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DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 13 Deireadh Fómhair 2026

Tuesday, 13 October 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 those in the Gallery who are visiting.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Today a family and a community in Waterford city are dealing with unimaginable grief and trauma. Two adults and two children have lost their lives in an arson attack and two more children fight for their lives. It is a scene of utter devastation and heartbreak in Waterford. Gardaí are now carrying out a murder investigation. This community needs every support possible. We stand with it at this desperate time. We think of those lives that have been lost. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a n-anamacha.

Beidh níos ná 300,000 oibrithe sa tseirbhís phoiblí ag dul ar stailc amárach. Tá siad ag troid ar son comhréitigh pá réasúnta a thugann aghaidh ar an gcostas maireachtála atá tar éis ardú go géar. Is féidir leis an Rialtas an stailc seo a sheachaint tríd aontú a dhéanamh déileáil le cúrsaí pá mar thosaíocht.

We are facing into a strike action of more than 300,000 public sector workers for a pay deal to address the soaring cost of living. These are nurses, teachers, special needs assistants - public servants - forced to the picket lines, and Sinn Féin stands with them. These are the workers we depend on. They educate our children, take care of us when we are sick and deliver the services we depend on every single day. They literally keep the country running, yet they cannot afford to get by. They have been left with no option other than to strike because the Government has failed to do its job. That is what has brought us to this point.

The previous public sector pay deal expired last June, so the Government has had nearly four months to listen to public sector workers, four months to engage in meaningful negotiation and conversation and four months to sort this out and avoid industrial action. In fact, the unions warned the Government last year of the challenges it would face in reaching a new pay deal. The Government chose to ignore, delay and drag things out. Where there should have been leadership, it has engaged in brinksmanship.

The Taoiseach's remarks last week provoked real anger. He claimed people want industrial action irrespective of what happens, but that is not true. This is not a game for public sector workers; this is about having enough money to pay their bills, provide for their children and have a decent future. That is why pay must be at the core of these negotiations - pay first and foremost. The Government refuses to listen. It refuses to hear what public sector workers have been saying for a long time. It is more interested in shifting blame than in any serious effort to resolve this dispute. That disrespect has led to this strike. That is why we face school closures, the cancellation of hospital appointments and disruption to public services.

Public sector workers do not want to be on strike; they want to be at work.

They need a fair pay settlement so they can live decently. The way to resolve this dispute and avert this strike action is for the Government to agree to enter talks with pay as the priority and first item on the agenda. This is a crisis entirely of the Government's making. It now needs to intervene constructively and show public sector workers the respect they deserve. The phones should be lifted to the unions and it should be made clear that the Government will enter these talks with pay as the priority and the first item on the agenda.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Taoiseach: First of all, I would like to take a moment on the evolving situation in Waterford. I know that Deputies from across the House will have been united in shock, and indeed horror, as the news emerged this morning of the early morning fire at a house in Birchwood estate in Waterford. As Deputy McDonald said, two adults and two children have been killed in the fire, with another two children with very serious injuries being treated in hospital. The further news that An Garda Síochána is treating the incident as a murder investigation adds to the sense of shock and incomprehension. The thoughts and prayers of everyone in this Dáil and across government are with the family, the wider community in Waterford, the first responders, on whom we have to take a moment to reflect because the trauma that they encountered when they went to that house this morning cannot be comprehended and will leave an impact, and with the staff in the hospital in terms of the emergency situation they had to deal with. It puts the important role of public servants in our minds when we think of the first responders. All supports will be provided to the community. The Minister for education has ensured that the National Educational Psychological Service, NEPS, and counselling supports will be provided to children in the specific school and the neighbourhood. Regarding wider counselling and services, through the community network, the Minister, Deputy Calleary, will ensure that supports are made available also.

In relation to the public service strike tomorrow, this Government is pro public service. The previous Government was pro public service. I come from a trade union background. I respect the trade union movement. I attended Fórsa's annual conference earlier this year. If we look at the expansion of the public service over the past number of years, there has been an increase of about 25% in the numbers of people working in our public service, to over 424,000. That has been a steady growth over five or six years. This is a Government that understands the need for an expansion of public services and public servants to do it. For example, the number of healthcare staff has grown by about 31,000 since 2019. There has been a 53% increase in hospital consultants. There are about 11,000 more nurses, midwives and so forth. Next year, we will have up to 28,000 special needs assistants in our schools. I have been involved with

the expansion of SNA numbers all my political life. We are pro public service. I want to make that very clear.

In terms of the Deputy's assertions, we approached the budget with a cost-of-living framework in our minds. That is why we did substantial measures in terms of an income tax package, which amounts to €1.3 billion and cuts taxes, particularly the point at which workers go into the higher rate of tax where the band expansion will be significant. We are also listening to congress. We took measures that will reduce the cost of childcare significantly. These give us a clear pathway to get that cost down to €200 over the next number of budgets. We then did work on disability. From the outset of the Government, childcare and disability and the costs around disability were clear Government priorities. This will help many working families. In addition, there is a whole range of other measures, such as the increase in the tax credit and the improvement in student supports, all of which are helping working families. The reduction in excise duties on petrol and diesel also benefits workers. We saw the budget-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: -----as creating a platform, along with the €1.2 billion in provision, for negotiations.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy McDonald can come back in.

The Taoiseach: It is a good platform for negotiations to begin. We invite everybody in to discuss it.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach has known since June that a new pay deal had to be struck with public sector workers, and yet we find ourselves almost four months on here, at the eleventh hour, on the brink of this strike action tomorrow. The reason we are here is because of a failure of this Government to engage, to agree and to enter into those talks processes in good faith. It is glaringly obvious that the issue of pay for public sector workers has to be the first item on the agenda. The Taoiseach knows as well as I do that they, like other workers, are struggling with the cost-of-living crisis. Why on earth is the Government engaging in this brinkmanship? Why on earth is it playing a game of chicken with public sector workers at a time when what we need is leadership? This is just a matter of good order and entering into discussions in a rational and fair way. However, rather than do that, the Taoiseach has said things that have in fact inflamed the situation.

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up, Deputy.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I ask him now to be constructive, make it clear that pay will be the first matter, not the only matter-----

An Ceann Comhairle: An Taoiseach to respond, please.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----but the first matter for negotiations, and try to avert this strike action.

The Taoiseach: We have had ongoing contact and meetings with the trade union movement. The Labour Employer Economic Forum, LEEF, for example, is one such regular mechanism by which we engage with congress and trade union leaders. We circulated some ideas to the trade union movement. I offered an enhanced social dialogue earlier this year to the trade union movement, given the geopolitical uncertainty facing the world, the wars that have broken out and the impact that is having on economy. I made the point to the trade union leadership that we should move into an enhanced form of social dialogue so that we have a more united societal approach to really fundamental problems all over the world that are impacting on our society and our economy. That has not been taken up, but that was offered.

