, however. We are now four months into the boil water notice and the people of

Tipperary town have no idea when a safe water supply will be back, whether it will be done by an existing contract, whether it will be open to a process of tendering or how long the work will take place. That is simply unacceptable. During all this time, sick people, families and businesses have been paying for bottled water. I know I should not be asking the Taoiseach this question and nor should he be involved in answering it, but this company is an absolute disaster and we need his intervention on this again.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising a very important issue for the people of Tipperary town and the surrounding district. I will again engage with Irish Water on the question. There has to be clarity of information for the people. At least if people know what is happening, there is some solace. Even if it means it is going to take some time to install a particular well or whatever is required, at least people know something is happening and there is light at the end of the tunnel, so to speak. I will pursue the matter with Irish Water.

Deputy Joe Neville: Last week, when the Committee of Public Accounts met with the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, CCPC, I raised the issue of dynamic pricing online and how it impacts the consumer. I highlighted how people go online with the intention of buying at one price but when dynamic pricing kicks in, consumers are quickly in the impulse buying position at a significantly higher price than that originally viewed. Over the weekend, we learned of the liquidation of the country's second biggest selling platform, Tickets.ie. This has dramatically impacted the people running these events, with potentially devastating financial losses, and the full knock-on impact of this liquidation is as yet unknown. Serious questions remain over the online ticketing industry and what safeguards we can put in place for promoters and consumers. It seems online ticketing is now the wild west of retailing. Will the Government examine what steps we can take to protect the consumer and local event organisers?

The Taoiseach: This is a very important issue to many people. People individually have to behave responsibly as well but this is the role of the CCPC. We have funded the organisation so this is something it needs to pursue to protect the consumer. We create bodies and authorities to regulate and to make sure things are done properly and the consumer is protected. The Deputy is raising this again with me. I will revert to the Minister with responsibility for the CCPC and also with the body directly.

Guardianship of Infants (Amendment) Bill 2026: Instruction to Committee

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

I move:

That it be an instruction to the Select Committee on Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, on the Guardianship of Infants (Amendment) Bill 2026, that pursuant to Standing Order 194, the Committee has power to make amendments to the Bill which are outside the scope of the existing provisions of the Bill to provide that:

Part VA of the Child Care Act 1991 is amended for the purposes of providing additional clarification in relation to the appointment of a different guardian ad litem to a child concerned under section 35C; and for the purposes of providing additional clarification in relation to legal representation for guardians ad litem under section 35D;

and to make other technical and consequential amendments required to take account of the changes above.

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Cabinet Committees

1. **Deputy Séamus McGrath** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on housing will next meet. [12359/26]

2. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on housing will next meet. [12361/26]

3. **Deputy Ryan O'Meara** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on housing will next meet. [12365/26]

4. **Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on housing will next meet. [12366/26]

5. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on housing will next meet. [28189/26]

6. **Deputy Louis O'Hara** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on housing will next meet. [32048/26]

7. **Deputy Liam Quaide** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on housing will next meet. [38776/26]

8. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on housing will next meet. [38897/26]

9. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on housing will next meet. [38900/26]

10. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on housing will next meet. [38903/26]

11. **Deputy Conor Sheehan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on housing will meet next [39594/26]

12. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on housing will next meet. [39725/26]

13. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on housing will next meet. [42077/26]

14. **Deputy Conor Sheehan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on housing will meet next. [42080/26]

15. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on housing will next meet. [42219/26]

16. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Housing will meet next. [43620/26]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 16, inclusive, together.

The Cabinet committee on housing last met on Thursday, 14 May. The committee will next meet on Monday, 29 June. The committee works to ensure a cross-government approach to the implementation of our commitments regarding housing policy.

Housing supply has increased significantly over the past number of years and home completions data for quarter 1 shows that 2026 is off to a very good start, with almost 8,000 new homes built, which is the highest number of quarter 1 completions since the series began 15 years ago. Apartment completions in quarter 1 of 2026, at 2,355, are up 33.3% from quarter 1 of 2025. In quarter 1 of 2026, more than half of the completions were scheme dwellings, 30% were apartments and 18% were single dwellings. In 2025, over 36,000 homes were completed, up 20% from 2024, while 2025 saw the highest number of people buying their first home in well over a decade, with first-time buyer mortgage drawdowns of almost 28,000, supported by Government-backed measures such as the first home and help to buy schemes. In addition, we now have the highest social housing build per annum on record.

Clearly, the measures we have implemented, backed by unprecedented State investment, are working but we have an awful lot more to do and are still not at the scale we need to reach to make sure we can provide for people to be able to buy or rent a house at an affordable rate. We have made available the highest ever commitment of Exchequer funding for housing - €28 billion up to 2030 - along with additional funding through State vehicles, including the Land Development Agency, the Housing Finance Agency, Home Building Finance Ireland, the first home scheme and the Irish Strategic Investment Fund.

The Land Development Agency has revised its corporate strategy in line with its expanded mandate - a wider geographical focus, an emphasis on starter homes, a greater mix of tenure to include more social and private housing delivery and infrastructure-led delivery, with an

updated business plan expected by quarter 3 which will outline expected annual delivery to 2030.

Along with the agency's role in managing the State-owned lands to help develop new homes and regenerate underutilised sites, it will continue to unlock stalled private planning consented developments through its market engagement and home builder partnership initiative, Project Tosaigh. Through these various delivery channels, the LDA has delivered more than 3,000 homes to date and to scale up housing supply, we need to significantly zone more land and more serviced land. All 31 local authorities across the country have been tasked with ensuring that more than enough land is zoned to meet the needs of our citizens. The process is well under way, with local authorities signalling they will have over 70% of required land zoned complete by the end of June.

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up, Taoiseach. It will be read into the record. We have 16 Deputies. On the balance of fairness, I propose 45 seconds each. I will do my best so each Deputy gets a reasonable answer. I call on Deputy Séamus McGrath.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I thank the Taoiseach for his update. I want to raise the issue of the qualifying income limits for social housing. The Minister for housing has indicated a willingness to examine these limits but I am raising it because I believe they urgently need to be increased. An increasing number of working people are finding themselves outside the social housing income limits and outside the social housing support bracket. This is increasing the cohort of people who are effectively receiving no support from the State. Traditionally, social housing was available to working people. We need to get back to that place. I ask the Taoiseach to please take this issue back and increase the limits as soon as possible.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: In the past few weeks we have had a large number of social housing projects in my area completed, namely, Millview, Melville and Piper's Square, which will contribute more than several hundred cost-rental and social units. Last week, we were informed that the Land Development Agency had bought land for 600 units. Those units should be affordable purchase homes because that is not an option we currently have in the mix in our constituency. I ask the Taoiseach to do everything in his power to work with the LDA to ensure there is affordable purchase and cost-rental housing on this new site and that residents are engaged with about what that will mean for the area.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: I wish to raise the issue of difficulties of building a one-off rural house, particularly in my constituency of Tipperary North and in north-west Kilkenny. From restrictions around access onto regional roads that do not always need to be there, to sight-line issues, ribbon development and the difficulty of building on one's own land, it should not be a privilege to build a house and live in the area in which you grew up. What is the Government doing to make it easier to build that one-off rural home, particularly for younger people who are trying to get back into their own area, perhaps coming home from abroad, start a family, raise their family there to support the local club, the local school and the local community? What are we, in Government, going to do to ensure we can build those houses in rural Ireland?

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: Last night in Kilkenny we had a very special evening when Eamon Langton was conferred with the honour of becoming a freeman of Kilkenny city. Mr Langton has been a champion of Kilkenny city for decades and has been a brilliant ambassador for all things that are great in Kilkenny, be that the Kilkenny hurling team and his support, tourism and employment. He has been absolutely fantastic. He joins a very exclusive club that includes Éamon de Valera, Constance Markievicz, Brian Cody and Eddie Keher. Eamon Langton is a freeman of the city and it is much deserved. I pay tribute to and thank the mayor, Councillor John Coonan, for his foresight in nominating Eamon Langton. It was a very special evening. I congratulate Eamon and all his family. Can the Taoiseach give us an update on the rural housing and planning guidelines and when they will be published?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I asked the Taoiseach about what I consider to be the absolutely disgraceful decision of DLR Properties, which is a corporate subsidiary of Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council, to put up for sale land zoned for more than 1,000 houses. We could have more than 1,000 social and affordable homes but instead a board, which is not accountable to the elected representatives on Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council or to the public but is populated by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael councillors, has decided to sell off public land. I asked the Taoiseach about it last week. I would like to know because this is disgraceful. I thought all publicly-owned land that could be available for social and affordable housing was supposed to be made available, for example, to the LDA. The idea that it is being sold off to private developers who are then going to build housing that nobody can afford is a scandal.

Deputy Liam Quaide: The recent RTÉ "Prime Time" programme on dereliction should shame the Government into action on this issue. It showed that driving the blight of dereliction is an abject failure of enforcement as well as a failure to even record the number of properties that are being left to rot in our towns, villages and cities. The problem is painfully visible in east Cork. Castlemartyr is a beautiful, historic village with enormous potential but large parts of its main street have been scarred by long-standing, egregious dereliction. It is well-known locally that much of that dereliction in Castlemartyr is linked to one family. This is not just about appearances. It damages community pride, housing supply, tourism appeal and heritage, and creates a wider impression of neglect and decay. How has this been allowed to happen for so long? There is no excuse for it. Will the Taoiseach commit to a proper national register, stronger enforcement and full collection of levies?

Deputy Paul Murphy: South Dublin County Council management is planning massive rent hikes for 20,000 families from July of this year. That includes council tenants, HAP tenants, homeless HAP tenants and approved housing body tenants. The council is increasing the base rate by 25% but also making a series of other changes such as incorporating into the assessment the working family payment, which means some families are going to see their rents increased in July by 53%. Not only is this massively unjust and unaffordable for many, it flies in the face of what elected councillors agreed in a motion unanimously passed in February that stated there should be no change until there has been consultation with tenants and tenants unions, such as Community Action Tenants Union, CATU. That consultation has not taken place. At the very least, will the Taoiseach agree that this should be suspended until there has been a consultation and until elected councillors get to vote on it?

Deputy Conor Sheehan: Limerick faces a severe housing deficit. It is 6,000 homes behind delivery targets. The Taoiseach recently spoke at the Limerick Chamber business luncheon but planning permissions and housing commencements are down 40% in Limerick in the past year and both the Chamber and An Taisce-----

The Taoiseach: Did the Deputy say An Taisce?

Deputy Conor Sheehan: -----have raised reasonable issues in relation to the disconnect that is there between national policy enabling or hindering local development. Density zoning of 50 per hectare in Castletroy, Mungret, Raheen and other suburban areas is affecting viability in those areas and it is going to be very hard to get 100-plus dwellings per hectare in the city centre. What sort of targeted interventions are the Government considering to ensure that Limerick reaches its housing targets?

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: In Ireland, 90% of protected habitats are in an unfavourable conservation condition. Ireland ranks one of the lowest in the world when it comes to nature intactness and we also spend, as a percentage of our GDP, one of the lowest amounts among countries in Europe. The Government has an Infrastructure, Climate and Nature Fund but the independent body that was set up to look at nature restoration has estimated it is going to cost €450 million to €700 million a year to roll out nature restoration plans in Ireland. However, there is no money currently ring-fenced for that under the Infrastructure, Climate and Nature Fund. This is something I raised so many times with the previous Government and with the previous Minister. Funds needed to be ring-fenced for nature protection and restoration under the fund. It was not done by the previous Government. I am asking the Taoiseach to ring-fence money for nature protection.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The Taoiseach has acknowledged the fact that we need service sites to deliver housing. In many parts of the country, our water network is absolutely creaking. This weekend, for practically the whole weekend, Duleek and Stamullen in County Meath were without water due to unscheduled outages and failed repairs. These outages are all too regular. There is a plan for investment in the network. I am asking the Taoiseach to ensure that is prioritised and rolled out as quickly as is possible and in the meantime, that Uisce Éireann is held to account for responsiveness to outages and to communities.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach have roughly 11 minutes to respond.

The Taoiseach: I thank all the Deputies who raised numerous issues. Deputy McGrath raised qualifying limits and thresholds for social housing. I agree with what he said and a lot of working people, because of their income being just a bit above the income threshold, are not in a position to buy or get a mortgage or get a social house. I have spoken to the Minister for housing on this. He is actively considering increasing the income thresholds. I will pursue the issue again with the Minister. It is something that should be done and we need to do it.

Deputy McAuliffe has been very active on the ground.

He is so active that he is gone out now doing something else and meeting somebody else. He referenced the fact that there are 600 units. I was going to suggest to him that he should engage with the LDA and so will I in respect of that matter.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: That is where he is gone.

The Taoiseach: Okay. It is good to see. He outlined that close to 1,000 houses have been built and now there is a further proposal for 600 houses. There is a lot happening on the housing front. We just need more and more of it and to keep the momentum going.

Deputy O'Meara asked about one-off rural housing. I accept the basic principle that on your own land or in your own community we need people to have the capacity to regenerate that community, to grow up in it, to support the clubs, to maintain a population critical mass and to keep heritage and a community vibrant. The Minister, Deputy Browne, and the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, are close to new rural housing guidelines. We have discussed this. We are looking at the Gaeltacht as well. Hopefully, within the next number of weeks, we will have clarity on that and those guidelines will be brought to Cabinet.

In response to Deputy Cleere, I pay tribute to Eamon Langton as well. It is a wonderful tribute and he has joined an elite group of people. Fair play to the mayor, Councillor Coonan for his initiative in this regard. I have enjoyed their hospitality from time to time as well in the past while in Kilkenny. I note that Brian Cody was among the recipients as well. He is a good man to give a pep talk to any group of people, be they hurling or political. I do not know the man's politics at all but he is a man who speaks a lot of sense. On the rural housing guidelines, similar to Deputy O'Meara, Deputy Cleere has been championing that and arguing for it. I hope we will have the guidelines in the next fortnight or so.

In response to Deputy Boyd Barrett, I do not think I have the full story from him. I probably have the story from his perspective but I would be interested to know if it will definitely go for housing. A thousand houses will be built there.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Why are we selling it?

The Taoiseach: I do not know. I do not know the background to this. I do not run every council or every subsidiary of every council, nor should I.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: A thousand homes.

The Taoiseach: We delegate authority to local councils that are elected by the people in the given locality to get things done, but the Oireachtas pays lip service to that idea and notion.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The elected councillors did not decide this.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please. Be fair to other Members.

The Taoiseach: They decide the subsidiary, I imagine.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: A decade.

The Taoiseach: Maybe things will get done there because, in regard to the councils on the other side, Dublin City Council had land for a long time - O'Devaney Gardens and you name it. Nothing happened there for a decade. We need people to get things moving and maybe the other side of this story, which I have not heard, is that people are anxious to get things moving here and that we could have 1,000 houses much faster than would otherwise have been the case. I do not know. I have not the specifics of it but I will follow it up.

On Deputy Quaide's question, to be fair, two of the big significant interventions in terms of dereliction have been the grants we have brought in to enable people to refurbish and bring back to life vacant houses and dilapidated or derelict houses. Up to 7,000 people have applied for those grants and they have been effective. On the Derelict Sites Act 1990, again, the local authorities have responsibility on dereliction. It is, fundamentally, a function of local authorities. I accept it has not happened with the uniformity or consistency across the country that it should have. Some councils are better than others, so the Government, in this year's budget, decided to hand responsibility to Revenue for a tax on derelict sites that would be administered by it, which will deliver a better outcome in bringing derelict buildings back into use much faster. There is a lot of mapping going on and so on, and work being done to make sure that proposal is implemented efficiently, effectively and comprehensively but it is the right direction of travel given that the Derelict Sites Act, as administered by councils over the past decade or so, has not been as effective as it should have been.

Deputy Paul Murphy raised the issue of South Dublin County Council. Again, I do not have the specifics of that. There has to be sustainability in whatever situation is there but the Deputy is saying rents will go up 53%.

Deputy Paul Murphy: For some.

The Taoiseach: Not for everybody, I presume.

Deputy Paul Murphy: No. The base rate is up 25%. Everyone is up 25%.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputies are like the terrible twins over there. Please stop.

The Taoiseach: I will have to examine that and see what the position of the council is in respect of that. In regard to Limerick----

Deputy Paul Murphy: Should the councillors not get to vote on it?

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Murphy, you know it is not the format.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Council management is on it contrary to the vote of the councillors.

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask you not to ignore me, Deputy.

The Taoiseach: I am not running the council.

Deputy Paul Murphy: But the Taoiseach agrees that the councillors should get to vote and it should be suspended until there is a vote of the council.

Paul Murphy: I ask the Taoiseach not to encourage the Deputy. I ask the Deputy to please not ignore me. There is a format here and it is Taoiseach's Questions.

The Taoiseach: On another day, the Deputy would be attacking Government if we interfered in local authorities and local government. We need to make up our mind in the Oireachtas. Do we believe in a local authority system or not? Do we believe in delegating-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: We want to give power to councillors, not council management.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please. Be fair to other Members.

The Taoiseach: Do we believe in delegating authority to them or not?

Deputy Paul Murphy: The councillors.

The Taoiseach: Deputies are paying lip service and playing both ways as it suits.

I will come to the Deputy in regard to Limerick. Who was it?

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Sheehan, yes.

The Taoiseach: I was going to say, "Get your act together there". We are providing the funding. We have asked the council to zone land. Is the Deputy saying the density is too low?

An Ceann Comhairle: It is rhetorical.

The Taoiseach: I cannot; it is a rhetorical question. We are anxious for it and we will work with the local authority to make progress here. We have provided substantial funding. We believe the councils, generally, should be rezoning more land to get more housing. In some places, density can be an issue, where apartment blocks may not be feasible or sustainable. I do not know which is which and in that case, that needs to be reviewed. Our view is a far more flexible approach needs to be adopted.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: That is my point.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy. We are on the one page in respect of that. I will talk to the Minister about that and ask him to talk to the Deputy.

In response to Deputy Whitmore's question, I am working with the Minister of State, Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan. The plan has been recently concluded, chaired by Dr. Aoibhinn Ní

Shúilleabháin. It is a fine, comprehensive plan that lays out a roadmap to preserve and enhance our biodiversity and habitats. I have met with the National Parks and Wildlife Service and the Minister of State, and they have a plan on how the funding can be built up but it will not all be spent immediately or in one year. We are making progress. We have to have further discussions within Government to try to earmark over the next five years allocations of money from the nature fund for the implementation of this plan. That is the work I have under way. I know the Minister of State is working strongly with us and the relevant Ministers to bring that over the line.

We have established the Infrastructure, Climate and Nature Fund. Some €2 billion went to the metro initially, and probably more. We also need to do funding for nature. Some of the good European Union projects will come to an end. They have been very effective. I refer to the lapwing and others. We are making a lot of progress as well on some fronts but we need to do it on a sustained basis over the next decade or so. There has to be a sustainable funding framework to enable us to restore biodiversity and really make progress. That will have benefits for farmers as well. It is a way of supplementing income for farmers, particularly on the western seaboard, in the north west and so on. I see a lot of potential here for harmony. Farmers signed up to this as well. The number of non-governmental organisations that endorsed the plan was also remarkable.

Deputy O'Rourke talked about the need for investment. There is a plan there for investment in Duleek and Stamullen, he said, and we will certainly work to activate that plan and to make sure to prioritise the funding there. The investment is planned for there. As the Deputy knows, the Minister, Deputy Jack Chambers, has been working on faster delivery of infrastructure and so forth to make sure things get done much more quickly.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach. We will have an extra minute and a half on the next question, which is to ask the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on disability will meet next. That will give Members a minute each.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Happy days.

An Ceann Comhairle: I know.

Cabinet Committees

17. **Deputy Martin Daly** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on disability will next meet. [14279/26]

18. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on disability will next meet. [14280/26]

19. **Deputy Erin McGreehan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on disability will next meet. [14283/26]

20. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on disability will next meet. [28190/26]

21. **Deputy Louis O'Hara** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on disability will next meet. [32049/26]

22. **Deputy Liam Quaide** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on disability will next meet. [38777/26]

23. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on disability will next meet. [38898/26]

24. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on disability will next meet. [38901/26]

25. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on disability will next meet. [38904/26]

26. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on disability will next meet. [39721/26]

27. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on disability will next meet [39726/26]

28. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on disability will next meet. [42078/26]

29. **Deputy Mark Wall** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on disability will meet next. [42081/26]

30. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on disability will next meet. [42220/26]

31. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on disability will next meet. [43025/26]

32. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on disability will next meet. [43621/26]

33. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on disability will next meet. [43624/26]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 17 to 33, inclusive, together.

The Cabinet committee on disability has been established to oversee the implementation of programme for Government commitments in the area of disability, with specific focus on children's disability services, as well as disability more generally under the Government's new national human rights strategy for disabled people for 2025 to 2030.

Under the programme for Government, we are committed to delivering a step change in disability services and to advancing the rights and improving the lives of people with disabilities. To deliver on this, I established a stand-alone Cabinet committee on disability. This committee has met eight times to date, most recently on 27 April and it is due to meet again shortly. To date, the committee has considered issues, including the new national human rights strategy for disabled people, the provision of therapists in special schools, improving the delivery of services and reform of the assessment of need process.

Despite the committed efforts of so many working to provide services, and significant increases in funding and resources in recent years, we acknowledge that we can and have to do better and do more.

Reflecting the importance of disability issues, I have established a dedicated disability unit in my Department. An initial programme plan for the unit has been published, outlining the work of the unit, including its role supporting the Cabinet committee on disability and ensuring a truly all-of-government approach to disability, as set out in the new national disability strategy. The Government's new National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030 was published in September 2025. That is the framework for the whole-of-government approach to addressing disability. It represents our commitment and ambition that all disabled people in Ireland can live the life of their choosing and participate in their communities and our society to the fullest extent possible.

In budget 2026, we have taken initial steps to deliver on this commitment, with a strong focus on investment in both specialist disability services and mainstream services. A record €3.8 billion allocation to the Department of Children, Disability and Equality for specialist disability services represents a 20% increase in funding for disability services, which will improve both sustainability of the sector and delivery of residential, respite and therapy services for children and adults. The disabilities workforce is growing year on year, and budget 2026 will allow for further targeted expansion in the workforce across key services. Funding has been allocated for an additional 945 whole-time equivalents, which will bring the disability workforce to almost 23,600 by the end of this year.

Special education also saw record investment under budget 2026, totalling €3 billion, which will see an additional 860 special education teachers, SETs, appointed along with more than 1,700 additional special needs assistants, SNAs. A national therapy service in education has been established, commencing in special schools and subsequently extending gradually to schools with special classes and mainstream provision. As announced by the Minister for Education and Youth, Deputy Naughton, in early February this year, the first 45 special schools to benefit from this service have been selected and are based in clusters in counties Carlow, Cork, Dublin, Galway, Kildare, Kilkenny, Louth, Laois, Limerick, Longford, Meath, Monaghan, Tipperary, Westmeath, Wexford and Wicklow. Further roll-out of the service will occur on a phased basis with a wider roll-out to special schools commencing in the 2026-27 school year.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

It is planned that this service will be extended to special classes and mainstream classes following the roll-out to special schools. Initially the service will include occupational therapy and speech and language therapy services. Over time further disciplines such as physiotherapy may be included. A recruitment campaign for senior and staff grade occupational therapists and speech and language therapists has recently taken place to support the 45 schools in the initial phase. Posts are currently being offered and it is expected that the first therapists will be in post very shortly. In all, we expect there will be almost 290 staff supporting the overall education therapy service. This service is not a replacement for existing services; rather, it will work in an integrated and complementary way with existing services, recognising that special schools support children with complex needs.

Other initiatives to support a whole-of-government approach to disability include increased investment in housing adaptation grants and in the public transport retrofit programme, along with enhanced supports for employers for the employment of disabled people. In addition, budget 2026 also contained targeted and mainstream social protection measures which will support households with disabilities, including increases in weekly rates, expansion of eligibility to schemes and amendments to income disregards for carers. Budget 2026 is a first step in the Government's ambition to deliver the National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030. I believe we have made a strong start in year one of our programme of work and investment. I am determined that this will be a government that moves forward with purpose, in improving the level and scale of support for disabled people and their families.

Deputy Martin Daly: I am aware of the Taoiseach's commitment to the matter of disability and the establishment of the unit in his Department, and the Minister, Deputy Norma Foley's, commitment to improving the lot of people who live with disability in Ireland. We have met groups of parents whose main concern and apprehension is the care of their vulnerable offspring when they are not around anymore, either through incapacity or death, which happens to us all eventually, and the expectation that their siblings will take on that care without negotiation and without any hope or respite in planning for their accommodation as they get older, whether it is in full residential care, supervised care or in community and local authority housing that is suitably supported.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: My question is fairly straightforward. We understand the pressures that disability services are under right across the country. They are more acutely felt in certain regions and there are black spots around the country that have been well-documented in many of our clinics. There is a particularly acute problem with therapies in Cork, as the Taoiseach is well aware. A post for disability clinical lead for the country was advertised a number of months ago. My understanding is a number of people were interviewed, but the post was not filled. They were not deemed to be satisfactory, which is fine, but this post has been left unfilled for a number of months. When will that post be readvertised? It needs to be filled urgently.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: I appreciate the Taoiseach's Department's ongoing work on disability. One aspect that is often overlooked is funding to support local authorities to have disability access officers and funding to back up their work by making accessibility a default

and improving the quality of life for many people, including their access to towns and villages. I would like to see dedicated funding for those people.

Deputy Liam Quaide: I raise the case of Paudie Cody from north Cork. As the Taoiseach knows, the Cody family has already suffered the devastating loss of Paudie's younger brother, Rory, to Friedreich's ataxia. Paudie, who is 16, is living with the same cruel condition and his health is deteriorating. I welcome the compassion the Taoiseach showed in meeting Paudie's father, Craig, in recent days and his commitment to do everything he can to help secure access to Skylarys for Paudie and other patients who may benefit from it. I also acknowledge the strong advocacy of the Taoiseach's colleague, Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan, on this. I join other TDs, including Deputy O'Sullivan, in asking that this commitment be followed through with real urgency and that Paudie and other patients are not left waiting. There is a wider injustice here. The reimbursement system too often leaves families trapped in a process where time is lost as a condition progresses. Will the Taoiseach exhaust all efforts to try to bring forward the HSE drugs group discussion on Skylarys from July to June so that Paudie and his family are not waiting unnecessarily any longer?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Tomorrow, there is another protest by Northside Home Care Services workers who have been engaging in a series of one-day protests and strikes over the fact that they did not benefit from the pay increases arising from the section 39 Workplace Relations Commission decision on pay restoration. Many of these workers used to be paid on a par with HSE workers. Now, they are on rates barely above the minimum wage. There are thousands of them. This is one group of 80. Their shop steward has been disciplined because of their engagement in the process and suspended.

The Taoiseach: By who?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: By the not-for-profit company that provides services to the HSE. I met some of these other workers, doing the same thing. There are thousands of these people, all across the country, on poverty pay rates, who did not get the pay increase that other section 39 workers got. They are very angry and it is not fair. There should not be pay apartheid for home care workers.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I raise the matter of a group of children who are being left behind by this Government. Those are children with mild or moderate learning disabilities and complex needs. Mothers of children with Down's syndrome have written to me to express how abandoned they feel. They say that the Government is intentionally misleading people by talking about special classes when 89% of those classes are designed for children with autism. It is welcome that we are getting autism classes but the Government should be honest about that. When the Government announced in March that it was sanctioning 387 new special classes, only one was a general learning disability class. Of course, it is welcome to have some recognition by the Government of the needs of autistic children and their right to education but children with Down's syndrome have an equal right to education appropriate to their needs. An hour a day of special education support in mainstream does not provide that. Will the Taoiseach raise this? Will the Government commit to opening more general learning disability classes?

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I ask the Taoiseach about St. Francis Junior School in Dublin 17. It is a DEIS+ school that is losing a teacher this year. This is based on pupil numbers on 30 September last year. It is just one pupil short. This coming year, it will be over the threshold of pupil numbers, so this cut makes no sense at all. In 2020, in a similar situation, the Minister for Education intervened and a teacher was kept on a one-year fixed-term contract, which solved the school's problems. Will the Taoiseach ask the Minister for Education and Youth to look at this again and intervene?

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I raise a new special school that was announced for St. Fergal's in Bray. It was welcome news when this school was announced earlier this year. It will accommodate 18 to 24 students, beginning in September 2026. However, there has been radio silence about the school since. There has been no information for parents about how to apply and whether they will get places. The Taoiseach knows that children need to be prepared to start school in September. Indeed, parents have work to do to get a child ready for school. It is completely unacceptable that there has been no information locally about how parents can apply and whether they will get places in this school. I would appreciate it if the Taoiseach would raise that with the Minister.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Children with Duchenne muscular dystrophy in Ireland are still denied access to givinostat, a transformative drug. I understand that the HSE drugs group is to meet tomorrow, 10 June, to consider givinostat for reimbursement. This is after more than a year since it was licensed at European level.

4 o'clock

A number of serious criteria need to be met in relation to it, principal among these is that the eligibility criteria would be aligned with the National Institute for Clinical Excellence, NICE, approach ensuring access for boys who can walk or who can stand with or without support to ensure Irish boys are not treated differently from their British or European counterparts.

Deputy Mark Wall: I wish to raise St. Anne's Special School in the Curragh, County Kildare. It has been waiting ten years for a new school building. The project remains at stage 2b design, and planning permission is due to expire next year. The Taoiseach will appreciate there is very little time for the school to get shovels into the ground and start building. There is only one accessible bathroom for 40 students in the school. More than a dozen children, who are wheelchair users, have no access to inclusive equipment on the grounds at lunchtime or breaks. Due to the current condition of the school, the day-to-day operational costs are now diverting funding from essential educational and sensory equipment. I ask that the Taoiseach follow up with the Minister for education on this important project for St. Anne's Special School in the Curragh.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I want to raise the Disability (Amendment) Bill. While the Government presents this legislation as reform, the details suggest a significant shift in how children will be able to access assessments and services. The Bill gives authority to an assessment officer to formally determine whether a child has a qualifying disability before a full clinical assessment to the medical needs can begin. This represents a fundamental change. It places the decision on eligibility at the very start of the process rather than allowing clinicians

to assess need and determine diagnosis based on examination. It is my understanding that the assessment officers will be administrative officials. They will not have medical practitioner experience or they will not be therapists, yet under these proposal they are being given the central role in deciding whether a child proceeds to a full assessment. Does the Taoiseach agree with AsIAM, the Disability Federation Ireland and Inclusion Ireland which have warned that this could operate as a filtering mechanism, limiting the numbers entering the system, rather than resolving delays?

Deputy Barry Heneghan: The Northside Home Care Services workers are on strike again tomorrow. I submitted a parliamentary question two months ago which was followed up by another one because I could not get an answer. It was followed up by another one which eventually revealed that the Northside Home Care employers were invited by the Department's own agent to apply for the WRC pay agreement only to be excluded afterwards because of the HSE's procurement model. The workers have fallen into a Government-created loophole.

On my way to the Chamber, I met Emily Felix who is looking for the drug for Friedreich's ataxia. I know the HSE is meeting tomorrow. I would love for that to be examined.

Deputy Mark Ward: I want to raise the waiting times for therapies for children's disability network teams. A couple of weeks ago, I raised the unacceptable waiting time for children in Lucan for speech and language therapy. The average is a two-year wait. I thought that was bad until I received a response yesterday about a four-year-old boy from Clondalkin who will be waiting five years before he gets speech and language therapy. Every expert will say that early intervention is key. One of the worst jobs for TDs across this House is when you have to send a response back to a parent. It is really upsetting as a TD but that pales into insignificance compared to what the parent in receipt of that letter experiences when they receive news that their four-year-old child will not get an appointment for speech and language therapy until they are nine years old. What will the Government do about this?

An Ceann Comhairle: That concludes the contributions. There are just over nine minutes for the Taoiseach to reply to the 12 Deputies.

The Taoiseach: I thank all the Deputies for raising these very important questions here.

On Deputy Martin Daly's question, I have also met the group, Before We Die, in relation to vulnerable adult children and the fear and anxiety of parents in terms of providing for them if they were to pass from this world. The Minister for housing has met the Minister of State for disability. The Minister for housing is instructing local authorities to build and to have a quota in every scheme for people with disabilities in the first instance and not do so on the basis that if they get wraparound services, they will build a house. They must just go and build it. We will have to put pressure on the HSE side, on the healthcare side, to make sure there are supports. The local authority will have to work proactively with the families and the health service to make sure the appropriate balance of care is provided. A lot of people with disabilities are in the position to manage so a continuum of care is required here. The last meeting of the disability group discussed this in some considerable detail. Having met the Before We Die group, it was clear the parents were being asked to jump hurdles that were really not appropriate, in my view. We should be more proactive as a State in helping them along this

journey to try to provide for their children - particularly on the accommodation side. I met one parent who said her two sons could manage quite well with a bit of support and did not need anything too extraordinary. Others would need far more intensive care in a residential environment.

We also have to get the balance right between decongregation and new provision because if all the resources just go into decongregation, there are no resources for new provision. We have to try to work with all concerned in trying to find a way through this. I am just being honest and open here. The current situation is not sustainable - I am very clear about that. Both Departments are now working together to try to unblock that for the families concerned.

On Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan's question, I will have to check. My understanding was that progress was being made in terms of the lead positions. On the national disability lead, I will talk to the Minister in respect of that. I will come back to the Deputy on that.

Deputy McGreehan raised disability access officers. That is a potentially powerful catalyst in every local authority area with the right people recruited who could look at the full range of policies across a local authority from housing to pedestrian access to roads to access to buildings to ensure the entire philosophy of local authorities is imbued with implementing the human-rights based strategy for disabled people. I will revert to the Deputy on where we are on that and the coverage across the country. It is something the Government is interested in expanding.

On Deputy Quaide's contribution, I met Craig Coady yesterday with Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan. It was a very heartrending meeting. What the family has gone through is quite shocking. I have spoken to the Minister about this. We will do everything we can to accelerate consideration of Skyclarys provision. It was never scheduled for tomorrow but I think Givinostat is. However, we are hoping we can bring forward consideration of Skyclarys by the HSE's drugs group. We have about 200 families who are living with Friedreich's ataxia. I am very conscious of this as is the Minister. For the record of the House, I laid out earlier the information I was provided with in terms of the engagement between the HSE and the company. What is more important now is that we try to get this over the line as quickly as we possibly can in accordance with the procedures and processes that are laid out. Time is running out for many people, not least young Paudie himself who needs this as fast as we possibly can provide it. The Minister is taking other actions as well to make sure that if a positive decision was to emerge in the next number of weeks, we could make sure a green light could be given.

Deputy Boyd Barrett raised the Northside Home Care issue. Obviously, the industrial relations can be quite complex in terms section 39 organisations and WRC agreements. Every decision taken in relation to any one group does not stay with the one group. It has read across to other scenarios as well. I do not know whether that is the core issue here in terms of the nature of Northside Home Care and whether structure of it is the problem in terms of the application of the section 39 resolution of this through the WRC, which took a considerable length of time following the public service pay agreement. Deputy Heneghan also raised this. I will endeavour to engage with the Department of public expenditure on this and with all concerned to see if we can find a way to deal with this.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: There are a lot more affected than just those 80 workers.

The Taoiseach: That is the point. That is what invariably happens with industrial relations so that may be the factor here.

I accept Deputy Paul Murphy's general point. The incidence of autism seems to have grown dramatically. Although some say it is better diagnosed, I am not so sure any more. The numbers are significant in terms of expansion of services in health, but particularly in education. Even this year it has been significant. In the most recent census, in comparison with the previous one, there has been an exponential increase in adults and children declaring a disability. There is a challenge that in the overarching focus on autism, other disabilities perhaps do not get the same attention or focus. General disability special classes are important, such as for Down's syndrome. There are good organisations that advocate for Down's syndrome. The Government works well with them. However, it is something I will raise with the Minister to see whether we have a proper audit of the provision of service and there is a sufficiency of service for those with mild or moderate learning disabilities.

Deputy O'Callaghan raised St. Francis school. It was raised earlier in the Order of Business, presumably by his Sinn Féin constituency colleague. Apparently it went through the independent appeals process. It is one pupil short of the criteria governing the appointment of teachers and the enrolment numbers. I will raise it with the Minister, but the Minister made it clear to the Deputy that the independent appeals process made a decision on it. I do not know whether or not it is a growing population area or there is some manoeuvrability for the decision makers.

Deputy Whitmore raised a new special school for Wicklow. I will have to follow up on that. Is she saying absolutely nothing has happened since then?

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: They have not heard anything.

The Taoiseach: They have not heard anything. I will follow up because it is now June. If people want to get enrolled by September something has to happen. I will raise it with the Minister of State, Michael Moynihan and the Minister, Hildegard Naughton.

Deputy O'Rourke said the meeting to consider the drug for Duchenne is tomorrow. I hope we will get a positive outcome from that and can make progress. There has been a fair degree of representation and advocacy in that regard from both Houses.

Deputy Wall raised St. Anne's special school in the Curragh. That is a new school project. It is at stage 2B. We will engage with the Minister in respect of that. This is a special school that needs to be provided.

Deputy Tóibín heard Deputy Mark Ward and others talking about access to services. The existing system is not working at all. In fact, it is exacerbating the situation. It has meant there are fewer therapists available for services than for assessments. We are trying to get a more common-sense approach to this, so that the preponderance of therapy would be allocated to children in the earlier stages and they would have access to the therapists much earlier than they have currently. We need to do more, look at how therapists are deployed and ask how we can get the maximum outcomes from interventions.

Deputy Heneghan raised the northside home care workers, which I spoke about earlier. I also spoke about Friedreich's ataxia. I will come back to him about the home care workers; I think I have already outlined to Deputy Quaide and other Deputies the situation with Friedreich's ataxia.

Deputy Ward raised waiting times for disabilities. Early intervention is key. That is why we are doing the reforms that we are doing. Not everybody likes it, but we believe it is better to do it the way we are proposing so we get the therapies to the people faster and get earlier interventions than is currently the case.

Questions Nos. 1 to 33, inclusive, taken orally.

Questions Nos. 34 to 41, inclusive, resubmitted.

Question No. 42 taken with Writtens.

Questions Nos. 43 to 100, inclusive, resubmitted.

Question No. 101 taken with Writtens.

Questions Nos. 102 to 114, inclusive, resubmitted.

Question No. 115 taken with Writtens.

Questions No. 116 to 118, inclusive, resubmitted.

Finance Bill 2026: Second Stage

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Robert Troy): I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Bill, which is relatively short and covers the tax aspects of the energy support measures announced by the Government in March and April this year. I will first say a few words about the wider economic landscape. As Deputies are aware, the global economy is facing its second major energy price shock in less than five years. As a small, highly open economy and a net energy importer, Ireland is naturally exposed to movements in international energy prices. The disruption to energy supplies that we have seen to date has already fed into higher and more volatile energy prices with direct consequences for households and businesses.

The role of Government in these circumstances is to spread the burden to ensure that the most exposed sectors are partly shielded. We must also mitigate the impact on those least able to absorb the price changes. I stress that this is about burden sharing and not full absorption. No government in the world can absorb all of the price shock. Governments should not chase inflation when at full employment as this can lead to far greater economic problems over the longer term. We think we have struck the appropriate balance between delivering timely support while at the same time ensuring that the public finances remain on a sustainable trajectory. The combined energy support packages, which also included measures outside of the Bill under discussion today, is estimated to cost over €750 million.

The tax measures, which we will discuss today, are alone estimated to cost €442 million in terms of revenue foregone. As the House will be aware, this substantial package, which is one of the largest in Europe, was introduced following the energy price shocks caused by the conflict in the Middle East. The factors that have brought us here are far from our shores and beyond our control, but as a Government we have acted to mitigate the impacts across society with a broad range of measures. Some of the measures, like the diesel rebate scheme and the fuel allowance extension, are targeted, while others are more broad reaching, such as the excise rate reductions. As we have stated previously, no government can entirely eliminate the impacts of such a broad-reaching crisis. It is also important to again emphasise the importance of ensuring that our response needs to be measured and not risk second-round inflationary impacts.

I will briefly outline the elements of the support packages covered in the Finance Bill. These measures were debated in the House on 24 March and 14 April when the financial resolutions to give them temporary effect were approved. I thank the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, and Taoiseach for its constructive engagement to date on the outline of the Bill, which means these important measures can move as quickly as possible through the legislative process. The Bill is quite short, consisting of four substantive sections. Section 1 provides for the increase in the maximum repayment rate under the diesel rebate scheme. Section 2 deals with the temporary excise rate reductions for petrol, diesel, green diesel and the deferral of the planned 1 May carbon tax increase for mineral oil fuels. Sections 3 and 4 relate to the deferral of the planned 1 May carbon tax increase for natural gas and solid fuels.

I will now turn to each section in detail. As I mentioned, section 1 relates to the diesel rebate scheme, which was introduced in 2013 to provide support for essential road users at times when the price of auto diesel was relatively high. The diesel rebate scheme, DRS, is permitted under Article 7 of the energy tax directive, subject to the conditions set out in the directive. The scheme provides qualifying road haulage and passenger transport operators with a partial repayment of mineral oil tax paid on auto diesel.

In 2025, close to €39 million was paid out under the scheme, providing targeted support to the road haulage and passenger transport sectors. The DRS also provides support to the wider economy, which is dependent on haulage as a distribution network. Households and other businesses benefit indirectly by virtue of reduced distribution costs. To qualify for the scheme, road haulage and passenger transport operators must have an appropriate road transport licence and be tax compliant. The auto diesel must be used in qualifying vehicles in the course of the transport operator's business. In addition, the auto diesel must have been purchased with tax paid in the State by means of a Revenue-approved fuel card provider or in bulk for delivery to the transport operator's business premises.