Everybody knows that in any national pay agreement, pay is always the central issue. Let us call a spade a spade. That has not changed-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: So why are we facing into a strike?

The Taoiseach: You are asking me? I think you might be asking the wrong person.

(Interruptions)

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Cian O'Callaghan.

The Taoiseach: What I would say is this. We are open for discussions. We have invited in the unions to talk-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: -----and the Minister for public expenditure said every issue that they have raised is on the table.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: On behalf of the Social Democrats, I extend our deepest sympathies to the families and friends of the four people, including the two children, who were killed this morning in Waterford. Our thoughts are with the two children who are in hospital. It is really shocking and harrowing what is happened, and the wider community needs support. I also pay tribute to the first responders and the staff in the hospital who engaged in hugely important and traumatic work this morning.

More than 300,000 public service workers are taking strike action tomorrow. Nurses, teachers, doctors, SNAs, and local authority workers will be among those joining the pickets. The Taoiseach's commentary on this about the industrial action has been deeply unhelpful. On the few occasions that he has interjected, his statements have been glib and incendiary. Last week, he said, "People want industrial action almost now irrespective of what happens." He decided to rage-bait public sector workers and depict them as spoiling for a fight. Does he really think nurses want to be going on strike tomorrow? Does he think teachers want to be standing outside schools on picket lines? His comments are telling. They betray a

condescending attitude from the Government to public service workers which has led to this strike.

The Government made almost no attempt to engage with unions in advance of the pay deal expiring. There was a half-hearted effort of preliminary talks that was made only about two weeks before the previous deal expired. Comparing that with the negotiations which happened for the last two public sector deals, preliminary talks and then formal negotiations happened long before those deals expired. On this occasion, the Government opted to ignore the unions and treated them with contempt while expecting them to fall neatly into line. It got that badly wrong. The letter sent by Jack Chambers yesterday was no more than a desperate face-saving exercise, an attempt to disguise the Government's inept handling of the crisis, which has led to one of the country's biggest strikes. The responsibility for tomorrow's massive disruption can be laid squarely at the feet of the Government.

The people striking tomorrow are the workers who keep this country running. The last thing they want to do is to take strike action but they have been left with no other choice by the Taoiseach's Government. It has adopted a strategy which is effectively a game of chicken, going right down to the wire in the mistaken belief that unions would blink first.

Does the Taoiseach take any responsibility for his mishandling of the crisis? When will the Government make a credible pay offer so the negotiations can begin?

The Taoiseach: I do not think the Deputy was listening to what I just said. We had been engaged with the trade union movement. We did engage. The platform for negotiations clearly exists. The Deputy knows that too. Provision is made to increase public service pay next year and the year after. Those are the facts. We have cut taxes for workers, which was a key issue that was raised by the trade union movement. We have cut childcare costs, which was also an issue raised by the trade union movement, for workers and working families. We have also brought out the first ever cost-of-disability payment. We have enhanced thresholds for working families in terms of the working family payment. There are a whole range of other measures designed to try to reduce the pressure on working people, both public servants and private sector workers, in terms of the cost of living. If you combine what we did in the budget with the actual provision of €1.2 billion in the Estimates, by any objective yardstick that is a platform for negotiations.

I would say something if we were dramatically changing the conditions of workers, which we are not doing, or if we were trying to cut pay, which we are not doing. We are doing the opposite. We have also expanded numbers exponentially over the past five years in the health service and in education, quite dramatically, despite what gets said.

The last pay agreements were entered into in good faith, which resulted in pay rates and a pay deal that were higher than inflation. We are willing to engage with the unions again, and the Minister for public expenditure has made this very clear with the trade union movement, in terms of negotiating a new pay agreement. I genuinely believe that negotiation and dialogue are the only way to resolve this. The Government has said we are open for dialogue. We have invited in the trade union movement to avoid the level of disruption that will occur. I do not think that is necessary because we have taken measures in the budget, and if you add to that the continued expansion in the number of public servants plus the provision we have made in public service pay, there is a basis there for negotiations.

Clearly, pay will be a central issue. We all, including the trade union movement, know that. The attempts the Deputy is making to try to stereotype are not fair because, in the totality of everything I have said in the past week, I have been very clear that we are open for talks and that we want to engage, and that remains our position. In fact, I said earlier - and it is true - that I offered the trade union movement an enhanced form of social dialogue to deal with the global issues we face, which have impacted for the past six years, if you think about it, including Covid, the war in Ukraine and the war in the Middle East. All are impacting on cost-of-living pressures, and sometimes in such moments of crisis internationally a broader social approach can be helpful.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Does the Taoiseach take any responsibility for the industrial action that will take place tomorrow? Why is it that when Deputy Martin is Taoiseach he cannot get into negotiations? Why were the previous Government's public sector pay deals concluded long before this, at a time when the country had more resources? Does the Taoiseach take any responsibility for this, or is it all somehow somebody else's responsibility and somebody else's fault? Deputy Martin is the Taoiseach of the country. We will have one of the largest strikes taking place tomorrow as a result of his Government's inability to get negotiations off the ground with the unions.

What is the Taoiseach going to do specifically to get negotiations going? Is he going to change tack? What he has done so far has not worked and has not been effective. There will be a strike going on tomorrow, so what will he do to avert future industrial action?

The Taoiseach: The Deputy has not put one idea before me. It is very simple: come in and talk. It is a very simple invitation to the unions: come in and talk about a new public service pay deal. We have made financial provision and we have taken significant measures to enhance the quality of life of workers. We still accept there are people who are under pressure - we know that from the cost-of-living crisis - but there is only one way to resolve this, and that is people getting around the table.

The Deputy talked about the last two pay agreements and that is what actually happened. People came around the table, people engaged and we will engage. It is as simple as that.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: On behalf of the Labour Party, I extend my deepest sympathies on the family members who have lost their lives in the horrific house fire in Waterford. It is truly devastating news. Our thoughts are with all those affected, with the two adults and two children who have died, and with the two children who are now in hospital. Our thoughts are also all with the fire services, the Garda and the first responders on the scene, who will be dealing with the lifelong trauma of what has occurred. We are truly grateful to them for the vital work they do in protecting people, supporting communities through tragedy and keeping the country going.