The diesel rebate scheme rate of repayment is linked to the average retail price of auto diesel based on data from the Central Statistics Office. Since the end of 2021, a 7.5 cent per litre maximum level of rebate has applied to all claims, reflecting the relatively low price of €1.43 per litre at which the maximum rebate was given. The amendment we are speaking to today provides for an increase in the repayment cap from 7.5 cent per litre to 12 cent per litre. This enhanced or extended repayment rate applies to claims covering auto diesel purchased between 1 January and 30 June this year.

The diesel rebate scheme operates on a quarterly repayment basis, with repayment claims available for submission to Revenue quarterly in arrears. On 1 April 2026, Revenue opened the claim period for the enhanced rate under the rebate scheme for quarter 1. Some 1,427 claims, to the value of €10.6 million, were submitted in the period from 1 April to 5 June 2026 in respect of the first quarter of 2026. This compares with the 1,015 claims to the value of €4.9 million which were received for quarter 1 in the same filing period in 2025. I am advised by Revenue that it is currently processing these claims and has, between 1 April and 5 June, refunded 847 of those 1,427 claims to the value of €5.9 million under the enhanced rebate scheme. The estimated cost of increasing the maximum repayment from 7.5 cent to 12 cent from this six-month period is just €10 million.

Moving to section 2, which relates to the temporary reductions in excise applying to auto diesel, petrol and green diesel and the deferral of the May carbon tax increase on certain fuels, in March, we legislated for VAT-inclusive excise reductions of 15 cent per litre for petrol, 20 cent per litre for auto diesel and 3 cent per litre for green diesel. In addition, the NORA levy was reduced by 2 cent per litre for liquid fuels such as auto diesel, petrol, green diesel and kerosene. The initial legislation provided for these temporary reductions to be effective from 25 March to 31 May at an estimated cost of €150 million in terms of revenue forgone. In April, the Government announced a further reduction of 10 cent per litre on auto diesel and petrol as well as a further 2.4 cent reduction for green diesel. Taking the 2 cent NORA levy reduction into account, this brings the total reductions to 32 cent per litre for auto diesel, 27 cent per litre for petrol and 7.4 cent per litre for green diesel. We also legislated to extend all of the excise reductions until 31 July 2026. The Minister for Climate, Energy and Environment has also acted to extend the NORA levy reduction until the end of July. The estimated cost of these further excise rate reductions and the extension of the initial reductions until is €260 million. The NORA levy reduction is estimated to cost €40 million.

Section 2 also provides for the deferral of the planned 1 May carbon tax increase on certain mineral oil fuels, including kerosene heating oil and marked gas oil. Sections 3 and 4 also deal with the deferral of the carbon tax increase for natural gas and solid fuels. The decision to defer the carbon tax increase was made in recognition of the sustained level of inflation that green diesel and kerosene in particular were facing. The deferral of the increase provides additional relief from price pressures to consumers of these fuels as well as consumers of natural gas and solid fuels. This decision reflects the Government's continued commitment to balancing climate ambition with the need to mitigate the impacts on households and businesses from the energy price shock.

As the Tánaiste stated at the time of the decision in April, this is the first time that we have postponed a carbon tax increase since the multi-annual trajectory of carbon tax increases was introduced in 2020 and this was not a decision that was taken lightly. Since the introduction of carbon tax increases under budget 2020, the Government has ensured that revenues raised are transparently and purposefully recycled. These investments have funded energy efficiency upgrades in homes and communities, supported decarbonisation across agriculture and transport and underpinned just transition measures. The allocations for 2026 were determined as part of budget 2026 and are consistent with the approach taken in previous years. Over €1 billion has been allocated to climate action and social protection measures, representing an increase of €163 million on the 2025 allocation. These funds are specifically targeted at

measures that ensure households most exposed to energy and fuel costs are protected from unintended impacts.

The agreed deferral of the carbon tax increase will result in lower carbon tax revenues in 2026 than originally projected, with an estimated revenue impact of €22 million. This represents a small share of the total allocation of approximately €1.1 billion, just under 2%. The allocations set out in budget 2026 were approved by the Oireachtas and remain the voted amounts for the year. This includes carbon tax funding commitments incorporated into the national development plan, which provides medium-term budgetary certainty for the sectors and communities supported by these measures. It is not possible to offset all of the recent increases, which are driven by market forces, using the tax system. However, the measures this Bill legislates for will provide significant mitigation, supporting households and businesses experiencing the most acute impacts of the increases in fuel prices.

As I mentioned earlier, these tax measures form part of the broader package of measures Government announced in March and April this year. In March, we also extended the fuel allowance by an additional four weeks. This targeted intervention provided the 470,000 households in receipt of the fuel allowance with an additional €38 per week, totalling €152 over the four-week period on top of the annual allowance of €1,064.

On 12 April, as part of the second package of supports, the Government announced a comprehensive €100 million fuel income support scheme. The fuel income support scheme has been introduced as a targeted income support to assist farmers, agricultural contractors and fishers facing unprecedented increases in fuel costs. The scheme is available for fuel used over the five-month period from March up to the end of July 2026, which coincides with peak fuel usage on farms. Farmers and agricultural contractors availing of the scheme will benefit from a support rate equivalent to approximately 20 cent per litre of green diesel. The funding will be distributed proportionally, reflecting a point that was strongly emphasised in engagements with the representative farm and farm contractor groups. In terms of the fuel income support scheme for farmers, foresters and contractors, which closed for applications on 2 June, it will take some time for all the relevant information to be collated to give definitive information regarding claimant numbers and likely payment amounts. This targeted and practical support package ensures that those most exposed to these increases will receive meaningful assistance at the most critical time of year. Farmers and agricultural contractors availing of the scheme will benefit from a support rate equivalent to approximately 20 cent per litre of green diesel.

To further support the haulage and coach sector, the Government has also established a new road transporters support scheme, RTSS. This is modelled on the licensed haulage support schemes of 2022 and 2023, which were deployed to assist the sector with the higher fuel prices following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The road transporters support scheme will provide direct payments to hauliers, both licensed and own account. Payments are graduated, with smaller businesses receiving a proportionately greater level of support.

Additionally, support for operators of Transport for Ireland's Local Link services will be available through the National Transport Authority, and support for school transport services will be facilitated by the Department of Education and Youth. The estimated cost of these additional transport sector supports is €120 million.

As I said, this is a short but important Finance Bill. There has already been extensive debate on these measures when they were first announced and when the subsequent financial resolutions were passed. I am fully aware of the sensitivity and topical nature of the issues at hand. I look forward to further constructive discussion on this now on Second Stage and as it progresses through the legislative process. I commend the Bill to the House.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Táim buíoch as an deis labhairt ar an mBille seo. The Bill follows on from the financial resolutions that were passed through these Houses and came into effect in March and again in April in relation to the fuel crisis. Section 1, as the Minister of State said, relates to the increase in the diesel rebate scheme. I have raised this issue on many occasions with the Minister of State and the senior Minister, given the fact that many hauliers have issues accessing the scheme. On top of that, as the Tánaiste accepted when I put it to him previously, even the people who can access the scheme face severe cash flow issues and have to wait up to three months before they get the rebate. Despite the acceptance of this fact and the genuine issue that hauliers were facing, we still see no action to address it.

Sinn Féin argued in this House over and over again for a completely different approach. Because of how the EU energy directive is designed, when the diesel rebate scheme is increased, the space for the Government to reduce excise for the wider general public is reduced. However, there is a way in which the wider public, hauliers and transport operators can benefit at the same time. If the Government makes the cut directly at the pump, hauliers get the benefit, and they get it immediately without having to wait for three months. Everybody else also benefits - every commuter and every person who fills up their car with petrol or diesel - and it avoids the cash flow issues that the rebate scheme has ingrained within it.

Section 2 is probably the most substantive part of this legislation. It contains both excise cuts on fuels like petrol and diesel and the postponement of carbon taxes on home heating oil, green diesel and canister gas until October of this year. The excise cuts should have gone further on petrol, diesel and green diesel. We know people are still spending over €100 to fill their tanks. If they live in rural Ireland, have a long commute or drive as part of their work, they are getting crucified by those prices over and over again. We have heard from carers, home help workers and ordinary people who simply cannot afford to put fuel in their car. At the same time, the Government prioritised other areas. It cut private jet fuel by 17% while struggling to reduce home heating oil by a single cent. You could not make this up.

The second component of this section is that the carbon tax is being postponed until the autumn. That was one of the most frustrating elements of the Government's response to the crisis. The Taoiseach, Deputy Micheál Martin, specifically ruled out taking this basic step over and over again. At a time of huge pressure and crisis, he stood and proudly said that he and his Government were going to put taxes on people in the middle of the crisis. His immediate reaction to the fuel crisis was to dig his heels in and refuse to consider postponing a carbon tax increase. Think of that from the perspective of someone who was sitting at home with an empty tank in a cold house. They had just seen the price of home heating oil almost double, and the Taoiseach was not only refusing - indeed, he still refuses - to cut a single cent of excise duty from home heating oil, but his reaction was also to heap more tax and more pressure on that same family. It is no wonder that anger boiled over and, by God, anger did boil over.

Section 3 does the same for the carbon tax on natural gas. There is no access to natural gas in Donegal. As with the rail network and the motorway network, my constituency is cut off from the gas network. However, for many people across the State, heating their homes and water with gas has become completely unaffordable. One in four households is unable to pay the gas bill. That is a shocking indictment of Government failure, and it does not even count all of the people on pay-as-you-go meters and those working every hour that God sends and just managing to keep their heads above water.

Section 4 deals with the postponement of carbon tax on solid fuels, such as coal, briquettes and turf. These are fuels that heat the coldest homes in the country. It is what people turn to when they cannot afford a refill of oil. The Government is now proposing to lump more tax on home heating oil, coal and natural gas in October. When the days are getting shorter and far colder, the response of this Government will be to push up taxes on home heating oil, coal and natural gas. You could not make it up.

This legislation also recommits to increasing the carbon tax every single year until 2030. The Government nowhere in legislation says that it will improve the healthcare outcomes for people until 2030, or make an investment every year. It does not say that with regard to tax changes that would allow people to keep more money in their pockets but, by God, when it comes to carbon tax, the Government is not found wanting. It has no problem saying that not only is it going to increase it in October, but it is going to do the same to you in 2027, the same to you in 2028, the same to you in 2029 and the same to you again in 2030. This Government knows one thing about the future, which is that it is going to put additional pressure on ordinary people.

It is striking that what we are talking about here is additional taxes on people, some of whom are already struggling to meet their needs. Sinn Féin opposes increasing carbon taxes. They are unfair, and they do nothing for the climate or the environment where alternatives do not exist or are unaffordable. It is a tax on people trying to heat their homes or to get from A to B. The kicker is that the more the Government fails in delivering affordable green electricity and public transport, the more it collects on carbon tax because people have no option. It is a regressive tax, plain and simple.

We are in the middle of a cost-of-living challenge for so many people. People are getting hammered by costs. This started long before the attacks on Iran that sent the energy markets into chaos. It has been unrelenting for years. Real wages have stagnated as prices have continued to go up. That was the reality for people up and down this country when the price of fuel spiked in early March, when Ministers were more concerned with their St. Patrick's Day trips than taking action to protect the Irish people. It was sustained pressure from Sinn Féin, including legislation that I brought before this House on 10 March, that dragged the Government into acting. It took three and a half weeks of mounting pressure on the Government to force it to finally do something. Not only was it late in coming, but its initial response was a disgrace and barely scratched the surface of what was needed. It was the catalyst that drove people onto the streets in their thousands in the fuel protests.

We only have to look at it through the eyes of those at the sharpest end. Farmers and farm contractors were watching the price of green diesel almost doubling. What was the Government's response? It was to cut the cost by 3 cent when the price went up from 90 cent to €1.60. That was the response of the Government after it had increased by 80 cent. People

were gobsmacked, and that anger began to build as the reality bit home. Businesses were going to go under and jobs were on the line, but this Government did not seem to care. That is what the 3 cent cut in the price of green diesel meant to so many.

The message went out loud and clear that you were on your own. That was the message from this Government. That message demanded a response and, by God, did this Government get that response in the form of the fuel protests. All the disruption, all the tension and all the loss of income could have been avoided if the Government had listened. Instead, it decided to threaten the protesters and to stoke up tensions further.

The protests might have been spearheaded by farmers, farm contractors and hauliers, but their demands were much broader than just their own sector.

That is why they garnered support right across Irish society, despite the disruption that comes along with protests. They want direct cuts at the pumps that would help everyone. They called for excise duty cuts to home heating oil. That is why and how the protests tapped into the wider anger at the cost-of-living crisis, an anger that comes from feeling that it is just one thing after another. When we are talking about fuel costs, it is part of a wider picture. Right now there are many homes that have not had home heating oil since March. People are still feeling that they are getting absolutely hammered by the cost of petrol and diesel. Green diesel is far too expensive at the pumps. That is where we are at right now. The Government can pat itself on the back all it likes but that anger has not gone away.

The problem is that the legislation the Minister of State has brought forward today, the Finance Bill, will be enacted next month, in July. At the end of that month, what is going to happen? According to this Finance Bill that the Government is asking us to vote for, the price of diesel will go up by 32 cent and the price of petrol by 27 cent. What planet is the Government living on? People need support. The idea that this House will be in recess, that Ministers will be on holiday and that these prices will go up on 1 August is simply not acceptable. Nobody can predict, with certainty, oil prices in the future but the public deserves to know that there is a plan in place. The Houses of the Oireachtas will need to pass legislation to allow for an extension. These Houses are set to rise for the summer in mid-July. That leaves the Government with just a matter of weeks to bring forward any financial motions that are needed. Despite that looming cliff edge, everyone is being left in the dark. If prices stay at the current levels, then there needs to be an extension. Prices cannot be allowed to go up by 32 cent, as provided for in this legislation. What is the Government's answer to this? It has been mute on this issue so far. If that decision has not been made, then the Government should, at the very least, be able to tell the people when the decision will be made.

I will finish with one other cost-of-living issue. People shopping online are about to be hit with an additional €3 charge per item in parcels originating outside the European Union, including from Britain, as new EU custom rules come into effect next month, on 1 July. Many people simply do not know what they are about to be hit with. Shoppers beware is the message here. Somebody who buys three products from Amazon in Britain or from British online retail store, for example, like a pen, a notebook and a keyring, will have to pay an additional €9 on customs, with VAT added on top of that €9. At a time when people are under serious pressure from the cost of living, the last thing they need is another unexpected charge. Ireland is uniquely exposed because of online shopping and how it is integrated with Britain. For many households, buying everyday items online has become a normal part of life. The concerns that

were raised this week by An Post and others cannot be ignored. If these changes are going to result in additional costs, delays and disruption for people, then the Government needs to act. Nobody argues against the need to ensure that products entering the EU meet proper standards but let us be clear, these measures were intended to tackle high-volume, low quality imports, not to leave ordinary people facing extra charges every time they shop online. The Government should be pressing for these changes to be stopped and reworked to ensure that people are protected. We need to see leadership on this because people cannot be left paying the price for these new rules. It will cause chaos and the fraudsters will have a field day. More importantly, people are going to be out a serious amount of money in their pockets as a result of this.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: This legislation is a suite of reluctant half-measures, a package that does not meet the challenge of high fuel prices. Once this legislation is enacted petrol, diesel and home heating oil will continue to be unaffordable for hundreds of thousands of people and that is just not good enough. We know that it is not just the cost of fuel that people are struggling with. A package to reduce the cost of fuel is so desperately needed because the Government has let the cost of living spiral out of control for the past five years. There are thousands of working people who cannot make ends meet and who do not have a cent in savings. There are thousands of families who are slipping into debt because they just cannot cover their rent, grocery and energy bills every single month. These people desperately need a break. They need the Government to finally step up and end the rip off.

This legislation is an admission that the Government's own policies are failing. If carbon taxes worked, the Government would not have to delay the planned increases to them. By delaying them, the Government is acknowledging the obvious, that alternatives to carbon-intensive fuels do not exist for many people. A pause in carbon tax increases is needed because rural people have no alternative to using home heating oil and travelling in petrol cars. It is incredibly unfair that these people continue to face artificially inflated energy prices that are pushing many of them into fuel poverty. Fuel support measures are so desperately needed, not only because of this recent spike in energy prices but because the Government has let the cost of living spiral out of control for the last five years.

In just three weeks, over 1 million households who get their energy from Electric Ireland will see their energy bills skyrocket. The biggest energy provider in the State is hiking up gas prices by 7.7% and electricity prices by 8%. What does this legislation do for them? Energy companies have been given free rein. The Government needs to call this out for what it is, namely price gouging by a few big energy companies. We know that these big energy companies are already selling energy to households at three times the wholesale cost. We know that our energy prices, which used to be the lowest in the EU, are now the highest among all EU states. They are not just marginally higher but a shocking 52% higher than the average EU country. What do these rogue energy companies want now? They want to hike both electricity and gas prices by over double the rate of inflation. When will this Government wake up to the realities that people are facing? When is enough? When will the Government act? What the Government is doing now is sitting on its hands and overseeing a system that protects profits over people. There is no protection for children living in cold homes, for working people who cannot afford a hot shower in the morning or for the 300,000 people already in energy arrears. The only thing that is protected is the profits of energy companies. They have been allowed to hedge prices up and up, insulating their profits from any global shocks without the smallest

regard for the bills that land on the kitchen tables of workers, pensioners, students and parents who are all finding it increasingly hard to get by.

For weeks we have called on the Government to introduce an emergency cost-of-living budget, with energy credits to help thousands with these rip-off prices. The Government has ignored us and our demands. This legislation is testament to the Government's approach, which is to choose delay over action. It is too late and not enough. This legislation should include energy credits of €400, cuts to the USC to put €500 back in workers' pockets and targeted supports, including a €500 payment for people with disabilities. Instead, it is a reluctant suite of half measures that fail to tackle the reality of the energy poverty that, tragically, is widespread across this State. This problem cannot be solved by energy credits alone. We need a crackdown on energy companies to end these rip-off prices once and for all. Electricity and gas are natural monopolies. This market cannot be left to its own devices. The *laissez-faire* approach of this Government is exactly what has created the rip off in the first place. To have affordable energy we need regulation. We need an energy regulator with the powers to tackle price gouging and a mandate to ensure affordability. This legislation does nothing to recognise energy poverty. There is not a single cent allocated to reducing the price of home heating oil which has surged by over 80% in the past year. Energy poverty exists because of the Government's political decisions, not because we do not have enough money to put an end to it. It exists because the Government has no ambition to end it. It has become more and more clear that the Government's ambitions lie elsewhere.

Last week the Minister for foreign affairs, Deputy McEntee, told reporters that she is really ambitious for our country. She spoke of spending more on militarisation when discussing the EU's security action for Europe programme. She said that we should have taken out an EU loan at the taxpayers' expense to increase our military spending. The Oireachtas finance committee thoroughly scrutinised the security action for Europe programme and identified that it potentially conflicts with our neutrality and is incompatible with the EU's commitment to peace. The committee stated that it completely opposed the use of the EU general budget as a guarantee for these loans. However, the Minister's comments suggest that she is much more worried about impressing our friends in the EU than about listening to the concerns of the cross-party Oireachtas finance committee. Unbelievably, the Minister, Deputy McEntee, went even further in her comments. She went on to say that Britain should have been included in the security action for Europe programme, indicating, again, that she was not listening to the Oireachtas finance committee.

It is shocking that a Government Minister wants Irish taxpayers' money to guarantee loans for British military spending that is being used to support Israel and the US as they commit genocide in Gaza. The cornerstone of our foreign policy has always been our neutrality and this Government is taking a wrecking ball to it. The shift towards militarisation and away from neutrality that is being pursued by this Government is an expensive and dangerous agenda that does nothing to serve the interests of the working people. Our national security relies on our neutrality. To think that today we are talking about not having the money to support working people who are unable to put food on the table and who are unable to meet the electricity bills they have - people who are thinking about whether they have the finance to pay energy bills if they put their electricity on and put their heating on. At the same time we have the Government telling us that it wants to go further in its militarisation agenda and it wants to go further in

supporting the security action for Europe, SAFE, programme, about which the finance committee of this Dáil raised serious concerns.

There is a serious question about where this Government's policies and interests lie because they do not lie with those working people, they do not lie with pensioners and they do not lie with those people who are €1,400 worse off as a result of the budget of last year. It is the people with disabilities who have said to the Government that enough is enough. They do not have the money to meet their daily needs but instead there seems to be enough money for militarisation and enough money to want the SAFE programme to go even further and to include Britain in that.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: While we are broadly supportive of the measures in this Bill, I have to say that this is not a sustainable approach. The Social Democrats believe there needs to be targeted measures and investment that will permanently bring down the cost of living. That has completely failed in the Government's approach. The Government has failed to take action to help the pensioners who are unable to heat their homes. The whole issue of pensioners and people on low incomes who are reliant on home heating oil has not been properly addressed. The Government has failed to help renters who cannot make ends meet. Indeed, this Government has made the cost-of-living crisis even worse for renters in terms of the increased rents they are facing, putting an already very struggling and exposed group of people under more pressure again. The Government is failing to help families to put food on the table.

We read the reports today from Family Carers Ireland on the work it did when it spoke to 3,000 carers. It talks about the financial isolation they are under and the financial strain that is making their world shrink. Thousands of carers are saying they are cutting back on food and heat to make ends meet while at the same time they are paying out for crucial equipment such as wheelchairs for their loved ones, which of course should be funded by the public system. It is absolutely outrageous that given the resources at the disposal of this Government, this is not being properly addressed.

The measures in the Bill are untargeted and they ignore the root cause of Ireland's affordability crisis. Unfortunately, the war in the Middle East is showing no sign of coming to an end and the energy crisis is not going anywhere. The impact of this Finance Bill, which will cost half a billion euro, will soon be forgotten. Consider what has happened with home heating oil and the increases of 67% and almost 70% between February and March of this year. This has been the sharpest increase anywhere in the European Union. The people reliant on home heating oil can often be older people and people on low incomes. In rural areas a lot of people who are on lower incomes are very heavily affected by that. They have not been properly supported by the measures in this Bill.

One of the core increases in inflation has been driven by energy bills increasing by 15.5%. People simply cannot afford these increases. Ireland has the highest electricity bills in Europe. Over 300,000 households are in arrears and this is a direct result of a baffling failure to invest in our infrastructure. It is incredible that since Fine Gael has been in office, since 2011, we have no offshore wind farms. The one wind farm we did have has been decommissioned since, so we have actually gone backwards in that respect. Last year we lost over half a billion euro worth of wind energy, which was wasted because our crumbling grid infrastructure could not cope with that wind energy. We are an island on the edge of the Atlantic, yet we are not availing

of this. We should be a net exporter of wind energy but we are nowhere near it because of this Government's failures.

We see too the issues with pensioner poverty. Incredible and stark figures have been released by the Central Statistics Office, CSO, showing that the consistent poverty rate for those over the age of 65 increased by 70% in just one year. People who have worked and done their very best all their lives are being pushed into poverty at a time when they should be supported in their retirement years.

The Social Democrats put forward proposals on this, for example, the targeted €400 energy credits for households earning less than €70,000 a year. That would be a start and would make a bit of a difference. We also need to invest in things like solar for all, which is our plan there. Existing grants would be doubled for people who want to install solar panels. We could make solar panels a realistic option for people on lower and middle incomes. It would be for those who are not covered by current schemes and those who cannot really avail of the current grants because they do not have the matching funds. This would be a once-off investment that would bring down people's energy bills, and bring them down year after year. It would be a long-term investment, it would help us meet our climate targets and it would reduce our country's exposure to energy crisis shocks. It is the kind of thinking we need but that is sorely lacking.

Let us look at this Government's budget promises and the promises it made at election time. For example, affordable childcare was to be cut to €200 per month. Instead, we have seen absolutely minimal progress on that. There were promises that third level fees will be phased out. Instead they were actually increased. There was a promise of a cost-of-disability payment. A €500 payment was meant to be introduced but in the last budget we saw the incomes of disabled people actually slashed by up to €1,400 because of decisions that this Government made. Childcare in Ireland is exorbitantly expensive and very difficult to access. This is making the cost-of-living crisis even more difficult for families.

We have record numbers of people now homeless. Shockingly, there are 5,604 children living without a home, which is absolutely devastating. Ar an gcéad dul síos, déarfadh mé go bhfuil rudaí an-deacair do dhaoine. Rinne an tAire Stáit na roghanna míchearta. Tá na tosaíochtaí míchearta aige. Tá níos mó agus níos mó daoine á mbrú i dtreo na bochtaineachta ag an Rialtas. Tá rudaí go dona, go háirithe mar gheall go ndearna an Rialtas na roghanna míchearta.

I also want to address the situation of the workers from Northside Home Care who are taking industrial action this week. They work long and hard hours taking care of the elderly. This is another group of people who are really suffering under this cost-of-living crisis. Despite the incredibly important work they do, they are on just above the minimum wage. People who have been working there for 20 plus years are still just above the minimum wage. There is no recognition of the work they are doing. I call on the Minister of State, Deputy Troy, and his Government colleagues to actually intervene to ensure a proper wage for people doing home care work. There should be a sectoral wage agreement for that sector. It is utterly indefensible. These workers do an incredibly important job. Whether they are doing it at not-for-profit companies, or in the private sector rather than directly employed by the HSE, they are not getting the HSE going rate. It is grossly unfair. The Government needs to stop sitting on its hands on this and actually take some action.

The measures in this Finance Bill follow a familiar pattern from this Government. Instead of targeting resources where they are needed most, the money is spread evenly reducing its impact and, crucially, the Government is failing to invest in measures that will reduce the cost of living permanently. That is what the Government needs to be doing. I do wonder will this Government ever learn. If it was serious about tackling the cost-of-living crisis, it would target resources where they are needed most. Crucially, this would build resilience and reduce our dependence on fossil fuels. That is absolutely essential for tackling the cost-of-living crisis and preparing us for the next one, and for helping us to meet our climate targets. Unfortunately, this Finance Bill does neither.

Deputy Tom Brabazon: Aontaím leis an Teachta O'Callaghan sa mhéid is go raibh sé ag tacú le muintir Northside Home Care. I fully agree with Deputy O' Callaghan in relation to Northside Home Care issue. It is really important that the considerable and important work done by these people is acknowledged by the Government and that they at least get equal pay for equal work.

With regard to the Finance Bill, my constituents in Dublin Bay North are really feeling the pinch, and particularly with rising energy costs.

5 o'clock

I have spoken with many who have told me first hand of the difficulty and pressure they are facing in meeting their household costs. I welcome the measures the Government has taken. Thankfully, we have seen some reductions at the pumps in respect of fuel for transport but that is not to say the problem has been fully resolved. It is clear from the people I have been engaging with that energy costs remain a serious pressure for households and families. Interim supports are certainly welcome but we also have to bring forth longer-term measures to reduce bills.

It is very difficult to listen to elderly people who in the autumn of their years require a lot of heat in their houses and are simply not putting the heat on. Just this week I had one constituent tell me how their gas-electricity supplier has informed them their annual electricity bill will increase by almost 10%, and annual gas bill by 11%. Electric Ireland announced this week it is to increase its prices by 8%. By any measure, these are extraordinary increases and any household would struggle to cushion such costs. There is understandable frustration among the public when bills continue to rise at a time when households are already under considerable pressure. We need to see transparency from the energy providers and greater consumer protection to ensure the public is not being price-gouged by companies which are earning extraordinary profits.

The recent report that found Ireland has the highest household energy costs in the EU and the report published in recent days by the Household Energy Price Index that found that Dublin is the most expensive capital city in the EU for electricity are very concerning. My constituents are working hard and doing their utmost to make ends meet. They cannot take any more increases or pressure. I urge the Government to keep additional measures on its mind between now and the budget, keep this under consideration and invest in implementing long-term solutions to bring down bills. We must do everything we can to help households in meeting rising costs and ensure they have something to show for their hard work at the end of each week.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Finance Bill 2026, which gives effect to the cost-of-living package introduced by the Government earlier this year. These supports include 32 cent off a litre of diesel, 27 cent off a litre of petrol and other measures which are not small adjustments. They are part of a significant €750 million package to support families and businesses as we deal with the energy shock caused by the continuing conflict in the Middle East. The Government's €750 million intervention was a serious response to the situation and one of the most significant across the EU. The Government also deferred the carbon tax increase that was due on 1 May. That deferral runs until 14 October and may need to be extended if energy prices remain elevated. It protects households heating their homes with kerosene, natural gas and solid fuels and is targeted relief at the moment people need it most.

I also acknowledge the supports provided for the transport sector. The diesel rebate scheme has been increased from 7.5 cent to 12 cent per litre and backdated to January. There is new road transporters support scheme worth €40 million a month. There is also €100 million scheme for farmers, contractors and fishers. Our hauliers, coach operators and farmers keep this country moving. They deserve that backing.

The situation in the Middle East seems to shift on an almost hourly basis. We all hope that a durable ceasefire can be achieved that gives way to permanent peace in the region. However, it is clear the energy shock caused by the conflict will continue in the short term.

Turning to budget 2027, I call on the Minister to ensure working families and individuals are supported in the budget with a decent tax package. I was disappointed income tax bands were not adjusted last year. This had a negative impact on workers and must be rectified in this year's upcoming budget. Further progress must also be made on the USC. Equally, given inflation, we need to see a decent package for social protection with particular emphasis on fuel allowance. A general energy credit should also be examined if energy prices remain high as we enter the winter.

More generally, I echo calls for adjustments to capital taxation rates and bands. I hope the Minister will consider the call I made last year to increase the small gift exemption from €3,000 per year. It has not been increased since the euro was introduced quite some time ago. I support calls for a more general overhaul of the inheritance tax system to give everyone a lifetime allowance which would be far more equitable.

In the limited time available, however, it is not possible to cover everything I would like to raise. I have highlighted a range of measures via parliamentary questions but I would like to see supports increase for schemes such as the cycle to work programme and to expand them to the self-employed. I would also like to see increased investment in capital projects, particularly in public transport. We badly need more buses, trains and Luas lines, and especially the expansion of the Luas line to Bray. Given the increase in the population in my constituency of Dún Laoghaire, the Government must increase investment in local infrastructure that provides for critical services, such as the construction of a new Garda station in Cherrywood and a primary healthcare centre in Loughlinstown.

Value for money is important and I call on the Minister to examine some of the disruptive road interventions being planned across Dublin to ensure they deliver a real public benefit. Removing bus lanes, turning lanes, roundabouts or sliplanes along the N11 in particular, which

was recently refurbished at a very significant cost, do not strike me as good use of public funds, particularly at this time. This funding would be far better invested in housing, upgrading public transport services or EV-charging infrastructure, which is critical to support the shift to green energy. I look forward to engaging with the Minister over the coming months ahead of budget 2027 to ensure it reflects priorities and supports hard-pressed households and indeed businesses.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The first thing I want to say on the Finance Bill we are discussing is that it goes to show how this Government just does not get it. It is another failure at a time when the Government had the money and knew people were struggling. It could have stepped in. If people throw their minds back to late February and March when people came on to the street, remember the anger that was there. The Minister of State and the Government went on holidays for St. Patrick's Day to get out of here while people were paying double for home heating oil and struggling to pay their bills.

Deputy Robert Troy: I met protesters on the march. I did not go anywhere. I was not booed either.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The Minister of State's Government was not where it should have been, namely in the Dáil doing its job, protecting ordinary workers, families, pensioners, farmers, hauliers and small businesses who were, and who still are, looking for help. The Minister of State can try to interrupt me but I talk to these people. I was on the line in Whitegate, Cork city and Youghal. Those people are still feeling it today. There are more than 300,000 people in arrears with electricity. A quarter of people who get gas are in arrears.

There are people who use home heating oil who cannot pay their bills. Some people have to use their savings and some have to borrow from the credit union or family but some have to go cold because they do not have the money to put home heating oil in the tank. I know some of those people. The Minister of State might come in and say, "We are great boys" but-----

Deputy Robert Troy: Not at all.

Deputy Thomas Gould: -----Electric Ireland has 1 million customers and it is putting up the cost of electricity by 8% and gas by 7.7% and the Government is doing nothing to tackle it. What is the famous phrase? It is standing idly by while energy companies come in and gouge the market. They pile the pressure on ordinary, hard-working families and what is the Government doing? It has half a Bill instead of delivering for people. We have pensioners who are afraid to turn on the lights, boil kettles or turn on the heating. The weather might be good today but if the Minister of State was around the past couple of days, he knows there was many a night when people had to put on the heating. Where is the support for ordinary, hard-working people and families? This Bill is not it.

I was outside SuperValu in Hollyhill and a guy who is not a farmer, haulier or owner of a small business but an ordinary working man said to me that he stood by the farmers. The reason he stood by them was that somebody had to stand up and be counted and they were there.

Over the summer the price of diesel will go up by 32 cent and the price of petrol will go up by 20 cent, and the Government uses the camouflage of the summer holidays again. It will run out of here, run out the door. I am asking the Minister of State a straight question. Will he give a commitment that those prices will not go up? We also had the carbon tax increases. Has the Government any idea what ordinary people are dealing with? I live in Cork. We have a bus service that is in chaos, with buses not turning up and buses always late, and then the Government puts extra taxes on people for their diesel and their petrol.

We need supports for ordinary people. Energy credits, a cost-of-living budget for people with disabilities and a reduction in the USC for ordinary, hard-working people - these are the things that need to be delivered. I have a list of stuff here where the Government has failed. Will it not stand up now and stand with the people? We are running a huge surplus and the Government is sitting on it.

Deputy Ged Nash: I am pleased to speak on behalf of the Labour Party on this Bill, but I will speak predominantly about what is not in the Bill, more so than what is in it and the effect of its provisions.

Day in and day out, we see the impact of the cost-of-living permacrisis of the past few years. The Minister of State knows only too well - all the evidence shows this - that the impact is felt most acutely by those who are on low and middle incomes and those who depend on the State for their small incomes. We know the outside or exogenous causes of this: a global pandemic, closely followed by war on the continent of Europe and then the effects of Trump and Israel's insane folly in Iran. We can but hope that we are near the endgame of that and that fuel prices in the world's economy can get to a point where we can all catch a breath. That, I think, is the one thing that unites us all in this House. Any of us with any sense, however, know that no government, regardless of how fortunate this country is in terms of the surpluses we post year in, year out, can insulate every home and business from the effects of inflation. Anybody who pretends we can is simply playing political games. What divides us here is how the resources we do have to help have been deployed and on what basis.

The truth is that close to €750 million was dished out to a noisy group that stopped much of the country from getting to work to buy its silence and to placate it, and that has now been entrenched in this legislation. The other truth is that PAYE workers looked on at the events after last Easter and the reality dawned on them that this must be how you do business with this Government. That is not a good place to be for any government. I would not read too much, if I were the Tánaiste, into a by-election win in Galway. Local circumstances were at play there and candidate quality and so on. PAYE workers and the trade union movement will, I guarantee the Minister of State, be much more muscular when it comes to pursuing pay claims and improved conditions based on the message sent after last Easter's fraught events. The silent discontent in households across the country is real because the impact of this cost-of-living crisis is very real. It is affecting people day in, day out, the choices they make and the limited resources they have.

All this is playing out before we see a likely two or three hikes to variable mortgage interest rates over the next few months and the inevitable energy price rises as we face into the winter, as if domestic energy prices in Ireland were not already high enough. Allied with ever-rising grocery price rises, no sign of the €200-a-month childcare we were promised or a break in

college fees, rising health insurance and back-to-school costs and so on, households are in very real and present trouble. However, you would not think it from this Finance Bill or from the Government's actions over the last few weeks and months.

Much of this difficulty can be traced back to decisions made in budget 2026. Here is the truth: no matter what way you want to spin it, PAYE workers were left behind. It is why we in Labour Party produced a number of weeks ago, and the Minister of State responded to this particular initiative, a mini-budget, for the want of a better description, to try to assist working families between now and the budget. These are people who have been told to wait for a breather from the cost-of-living crisis that is so badly affecting households across the country. We know that in the budget, as I said, PAYE workers were left behind and we know why. Core social welfare payment increases have been eroded by inflation. The tax package favoured hospitality over working people. This Finance Bill gives the Government the chance to be more ambitious for working people, who are the real engines and the real producers of goods and resources in this economy. It gives the Government the chance to change course and to be more ambitious than has hitherto been the case.

However, in last year's budget, and it is important that we reflect on this, it was decided that at a full-year cost to the taxpayer of €680 million, the VAT rate in the hospitality sector would go from 13% to 9%. I have heard people argue that this is Government policy. We know it was Fine Gael policy before the 2024 general election, but so is the indexation of PAYE tax bands, rates and credits. We all know politics is about choices. I am comfortable with that and people in this House should be comfortable about it. It is the bread and butter of politics. I think the Minister of State will agree that politics is fundamentally about the generation or the creation of resources and how we redistribute those finite and precious resources. The bizarre decision was taken to cut VAT for the hospitality sector to boost the bottom line of restaurants and cafés instead of providing some respite to working people. I have said it time and again and the Minister of State has seen all the evidence as much as I have. The objective, impartial evidence shows that this cut will favour the chains, which do not need it, rather than the small independent operators that we know are finding the going tough. What makes it all the more bizarre is the fact that we are using tax policy and how we distribute our precious resources to narrow the tax base for a sector that, in its totality, is adding jobs by the week. That makes no economic sense whatsoever. What is more is that all of this is being paid for by the working class having to forgo a small breather on their income tax, with hard-earned pay rises swallowed up by inflation and the failure to ensure that rates, bands and credits kept pace with the very inflation we are trying to combat at the moment and that has proven to be so problematic for consumers across the country.

All told, because of those fateful decisions taken last October and reflected in the Finance Act giving effect to the budget measures, what we are dealing with now is effective pay cuts for many low- and middle-income workers at the very time when the cost of everything is going up. It is reported in *The Irish Times* today that the Tánaiste said yesterday - I found this remarkable - when he was talking about his favoured retail savings and investment scheme, which he has announced and reannounced about 562 times now, that PAYE workers are "irked" over the fact that income tax bands, rates and credits were not adjusted to allow for inflation this year. They are more than irked. They are incredibly annoyed about this because they can feel the impact in their day-to-day budgets and on their inability to manage their weekly and monthly budgets and household costs. That PAYE workers are irked is the understatement of

the year. They have been left behind. Wait until that particular measure goes live on 1 July when people understand that the money that should have been going to them for some tax adjustments is going to McDonald's, Supermac's, KFC and so on. It is absolutely bizarre. It is bad economics and it is even worse politics. Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil will have some explaining to do to constituents when they realise what is happening.

Nobody is saying for a moment that parts of the hospitality sector do not need some structural reforms. They do, but decisions taken to reintroduce a lazy rinse-and-repeat VAT cut that has been around in one form or another since 2011 is not the answer to the structural problems small hospitality businesses face. The answer is addressing once and for all the ridiculously high energy charges in this country for high consumers of energy like the hospitality sector. It is also a real reform of the commercial rates system for good bricks-and-mortar businesses around the country that employ significant cohorts of people. We must also ensure that staff in those sectors can have a real career. That used to be the case when organisations like CERT trained people to a very high international standard to be chefs, hospitality managers and so on. That is what we need to look at rather than the short-term sugar rush of VAT cuts, which improve the bottom line for a short period of time for hospitality businesses that are finding it difficult.

If the Minister of State is serious about giving working people a break he would use this Bill to address that issue, and use the resources that we have available to index PAYE workers' tax-rate bands and credits back to January to ensure that there is some respite for such workers. We know from experience that will not be the case. PAYE workers are being told in this Bill that they are going to have to wait. We have been told time and again that with the excise duty cuts this Bill will legislate to bring into primary legislation, based on the financial resolutions a number of weeks ago, there is some respite from high prices at the pumps for diesel and petrol for PAYE workers. That is an afterthought. PAYE workers certainly were not the target and the focus of this measure. When these measures were first announced a couple of months ago, the Labour Party said there was nothing in them for PAYE workers. There is nothing in this Bill for PAYE workers either and the Government will reap a political whirlwind because of that.

Deputy Joe Neville: I wish to speak today against the backdrop of the budget last year and the economic situation Ireland finds itself in. There is no doubt we find ourselves in a strange economic place. We are in a place where we have budget surpluses. We are not in an era of budget deficits, which was something we all grew up with in this State. It was a situation that came against us with the crash. This is also a situation that is widespread across Europe and in many areas across the world.

We are in a situation where we have billions of a surplus. That brings a need for big and difficult decisions, some of which were taken in the budget. The easy thing is to continue to spend. We have done a lot of spending. We have significantly increased our public spending over the last number of years. That is something of which we always have to be conscious. We also have to be conscious of maintaining fiscal discipline and ensure that we do not just spend the tax receipts that are coming in because, ultimately, we do not know exactly how long they will last.

We have a situation where we have windfall taxes of up to €20 billion. We have a budget surplus of €9 billion or €10 billion. We know that if the situation changes or the headwinds change the Irish economy would be in a very different situation and we would not have the money to back it up, but ultimately that is not the situation that exists here. The strong economic planning of this Government, and of previous governments, has led us into this situation where we do have that money. What this Government has decided to do is to spend heavily on infrastructure, which is something I would consider a significant need. As a councillor for a number of years in north Kildare, I saw the growth in the development of housing, which was obviously welcome, but we need the infrastructure to go with it. This is what the budget plans for and what future budgets over the next five years will continue to do. We need schools, roads, rail lines, wastewater plants and football pitches for people. That is one strong section of this budget and something that we have ensured that we deliver.

It is very easy to write cheques for this and that and to keep increasing spending. That is broadly what populists wish to do. I do not mean just in Ireland but across the world. We have seen the difficulties in many countries where populists have taken over politically. In Ireland we are lucky that we do not necessarily have that division, but at the same time those risks and demands exist.

As we continue to spend, there is a risk that we are not competitive for SMEs, which is another area I am very passionate about. We need to ensure that Irish companies are working in step with those US and other foreign-based companies that come to Ireland. Ultimately, indigenous Irish businesses and SMEs are what will keep us afloat, and are what have kept us afloat through the good and the bad. They are the people we rely on, so we need to ensure that they remain competitive and that we can support them.

Most of the decisions we made in this budget were to support local businesses and ensure that we got extra housing delivery. They were the type of decisions that we made. This is one of five budgets for this Government. There will be an aligned approach in the next budget. We might see a variance from a personal income perspective but that will go along with the budgetary and housing supports in this one.

Research and development tax credits might not necessarily get the kudos, plaudits or headlines but improvements in that regard are what keep those large businesses in place in Ireland. Companies like Intel, which is based in north Kildare, can benefit from such a tax credit, but small companies can also benefit from it. Tax credits are the sort of initiative and incentive that make sure we have jobs in our country. While this budget might not have garnered the same headlines from a populist point of view, what it did was put the economy on a solid footing. It ensured that we did not waste the money over the coming years. What we have done is put it into capital spending, infrastructure, businesses and housing, so we can ensure that in the coming years it could be the source of future economic success.

Ultimately, we are going to be here and we are going to be judged before the next election. I want to ensure Ireland is on a good economic footing and that people in Ireland can benefit. A short win today, politically, would not necessarily be of benefit in the long term. I see this budget as being one of five budgets to ensure the future of Ireland. I welcome the initiatives that were put in place in the budget and in the Finance Bill we are talking about today.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate today. The Finance Bill before the House is a reminder of how exposed we are as a country to fluctuations in global fuel markets. While I fully support the measures being discussed today, they are but a temporary solution to a longer term problem. To deal with it, we need to consider longer term measures.

To build energy independence, we need to look closer to home for the changes that are required. The last budget extended the €400 tax exemption on income earned by households from selling electricity back to the grid to December 2028. That was a welcome step but it is just that - a step. Households that make the leap to solar panels should be further supported through an increase in that exemption. As solar becomes more advanced, many households can now expect to export more than €400 to the grid each year. However, upfront installation costs remain high and act as a disincentive. Raising the exemption to €800 would send a clear signal to households that investing in solar is practical, supported by us, attractive and worthwhile.

Alongside panels, batteries are becoming more advanced and more affordable. When we add a battery to our solar PV system, we unlock a whole range of extra benefits, from greater energy independence to lower bills and protection in the event of a blackout. Locally, a 5 kWh battery costs between €1,700 and €3,000, with larger capacities more expensive still. Unlike PV panels, there is no grant available for batteries, meaning the upfront cost is out of the reach of many ordinary households. We should look to incentivise the purchase of batteries. The Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, has acknowledged that battery storage solutions have become increasingly viable. His Department is reviewing how microgeneration and battery storage could help homes and businesses reduce energy costs and reduce their dependence on the national grid.

The review is welcome but recent volatility underlines the fact that we need to move faster, particularly in advance of the upcoming budget for next year. Incremental, well-targeted changes made over the lifetime of this Government will deliver a real difference. We have a clear opportunity to reduce our dependence on global fuel markets and fossil fuels and deliver a more secure energy future for households across Ireland.

Deputy Martin Kenny: We recognise that so many people were suffering so much as a consequence of the fuel crisis that many of them took to the streets and expressed huge frustration about a situation that was outside their control and about which they felt the Government could do much more. We all acknowledge the Government was not able to stop the war that caused the crisis in the first place but it could certainly have done more to ensure people could get a break, particularly when it came to home heating oil. In my part of the country and, I am sure, in the Minister of State's area, the vast majority of people use home heating as their source of fuel. Older people, people with disabilities and others found it difficult, having come through a long, hard winter when they were already hit with the cost-of-living crisis, that the cost of a fill of oil went through the roof and the Government did absolutely nothing about it. That is one of the big frustrations people had. They felt so let down by all of that.

Families who had to bring children to school and those who run small businesses and so forth also found their costs spiralling and, again, the Government did the minimum to help

them. That was their experience. It is why we proposed that whatever reduction should come, it should come at the pump so that everybody would benefit from it. It would benefit hauliers, those who own a school bus that brings children to school but also people who cannot get a school bus and have to bring their children to school themselves. There are many people who have no option but to do that. People who go to work felt the Government simply was not listening. That is why there was such frustration and people took to the streets at that time.

Since then, prices have stabilised at a high level and have not come down enough for people who are struggling to survive. The squeezed middle are often talked about. People cannot manage to pay a mortgage because they are under so much pressure. They cannot manage to pay the car loan and everything that is hitting them at all angles. Then, they suddenly found the price of fuel, home heating oil and everything else going through the roof. The Government did little to help them and they felt they were left alone. That is what brought people to the streets. These people were not crazies. They were just ordinary people who felt they were being totally let down.

While the Finance Bill is about trying to put in place mechanisms to deliver the measures the Government put in place in March and April, it is really an opportunity for us to tell the Government it needs to wake up to ordinary people's struggles. Ordinary people feel the Government has opportunities to do so much more but continually hides away and pretends that, somehow or other, everything is out of its control and it has to put away money in a big piggy bank for a rainy day. People feel it is raining on them right now. That is the frustration we have and the frustration felt by the vast majority of ordinary decent people who just want to get on with their lives. They want to have a chance to do a little bit better than their parents before them and to see a future for their children coming after them. That is the problem for so many people. It was said to me the other day that in the past, back in the 1970s and 1980s in this country when things were terrible, people could buy a house and have a future. Today, people are saying their children will not be able to do those things.

These are the issues that are impacting people. We need to recognise that the Government has a role to play in assisting people through the ordinary things in their lives as well as the big things in the economy.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I had a look at petrol and diesel prices before I came into the Chamber. The Circle K on Belgard Road in Tallaght is charging €1.85 per litre for diesel and €1.84 per litre for petrol, even after the two rounds of VAT and excise cuts. A year ago, the average price for diesel was €1.76 and for petrol, it was €1.68. There is, therefore, still a big additional cost for ordinary people. In my constituency, many people are basically forced to drive because public transport is so bad and inadequate. It depends on where they are going, obviously. The least the Government should do during the fuel crisis - it should have done it a long time ago but it should do it now - is abolish fares for public transport and put on a load of additional buses so the service is made frequent and reliable. The other thing we need is to have price caps on petrol and diesel, so that every VAT and excise cut we see is not swallowed up by price increases. People need certainty that prices will not go any higher than €1.75 per litre, which is the price cap in People Before Profit's emergency price controls Bill. We first introduced that Bill during the previous energy crisis. It is even more important now when oil prices are so volatile and every day is bringing different news about when or if Trump and Netanyahu's illegal war will finally end.

The Finance Bill is only a drop in the ocean compared to the worsening cost-of-living crisis people are facing every single day. It is not only motorists who need help with rising costs. It is everyone who is forced to cut back on their weekly shop. It is the four in ten parents who say they go without or with less so their kids can eat properly. It is everyone who cannot pay rents that the Government has decided should go higher and higher in order to attract in more vultures to resolve our supply problem, ultimately some day long into the future. It is everyone who is behind on their energy bills, hundreds of thousands of people, because prices are the highest in Europe. It is disabled people who had about €1,400 cruelly taken from them in the most recent budget, despite the Government having billions of euro in surplus. Now, we have the ESB announcing another 8% increase in electricity and gas prices. People are at the end of their tether; they just have not got it. They cannot be bled dry by the Government, landlords and energy companies any longer. The rip-off off has to stop.

Apart from the electricity price increases we are seeing - we saw a report last week from Friends of the Earth - it is because this Government is beholden to big tech. It is because the Government has laid out the red carpet for big tech and their data centres to use as much electricity as they want. We heard this morning in the Joint Committee on Artificial Intelligence that we are potentially on track to reaching the point where data centres use as much electricity as the rest of the economy and the rest of society combined. They currently use well over 20% of electricity, but we are on track to them using 50% of electricity in this country. That is pushing up prices for ordinary people in this country who have already paid hundreds of euro as a consequence of that. The Government likes to defend this position with unfounded, ridiculous claims in terms of jobs. It has been trotting out a KPMG report claiming 870,000-odd jobs are related to data centres. The report counted every job that uses cloud computing, thereby fundamentally missing the point of what it is for something to be in the cloud. It means it can be accessed anywhere, which means there is no benefit to it being around the corner from us or even in the same country, as opposed to being somewhere else. It is interesting that the Government used to answer questions in the past about how many people are directly working for data centres. Five or six years ago, however, it simply stopped answering questions about that. It just refused to answer that question and instead talked about all the people who benefit from the data centres. However, if we read what comes from the data centre lobbyists themselves, they let the cat out of the bag. There was an article in *The Irish Times* in December of last year in which Tom Parlon, the representative of the data centre lobbyists in this country, spoke about them directly employing 1,800 people.

How many jobs are lost as a consequence of the data centres and the use of AI to replace jobs? We have seen that in Covalen and we are seeing it elsewhere in the economy. More jobs are being lost as a result of these data centres than are being added. We need to tackle this.

A serious plan to tackle the cost-of-living crisis simultaneously involves tackling the climate crisis. It means trying to reduce energy usage instead of expanding it, having no more data centres, getting people out of cars into free and frequent public transport and having a nationalised, not-for-profit electricity system that drives investment in renewables. With that comes price controls so that we give people certainty while the transition takes place.

The other thing that has to happen is a fight for higher wages. A few weeks ago, I introduced a Bill that would guarantee apprentices and young workers are paid at least the national minimum wage. That should not sound like a very big ask and it should not require

legislation. Right now, craft apprentices are being paid as little as €7.67 an hour, which is €6.48 less than the national minimum wage. We have a national minimum wage that is inadequate and is recognised not to be the living wage and then we legally say that young people - those under the age of 20 - and apprentices are legally allowed to be paid a lot less than this inadequate minimum wage. On what planet are people meant to survive on €7.67 an hour?

A first-year motor mechanic wrote to me after I introduced the Bill, saying that he is working 40 hours a week on €6.20 an hour. He is expected to pay for his own tools with only a €250 tool allowance. He points out that to even get an apprenticeship in most trades, you have to have a driver's licence, so he has to pay extortionate insurance on top of car loan repayments. He is walking away with €250 a week and is left with only €120 after bills. He says that "taking into account the rising cost of living and the expenses of day-to-day life, it's nearly unbearable and as a worker, I feel disheartened and it's hard to get out of bed in the morning some days." On top of this, he says "the greed of trade employers in Ireland is sickening". I could not agree more. That greed and the dismissive attitude of this Government towards young workers are directly contributing to the housing crisis because it means there are not enough skilled construction workers to build the houses that we need. There are not enough skilled mechanics to run the bus service properly. A lack of mechanics is the main reason that Dublin Bus and Go-Ahead constantly give for ghost buses and cancellations. Another 20-year-old apprentice wrote to me to say:

The lack of young lads and women going into trade is because of the terrible pay that every employer in Ireland's paying them. I'm looking to move out of home and buy or build a house but I can't afford to do so because I can't get a mortgage from the bank because I'm an apprentice and making far less than the minimum wage.

The situation of young workers and apprentices sums up the cost-of-living crisis for many people in this country. Wages are far too low and the cost of living is far too high. What is the Government doing in response? The Low Pay Commission recommended abolishing subminimum wage rates for young workers back in March 2024. That was after we had proposed a Bill to abolish these rates for young workers in the Dáil. It passed Second Stage. The Government placed a timed amendment of one year on it, the year passed and the Government said we needed to look into it. The Low Pay Commission looked into it, as did the ESRI, and it recommended that they be abolished. The Government then promised to look into it but then about a year ago, it said it was not going to do anything on it until 2029. It would not make a decision and we do not even have a commitment that it will abolish these incredible, exploitative subminimum wage rates in 2029. We just have a commitment that the Government is going to think about it in 2029. In the meantime, more and more employers are using subminimum pay rates as a loophole to avoid paying the minimum wage. The number being paid less than the minimum wage has gone up from 20%, or one in five in 2020, to 30%, or almost one in three young workers being legally paid less than the minimum wage. Now we have Fianna Fáil TDs talking about bypassing the Low Pay Commission altogether and using a different mechanism to set the minimum wage that gets rid of any benchmarking with the public sector or multinational pay rates. The only reason to do so is to keep the minimum wage artificially low in order that bosses can make even bigger profits.

It is obvious from how this Government is treating workers that it thinks it can do whatever it wants and workers will not fight back. However, the fuel protests show that when people

power takes it on, the Government is weak and can be forced to crumble very quickly and give concessions. The reason the hauliers and transport operators are getting a bailout in this Bill is that they forced it out of the Government through militant protest. The lesson there for the trade union movement is that politely going into pay talks over and over and playing by the rules is getting it nowhere. The Government has proved it will only listen to militant protest. That is what workers need to do. They need to get organised into trade unions and they need to fight within those trade unions for militant action for above-inflation pay rates to ensure they are not left behind and put in a position of deeper and deeper deprivation as a consequence of the cost-of-living crisis.

Deputy Grace Boland: This Bill represents progress in a number of important areas. It reflects an effort to respond to the pressures on working people through a number of targeted tax measures, including an increase in the USC threshold; the extension of supports, such as rent tax credits and mortgage interest relief, alongside continued investment in our infrastructure and public services; measures backing innovation, research and quality jobs; regenerating towns and city centres; and measures to intensify the supply of housing. No more is that evident than in my area of Fingal where we see housing developments in every town.

It is also clear, however, that pressures remain very real for many families because for many working people, the question is not whether measures are introduced, but whether they make a meaningful difference for families. It is about whether taking on extra hours or returning to work actually pays and whether the balance between wages, taxation, childcare costs and commuting costs works in their favour. That is particularly true in fast-growing commuter areas like Fingal. In towns such as Skerries, Balbriggan, Lusk and Rush, people are working hard, often commuting long distances, raising families and contributing to their communities, yet many still feel under financial pressure.

When we talk about workforce participation, we must look at the practical realities that many families face. Across the country, many people, in particular parents of young children, are working part time, not by choice but because it is the only viable option available to them. That is where childcare becomes central. While we have seen an increase in investments in childcare and more families benefiting from supports, availability remains a real issue on the ground. In Fingal, the shortage of childcare places, in particular community childcare places, is raised with me time and again. Parents want to work more hours or return to the workforce but they simply cannot do this because there are not enough places available. If we are serious about making work pay, particularly for families, this issue has to be addressed because without accessible childcare, financial supports alone are not enough. That is why areas experiencing rapid population growth, for example, north County Dublin, must be prioritised for additional childcare provision.

Alongside this, we must continue to invest in the fundamentals that allow communities to grow. That includes our schools. North County Dublin is seeing significant population growth, particularly among young families. That growth must be matched with timely delivery of school places in modern, warm buildings and appropriate supports. The increase in special needs assistants announced in budget 2026 is very welcome but families also need certainty that overall school capacity will keep pace with demand. That is what allows communities to put down roots with confidence.

We are also seeing very substantial investments at a national level in public transport, water infrastructure and strengthening our electricity grid. These are necessary investments, particularly if we are to support housing delivery and economic growth, but we must also ensure that this investment translates into real outcomes on the ground. The public needs confidence that funding is not just being announced but is being delivered effectively. It needs to see projects completed on time, systems working as they should and services improving in a way that makes a tangible difference in people's daily lives. That responsibility sits across the State, in the Departments and agencies and across the public and Civil Service. Ultimately, this is about trust that investment leads to delivery, that policy decisions translate into real improvement and that the system is working in the best interests of the people it serves.

Taken together, taxation, childcare, commuting and infrastructure all shape how families experience our country and the economy. This Bill moves us in the right direction. As we look ahead to budget 2027, we need to go further in making work pay, particularly for families balancing work and childcare, in ensuring that infrastructure keeps pace with population growth and in making sure that the significant investment being made is delivered effectively and visibly. For many working families, the question is not whether progress is being made; it is whether they can feel it in their everyday lives.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Bill the Minister of State has brought before the House in many ways represents everything that has been so wrong with the Government's approach to the fuel price crisis and to the broader cost-of-living crisis. Everything is too little, too late. It took far too long for the Government to listen and to accept and realise that ordinary workers, families, farmers, small businesses, coach drivers and hauliers had their backs to the wall and that people needed a bit of support and relief. The Government had to be dragged kicking and screaming to take any type of action at all. Of course when it did act, in typical Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael style it did far too little. What the Government did was insufficient. Then, when it introduced schemes in respect of contractors, it took far too long to bring clarity to how some of those measures would actually work. We have found out virtually every week since that there is another cohort in the business sector that was hopeful it would benefit from the rebate but which, it transpires, gets no benefit at all. It was for all of those reasons, and because of the failure to provide adequately or within an adequate timeframe, that Sinn Féin opposed the financial resolutions brought forward by the Government.

All of this is a choice. We have had the choices of the Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael parties and Independent TDs. What were those choices? To this day, there has not been a single cent of a reduction in the price of home heating oil, despite the fact that there are TDs across the Government benches who, I have no doubt, are aware of people in their constituencies who have had empty tanks for months because they cannot afford to put oil in them. They are going cold because the Government refuses to provide them with any support whatsoever or take any meaningful measures.

The average cost of diesel at one point in May, before the measures took effect, stood at €1.97. Today, the average cost of diesel is €1.88 a litre. It might be the Government's policy to have petrol and diesel at those prices on an ongoing basis, but they are too expensive for people who have no option but to use their cars to get to work. Green diesel costs nearly 50% more.

The most bizarre aspect of the financial resolutions that have come before the House is the Government's commitment to increase the carbon tax every single year until 2030, despite the irrefutable evidence that carbon taxes hit lower income people and people from rural communities hardest. Carbon taxes charge people for not changing to something that does not exist. The people I and the Minister of State represent cannot afford a new car costing €50,000, whether they have an €8,000 grant or not. They rely on their petrol or diesel car to do everything, from driving to work to driving their kids to school in some instances or to activities they are involved in, yet the Government's choice, time and again, has been to kick them in the teeth rather than give them the support they need.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: As I and others have said in this House, the measures were too little and too late. Nevertheless, we are extending them for another period of time. I would have preferred to have seen them extended to September because I cannot see the Strait of Hormuz crisis being sorted out by then, given the incumbent in the White House. The measures are welcome insofar as they are coming forward, but they should have been for a longer duration and for greater amounts, while being cognisant at all times that the bigger picture, the strategic picture, is, as I have said previously, our energy self-sufficiency and the fact that we are slow to ramp up to self-sufficiency and cut down on the massive amounts of foreign imports for which we are paying.

In the new era in which AI will impact on certain types of jobs, we have to find other types of jobs. We have to go the vocational route because there are huge incomes to be made in data centres if someone is an electrician, for example. However, if we have demand from companies to store data in Ireland, the only way it will be done is if we have a massive surplus of capacity, which is not what we have been gearing towards.

I note, although it is not being done in this legislation, the trial EV scrappage scheme of €5,000. I welcome this measure because for some vehicles, it will bring the price of a new EV with a range of between 200 km and 300 km down to around €12,000, which is an affordable amount for a credit union loan. I welcome the measure but it needs to be put on a better footing, with more of an incentive on top. In Dublin, I have been driving a 24 kW EV for the last ten years. It has a range of about 120 km, which is sufficient most of the time, although if I am travelling down the country, I have to stop off a few times. For someone in rural Ireland, a 250 km or 300 km range goes quite quickly. We have to encourage people in rural areas to invest in these types of vehicles at an affordable rate, alongside taking up grants for solar. We need to ensure that people get fair prices for exporting home-grown energy from their solar panels and make retrofitting affordable in the first place. The roll-out of retrofitting in local authority housing remains abysmal. We are still hitting those who can least afford it.

Deputy Paul Lawless: Let us be honest about the fuel support scheme. The Government sold farmers a pup. When the price of green diesel spiked by 80% and farmers were struggling, the Government offered them 2.4 cents off per litre. It was an insult. We warned the Government on the floor of the Dáil what was going to happen. Sure enough, what happened was a revolt. When farmers and contractors went to the trouble of protesting, the Government, after several days of blackening those people, announced a bigger scheme for farmers worth €100 million. Ministers were on the radio promising €100 million and promising farmers relief. The reality was very different because the vast majority of farmers I have spoken to in

County Mayo are ineligible. They cannot apply. They listened to the Minister for agriculture and many other Ministers on radio promising relief. When they looked at the detail of the scheme, they saw it is calculated so that the minimum payment is €100 and the minimum amount of fuel is 1,200 litres of green diesel from the previous year, 2025. That is the threshold. Below 1,200 litres, people cannot apply and do not qualify.

The Government has promised farmers a scheme and the vast majority of small and medium-sized farmers across Ireland are ineligible. Small beef farmers, part-time farmers, men and women who have 30, 40 or 50 suckler cows and 50 or 60 acres will not avail in the vast majority of cases. I have spoken to farm consultants who, in some cases, are advising farmers not to bother because it is not worth it. The spin has to end.

6 o'clock

It is time the Government treated farmers and the people of this country with decency and honesty. All of this is landing at a time inputs continue to rise and factory quotes are falling dramatically. Over the past year, there have been reductions of over €1 per kg of beef and in the past number of weeks, there was about 50 cent of a drop. It is simply not good enough. The scheme is totally inadequate.

Deputy Peadar Kirby: We are living in a rip-off republic. The Minister of State started the debate with the pretence that the Government is fighting the costs that people are experiencing at the moment. The truth is that right now, the Government is one of the main causes of expensive prices in Ireland right across the system.

Let us consider the ESB, for example. Electricity prices in this country have risen by 57% in the past five years. That is startling. The ESB Group, which is a semi-State operating on the basis of Government policy, made a profit last year of €636 million, at a time people are in trouble in the context of the cost-of-living crisis. One third of a million people are in energy arrears at the moment, and a semi-State is milking the system for that amount. It works out at about €300 per family that the ESB is making in profit. The electricity system is a mess. The wholesale cost of electricity only works out at about 32% of the cost. The transmission and distribution system, which the Government is in charge of, is working at 42% of the cost of the electricity. It is simply not able to do the job it is meant to do.

Carbon taxes amount to €1 billion. They did not exist a couple of years ago and, right now, the Government's objective is to increase them in October and every October until 2030. There were some €4.1 billion in taxes last year. In the jaws of a cost-of-living crisis, the Government made more in fuel taxes than ever before. That is absolutely wrong. The cost of diesel has increased by 60% in the past five years and it is also driving up not just the cost of transport but every single food item on our shelves at the moment as well. The price of shopping has gone up 40% since 2021. A trolley that was costing €150 is now costing €225. That is €3,000 extra per family on groceries per year. Items such as chicken breasts are up from €5 to €12.98. Steak is up from €10 to €19.49. There has been a 35% increase in the price of eggs since 2021. Beef is up 32%. That is really hitting families hard and a lot of this is down to price.

One of the biggest frustrating elements is that at the end of the July, it is the Government's objective to put the price of diesel up 35 cent a litre and the price of petrol up by 22 cent. That is wrong, and I call on the Minister of State at this stage to say openly and in public that he will

not increase petrol and diesel prices for families at a time of sheer pressure in terms of the cost of living. It is really important that he gets that right. The cost of living is bearing down hard on families at the moment. They are suffering at a rate I have never seen before.

Some 320,000 families are currently in energy arrears. This is not a luxury good; it is a staple they simply cannot pay for anymore. It is in the gift of the Government to ease the pressure on them by taking the foot off the accelerator on the taxes it is putting on those families at the moment. It is important that the Government reduces the taxes on home heating oil, otherwise families are going to go cold again next winter.

Deputy Michael Collins: Independent Ireland always welcomed any fuel cuts that were made but, in fairness, they never went to the core of the problem. I know, following the protest, the Government was kicking and screaming against giving anything to the people. The people almost had a revolution in the country before it woke up and then when it woke up, it did not go about it in the right way. The right way is always at the pump. If money is taken off at the pump, it goes back into the wallet or purse of the mother or father who is out there working and struggling greatly at this time. However, the Government did not do that; instead it did through the tax system and this, that and the other thing. I met a farmer the other day who said to me that it all he got was three or four cent per litre. That is what it all boiled down to because by the time people have their accountants and others sorted out, they are not going to get anything. That is a terribly unfair way to deal with people. It is a kind of back door system of getting the money back - pushing it out one door and in the other.

This all hurts. It hurts the farmer on the ground. If he does not have some kind of relief, he has to pass that on to the person who is buying the produce in the shop, whether it is eggs, beef, potatoes or vegetables. That is all going to be passed on and people are feeling the hurt of this. The increases in the cost of butter and other foods are extraordinary and people are finding it very hard at this present time. In a crisis, Government is meant to be there to stand with the people. It failed to do that. Independent Ireland did and we got a lot of criticism from the Government. We know why; because we showed the Government up. We stood there on the side of the road. We tried to create peace and bring in an environment where the Government and the protesters could talk. That was refused. We thought we could reconvene the Dáil so if the Government could not talk to the protesters, it could talk to us but it did not want to do that. We tried different mechanisms to put forward solutions and the people appreciated that. They knew there was some voice there. This was a voice for the people who were going out of business who are the men and the women who have built this country.

The one thing that taught me a lesson was that hard-working people who are working day and night said there was no voice for them. Everything is up on their backs and the Government believes, "We will shove it up again". Forget what the Government is doing. We have the Social Democrats and the Labour Party in here telling the Government that it needs to reduce the cost of fuel but they never shut up about carbon tax. Where do they think the money is going to come from? It is the same people. They have no understanding of how people are suffering because if they did, they would ask for a freeze on carbon taxes until the crisis is over and let us have a look at these things after it. They should not come into the Dáil saying, "I should do this", but then shove up the carbon tax anyway because that does not matter, it is a great idea. It is not a great idea. It is an extra infliction on people at a difficult time.

The one little bit of comfort that people have in their own homes is home heating oil. That never really reduced in price. People have been telling me that up until last weekend the heating was still on in their homes because they have no choice. Nobody wants to have it on but the Minister of State knows the weather we have. There are cold, bitter evenings and a lot of people have to turn on the home heating oil. My God, did they get any break? They got no break. These are hard-working people or maybe retired people who have given to the State long enough and they get little or no respect.

Fishermen find themselves in the same situation regarding the rebates for fuel. They have huge fuel issues, whether it is the petrol for the inshore fishermen or the pelagic fleet. They have huge bills to pay and it was not long ago that Europe was willing to give some bit of a rebate to the Irish fishermen but the previous Government would not dare apply for it in case it gave some bit of relief to the people who work hard.

We seem to have a problem in this country. We bleed the man and the woman who works to death and do not support them or try and bring them through a situation where it is a known crisis throughout the world for other governments. There are over 300,000 people in arrears with their electricity bills, and that is a very serious issue. The Government helped them before by giving them a break but it will not even consider that now.

The Government is always on about renewables. Everybody is shouting about them. People want to change; there is no point in saying they should not. They would, of course. It is only a fool that would not. I refer to putting solar panels on their houses but there is only a grant of €1,800 - a measly, dirty little grant when all the rest of Europe is giving €7,000 or €8,000 for putting the same amount of solar panels on their roofs. The Government is way behind the times. It has the National Oil Reserves Agency fuel costs and a budget left that it never spent. The Government is not in the real world and it needs to catch up.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I was in Newcastle West last week at the agricultural show, the Newcastle West Show. One thing resonated with me at the show. A young girl of nine years of age from County Kerry came up to me. She was standing in front of me, her mother was behind her and I think her aunt was with her as well. She turned around to her mother and her mother said, "Ask him yourself". She asked if she could have a picture with me. I was intrigued as to why she wanted the picture. I was intrigued to know why a nine-year-old girl from Kerry recognised me and wanted a picture. I asked her, "Why do you want the picture with me?" Do you know what she said to me at nine years of age? She said: "My mammy takes me to training. My mammy takes me to my matches. My mammy could not take me to two matches because of fuel."

She said I stood with them during the fuel crisis. That is what a nine-year-old from Kerry was saying. Can the Minister of State imagine that? It is not a laughing matter when a nine-year-old is saying it. Independent Ireland had our stall at the show in Newcastle West, and I did not get a minute to myself with people coming up to me thanking me for standing with them, for holding a peaceful process and for understanding where they were. I have said on more than one occasion that the people who were at the protests, who I stood with in Foynes, County Limerick, were people who had never protested before. They were all members of the Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael parties, but they said, "Never again," because they believe they have

become city-based parties, they have forgotten their roots and the Cabinet no longer reflects the whole country.

These cities or large towns were built by people who came from the county. They built the likes of Dublin. They moved here and integrated. Believe it or not, Dublin, Cork, Limerick and Galway everywhere all originated from people in the county, coming to build big cities. That is where they came from. Their ancestors are here but when it comes to the next election, they will remember what the Government has done to everyone in this country who could not afford to buy an electric car. People are building new homes and have A-rated houses with heat pumps and solar panels. I commend it, but when the snow hit and they went three weeks without power, they all bought diesel generators because when the infrastructure was down, they had no other way to heat their houses. The problem with heat pumps is a 20 kW generator is needed to run them so all they will do with their generators is run an electric heater and run the power in their houses.

In one sense, having an A-rated house is brilliant, but we are an island. Does the Government not understand it? Things go wrong and power goes out because of a lack of infrastructure. The Government should have allowed at least one fireplace in a house so people could heat themselves if the power goes out. What happened? They all went back to the houses of their parents, uncles, aunts, brothers and sisters that had heat because they could not sustain it in their own household. We talk to young people with young children who could not live in their own modern houses because of power outages. We are talking about how we want people using electric vehicles to protect the environment. It is great if people can afford it, but the average vehicle on the road at the moment is from between 2010 and 2018. That is what people can afford, but what does this Government do? Since that is all they can afford, it taxes them out of existence on fuel. That is what the Government is doing. It is taxing people who cannot afford to buy something electric out of existence. How will they ever get to where the Government wants them to go to?

People have infrastructure in the cities, which I welcome, but outside the cities, there is nothing because of the failure of Government, which put all its eggs in one basket, and now people in Dublin are giving out that their children cannot come home because there is no place for them to live. The Government filled all the cities, trying to make them bigger and bigger, and has forgotten about the generations that have moved out and want to come back home. If infrastructure was put in around the country, people should be able to live and work anywhere in Ireland, but all the Government does is try to cram more people into the one place where it thinks it can try to control them.

If the Government thinks it can give people a giveaway budget with five or six days to go coming up to the election, they will never believe it again. Each year, the Government is dropping in the ratings and, the next time, it will be dropping an awful lot more.

Deputy Carol Nolan: Tá áthas orm deis a fháil labhairt ar an mBille Airgeadais seo atá os ár gcomhair tráthnóna inniu. As an Independent TD for Offaly, I have consistently highlighted the intolerable burden of high energy and fuel costs on families, farmers and hauliers across my constituency. I accept that this Bill seeks to provide some temporary relief in that it increases the diesel rebate scheme cap to €120 per 1,000 litres for qualifying road transport operators, until the middle of this year. It also implements cuts to mineral oil tax rates on petrol,

auto diesel and other fuels until July, while postponing further carbon component increases until October but these steps are not enough and they offer modest short-term respite. We need a long-term strategy to protect our businesses and safeguard tens of thousands of jobs, particularly in rural areas, where we have haulage companies and agri-contractors. That is what I am concerned about. These steps represent a wholly inadequate response to a deep and sustained crisis. I stood with agri-contractors, hauliers, and construction workers on the lines in my constituency during the protests. I found it remarkable that there is a lack of acknowledgement of the struggles that businesses face in this country.

What is very concerning is the fact that I have seen businesses going to the wall in my constituency, Offaly, but I have never heard of one NGO going to the wall in this country. We have 34,000 NGOs. Let us face it. They are not known for creating employment. They are certainly not known for creating tens of thousands of jobs in rural counties like Offaly, yet we have a situation where there are 34,000 NGOs and there is massive duplication. We could have the same categories of NGOs over and over again. We paid out €6.2 billion of taxpayers' money last year. I have not heard of any of them going to the wall, but I have heard of agri-contractors and small businesses in my constituency going to the wall. I have heard of job losses. This is shameful.

I ask the Government to reflect on its policy position. When it comes to NGOs or overseas aid, it seems to have shifted too far to the left. They are left-wing policies. It is crazy. The Government has abandoned businesses. All we have to do is look at overseas aid. There are five countries on the watchdog list for human rights abuses. What did the Government do in this year's budget? It decided to pay them €840 million in overseas aid, with taxpayers' money. Some of those countries, incredibly, include Afghanistan, Sudan and North Korea. We have the Irish taxpayer paying overseas aid to North Korea and Afghanistan. Meanwhile, our own businesses go to the wall and 34,000 NGOs get €6.2 billion of taxpayers' money. That is not to mention the sham of the asylum system and the money that is handed out in social welfare payments.

We need to put Irish citizens first. We need to put our own businesses first and there needs to be a proper focus. The Government needs to move back from its left-wing policies because I can see it shifting further and further to the left. All it has to do is look at its position on NGOs and on paying countries with appalling human rights records. It is handing out our taxpayers' money to that sort of thing. It is crazy.

I have stood with many businesses in my constituency. They tell me that they are crippled with diesel costs, VAT costs, tolls, auto-enrolment costs, energy costs, regulatory costs and input costs for farmers. It is crazy. It goes on and on. Rural households continue to face some of Europe's highest energy prices while small peat producers and turf users in the midlands in counties like mine are penalised by policies that ignore basic realities and common sense, yet the Government has nothing to say about that. It has nothing to say to how it states, in the event of an energy crisis, people should not be allowed to cut their turf. They should be allowed to. The Government is bowing down to its EU masters all the time. It seems that its policy is to appease its EU masters, forget the Irish citizens and people in County Offaly who depend on solid fuel. It throws caution to the wind and forgets and ignores those people. I have repeatedly criticised Government's misplaced priorities.

It is directing vast sums of money where it should not be going, on asylum accommodation and on social welfare payments which are far too generous. It is acting as a pull factor, bringing in people we do not want on this island. All we have to do is look at what happened in Belfast. Do we want that down here? No we do not. We do not want that on any part of our island. It is high time the Government got its act together, clamped down on and cut the social welfare payments for people who are not genuine asylum seekers and treat the Irish taxpayer with respect.

Contrary to what a previous Fine Gael Taoiseach said about people getting up early in the morning getting fair play, they are not getting it. People in this country who get up early in the morning are being punished. There is tax upon tax on working people. That is where the Government is hitting them, yet it squanders money and pays into the whole sham of the asylum seeker accommodation. We do not have vetting of the people coming in and we do not have vetting of the cowboys and chancers providing the accommodation either. It is an absolute sham. I will continue to call it out because I think that as Irish citizens we need to stand up. I am listening to what people are saying to me. That is my job as a politician in here. I serve the interests of Ireland only and that is why I am raising it here again today. The Government needs to look at its policies. It has gone too far left altogether. It is just crazy what is going on.

I have constituents at absolute breaking point. I have had people in my office who are very upset. They are working people who are trying to make ends meet and put their children through college but instead of being helped, they are being taxed and punished. We must deliver permanent and meaningful tax reductions on fuel and energy. The USC, which was meant to be a temporary measure, must be abolished. We have to help working people here. Our own interests should always come first.

The Government should suspend punitive carbon charges for rural Ireland. I am glad to say I was one of the 12 who voted against the climate action Bill. I recognised at the time that it was not good and I remain opposed to the carbon tax. We need to support our local fuel and peat producers and place the needs of Irish citizens first.

This Bill is a small concession but it falls very short of the decisive and long-term action that Ireland demands. We need an end to the squandering of Irish taxpayers' money and to the crazy amounts of money going into NGOs. We need to support our businesses and working families in this country.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: In regard to the package put in place, I want to thank the Minister, Deputy Heydon, the Ministers of State, Deputies Dooley and Grealish, and the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien. I also thank the team who worked to put it together. Of course, I would welcome the package because I worked on it too. Like every package put together, the one thing you would always ask is whether it went far enough. The whole issue of taxation on fuel has to be looked at and that will have to be done ahead of budget 2027. Our tax system cannot rely so heavily on taxation on fuel given that rural people are at a disadvantage because they have to drive further, because of agriculture and contracting and because of trying to survive in rural Ireland. The carbon tax deferral is very welcome but this is a tax that will have to be examined as to its effectiveness because it is punishing people living in rural areas who do not have any alternative to driving. They have to use diesel or petrol

because electric vehicles are not as reliable or give the same distance. That is why the whole issue of carbon tax is such a hot potato for people living in rural areas.

Again, I remind people that the package put in place was, if not the largest, the second largest fund put in place in Europe in response to the war being waged many thousands of miles away and which is totally beyond the control of this Government. At the same time, we have to be balanced and considerate in taxing fuel and to understand that an awful lot of people living in rural areas, like County Kerry, are being more directly and negatively impacted by taxes on fuel than others.

On carbon tax funds, the SEAI is being funded by carbon tax but it is ironic that we still have people waiting two years for retrofitting under the warmer homes scheme. Such an amount of money is being collected all the time through taxation to help people retrofit their homes. When a person in their 70s or 80s, who is living in a cold home, says they would like to make their home more energy efficient and to avail of the retrofitting grant - I welcome the retrofitting grant and I am glad it is there - they are told they qualify but they will have to wait so many years. The Minister of State will understand why that is a big worry to a person who might be shoving 80 years of age to be told they will be given the grant but they must wait two years for it. Surely we could do better when it comes to delivering. I know there are issues like manpower on the ground, labour and so on. I understand why there are difficulties delivering it more quickly but it is something we should seriously look at. I hope budget 2027 will look at aspects of that scheme to see if we can get the money to where it is needed more quickly and to bring relief, heat, warmth and comfort to older people more quickly than at present.

On issues like the carbon tax, we have to start looking at exactly how much is being collected and how quickly it is being delivered to help the people we are trying to help. Money is being collected and it is going to TAMS grants, for example. That is something we desperately want funding for. We have to strike a balance for the greater good at all times.

It would be wrong for anyone to talk on the Finance Bill and not recognise the package put in place was such a large and substantial sum of money. On agriculture and the marine, that fund was put in place in a very timely fashion. Yes, administration had to be dealt with but I want to acknowledge the work of the Secretary General, the people in the Department of Finance and the Minister, Deputy Heydon, for chairing all those meetings and being so diligent dealing with the representatives from all the groups, whether it was the contractors, the marine people, the fishers or the farmers, to try to deliver something that would be substantial enough that it would make a difference. That has been implemented now. People have put in their applications and will know what they will get. Any money they get is a help. There is another issue, in that because it is a rebate scheme, they should not have to pay tax on the money they get.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Danny Healy-Rae.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Many people are in a desperate state. I appeal to the Minister of State to acknowledge that. While I welcome these energy supports, which are badly needed, a lot more needs to be done. With over 300,000 people in energy arrears, there is no question as to the impact the increase in energy costs is having on people. Something needs to be done

about the ever-increasing costs of electricity. Since Bord na Móna closed, the cost of electricity has gone up each and every day.

Electric Ireland is putting prices up by 8% again. Where is it going to stop? Is there any regulator? Many working people are finding it difficult to make ends meet. Those people at home all day on illness payments, disability and pensions need to have a warm home. It is quite cold for this time of the year. Those who are lucky enough to have turf have their fires lighting. Many people cannot afford heating because of the cost of electricity and the cost of the heating oil. Nothing was done for the people who need heating oil. There was nothing done except that the fuel allowance was extended. However, many people are not on fuel allowance and are not entitled to get it. Many farmers and farm contractors are under severe financial pressure to manage day to day costs of fuel and to carry out their work. It is shameful that these reductions in fuel are only temporary.

I am worried. The war is not over. We will go on holidays. The Dáil will close down on 16 July, and we will not be back until around 15 September. I am worried about people in that space of time. Will there be any preparation to extend the relief packages in place? I ask the Government to go back to what I asked on 24 March when it forgot about the people on green diesel and heating oil. When green diesel went up 80 cent, the Government offered 3 cent. When green diesel is at €1 per litre the Government should not be claiming tax on anything above that, whether carbon tax, VAT or anything else and they should charge less for it. It is the same at the pumps. Give it back to the people at the pumps. The Government should take the taxes it was getting until the emergency happened and give back the rest of it to the people entitled to get it.

The carbon tax increase has been postponed, but what will happen in October? Will they carry on with it? When diesel and petrol were approximately €1.20 per litre and the Government was trying to discourage people from using both we saw that people cannot manage without it. They cannot afford electric cars. They will not go far enough. When it was €1.20 per litre carbon tax was put up. Surely there is no case to be made when it goes up to €1.80 per litre that they should get carbon tax then as well. That is wrong.

Many people have not qualified for these packages. I remind the Minister of State of that. Many people are not entitled to the rebate system in place. Packages should last until at least the end of September when we are back here to make sure people can live in between. I saw people protesting on the bypass in Killarney and I was hurt at that time because I saw friends there who would not talk to me. That was the worst part of it all. Maybe the Government thinks those people have forgotten what caused that. I can remind them there was a 94-year-old woman with a flag on the bypass in Killarney. Why was she out? Why were the nurses giving out? Why were the teachers giving out? Why were they all protesting? It was not just farmers and contractors. Many people were feeling the pinch and felt they could not pay the people who mind their children when they go to work and pay for the fuel to go to work and pay for everything else. I ask the Government not to leave those people behind if things are still as bad on 31 July, because that will not be long coming.