They are not alone in carrying out an essential role in Irish society. There are over 300,000 public sector workers who are the backbone of our public services. Sadly, tomorrow their unions have been forced to escalate the dispute over pay by taking nationwide strike action after the Taoiseach's Government recklessly allowed the last pay deal to run out in June. Public sector workers have my solidarity and that of the Labour Party in this industrial action. Indeed,

they have the support of the public. The Government has treated them with contempt in refusing to engage meaningfully with unions and making derisive remarks about workers suggesting that they want to be in this situation. Nobody wants to be on strike but they were left with no choice. The Taoiseach's so-called "workers' budget" last week was anything but. The Government has cut taxes on the very wealthiest in Ireland and has narrowed the tax base making ordinary families even more vulnerable to future economic shocks. It announced a €1.2 billion package for pay negotiations but hidden in the fine print was that this sum was also intended to cover existing costs. In reality, the Government showed no understanding of the real struggles resulting from rising bills, poorly funded public services and creaking public infrastructure at a time when the cost-of-living crisis leaves so many households running just to stand still.

Inflation is running at nearly 4% and rising. The country has never had more money it seems, yet one in five children is living in poverty while many of their parents who have what used to be known as good public sector jobs are finding that is no longer a guarantee of a good life or even a basic quality of life. Something has to give. Yesterday the Government reissued the invitation to meet workers' representatives but there was nothing new in that invitation. It seems the Government is not serious about breaking the stalemate. We would love the Taoiseach to prove us wrong. Negotiating in good faith means putting cards on the table. Pay talks must do what they say on the tin and that means prioritising pay from the word go, as the unions have asked.

I have three questions for the Taoiseach. How much of that €1.2 billion announced last week is actually new money for a public sector pay deal? Is the Taoiseach seriously asking unions to negotiate on the basis that the best they can expect is a 2.5% increase? Will he confirm that future pay increases for public servants will, at a minimum, protect their wages against inflation?

The Taoiseach: I think the Deputy's assertions are wrong in terms of what we did in the budget. It was a substantial budget by any yardstick. The tax package was about €1.3 billion. Basically, we increased the entry point for the higher rate of income tax by €2,500. That is significant for many workers who are paying the higher rate of tax far too early in their incomes. We have increased the main tax credits by €125 and the home carer credit by €100. We have increased the ceiling for the second USC band, increased the maximum level of help-to-buy relief, which will help workers, and young workers in particular, in buying homes, and increased the rent tax credit again to €11.50, which will help many workers. Childcare fees will be reduced from €735 a month to €550 per month. That will help families significantly. The working family payment income thresholds will rise by €30 per week helping almost 60,000 working families. Then there is the €500 cost-of-disability payment.

The Deputy cannot ignore all of that as she just glibly did in her presentation. In fact, if the Deputy read the ESRI reports, or any reports, the budget helped the lowest income people the best in that they benefited more from the budget than anybody else. It did not look after the wealthy as the Deputy just threw out as a cheap shot, which is not based on facts. The Deputy can keep on saying things, as a lot of people do here, that are not factual. The last two pay agreements exceeded inflation. The last agreement exceeded inflation by 3% or 4%.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: It did not.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Not true.

The Taoiseach: That is true. That is true and, again, it is not our statistics. All of this can be mediated. It is new money.

A total of €1.2 billion is being provided. That is new money. It is in the Estimate and is provided for in the budget. The Deputy, as leader of the Labour Party, knows full well that the basis exists for negotiations, given what happened in the budget, that €1.2 billion is provided and that we have increased the number of public servants by over 80,000 in the past five years.

Then we have people here saying we are anti public servants and do not respect them. For God's sake, can we have a bit of reality in the debate? We want to invite people in to talk about a pay agreement. Of course pay will be central; it has to be. We understand that people are under pressure. In the public sector, and in the private sector also, there are a lot of pressures on people.

I again repeat that our offer was not taken up. I offered an enhanced social dialogue and we circulated ideas to the union movement in respect of that. The offer was not taken up.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: The Labour Party has a very proud record. Our record is with the trade union movement and we understand negotiation. That is why we find what has happened extraordinary. We are not alone in the Labour Party in finding it very hard to understand how the Government could let a pay agreement lapse in June and not take steps to ensure a new pay agreement would be negotiated to follow from it. That is the extraordinary thing. That is the reckless behaviour from the Government.

The Labour Party has a motion before the House, which will be taken on Thursday, on public sector pay. I very much hope we will hear a more substantive response from the Government to our motion than the sorts of responses we are hearing from the Taoiseach today in the Dáil, including the talk of "enhanced social dialogue". Where was that in June? Why did Government officials and Ministers not come to the table and engage meaningfully with trade unions to ensure there would not be industrial unrest and to avoid this cliff edge whereby the agreement was allowed to lapse? That is the reckless behaviour. Enhanced social dialogue means nothing if workers are not protected against rising inflation. That is the fundamental honesty the Labour Party is talking about.

The Taoiseach: There are two things to say. I fully appreciate the role of the Deputy's party in the labour movement. I delivered a paper at the Irish Labour History Society last Saturday morning outlining Fianna Fáil's relationship with labour since the formation of the party, which, by the way, has been a very constructive and proactive one. I invite Deputy Bacik to read the paper because it will give her a sense of where I have been coming from.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Maybe I will.

The Taoiseach: As I said, I come from a very strong trade union background and have full respect for workers.

I offered an enhanced social dialogue but it was not taken up. "Not yet" was the response. I think people were waiting for the budget. I think the unions wanted to see what was in the budget as well. There was engagement. The budget focused on the cost of living. That was the main issue as far as we were concerned. Through the tax cuts, childcare cost cuts and disability payments - there were measures in other areas as well but it was through those three areas mainly - plus the provision for public service pay of €1.2 billion, we honestly felt the basis existed for dialogue and negotiations to take place between the Government and the unions. The Deputy knows that.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach's time is up. Deputy Tóibín is on his feet.

The Taoiseach: Normally, the scenario would be much different when a strike is called in the manner it has been called.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I join other speakers in expressing my horror at the devastating news that is emerging from Waterford. It is deeply shocking. The fact the Garda has declared a murder investigation is chilling. It is the second such attack this year in which children have been killed. Everyone can remember the face of Tadhg Farrell, who was killed in Edenderry. This is a dark and disturbing development in Irish society.

I want to speak about the record of the Government. The Minister, Deputy McEntee, is accused of breaking the law and damaging the protected disclosures system within the Garda. I put the Government on warning that if she does not answer the questions properly on this matter, Aontú will table a motion of no confidence in her. The Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, has blocked the promised scoliosis public investigation and has devastated families. The Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, threatened RTÉ funding because of its fuel protests reporting and then proceeded to pull funding. The national children's hospital still has no opening date and the costs keep racking up. Meanwhile, the Tánaiste, previously Minister for Health, has still evaded accountability. The Taoiseach stood idly by as we faced the possible breakdown of peace around Drumcree and then went on to welcome a decision by the Secretary of State that he refused to do anything to bring about. The Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, is presiding over the breakdown of the free legal system in the courts. The Minister, Deputy Browne, is telling the country we have turned a corner while 17,800 people are homeless.

The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, oversees the highest electricity price and the worst congestion in the EU. While there is a shortage of medical professionals in this country, the Minister, Deputy Lawless, allows for the majority of medical professional places in Irish universities to be taken by people from outside of the EU.

Deputy James Lawless: Incorrect.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Minister, Deputy Calleary, uses our money to pay for 100,000 free school meals that are dumped on a daily basis. In that same school system, the Minister, Deputy Naughton, oversees over 20% of students who are chronically absent every year.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I think we get the memo.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Minister, Deputy Burke, facilitates more work visas than there are houses built in the country at the moment. The Minister, Deputy Foley, is the Minister for Tusla, where there is an omniscrisis leading to children's lives being lost. The Minister, Deputy Heydon, cuts budgets for farmers in their time of difficulty.

At the start of this year, the country ground to a halt because of fuel strikes. Tomorrow, the country will grind to a halt again because of the public service strikes. The Minister, Deputy Chambers's inaction has led to the largest public sector strike in two decades and possibly a winter of discontent. The cost-of-living crisis, which in part the Government has created, has led to an actual fall of public service income. The essential workers the Government applauded and clapped during Covid are now getting poorer under this Government. The Taoiseach said he is not seeking to cut wages but, in real terms, those wages are being cut. The unions simply want to front-end negotiations. Will the Taoiseach put his intransigence aside and negotiate with those union leaders?

The Taoiseach: First, I said I will negotiate with trade union leaders, or the Government will and-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Front-end it.

The Taoiseach: ----- we have no issue with that. I have said that we are open for negotiations. We believe negotiations should take place. There is no issue there. I do take issue with everything else the Deputy said.

Deputy James Lawless: Hear, hear.

The Taoiseach: We will go through some of those issues. In terms of health, we have a lot of pressures in our health service. We have expanded it hugely. The Deputy did not mention the fact we are up 53% in the number of consultants in our hospitals over the past five years. There are thousands of extra nurses. We have expanded the health service. The more important point about health service is our lifespan has increased dramatically as a country. If the Deputy goes back over two decades, there has been a transformation in the quality of life that people are living in this country health-wise, and in the lifespan, which is probably the most important metric. That came about through a national strategic approach on key issues like cardiovascular health, cancer, stroke and other areas. That is the approach we need to continue to take. Vaccines are included in that as well, by the way. They have been particularly important in terms of dealing with disease. On the national children's hospital, by the way, the Minister is not blocking any inquiry. That is a fairly low sort of way of describing things-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Ask the parents of the children.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy. You asked the question. Let the Taoiseach answer, please.

The Taoiseach: The Minister is not blocking anything. Remy Farrell independently came forward with a report. That is not the Minister blocking something-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Who has the executive power?

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, I will not tell you again. Allow the Taoiseach to deliver uninterrupted, please.

The Taoiseach: I did not interrupt the Deputy. Remy Farrell gave his best recommendation in terms of the form of inquiry he deemed to be optimal given the circumstances and the situation involved, particularly in relation to children. By the way, that is an ongoing debate in terms of inquiries - whether it is a public open inquiry under the 2021 Act or a commission of inquiry. These are legitimate issues. The Deputy should not be reducing them to simplistic derogatory soundbites. It does not do justice to the seriousness of the issue. Very often, you may reduce the number of people who participate in an inquiry if you go one route as opposed to another. We have had a challenging history with inquiries in the country in terms of the length of time and in terms of people getting satisfactory closure from inquiries. All those issues are legitimate issues for debate but not in the manner the Deputy has tried to do it, in a derogatory soundbite which does not do justice to the issues.

No one stood idly by in Drumcree, by the way, but I did think of the future. I did look around the corner, unlike the Deputy-----

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Hear, hear.

The Taoiseach: He just wanted to see how much space he could get to deal with Sinn Féin or others. A lot of cynicism went on there. We fully supported the right of the residents of Garvaghy Road not to have that parade.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: You did not show it.

The Taoiseach: We engaged in diplomacy. The Minister for foreign affairs, Deputy McEntee, in particular, engaged with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. We were very conscious of what comes after.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: We are looking at future relationships on this island. We actually believe in unity but-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach, the time is up.

The Taoiseach: ----- there are times when the Deputy's behaviour gives me the sense that he actually does not really believe in it.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: It is interesting that the Taoiseach chose the health service because 1 million people are on hospital waiting lists at the moment.

It is also interesting that one of the issues the Taoiseach chose to respond to was the promise that there would be a full public investigation into what happened in terms of scoliosis. Who has the executive power in relation to that decision? Remy Farrell does not have the executive power. He is not the individual responsible for fulfilling that particular promise to the families.

The reason that the country is coming to standstill tomorrow is the cost-of-living crisis. Housing, electricity, gas and other fuels have increased in cost by 9.5% over the last 12 months. The Government is, in general, in large part responsible for the increases of all those issues over the last while; 45% of the cost of petrol, for example, is Government tax. It is incredibly frustrating for the Taoiseach to stand up in the Dáil and give the pretence that he is standing, willing and waiting to negotiate with unions. He is not paid big money to stand willing and waiting to negotiate with unions.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. The Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: He is paid to roll up his sleeves, get in there and make sure that the sticking point here-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach to respond now, Deputy.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: -----which is the front-loading of income, is the issue that is addressed first.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach, please.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy went through a long list and I do not have enough time in three minutes. If we take education, we have the highest school completion rates in Europe. We have probably the highest participation rate in third level education, all because of expansion in numbers and investment in education at primary and secondary level and particularly in third level.

The Deputy mentioned the Minister, Deputy Lawless. The INSPIRE programme, which was launched last year, does not get a mention in the House because the Deputy is not into long-term stuff. The INSPIRE programme is a massive investment in research that will guarantee enterprise, new ideas, new companies and new solutions for the future of this country. That will never get a mention by the Deputy, however, because it is long term and, as far as he is concerned, it is not into the meat of politics or electoral politics.

In terms of infrastructure, disability and childcare but also investment in education and research, this Government has made significant, game-changing moves in the last two budgets alone in the research space. The Minister, Deputy Lawless, has the confidence of the entire third level sector because of the work he is doing in that regard.