I am also very concerned about the value taxpayers are getting when we see the pressure they are under every day with the taxes they are paying. We then see that we have no bother in the world giving €40 million to Ukraine in the middle of the crisis. That is on top of all the other money it was given. We borrowed approximately €1.9 billion for a loan for Ukraine. We

did not cause the war at all. No Irish person had anything to do with it. Does the Government think it is fair to load the people of Ireland with that kind of bill on top of the €125 million they gave Mr. Zelenskyy when he was here? They gave it to him in his back pocket when he was going home. There is a place called stop. See after your own people first and think of your own people, because they will think of you when you come to the door and will remember what the Government put them through in March and April. They will not forget. It is time to cop on. Do not leave the people behind at the end of July without ensuring they have packages going forward.

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up, Deputy.

Deputy John McGuinness: With the Ceann Comhairle's permission, I am sharing time with our new Deputy Kyne.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is that eight minutes and four minutes?

Deputy John McGuinness: Yes. I congratulate the Deputy on his success.

I join in some of the comments made about the carbon tax and I ask the Minister of State if he thinks we are getting value for money from it. Does he think it should be tailored to ensure there are not the types of increases faced through the carbon tax, and to divvy up the money raised from a lower amount of taxation? One of the issues that has come to the fore from the fuel protest and so on, is that enormous taxes are being taken from fuel throughout the country by the Government. It has reached the point of being absolutely unacceptable. I agree with the suggestion that relief should be given at the pumps. Everyone would have benefitted from that, and it would be an easy scheme to administer. The individuals who go to work and are hard-pressed would benefit from it. While the diesel rebate scheme and others put in place on the agri side are welcome, we cannot forget the people we represent. I refer particularly to pensioners and those on low pay who are feeling the squeeze because of the cost-of-living crisis. We have to ensure there is some benefit for those people in whatever action we take.

I think all who have spoken in this debate have mentioned that we know someone who cannot buy home heating oil. We know people who have cut back on their grocery bills. They cannot afford some of the prices being charged in supermarkets and shops. There is a need to examine the costs in all of these supermarkets and at the petrol pump to ensure there is not price gouging going on. Insurance costs have gone up. Commercial rates have gone up. Planning charges have gone up and the small to medium size businesses are being crucified once again. This is the sector we say employs up to 1 million people. These are the homegrown people who base their business on a family input and are the people we rely on. We seem to have abandoned that whole sector and walked away from it. The cost of fuel at the pumps needs to be addressed. The cost of home heating oil has to be addressed. The USC and tax bands need to be addressed. The USC was supposed to be temporary. I remember the late Brian Lenihan telling us all of that in this House. That is not the case. We need to reform the tax bands for workers to ensure they take home more to meet the various costs they are challenged by in their own homes. However, when the costs are added together and you move from the home to the SME sector you are destroying the local economy that keeps the shops open in villages and towns all over the country and in the high streets of Ireland. There is not

enough said about these costs in this House. There is not enough action taken outside of this debate to ensure the businesses that are threatened and being challenged by current costs are kept open. We are not doing enough for them. We speak enough about them and praise them enough, yet when it comes to action I am afraid we fall far short of what is required.

One of the areas I am concerned about is the work of Comptroller and Auditor General and the costs that are spiralling for the children's hospital and in almost every project you can think of, without being challenged in a robust way by any of the committees of this House.

It is not that they do not want to do it. I am sure they would like to do it but, unfortunately, we are told their hands are tied, although that is not the case. We in this House have a job to do. We must work to ensure that every Secretary General and civil servant is made accountable to this House. We need reform to ensure that where we do not get value for money, where there are inefficiencies in the system and where public money is obviously being wasted, following scrutiny and due process, action is taken with regard to those who were central to the loss of funds to the Government or to the inefficiencies I have outlined.

I remember going to a state in Africa as Chairman of the public accounts committee to look for €4 million that had to be accounted for. When we visited the schools supported by money from the Irish Government, the children and the teachers were counting the pencils and the jotters, as they called them, to account for the money they spent, but the comptroller and auditor general in that country was driving a very big Mercedes and was subject to very little obvious accountability. We need to examine all of that. We need to empower our own Committee of Public Accounts and Comptroller and Auditor General to ensure we get real value for money. It is not happening.

I am beginning to receive huge complaints from people who are now more in tune with what is going on, or not going on, in Government. They see this waste and are appalled by it. It is a national disgrace that this is allowed to continue but successive governments have failed to introduce any real radical reform, or structural reform, to address these issues. Can the Minister of State imagine how much money we would have at budget time if we had a more efficient and accountable system, one that did not lose as much as the current system does? I know that it is a risk. I know decisions are risky. However, factoring all of that into how the State is managed, we see the same results: poor value for money and not enough attention being given to developing the Civil Service to a point where it is at the top of its game in relation to all of this.

I ask the Minister of State to reflect on what has been said and to factor in the fact that it has been said more than once. He has heard all of this from me more than once. I ask him to do something about it within Government and within our own party because, as far as I can see, no one is listening.

Deputy Seán Kyne: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for sharing his time with me. As this is my first opportunity to give a speech, I will thank all members of the public in Galway West who voted for me and gave me the distinct honour of coming back to this House for a second chance to represent the people of Galway West. I thank everybody who voted for me in that election, whether they gave me their number one or a transfer. I acknowledge all of the other candidates who stood in the by-election. It was a clean and competitive election. I thank the director of elections, the Minister, Deputy Peter Burke; our party leader, Deputy Simon

Harris; all of my colleagues in the parliamentary party, particularly Seanad colleagues; MEPs; city and county councillors in Galway; others who came to assist; and party members. As I said, it is a distinct honour to have been successful in that by-election. I will not take it for granted.

I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Troy. I acknowledge this Bill, the necessity for it and the reason behind it, which is the conflict in the Middle East and the resulting increases in fuel costs at our petrol pumps around the country. I also acknowledge the very valid cost-of-living concerns this has caused for members of the public. I welcome the postponement of the carbon tax increase until budget day. We will have a look at it at that stage. As I said in many of the election debates, we do not know what the world will be like in October. None of us has a crystal ball. We do not know how much longer this conflict will continue. It is important that we are in a position to review matters as things develop and to have the foresight to look to the future. We have to acknowledge that because of the management of the economy and the hard work of people across the country we have reserves for the forthcoming budget.

When talking about the carbon tax, it is important to note the moneys that derive from that tax go into very important areas of our economy, including ACRES for farmers, fuel allowance for those in need and home retrofit schemes. While no tax is popular, it is important to acknowledge where carbon tax revenues go, although we also need to keep these things under review in the future.

I will talk about another area I talked about during the campaign - home heating oil. Home heating oil is obviously not subject to excise duty but it still represents a significant cost. We have seen a significant increase for those who are reliant on home heating oil or kerosene across our country. We are closer to the next budget than we are to the last and it is important in that budget we ensure that if this conflict is still with us and if prices are still high, there is some rebate or other mechanism to assist those who are reliant on home heating oil or kerosene. It is absolutely vital that they are looked after. Again, this is not something new that I am saying. I have been saying this over the last number of weeks. We have seen home heating oil prices effectively double over the course of a number of weeks during this conflict.

I also acknowledge the substantial package the Government put in place both because it was done and because it was needed. It was absolutely vital to provide that support to those across the country who were impacted by the rise in prices at our petrol pumps arising from the conflict in the Middle East. It was important for Government to respond. As I said, it did so because it was necessary and because it had the resources to do so thanks to the management of the economy.

An Ceann Comhairle: I congratulate the Deputy. I was not aware it was his first speech here since being elected.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Robert Troy): I thank all the Deputies for their contributions today. I join in the congratulations to my colleague. It is a great honour to be elected at any stage but he will be particularly pleased to be re-elected during a by-election. I offer him my best wishes for the remainder of this term.

Neither I nor anyone in Government are patting themselves on the back. We are acknowledging and outlining the measures we have introduced in response to a global issue. The one thing we can all agree on is the need to continually monitor our response to these international high energy costs. At the very beginning, when the first set of schemes, savings or supports were introduced, we said this would be kept under constant review and that we would revisit it, if needed. We did that. It is also right and proper to say that it is not possible to offset all of the recent market-driven fuel price increases using the tax system. Some in the Opposition will say that although not all will. It is fair to say that these measures, together with the non-tax supports introduced by Government, will provide significant mitigation, supporting those who are experiencing the most acute impact of the increases in fuel prices. The total estimated cost of the support packages the Government has introduced is over €750 million, making Ireland's support package one of the largest in Europe on a *per capita* basis.

I will say something to the Members opposite. I recently travelled to Belfast and had a very productive meeting with the their party colleague, the Minister, John O'Dowd. He too acknowledges the real challenges in trying to protect every single person. He would not claim to be able to do it either.

I will say that what we primarily spoke about was financial literacy, credit unions, the promotion of financial services and how we can work together but he was fair in his acknowledgement of the challenges that all governments have. Each of us across the various political parties, whether talking to sister parties in Europe, or when we travel as part of our membership of the multilateral fora, knows that every single government throughout the globe is facing huge challenges in bringing in supports. It is not possible, despite how it is portrayed, to absolve and mitigate all of the effects of the energy increases.

Deputy Doherty raised concerns with regard to the diesel rebate scheme and cash flow issues for recipients. The Government is cognisant of the current difficulties being faced by licensed operators. I would highlight that the diesel rebate scheme will provide much-needed cash flow to the sector. I can confirm that Revenue has reviewed its internal processes and identified several IT solutions, which are to be implemented to issue refunds faster to compliant taxpayers.

The Deputy was also critical of the fact that reductions applied to diesel and petrol were also applied to aviation fuels. As the Deputy will be aware, because, to be fair, he is competent in his job, the taxation of energy products in Ireland is governed by the EU energy tax directive. This directive prescribes the minimum rates for fuels and fuel uses. The directive prescribes that in addition to adhering to minimum rates, the excise duty rate on particular fuel types used for propellant purposes must be consistent across all propellant uses for that fuel. This means that the same mineral oil tax rate must apply to heavy oil, whether it is used as a propellant in motor vehicles, aircraft or waterborne vehicles. Ireland has no discretion in this regard, and we are simply adhering to EU law, as we must. Of course, the facts do not support the Deputy's narrative. He is portraying a different issue as if we made a conscious decision to not exclude private jet fuel. That is not factual. It cannot be done, and the Deputy knows it, but he wants to portray his narrative, and he wants to be able to stick it up on Facebook later this evening. That is the point.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Government went beyond the directive. Maybe the Minister of State does not know it.

Deputy Robert Troy: Deputy Doherty also called for the carbon tax to be further reduced for kerosene, as well as for further reductions in the mineral oil tax for other fuels. The Government has deferred the planned increase in carbon tax scheduled for 1 May until October. This will impact green diesel and non-propellant fuels such as kerosene, heating oil, natural gas and solid fuels.

A number of speakers made the point that they are aware of old age pensioners who were going cold because they simply had no money for fuel. That should not be happening anywhere in any constituency. We are all constituency operators. We are all acutely aware of the exceptional needs payment that is available to people. When a Deputy gets up to say he was aware of three old-age pensioners, I would be asking why he did not assist those people to go to the community welfare officer and ensure they could get-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: How does the Minister of State know he did not?

Deputy Robert Troy: He did not claim that he did.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: He was cleaning up your mess.

Deputy Robert Troy: With regard to the carbon tax, some speakers referred to no concrete measures being taken to reduce the long-term cost of energy for people. The deep retrofitting of houses is making sure that people who are in receipt of fuel allowance, who are more likely to be susceptible to fuel poverty, have lower energy costs in the longer term. In 2025, €469 million was spent on the retrofitting of homes. They are permanent measures. I see it first hand in my constituency, and I am sure others see it also. Some €140 million was spent on energy efficiency and €99 million on the fuel allowance. The fuel allowance was increased in the most recent measures and in the previous budget. The income eligibility criteria were increased, and people on the working family payment can now avail of this. Some 470,000 people are availing of these additional measures that are targeted at those who most need support due to fuel poverty.

A number of Deputies, including Deputies Devlin, McGuinness, Brabazon and Kyne, made the point that the upcoming budget needs to ensure that workers are protected and supported. There should be a package of measures that rewards people who get up every day to go out to work, so they can feel the benefits of doing so. I would be very confident that that will happen in this budget.

Deputy Nash made the point that the generation of resources and how we redistribute resources are very important. He is right. Budget 2026 was about protecting jobs. The Deputy is critical of the VAT reduction, which was supported by many in the Opposition. Perhaps it would have been better if it were targeted more at smaller microenterprises. That said, there are 190,000 people working in the hospitality industry, and 75% of those are in businesses with fewer than ten people. It is about protecting jobs. We invested in services, and the largest ever investment in the most recent budget was for the provision of housing. The first home scheme

and the shared equity scheme are supporting people into home ownership, which is something we can all agree on.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae is right about the SEAI grants. We should be doing more. Anyone who applies for the grants only to be told there is an 18- to 24-month waiting list is bitterly disappointed. They see the benefits in their friend's house, and they want that. However, they want it faster, and we need to work towards that.

With regard to the overseas aid budget, Deputy Nolan suggested that if we did not give anything to overseas aid, we would have no challenge in society in Ireland today. While I would like to spend more, I am proud that as a developed country, we spend 0.56% of our gross national income on humanitarian supports for malnourished women and children across the globe, helping to build communities in the developing world. I think that is a good thing to do. To try to sow division by saying that if we did not do that, we would be able to answer all our problems, is distasteful and wrong.

Question put and agreed to.

Finance Bill 2026: Referral to Select Committee

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Robert Troy): I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure, Public Service Reform, Digitalisation, and Taoiseach pursuant to Standing Orders 103(2)(b) and 188(1).

Question put and agreed to.

Stop the Game Campaign and FAI Participation in Matches against Israel: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Joanna Byrne: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes:

- the findings of major international human rights organisations, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Palestinian human rights organisations, that Israel operates a system of apartheid against the Palestinian people;
- the ongoing military occupation of Palestinian territories, the expansion of illegal settlements, restrictions on freedom of movement, collective punishment, and repeated attacks on civilians in Gaza and the West Bank;
- the 2016 United Nations (UN) resolution, which reaffirms that Israeli settlements in the Palestinian territory occupied since 1967, including East Jerusalem, have no legal validity and constitute a flagrant violation under international law and a major obstacle to a two-state solution;

— the Advisory Opinion issued by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in July 2024 entitled "Legal Consequences arising from the policies and practices of Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem", which determined that Israel's settlement policies, annexation and exploitation of natural resources violate International Law, and mandated Israel end its occupation, dismantle settlements and pay reparations to the Palestinian people;

— the Prevention of Genocide 2024 and 2025 provisional measures issued by the ICJ, that concluded that Palestinians are at risk of irreparable damage and ordering Israel to prevent genocidal acts that fall under the UN Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, and to comply with international humanitarian law;

— that FIFA's statutes prohibit member associations and their clubs from playing on the territory of another member association without that association's approval, Israeli clubs based in illegal West Bank settlements continue to play under the Israel Football Association within the territory of the Palestinian Football Association (PFA), without the PFA's consent, and thus contrary to this rule;

— that UEFA, as a confederation, is obliged to comply with, and enforce, FIFA statutes and decisions;

— that at least 1,008 athletes, players and sports officials have been killed in the genocide, and close to 300 sports facilities in Gaza and the occupied West Bank have been destroyed by Israel;

— that at least ten Israeli football clubs are located in occupied Palestinian territory, in violation of the ICJ Advisory Opinion of July 2024, and Article 64.2 of FIFA's statute; and

— Israel's policy of mandatory military service means that team members may have fought with the Israel Occupation Forces when war crimes were committed;

further notes:

— the historic role sport played in isolating apartheid South Africa, and the importance of sporting boycotts in challenging systems of racial segregation and oppression;

— FIFA and UEFA banned Russia in 2022, in response to the decision of the football associations of Czechia, Poland and Sweden to refuse to play Russia in international competition, and no action was taken by FIFA or UEFA against these associations for refusing to play Russia, thus setting a clear legal and moral precedent;

— the UN International Convention against Apartheid in Sports (1985), which recognised that sporting contacts with apartheid states undermine international efforts against racial discrimination and oppression;

— that in November 2025, 93 per cent of Football Association of Ireland (FAI) members voted to instruct the Association to call on UEFA to suspend Israel;

— in May, FAI general assembly members secured the numbers to call an Emergency General Meeting to vote on Ireland's participation in the football matches;

— the growing support across Ireland for the "Stop the Game" campaign, calling on the FAI to refuse participation in international fixtures against Israel, while violations of international law and apartheid policies continue; and

— the strong tradition of solidarity in Ireland with oppressed peoples and anti-apartheid struggles internationally;

recognises that:

— sport cannot be separated from fundamental questions of human rights, equality, and international law;

— Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, affirms every child's right to play and participation in sporting life as integral to their dignity and development, and that the systematic killing of child athletes and destruction of sporting infrastructure in Gaza therefore constitutes not only a violation of international humanitarian law, but a direct and catastrophic assault on the fundamental rights of Palestinian children;

— under the UN Guiding Principles (UNGPs) on Business and Human Rights, all business enterprises, including sport's governing bodies, have a responsibility to respect human rights', and FIFA and UEFA have each voluntarily committed to meeting this responsibility by incorporating the UNGPs into their statutes and governance frameworks;

— allowing normal sporting relations with states accused of apartheid, and grave breaches of international law, contributes to the normalisation of oppression; and

— Irish sporting bodies, and the Irish Government, have moral and political responsibilities to uphold human rights standards and international law;

believes that UEFA and FIFA should uphold their stated human rights commitments and suspend Israel from international football competitions, until it complies with international law and human rights obligations; and

calls on the Government to:

— support calls from the Irish football community, which includes the Professional Footballers Association of Ireland and Irish Football Supporters Partnership, for the FAI to refuse to participate in the proposed matches against Israel, scheduled for September 27th and October 4th, in protest on legal and moral grounds;

— uphold its obligations under international law to not engage in economic or trade dealings with Israel which may entrench the illegal occupation by implementing meaningful legislation and sanctions, and this extends to sporting and cultural life within illegal settlements, i.e., settlement football clubs, because engagement contributes to the normalisation of occupation and apartheid;

— support the application of the principles contained within the UN International Convention against Apartheid in Sports to states operating systems of racial domination and oppression, and to sign up to this Convention;

- deny any Israeli football players and staff, Israeli officials, including Israeli Minister of Culture and Sports, Makhoul Zohar, and President of Israel, Isaac Herzog, and Israeli fans who have participated in violations of international law, entry into Ireland;
- agree to cover the costs of any financial penalty that the FAI may incur through refusing to play the games; and
- send copies of this motion to the FAI, UEFA and FIFA.

People all over this country, every week, in their tens of thousands, proudly play and watch football in their communities and treasure every moment of it, yet this is denied on a daily basis to those in Palestine and Gaza. At least 1,008 athletes, players and sports officials have been killed in the genocide, and close to 300 sports facilities in Gaza and the occupied West Bank have been destroyed by Israel.

7 o'clock

There is no sporting infrastructure left. Stadiums are obliterated. At least ten Israeli football clubs are known to be located in the occupied Palestinian territory, in violation of the ICJ advisory opinion of July 2024 and Article 64.2 of FIFA's statute.

As somebody who was born into a football family, who took my first steps on my beloved club's football pitch and who was hand reared around my local football club, I find it completely incomprehensible that anybody believes our national team should line out against the terrorist state of Israel while this genocide is ongoing. The fact is that Israel should not even be in the Nations League competition. UEFA should have expelled it as soon as it went into Gaza on a genocidal, ethnic cleansing mission that has seen tens of thousands of innocents murdered, including hundreds of sportsmen and women. Israel should have been sanctioned long before that for its breaches, with clubs in illegal settlements built on lands stolen from Palestinians. Despite UEFA and FIFA being in contravention of their own rules, there are no sanctions and no expulsion because they are both serving their own political interests by cosying up to the US and Israeli governments.

Sport cannot be separated from justice and humanity. We have an opportunity now to take a stand, activists, civil society and politicians alike. Anybody who says there is no place for politics in sport neither understands politics nor sport. Not only do we have an opportunity to take a stand, we have an obligation as politicians and community leaders to make a stand because we are elected to act with morality. We cannot sit on the sidelines and watch sporting bodies act selectively according to politics favourable to their own interests. There is a history in this State and in world football of participating in boycotts of nations that violate international law and sporting statutes. We know from apartheid South Africa that the sports boycott was instrumental in bringing apartheid to an end. The international boycott of apartheid South Africa and the swift exclusion of Russia and Belarus by these sporting bodies sit in stark contrast to the current silence and inaction regarding Israel's egregious violations. It screams of double standards and hypocrisy and it legitimises occupation through football. It is abundantly clear that the Irish people do not want these matches to proceed while the Palestinian people are enduring genocide, occupation and apartheid.

The Sinn Féin motion calls on the Government to support the calls of the Irish footballing community to stop the games on legal and moral grounds and to pave a clear pathway forward

for the FAI to do the moral thing and refuse to participate in the Nations League fixtures against Israel. These calls are supported by the Professional Footballers' Association of Ireland and the Irish Football Supporters Partnership, trade unions, the vast majority of Irish football fans and, crucially, by members and stakeholders of the FAI itself. In November, 93% of FAI members voted to instruct the association to call on UEFA to suspend Israel from international competitions. As recently as May, FAI general assembly members secured the numbers to call an emergency general meeting to vote on Ireland's participation in these fixtures.

The Government is all over the place on this issue. First, it supported the matches proceeding. Then it washed its hands of it and said it was a matter for the FAI. Then, embarrassingly for the Government, both the Minister and the Minister of State publicly declared that they will not attend the matches, not because they have any moral qualms or want to show respect for international law but because they have realised there is major discontent around the country and it will, inevitably, reflect poorly on them.

An Ireland Thinks poll commissioned by Irish Sport for Palestine released today shows that 56% of Irish people surveyed do not want this match to proceed. All of the Government's flip-flopping as to whether it will stand up and be counted heaps pressure on the boys in green - who just want to play football, might I add - to make a personal decision between right and wrong and whether their own moral conscience will allow them to participate in such a fixture. It leaves them exposed and vulnerable and no player should ever have to carry that burden.

We are offering the Government the opportunity tonight to show real leadership. We are also calling on it to uphold its own obligations under international law. This is bigger than sport or football matches. Sport has the power to send a very strong message of morality. Israel actively uses football to sportswash its image and to extend its territory, while also committing genocide and implementing apartheid. Its slaughter of footballers and bombing of football pitches cannot be accepted or normalised. Front-line Israeli soldiers with blood on their hands lining out against our national team cannot be accepted or normalised. We need to stand firm on the consensus that sportswashing cannot be accepted or normalised. Ireland playing Israel normalises a genocidal regime and gives cover for statute violations, apartheid and war crimes.

The narrative from the Government is around sanctions, implications and consequences for the FAI should it refuse to fulfil these fixtures but with the right support from the Government, the FAI could be empowered to take a moral stance. Rather than damaging the association, I guarantee it will enhance it and its standing. Sport will thrive, national confidence will grow and the Government could be on the right side of that. For a small country, we are a mighty force when we come together. Will the Government join us in ensuring that we stop the games or will it turn its back on Irish football and our national team and hide on the sidelines? Our call is quite clear. It is not to move the game but to simply stop it.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Hear, hear.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: The crux of the issue is not where the game should be played but who is participating in the fixture. As we debate this tonight, the people of Gaza endure starvation, bombardment, displacement and unimaginable human suffering. Does the Government's conscience allow it to continue with and encourage business as usual? I know

that mine does not. I have stood proud and true to the courage of my own convictions on this issue from day one. These fixtures should not proceed.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: This debate is about more than a football match. It is about who we are as a people. Ireland is a small nation but in our history we have sought to play a role in the world that is larger than our size. That role has not been built on military power or economic might but on our instinctive understanding of injustice, our own experience of colonisation, dispossession and partition and our belief that small nations have rights, people have the right to self-determination and international law matters. That tradition has shaped Ireland's place in the world for generations. It is why people took a stand against apartheid in South Africa and why Irish peacekeepers have served with distinction across the globe. It is why Irish neutrality enjoys great public support. It is also why, when people witness suffering, injustice and genocide in Palestine, their instinct is not to look away but to speak out. The people of Ireland expect their Government to reflect those values always, not only when there is no cost, but especially when difficult choices have to be made. The question before us is not really about sport but about whether there comes a point when a nation says that normal business cannot continue. History tells us that there are such moments, occasions when silence is wrong and when neutrality between oppression and injustice is impossible. That is the tradition we inherited and it is the one we should honour. It is the tradition that should guide us today. That is why we need to stop the game.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: For almost three years, we have witnessed horrific destruction in Gaza and the suffering of the Palestinian people. Children have been killed, families buried under rubble, hospitals attacked and entire communities wiped from the map. We have seen starvation, displacement and collective punishment inflicted on a civilian population. When apartheid existed in South Africa and when war engulfed the former Yugoslavia, boycotts and sanctions followed. When Russia invaded Ukraine, FIFA and UEFA acted within days. Yet, despite all of this, there remains a dangerous and pervasive attitude that treats the Israeli state with kid gloves. If international law matters, it matters all of the time. If human rights matter, they matter for all people. If there are consequences for breaching international law, then there can be no exceptions. We are being asked to accept that a state accused of engaging in apartheid, whose actions are subject to an ICJ proceeding, can arrive on Irish soil, have its flag raised, its anthem played and be welcomed as if everything is normal. There is nothing normal about what is happening in Gaza. There is nothing normal about sportswashing or pretending that sport exists separate from international law and human rights. The suggestion to move these games to a neutral venue is not a solution. It is moral cowardice dressed up as compromise. The Irish people have already taken a position. They have stood up and spoken out loudly in solidarity with the Palestinian people. This game should not go ahead on legal and moral grounds. It is time to stop the games.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Táim ag tacú leis an rún seo mar tá dualgas orainn seasamh a ghlacadh nuair a fheicimid éagóir. Tá an domhan tar éis féachaint ar an scrios atá déanta ag Iosrael ar mhuintir na Palaistíne. Tá na mílte fir, mná agus páistí maraithe. Tá pobail leagtha go talamh agus tá páistí ag fás aníos faoi bhuamáil, ocras agus eagla. Tá cúiseamh ann faoi chinedhíothú, coireanna cogaidh agus apartheid. Ní féidir linn leanúint ar aghaidh mar is gnáth agus na himeachtaí seo ar siúl. Tá rud simplí á lorg ag muintir na Palaistíne; tá siad ag iarraidh

a bpáistí a thógáil i síocháin. Tá siad ag iarraidh a gclann agus a dtodhchaí a thógáil agus saoirse, dínit agus a gceart a gcinniúint féin a mhúnlú ina dtír féin. Sin an fáth go bhfuilim ag tacú leis an rún seo.

I support this motion because there are moments when people must choose whether to remain silent or to take a stand. The world has witnessed the devastation inflicted on the Palestinian people by Israel. Tens of thousands have been killed. Homes, schools and hospitals have been destroyed.

Children have endured bombardment, hunger, displacement and trauma on a vast scale. Israel is guilty of genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and the crime of apartheid. These are not matters that can simply be ignored while business continues as usual. The Palestinian people seek what every people seeks: freedom dignity and peace. They want to raise their children safely, build a future, build homes and communities and play football on their own fields and determine their own future in their own homeland. Those aspirations deserve solidarity and support and for those reasons, I support this motion. Israel is not a normal State and it must not be treated as such. Stand up for Palestine, stand up for humanity and stop the game.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: As we look at the history of sports, we see how politics has shaped football when it suits. The usual cry from those who do not want to stop the game is, "It is a game and we should not politicise sports." Let us think back. In Ireland we stood proud as a country when we boycotted the South African apartheid regime. Did this have an impact? Of course it did. The Irish Government of Fianna Fáil blocked the Serbians from playing here when there was a genocide going on in Bosnia. In a few weeks, we will commemorate the massacre in Srebrenica when 7,000 men and boys were murdered. When Russia invaded Ukraine the EU and UEFA could not move quickly enough to impose sporting sanctions on Russia. Tomorrow we will discuss sanctions in relation to Israel. Just today the EU announced a round of 21 sanctions against Russia, but God forbid that we mention sanctions against Israel.

The Taoiseach talks about the impact on Ireland, and as supporter,s that would be difficult. What about the impact the genocide is having on the people of Palestine, on the footballers of Palestine, on the children of Palestine and on the women of Palestine who are being slaughtered? The Taoiseach talks about money and the coefficient. There are two things that this Government can do: give the money that has been lost to the FAI and, more importantly, why not support the FAI at grassroots level for the future? That would certainly improve our coefficient. The Irish people have been clear in poll after poll that they want the game stopped. Let us show leadership across Europe and across the world. Let us stop this game and let us ensure that those people who are committing this genocide are held responsible.

Deputy Pa Daly: If the Minister of State was the manager of an under-16 team and the manager of the other team called or made a racist comment about one of his players, what would he do? He would take his team off the pitch and he would tell the other team to get their act together before he would recommence. If someone stole the land of another and dispossessed them in their thousands, deliberately starved another nation, rained artillery upon them, shot footballers in the foot, used pitches as detention centres, shot 114 children in the head with single bullets, and justified this with a concept of self-defence that is unknown to jurisprudence and that would be ridiculous if it was not so unjust and enraging, would the

Minister of State compromise his players and himself by continuing to play against this team? I do not think so.

In January 2024, five-year-old Hind Rajab was trapped in a car alongside her aunt, uncle and four cousins who had all been shot and killed by the Israel Defense Forces, IDF. She spent five terrifying hours on the phone with rescue dispatchers pleading and begging for her life. Paramedics were killed when they tried to help. Eventually, of course, we know that she too was murdered by the IDF who later said that their troops were not within shooting range. No outcome of any investigation was ever published. Her body was recovered two weeks later. There is no accountability in Israel and there are no consequences for its enablers. We cannot continue business as usual with Israel. Suffering and trauma continues in Gaza and the West Bank. My town of Tralee is twinned with a town in the West Bank, Beit Sahour. People are killed queuing for food. Journalists are attacked and killed. Negotiators and peacemakers are killed. There is a hideous thing to be righted. We must show our detestation of the crime that is being committed. While a strike or a boycott might cost us much, what we might lose in points, penalties or fines, we will gain in self-respect and human dignity. The Minister of State must listen to the voices of supporters, read between the lines, listen to the players, listen to the voice of Hind Rajab and stop this game.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I heard the Minister of State's comments and I am struggling genuinely to understand. He told us that he will not go to the game. He will take himself out of it but he expects the players to go. It will not be held, mark my words. It should not go ahead but the Minister of State expects those young men to shake hands with other men from Israel who potentially served in the IDF, men with blood on their hands. The Minister of State wants the players to stand there while they play the Israeli national anthem. He will not do it but he wants a group of young fellows in green to go and do it. The Minister of State expects that they will stand for the Israeli national anthem and shake hands with men that have blood on their hands, but he will not go. For the love and honour of Jesus, will he show some leadership please? There is a genocide. We have seen it. Nobody disputes it. The Minister of State's leader has used the word. There is a genocide. Children are being starved. They do not play sport on the pitches anymore in Palestine. Those pitches are used as detention centres. There are no players left to play sports because they have all either been murdered or shot in the foot, but the Minister of State will not go. That is okay for him but he expects those young men to go. I do not think that is right and I genuinely think that when he reflects on it, he knows it is not right.

He is as aware of our history as I am. In 1983, when Mary Manning refused to handle fruit from apartheid South Africa, she showed leadership. The other ten Dunnes Stores workers who stood with her on the picket line showed leadership. Where she led, the State followed. This is the Minister of State's turn. He can show leadership. He can withdraw his shameful amendment and he can send a clear message about where we stand. We stand with the people who have overwhelmingly told the Government that they do not want this game to go ahead. Show solidarity with the people experiencing genocide, solidarity with Palestine and stop this fucking game.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: This is a question of Ireland's obligations under international law, our commitment to human rights and our responsibility to act consistently when serious allegations of violations of international law are before us. The Irish football community, campaigners, trade unionists, community organisations and ordinary people rightly say that proceeding with this game risks normalising a situation that demands accountability. They point to the historic role that sporting boycotts played in challenging apartheid in South Africa, the Yugoslav invasion of Kosovo and Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, to name just a few. They ask why quite similar principles should not apply today. The answer is that of course they should. Moving the game to Hungary or anywhere else is no better. If anything, it would be worse as it would deny people the right to protest, it would be an act of sportswashing and it would amount to hiding genocide. It cannot happen. This game cannot go ahead. Instead, the Government should support calls to cancel the game on legal and moral grounds. It should uphold their obligations under international law. It should deny entry to any Israeli football players, staff, fans and government officials who may have participated in violations of international law. It should cover any sanctions the FAI may incur and should sanctions be imposed, support any appeal to the Court of Arbitration for Sport. It should sign and ratify the International Convention against Apartheid in Sports and support the calls to ban Israel from all sporting competitions.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Micheál Carrigy): I thank the Deputies. I call on the Minister of State to move the Government's amendment to the motion. He has ten minutes.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Could Members please have a copy of the Minister of State's remarks, as is customary?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Micheál Carrigy): Yes, copies are available now.

Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I move amendment No. 2:

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

"notes:

— that the Irish people are deeply concerned about the conflict in the Middle East and Gulf region, particularly the situation in Palestine, and that the Government is committed to working with key partners to end the conflict;

— that Israeli actions in Palestine consistently contravene international law, and the Government continues to press for appropriate action, both at European Union (EU) and international level, in response to egregious Israeli breaches of human rights and democratic principles;

— Ireland's commitment to working with key partners to end the conflict in Gaza, and to advancing a sustainable peace plan and addressing the huge challenges facing Palestinians in Gaza;

— the Government's grave concerns about the worsening humanitarian situation in Gaza, with intolerable conditions;

— that Israel must immediately remove restrictions on aid access and facilitate essential supplies and services to reach people across the Gaza Strip;

— the Government's condemnation of the law passed by the Israeli parliament to expand the scope of the death penalty and revive its implementation in Israel and occupied Palestine;

— the particular concerns about the discriminatory nature of the law as it relates to Palestinians, and that the implementation of this law would give rise to serious breaches of international human rights law and international humanitarian law;

— the approval and publication of the text of the Israeli Settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (Prohibition of Importation of Goods) Bill 2026, noting that the Bill fulfils the commitment set out in the Programme for Government, to progress legislation to prohibit the import of goods from Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory, and further noting the proposed introduction of the Bill in Dáil Éireann this week;

— that, in line with the Taoiseach's statement, Ireland will act to prevent those members of the Government of Israel who have been instrumental in fomenting the unfolding disaster in Gaza, and the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration has instructed immigration officers to refuse entry to Itamar Ben-Gvir, Minister of National Security of Israel, and Bezalel Smotrich, Minister of Finance of Israel, should they seek to enter Ireland;

— Ireland's support of an EU-wide prohibition on trade with Israeli settlements, and that at both the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) and the FAC Trade in May, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, requested that the European Commission bring forward proposals for a prohibition on EU trade with settlements, on the basis of the EU's Common Commercial Policy, and furthermore, that the Minister also reiterated Ireland's longstanding position that the EU-Israel Association Agreement should be suspended or, at a minimum, that the trade elements should be suspended;

— that a number of other member states supported Ireland's call for stronger collective EU action, and agreed that targeted sanctions alone cannot substitute for meaningful measures relating to trade with illegal settlements; and

— that the Taoiseach also wrote to European Council President, António Costa, on 20th May, reiterating Ireland's position on EU trade with Israel, and requesting an urgent discussion of these issues among EU leaders at the next meeting of the European Council on 18-19 June;

in relation to sport, further notes that:

— the performance and integrity of our top athletes on the international stage have a very positive representational impact for Ireland, as Irish sport provides the world with a window into Ireland and the Irish people, both at home and abroad;

— international success for our top sports people enriches our country in a variety of ways, and Ireland's achievements on the global sporting stage have been a cause

of both celebration and inspiration for the Irish public, and will continue to be so into the future; and

— the Government is committed to supporting Irish athletes competing at the highest level of international competition; and

recognises that:

— national governing bodies of sport, such as the Football Association of Ireland (FAI), are independent, autonomous bodies responsible for the governance of their own sports, including the organisation of sporting fixtures, whether in domestic or international competitions;

— it is the role of the FAI to decide to fulfil its UEFA Nations League fixtures against Israel in September (home) and October (away);

— the FAI has stated that it intends to fulfil both fixtures against Israel; and

— the Government acknowledges the FAI's independence and autonomy in arriving at this decision and any decisions it may make in the coming days."

I thank Sinn Féin for its motion this evening. I wish the Irish ladies' football team well, whose match coincides with this motion. They will start to play very shortly in Grenoble, France, on what could be a really historic occasion. Should they win, it will be the most historic occasion we will have had in Irish women's football, and indeed in Irish football in our history.

I am sure everyone in the Chamber will join me in wishing them really well this evening. Good luck to them.

It is unfortunate that the nature of what we are discussing is very different and grave and that is what we are focusing on, understandably. As we all recognise, people across this country are very deeply concerned about the conflict in the Middle East and the Gulf region, and particularly the situation in Palestine. The Government is committed to working with key partners to end the conflict and advance a sustainable peace plan.

Israeli actions in Palestine consistently contravene international law and the Government continues to press for appropriate action, both at EU and international level, in response to egregious Israeli breaches of human rights and democratic principles. The Government calls on Israel to immediately remove restrictions on aid access and facilitate essential supplies and services to reach people across the Gaza Strip.

There have been many calls for Irish sports organisations to boycott or exclude Israel from international sporting competitions, in the context of the conflict in Gaza. These include, of course, the issue we are discussing tonight, which is the Football Association of Ireland being asked not to fulfil its UEFA Nations League fixtures against Israel in the autumn. It is important to note however that national governing bodies, NGBs, of sport, such as the FAI, are independent, autonomous bodies responsible for the governance of their sports, including the organisation of sporting fixtures, whether in domestic or international competitions. The Government and Sport Ireland have no role in determining or supporting the organisation of such fixtures. At the end of the day, we in this Chamber do not decide who plays who in sport, whether at a domestic or international level.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: That is not what our motion asks of the Minister of State.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Micheál Carrigy): I ask the Deputy to please let the Minister of State speak.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Minister of State is raising extraneous matters that are not contained in our motion.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: The FAI has stated that it intends to fulfil both fixtures against Israel in accordance with its obligations as a member of UEFA and the Government acknowledges the FAI's independence and autonomy in arriving at this decision and any decisions it may make in the coming days. The performance and integrity of our top athletes on the international stage have a very positive representational impact for Ireland, as Irish sport provides the world with a window into our country and the Irish people, both at home and abroad. International success for our top sports people enriches our country in a variety of ways. Many of our fondest memories are centred on Ireland's achievements on the global sporting stage. These achievements have been a cause of celebration and inspiration for the public and will continue to do so into the future. This is why the Government is fully supportive of our athletes competing at the highest level of international competition. However, it is ultimately international sporting federations who are responsible for deciding how to carry out their competitions and who may participate.

International federations, in this case UEFA, have a leadership role for their global games, and it is at this level that strategic decisions should be taken rather than by individual countries' NGBs.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Shame on you.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: The FAI has decided to play the fixtures against Israel in accordance with their obligations as members of UEFA. While there is speculation that the FAI may request that UEFA allow the game to be moved to a neutral venue abroad, this is ultimately a decision for the FAI to make.

While the decision to fulfil the fixtures, or not, is a matter for the FAI, it is important to note that not fulfilling the games could have serious sporting consequences for the Irish team, including losing points, relegation in Nations League standings, weaker seeding for Euro 2028 qualification and harm to its FIFA ranking.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Shame.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: At an operational level, I understand that the FAI is continuing to engage with An Garda Síochána to ensure appropriate preparation for and policing of the home leg of the fixture. The FAI is also engaging with the Norwegian Football Association which hosted a match against Israel in November last year to see if any learnings from its experience can be applied to preparations for the upcoming game in Ireland. Norway played the away leg of its World Cup qualifiers against Israel in Debrecen, Hungary. The FAI

is also engaging with the Palestinian Football Association to gather its views on how to prepare for the match.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: You are joking me.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: In addition, the FAI has engaged with the Israeli Football Association, which has confirmed that it does not expect a significant number of Israeli fans to travel to Ireland for the fixture. In accordance with UEFA rules, home legs of fixtures cannot be played in another jurisdiction unless concerns are raised about the capacity for the fixture to be held securely and safely. In this instance, An Garda Síochána has confirmed that it is prepared to police the home game.

While there has been a wholesale exclusion of Russia from most international sporting events, this exclusion is built upon international consensus, driven by international sporting bodies and, within the EU, is linked to sanctions against Russia following its illegal invasion of Ukraine.

Deputies: Hypocrites.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: No such international consensus exists in relation to Israel.

The decision made by RTE in December 2025, to neither participate in nor broadcast the 2026 Eurovision Song Contest due to Israel's ongoing participation has been referred to in debates. This was an independent decision taken by the State broadcaster, which is legally and editorially independent of Government.

Sport Ireland, which is funded by the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport, is the statutory body with responsibility for the development of sport, including the allocation of funding across its various programmes. The Sport Ireland-recognised NGBs play a key role in helping to deliver on the strategic priorities identified in the national sports policy.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: What about the genocide?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: The funding delivered via Sport Ireland to NGBs is not tied to the operational or administrative models used by NGBs, nationally or locally. All NGBs are independent, autonomous bodies and are responsible for their own governance and decision making, including regarding the organisation of and participation in, international sporting competitions. As Minister of State with responsibility for sport, I have no role in how NGBs organise their sports-----

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: No conscience either. You have a moral obligation.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: -----or in their day-to-day operational functions and nor, indeed, does the Oireachtas or Government. It would not be appropriate for me to intervene--

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Micheál Carrigy): The Deputies are on the speaking rota. They will get an opportunity to speak. I ask them to let the Minister of State speak.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It is offensive that we have to listen to this.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank the Cathaoirleach.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Micheál Carrigy): Deputies will have ample time to make their contributions on the speaking rota. I ask them to let the Minister of State finish what he is saying.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: The FAI is completely within its rights to fulfil its international fixtures, and the Government acknowledges its right to do so. For these reasons, the Government proposes to amend the wording of this motion, as submitted to the House.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister of State has two minutes on the clock to address the genocide. He has yet to mention it at all or anything that is happening.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Micheál Carrigy): Sinn Féin has ten minutes. Deputies Ward, McGettigan, Ní Raghallaigh agus Newsome Drennan have two and a half minutes each.

Deputy Mark Ward: I raised the issue of stopping the game two weeks ago and I said at the time that the Minister of State's response was a cop-out. His response tonight is again an absolute cop-out. The amendment he tabled is another cop-out.

I am a season ticket holder for the Irish national team and for a League of Ireland team. I love football. My missus will tell the Minister of State I love it too much. However, I hate the idea of Israel using my sport, the sport I love, to sportswash its way out of genocide.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Mark Ward: That is what the Minister of State is standing over. He is complicit in this. The Minister of State can shake his head all he wants. Does he know what else is a cop-out? It is not having the balls to go to the Aviva or wherever the match is going to be on and backing the Irish players. The Minister of State is afraid to go to the match but he will send the young men out in the green to go and play it without any backup from the Irish Government. The Government needs to stand by its convictions if it is going to do it.

The Government has shown no leadership on this whatsoever. It can tell the FAI not to play, and support it in not playing the game. It can tell the FAI it has its back. The FAI is reliant on the Government for funding. That is where the problem lies. It is too terrified of its paymasters to make a decision. If the Minister of State stood up and said, "I will back the FAI. If the FAI decides that it will not play this match, I will have its back", I guarantee there would be a different response from the FAI. The association also needs to not have a cop-out. We are not

calling for this match to be moved somewhere else; we are calling for it to be abandoned altogether and not to happen. We are calling for Israel to be put out of UEFA and FIFA competitions altogether. Israel has broken international law. It has also broken the laws of UEFA and FIFA by having ten football teams playing in occupied territories. That is against FIFA and UEFA laws. It should have been put out for that alone.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: I support this motion. The Minister of State's amendment is shameful. He did not mention once in his speech the genocide going on in Gaza.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Hear, hear.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: Across Ireland, a huge number of organisations, community groups, sporting bodies, trade unions, public representatives and ordinary citizens have spoken out. They are not doing so because this is easy; they are doing so because they believe there comes a time silence becomes complicity.

Genocide is genocide. Moving this match to another venue does not make us any less complicit; it simply makes it out of sight and out of mind. There is no hiding, however, from the reality facing the Palestinian people. We cannot look away from the killing of innocent civilians or the destruction of homes, schools, hospitals and sporting facilities, an infrastructure that should be nurturing the next generation of athletes.

Sport does not exist in a moral vacuum. It never has done. When faced with grave injustices, sporting bodies have acted before. UEFA and FIFA moved with remarkable speed when it came to Russia. Within days of the invasion, Russia was suspended from international competition and countries that refused to play Russia were not penalised. What is the difference? Why is it not the same in this case? The principle was clear then. There are moments when the values sport claims to uphold must be defended. Why should a different standard apply now? Penalties and sanctions that may or may not happen can be appealed, but the consequences facing Palestinian families cannot be appealed. The loss of life and destruction of communities cannot simply be set aside because they are politically inconvenient. There is a moral obligation here. A genocide is being played out before the eyes of the world, yet those responsible appear untouchable. We need to speak up and we need action to confront this suffering. We cannot allow a business-as-usual attitude. This is more than a football match. It is about whether we are prepared to act according to our values. If we believe that sport should not be used to normalise or distract from atrocities, then this match should not go ahead. Stop the game.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: The Ireland-Israel match must not go ahead - not here, not anywhere. The point of this action is to send a message to Israel and the international sporting community that genocide will not be tolerated or normalised. Moving the fixture abroad is just turning a blind eye and prevents the Irish people from expressing their right to protest. The majority of the Irish public is supportive of the boycott. Fans, players and unions are all against the match going ahead. Some 93% of FAI members voted for Israel's suspension. UEFA ignored this and is now standing over an inexcusable double standard having banned Russia in 2022. There is no justification for our playing the terrorist state. Precedent exists. Ireland boycotted the 1936 Olympics due to partitionist rules being imposed on us. The

Government opposed the IRFU's tour of South Africa in 1981. Yet now it is happy to accept apartheid and genocide.

We have an obligation under international law to oppose any engagement with occupation. The ICJ ruling provides a legal injunction on top of the moral one we hold as human beings bearing witness to the mass slaughter of Palestinians livestreamed before our very eyes. Under no circumstances should our flag be flown alongside the Israeli flag, or its national anthem sung with our "Amhrán na bhFiann". The green jersey has to mean more than this. It has to stand for more than this.

Caithfidh muidne ar fad sa Teach seo gach cumhacht atá againn a úsáid chun a chinntiú nach rachaidh an cluiche seo ar aghaidh mar is é an rud ceart le déanamh. Ní ceist chasta í seo. Tá fírinne an scéil lom agus duairc, agus ní féidir linn ár gcúl a chasadh leis a thuilleadh. Tá deich bhfoireann sacair de chuid Iosrael ag imirt ar pháirceanna a goideadh ó Phalaistínigh. Tá 1,008 fir agus mná spóirt maraithe ag Stát Iosrael. Ní féidir linn, mar sin, seasamh thart agus an dallamullóg a chur orainn féin. Tá an spórt polaitiúil. Ní féidir an spórt agus an pholaitíocht a dheighilt óna chéile, go háirithe agus cinedhióthú ar bun. Cuir deireadh leis an gcluiche.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: The call to stop the Ireland-Israel football match has overwhelming support from the Irish public, yet somehow some Government TDs are trying to paint it as a controversial move. I cannot understand why we need to even think about whether or not it is okay to welcome Israel here. It is an apartheid state that has inflicted mass genocide on the people of Palestine.

Let us remember the double standards. When Russia and Belarus invaded Ukraine, it took UEFA and FIFA just four days to ban them, but Israel? Complete inaction. On one hand, our Government tells us Israel is carrying out a genocide; on the other hand, it welcomes Israel's team into our capital city. We have a simple but powerful opportunity here to say no - no to apartheid, no to genocide. Has the Government just decided to throw the numerous UN conventions on genocide, the rights of children and apartheid in sport straight out the window? History shows that sporting boycotts work. Banning South Africa from sport helped dismantle apartheid. Just last year, cities refused to host Israel's cycling teams. That crippled Israel's sportswashing in cycling, effectively bringing it to a complete end.

Ireland now has a historic opportunity to tell the world we will not treat an apartheid state as an equal by welcoming it here to Dublin. Will we say, "No, Ireland will not stand side by side with an apartheid state"? Most importantly, we have a chance to say to the people of Palestine, "We have not forgotten you and we will never be silent while Israel's brutal system of apartheid continues." Stop the match. Take a stand.

I have four boys at home who absolutely adore sport. What kind of a mother would I be to say, "Yes, these folk are getting away with absolute murder, but the Government and we as people who are elected by the people of Ireland will not stand up and make a stand"? There should be consequences. What are we teaching our children? That you can get away with murder. It is wrong. Stop the game.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Micheál Carrigy): Next we have the Social Democrats speaking slot. Deputy Gibney and Deputy Gannon are sharing time.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I thank and commend Sinn Féin on bringing forward this motion, which sets out very clearly the mechanisms available to the Government to assist the FAI in making the right decision and, basically, to stop the game. That is what it does. It gives the Government the clear tools that we know will work should it choose to act and should it choose to show leadership.

I will talk first about leadership because what we have not seen from this Government is leadership on this issue. Since February, when we knew this was an issue, when we were drawn against Israel and the FAI came out very quickly and said what its plans were, there has been nothing from the Government. There has been nothing to assure us that it is even looking into this, dealing with it or engaging with the issue at all. Quite recently, in committee, I asked the Minister of State about anything he and his colleague the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, had done regarding the broadcasting side of things and there was very little by way of satisfactory answer. The response basically seems to be, "It is an FAI decision and we are not going to go near it."

Of course, the Government cites "governance" as the reason that it cannot do this and states that the FAI is a sports governing body and there is no place for politics in that. However, I have seen governance weaponised by Cabinet Ministers in this Government whereby, essentially, when it suits them to take action or engage appropriately with particular bodies, they will choose to do so, and when it does not suit them, they decide to leave their hands off. This is in stark contrast to the leadership shown by Deputy Joanna Byrne, who has taken on great personal sacrifice for her stance on this issue. She is to be commended. She is representative of a football community here in Ireland which has shown the same resolve and the same leadership in saying, "We will not tolerate this and we do not want this game to go ahead."

It must be deafening for the Minister of State to hear the cacophony of support and the growing momentum that I told him two weeks ago would happen for the Stop the Game campaign. It must be deafening for him and his colleagues who have decided, instead of showing leadership, to say, "We will not go to the match because". They have not said why but presumably it is because the Minister of State does not support sportswashing, although he denied in that committee that he would even call this sportswashing. He has said he will not go to the match, will not engage with the FAI and will not do anything to influence it to change its decision, yet what he will do is support its position and, potentially, support the removal of this match to another location, which would mean that all of this would fall on the shoulders of the Irish national team. Those men would be asked to make a choice to step onto that pitch or not. From day one, this is the very thing I warned we needed to avoid. That pressure should not be placed on them.

They have worked their whole lives for a particular goal but are surrounded by a country telling them that this game should not go ahead and they have to make that decision. That is so unfair. It is a direct result of the lack of leadership that is being shown by the Government on this specific issue.

This genocide has been going on for two and a half years. It is being livestreamed onto all of our phones. Some 75,000 men, women and children are dead in Palestine, although we all know that is a conservative figure because of the formulation of those statistics, which require a various set of data to determine that. We know that these figures are not representative of the

true atrocity that Israel is inflicting in Gaza and increasingly in the West Bank and in Lebanon. Eleven children a day now die or get injured in Lebanon because of Israeli strikes and 20% of the country is occupied. They are not stopping. They will not stop. The global order is not going to stop them. If you read Francesca Albanese's most recent book, *When the World Sleeps*, what she will tell you is what we have to do - the only thing that we can do - is sanction them and boycott them. We have to distance ourselves from Israel and say that we do not support this. This is a beautiful opportunity for the Government to do that.

The Minister of State said something in his speech about no such international consensus existing in relation to Israel. That was following the comments on why it is not the same as the Russian example. That comment really irks me because time and again his colleagues stand in this Chamber and tell me that we need to reach international or European level consensus to be effective against Israel. If that consensus does not exist, which the Minister of State has conceded in his speech, then how do we start it? We stand up and we are leaders. That is what we do. We say we are not going to play Israel and then all of a sudden other countries have to answer the same question and we start to see these things happen. It is exactly what happened with Mary Manning refusing to handle a grapefruit in Dunnes Stores decades ago, which we know now has been lauded as a key part in the drive towards dismantling the apartheid South African state.

The fragmentation that is being perpetrated on the Palestinian people, includes the tactic of dividing communities literally and physically on a map, but also within communities by taking children out of homes and detaining them for long enough that their communities are suspicious of them when they go back. These atrocities amount to an organised genocide. They have been practising and preparing for it for decades, and this is their final phase. We are standing complicit if we do not act. The thing that angers all of us the most is the impunity. Again, here is his opportunity to deal with that - to show them that this cannot happen.

I will talk about some of the specific ways in which football has been a feature of this genocide because Israel has at least ten football teams playing on illegally occupied Palestinian territory. Israel has killed over 1,000 Palestinian football players and sportspeople. Just last week, two members of the Palestinian women's team were detained. All sports facilities and infrastructure have been destroyed. Article 72.2 of FIFA statutes states: "Member associations and their clubs may not play on the territory of another member association without the latter's approval." The ICJ ruling on occupied territories in 2024 was that the territories are illegal, ergo, it is illegal. There is ample evidence for why Israel should not be playing in these competitions. The Minister of State essentially threw up his hands and the way he put it in his speech was that the decision lies with UEFA and FIFA to decide against it. He said that "it is at this level that strategic decisions should be taken rather than by individual countries' NGBs." If the Minister of State is waiting for UEFA or FIFA to do it, then he is going to be waiting a while, so what we have to do as a country is stand up and start the process. We must stand up in solidarity with the people who are being killed in Palestine, Gaza, the West Bank and now in Lebanon.

I will touch on some of those legal obligations because, obviously, we have the Genocide Convention and the ICJ ruling, of which the Government is the custodian. It is the one who has to carry out the responsibilities that we have as a State under those. We also have to ratify the UN's International Convention against Apartheid in Sports. I want to touch on the Court of

Arbitration for Sport. One of the reasons that is put forward is the potential sanctions and financial implications of this. If we look at the case law from that particular jurisdiction, it seems to me quite clear that UEFA will not be able to impose any such sanctions. You need to grow a pair, as a Government, and do this and stop the game.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: Hear, hear.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Hear, hear.

Deputy Gary Gannon: One of the most lamentable things I have heard over the last couple of weeks and months as we talk about whether Ireland should fulfil its fixture against a country we believe is enacting a genocide against another is when people say, "But sure Ireland might lose six points". Ireland might lose six points in a Nations League division 2 game and potentially be put down into division 3, but so what? What do we actually lose even more of if we do fulfil a fixture? A couple of years ago Ireland aligned itself to South Africa's case in the ICJ that Israel was committing genocide against the people of Palestine, yet now somehow we expect people adorned in green jerseys to go out onto a pitch, listen to "Amhrán na bhFiann" and then watch the flag of the same nation that we believe is committing genocide against another people - we have aligned ourselves to a case in the ICJ in this regard. I imagine that if we do that we would lose a hell of a lot more than six points. We would lose a portion of ourselves that believes we can call out what is right and what is wrong.

One of the other sadder things people say is that we should not mix politics and sport. When did we become a people who believe that politics and sport should not mix? That appears to me to be a new phenomenon. We, rightly, did not raise objections in 1961 or again in 1976 when apartheid South Africa was suspended by FIFA and, rightly, expelled because of the apartheid it inflicted upon its people. We rightly did not object when the former Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, intervened and said that we should not fulfil a fixture against Yugoslavia. Again in 2022 and 2023, we rightly believed that Russia should not partake in sports at any level because of its horrific invasion of Ukraine. Now and only now do we say that politics and sport should not mix. It would seem a luxury on our part if we were to tell the athletes in Palestine and Gaza, who have been directly targeted precisely because of their profile by the State of Israel that politics and sport should not mix.

According to the Hind Rajab Foundation, soldiers in Gaza are planting Beitar, Hapoel and Maccabi Haifa flags in the ruins of Palestinian homes and dedicating killings to their clubs. They tag neighbourhood walls with ultras' slogans and they pose for selfies that are then celebrated by online supporter networks. Israeli soldiers are bringing stadium culture and battlefield atrocity and making it merge seamlessly in the ruins of destroyed homes where people have been killed. This is what we have rightly called a genocide and aligned ourselves to.

This is not about six points in a Nations League division 2 game. It is not about whether the FAI might lose a bit of its income. It is actually about who we are as a people - a people who have known oppression, who have learned lessons from the many horrors and atrocities of the past and who recognise that never again should mean precisely that. We willingly signed up to the prevention of genocide convention. In doing so, we did not say we will commit

ourselves to doing all we can to prevent genocide with the exception of maybe sacrificing six points in a division 2 Nations League game.

The Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, and the Minister in the Department of sport said that they are not going to attend the game. I say "well done" to the Minister, but I believe in leading from the front. If the Minister of State holds the position that he is not going to attend the game, he should not ask any other young Irish person to stand on a pitch, listen to the national anthem and watch the flag of a state being waved that we believe is committing genocide against another.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Micheál Carrigy): Just before I move on, I want to point out to Members that Deputy Gibney's comment at the end directed towards the Minister of State was unparliamentary.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Which one? What was unparliamentary?

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: What was it?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Micheál Carrigy): It was at the very end of the Deputy's comments. I am not going to repeat it. I just ask that she would not make such comments in this House.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I thought it was a most appropriate comment.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Micheál Carrigy): No, not in this House. It was unparliamentary language to use in this House and it was directed personally towards a Member of this House.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I said "the Government" actually.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Micheál Carrigy): No, it was directed towards the Minister. It is unparliamentary to make that comment.

The Labour Party has 12 minutes. Deputy Smith will be followed by Deputies Lawlor, Wall and Sheehan.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I thank and commend Sinn Féin and Deputy Byrne, in particular, on bringing this motion forward. There is another motion being brought forward tomorrow by the Social Democrats and I am thankful it is being brought forward as well.

Football is like no other sport. It is the world's game. It is the global game. It cuts through class, identity and borders like no other. It unites people. It has a long history of expression and political expression, whether it is the troops in the fields of Flanders in 1914 or the numerous examples of boycotting or expelling countries for gross violations of human rights or apartheid, such as South Africa. It is a part of who we are. When you tell someone which football team you support, it identifies you in a way that is outside of your friends, family and

community. It adds a layer of understanding to the individual. When we combine that with patriotism and with our country, it is an expression of who we are.

Therefore, when people ask why we are so exercised about these two games against Israel going ahead, it is because it is an expression of who we are. We are not a country that in any way wants to endorse, celebrate or stand shoulder to shoulder and engage in regular sporting competition with a state that commits genocide. That is it. It is not easy, and it will have some consequences. What are the consequences? It is losing some points. There may be some financial consequences. We may have to answer to some people in UEFA. We should be leading the charge to UEFA in terms of garnering support for others to stand shoulder to shoulder and say "No, we do not accept this from the State of Israel". It is not a normal state. It is obliterating the international rules and international law. It is committing genocide. It is carrying out illegal ongoing occupations in the West Bank. It is continuing to launch invasions and ethnic cleansing up through Lebanon. We saw today more killings taking place in the city of Tyre.

We do not bat an eyelid when there are sanctions against Russia in the sporting world, and rightly so. In times gone by, we did not bat an eyelid in terms of sanctioning South Africa, and rightly so, but why this exceptionalism? Why do we in Europe, in the global north, in the western world or whatever you want to call it continue to embrace Israel as a normal state in our neighbourhood when it is anything but? It is an abhorrent and criminal state that is carrying out the worst atrocities on a number of fronts at this moment, and has been at an intense rate for the last two and a half years at least. That is not going back any further but we can if we want because its crimes go back many decades.

The Taoiseach accuses us of moralising on this issue. Yes, it is the moral issue. It is a moral issue. It is immoral to play these games. It is immoral to welcome Israel and stand shoulder to shoulder and compete with Israel in international sporting competition. The higher that sporting competition is and the higher the profile and the more accepted it is, such as the global game of soccer, the more immoral it becomes and the stronger the stance we have to take.

I am proud of being Irish for many reasons but I am proud of the stances we as individuals, as communities and as governments over the years of different combinations and hues have taken against despotic regimes, international crimes and apartheid regimes. I am ashamed that we are not doing that the way we should right now.

If this all washes through our Parliament over the next number of months, all we may have to show is a couple of things - a recognition of the State of Palestine, which is not unimportant, and a watered down version of the occupied territories Bill. That is not good enough. That does not reflect what the Irish people believe and what the Irish people want.

More specifically, speaking about football, the majority of Irish football fans do not want this game to go ahead. The majority of Irish football players do not want this game to go ahead. The majority of the FAI general assembly do not want this game to go ahead. Together in this Chamber, we have an opportunity with these two matches to stand shoulder to shoulder with the people of Palestine, the West Bank and Gaza, and southern Lebanon and to say "No", that we will support our FAI and our footballers through whatever sanctions will be imposed on them and that we will look for support from other European nations and nations beyond Europe to stand up to Israel in football and in other sports.

The FAI's decision to move this to a neutral venue is an answer to a question nobody asked. This game should not take place in a neutral venue. It should just not take place. We need to stop the game.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy George Lawlor: Hand-wringing is complicity. We, as a nation, have always prided ourselves on standing on the side of justice, humanity and, indeed, international law but today, as the world watches the ongoing devastation in Gaza and the mounting civilian death toll of 73,000 to 75,000 - we do not fully know - men, women and children, our Government hesitates. This hesitation is absolutely unacceptable. It is time - indeed, it is past time - for us to show leadership worthy of our values and for us, as parliamentarians, to show absolute leadership and direction. We must demand that UEFA acts with moral clarity and expels Israel from international football. UEFA cannot preach respect, equality and, indeed, fair play while allowing a state engaged in relentless disproportionate violence against civilians to participate as though nothing is happening.

Sport does not exist in a vacuum. Football cannot be a sanctuary for cheerleaders of atrocity. Ireland must not hide behind process or, indeed, bureaucracy. We must be the country that says what others are afraid to say. We must insist unequivocally that the upcoming nations league fixture involving Israel does not go ahead - not in Dublin, not anywhere. To go ahead with these matches would be to normalise what is the abnormal and pretend that the suffering of thousands through state sponsored slaughter can be brushed aside for 90 minutes of football.

Our Government must use its voice and use its influence. We have done it before; we can do it again. The world remembers with Ireland stood against apartheid. The world remembers when Ireland championed peace and human rights. This is not about politics. It is about humanity. It is about refusing to look away. It is about demanding that UEFA lives up to its own principles. It is about Ireland leading both bravely and apologetically when leadership is most needed. The time for caution is over. The time for action is now.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: Hear, hear.

Deputy Mark Wall: I thank Deputy Byrne and Sinn Féin and, indeed, the Social Democrats for the two motions before this House. In making any decision, it is important to consider the facts and why we are here tonight to discuss this game of football. The facts are that over 70,000 people have been killed during Israel's genocidal campaign against the people of Palestine. This number is growing every day of these months of a so-called ceasefire agreement.

The unbearable fact is that even during this ceasefire, at least two children per day have been killed. Let that sink into this debate tonight. These children, I am sure like many children around the world, were dreaming of playing football for some far-flung favourite team or just having a game with their friends among the rubble or the tents they now call home. Two in three children are now at risk of infection due to the plagues of rats, mice and insects. This ceasefire has delivered nothing but more pain and suffering for the people of Palestine. Only yesterday, Israel announced that it is closing the border crossings into the Gaza Strip. No aid

will get into Gaza. There will be no access to food, water or vital medicines for a population that has had its healthcare system destroyed by Israel.

This is simply why this match cannot be played. Others have said tonight, and I totally agree with them, that we are a proud football nation and we cannot and should not subject our players to having to play against the State of Israel and the genocide it continues to carry out against the Palestinian people. Hiding this game in some other country is simply not dealing with the substantial issue and is a cop-out.

8 o'clock

The facts are clear. The children of Palestine have suffered and are suffering death and injury on a daily basis. For their dreams and their safety, Ireland should not play this game. Stop this game.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: I thank Deputy Joanna Byrne for introducing this motion. She has shown real bravery and leadership on this issue. We have a proud history of standing up against injustice, whether it was the stance we took on apartheid in South Africa or the recognition of Palestinian statehood. In June 1999, the then Fianna Fáil Government showed leadership in relation to this in refusing to grant entry visas to the Yugoslav national football team, which blocked the scheduled Euro 2000 match in Dublin. Moving the fixture is a complete cop-out. The State can and must step in. There is a precedent. This is forcing our young players into an impossible position where individual athletes must choose between their international careers and their conscience.

I am asking the Government to show some leadership because when I think of this genocide, I am particularly haunted by an interview with the British surgeon Nick Maynard, who was talking about Palestinian boys being shot by IDF soldiers. Each day, the soldiers would shoot a different limb, almost like target practice. One day, they were shooting them in the testicles; another day, they were shooting them in the arm; and another day, it was the legs. These are very young boys. Many of us have sons, nieces, nephews, cousins or godchildren. These are the people who should be able to go out and play football freely and not have to worry about being shot at aid posts.

We cannot stand by and watch the utter destruction of Palestinian life and the obliteration of Palestine. When Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, UEFA and FIFA did not hesitate. I am conscious that Kaja Kallas is about 250 m from this Chamber today. We know the EU took a firm stance in relation to what was going on with Russia but, as usual with international bodies in this world, when is a war crime not a war crime? It is when Israel is doing it.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I thank Deputy Joanna Byrne and her colleagues in Sinn Féin for bringing forward this motion this evening. The Green Party will be supporting this motion and also the motion being brought forward by the Social Democrats tomorrow. In particular, I thank the leadership of the Stop The Game campaign that has operated across Ireland in recent weeks. It is a campaign made up of grassroots supporters, passionate supporters of football in Ireland. They are people who dedicate so much of their lives to supporting our national teams in all their shapes and sizes. They are also people who are not prepared to allow our national

teams, our national jersey and our national flag to be used as tools of sportswashing the genocide that is taking place in Gaza. I salute their leadership.

I feel that leadership is lacking in Government and the FAI. It is simply not good enough to say that this match can be played abroad in a supposedly neutral venue, somewhere where Irish people will not be able to demonstrate our abhorrence of this game taking place. It is not enough for this game to be played behind closed doors without a crowd because out of sight is not out of mind and Irish football supporters are not prepared to see our national jersey used in this particular way. Nor is it good enough, as some have suggested, that it should be left up to the individual consciences of players - let them decide if they want to play or not. That is far too much pressure and far too great an obligation to put on young sportspeople at the beginning of their careers. What we need to see is leadership from the Government to give a very clear statement that Ireland should not play this match in any circumstances and let that be followed up by the FAI, recognising there are consequences to that. We see those consequences and we meet them with our eyes open.

In just four weeks' time, Ireland will take on the Presidency of the EU. The themes we have adopted for that Presidency are competitiveness, security and values and yet on this issue and on the issue of Palestinian statehood, too often, we allow our values to be trimmed due to fear. We are trimming our values on the issue of whether Ireland should play this match. Tomorrow, we will see our values trimmed when an occupied territories Bill lite, minus services, will be guillotined before this House. Ireland should not allow our values to be shaped by fear of the Trump administration. We should say "No" to this match and we should say "Yes" to an occupied territories Bill that includes services.

Deputy Charles Ward: I thank Deputy Joanna Byrne for bringing forward this motion from Sinn Féin. I am proud to stand with my constituents in Donegal and countless people across the country and wholeheartedly support the Stop The Game campaign. After more than two years of watching Israel commit genocide against the Palestinian people in real time, we cannot allow Israel to use sport to normalise its crimes. This autumn's Nations League game between Ireland and Israel must be called off. Poll after poll shows the majority of people in Ireland do not want to see this game played. Instead they want sanctions against Israel for the horrific crimes it has continued to commit and the genocide that is still ongoing. Even players do not want to play this game. As Donegal man Séamus Coleman said, players have a heart, they know what is right and what is wrong. He said, "It's awful, it is extremely sad and it's a very difficult position for the players to be in." It is ridiculous that the players have been put in this situation and have to come out and answer.

UEFA's Equal Game campaign states that everyone should be able to enjoy football regardless of who or where they are or how they play the game. The hypocrisy is staggering. The Palestinian people have not been given the freedom to enjoy football or any other sport. According to the Palestinian Football Association, Israel has killed 1,007 members of the Gaza sports community. Between October 2023 and February 2026, 184 sports facilities, stadiums, halls and headquarters were completely destroyed and a further 81 facilities were partially destroyed. Meanwhile stadiums have been turned into shelters for displaced people. Israel has stripped the Palestinian people of the opportunity to play, watch and enjoy football, yet there are no consequences for this. UEFA sits back and allows Israel to engage in sportswashing in

an attempt to distract from its crimes against the Palestinian people. Israel is not a normal state and should not be treated as a normal state.

It is often said that there is no place for politics in sport but sport is inherently political. Sport reflects the shapes of wider social, economic and political realisation. Countries and sporting bodies use the likes of the Nations League and the World Cup to promote their national identities. Playing the Israeli team is a political act and it normalises the violation of international law. Israeli teams must be excluded from sporting events by the governing bodies UEFA and FIFA.

Deputy Seamus Healy: I welcome this motion and will also support tomorrow's motion from the Social Democrats. Ireland must lead an international campaign to exclude Israel, a genocidal apartheid state, from all sporting fixtures and competitions and there must be no soccer games between Ireland and Israel at home in Ireland or on neutral grounds abroad. There is significant and growing opposition to these fixtures. In November 2025, 93% of FAI members voted to instruct the association to call on UEFA to suspend Israel. In May of this year, FAI general assembly members secured the numbers needed to call an emergency general meeting to vote on Ireland's participation in these soccer games. The call to refuse to play Israel is supported by the Irish football community, including the Professional Footballers' Association of Ireland and the Irish Football Supporters Partnership. Indeed, Irish Sport for Palestine has commenced judicial review proceedings.

There is precedent for stopping these fixtures. In 1999, the then Fianna Fáil government prevented the Euro 2000 qualifier between Ireland and Yugoslavia because of Serbian atrocities in Kosovo and in 2022, FIFA and UEFA banned Russia from all club and international games after Poland and Sweden refused to play World Cup qualifiers.

Ireland as a nation and as a people must not be complicit in genocide. We have a particular link with the Palestinian people through our own long history of British imperialist domination and our own genocidal famine, an Gorta Mór.

Israel is still committing a genocide in Gaza and 75,000 Palestinians have died, including 20,000 children. Gaza itself is a wasteland. Water, energy, healthcare and educational infrastructure have been wiped out and 1,000 Palestinians have died since the ceasefire was announced. Under international law, Israeli settlements in the occupied territories are illegal. There are over 250 settlements with about 500,000 people there. These numbers are expanding on a daily basis. Settler violence is an ongoing threat to Palestinians in the West Bank and in East Jerusalem and campaigns of harassment continue on a daily basis.

This violence also targets Palestinian Christians. Their numbers have dropped tenfold. Seventy years ago Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus Christ, was 86% Christian. It is now 12% Christian. Israel's strategy against Christians is a combination of violence, economic hardship, permanent siege, apartheid and it is doing this to drive Palestinian Christians out of their homeland. Israel must be brought to book. Stopping the Irish-Israel fixtures would be a small but vital step in that direction.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Government response to public opinion, to the stop the game campaign and to the massive pressure it is now under is a continuation to its basic approach to

the issue of Palestine. It is to have words. It is to hide. It is to engage in cowardice. In this case, it is to hide behind the FAI. The Minister for sport says he will personally not go to the game but then hides behind the FAI and refuses to take a clear position.

What is needed from the Government is absolutely clear and it is what is being called for. The Government needs to make a clear statement about its opposition to playing the genocidal team of Israel, call for its exclusion from international sport and then it needs to say it is going to back up the FAI in that and ensure that grassroots football will not pay any price as a result of taking a principled position. What the Government needs to do is very simple.

I find it astounding that there is an amendment from an opposition party tonight. Independent Ireland is calling for serious consideration to matches being played behind closed doors, thinking that somehow if we close the doors and play this genocidal team it somehow makes it okay. Let us be clear why there is mass support and calls for boycotting these games. It is because Israel has been committing a genocide for almost three years where it is likely that the death toll in reality is well over 100,000 people, where the vast majority of buildings in Gaza have been destroyed and where this is all continuing today. We know, in terms of the impact of sport, that 1,000 Palestinian athletes and over 560 footballers have been killed.

As for this idea that sport and politics have nothing to do with each other, look at what is happening in America right now where a Somalian referee has been refused access to referee the World Cup because of the racist policies of the US Government. An Iranian team are going to have to fly in and out to play games because of the murderous assault being rained down on them by the US and Israel. Football and sport are absolutely political.

Let us not act like the members of the Israeli national team are some innocent civilians. Many of them are former IDF terrorists. It is even more insidious than that because many of them qualify for an exception as athletes but chose to join the IDF in any case. I will give two examples. Number 10, Manor Solomon, stated that Palestinians were killing their own people and blaming Israel. His hatred for the people of Gaza is so well known that fans of his former club made up the chant of "He looks good, he looks fine, he hates Palestine". Shon Weissman is a forward who had a transfer to another club cancelled over his support for the genocide of Palestinians. He said that Israel should wipe Gaza off the map. Of course, we should not be playing these people. Ireland should be leading the way in isolating Israel on the world stage. That starts with stopping the game.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Micheál Carrigy): The Independent Technical Group has 12 minutes. Deputy Collins has three and a half minutes; Deputy O'Donoghue has three minutes; Deputy Tóibín has three and a half minutes; and Deputy Gogarty has two minutes.

Deputy Michael Collins: Let me begin by saying something very clearly: the humanitarian situation in Gaza is heartbreaking. The loss of innocent civilian life, the suffering of families, the destruction of homes, schools and hospitals and the terrible impact of this conflict on ordinary people should concern every decent person. We in Independent Ireland condemn violence against civilians where it occurs and we support every effort to achieve a just peace and lasting resolution to this conflict. Nobody should mistake our amendment for indifference.

It is not. However, we believe that we must also recognise another important principle: sport should not become a tool of political direction by Government or opposition.

The Sinn Féin motion seeks to place the Football Association of Ireland and Irish athletes at the centre of an international political dispute. We do not believe that is fair. Irish sports people have devoted years of their lives to representing their country. They have trained, sacrificed and worked tirelessly for the opportunity to compete at the highest level. They should not be asked to carry the burden of resolving conflicts that are far beyond their control.

If international sporting sanctions are to be imposed, those decisions should be made by the recognised international sporting authorities. UEFA and FIFA exist precisely to govern international football and to make decisions regarding participation, suspension and fixtures. Whether people agree with their decisions or not, those are the bodies charged with that responsibility. Governments should not be dictating who national teams play. Political parties should not be deciding which fixtures go ahead. Once we cross that line, sports risk becoming another battleground for political disputes rather than a space where people from different backgrounds can come together. Political parties are long enough in this Dáil saying religion and politics should not go together. Now it is time there is a separation between sports and politics. We must also consider the wider consequences.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: That is absolute rubbish.

Deputy Michael Collins: Excuse me, I did not interrupt you when you were speaking.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: You are welcome to.

Deputy Michael Collins: I did not interrupt you.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Micheál Carrigy): Deputy, please.

Deputy Michael Collins: A unilateral refusal to participate in fixtures could have serious implications for Irish football. It could affect our players, our supporters, our future participation in competitions and even Ireland's reputation as a host nation for international sporting events. Those consequences would not fall on politicians. They would fall on athletes, fans and sporting organisations.

Our amendment takes a balanced approach. It acknowledges the genuine concerns expressed by many people regarding the conflict. It recognises the importance of international law and protection of civilians but it also recognises that responsibilities for resolving international political conflicts should not be placed on the shoulders of Irish footballers. Where there are concerns around public order or safety surrounding fixtures, those matters should be addressed properly. That is why our amendment calls for a comprehensive security assessment involving Government Departments, An Garda Síochána and the FAI, with consideration given to matches being played behind closed doors if necessary. Sport should unite people, not divide them. We can stand for peace, human rights and humanitarian principles while also respecting the independence of sporting organisations and protecting the interests of Irish athletes.

I welcome the fact the Government now appears to have adopted a position put forward by Independent Ireland's amendment. While there may be differences elsewhere in the motion, on the central question of sport, the Government has arrived on the same conclusion we did. We all recognise the terrible humanitarian situation in Gaza and the need to stand up for international law but we also recognise that Irish athletes should not be punished for events beyond their control. Decisions on international fixtures belong to the FAI, UEFA and FIFA. Sport should unite people and not become another battlefield for political disputes. That is why we are putting forward our amendment here this evening.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Any life that is taken is wrong. I am coming in here as a broker of peace. Ireland should be a broker of peace. People can talk about what is happening in Gaza, which is 100% wrong. Where a life is taken and families are destroyed anywhere in the world is 100% wrong but look at Irish history. There are people in this House who have been involved in the taking of lives. They are sitting in this House.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Where?

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: When we look at traditional parties going back through the years and the wars that happened here in Ireland behind closed doors and everything else that happened, it was wrong.

I stand for peace. What I would not mind seeing with the match they are talking about is both sides coming out, sitting down in the middle of the field, saying they are not playing because of peace and linking arms together. That is what I would like to see and I would like to see unity shown that way, rather than this being a political football being played inside here for popularity.

I will say what I feel. I broker peace. I would like to see peace happening. I would like to see that across the world, and in Gaza. I would like to see it across football. Let them link arms together and say, "Lads, this is wrong. We want peace". That is what I would like to see.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Micheál Carrigy): I ask Deputy O'Donoghue to be very careful when making comments in the House. I do not think the comments he made were correct.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I did not name any names. The rules of the House are that when you do not mention a name, you can mention what you like.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Micheál Carrigy): Deputy Tóibín is not here. I call Deputy Gogarty.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach Gníomhach. If Deputy Tóibín comes in, I will cede to him.

I support this motion in principle and if gets to a vote, I will vote in favour of it, in some ways, symbolically. The message has to be sent out in any forum that Ireland stands in

solidarity with the people of Palestine. We know we will ultimately vote on the Government's amendment, which I will not support.

In the context of what people are being asked, and I hope this will be the case after the debate, I agree that the Government should make it easy for the FAI to make a decision. If the FAI has to make a decision, it has to do so on the back of cowardice by FIFA and UEFA. They did not take the same approach to the genocidal Israeli regime as they did to Russia when it invaded Ukraine. By the same token, there are a couple of other countries I would add to that as regards being murderous and mistreating their own people. However, the Israelis take the biscuit. I say that while condemning Hamas wholeheartedly, acknowledging that innocent Israelis have been killed and condemning that. At the same time, Israel has killed multiples more Palestinian people. What it has done in Gaza is genocide. The Irish Government has gone to some lengths in regard to the International Court of Justice, the watered-down occupied territories Bill, which we should be pushing further, and the debates we have had on the financial situation and how far we should be pushing our European colleagues. I acknowledge that the Germans, the Danish and the Cypriots have different approaches to this and that is why it is very hard, in a Europe-wide context, to get absolute righteous condemnation of what the Israeli state has been doing.

Should the FAI decide to carry on with the matches, for whatever reason, I do not think anyone in this House or in the campaign should criticise it for not being as morally upright as someone else. We are in a particular situation in relation to this. We can make our own self-sacrifice and be potentially relegated in respect of our placings. We could lose out on automatic qualification. I hope things go well and we are in the European Football Championship anyway. Fundamentally, by handing six points to the Israeli team, we would give them a gilt-edged welcome to come to these islands for the championship. That would be a much bigger boon for the Israeli team than knocking them off the pitch. That is a fair argument. I am not going to vote that way but we should get into a situation where we say, "I am more a supporter of Gaza than you" or "Your decision is morally corrupt or bankrupt".

People are in a difficult situation. Maybe the Government should take the decision out of the FAI's hands and the FAI should maybe recognise what its members are saying and make the decision. If it does not do so, we should call for the match to be stopped all the way along but we should not criticise people for making a genuine and tough decision. In essence, we are going to lose one way or the other. I do not want to see the Israel team coming over here as competitors in Europe but, at the same time, I cannot stand over the match going ahead. That is why I support the motion.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I will be supporting the measured and balanced amendment proposed by Deputies Collins, O'Donoghue, O'Flynn and Fitzmaurice. Let me make clear that I recognise the grave humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza and the continuing heartbreaking loss of innocent civilian life. No one with a conscience can look at the suffering of families and children there and remained unmoved. I also unequivocally condemn all acts of terrorism, violence and attacks on citizens and civilians, wherever they occur, such as the barbaric attack by Hamas when innocent men and women were murdered at a music festival. That was particularly sickening and should not have happened either.

The recognition of suffering cannot justify turning Irish sport into a political battlefield. Sport must be depoliticised as much as possible. Irish sportspeople, men and women who have given years of dedication, sacrifice and discipline to represent this country, should not be punished or dragged into international disputes that are far beyond their control.

There is also a glaring moral contradiction at the heart of this debate. We are told that playing against Israel is somehow unconscionable. However, Ireland happily competes against Qatar, whose human rights record includes the exploitation of migrant workers, the denial of basic freedoms and appalling records on women's rights, religious freedoms and political repression, all of which are synonymous with that country.

The selective outrage directed at Israel, and only Israel, undermines the credibility of those demanding a boycott. This House has spent a disproportionate amount of time on this one international conflict, while urgent domestic issues - the housing emergency, the crippling cost of living, the chaos in our health service and the rise in crime on our streets - receive far less attention. Irish citizens watching these debates must wonder why Gaza dominates the agenda here, when families in their own communities cannot find a home. We owe it to the people who elected us to get our priorities straight and right. This amendment rightly states that decisions on fixtures and tournament participation are matters for UEFA and the international sporting bodies, not unilateral grandstanding by the Irish Government. We should respect those determinations.

Withdrawing or boycotting carries real consequences - sporting, economic and reputational - for our teams and supporters and our ability to host major events in the future. Sport should be a source of national unity and pride, not a vehicle for political activism.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Bhí mé ag éisteacht le gach duine ó m'oifig. Gabhaim míle buíochas leis an Teachta Byrne agus le Sinn Féin as an motion a chur isteach. Bhí go leor daoine ag caint faoin spórt agus saol na polaitíochta, saying that they do not mix. It has been said before but I want to say it again. We all know they have mixed before. In 1981, the then Taoiseach, Charles Haughey, who was born in Donnycarney in my constituency, summoned the Irish Rugby Football Union, IRFU, and said plainly that the tour to South Africa would cause serious damage. Maybe back then, taoisigh, Ministers and Governments could do more but I do not believe so. I think the Government can do more and we need to do more. I think Mr. Haughey understood the weight of the issue.

I was at the sport committee when the Minister of State said he was not going to the game. I welcome that and I understand his hands might be tied in a sense but we need to fast-forward from 1981 to November of last year when Bohemians brought forward a motion, backed by Shelbourne, Shamrock Rovers and Cork City, which was then followed by Norway, Spain, Türkiye and then UEFA itself, to stop the killing of children and civilians, and to stop the genocide. Did the Geneva Convention fall out of the sky?