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

The Taoiseach: The Minister, Deputy Heydon, this morning brought before Cabinet measures in terms of fertiliser and fuel costs that will benefit farmers-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up. That concludes Leaders' Questions.

The Taoiseach: -----and the Minister for Transport has a transport support scheme in relation to fuel for hauliers.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

An Ceann Comhairle: In accordance with Standing Order 35, I call on the Chief Whip, Deputy Butler, to move the arrangements for this week's business.

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

Tuesday's business shall be:

- Motion re Appointment of Ordinary Member of the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission (without debate and any division claimed to be taken immediately)

- Employment Equality and Institutional Burials (Amendment) Bill 2026 (Second Stage) (to conclude at the end of the first half speaking round; not to exceed 1 hour and 52 minutes and any division claimed to be taken immediately)

- Broadcasting (Amendment) Bill 2026 (Report and Final Stages) (to conclude within 90 minutes)

- Employment Equality and Institutional Burials (Amendment) Bill 2026 (Committee and remaining Stages) (to conclude within 90 minutes)

Tuesday's private members' business shall be the Motion re Home Heating Oil Costs, selected by Sinn Féin.

Thursday's private members' business shall be the Motion re Public Sector Pay, selected by the Labour Party.

Thursday evening business shall be the Second Stage of the Children's Health (Ospidéal Náisiúnta Kathleen Lynn do Leanaí) (Amendment) Bill 2025, sponsored by Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh.

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;

(b) there shall be no Questions on Policy or Legislation pursuant to Standing Order 36;

(c) Oral Parliamentary Questions to the Taoiseach shall not be taken;

(d) private members' business shall be taken on the conclusion of proceedings on the Employment Equality and Institutional Burials (Amendment) Bill 2026;

(e) Parliamentary Questions to a Minister pursuant to Standing Order 47(1) shall not be taken;

(f) Topical issues shall not be taken and the Dáil shall adjourn on the conclusion of private members' business; and

(g) the Dáil on its rising shall adjourn until 8.47 a.m. on Thursday, 15th October 2026;

2. the proceedings on the Motion re Appointment of Ordinary Member of the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission shall be taken without debate and any division claimed thereon to be taken immediately;

3. the proceedings on the Second Stage of the Employment Equality and Institutional Burials (Amendment) shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion at the end of the first half speaking round and the following arrangements shall apply:

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

(b) on conclusion of the first half speaking round or where speeches conclude before 1 hour and 42 minutes has 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;

(c) any division claimed on the Second Stage proceedings shall be taken immediately; and

(d) members may share time;

	Gov	SF	SD	Gov	SF
Mins	10	10	10	6	2
	Lab	Gov	SF	IPTG	Gov
Mins	10	6	2	10	6
	SF	ITG	Gov	SF	OM
Mins	2	10	6	2	10
Total: 1 hour 42 mins					

4. the proceedings on Report and Final Stages of the Broadcasting (Amendment) 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 Culture, Communications and Sport; and

5. the proceedings on Committee and Remaining Stages of the Employment Equality and Institutional Burials (Amendment) 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 Children, Disability and Equality.

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

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders:

- (a) topical issues shall be taken immediately following the SOS;
- (b) private members' business pursuant to Standing Order 168(1) shall be taken for 2 hours on conclusion of topical issues; and
- (c) Second Stage of the Children's Health (Ospidéal Náisiúnta Kathleen Lynn do Leanaí) (Amendment) Bill 2025 shall be taken on the conclusion of private members' business and the Dáil shall adjourn on the conclusion of Thursday evening business.

An Ceann Comhairle: Are the proposed arrangements agreed to?

Deputy Pa Daly: Not agreed.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Not agreed.

Deputy Pa Daly: Under Standing Order 35(3), I want to propose an amendment to the Order of Business. Some 3,600 households in Kilmoyley, Causeway and Ballyheigue have been subject to a "do not consume" water notice for the past week. People out there are confused about the risks to the population and the health of the people in the area. Having handed over control of water to Uisce Éireann, we need the Minister to make some time to come into the Chamber, give reassurance and give extra funding, if necessary. He should make some time so that we can ask the questions that need to be asked about this.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Last week, three students from Gaza successfully appealed their visa refusals from this Government. However, they do not yet know if they are on the evacuation list for 26 October, whether the number of evacuees can be increased, how many evacuations are planned over the next month, on what dates, and whether their names have been notified to the Israeli Government for security clearance to be completed in time or how the Government will get them here in time for their academic deadlines. We need answers urgently for these students from the Minister for justice and if he cannot appear before the Dáil, he might please provide them to my office.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: We need urgent action on the students in Gaza who have been denied visas despite being granted scholarships in Irish universities. This is deeply shameful. It is really appalling to see students who are now waiting under the bombs having been granted full scholarships in Irish universities. Time is running out for them. The court case this week saw the State delaying matters and delaying the cases being heard. We are looking now for answers from the Minister for justice, in particular, on whether the cases can be settled to enable these students to take up their scholarships in Irish universities.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We need an emergency debate on the fact that hundreds of thousands of public sector workers feel they have no choice but to take strike action - the people who work in these buildings and who look after us, health workers, teachers, people in further education, councils and so on - because even now, the Taoiseach has failed to acknowledge that the pay increases they have got over recent years have not kept pace with inflation and the cost of living. Even now, he is denying the fact that has led them out to take strike action tomorrow.

Deputy Michael Collins: I am raising a very serious issue that arose in the courts in the last few days. It affects every potato grower in the country. Tailte Éireann won a case meaning that it will now apply rates to sheds to store potatoes.

Worryingly, that could apply to every food grower in Ireland, which would add major costs for the grower and the purchaser in the shops. Can we debate this issue in the Dáil this week?

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: A Cheann Comhairle-----

An Ceann Comhairle: No, Deputy. I call the Chief Whip.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I wish to raise something very important-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy cannot raise anything. I call the Chief Whip.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Why not?

An Ceann Comhairle: What is the point of order?

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: The point of order is-----

An Ceann Comhairle: There is none. Thank you. I call the Chief Whip.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: -----our roads are riddled with deer and people's lives are being endangered every day of the week, day and night.

An Ceann Comhairle: This is not the time or the place.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: We need to have a debate in here-----

An Ceann Comhairle: This is not the time.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: -----on how this is going to be addressed, or if will it be addressed at all.

An Ceann Comhairle: Will the Chief Whip please answer?

Deputy Michael Collins: Excuse me, a Cheann Comhairle. The Deputy is right.