We have multiple independent UN reports that have said it is a genocide. We have to do everything we can. Hosting a match on a pitch with a country that is inflicting genocide is not neutral. It is a signal that the rules do not apply to that country, specifically when there is precedent for us doing it to other countries, particularly with how quickly sanctions were put on Russia.

I have had an Israeli gun pointed at my head, saying that I am an Irish terrorist. I have had meetings with Palestinians, now-paralympians, who were deliberately shot in the knee while trying to leave to enter the Jakarta Olympics. Alaa Aldali was in Sicily before I went on the flotilla. He was the first Palestinian ever to compete in the UCI World Championships. He said before the race, "I dreamt of becoming a champion with both legs. After my amputation, I became determined to be a champion for Palestine with one." Despite being an amputee, he was helping to set up the ships and he was keeping guard. He is one of the most passionate and determined young men I have met. He founded the Gaza Sunbirds who were on one of the eight ships that was in my flotilla, which was painted with the Gaza Sunbirds symbol. They have visited this House. Another Deputy met them too.

When the bombing started in October 2023, they stopped training and they started using bikes to deliver bread through the rubble. Their bikes were later destroyed in an airstrike, killing one of the volunteers. We cannot say that sports and politics do not apply when clearly the current Israeli regime is doing so. This is not against Israelis. We had Israelis on flotillas and we have Israelis in Israel protesting against the current regime. This is about the current regime that is in place. We need to do everything to oppose it and we need to stop the game.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank Sinn Féin and Deputy Michael Collins. Each and every one of us knows what harm the Israelis have done all over the world and continue to do. We do not support that. I am concerned about stopping our Irish team from playing a game and I wonder whether it may have far-reaching repercussions for them. The players have trained and come this far. Will it be just this game they forfeit? How many points will they lose? Will they be thrown out of the competition? I am worried about all those things. I would like to know what the players themselves think. It should be up to them and the FAI to decide what is right for our team. I do not blame Sinn Féin for being angry. The Social Democrats have tabled another motion on the same matter. In no way in the world do I blame them. We all know what harm Israel is doing, the loss of lives, the loss of little children and the murder that is going on. We are helpless. We cannot do a bit about it. We do not have an army. We are a neutral country. I know it would be a good message to send to the Israeli Government but it will take no notice of that.

It is our Irish team I am concerned about. Do the players want to play? Does the FAI want to proceed? It should be up to them. I do not want to see the Israelis coming here to play a game. Maybe it should be played in some neutral country. I have to know more about what implications this will have for the team. We remember the glory days of Jackie Charlton and we still appreciate, while the players and teams have not been doing as well in recent times, they are our team. They are the Irish team and we must stand by them. Whatever they want is what I want. They cannot be blamed for playing Israel. UEFA or whoever drew up the schedule and ordained that Israel was to play Ireland. Maybe it is UEFA have a right to kick Israel out of the competition but it is wrong to blame our players, our countrymen, for playing in this competition. Will it finish them for the whole of this tournament? Those are the questions we need to ask. Will it throw them back an awful lot? We need to know that. I am concerned.

I do not blame Sinn Féin for tabling the motion. It is on everyone's minds and everyone is concerned about the reckless harm Israel has done. Netanyahu and the others are criminals. I have no problem saying that because they have done terrible, terrible things. We are deciding the fate of Irish team here. I do not think the Government would be doing the right thing to

stop them from playing unless we get direct confirmation from the team or the management about what they want to do.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Noel Grealish): It is obvious that this House, and indeed the people of Ireland, have significant concerns about Israeli actions in Palestine and the dire and worsening humanitarian situation in Gaza. I reiterate that Israeli actions in Palestine consistently contravene international law and the Government continues to press for appropriate action at EU and international level in response to Israeli breaches of human rights and democratic principles. The prevention by Israel of essential and sufficient humanitarian aid going into the people of Gaza, the continued facilitation of violent settlers in the West Bank, and the appalling displacement of so many people in Lebanon, is completely unacceptable.

Ireland had taken a strong stance in respect of the ongoing conflict in the Middle East, including recognising the State of Palestine, and the Government stands ready to play our part in working towards a sustainable peace between Israel and Palestine, through the realisation of the two-state solution. The Government believes that the most effective and impactful way to deal with Israel's actions is at European Union level. We have a consistently strong record as a country in highlighting these issues but also in taking action on a number of fronts. It is clear that the European Union needs to do more on this issue, and the Taoiseach has written to the President of the European Council, Antonio Costa, asking that it would be put on the table at the next European Council meeting. We will continue to raise this at EU level.

We will also continue to use our influence to persuade the international community to take appropriate action and stop this conflict. However, we should not reduce this issue to one or two football games or events. For good reasons, governments should not interfere with international sports federations or NGBs, particularly by directing who should play whom in international sporting events. FIFA, the world football governing body, and UEFA, the European football governing body, are responsible for the system within which these fixtures are scheduled to take place and maintain a strong line against interference by governments in international football competitions. We do not want to see an Irish team penalised due to interference by an Irish government. We are in government to run the country. The FAI should be left to run football.

In this regard, the FAI has strongly represented the views of its membership that Israel should be excluded from international football competitions, including bringing a motion to UEFA to this effect last year. While we all may agree with the motion, the reality is that it was not passed by UEFA, and the FAI must conduct itself in line with UEFA rules. While deciding whether to fulfil these fixtures is ultimately a matter for the FAI, it must be acknowledged that refusing to play the games against Israel risks isolating Irish football from the international football community.

The FAI's role is to ensure that Irish football remains viable domestically and in good standing globally, without inflicting long-term damage on the sport. Punishing athletes for the actions of governments undermines the principles of international sportsmanship. Players have trained their entire lives to compete for their country at the highest level. Denying Irish footballers the opportunity to compete in the Nations League compromises their careers and development. The Irish players, who have brought us such joy in the past year and who have dedicated so

much to representing their country, should not be denied the opportunity to compete at major international tournaments as a consequence of decisions beyond their control.

With regard to security around the home leg of the fixture in Dublin, the FAI is engaging with An Garda Síochána, which is confident in its ability to deliver a safe and secure environment to facilitate the fixture should it take place in Dublin. Should the first fixture take place in Dublin, which again is ultimately a matter for the FAI and UEFA, I am fully confident that An Garda Síochána has the expertise and resources to police the game properly.

As has been pointed out during this debate, all NGBs, including the FAI, are independent, autonomous bodies responsible for the governance of their own sports, including the organisation of fixtures. The FAI is completely within its rights to fulfil its international fixtures, and the Government acknowledges its right to do so. The Government has no legal authority to interfere with sporting fixtures and our amendment to the motion reflects that position. The Government proposes to amend the wording of this motion, as submitted to the House.

I wish the ladies' football team well tonight. It is playing a very important game. We are in here discussing soccer and I am very disappointed in all the Members across the House. Not one wished the Irish ladies football team well bar one – the Minister of State here-----

(Interruptions)

Deputy Mark Wall: Did either of the Ministers of State between them mention genocide?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Micheál Carrigy): Members, please.

Deputy Noel Grealish: -----but I wish the women well in their game tonight.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Micheál Carrigy): Members, please.

Deputy Johnny Guirke: We are talking about genocide.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Micheál Carrigy): Members please. Sinn Féin has ten minutes to conclude. Deputies Guirke and McDonald have two and a half minutes, two and a half minutes and then five.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: The world witnessed in the Israeli offensive in Gaza some of the worst excesses and some of the most extreme cruel actions a nation can inflict on another group of people. The devastating toll on human life resulting the deaths of tens of thousands of men, women and children as a consequence of the Israeli military campaign in Gaza far exceeded any of the norms of a civilised society. The vastly disproportionate number of civilians and children killed in the Israeli offensive clearly shows that Israel has had nothing but total and absolute disregard for balancing military necessity with its obligations to protect non combatants. Israel did not just target what it would consider legitimate military objectives. It systematically and deliberately attacked not just civilians, but civilian infrastructure as well as using starvation and thirst as a weapon against the Palestinian population. The barren

landscape of rubble across Gaza demonstrates that for Israel Palestinian homes, schools and hospitals were legitimate military targets.

Israel has also killed hundreds of Palestinian athletes and footballers and 300 sports facilities across Gaza and the West Bank have been destroyed. A comprehensive report from a United Nations commission concluded that Israel has committed genocide in the Gaza Strip. The horror stories coming out of Israeli prisons and detention centres are shocking beyond belief. Detainees are regularly beaten, electrocuted, sexually tortured and shockingly abused by military dogs. Detainees are denied adequate food, water and proper medical care. Settler violence has escalated and the illegal land grabs are continuing with the connivance of the Israeli military. If Palestinians intervene to protect their homes and farms, they are the ones attacked and killed by the settlers and the Israeli military. If Ireland competes against the Israeli national team, we are helping to legitimise the genocide and torture and the stealing of Palestinian lands. We would be saying that these human rights abuses and war crimes are acceptable and normal. Israel needs to be sent a clear message that we will never allow it to use sport to normalise its apartheid system, the genocide or systematic abuse and its torture of Palestinians. Israel needs to be suspended from UEFA and the FAI needs to cancel its game against this apartheid regime.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Hear, hear.

Deputy Johnny Guirke: As of 6 May 2026, more than 72,600 Palestinian had been directly killed by the Israeli invasion of Gaza. Thousands of those were women and children. The United Nations and many humanitarian organisations believe the Gaza health ministry's figures to be a significant under count with thousands of Gazans still unaccounted for. In 2025, Israel bombed at least six countries – Palestine, Iran, Lebanon, Qatar, Syria and Yemen. It also carried out strikes in Tunisian, Maltese and Greek territorial waters on aid flotillas heading for Gaza with no consequences for it.

The decision by UEFA to allow Israel, a non-European country, to participate in the European Nations League despite the ongoing genocide against the Palestinian people in Gaza and the West Bank is disgraceful. UEFA defends its stance by claiming that politics should play no part in sport but, hypocritically, has no problem in banning Russia from the competition. FIFA, UEFA and the Irish Government should not have put the football association in the position in which it finds itself. The issue of whether the game gets played should never have reached this point but now that it has, the FAI needs to take a stand and refuse to participate.

The Minister of State and the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, have said they would not attend the game. The Minister of State said that because he knows it is wrong. Worst of all is the FAI talking about playing the game at a neutral venue, removing the people's right to protest. The issue is not where the game is played. The Israeli presence is the issue. We should not carry on as normal while Gaza is being devastated. Thousands of men, women and children have been killed with no regard for international law or human rights. Refusing to play South Africa in rugby played a major part in isolating the apartheid regime there. A similar stance should be taken in relation to soccer and Israel. If football authorities can act in one conflict but not another, people are entitled to ask why. All we are asking for is not to play the game – other countries will follow – and to not shake their hands or listen to their anthem. Ireland refusing

to play Israel would not end the suffering in Gaza but it would be a statement heard far and wide. Let us show Israel the red card and stop this game.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: We teach life, sir.

We Palestinians teach life after they have occupied the last sky.

We teach life after they have built their settlements and apartheid walls, after the last skies.

We teach life, sir.

How many Palestinian lives can Israel steal? How many Hind Rajabs? How many mothers, fathers, doctors, nurses or farmers? Is there a point? Is there a red line or a bottom line? How many farms can be destroyed, olive groves ploughed through, homes destroyed or football infrastructure destroyed? Is there a bottom line? Is there a point at which Zionism is stopped? Is there a point at which Israeli impunity is not merely named but confronted? There are moments where a refusal to act, where excuses and distractions are exposed as complicity. There are moments when looking away and a determination to keep looking away becomes an obvious political choice. There are moments when people, governments, institutions and, yes, when sport will choose to either stand on the side of justice or accommodate and enable injustice and oppression. The world witnesses. We witness the devastation of Gaza with hospitals bombed, schools destroyed and refugee camps attacked. We witness starvation used as a weapon against civilian populations and children killed, maimed and orphaned in numbers that should shock the conscience of the world.

This is not merely a conflict. This is a genocide. As desperate families queue for food and aid, they face bombardment, displacement and fear. Yet, despite all of this, only two Government members have come into the Chamber. The rest of their benches are bare. They are benches of shame. They come in here to tell us that when it comes to a football match against Israel, sport should be treated as separate from the reality that unfolds before our eyes. We reject that proposition.

Sport does not exist in a vacuum, and it never has. Sport is the most powerful force for inclusion, equality and justice. It can be used to challenge rather than enable. Those who have ignorantly argued that sport and politics should never mix conveniently disregard the key role sporting boycotts played in isolating apartheid South Africa and conquering apartheid South Africa at that time. I want to read the names of four brave rugby players - Tony Ward, Moss Keane, Donal Spring and Hugo MacNeill. They knew in 1981 that sport could not be used to enable and prolong discriminatory and racist practices in apartheid South Africa. They were right then, and they are right now. I applaud them for that fact.

Thousands of athletes, players and sports officials have been killed in Palestine and Gaza. Our motion sets out the disgusting and deeply troubling facts of the International Court of Justice's findings on Israel's occupation and settlement policies. The court issued provisional measures warning of the risk of genocidal acts and requiring Israel to comply with its obligations. Hundreds of sporting facilities have been destroyed. Entire generations of

Palestinians have seen not only their homes and schools targeted but their pitches and clubs. Places that ought to be their places of joy are stolen from them.

We come in here this evening and have this Pontius Pilate routine from the Government. This is deeply shocking. It is not enough to try to hide behind the spin. Of course, the FAI, UEFA and FIFA make the sporting decisions. Of course they govern their sporting codes. We recognise that in our motion. We ask merely that the Government stand on the right side of this and back the growing campaign to stop this game and gives the FAI the protection and cover to do the right thing and protect those who don the green jersey, so they know when they make the moral choice that their Government is on their side. That is what this motion is about and that is why we must stop this game.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Amendment put.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Micheál Carrigy): In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time on Wednesday, 10 June 2026.

Message from Select Committee

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Micheál Carrigy):

The Select Committee on Justice, Home Affairs and Migration has completed its consideration of the Guardianship of Infants (Amendment) Bill 2026, made amendments thereto and amended the Title to read as follows:

AN ACT TO AMEND THE GUARDIANSHIP OF INFANTS ACT 1964 TO PROVIDE FOR THE RESTRICTION OR REMOVAL OF GUARDIANSHIP OF A CHILD IN CERTAIN CIRCUMSTANCES BY ORDER OF A COURT IN PROCEEDINGS FOR THAT PURPOSE, IN THE RESOLUTION OF WHICH THE COURT SHALL REGARD THE BEST INTERESTS OF THE CHILD AS THE PARAMOUNT CONSIDERATION; TO AMEND CERTAIN PROVISIONS OF PART VA OF THE CHILD CARE ACT 1991 IN RELATION TO THE APPOINTMENT OF, AND LEGAL REPRESENTATION FOR, GUARDIANS AD LITEM; AND TO PROVIDE OR RELATED MATTERS.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Military Neutrality

119. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Defence her proposals to remove the triple lock neutrality protection; when she plans to bring forward a Bill; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [43733/26]

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I understand the Government's proposal to remove the triple lock neutrality protection was discussed at Cabinet today. I believe a Bill was brought forward. Will this Bill be published in the coming days? When will that come to Second Stage? When will it be debated and what are the plans in that regard?

Minister for Defence (Deputy Helen McEntee): I thank the Deputy for the question. As he said, this was discussed at Cabinet today. Approval was sought by me, and it was agreed by Cabinet that this would be presented for Second Stage. This will happen in the coming weeks. While there is no date set, I intend that this will be presented to the Dáil in coming weeks and published in the near future.

The purpose of the Defence (Amendment) Bill 2026 is to consolidate, with amendments, the existing provisions of the defence Acts 1954 and 2015 concerning the despatch of members of the Defence Forces for service outside the State. There are other elements to the legislation proposed today, specifically where we can give a mechanism to the Defence Forces so that somebody who has been convicted or put forward on charges can be relinquished from their duty for that time. That does not currently exist. I outline that is also part of the legislation.

In effect, the requirement for a UN mandate will be removed. It will modify the existing requirement regarding what we know as the triple lock mechanism in relation to the despatch of the Defence Forces for service outside the State as part of an international United Nations force. There has been extensive engagement between my Department and the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel with regard to the drafting of the Bill and it is my intention to bring it to the House as soon as possible.

As this House is aware, the key proposed legislative change is that the requirement for a UN Security Council mandate will be removed. Current legislation allows members of the UN Security Council by means of a veto or threat of same to bind this country's hands in its international peacekeeping engagement. It is simply not acceptable to have a situation in which Ireland's decision making with regard to participation in peace operations can be impacted by the geopolitical interests of other states. I have provided many examples of this to the House, most recently the difficulties regarding extension of the UNIFIL mandate until the end of this year, and because of that the requirement for us to withdraw our personnel from south Lebanon at the conclusion of that mission.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The defence Acts exist in Irish legislation and state clearly the circumstances this Legislature has decided is the threshold that should be met if we are to send Irish personnel - men and women - on peacekeeping missions. That is a decision that was made here and nowhere else. We need to be clear and honest about that. There were a number of key points in the pre-legislative scrutiny report, one of which was that it did not recommend the removal of the triple lock neutrality protection. It called for a number of safeguards. There was a considerable amount of discussion. I am surprised that there seemed to be a Whip on members to try to rush it. I am not sure what the need for it was. We could have gotten a bit more time to scrutinise it. I would like to know if the Minister has taken on board any of the points from that report.

Deputy Helen McEntee: We are seeing the reason for moving on this now play out in real time. It is not just the decision taken not to continue the UN mandate in Lebanon where we have had members on the ground for decades.

9 o'clock

In the last two weeks, I met members of the Defence Forces in Rome. On the very day I met them, they had to finish up with Operation Irini, which had a mandate to operate in the Mediterranean to prevent arms from getting to Libya. These members contributed significantly to that overall mission and are held in very high regard among members of the defence forces of other countries. They themselves told me personally that Ireland is the main one to lose out because of this mandate not being renewed. Irish troops, members of the Irish Defence Forces, and the people of this country will no longer benefit from the experience and knowledge those troops gain from being part of these missions. It is really important to take into consideration that we are not talking about some abstract concept. This is not about something that may or may not happen in the future or that happened in the past. As of now, we have troops in Lebanon whose mandate will not be renewed. The final troops went out on rotation in the last few weeks. That will finish next year. It will no longer continue. In the last two weeks, troops have had to finish up with a mission that will continue without us. The only people who will lose out are the Irish people and members of our Defence Forces, who have gained a wealth of experience from their participation in that mission.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: This is one of those pieces that come up in this debate. I deeply regret the end of UNIFIL. It is very worrying for the region. However, there is no UN mission afterwards. It is not that we are not participating in a UN mission. UNIFIL will end. It will be gone. There will be no more UNIFIL. That is a shame, but there is no UN mission to which other countries' troops will be deployed but that Ireland will be prevented from taking part in. There is a question I have been asking for a while now. There is a need for the UN to be reformed. We have brought forward propositions in that regard. There are 11 or 12 existing peacekeeping missions outside of UNIFIL. It is true that we need our peacekeepers to go on peacekeeping missions to ensure their experience is developed. It does not seem as if this Government has been actively seeking out alternative deployments with existing UN peacekeeping missions. I have seen no evidence of that. I have been asking that question and I ask the Minister the question again.

Deputy Helen McEntee: We are part of various different peacekeeping missions, including those in the western Balkans and Common Security and Defence Policy missions, although I appreciate those are separate and mainly focus on training. There are civilian missions and there are also military missions. Just now, I gave the Deputy an example of a UN mission we have been part of and contributed to for the last number of years. Our members have been held in high regard because of the experience, knowledge and commitment they have brought to that mission, Operation Irini. Because that mandate was not renewed and expired in the last two weeks, we can no longer have troops as part of that mission. Because of the triple lock, other countries can decide where we keep our troops and whether they can continue to be deployed on missions that will continue without us, as Operation Irini will. We should not allow other states to take that decision. This Bill does not change our position on neutrality and does not prevent us from engaging in other missions outside of the UN mandate structure,

as we already do. It makes sure that, where we are involved in operations like the one we saw end in the last two weeks, the rug is not pulled from under us because the mission is not continuing in its current format. The triple lock binds us in a way that it should not. It does not bind other countries. Even Austria, a neutral country, is not required to go through this extensive triple-lock process.

Military Neutrality

120. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Defence if she will withdraw legislation to abolish the triple lock pending a referendum to let the people decide; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [44192/26]

122. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Defence whether public consultation has been undertaken in relation to any proposed changes to the triple lock; and whether the Government will commit to a referendum should any fundamental alteration to Ireland's neutrality arise from such changes. [44028/26]

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Minister wants to scrap the triple lock. She wants to be able to send Irish troops abroad on international missions outside of the framework of international law. She wants to be able to send Irish troops on NATO-led or US-led missions. That is her political position. I believe that equates to getting rid of neutrality but that is a question for the Minister. My question is whether she will allow the people to decide. Opinion poll after opinion poll has shown public support for neutrality and the triple lock. Will the Minister allow the people to decide on this question rather than making the decision herself?

Minister of State at the Department of Defence (Deputy Thomas Byrne): I am going to answer this question on behalf of the Minister. I propose to take Questions Nos. 120 and 122 together. As the Minister has already outlined, this legislation is a key priority for the Government. The commitment to undertake this necessary reform of the triple lock is set out in the programme for Government. The triple lock is a statutory mechanism. It is established under statute and is not a constitutional mechanism. Any change does not require a referendum.

The Deputy has criticised NATO leadership of missions. He completely ignores the fact that our troops have been under NATO command in Kosovo for the last 25 years where they are on a NATO-led mission that has a UN mandate. The Deputy says that we are going to participate in missions in breach of international law. The exact opposite is the case. Everything that we do has to be in accordance with international law, the United Nations principles and our Constitution, which sets out very clearly that this is a peaceful country and that we want friendly relations with people. We are a country that does this.

The truth is that if the triple lock continues, there will be no more peacekeeping. That is the reality because the UN has not mandated any new missions. The Minister has already given the example of Operation Iirini. That is a really important mission. Irish troops left that mission on Monday of last week. That mission continues in accordance with UN law, international law and the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. Our people had to come home, however. The impact is not just on the mission. They had to come home. They did.

Deputy Paul Murphy: It is not continuing under UN law. That is the whole point.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: It is continuing.

Deputy Paul Murphy: It is not continuing under UN or international law. It is outside the framework of international law.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: It is continuing and most of the member states are part of it. That is the reality. It is continuing to do really important work-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: Most of the members states were involved in the invasion of Iraq.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: -----to enforce a UN arms embargo in relation to Libya. By the way, it is also doing very important humanitarian work. That is really important but our people had to leave. We are losing the experience they were gaining on these missions with all of their European colleagues. Their European colleagues are all still out there doing that work today. We are not and that is all the triple lock is about.

There is no other country, in the EU or otherwise, that requires the same triple lock we have. This weekend, Dermot Ahern, who was the Minister when this was a big issue, said that was then and this is now and that times have changed. We believe the triple lock is no longer fit for purpose and that it must change. That is the reality because UNIFIL is ending this year. The Lebanese Government may well invite countries to participate in a peacekeeping mission there. That may well happen. I do not know whether it will. There may well be discussions about that. However, under the triple lock, we cannot be there. We cannot be there under the current legislation. All we are trying to do is to reform this so that we can continue to be involved in peacekeeping. That is really important.

We have had extensive public consultation in this area. The Consultative Forum on International Security Policy was convened. It was open to the public. The forum facilitated a broad national conversation on Ireland's foreign, defence and security policy. It brought together a wide range of stakeholders including civilian and military experts, academics, current and former members of the Defence Forces, representatives of international institutions and members of the public. It was held over four days in Cork, Galway and Dublin. Approximately 1,000 people attended in person and 10,000 people watched online. Some 850 written submissions were received.

When reforming the triple lock, we will do so in a manner that remains fully consistent with our legal principles and moral values as a nation. In fact, our Constitution specifies that. We will act in accordance with our obligations under international law. Ireland's continued commitment is to multilateralism, peacekeeping and the principles of the UN Charter, which are seen in the work UNIFIL will continue to do until the end of the mandate and the very work Operation Irini continues to do, although we can no longer take part. Our people came out that day. Nobody else was affected. The proposals to reform the triple lock are consistent with our policy of military neutrality. There are neutral countries participating in Operation Irini today. We are focused on ensuring that Ireland has the capacity to act responsibly and effectively in the service of international peace.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): I will take Deputy Murphy's supplementary question and then Deputy Tóibín.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Do I not come in for the first 30 seconds?

Deputy Paul Murphy: I do not think so.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): No, I do not think so. The Deputies will have a minute each and then the Minister will get two.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The idea that there has been any real public consultation here is a joke. Micheál Martin said we were going to have a citizens' assembly on neutrality. That was scrapped and replaced with a consultative forum packed with warmongers, NATO heads and academics with links to the military industrial complex. That was the Government's public consultation. What a joke. Allow the people to decide. Give the people a referendum. If the Government is so confident in its arguments, let us have it out and allow the people to decide.

I will quote the Minister of State, Deputy Robert Troy. He said:

Ireland's position on the use of force where there is no UN mandate or authorisation is well established and known. For fear that anyone is in any doubt, let me be clear: it is wrong and it is illegal.

Does the Minister of State agree with Deputy Troy or does he not? All the triple lock does is ensure that any mission we go on has a UN mandate or authorisation. That is the whole point of it.

Why did Operation Irini not get extended by the UN? It is because it is no longer just about Libya. Let us be honest; it is about Russia. It is about chasing the Russian shadow fleet.

Why on earth should Irish troops be chasing the Russian shadow fleet in the Mediterranean? That would be a breach of neutrality. It is perfectly correct that we are not going to be participating in that.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The triple lock was created through the democratic decision of the Irish people. The triple lock was introduced in 2001 after the defeat of the first referendum on the Nice treaty. When that referendum was defeated, the Government noted that the main concern in the referendum was the issue of Irish neutrality and its erosion. The triple lock was an essential part of the passing of the second referendum on the Nice treaty. Every home in the country received a leaflet from the Government with the triple lock written into it, saying that if they voted for the Nice treaty in the second referendum, they would get the triple lock. While it is not written in the Constitution, it is morally and politically coupled with that democratic decision. The fact that the Government is looking to decouple it from that decision is profoundly antidemocratic.

I do not think the Minister of State understands the whole issue of Irish neutrality. When large military blocs, such as the USA, Russia and China, are in opposition to each other, taking sides with either group is by definition military alignment. The reason the Government is going

down this route is because of the changes in the European Union. Ursula von der Leyen has stated very openly that she wants to create an EU defence union. In reality, the Government is doing this undercover. I ask the Government to at least put it to a referendum. Do not be afraid of the people in terms of a referendum.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: It is very clear to anybody who examines the reality of this situation that the triple lock is simply about maintaining our role as peacekeepers. The issue of neutrality is completely different. We are not taking sides with anybody. We enforce the shadow fleet ourselves, by the way, with other countries. Operation Irini continues to do excellent work in accordance with international law. It is enforcing international law in the Mediterranean and doing really important humanitarian work.

The circumstances have changed dramatically. The mandate that I feel I have is the Fianna Fáil election manifesto. We had an election on that because things changed - all of this changed. There is no European Union defence union. There is no defence alliance at the European Union level. We cannot enter that. The people put that in the Constitution, and it cannot happen. It is very wrong to mix those things up. We cannot become part of a European common defence. There are no proposals for a European common defence. Our decision on the triple lock is simply about making our own decisions here in Ireland, in the Dáil, as to where our troops go. We make these decisions in the best interests of peace, the best interests of international law and the best interests of our military and its members. That is what this is about.

The Members opposite seek to ascribe a conspiracy to the Government about wars. We have heard it all. In relation to Deputy Paul Murphy's comments, briseann an dúchas trí shúile an chait. Once Russia is mentioned, he gets all agitated.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I mentioned Russia.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: The Deputy mentioned Russia, and he became very agitated because this is about Russia. It is about Russia and other countries vetoing proposals at the UN Security Council. Because of that veto power, it was not possible to get a mandate renewed for Operation Irini. In any event, all of the other countries that were enforcing international law and peace and security did not need this mandate. The decision of the Security Council stands.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Minister of State claims he has a mandate. What does the Fianna Fáil manifesto say? It says it will continue to protect and promote Ireland's military neutrality, including sensible reform of the triple lock legislation. That is not what it is doing, is it? The triple lock is gone entirely. We look at the heads of Bill, which make it clear. The heads of Bill state that the Bill will provide for the removal of the triple lock. It is gone. Fianna Fáil does not have a mandate for this. We look at the presidential election, and we look at opinion poll after opinion poll. People are attached to neutrality, and they are not stupid. They know, just as Deputy Micheál Martin said, that the triple lock is at the core of our neutrality. Why? It is because it is the only thing that stops this Government or any future Government from sending Irish troops to participate in any sort of imperialist intervention anywhere in the world. It is the only legal thing that stops them. At the committee, it was said that without the triple lock, Irish troops could have been sent to participate in the invasion of Iraq. That was said at

the committee by the top civil servant. The Government allowed them to use Shannon Airport. If it were not for the triple lock, the Government could have sent Irish troops abroad. That is what the triple lock is about. I ask again whether the Minister of State agrees with what the Minister of State, Deputy Robert Troy, said.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: What we are seeing here is choreography. It is not a conspiracy. Ursula von der Leyen did not hide the fact when she ran for the European Commission Presidency that she wanted an EU defence union. She said it very clearly. She has stated clearly that her objective in the EU parliamentary term is defence and security issues. We have had an EU Defence Commissioner since 2024 whose objective is the defence of the EU. This is not a conspiracy. These are actions that are taking place. Very soon after that discussion, Deputy Micheál Martin said he welcomed the changes to the EU treaties that would reduce the power of nation states to determine decisions on issues such as defence, the military and security. Even the decision-making within the EU is to see a far more diluted influence over nation states.

Large nation states fight wars for their national interests. Small nation states will not have influence over those decisions, but will have to send their young people to fight those wars. All we are asking the Government to do is put it to the people. This is the reason the triple lock existed in the first place.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: The statements by Deputy Tóibín about fighting wars are outrageous and without any basis in fact. It is the timeworn theme from those in the opposition to the European Union, completely forgetting about and actually insulting those countries that, after the most devastating war, came together to make peace. This idea that big countries in Europe are going to be making war and we are going to join them-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: They are rearming, in case the Minister of State has not seen it.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: It is not true, and the Deputy knows it is not true.

Deputy Helen McEntee: They are being attacked by the very country-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Minister is contradicting Deputy Byrne.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: While it is nice to hear a socialist quoting the Fianna Fáil manifesto, and I certainly appreciate the Deputy's examination of the manifesto-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: That is your mandate.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: The Deputy has not quoted the Constitution, which governs everything we do. The Constitution states at Article 29:

1. Ireland affirms its devotion to the ideal of peace and friendly co-operation amongst nations founded on international justice and morality.

2. Ireland affirms its adherence to the principle of the pacific settlement of international disputes by international arbitration or judicial determination.

That is what governs this Government, it governs the Dáil and it governs our military. That is what we do. We do peace, we do friendly co-operation and we accord with the principles of international law. That is what we will do. If there are peace missions out there that are going to take place, perhaps at the invitation of countries affected, maybe Lebanon, we would like to be able to make a decision properly here in the Dáil, maybe involving an Oireachtas committee to examine every aspect of it. We want to make the decision here. We cannot allow countries that some of the Members opposite castigate to have a veto over our foreign policy decisions.

Deputy Paul Murphy: It is called international law.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: We are governed by the Constitution. We are governed by this Parliament. That is all we are trying to do here. Operation Irini continues. That goes on, but our people came home. That is the reality of the triple lock, and it is a reality that is wrong for this country. It is a reality that is wrong for a sovereign country. If there are discussions with the Lebanese Government about future peacekeeping missions there, it is wrong that we would not be involved in them because of the triple lock.

Air Corps

121. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Defence further to recent Dáil Éireann debates, her views on past health and safety measures in the Air Corps; the actions she plans to take to support former aircraft maintenance and ancillary personnel; whether she intends to ensure their medical needs are met; and the other supports that can be offered to the category affected as a whole. [43734/26]

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Our last exchange on this issue was one of the most frustrating exchanges I have had on this particular topic since I started raising it about a year and a half ago. Every attempt at diversion was sought. I am asking this question very clearly. There are concerns in relation to the State Claims Agency and so on, and perhaps we can get into that some other time. What I asked the Minister for the last time and am asking for again is an update on the approach the Government proposes to take in relation to the whole category of people affected by chemical exposure in the Air Corps in terms of an examination of health outcomes and medical supports.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I appreciate that the Deputy has raised this a number of times, and that he might not always like the answer I give him. However, I am reminded continuously that in the discussions we are having here, while the Deputy appreciates there are certain things I cannot say and certain areas I cannot talk about, that is because I am a main defendant, as Minister, in all of the cases that have been brought forward, cases that are being brought forward and cases that may come forward in the future. While the Deputy talks about the whole group of people that may be impacted by the issue we are talking about here, there are current live litigation cases that are potentially being brought forward in the weeks ahead that will have

implications for any other person who might find themselves in a similar situation. I am not trying to be evasive or avoid questions.

It is clear to me that matters of health and safety in the Air Corps, particularly when we are talking about allegations of exposure to chemicals, are directly relevant to all of the cases before the courts which is why I cannot get into detail in terms of what is next. I know of the number of cases that are there. There were 23 cases. One has been settled through mediation, 12 are moving forward and ten have only come to the fore in the last number of years. There are a number of cases that have been presented. I cannot speak beyond that because there are limitations in that regard currently.

In respect of the current litigation cases, I can bring a recent development to the Deputy's attention, which he might not be aware of since we last spoke. The State Claims Agency has informed me that a number of cases have been taken under active case management by the courts. At the moment, nothing is moving. As I referenced previously, there have been attempts by the State Claims Agency to actively engage with a number of plaintiffs over the last number of months, with a particular view to mediating cases. However, these offers to progress the mediation have not been taken up. Neither has there been progress in relation to the courts. There has been an active case management taken on by the courts. As I am sure the Deputy knows, this means a judge can actively pursue, require engagement of the parties, push matters forward, seek papers and testimony, compel mediation and set specific deadlines. This may result in the development of these cases in the near future. There has been progress since we last spoke about this. Obviously, this means that this is now moving forward in the courts process. This is not a decision that we have taken ourselves; it is the decision that has been reached by the judge. It is important that I do not say anything here that would in any way impact that process.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I have never asked the Minister or her predecessor to do that and I would not do so because it would be a waste of time. I would never ask about ongoing court cases because I know it would be completely pointless. I have never asked about that because I know the Minister cannot say that in this place. The equivalent of what the Minister is saying is that when more and more attention started being brought to bear on abuse in industrial schools or the treatment of women in the Magdalen laundries, the Minister for education or for children, or whoever was responsible for the issue at the time, would come forward and say that he or she could not do anything about that because people have a right to take a court case, that there were a number of court cases and the Minister could do nothing about that. That was not true then and it is not true now. In that instance, commissions of inquiry, redress schemes and things like Caranua were set up. None of those were prevented by the court cases. People continued to retain their entitlement to take court cases. That continued and people did take court cases but the Government was able, separate from the court process, to put in place measures for redress. The same thing should be happening here. The Government should be doing a health audit. None of that is prevented by the court cases. The Government should be looking at forms of redress and at health protections. None of that is prevented by court cases.

Deputy Helen McEntee: What the Deputy is referring to are completely different scenarios, with potentially significantly different numbers-----

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: It is not procedurally different at all.

Deputy Helen McEntee: What we know is the number of people who have come forward. I know the number of people who have presented, be it through the State Claims Agency or who are going through litigation processes and have only in recent times put themselves forward and highlighted their own situation. There is one case, as we know, that has gone through mediation and concluded that mediation process. There is a particular decision that has been taken by individuals as to which route they want to take here.

Beyond that, as I have said, a body of work was done in the Department to see if there was anything further that should be done. Subsequently, since that work was done, I have engaged with the Attorney General, the State Claims Agency and my own Department. Based on those conversations, I have determined that the process that is currently happening at the moment is the most appropriate course of action. There is no suggestion to me at this moment in time that we are talking about numbers that the Deputy has referenced in other types of cases or scenarios. What I do know is that we have active cases that are now going to be brought forward because of case management. Individuals have the option to engage in mediation as well. That is a process that is there and that has a legal structure to it as well and one that we have supported. I do not want to push people to the courts for any issue here. That is not something that we would do as a Department. There are options there and there are alternative options for people. Again, I would say those options are available to people if they do not wish to go through the courts process.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: What I am interpreting from what the Minister is saying - perhaps she can clarify it because she has not said it explicitly - is that she received advice from her officials, engaged with the Attorney General and the State Claims Agency and effectively, on foot of that, there is no policy solution to this. Ultimately, it is all through the courts. Contrary to what the Minister has said, her strategy or proposal is that the court is the only route here. She is not offering any policy solution. Of course, in terms of the substance of the issue, it is very different from any of the examples I just gave. However, in terms of the principle, the Minister does not have to step into the court cases or interfere with them in order to do right by the whole category. The Air Corps chemical abuse survivors have counted up to 130 deaths that they consider to be premature. I am not a clinician. I cannot go through each of those cases and identify that. What I am and have been asking for, and what Deputy Micheál Martin asked for when he was in opposition, is an assessment of those people, with patterns identified. We need to make sure they are looked after and that there is an inquiry into it. None of that is prevented by the court cases. Not a bit of it.

Deputy Helen McEntee: What I am saying is that I have engaged with my team. A body of work had started when I came into the Department and I had asked for it to be completed. Since then, I have engaged with the Attorney General and the State Claims Agency. I have also assessed the current situation. What we know is that we have a number of cases that have gone through the State Claims Agency or that have engaged with the agency, as they were entitled to do. There is another process, and that is through the courts. What I am saying is that is not the route we are forcing people through. There is a separate process through the State Claims

Agency that we have already seen an individual go through, where there has been a resolution following mediation-----

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The Government is not doing anything outside of the courts.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach Deputy Conor Sheehan: It is not a back and forth.

Deputy Helen McEntee: There has been a conclusion there but because this process is ongoing and because of the cases, there is not much more that I can say in this regard. It is important to stress that the State Claims Agency has reached out. I understand that it is very much the decision of individuals as to which route they decide to go or what they decide to do. On that basis and given the legal advice I have received, I cannot go into any more detail on this.

Defence Forces

123. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Defence her views on the matter of entry-level cadet pay; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [43735/26]

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I raised this issue with the Minister a little over a month ago but unfortunately we have seen no progress. It is an issue of enormous concern for cadets and their representative organisation, RACO. It potentially creates problems for our ability to recruit and retain people of quality. We need to see this addressed. The Minister promised to address it. She is seven or eight months in her role now but, as yet, we have seen no progress.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I have been in office for a little bit less than that but I am absolutely determined that we make progress across all areas of pay when it comes to the Defence Forces, at every level. The Deputy will appreciate that much of that work will have to happen through the normal process of the public sector pay agreements. At the same time, I have been very clear that where we can make progress in other ways, I would like to do so.

I want to highlight the significant progress that the Government has made on pay and conditions for Defence Forces personnel, particularly over the last five years, including in the area of cadet pay. For context, in July 2021 the first entry-level point for a cadet joining the Defence Forces was €19,640 but as of 1 June 2026 the first point on the scale for a cadet joining the Defence Forces is €26,510, an increase of almost €7,000. I appreciate that for somebody who is coming in later in life who has financial commitments, that is not going to be at a level that he or she might achieve in other areas. However, we have different pay scales that apply during the cadetship period depending on qualification, with the current pay scale applicable to cadets ranging from €26,510 up to almost €40,000. Cadets are also provided with accommodation and meals free of charge which obviously adds significant value, on top of the overall pay package. Following the cadetship and on commissioning, officers' starting salaries range from €46,823 to €52,265, depending on whether they joined as school-leavers or graduates.

What is very clear is that there is still a high level of interest in joining the Defence Forces through cadetship. We received 2,878 applications for 80 cadetship places this year.

We want to make sure that when we fill those numbers we maintain people and keep people there. If we compare that even with last year, there were 1,819 and in 2024 there were 1,791, so the numbers have increased significantly. I believe the increase in the overall pay will help towards that but this is not to say I am not determined and committed to try to increase those numbers even further.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The Minister is committed to trying to increase those numbers but is she committed to addressing this discrepancy? Is the Minister committed? That is what I want to know. Cadet pay is one of the lowest in the Defence Forces at €503 per week compared with €550 for a recruit, which rises to €627 after 12 weeks. In the first year they earn 40.7% less than their enlisted counterparts. I cannot speak for every category of cadet that is coming through but there have been issues in the past where groups have come out of training in the Defence Forces and a large number of them have ended up in the private sector because the terms and conditions are more attractive. If we are putting in the money and putting in the effort in respect of people who are dedicated and committed and who want to serve their country in the Defence Forces, we should be trying to keep them. Particularly with the current cost of living, this pay is nowhere near adequate. It is below the national minimum wage for the hours they work, which are quite considerable.

Deputy Helen McEntee: The Deputy will be aware that anything we do in this regard has to be very much in line with the parameters of the public pay policy. I am not the Minister for public expenditure and reform. What I can do is look to see whether there are other mechanisms by which we can increase the overall figure. I have met RACO and I have spoken to its representatives about this. I know this is a real priority for it. While I gave a very clear commitment when I met them earlier this year that this is something I would pursue, I have to do it through the various different channels. The issue is on the agenda of the conciliation and arbitration scheme for members of the Permanent Defence Force. I have agreed to see if there is something further or another mechanism or way in which we can address this.

There also has been engagement with the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation on the issue of cadet pay. It has highlighted again the public service pay agreements and the need to work within those parameters. We also have the local bargaining process. I appreciate that this is taking longer than any of us would like but this allows parties to bring forward proposals up to a maximum value equivalent to 3% of basic pay, with 1% to be paid from the current agreement and then the balance addressed in any successor payment agreement. There are opportunities in the various different processes that I have mentioned to try to address pay and conditions. I may come back in on some of the other areas where we have tried to address what the Deputy said, namely, how, when we get people in, we actually maintain them and improve conditions more broadly; not just for cadets.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I have said before that sometimes I get a bit worried in that while I am not against local bargaining *per se*, it worries me when the holy world and all is going to be fixed through local bargaining. It comes up time and again that it will fix this, that and the other. Ultimately, it comes down to 1% of the payroll in an individual pay deal. I

believe what cadets want to hear is that the Minister is committed to doing this and that she will address this. The Minister has said that she will try to progress it but we need to see a clearer commitment in that regard.

In the time I have left I will briefly raise another issue on the welfare of Defence Forces personnel in the context of the tribunal process. The Women of Honour group has raised the issue of the absence of interim funding for representation. This will constrain them considerably in their ability to participate in the tribunal particularly given that the State obviously is well funded with resources for its representation. The Minister might consider that also.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy. I repeat what I have said on the floor of the House here but also when engaging with RACO and other members. I am committed to working with them in trying to advance not just pay but overall working conditions for members of the Defence Forces. If we want to achieve higher numbers, if we want to achieve a greater workforce design and if we want to expand our overall priorities, objectives and our overall capabilities then we need to make sure that we are looking at every aspect here. I have to work within the processes that are there, however. I have to work within the public sector pay agreement. I have to work within the structures that are there. Local bargaining is there and it is within the remit and the gift of the different representative groups to decide what they want to prioritise within that. We will work closely with them to try to make progress on this matter. I have no doubt that we will and that very soon we will be talking about the next public sector pay agreement and how we can see a greater level of increase across the board,.

In terms of the tribunal, I have to work within the legal parameters of the tribunal and it is only for the chair of the tribunal to decide where and when costs would be awarded. It is not a decision that I can take. I have relayed this directly to the Women of Honour but obviously a decision has been taken in the last few days by the judge and it is a matter for the judge in the tribunal to address those matters specifically and to respond to the request.

Defence Forces

124. **Deputy Tom Brabazon** asked the Minister for Defence the engagement which has taken place with the United Nations and Ireland's international partners in relation to the future of the Irish peacekeepers serving with UNIFIL particularly in view of ongoing hostilities in Lebanon. [44191/26]

Deputy Tom Brabazon: We are the only country in the world to have a continuous presence on UN mandated peace operations since 1958. Our peacekeepers have served with distinction and pride, and in particular with their deployment in Lebanon as part of the UNIFIL mission there. It is very disappointing that this mission is to come to an end and especially in light of ongoing hostilities in south Lebanon. Will the Minister please advise the House on the engagement her Department has had with the UN and international partners in relation to the future of Irish peacekeepers serving with UNIFIL? What arrangements are being put in place to ensure their safe and orderly removal from the region at the end of their current mandate?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. We are all very conscious of the very complex and changing environment in Lebanon on a daily basis, and even today when there were supposed to be ceasefires we see continuous fire and conflict taking place. I assure the House that there has been ongoing and substantive engagement with the United Nations and with our international partners regarding the position and future role of Irish personnel serving with UNIFIL, and particularly in light of the continuing and deeply concerning hostilities in Lebanon. I have engaged extensively, and will continue to do so, with the United Nations, with our European partners and with other key stakeholders on this matter, as well as maintaining direct bilateral contact with the Lebanese authorities and with my Lebanese counterpart who I have spoken to on a regular basis. This engagement reflects our long-standing commitment to peacekeeping, to the UNIFIL mission and to the seriousness of the current security environment. I have also spoken directly at senior levels within the UN. Most recently I have spoken with UN under-secretary-general for peace operations, Mr. Jean-Pierre Lacroix, and I have written to him again reiterating our serious concerns regarding the safety and the security of peacekeepers in Lebanon. It is important to stress that I engage with our own Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces and our own personnel on a daily and weekly basis on the current situation and to ensure that our personnel are safe. In parallel, I have worked closely with European partners contributing to UNIFIL. We have had a broader discussion with the European troop contributing counterparts where, following that discussion, we engaged directly with Under-Secretary-General Lacroix calling for strengthened protection mechanisms for UNIFIL personnel and for thorough investigations into all incidents involving peacekeepers. We acknowledge that a number of peacekeepers across different countries have been killed in their duties in recent times and it is completely unacceptable that peacekeepers would be put in this type of danger. At a bilateral level I have also engaged directly with the Lebanese foreign minister, Mr. Raggi, and during this conversation I expressed our concern regarding the ongoing hostilities. It is important to stress that while he reaffirmed his absolute thanks and his appreciation for the role of the peacekeeping troops, I reaffirmed our absolute commitment and our presence on the ground and our desire to ensure that there is a continued mandate or a continued mission in some format once the UNIFIL mission comes to an end.

Deputy Tom Brabazon: Our peacekeepers have been operating in very difficult circumstances in recent months, as the Minister has outlined, with air strikes, drone strikes and ground operations in the Irish area of operation. The escalating hostilities and recent deaths of peacekeepers is extremely concerning. We need to make sure that the Irish peacekeepers are given every necessary protection.

On top of that, the local Lebanese population has a great trust in our peacekeepers and respect for them. This is down to the peacekeepers' exemplary service and our own history of suffering oppression at the hands of colonial powers. The international community cannot let the end of the UNIFIL mandate create a vacuum in south Lebanon. For the local community who lives there the presence of UNIFIL has given them reassurance. I again urge the Minister to do everything in her power to have that mandate, in whatever way, extended so that there is not a vacuum left in south Lebanon.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I will refer to an earlier question around the orderly drawdowns. We have had in the last few weeks seen the last battalion travel to Lebanon where there was a

crossover with the troops who had been there previously. That will be the final round of troops, essentially, that would carry out this mission.

What we will see later this year is a much smaller number who will travel over to help to wind down the mission and make sure the equipment and technology we have over there can be brought out, as well as to make sure we support what is an orderly draw-down in order that other troops and teams are protected. In the past few months in particular, we have seen a lot of how the Irish Defence Forces, our peacekeepers, have worked closely to protect and support their French, Italian, Spanish, Polish, Indonesian and many other colleagues. It is really important that as this mission comes to a conclusion, it does so in a safe and orderly way. That is absolutely at the forefront of our Defence Forces members' minds in everything they do. What is also important - and I can touch on this in my final contribution - is what we do next.

When I spoke to Kaja Kallas today, the High Representative who chairs the foreign affairs and defence Council and with whom we will be working closely during our Presidency, I confirmed that during our Presidency and at its outset, we will be steering the conversation as to what happens next. It is really important from Ireland's perspective that we find a way to be present and to be part of some form of the mission on the ground in Lebanon to carry on the work we have been doing for decades.

Deputy Tom Brabazon: Our responsibility is essentially twofold in that we have to continue to support the people of south Lebanon, who are at real risk, and we must make sure that each Irish peacekeeper returns home safely to his or her family.

I will finish by thanking all those who served in UNIFIL and particularly those who made the ultimate sacrifice in support of peace in that area. They have worn the Tricolour and blue helmet with distinction, courage and honour.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I join with the Deputy in thanking all of our troops who, for the past number of decades, have contributed significantly to peace in Lebanon and to monitoring the situation and who continue to do so even in the most hostile of environments. I met many of those members who travelled out in the past few weeks with their families. For many of them this is their second, third, fourth or fifth mission. This is something we know our troops are absolutely committed to, for which they are held in high regard, not just by the Lebanese armed forces and Government but by the people on the ground. I have no doubt but that had our troops and other troops not been present in recent months, the situation could have been much worse for them, which is hard to imagine in what is already a very difficult situation.

We wish to reassure our colleagues in our discussions in the months ahead and I have already met our French, Italian, Spanish and Polish colleagues to discuss how we can ensure there is a continued presence on the ground but without the UN-mandated mission. We are talking about something much smaller that does not provide the same level of support or numbers of troops, which is a real regret for all of us. We will do everything we can to ensure there is still that presence on the ground.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Defence Forces

125. **Deputy Noel McCarthy** asked the Minister for Defence the current military radar capability of the Defence Forces; her plans, if any to increase such capability; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [43588/26]

Deputy Noel McCarthy: This is to ask the Minister for Defence the current military radar capability of the Defence Forces or plans, if any, to increase such capability and whether she will make a statement on the matter.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy for this particular question. Developing the military radar capability of the Defence Forces is one of my key priorities and a key element of the move to level of ambition 2. The Commission on the Defence Forces advised that the absence of a capability to maintain a complete recognised air picture is something we need to address. We need to make sure we have the capacity to have a recognised air picture and it needs to be complete. This means we would be able to protect our national sovereignty and airspace and we would have the ability to detect any infringements for the purpose of civil aviation safety and maintenance of co-operative relations with neighbouring states, which are also impacted by this capability gap.

Among its recommendations on capability development, the commission recommended that we develop a primary radar system to ensure Ireland can maintain that complete air picture and that this should be an immediate priority. That is why when I came into the Department I insisted this was brought forward in terms of our capital spend and that we bring forward as much of it as possible. This is being progressed under the military radar programme. There are three elements to it, namely, the land-based, long-range radar primary radar; ground-based air defence systems to include the counter-unmanned aerial systems, that is, the counter-drone technology and our maritime radar. This programme of work is ongoing but good progress has been made.

Towards the end of last year, the preliminary business case for the military radar programme was approved. This concluded that a Government-level approach with one country was the preferred option. In line with this approach my Department immediately commenced negotiations with France on a potential agreement for the delivery of capability requirements under this programme. These are ongoing with the French authorities. However, while full delivery of the programme will be complex, it has been prioritised with a target date identified in the years ahead of 2028. I published recently the detailed implementation plan for the development of this complete, recognised air picture. That being said, elements of the overall programme will be rolled out in phases. It is going to take a number of years to do all of this; starting this year in particular with the counter-UAS capabilities. The Deputy will have heard this discussed many times around the counter-drone technology and making sure we have this in place for our Presidency and to support the work of An Garda Síochána.

Deputy Noel McCarthy: I thank the Minister for her response. Although we are a neutral nation and plan to remain one, it is important our Defence Forces are provided with appropriate radar technology to help with their vitally important day-to-day operations. In an ever-changing world, the development of air and sea radar capability should be a cornerstone in

ensuring our Defence Forces' protection of national security concerns. I understand that a business case for a national military radar programme was approved last year for a proposed delivery target of 2028. Is this still the timeline the Department is working towards? In addition, can the Minister provide any specifications as to what if any infrastructure is needed at land and sea level to progress radar capability?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I fully agree with the Deputy. The reason there is a need for this to be introduced as soon as possible is because we are seeing a changed landscape and changed types of threats. We are seeing more hybrid activity and use of drones not just here, but in other countries as well that is disrupting airspace, causing significant challenges, costing a lot of money and creating a real sense of unease. It is really important that we have the right capability to be able to detect what is in our skies, what is happening over our waters and importantly, under water. This is an area through the maritime security strategy that we will be able to ensure we can progress as quickly as possible.

The counter-UAS anti-drone technology is progressing this year. There were tenders agreed last year for the sonar programmes, that is, the radar programmes under water. That will be complemented by the sonobuoys, which will be worked from our helicopters. The longer-range equipment required on our ships will take a little bit longer. This is being done in stages. This is an absolute priority. We want to make sure we can move along the various stages as quickly as possible.

Deputy Noel McCarthy: I acknowledge that a Government-level approach with one country is favoured in the development of radar capability and that negotiations have begun with France on a potential agreement in this regard. As such, I ask the Minister what engagement she has had to date with her French counterpart on the matter? Can she give us an indication of the level of training necessary for the operation of radar and what is the estimated number of Defence Forces personnel who will be considered for radar duties?

Finally, is it the intention that radar specialists will be recruited, possibly from France, as part of the initial operations of the programme?

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I welcome the question from Deputy McCarthy. This is a vitally important area for us as an island nation. When will the counter-drone technology, the CUAS, be operational? The Minister spoke about the Presidency, which starts within a month. Realistically it is not going to be in place at the start of the Presidency. Is that not the case? What will be the first date on which the anti-drone technology will be in place? When will it be operational from the Defence Forces' point of view? It is far too late. This was meant to be delivered in quarter 3 of last year. That is down to the Minister's predecessor but it is not good enough.

Deputy Helen McEntee: To answer the Deputy's question, the capability will be in place by 1 July for our Presidency. Training is under way.

I was with my French colleague just last week in Paris and we discussed not just the radar programme but other ways in which we are working more closely together. The French have been supporting and working closely with our Defence Forces personnel around the training

on how to use this. This is just to assist. I stress that again because there is often a perception that it is the Defence Forces which are going to be carrying out all of these security measures. What they are putting in place will be to supplement and assist the work of An Garda Síochána. An Garda Síochána already has significant levels of counter-drone technology in place and more that they will put in place during the Presidency. We will assist through the introduction of counter-drone technology through the Defence Forces and throughout the year there will be further technologies provided.

However, we will have what we need in place for the beginning of the Presidency. That training is under way. I assure the Deputy of that. What I spoke of with my colleague Ms Vautrin last week was other ways in which we could work more closely together. Are there other ways in which we can share our knowledge, experience and training? I think we underestimate the level of knowledge that our Defence Forces members and gardaí have in using these types of equipment. It is important that we work together and share our experience and knowledge. Obviously, where we can work together on purchasing, perhaps jointly, different types of technology or capability, we should always look to do that as well.

Question No. 126 taken with Written Answers.

Defence Forces

127. **Deputy Martin Daly** asked the Minister for Defence when a decision on a location for the Army headquarters will be made; if Custume Barracks, Athlone, will be considered; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42807/26]

Deputy Helen McEntee: As Minister, I am committed to the ongoing work of ensuring that our Defence Forces are modern, agile and fit for the world we live in to defend the State and meet the challenges of today and the future. That obviously means investing not just in the Defence Forces as personnel but also in our infrastructure. That is a key commitment in our overall capital plan.

The Commission on the Defence Forces recommended in its 2022 report significant changes to the Defence Forces and defence provision in Ireland. It covers high-level Defence Forces structures, defence capabilities, organisation, culture and human resources, the Reserve Defence Force, and funding overall.

In February, I published the second detailed implementation plan for the Report of the Commission on the Defence Forces. This plan sets out an ambitious programme of work to move to level of ambition 2 by 2028 and the significant and fundamental change for the Defence Forces that will be delivered across the commission's recommendations approved by the Government. The commission recommended:

The Chief of Defence to initiate an immediate force design process assisted by external experts with access to international military expertise, and to include a detailed force design process.

The Defence Forces have established three force design teams within the Army, Naval Service and Air Corps. An overarching strategic force design office has also been established.

This work is ongoing, with all force design teams working collaboratively to develop a force design for the entire Defence Forces.

On completion of the force design work, the Chief of Staff will submit a report on force design to me for consideration. No decisions have been made on where the Army headquarters will be located, but it is important to say - and this is the reason I have outlined all of this in terms of the force design - that this process has to be gone through before any decision can be taken on the Army headquarters.

This is complicated and challenging work that we need to get right. We need to make sure that if we are looking at modernisation and restructuring of our Defence Forces, we take the time to do this correctly, and that is the work that is happening at the moment. What is important for me is that any force design process will include a transitional plan with incremental steps beyond current numbers to the 11,500 force recommended by the Commission on the Defence Forces.

As the Deputy will appreciate, because this is a significant body of work, there is a huge amount of effort by all involved. It is once all of these measures have been put in place that we will be able to identify where the location might be.

Deputy Martin Daly: I thank the Minister for a comprehensive reply. This is in the context of the record €1.7 billion defence national development plan, which the Government will invest in capital infrastructure for the next five years. It is important that it is got right. We are living in a changed geopolitical situation since the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, and we will have to live up to our defence obligations not only within our own national context but also within the European Union context.

As regards the military history of Athlone, Custume Barracks goes back to 1691. It is geographically strategically located and is well served by railroad and river. I hope it will be considered. It also has access to third level education, namely, Technological University of the Shannon, TUS, so I hope that it will be given full consideration when a decision is made.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I will refer to what the Deputy has referred to as well, but there is also the significant increase in funding that has been agreed by this Government, specifically investment not just in the men and women, but also in our overall structures within our Defence Forces system. I have visited quite a number of barracks in the past few months. I have been in Aiken Barracks in Dundalk, the accommodation in Renmore, Galway, the Gormanstown campus and Haulbowline. All of these are areas where we are seeing significant investment in accommodation, dining facilities, gym equipment and the overall environment. Making sure that that investment continues will be a key priority for me. I think €170 million has been spent in the past five years alone, but this year close to €70 million has been spent. On top of that, there is €13.5 million for maintenance and running costs. There is an absolute commitment to make sure that our barracks and critical infrastructure for our Defence Forces members are up to scratch, modern and fit for purpose. Any new decisions for a new barracks or new accommodation will have to be taken once the overall process is done, but I will be determined to ensure that we have more money and that we invest in any of these new buildings or any new expansion that is required.

Deputy Martin Daly: I welcome the investment in our defence capability. It has grown by 35% in the past three years and by 11% in the past year. We need to continue to invest to meet our international obligations but also to meet our own obligation as a sovereign nation and to protect our borders and the seas that surround this island. It is extremely important that we be strategic as a small country in the investment we make. It is true that we have lagged behind other countries of similar size in Europe, possibly through complacency because of our position on the edge of Europe, but that has changed now. I welcome the investment but I also hope that full consideration will be given to an Army headquarters in Athlone, which is at the centre of the country, geographically strategically located, with all the services that a headquarters would require.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I probably was not aware of it myself until coming into the Department, but there is a significant body of work happening, following on from the Commission on the Defence Forces, to look at what we need. The commission has set out how we reach level of ambition 2, how we increase our numbers and what type of capabilities we need. There is also other work being done to look at our overall footprint, where we need to invest in different barracks, how we need to expand and grow, and which areas we need to look at from a maritime perspective and from the perspective of our Naval Service, our Air Corps and our Defence Force personnel. Then, taking into account the reform of the triple lock, the question is how we make sure that an integral part of our Defence Forces work, namely, peacekeeping missions, can continue into the future. There is a huge amount of work, coupled with the cultural reform and change and the body doing that work. It is really important that all these aspects be progressed at the same time, supported and coupled with financing. That is why we have seen the 55% increase in our capital budget and the 40% increase in our current budget.

To come back to the Deputy's original question, once the process that is under way is concluded, a decision on the HQ will be taken.

EU Meetings

128. **Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil** asked the Minister for Defence to outline Ireland's position at the recent meeting of EU defence ministers; the main outcomes regarding Ukraine, the European defence industrial strategy and EU defence co-operation; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [43590/26]

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I attended that meeting on behalf of the Minister, Deputy McEntee, in Brussels recently. There was also an informal meeting recently, but the meeting in Brussels was a formal one. It took place against the backdrop of an evolving and increasingly complex security environment. It was a key moment for EU member states to reaffirm their steadfast solidarity with, and support for, Ukraine. There were two main topics on the agenda: EU support to Ukraine and the repercussions of the situation in the Middle East on European defence and security, along with an update on the state of play of defence readiness, among other matters.

In the session on EU support to Ukraine, which was attended by video in part by Ukraine's newly appointed Minister of Defence, Mykhailo Fedorov, discussion was focused on the latest

developments in EU-Ukraine defence industrial co-operation, including progress on implementing the Ukraine support loan, the European Peace Facility and other EU instruments, such as Security Action for Europe, SAFE.

Ireland has been resolute in our support for Ukraine in response to Russia's illegal, unjustifiable and morally reprehensible war against it. The Irish Government remains committed to working with our European and Ukrainian counterparts to maintain solidarity with Ukraine and to ensure that Ukraine gets the support it needs to defend itself against brutal Russian aggression.

Discussion on the ongoing situation in the Middle East at the Council was also very welcome. The Irish Government remains deeply concerned about the conflict in the Gulf and the wider Middle East, and the implications for Lebanon, in particular. The Government remains deeply conscious and appreciative of Irish Defence Forces personnel, and all peacekeepers, currently serving under the UNIFIL mandate in south Lebanon.

10 o'clock

I again commend those members of Óglaigh na hÉireann, past and present, on their service in the work of international peace and security, as I am sure all Members do.

In addition, yesterday I attended the informal meeting of EU defence ministers in Nicosia in Cyprus. I can certainly discuss the meeting, but I do not have a full written report of the meeting yet because I only got home last night.

Deputy John Connolly: I welcome the Minister of State home. I also welcome the fact that, at the meeting of EU defence ministers, there was continued support and solidarity among all nations with the people of Ukraine, given the circumstances they currently endure. Was there any specific discussion at the meeting about a post-war scenario in Ukraine and the potential for a peace agreement between the countries? I note that, recently, Volodymyr Zelenskyy visited Downing Street where he met with President Macron and the German President. Those nations again reiterated their support for Ukraine. At any point during the meeting did the talks come to the point where there may be a peace agreement, what that might look like, and what a post-war scenario might look like in Ukraine?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: That certainly was mentioned at the meeting of defence ministers, but the meeting was mainly focused on the defence response at the moment. The Minister, Deputy McEntee, at the Foreign Affairs Council and the Taoiseach at the European Council will be discussing that matter in considerable depth this month. There is certainly a lot of discussion about it, but what is important is that we continue to support Ukraine in the meantime. There needs to be peace, but it needs to be a just peace. It needs to be fair to Ukraine. We need to continue to support them in the meantime. For my part, solidarity will be very much in evidence at the General Affairs Council, where the whole issue of enlargement of the European Union will be very high up on the agenda during the Presidency. We will continue to support Ukraine, particularly on the mobilisation of the European Peace Facility support. We are going to continue to engage the Department of Defence. The Defence Forces have provided bilateral support to Ukraine, fully in accordance with our military neutrality and our commitment to providing non-lethal support. That support will continue. We are also

contributing to the EU loan that is going to Ukraine, which will partly be used for defence purposes as well.

Deputy John Connolly: I compliment the Government on its continued support, in particular for that loan measure.

The Minister of State mentioned the ending of the UNIFIL mission at the end of this year. Are there other European countries like us that are concerned they will not have the opportunity to provide peacekeeping missions in other parts of the world? Unfortunately, if troops from European countries are not keeping peace, more lives will be lost, more conflict will reign and there will be less stability and more volatility in the world. Are there other countries like us that have a similar measure whereby the participation of their forces in peacekeeping missions must be sanctioned by the UN Security Council? Are they thinking of how they might be able to operate in the future when it is clear that the Security Council will not provide an opportunity for peacekeeping missions?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: In relation to UNIFIL in particular, there are soldiers in it from all over the world. There were some deaths at the weekend. I pay tribute to them as well. That mission, which is a United Nations-run mission, will end. As far as I can tell, there is no other European Union country that needs a UN mandate to send their troops on peacekeeping missions. I have spoken to Switzerland and its troops can go on other missions, not just UN missions, for example. They deal with their neutrality in a different way from us. They do not need a UN mandate. If there were to be discussions in the future about a peacekeeping mission continuing in Lebanon, perhaps at the invitation of the Lebanese Government, most countries would be able to at least consider taking part, but we would not even be able to be part of the discussions. Last week, Operation Irini, which is an EU-led mission, lost its UN mandate. Our service members had to leave on that day, but the mission continues. Everyone else stayed but our people had to leave. That is what the triple lock has done. That is all we are trying to change in relation to that.

Naval Service

129. **Deputy John Connolly** asked the Minister for Defence the plans in place for an expanded Naval Reserve presence in Galway as supported by the report of the Commission on the Defence Forces; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [42813/26]

Deputy John Connolly: Will the Minister outline the plans in place for an expanded unit of the Naval Reserve and an infrastructural presence in the form of a Naval Reserve base in Galway, as supported both by the report of the Commission on the Defence Forces and by the maritime security strategy, and will she make a statement on that matter?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I acknowledge the important role played by members of the Reserve Defence Force, RDF, and thank them for their continued commitment and the way in which they consistently support the members of the Permanent Defence Force. The strategic objective for the Reserve Defence Force is the development of a reserve force that can seamlessly train, operate and deploy on a voluntary basis with our Permanent Defence Force,

both on the island and overseas. As the Deputy mentioned, this is strongly reflected in the report of the commission.

A key recommendation for the RDF was the establishment in 2022 of the Office of Reserve Affairs to oversee and support a more holistic approach to the revitalisation of the Reserve Defence Force. In July 2024, that office published the RDF regeneration and development plan. This in itself contains 27 individual actions designed to operationalise the recommendations contained in the Commission on the Defence Forces report for the Reserve Defence Force. The regeneration plan recognises that the transformation of the force structure is required for the development of the RDF. Action 22 of the plan relates specifically to the transformation of the Naval Service Reserve. As the Deputy is aware, another key recommendation from the plan is to increase the future RDF establishment strength to include a minimum Naval Service Reserve of 400 personnel. The military authorities have advised that, under this expansion, additional Naval Service Reserve units may be considered in suitable coastal centres where there is already port access. The current position is that options are being examined in the context of the wider transformation of the Defence Forces.

I mentioned earlier to our colleague the three force design teams, whereby we are looking at restructuring and modernising our Defence Forces. There is one each for the Army, the Air Corps and the Naval Service. They were established by the Defence Forces. An overarching strategic force design office has been established. These teams are working collaboratively to develop a force design for the entire Defence Forces. This will include members of the Reserve Defence Force and civilian members. Work is ongoing at the moment to try to complete this. The Chief of Staff will submit a report on force design to me for consideration. Based on that, the selection of locations can take place. There is a body of work happening. I hope it will conclude soon. Once that work is done, we will be able to identify where there might be options for what the Deputy outlined.

Deputy John Connolly: I commend the frankness of the report by the Commission on the Defence Forces. It noted the serious area and scale of responsibility that we have in "our Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), the scale of fishing activity in our waters, the number of aircraft crossing Irish controlled airspace, our growing seabased energy infrastructure, and the number of subsea communications cables and sea lines passing close to our coastline". There was a full and frank recognition:

...that a more comprehensive patrol programme [is required for that area and that this could] be facilitated by the establishment of a naval support base or bases, making use of existing port facilities at locations in the west ... which would allow for faster deployment and would facilitate replenishment of fuel, fresh food and water, and the removal of waste. The location of a support base on the west ... coast ... combined with double crewing of vessels, would facilitate ships remaining at sea for longer periods as they would no longer have to return to Haulbowline for replenishment and crew changeover.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I concur with the Deputy's initial point, which is that we have 24-7 monitoring of Irish waters, of our exclusive economic zone. This is happening in the air and at sea, and it is supported on land mainly by our base in Haulbowline. We have increased and expanded our capacity, capabilities and ability to monitor what is happening above our seas, but also to monitor what is happening below our seas, in particular to protect our critical

infrastructure, which comes across the Atlantic and goes through Ireland on to mainland Europe and beyond. It is an absolutely essential component of the work of our Defence Forces that we ensure we have the right numbers, that we grow our capacity within our Naval Service and that we continue to invest in our capabilities while working more closely with our European and international partners. Integral to that is the expansion and overall growth of our Reserve Defence Force members. We have seen that in other important structures of our State, notably An Garda Síochána, where our reserve members, coupled with the civilian forces, have helped to grow and expand and have really complemented the work. That is no different here for our Defence Forces.

Deputy John Connolly: One of the things I have often found puzzling is that the very proud and historical tradition of maritime and naval participation that a location like Galway has among its citizens seems to have petered out in recent times.

The operation of a naval support base or naval infrastructure along the west coast in Galway would encourage more local people, potentially, to join the Naval Service or the Naval Reserve. That is noted by the Commission on the Defence Forces as well.

To bring it on then to our national maritime strategy, one of the initial action points for the first strategy is to "Explore concept of a forward operating base on the West Coast base for the Naval Service". Everything in these studies is pointing towards the need for the west coast to be serviced by a naval base. Galway would make great sense - eminent sense, in fact - for that because it would be complemented, obviously, by the Army base at Renmore and it also has the natural infrastructure to facilitate such a development. I ask, therefore, that we start to develop the maritime strategy and that point in particular.

Deputy Helen McEntee: The Deputy is right: the Naval Service Reserve is organised across five different units. There are units in Cork, Dublin, Limerick and Waterford. The fifth unit is a technical support base, so it is not based in any specific location rather than the Naval Service HQ. If there were to be an expansion, we would be looking at other areas that currently are not covered. Again, the Deputy is right; the maritime security strategy was clear in outlining that we need to look to see if there is a need for another base from a maritime perspective. That work is already under way. I published the maritime security strategy only a few months ago. I am really ambitious that we move on as many of the actions as possible. One of those clear recommendations is that we would scope out the need or requirement for another potential naval base. As we have locations in Cork, Dublin, Limerick and Waterford, it stands to reason that we would look beyond those areas to see what we can do. While a decision has not been taken yet, I believe there is merit in the proposal the Deputy is suggesting. Obviously, we need to go through the various different processes to get to that point.

Question No. 130 taken with Written Answers.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): We are moving on to Question No. 131 in the name of Deputy Murphy, who is taking it for Deputy Boyd Barrett.

Military Neutrality

131. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Defence the discussions and communications she has had with her counterparts across Europe in relation to the potential of Ireland's departure from the triple lock mechanism, and possible new military deployments or actions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [43667/26]

Deputy Paul Murphy: This goes back again to the triple lock, this time on the international implications. I ask the Minister whether the new Bill would have allowed Ireland to participate in Trump's illegal war on Iran. We heard from a top civil servant, despite seeming objections from the Minister and her junior Minister at the committee, that if the triple lock was not there, Ireland could have participated in the invasion of Iraq. If the triple lock is gone, and if the Minister gets through with her Bill, will there be anything stopping her making Ireland join Trump's war in Iran?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy. I would say at the outset that times have changed. We should be allowed to debate the fact that we are in a different world now from when this was first introduced. At the time when the triple lock was introduced, those who opposed its introduction said that it was going to drag us into wars; that the US, Russia, China and the permanent member states of the UN were going to drag us, through the triple lock, into all these wars in which we were going to partake; and that we would lose our neutrality. These were debates that were actually put forward at the time. That did not happen. It did not transpire. We have had decades of peacekeeping troops on the ground that have contributed to peacekeeping missions and that has been it. What is now happening is that we have the bizarre situation whereby those very countries like Russia, which is waging a war, and the USA, which is obviously actively involved on the ground - I do not dispute that - are-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: Waging a war?

Deputy Helen McEntee: -----now preventing us from continuing on these peacekeeping missions. Therefore, I do not understand or fathom how we could find ourselves in a position now where we would sit, do nothing and allow larger countries that have nothing to do with, and nor should they have anything to do with, how we deploy our troops to prevent us from continuing in missions and see us now having to come off missions that other member states are on. There are no other countries within the EU that have this position. There are no other countries that are neutral. Austria, for example, will not sign up to a military alliance in the same way that we will not, but if it is putting forward members for peacekeeping missions, it does not have to go through the same triple lock mechanism.

The Deputy asserted this evening that we are suddenly deciding out of nowhere, as a Dáil, that we are going to put forward our troops for missions that do not align with international law and are completely outside of the UN Charter. The legislation that is being proposed is very clear and specific in providing that any mission we would propose our troops for would have to align with international law and the principles of the UN Charter and that it would be a decision for this House. We are all democratically elected Members. We represent the people who voted for us, so we have a duty to make sure we reflect their views and wishes. I believe we can have that debate here without allowing an outside force that has nothing to do with

anybody and that has not been democratically elected by a single person in this country to decide what we do with our peacekeeping troops.

Deputy Paul Murphy: There is something called international law. I will quote to the Minister what the Minister of State, Deputy Troy, said: "Ireland's position on the use of force where there is no UN mandate or authorisation is well established and known. For fear that anyone is in any doubt, let me be clear: it is wrong and it is illegal." Does the Minister agree with the Minister of State, Deputy Troy? All the triple lock does is ensure that we can only send troops where there is a UN mandate or authorisation. That is all it does. The Minister getting rid of the triple lock is about enabling her to send troops outside of the framework of international law. That is 100% what it is about. What is interesting is that the Minister speaks about how the new Bill is going to talk about the principles of the United Nations Charter.

Deputy Helen McEntee: No.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Will it say that we will only send troops abroad in accordance with the articles of the UN Charter? The articles of the UN Charter are very clear. The Minister can send troops abroad in self-defence, which is not covered by the triple lock, or she can do it with a UN-authorized mission, which is precisely what the triple lock states. The triple lock enshrines in Irish law international law. It states that we can only send troops in accordance with international law. The only reason to get rid of it is if the Minister wants to send troops outside of the framework of international law.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Deputy Daly wishes to come in on a supplementary.

Deputy Pa Daly: Whatever about what was said when the triple lock was introduced, it is clear that there is great concern about it and 40% of the questions tonight, including the next question, are in relation to the triple lock. I want the Minister to outline the proposals she has to remove it. When will we see the Bill? I know the Minister has abandoned the plans for a citizens' assembly but is there a timeline? I presume there is not going to be a referendum. The Minister has no plans, certainly, for a referendum. I look around my own town and see the statues and various monuments to Crimea, the Boer War, the western front and Gallipoli. The Minister would surely agree that the triple lock has served us well. It was backed by the Irish people because it was central to convincing the electorate in the Nice II and Lisbon II referendums in that it was mentioned that it was a guarantee of neutrality. Therefore, claims of frequently vetoing or that there will be no more peacekeeping do not stand up. How many times this century has there been a block put on as a result of the veto being there? Contrary to the Minister's partners in government's plans to reform, they clearly want to abolish the triple lock.

Deputy Helen McEntee: In terms of what will be in the proposed legislation, we will have an opportunity to discuss and debate in this House on Committee Stage, as we should do, anything of significance. This is significant because it will allow us to continue a practice we have had in place for many decades. The absolute priority here is to make sure that any future

deployments for operations are put forward and that they adhere not just to the principles of the UN Charter but also to international law. We are very clear. We are not going to start proposing sending troops on any other missions that do not adhere to international law and are not peacekeeping missions. There is a proposal in the legislation that would allow for UN troops and smaller numbers to be able to remove people safely from conflict zones. That is something that happens at the moment, but we need to make sure we have this included in the legislation as well. Where there will be a requirement to seek Government approval where the number of Defence Forces personnel is over a certain number, Dáil approval will still be triggered. There will still be a mechanism here in the Dáil to make sure. At the moment, the number is 12. The legislation proposes to increase this number to 50 but even at that, there will have to be engagement at the end of the year with a final report and there will be engagement with the committee through different stages. All of this can be discussed when this Bill comes to the fore.

Again, I will make a point on referendums. A referendum is to change the Constitution. What are we talking about putting in here? What we are actually talking about is amending legislation. We are not amending anything that is in our Constitution. We are talking about changing legislation that was agreed by this House many decades ago. I believe the onus is on us now, as Members of this House, to change the legislation in the same way so that we can continue doing what the legislation set out to allow us to do in the first instance and we are now being prevented from doing.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I think the Minister is deliberately being a bit disingenuous by saying that, okay, this is agreed by legislation. She does not recognise the European referendums that enshrined this. We have the Seville declaration. It is part of international law. The Minister does not recognise that the people voted on this. That is forgetting about the recent presidential election where neutrality dominated the campaign.

That is forgetting about all the opinion polls that show that people support neutrality and support the triple lock.

The Minister might enlighten us then about the circumstances where she thinks it is legal to deploy soldiers abroad that do not have UN authorisation nonetheless are in the framework of international law? What is it that she is talking about? I cannot understand because the UN Charter is very clear. It is very clear about the circumstances where you can deploy troops abroad. You can do it in self defence or you can do it when there has been a resolution by the UN Security Council or the UN General Assembly. It is clear. That is precisely what the triple lock says. What I think the Minister wants to do is say that we adhere to international law but we do what we want and then we just say that it is in line with international law. When the US engages in its imperialist adventures around the world, it always says it is in line with international law. I think Putin claims that his invasion of Ukraine is in line with international law but there is a big difference.

Deputy Helen McEntee: The Deputy is being completely disingenuous by consistently and continuously linking the triple lock with our neutrality. We were a neutral country before the triple lock was introduced. Does he accept that? We were a neutral country before the triple lock was introduced. It was introduced at a time to make sure that we could send our troops across waters to peacekeeping missions. In many instances, that is not possible so, again, does

the Deputy accept that in the past two weeks alone, we have had troops who have been active on a mission in the Mediterranean who have to come home because we now no longer have a mandate. The Deputy can say it has changed and the mandates changed. Our Naval Service monitors shadow fleets across the EEZ at the moment-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: I do not think they should be in the Mediterranean.

Deputy Helen McEntee: Our Naval Service already monitors the shadow fleet so the very fact that this is now not being continued and the UN mandate is not continuing is because countries like Russia do not want us to. The Deputy is being disingenuous in saying that this is about our neutrality. There is nothing in this that impacts our neutrality. We were a neutral country before the triple lock was introduced and we will be a neutral country if and when this changes. I hope that we can change it as soon as possible.

Military Neutrality

132. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Defence if she will outline her proposals to remove the triple lock neutrality protection, when she intends to bring forward a Bill in relation to same, if there are plans to hold a referendum on the issue and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38222/26]

133. **Deputy Louis O'Hara** asked the Minister for Defence to provide an update on the planned legislation to abolish the triple lock and if she will make a statement on the matter. [43465/26]

Deputy Louis O'Hara: Could the Minister to provide an update on her plans to dismantle the triple lock neutrality protection?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I propose to take Questions Nos.132 and 133 together. I am pleased to discuss this issue and to expand on some of the areas that we have elaborated on. This key legislation is a priority for me and this Government but it is important that we have an opportunity in the House not just here during Parliamentary Questions but through the legislative process to debate certain elements of this Bill. There have been a number of calls for a public plebiscite or a referendum in relation to what is being proposed in the Bill with regards to the triple lock. Again, I highlight the fact that there has been a lot of conflation as to what is actually being proposed and what is actually being suggested. The triple lock is a statutory mechanism. It is set out in the Defence (Amendment) Act 1960. It is not a constitutional mechanism and is not enshrined in our Constitution. It was a political commitment during the Nice and Lisbon treaties process. It is clear, therefore, that as I and my predecessors have stated a number of times on the floor of the House and as I have stated a number of times this evening, amending the legislation that governs how we deploy our Defence Forces overseas does not require a referendum. It does not require a national plebiscite.

We are talking about a very different time when the legislation was developed. The world has changed. The UN structure itself has changed since. It is not working. We can accept that.

We all know that it is not working in the way that it should. The geopolitical environment has changed as well. We now find ourselves in a situation where one in five of the permanent members of the Security Council can decide whether or not our Irish troops can travel to engage in peacekeeping missions, be it in Lebanon, the western Balkans, the Mediterranean or any other part of the world. It is simply not acceptable to have a situation where Ireland's sovereign decision-making with regards to the participation of our peacekeeping troops in peace operations can be impacted by the geopolitical interests of other states. That is exactly what is happening. I repeat that in the past two weeks alone, our troops have had to come home from a mission on which they have been working for a number of years now and where they have been held in such high regard by their fellow defence force members and the Mediterranean Operation Irini because the UN mandate has not been renewed. This is what we are talking about. We are not talking about going off to war anywhere. We are talking about peacekeeping missions.

We are very clear that our neutrality is to be protected. We are very clear as a Government that this is not what is being impacted here. As I mentioned earlier, it has been demonstrated in a real tangible way as well through the UN Security Council resolution that underpinned the EU mission Operation Irini, which has come to an end for Irish troops but for nobody else that has been involved in that overall. We also know that this clearly illustrates the extent to which Ireland's ability to contribute to international peace and security efforts can be affected by factors outside of our control. That situation is not sustainable if we are to retain a meaningful and credible capacity to participate in international peace support operations in line with our values and I think this is in line with our own interests and the democratic will of the people of Ireland who have entrusted us as their representative. There has been extensive engagement between my Department and the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel about the drafting of the Bill and it is my intention to bring this to the House. It was approved by Cabinet today that we would bring it forward for Second Stage to debate this even further and to have a wider debate with colleagues as soon as possible.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: There is no doubt that this is an erosion of our military neutrality. The triple lock is something that is deeply valued by the Irish people. Opinion poll after opinion poll has shown clearly that the Irish people want to retain this protection, yet Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael are absolutely determined to get rid of it. These plans are going to endanger our neutrality, endanger our reputation on the world stage as peace builders and expose us to the rising moves towards militarisation across the EU. If the Government is so confident in its position, why will it not put it to a referendum? The Minister said that we do not have to put it to a referendum but that is not a justification in and of itself. Let the people have their say on this issue. We know why the Government is refusing to do that. It is because it knows the answer it will get from the people on this because the Irish people cherish our military neutrality and the triple lock as a core aspect of this. Removing it without putting it to the people through a referendum is an attack on our sovereignty and democracy and I just cannot understand how the Minister can justify that. How can she justify not letting the people have their say on such an important issue and a core aspect of our military neutrality?

Deputy Helen McEntee: We are seeing this happen on a number of fronts at the moment where there is a claim that Government is eroding our sovereignty and that we are allowing other people to essentially make decisions for us with the migration pact or now the triple lock.