An Ceann Comhairle: It is not the time. He does not have-----

Deputy Michael Collins: There are people being killed on the roads.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Chief Whip, please.

Deputy Mary Butler: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for convening a meeting of the Business Committee on Saturday last at 2 p.m., at which a Dáil schedule was set out for Tuesday and Thursday of this week. When I attended that meeting, I got the impression that the majority of people were in agreement with the proposed schedule. Legislation was prioritised for today because it is time-sensitive. Both of the Opposition parties that will have Private Members' business this week were facilitated. All I can do is suggest that the Order of Business go ahead. I am not in a position to accept the amendment to the Order of Business proposed by Deputy Pa Daly.

An Ceann Comhairle: In answer to Deputy Danny Healy-Rae, he can contact the person who sits at Business Committee meetings on behalf of his group, Deputy Gillian Toole, to put his proposal forward, rather than disrupting proceedings.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I did not disrupt anyone.

An Ceann Comhairle: Are the proposed arrangements for the week's business agreed to and the proposed amendments negatived?

Deputies: Not agreed.

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

The Dáil divided: Tá, 84; Níl, 68; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Brennan, Brian.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Shay.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brophy, Colm.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Browne, James.	Carthy, Matt.	
Burke, Colm.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Burke, Peter.	Collins, Michael.	
Butler, Mary.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Butterly, Paula.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Cronin, Réada.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Crowe, Seán.	
Cahill, Michael.	Cummins, Jen.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Daly, Pa.	
Calleary, Dara.	Devine, Máire.	
Canney, Seán.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Ennis, Daniel.	
Chambers, Jack.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Farrell, Mairéad.	

Clendennen, John.	Gannon, Gary.	
Collins, Niall.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Connolly, John.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gould, Thomas.	
Cummins, John.	Graves, Ann.	
Currie, Emer.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Daly, Martin.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Healy-Rae, Danny.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Healy-Rae, Michael.	
Dillon, Alan.	Healy, Seamus.	
Dolan, Albert.	Hearne, Rory.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Kelly, Alan.	
Fleming, Sean.	Kenny, Martin.	
Foley, Norma.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	Lawlor, George.	
Geoghegan, James.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Grealish, Noel.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Harkin, Marian.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Heneghan, Barry.	Murphy, Paul.	
Heydon, Martin.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Higgins, Emer.	Nash, Ged.	
Keogh, Keira.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Kyne, Seán.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Lahart, John.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Lawless, James.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
Lowry, Michael.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
Martin, Micheál.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
Maxwell, David.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
McCormack, Tony.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
McEntee, Helen.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
McGrath, Séamus.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
McGreehan, Erin.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Quaide, Liam.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Rice, Pádraig.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Sheehan, Conor.	
Murphy, Michael.	Sherlock, Marie.	
Naughton, Hildegard.	Smith, Duncan.	
Neville, Joe.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Brien, Darragh.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Connor, James.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.		
O'Meara, Ryan.		

O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

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

Question declared carried.

Appointment of Ordinary Member of the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission: Motion

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Norma Foley): I move:

That Dáil Éireann, in accordance with section 8(3)(a) of the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission Act 2003, as amended, appoints Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere to be an ordinary member of the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission in place of Deputy Catherine Ardagh who has resigned her office in accordance with the aforementioned section 8.

Question put and agreed to.

Employment Equality and Institutional Burials (Amendment) Bill 2026: Second Stage

Minister for Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Norma Foley): I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak on the Second Stage of this important legislation. At the outset, I would like to thank the House for facilitating the taking of all Stages of the Bill today. The Bill provides for two separate and important issues. First, the Bill includes amendments to the Employment Equality Act 1998. The proposed amendments and subsequent regulations to be made under the Bill will legally oblige employers in scope of the legislation to report their gender pay gap information via the gender pay gap portal.

The Department of Children, Disability and Equality first introduced gender pay gap reporting in 2022 following the enactment of the Gender Pay Gap Information Act 2021.

Reporting was introduced on a phased basis. As of 2025 employers with over 50 employees must report on their gender pay gap by publishing it on their own website or making it otherwise publicly available. The Department has now developed a centralised database called the gender pay gap portal which launched on a voluntary basis last year. The amendments to the Employment Equality Act 1998 contained in this Bill, which are purely technical in nature, will make the use of this portal mandatory for all employers in scope of the legislation.

I would like to emphasise that the use of the gender pay gap portal is not an additional burden on employers and SMEs. Employers with over 50 staff are already obliged to report on their gender pay gap and publish the report on their own website. Mandatory use of the portal will provide this information in a centralised manner allowing employees, researchers and the general public to view and compare gender pay gap information across year, employer and sector.

I am pleased to say that throughout the development and voluntary launch of the gender pay gap portal our social partners have been incredibly supportive with IBEC a key partner in promoting the portal to its members. I also want to note that this legislation, while not directly transposing elements of the pay transparency directive, will assist with its transposition.

3 o'clock

I will be bringing further legislation to the Houses in the coming months to complete the transposition of the directive. Mandatory use of the portal and having this information available on a centralised database will help us to progress our efforts to close the gender pay gap by highlighting the difference to make a difference.

The Bill also includes amendments to the Institutional Burials Act 2022 to include first cousins as eligible family members who can participate in an identification programme under the Act. The 2022 Act provides for the excavation, recovery, analysis, identification and reburial of remains which have been buried in a manifestly inappropriate manner on land associated with a former residential institution in which a public body had or has a relevant role.

Part 4 of the Act provides for an identification programme. It allows for samples to be taken from eligible family members who wish to participate and for their DNA profiles to be compared with DNA profiles from recovered remains. The Act defines an eligible family member as a person who has reasonable grounds to believe that they are the child, parent, sibling, half-sibling, grandparent, grandchild, aunt, uncle, niece, nephew, half-niece, half-nephew, grand-niece or grand-nephew of a person who is buried at an intervention site. The policy intention of this definition was to enable participation in as inclusive a way as possible by a range of relatives. It was drafted to reflect the technology that was available at that time and which could reliably establish a familial link. The inclusion of first cousins was raised during the passage of the legislation through the Houses. However, the scientific advice provided at that time highlighted challenges with the inclusion of first cousins due to greater variability of DNA which would make it notably more difficult to draw conclusions about a familial link than with the other third-order relatives.

Earlier this year, Forensic Science Ireland informed me of new scientific developments which have emerged since the enactment of the legislation and can allow for DNA matching of sufficient quality to support the inclusion of first cousins in an identification programme.

On foot of this updated advice in April, the Government approved my proposal to amend the Act to include first cousins. I was keen to move quickly because I know that there are first cousins who are interested in participating in the identification programme under way in Tuam. I am now deducing the amendments to the Houses at the earliest opportunity as the age profile of some of those who wish to take part in the Tuam identification programme means that time is of the essence to them.

I will now outline the key Parts of the Bill as initiated. Part 1 of the Bill contains the Short Title and details of the Bill commencement, with Part 2 coming into operation following a commencement order and Part 3 coming into operation upon enactment.

Section 2 of the Bill amends the Employment Equality Act 1998. subsections (A), (C), and 1 insert the requirement for employers to publish their gender pay gap information directly to me as Minister for Children, Disability, and Equality. Subsection (B) allows me to make regulations as to how, where and when employers should report this information to me. As previously mentioned, employers will report this information directly to me via the gender pay gap portal. Subsection (D) provides for the recording of information being reported to me in adherence with GDPR and data protection legislation.

Subsections (F) and (G) provide for a number of measures related to the information to be reported to the Minister and its publication. Regulations made under this section, which are currently being drafted, will lay out the criteria the information must comply with. This includes ensuring the information is accurate and the employer's statement does not contain any personal data or offensive or discriminatory language.

In addition, the regulations will allow comparisons to be made with the statistical information submitted. The new subsections will allow me to publish information that employers have already submitted during the voluntary reporting period since the portal's launch in November 2025. They will also allow the unpublication of information that may directly or indirectly identify a person.

Part 3 of the Bill amends the Institutional Burials Act 2022 to provide for the inclusion of first cousins in an identification programme conducted under that Act. It also provides for transitional arrangements so that first cousins can participate in an identification that is already commenced under the Act, as is the case in Tuam.

Section 3 expands the definition of "eligible family member" to include first cousins. It includes the first cousin of a deceased person in the category of "eligible family member" whose participation in an identification programme can be objected to by a child, parent, sibling or half sibling of the same person.

It also adds a first cousin to the list of family members for the purpose of making final arrangements for recovered remains of a deceased relative.

Section 4 contains a number of transitional provisions. Subsections (1) and (2) will allow first cousins who may have previously applied to participate in an identification programme to reapply following the legislative amendments in this Bill. This is particularly relevant in the context of the ongoing Tuam identification programme. Subsections (3), (4) and (5) provide for situations where a first cousin applies to participate in an identification programme and an eligible family member of the same deceased person has previously objected to another

person's participation in that identification programme. In such circumstances the director will make reasonable efforts to contact the previous objector to ascertain if they also wish to object to the participation of the first cousin. Subsection (6) defines "identification programme" for the purposes of this section.

I sincerely thank colleagues for their attention and I look forward to hearing their thoughts on these important amendments. I commend the Bill to the House.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: Before I begin, I want to put on the Dáil record my welcome for the release of Robert Pether who is a resident of County Roscommon. He returned home from Iraq yesterday. I take the opportunity to acknowledge him, his wife and his family. I was there with them yesterday as he returned to Dublin Airport. It was a very special moment that will remain with me forever. I wish him and his family all the very best.

I appreciate this legislation is timely, particularly in terms of Tuam and the extension to first cousins in terms of DNA. We are all aware that there is an age factor, with people getting older. People firmly believe loved ones' remains are in Tuam and they want the opportunity to have the remains of their loved ones identified and buried appropriately according to their wishes. I have no issue with the legislation before us. Similarly, I have no issue with centralising the gender pay gap portal, which has already been launched, and making reporting via that system mandatory.

Listening to the Minister, I thought of those people in Tuam, and the fact that we are in a rush to get this through because we want DNA to be able to be collected from first cousins and put to use in the processing that is under way. That then reminds me of time and the time that survivors, who are locked out of the mother and baby institutions payment scheme, have. I do not understand the purpose of having a special advocate in place if, when she does her report and calls for the expansion of that payment scheme, she is ignored.

What will the Minister do following the High Court judgment in February on Temple Hill and St. Joseph's? There are survivors for whom time is of the essence. They are locked out of the scheme over the silly issue of them having been in the institution for less than six months. As far as I am concerned, it is entirely unacceptable that any survivor is excluded from the scheme. Some of them will have had a similar experience to those in Tuam and yet they are excluded.

I again call on the Minister to look at all survivors and at the report by the special advocate and not to ignore her request. Every year this payment scheme is returning money in the millions. There is no excuse for leaving out survivors. Temple Hill was one of the institutions that was cited and part of that High Court action and judgment back in February. What a shame that survivors are forced to go to the High Court to seek recognition and respect in terms of this payment scheme. Every year money is sent back unspent and yet so many survivors are excluded. They do not have time on their hands either.

Temple Hill was where Michael Grant spent the first year of his life. I have referenced his case on the floor of the Dáil and in committee with the Minister many times. I cannot sit in front of Michael Grant and tell him why he is excluded. He was in Temple Hill for his first year. He had no illness and no issues with his health.

His mother paid for him to be there for the first year, yet we deem Temple Hill a hospital and say it will not be one of the institutions covered. It was not a hospital for Michael Grant. He will say time is of the essence and that he remains excluded. He is the same as any other survivor but he is being treated differently. I have to raise his case on the floor of the Dáil again. Michael is one of many survivors being excluded.

This legislation is important, particularly in relation to Tuam and the work under way there. I commend everybody involved in that work. It is difficult. I particularly commend the local community, who have given space in their family homes to allow the process of finding remains to continue.

There have been repeated calls for a forensic examination of the site at Sean Ross Abbey in Roscrea, County Tipperary. Those calls have not gone away. When it comes to this issue we cannot ever do enough, given the hurt and pain the survivors live with to this day. More should be done in terms of Sean Ross Abbey. Anything that can be done should be done.

The move in terms of Tuam and first cousins is welcome but I reiterate my point: the institutions payment scheme is failing too many survivors because of the institution they were in, or because they were boarded out or were there under six months. It is unacceptable. I say again it is unacceptable to return millions at the end of each year unspent in a scheme, where we have survivors who have suffered, live with the pain and are excluded, as if they have not suffered enough.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I acknowledge the contribution from my colleague, Deputy Kerrane, who addressed the provisions of the Bill related to institutional burials. I also acknowledge the work done by my colleague Kathleen Funchion, MEP, on the whole area of mother and baby homes. These are deeply important matters of dignity and justice for families seeking answers. It is important to mention the Bessborough mother and baby home and the denial of justice for the families of those buried there, who will not receive the same recognition as Tuam if building works go ahead on that site. We can never talk about this subject without acknowledging the wonderful work of Catherine Corless. We would not be here discussing this today if it were not for her. We owe her a debt of gratitude and will forever. I acknowledge the families as well. I know some of the families and some of the individuals who spent time in Tuam, and I acknowledge the trauma they have experienced from that time. It is appalling that those who were there for under six months are excluded. As Deputy Kerrane said, millions have been sent back. There is no rhyme or reason to this. It is cruelty upon cruelty to exclude people from this payment scheme.