Currently, other countries, like Russia, which has been waging a war on European soil in Ukraine for almost five years - longer than World War I - could actually prevent us from keeping peacekeeping troops on missions. That is what has happened in the past two weeks alone. The Deputy says that our reputation is being endangered. We have an excellent reputation. The men I met in Rome only a few weeks ago are highly regarded because of their contribution to operations like Operation Irini and now they will no longer be able to contribute, so what is actually being eroded is our ability to contribute and to continue to be held in such high regard and the only people who are losing out are us. We are losing out and our Defence Forces personnel are losing out. Regarding our military capabilities, knowledge and experience in working with other partners, we are going to lose out if we cannot continue in these types of missions. This suggestion that we are giving away our sovereignty is completely contradictory when it is other larger military powers that are able to dictate where we send peacekeeping troops. It makes no sense to me and I think the vast majority of people to whom I speak see what it is that we are trying to do here. We are trying to make sure that we have a mechanism in place to continue what is a long and proud tradition of our peacekeepers and to ensure that we are not impacted by the decisions of others that very clearly have ulterior motives and objectives at hand.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: If the triple lock protection is removed, it will be possible to deploy Irish troops to any situation at all that the Government sees fit. That is not what the Irish people want because that gives *carte blanche* to any future Irish Government and indeed will expose Irish Governments to significant outside pressure as well in future situations. It is a serious diminution of our neutrality. There is no doubt about that. The Minister should be working to strengthen our neutrality, ending the US use of Shannon Airport and actively opposing increased EU militarisation. Only a few years ago, Micheál Martin said the triple lock was at the core of our neutrality. What has changed since then? It is clear that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael just want to follow the EU's drum beat for increased militarisation. That is the reason for this. That is the reason for such a drastic change on the triple lock and it is shameful. Even Government TDs are opposed to this. One of the Minister's predecessors at the Department of Defence, Deputy Willie O'Dea, in response to the Taoiseach's call for a referendum on increasing the number of Ministers, said, "How about a referendum people actually want, like on the triple lock?"

Once again, the Minister is out of touch with the Irish people. She is failing to listen to people and has not been able to give any good reason this evening as to why she will not put this to the people in a referendum. That is what needs to happen in this case for such a significant decision. The Government is hiding from the people because it knows the answer it will get.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I am very happy to debate this with anybody. I am very happy to outline what is actually in the legislation. It will be published in due course. The legislation will be very clear. It will outline how we will deploy our troops for peacekeeping missions. It will outline how we will deploy them in line with UN principles and with international law. It will not allow for any other type of deployment that goes beyond those areas. It will allow for a smaller number of troops to be deployed to ensure that where our own citizens are at risk in conflict areas, they can be taken out, removed and brought home safely. Beyond that, to be very clear, nothing in this legislation will allow me, as Minister, this Government or anybody

in it to decide we are going to send troops to a conflict zone to take part in a conflict. Let me be very clear that is not what this legislation is proposing. So, all of the misinformation and the attempts to suggest this is suddenly going to open us up to becoming a warmongering country is completely wrong, completely inaccurate and is trying to sow a level of misinformation that muddies the waters here.

The legislation is very clear. How do we make sure we can continue to deploy our troops in peacekeeping missions? How do we make sure that other countries - Russia, the US, China, France or the UK - do not have a say in how we deploy our troops? How do we make sure that we, as a sovereign nation, the people here, democratically elected to this Chamber, are the ones who decide, with the advice of the Defence Forces, on exactly how we deploy our troops to peacekeeping missions? That is what the focus of this legislation is. I look forward to debating it with colleagues in this House and progressing it in the weeks ahead.

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Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Barry Heneghan): 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 Albert Dolan - To discuss the pricing of train tickets between Athenry and Galway.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne - To discuss the need for social and affordable housing in Arklow, County Wicklow.

Deputy Keira Keogh - To discuss the transparency of the CODA process for LGFA clubs and players.

Deputy Pat Buckley - To discuss the urgent need for a person (details supplied) to have treatment under the EU cross-border health directive.

Deputy Thomas Gould - To discuss the proposed new prisons in the Glen, Cork.

Deputy Tom Brabazon - To discuss the loss of a mainstream teacher at St. Francis Junior School, Clonshaugh, Dublin 17.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon - To discuss the exceptional staffing pressures at St. Patrick's National School, County Sligo.

Deputy Jen Cummins - To discuss the planned closure of Carlow College and transfer of the campus to SETU.

Deputy Ged Nash - To discuss the recent fish kill on the River Glyde, County Louth.

Deputy Michael Murphy - To discuss the closure of the South Tipperary Memory Clinic in Cashel.

Deputy Pa Daly - To discuss the need for an autism unit at Causeway Comprehensive School, or Scoil Chuimsitheach an Tóchair.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae - To discuss delays in the opening of the new Killarney community hospital.

Deputy Shane Moynihan - To discuss the reform of eye care services in line with emerging trends.

Deputies Conor McGuinness and David Cullinane - To discuss the need for extensions and improvements to school buildings in Waterford.

Deputy Paul Donnelly - To discuss the report by EnergyCloud Ireland titled Ireland's Wasted Renewable Energy Report for the 16 months to 30 April 2026.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly - To discuss the school summer programme.

Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher - To discuss the designation of Burtonport as an approved port for landings by fishing vessels on a Saturday from 2 p.m. to 6 p.m.

Deputies Rory Hearne and Gary Gannon - To discuss the proposed closure and disposal of the Griffith Avenue delivery office.

Deputy Matt Carthy - To discuss the EU pact on migration and asylum.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan - To discuss access to treatment for Friedreich's ataxia under the HSE reimbursement scheme.

The matters raised by Deputies Shane Moynihan, Michael Murphy, Paul Donnelly, Rory Hearne and Gary Gannon, and Conor D McGuinness and David Cullinane have been selected for discussion

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Health Services

Deputy Shane Moynihan: Is mór agam an deis seo a thapú labhairt ar cheist atá tar éis teacht faoi mo bhráid le cúpla mí anuas. Baineann sé le cúrsaí súile. Issues and concerns that have been raised with me by constituents about our eye care model in Ireland. We know, for example, that public eye care services are under significant pressure. National Treatment Purchase Fund, NTPF, data shows that over 42,000 people are waiting for eye care appointments, with approximately 33% of those waiting longer than one year.

While much attention is rightly focused on that side of the thing, what I want to talk about today relates to our community eye care model and whether it is equipped to identify and manage emerging eye health challenges, particularly among children and young people. The current paediatric eye care pathway is focused on early childhood screening and the identification of serious visual impairments, but I do not think this captures the changing nature of eye health among children and adolescents, particularly when we take account of the rapid rise in the incidents of myopia, or short-sightedness.

We know myopia typically develops between the ages of eight and 16, after school entry vision screening has taken place. This raises the question as to whether some children are developing vision problems without any structured follow-up or monitoring and, in fact, in many cases a diagnosis is reactive because a child will complain, for example, that they cannot see the blackboard or cannot engage properly with a lesson. By that stage, there would have been some lag in academic outcomes and the vision problem would have presented itself.

Emerging evidence from Ireland and abroad would suggest that myopia is becoming increasingly common, particularly in younger age groups, with clinic based data showing the highest rate of myopia now among people in their 20s. While long-sightedness remains more prevalent in clinical populations, adjusted population estimates indicate that myopia is now becoming more prevalent as an eye condition, which shows the changing nature of eye health.

We know that undetected vision problems can negatively affect educational attainment, classroom participation, confidence and social development. Also, myopia is associated with a lifelong increase in serious eye disease like retinal detachment, glaucoma or cataracts. This risk of myopia and the severity of it increases with age and we know that high myopia is much more associated with a high risk of vision loss compared with normal vision. This has significant public health implications. Individuals with high myopia face the greatest risk. The overall burden on services is likely driven by the growing number of people with moderate myopia as well. We estimate that 50% of the global population could be myopic by 2050.

This is something we need to be very aware of in terms of how we design our eye care model and whether we should have proactive monitoring in place. One immediate action we could take is to encourage and enable independent prescription of medicines for eye conditions by optometrists in Ireland, which is something that is not in place at the moment. International evidence would suggest that allowing those prescribing powers to be made available to optometrists can allow more patients to be treated safely in the community. This reduces unnecessary hospital referrals and eases pressures on ophthalmology services. Large-scale clinical data from a number of studies suggests that electronic medical records can enable this as a potential cost effective tool for monitoring trends in eye health.

Will the Minister of State give us a view on the current model of the eye care pathway, especially at a paediatric level? Given our educational system is becoming more reliant on screens and we know there is greater use of screens, that in itself is compounding the issues affecting myopia and increasing its prevalence, as evidenced by the data. Ultimately, can we build an early warning or early detection system into our paediatric eye care pathway?

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I thank Deputy Moynihan for raising this really important issue of eye care services in line with emerging trends. I am taking this on behalf of the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill.

There are measures either in place or being progressed to address the emerging trends in eye care services, such as those due to an ageing demographic or an increase in the prevalence of myopia. The Health Service Executive provides optical services free of charge to children referred from child health and school health service examinations who are discovered to have sight problems. These children are referred to the appropriate service for treatment. Under the community ophthalmic services scheme, COSS, medical card holders and their dependants aged over 12 can be seen by ophthalmologists, optometrists or dispensing opticians. They can

receive an eye examination and be provided with prescribed optical appliances in accordance with a national schedule of approved optical appliances.

In 2017, the HSE published two important documents, the Primary Care Eye Services Review Group Report and the national clinical programme for ophthalmology. The review report set out how a significant proportion of eye services could be delivered in a primary care setting. A key recommendation was that children aged between eight and 12 with routine eye care needs should be transferred to the care of local optometrists. These would receive an annual eye exam under the COSS, irrespective of their medical card eligibility. This remains a priority and work is ongoing to implement this recommendation.

The clinical programme set out a model of care regarding how the realignment of eye services from an acute hospital setting to the community would be undertaken. The HSE has been developing multidisciplinary integrated eye care teams in accordance with this model of care. These teams facilitate assessment, diagnoses, management and treatment, enabling most patients to be seen in their own locality. Where necessary, patients can be referred onwards to acute ophthalmology services to receive the necessary specialist input.

Significant investment has been made in developing and strengthening these integrated eye care teams. There are ten across the six health regions. These teams are also facilitating the large-scale transfer of care from hospital outpatient departments to community settings, with a substantial proportion of referrals assessed, treated and discharged outside the acute system. This has reduced pressure on hospital ophthalmology clinics, enabling acute services to prioritise complex, surgical and high-risk patients, and has improved patient experience through earlier assessment, shorter waiting times and care delivered closer to home.

Work is also under way to ensure Ireland has enough trained eye care professionals to deal with increasing demand: The South East Technological University, SETU, is progressing work to establish a bachelor of science honours degree in optometry, with a first intake of students expected in September 2027. I have been working closely with Professor John Nolan and Dr. Fraser Horn, who have done phenomenal work in the last couple of years to embed this into the new technological university.

They were very supportive of this "one health" approach. You have to have the eye care professionals in place to deliver an awful lot of the services.

I am really struck by what the Deputy said as well about optometrists being able to take that step in regard to dealing with children especially. We have seen how the Minister and the previous Minister have moved in relation to pharmacists now being able to prescribe up to 12 different medications, which is really important.

The Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment also recently announced that the ophthalmic optician is now an eligible occupation for the critical skills employment permit. Finally, the Department is also considering ways to expand the scope of practice for optometrists to ensure that the eye care needs of people, especially children and older persons, can be met.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: I thank the Minister of State for that very comprehensive response. Core to a lot of the emerging healthcare needs we have in Ireland are training and skills, so I am very pleased to see that one of the planks of the Minister of State's answer was

making sure we have enough trained professionals. I think that needs to be at the core of how we future-proof our public services and make sure we are able to address demand in the future. I also welcome the steps that are being taken towards embedding this into a community care model, which I think is what these integrated eye care teams will deliver. They are contingent on the number of trained professionals.

I ask the Minister of State to take it up with the Minister for Health in a broader piece around the prescribing powers for optometrists to enable them to be a core pillar of how we engage directly with children in the community and to avoid them necessarily having to even go as far as the integrated eye care team, especially if medication or treatment can be prescribed in a low-cost setting.

While all the other developments the Minister of State described are very welcome, there is a piece around early detection. Even with the model that is laid out at the moment, it seems to be a referral or reactive, which is a very good and strong way to find this. Given that we know this is going to have increased protection, studies from the US and South Korea suggest that myopia affects 50% of the population towards the middle of their lives, and that that, as the Minister of State knows, brings added risk of eye disease later on in life, how do we build on that early detection piece, in the same way we would have done with dental care and on the back of public health nurse checks in the first years of a baby's life? How do we keep an eye on - pardon the pun - the development of eye health and eye care but also address and ensure we use the data to inform monitoring and planning and learn about the prevalence of myopia? One thing the increased use of screens has taught us is that nobody would have anticipated that it has had a very detrimental effect on the overall state of the eye health of children and adults in the country, which has led to this increased prevalence of myopia. I thank the Minister of State for the response, and she might respond to the other points too.

Deputy Mary Butler: It is great to have the opportunity to discuss the reform of eye care services in line with emerging trends across the country. Deputy Michael Murphy, who is sitting in front of Deputy Moynihan, has discussed with me several times the issue of getting the right clinicians into the job. We have been really challenged, for example, in south Tipperary in getting a consultant optometrist in there to fill that post. That is why it is really important we have the training skills across the country. We do not have enough positions at the moment. I am strongly of that opinion and we are trying to change that. That is really important.

The Deputy talked about eye care. Often when we think of eyes, we think about the glasses or the contact lenses but eye care is very important. There is a huge amount of work done with older people with dementia, macular degeneration and cataracts. It is very important that the quality of life of a person can be so much improved if they have the correct eye care.

Myopia - short-sightedness or nearsightedness - is increasing among children both globally and in Ireland. Research indicates that daily outdoor activities and managing children's screen time and sleep time may be beneficial for slowing the progress of myopia. Children discovered to have sight problems, including myopia, during HSE screenings get free treatment from their local HSE integrated eye care team, but I am conscious of waiting lists and where a young child is waiting. I am conscious again of the situation in south Tipperary, which has been raised. We failed over the past two years to get a consultant in post, and that ends up creating very long

waiting lists for children. As we all know, regardless of what health issue it is, early intervention is key.

I will raise with the Minister again the prescribing element of it, because the more services we can move away from the acute hospital setting and into the community, the better. I thank the Deputy again for raising this.

Health Services

Deputy Michael Murphy: I raise the ongoing closure of the south Tipperary memory clinic in Cashel and the growing impact it is having on patients and families across the county. I thank the Minister of State for taking the question, as I know it is an area she is very familiar with, given her previous responsibility in this area.

Through a number of parliamentary questions I submitted recently, I received confirmation from the HSE that the memory clinic has been closed since January 2026. There is no reopening date, and while there is a review under way, families have no certainty as to when a fully functioning service will be restored. The figures provided to me by the HSE are deeply concerning. There are currently 450 patients awaiting an initial assessment and a further 168 waiting for follow-up appointments. That is a total of 618 people caught up in a system that is simply not functioning.

This matters, as the Minister of State well knows, because dementia diagnosis is not a luxury; it is a gateway to treatment, care planning, family support and future decision-making. While the HSE points to dementia advisers and other support services, those services are not a substitute for diagnosis itself. What families want and what patients deserve is timely assessment and diagnosis.

I know the Minister of State is very familiar with the dementia model of care. I think that sets out a pathway for timely access to assessment and intervention of six weeks, yet in south Tipperary, we have a situation where public memory clinics have ceased operating entirely. Patients are being left indefinitely, while GPs are being provided with information on private providers. I think that raises serious questions about equity of access.

Will the Minister of State address the stark contrast with services available in other parts of the south east? I know the tremendous work the Minister of State has done in Waterford and Wexford, both of which provide a structured multidisciplinary approach to dementia assessment and support. Why is a comparable service not available to the people of south Tipperary? My understanding is that there is currently no dedicated memory service in north Tipperary either, and if that is the case, large parts of the county are effectively without direct access to specialist memory assessment services.

We all know our population is ageing. We know that dementia referrals are increasing year on year. This cannot be dismissed simply as a temporary inconvenience or an administrative issue. This is a systemic failure, in my view.

We talked about ophthalmology a minute ago. We have a similar systems failure with ophthalmology provision in south Tipperary, and we have a similar systematic failure when it

comes to orthodontic care in south Tipperary. However, this particular memory clinic service failure is leaving hundreds of patients waiting for a diagnosis and is leaving families in distress.

I plead with the Minister of State to engage directly with the Minister to address the specific issues. When will the review be completed and when will the memory clinic reopen?

Deputy Mary Butler: I thank Deputy Murphy for raising this very important issue. I am taking this Topical Issue on behalf of the Minister of State with responsibility for older people and housing, Deputy Kieran O'Donnell, who sends his apologies for not being able to be here tonight.

The Deputy is quite right. I was a Minister of State in the previous Dáil for four and a half years, and one of the areas where we made a lot of progress was dementia. Every day in Ireland, there are 30 new cases of dementia. There were 30 yesterday, there are 30 today and there will be another 30 tomorrow. I was delighted to welcome the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, to Cappoquin in Waterford last Friday, where we opened a new dementia day service. It is something I worked on while I was in the role and it was great to get it over the line, because bringing services to people in the community, especially those with dementia, is really important. You can live well with dementia in your community with the correct wraparound supports of home care, day care, meals on wheels and the like of the memory clinics.

When I was asked to take this Topical Issue debate tonight, I was disappointed to hear that one of the 25 memory clinics that I worked so hard to open across the country after Covid had been "paused". I do not like seeing that word at all. Memory clinics are so important. They are a specialist service to support people with memory loss, changes in cognitive formation or dementia. As the Deputy knows, it is located in St. Patrick's Hospital in Cashel in south Tipperary. I appreciate the impact that this is having on people who are awaiting dementia services.

The HSE has advised me that the memory clinic in Cashel has been paused since January this year due to staffing and resourcing issues. I have spoken to the integrated healthcare area manager for south Tipperary this evening. I rang her and she assured me that the HSE was working both locally and nationally to resume the clinic as soon as possible. I am very conscious of the waiting list that the Deputy called out of 450 patients, 168 of whom have had the initial appointment. That is a significant waiting list. Currently, people are referred to the memory clinic either by their general practitioner or through acute hospitals or community specialist teams. Increasing service demand, combined with staffing challenges, has led to longer waiting lists in the memory clinic, as the Deputy alluded to.

The HSE has approved the appointment of a full-time administrative post to support the current clinical administrative systems and allow for their further development. In addition, the current clinic staff are exploring new ways of working to address the waiting lists and resume the provision of a memory clinic service in south Tipperary. As the Deputy quite rightly said, the programme for Government includes a commitment to roll out more memory assessment and support services. I had the honour of being able to write that into the programme for Government. I feel strongly about dementia supports, regardless of where people live. I am disappointed to see that this is the current situation.

I have been told that referrals can be made to the south Tipperary integrated care programme for older persons, ICPOP, team in Thurles, which provides specialist secondary care for people with cognitive decline, falls and frailty. I am conscious that the current situation in south Tipperary is difficult. I will give the Deputy a commitment tonight. I have already spoken to the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell's office this evening. We will follow this up rigorously because it is really important. We came from a situation where we did not have many dementia supports. We have 25 memory clinics open. They are vital, the length and breadth of the country. I will work with the Deputy and the Minister of State with responsibility for older people to make sure that we get this up and running again.

Deputy Michael Murphy: I thank the Minister of State for her reply and acknowledge the extent to which she has been a positive force. I acknowledge the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, too, and the establishment of 25 memory clinics around the country. The central issue remains that we have no clear timeline for the restoration of service in south Tipperary. At the heart of my question lie the 450 people awaiting an initial assessment and the 168 awaiting a follow-up appointment. That waiting list will only grow as long as the clinic remains closed. As the Minister of State rightly pointed out, behind every one of those numbers is a person or a family living with uncertainty. Delayed diagnosis can mean delayed treatment, delayed supports and delayed planning for the future. I reference the national dementia model of care, which the Minister of State is familiar with, and the six-week optimal waiting list.

I appreciate the commitment that the Minister of State has given. We really need to push for a timeline for completion of the review and, more importantly, for the restoration of services in Cashel and the re-establishment of the memory clinic in south Tipperary so that we can set a clear plan to address what is a serious and growing waiting list. This is a systematic failure by the HSE. It needs to be corrected and I sincerely welcome the Minister of State's commitment tonight.

Deputy Mary Butler: I thank the Deputy. Many of the memory clinics evolved organically over many years. I am aware that there is a memory technology resource room in Clonmel, which supports people with technology when, for example, they are living well at home with dementia, but it is important that we get the memory clinic back up and running. These clinics are a vital cog in the wheel. There is an excellent dementia adviser in south Tipperary. I have met her many times. She is fantastic. There is a great partnership with the Alzheimer Society of Ireland. I commend it on the work it does. The opening of the new service in Cappoquin last Friday brought to 62 the number of dementia day services across the country. I commend the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, for following on and making sure that dementia in general remains a key part of the work that he does every day of the week.

We always talk about the prevalence of early onset dementia. We are seeing more and more younger people with it. As the Deputy knows, we had the two fantastic Adams brothers in Ireland only recently. They ran 33 marathons in 33 days. I had the honour of meeting them with the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, and others. We had a very good conversation. I am delighted to say that they will be coming back to Ireland early in July. We will have statements on dementia in the House and the brothers will be present.

I thank the Deputy for putting the spotlight on dementia today, specifically with regard to Cashel and the memory clinic. I will speak with the Minister of State in the next week or so and try to make sure that we get traction and get this service back open as quickly as possible.

Energy Policy

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I appreciate the opportunity to raise this extremely important issue. It has been pointed out that last week alone, over €15 million of renewable wind energy was wasted. According to EirGrid, 18% of wind energy was wasted in 2026. For people who do not know, EnergyCloud is delivering free heated water to thousands of people over 120 nights a year and will be helping thousands of homes by the end of 2026. It is demonstrating the link between surplus renewable energy and energy poverty in a very practical way. It is making impacts on a day-to-day basis for people who are in energy poverty. The residents in question have spoken not only of the money, but also of the fact that they now have hot water to wash themselves, their children, their dishes, and their homes. It has a real impact. It removes having to make the choice between heating or eating, and shows what is possible.

Some of the statistics are quite shocking. The programme for Government has a commitment to use surplus renewable energy to help those in fuel energy poverty. Renewable energy wastage came to 2,137 GWh. Approximate retail value of the wasted energy was €756 million. That is an astonishing amount of wasted energy. It is equivalent to 692 million tanks of hot water heated. The average waste per day is €1.633 million. That is energy that is being created every single day that is going to waste.

EnergyCloud is trying to make the connection between the renewable energy that is being created, that cannot be used at a particular time that day, and people who are in energy poverty. When we talk about the cost-of-living crisis that we have at the moment, there are something like 320,000 people currently in energy poverty or energy debt. They are a number of months behind on their payments. The scale of this is absolutely huge. The scale of energy that is being created and wasted is astonishing.

A commitment is required from the Government to support EnergyCloud.

11 o'clock

That is what it is asking for. It has sent this email to every single TD. The Minister of State may have received it himself. It is really important that we have that discussion on linking the energy we have here and people in energy poverty. This about enabling them to wash themselves, washing their dishes and heating their homes. It is quite incredible.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Noel Grealish): I am taking this on behalf of the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, who is out of the country. Ireland is fully committed to an ambitious and just green transition, which is essential not only from an environmental perspective, but is also required to reduce our reliance on expensive imported fossil fuels. This involves remaining abreast of new technologies in order to support the integration of increasing volumes of renewables and to further support the use of surplus energy to reduce the amount of wasted energy. Some major challenges exist for electricity systems like ours which are increasingly

powered by renewables. These complex issues can only be addressed by taking a systematic approach requiring investment in grid, storage and demand flexibility.

The Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment has engaged widely with relevant stakeholders to identify areas for co-operation in relation to tackling energy poverty and renewable energy waste. A number of key measures are currently under way. First is grid enhancement and interconnection. We are investing €18.9 billion in network infrastructure. The Greenlink interconnector, completed in April 2025, and the forthcoming Celtic interconnector with France will allow us to export surplus energy to European markets during periods of high generation.

Second is the national energy affordability action plan. Through the national energy affordability task force, we are developing an action plan to be published in late 2026. A primary objective is to identify solutions that allow household, particularly those in energy poverty, to avail of low-cost surplus renewable energy.

Third is the electricity storage policy framework. Following the publication of our battery storage framework, we are accelerating the deployment of long-duration storage and batteries. In addition, we are increasing battery capacity to buffer the grid during peak production.

The fourth is the national hydrogen programme. Our new national hydrogen programme task force is overseeing a work programme to develop green hydrogen as a long-term storage solution for surplus wind and solar power.

Fifth is the smart grid and demand response. Through the CRU and ESB Networks, we are expanding "Beat the Peak" initiatives and smart meter incentives, encouraging consumers and large energy users to shift their demand to times of high renewable surplus. The national energy demand strategy aims to make 20% to 30% of electricity demand flexible by 2030. A key aspect of this strategy is preparing households and businesses to maximise their use of renewables.

The sixth is district heating. We are advancing the development of district heating systems to take excess heat from large energy users and other sources to power district heating solutions for both households and businesses.

Finally, the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment will also lead the development of an integrated strategy on the use of renewable surplus energy, which will co-ordinate technical grid limits, flexible demand, storage deployment and interconnector flows to maximise the use of renewable energy units.

These measures clearly demonstrate our commitment to a just and green transition while managing the current energy affordability strains on households in Ireland.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I welcome the report from the Minister. One of the key things is the national energy affordability task force report which is due to be published late this year. My concern and that of EnergyCloud is that it will come too late for the next budget because it will need investment. Although there is investment in the smart grid and all the things the Minister of State just outlined, I am unsure where it makes the connection between the 550,000 homes where people are living in energy poverty and how that connects with the seven items the Minister of State talked about in his reply.

I welcome the advancements but when one looks at the wasted renewable energy report from EnergyCloud for 16 months until 30 April, as I said, that is €756 million in retail wasted energy. This cannot come too soon for people in energy poverty who, as we speak, are probably not heating their homes. I know we are in June but we are not talking about warm weather today. I welcome the report but there needs to be more urgency about it. People are choosing between heating and eating need it now and they need that support now.

Deputy Noel Grealish: The Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment is acutely aware that, with the scale of renewable electricity generation sources coming onto the grid, the grid needs to be more flexible to account for the intermittent nature of renewables. Moreover, for the decarbonisation pathway to be efficient our energy systems must be smart. A smart and flexible energy system will reduce consumer energy bills by reducing the amount of generation and network assets that need to be built to meet peak demand. Consequently the deployment of energy smart appliances such as electric vehicle charge points, domestic battery storage, energy storage systems, heat pumps and hot water heating solutions is a crucial step for empowering households and businesses to play a central role in Ireland's energy transition. Some major challenges exist, however, that can only be addressed by taking a systematic approach requiring investment in grid storage and demand flexibility.

The Government remains fully committed to an ambitious and just green transition that is fair and leaves no one behind. The Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment has engaged widely with relevant stakeholders to identify areas for co-operation in relation to tackling energy poverty and renewable energy waste and a number of key measures are currently under way, some of which I referred to in detail earlier.

Post Office Network

Deputy Rory Hearne: We want to raise an issue of deep concern to the community around Griffith Avenue, Glasnevin, in relation to a proposal – which seems to be going ahead – to sell the An Post depot on Griffith Avenue. This has been publicly advertised for sale. Will the Minister of State set out what is planned on this? We have a number of issues of concern to the residents. They really want to stop this happening.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I want to talk about the erosion of a community service. I am conscious the Minister of State may be taking this on behalf a different Minister. I have to be honest - the Minister of State is an Independent who is not part of the same party as the Minister with responsibility for the matter and I am not sure what role the Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has in relation to the loss of a postal service. I am quite frustrated. Myself and Deputy Hearne are both here at 11.10 p.m. on a Tuesday evening. We equally have families to be home to. I do not think this is an appropriate standard for parliamentary debate. There was no communication with our offices on the change of Ministers. I think it is really disrespectful not only to our role but to the people we represent in our respective constituencies.

I want to speak on the loss of a postal service in Drumcondra but I am also speaking about the erosion of community. Community happens in a multitude of different forms. That postal service parcel delivery office on Home Farm Road, off Griffith Avenue, is a place of

congregation. It is a place where older residents in particular in an older part of Dublin city actually find their routine. They find their engagement. They go about their business. It is a source of community. We are about to lose a site from a semi-State entity. There will be a big hole in the ground that once was a State service and residents are angry about it. They are not just angry because of the loss of a particular entity; they are angry because of the loss of a service. There has been no consultation. The residents rightfully feel disrespected.

Further compounding that disrespect, when we strive to have a parliamentary debate about the loss of service, while I respect the Minister of State's role, I have no concept of what happens after this. He will read from a prepared script, but who will take this back to the Minister with responsibility, who seems to be able to give a soundbite to the media about some ridiculousness every once in a while? However, when we are here to engage on a substantive issue, we have nothing. I genuinely feel disrespected and the communities we represent are equally disrespected.

Deputy Noel Grealish: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. I speak today on behalf of the Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, who could not be here. I am reading from a prepared script. I welcome the opportunity to outline the position on this matter. An Post is a commercial State company with a mandate to act commercially and as such, day-to-day operational matters including decisions in relation to the size, distribution and future of the network are matters for the board and the management of the company and are not ones in which either the Minister of State or the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, has a statutory function. The Ministers are aware of the impact that decisions relating to changes in An Post operations have on communities and individuals in both rural and urban areas.

This is a matter for the company. It would be inappropriate for the Government, as a shareholder, to comment on decisions that are for the board and management of An Post to consider. Notwithstanding that this is an operational matter, officials have engaged with the company. An Post has noted it is consolidating its national network of local sorting offices, also known as delivery service units, DSUs. It advises that it needs larger and purpose-fitted premises to manage increased parcel volumes. An Post has advised that as part of a citywide plan over this year and next, it is relocating a number of its delivery offices to new city delivery hubs. Among these will be the An Post delivery offices in Harmonstown, Dublin 5, and Griffith Avenue in Whitehall, Dublin 9, moving to a new north Dublin delivery hub. An Post states that the proposed move is scheduled for the second quarter of next year and there is much to be considered before then. It states that its delivery office in Finglas, Dublin 11, will also be sharing the new facility being completed and purpose-fitted at the North City Business Park in Dublin 11. An Post remains in consultation with staff and unions on the details of these moves.

An Post has further advised that it will facilitate the collection of missed mail locally in local post offices and PostPoint parcel collection pick-up outlets. It states the move will have also little day-to-day impact on local customers as the same postal workers will be delivering to the same local routes as before. An Post advises that it needs much larger premises or repurposed facilities, or both, to manage increased parcel volumes and to meet the future needs of the city and the changing needs of its customers. It notes these new buildings also represent an improvement in working conditions for staff and make huge inroads in terms of sustainability with regard to heating, lighting and the day-to-day operations of buildings like the new delivery hub.

In accordance with section 8.22 of the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies, all State bodies are required to seek the approval of the relevant Minister and the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Sector Reform and Digitalisation in advance of any material acquisition or disposal of land, buildings or other material assets proposed by a State body. Departmental officials engage with An Post on various consent requests and An Post is aware of the requirement for compliance with the code of practice. The Government is committed to a sustainable An Post and post office network as a key component of the economic and social infrastructure throughout Ireland. The programme for Government states that the Government will continue to provide the nationwide network of post offices with funding to ensure their sustainability and enhance the value they bring to local communities. The Department of Culture, Communications and Sport is working to deliver on this and an enhanced amount of €15 million per annum has been allocated for supporting the network subject to all legal requirements being satisfied.

In line with the programme for Government, the funding will support the stability and sustainability of the nationwide network of post offices, protecting and nurturing a commercially focused post office network. It will also support access for citizens to the key social benefits of the post office network and help citizens access services effectively.

Deputy Rory Hearne: I again express the deep concern we have for our constituents in Glasnevin and Drumcondra. This service delivery office has been an important local service for the community, and this is happening in the context of the removal of a number of local services like local transport infrastructure, bus changes, the closure of Whitehall Garda station, the loss of parking, restriction on transport and ongoing disruptions. This area also has an older demographic. Residents are deeply concerned that changes being made to essential services like this are being made without any consideration of the combined impact on residents who depend on accessible local infrastructure and services. In particular, it will have a negative impact on the quality of life of older residents, those with mobility challenges and families seeking to remain connected to local services. We are asking if An Post has undertaken an assessment of such accessibility and mobility impacts of the change in services. We are not aware of that. We would like to see these assessments done. We are also asking if ComReg has been addressed about this. On the issue of the material disposal of land, has the Department consented to An Post for the disposal of this according to section 8.22 of the code of practice?

Deputy Gary Gannon: I will speak to the Minister of State in his own capacity. He is an Independent who represents the constituency of Galway West. When he envisioned himself becoming a Minister of State, did he imagine he would be standing in the Chamber defending the closure of local postal services? I appreciate that my constituency and his are very different, but I imagine some of the community needs are the same. The older population in my community of Drumcondra and Glasnevin rely on their post office. When I am told that An Post is a commercial State entity, what does that actually mean? Some State entities do not need to be run for profit. They could also be run for community gain. What we are losing through this erosion of community infrastructure, not only in Dublin Central and Drumcondra, is that community itself. I ask Deputy Grealish to remember why he became an Independent, chose to get involved in politics and became a Minister of State and to stand up for genuine public services such as the post office. I do not for one second doubt he appreciates the need for this type of infrastructure as much as I do. Now that he is sitting in that chair, I ask him to

become a custodian of the issue and stand up for this infrastructure. It does not have to be a massive post office. It can be a small postal collection service with other community infrastructure like childcare facilities or anything. Let us show a bit of innovation rather than selling the service off to a private fund, which will be a loss to the community. I would imagine the Minister of State's belief system would go against that.

Deputy Noel Grealish: I thank the Deputy for his comments. When I was on that side of the House, we brought in a lot of Private Members' business about An Post. We always emphasised the importance of the post office and the postman. In all fairness, the postman was the connection with a lot of elderly people living at home. He used to call and check on them to make sure they were there. There is always that fear you will lose the services in the area. I will not read out the script I have in front of me. However, I will get a transcript of what the Deputy said and bring it to the Minister. I will ask him to reply directly to him about the issues he raised.

Schools Building Projects

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Táim chun caint anocht faoi Scoil Gharbháin i nDún Garbháin i gContae Phort Láirge. Tá sága - scéal an-fhada - sa scoil seo i dtaobh síneadh a chur leis an bhfoirgneamh scoile. I raise the situation of Scoil Gharbháin in Dungarvan, County Waterford and the long-running saga the school community, the children, teaching staff, management, board and parents have been dealing with over several years.

The Department of education has recently communicated the decision to the school that it is to scale back a long-approved nine-room extension. This decision has caused serious concern in the school community because it cuts across what was previously approved, communicated and planned for and what the school has been working towards in good faith over a number of years. In November 2024, after many years of delay and a lot of miscommunication and shifting goalposts, the Department issued a formal offer for a nine-room extension made up of four mainstream classrooms, two special education classrooms and three special education tuition rooms. That offer was made in response to an already recognised accommodation crisis in the school.

Today, the school has 13 classes but only nine permanent classrooms, meaning the school cannot operate within its own physical capacity. As a result, children are being taught across a fragmented mix of off-site accommodation, prefab buildings and repurposed spaces that were never designed for long-term use. One of the classes is based off-site in a nearby secondary school. That has been the case for three years. This requires daily movement away from the school campus and results in a loss of normal teaching continuity. The children educated off site also lose out on the community they might otherwise enjoy. Another class has been located in the halla for five years. The entirety of the funds to build that halla were raised by the parents and school community. However, for almost all of that five years, it has served as a classroom. That has removed any kind of proper PE and assembly space from the school. The schoolyard is also taken up with two prefabs, which means there is no outdoor paved area for play on those days when it is not lashing rain. Kids are effectively kept in their classrooms. Those in the prefabs are dealing with damp, deteriorating conditions and structural concerns.

The school, which was originally built for 100 pupils, now has 320 and demand is increasing. I should mention that this is a Gaelscoil in Dungarvan. Dungarvan has been recognised as a Gaeltacht service town for a number of years now. Government makes significant investment in promoting the use of Irish as a living community language in the town of Dungarvan. This is the sole Gaelscoil and it is intrinsically important to that project, to the school community, to the children who are educated there and to the promotion of Irish in west Waterford. There is no other Gaelscoil. There is no other option but demand increases. There is a naíonra on site which acts as a feeder for the school. There are waiting lists. Not only is this making teaching very difficult and not only is it impacting the learning experience of the children attending the school but it is also preventing parents from accessing oideachas trí Ghaeilinn dá bpáistí, getting an education through the Irish language for their children.

Next to the school is a 155-home housing development that is to come on stream in the next year or year and half. That is much needed in Dungarvan. Demand is only going to increase. In the catchment area, there are two English-language schools but both are landlocked and do not have room to expand. I should also mention that, back when I was a councillor, the Department of education funded Waterford City and County Council to buy a site to build an extension for this school. The site is there. It has been paid for with public funds. Approval was granted but the goalposts are now being shifted. To say that the school community feels utterly dejected and let down would be a massive understatement.

Deputy Noel Grealish: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta. I am taking this on behalf of the Minister for Education and Youth, Deputy Hildegard Naughton. I will outline to the Dáil the current position on investments in school infrastructure in County Waterford. Waterford county is broken down into five school planning areas. An analysis of the primary school population in Waterford indicates that primary school enrolments will reduce in all areas over the next five years, with the exception of the school planning area of Ring, which may see a small increase in enrolments. Post-primary enrolments in all areas are projected to remain steady and to peak in the next few years.

There are currently four school projects under construction in County Waterford. These projects are in addition to €150 million in capital funding for County Waterford schools since 2020. During that period, over 30 schools in County Waterford were upgraded through the provision of a new school building, a large-scale extension or the provision of modular accommodation. In addition, approximately 120 small-scale improvement works were undertaken across the county's schools to address maintenance needs and enhance energy efficiency. Furthermore, since 2020, a total of 68 special classes have been sanctioned in County Waterford, of which 17 were sanctioned for September 2026.

As the Deputy will be aware, the Department published the €7.55 billion NDP sectoral investment plan for the education and youth sectors for the period from 2026 to 2030 earlier this year. Of the total €7.55 billion investment, it is envisaged that approximately €5 billion will be used for project roll-out to support the delivery and modernisation of school buildings across the large-scale, additional accommodation, modular and annual September accommodation needs programmes.

The Department continues to build on the progress made over recent years with the roll-out of projects on a prioritised basis to meet the most urgent needs in terms of provision of

additional capacity and modernisation of existing facilities. In this regard, the Department also published a list of 105 school building projects in the first tranche to proceed to construction or tender over 2026 and 2027. This list included two projects in County Waterford, one of which is the now under construction. The second project has moved to tender stage.

As part of planning ahead for the next tranche of projects to progress to tender, a Department-led prioritisation process will continue over the course of 2026 and 2027. This will include engagement with key stakeholders, including meetings with patrons this month. The Department-led energy and condition survey of the school estate, which will be finalised later in 2026, will provide an additional evidence base for assessing priorities. A next tranche of projects to proceed to tender is expected to be announced in 2027.

Investment under the plan also involves the delivery of the first tranche of 297 projects under the climate action summer works scheme. This includes seven projects in County Waterford that are approved to undergo works this summer.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Gabhaim buíochas as sin ach níl sé ró-úsáideach dom ná do na daoine atá bainteach leis an scoil seo. I thank the Minister of State for the response. I appreciate him being here to read it. However, similar to other speakers tonight, I will put on record that I would much prefer it if one of the two Ministers in the Department of education were here. Neither is. That in itself tells us something. We could have a more engaging and robust conversation. That is no criticism of the Minister of State. To be fair, he is here doing his job.

What we need here is real and meaningful engagement with the school. I had the school principal, the deputy principal and the chairperson of the board of management in Leinster House for some meetings this evening. I understand they are going to meet with the Minister tomorrow. However, that cannot just be a meeting to go through what the Minister of State has just said here. I hope the Minister has more to say to the school because this is holding back the ability of children to get an education, of educators to do their jobs safely and of parents to vindicate their children's right to an education through the medium of Irish.

No matter what way you cut it, this is an infringement of children's basic rights, such as the right of children with special educational needs attending this excellent school to be able to get the educational interventions they need and deserve in an adequate and appropriate place. It infringes the right of children who are learning to move around during their break times and not be stuck in a classroom, sometimes a prefab classroom, without access to a halla or clós to go outside and play. We need a can-do attitude from the Minister tomorrow. We do not need a litany of what has been achieved, what might be achieved and what is aspired to. It is about the nuts and bolts of remedying this situation. If it is a matter of pointing to a miscommunication or error on the Department's part that it is going to solve, that is fine. We will take that all day long but we need an approach that aims to fix this and sets out how, and that involves working with the school community. They are reasonable people but they have been trying to get this extension for years.

Deputy Noel Grealish: The Department has a strong track record of delivering the Government's school building programme, with over €6.9 billion invested since 2020. This has delivered more than 1,400 completed school building projects along with over 4,000 small-

scale improvement works to meet priority maintenance needs and advance energy efficiency and climate goals. A total capital ceiling of €7.55 billion for 2026 to 2030 was allocated to the Department of Education and Youth under the national development plan review. This is a record level of investment in school buildings. It will expand the number of school places, significantly increase provision for special education, and upgrade and modernise our school infrastructure. The impact of this will be felt in communities right around the country. This €7.55 billion investment will be prioritised to ensure every child has a school place and it will support the overall operation of the school system and youth sector in terms of capital infrastructure. The Department puts a very strong emphasis on achieving value for money. Its focus is on delivering good quality functional accommodation for schools based on its suite of standard designs and specifications.

That is the response I was given from officials in the Department of education. I wish the Deputy well in the meeting tomorrow. It is important that the school engages with the Minister. Perhaps, they will get some good news.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 11.31 p.m. go dtí 9 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 10 Meitheamh 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 11.31 p.m. until 9 a.m. on Wednesday, 10 June 2026.