As enterprise, tourism and employment spokesperson for Sinn Féin, I will focus on the gender pay gap reporting provisions. Employers are already required to collect and publish gender pay gap information but the Bill introduces a mandatory requirement for that information to be reported directly to the Minister. I recognise the importance of having this information centrally available. However, I am also acutely conscious of the enormous administrative burden already facing small and medium enterprises. Businesses are dealing with increasing compliance requirements, rising costs and considerable pressures on their time and resources. We must ensure that additional reporting obligations, which I agree are necessary, are proportionate, straightforward and do not unnecessarily duplicate work already being undertaken.

The bigger issue is what happens after the information is collected. Unless that information drives meaningful action, we risk creating another administrative exercise without delivering real change. We must remember who pays the price for that failure. It is overwhelmingly women who experience the consequences of the gender pay gap through lower earnings, reduced career opportunities and, ultimately, lower pensions.

I wish to send solidarity to those who are in that category and the women who will be out tomorrow on strike who want to be in doing their jobs. I again call on the Minister and the Government to do something to stop that, let common sense prevail and let pay talks be pay talks.

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask the Deputy to stick to the content.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I want to see a clear commitment from the Government that the information that will be gathered here will be actively used to identify inequalities to hold employers accountable and to deliver measurable improvements.

Deputy Daniel Ennis: I welcome this Bill for both its updating of the Gender Pay Gap Information Act and its expansion of the identification programme to include first cousins. The measures of strength and transparency under the Employment Equality Act are also welcome, but Ireland's unadjusted gender pay gap is estimated at 8.3% in 2024. We know that for women with children, women of colour and women with disabilities this is even greater. However, closing the gender pay gap requires more than just collecting data. It requires fairer childcare systems, stronger maternity protections and proper recognition of the value of care work in our society.

Turning to the Institutional Burials Act, extending eligibility to first cousins is an important step for families seeking answers about their loved ones. Mother and baby homes, Magdalen laundries and industrial schools are part of our country's darkest and most shameful history. It is a history of incarceration and cover-ups in which anyone who tried to speak out was shamed and a history in which the State was deeply implicated for which it must now answer. A piece I read recently really hit me and has stayed with me. It said, "The children were never lost; if a baby goes missing, the police get called, social services become involved. The babies born at the mother and baby home ... [in] Tuam [were not lost they] ... were discarded."

While the children of Tuam are finally receiving attention, the State's responsibility cannot end there. We cannot claim that its work is done until that justice has been served. How can justice be served when we do not know where over 800 children and 19 women are buried at Bessborough? How can justice be served when in Sean Ross Abbey an investigation revealed that at least 1,000 babies died there? This is something that we still do not know the extent of. How can we claim to have confronted this history when so much remains unanswered?

Ministers cannot simply say that Bessborough or Sean Ross Abbey does not meet the criteria and consider the matter closed. When the Institutional Burials Act was initially brought forward, the committee's report emphasised that the legislation should be drafted so that as many sites as possible could be included. It warned that a large number of conditions and restrictions will prevent this from happening. Now, we have seen its warnings come true with families still fighting for answers. An Coimisiún Pleanála's decision to grant planning

permission for apartments at Bessborough is a further slap in the face for survivors who have spent years advocating for justice. The Government must release the archaeological reports and burial records relating to Bessborough. How can planning permission be granted when the commission of investigation found it highly likely that unmarked burial grounds remain on that site? Where is the justice for those children? The Government must compulsory purchase order, CPO, the remaining land at Bessborough.

The country owes an enormous debt to Catherine Corless. Her work forced Ireland to confront a history that so many refused to face. Despite being told repeatedly to stop searching, she persisted. Her determination has shown why we cannot accept silence or delay when families are still waiting for answers. Speaking recently about her work in Tuam, she said:

I also must mention Bessborough. There are 900 babies missing there, nobody seems to care. They want to come in and build apartments over the plots, which is horrific. I don't know it got to that. But that must be stopped and those babies must be found as well.

Catherine's words expose the failure of the State's response that leaves families at some sites still fighting for the recognition and investigation their loved ones deserve. The obligation to find these children cannot depend on whether a site fits criteria that the Government itself has set. Survivors and families should not have to spend their lives campaigning for the State to accept its responsibilities. They deserve answers and action while they are here to see it. These women and children were failed by the State, and we cannot continue to fail them.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I express support for both parts of this Bill, including the gender pay gap element of it. Currently, the gender pay gap in this country is at 10.8%. I welcome mechanisms to increase the reporting because when we have more data, we can see exactly what the difficulty is. I was trying to figure out how to explain the gender pay gap to somebody. If two people are working in the same company and they work from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., the man will get paid from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., but with the current 10.8%, the woman will get paid until 4.08 p.m. and then will do it for free for the rest of the day.

In 2026, that is a shocking situation to be in. Sometimes I am flabbergasted that we are in this situation, so I welcome any ability to change that.

Regarding the second part of the Bill, I support the addition of first cousins to this element of the institutional burials Bill. To hear of the babies and children buried at Tuam is utterly heartbreaking. They are somebody's child and, as Deputy Ennis said, they were discarded there. No conversation about mother and baby homes can ever happen in this Chamber without thanking Catherine Corless for the work that she has done. I send my thoughts and thanks to those people who are doing the delicate work of trying to find those babies in Tuam. That must be a very difficult situation so I thank them. I would also caution that for every fight that had to happen for Tuam, and it was a fight every single step of the way - and there are still fights for it - that is the same situation that is going on for Bessborough. I would like to encourage the people who are every single day campaigning to make sure that apartments are not build on Bessborough to keep going because people like Catherine Corless kept going. People like Councillor Noelle Brown, a Social Democrats councillor, has for decades been talking about mother and baby homes, and she is still campaigning. I encourage those people to keep fighting. We are supporting them. We are really hoping that something can happen in Bessborough that prevents this building of apartments.

Deputy Liam Quaide: I welcome the provision in this Bill extending to first cousins the right to participate in efforts to identify the remains of people buried at former institutions. That is a sensible and necessary change. However, I wish to raise the case of the Bessborough mother and baby home in Cork, where the burial places of 859 children and 19 women remain unaccounted for, according to the commission of investigation. Think about that. There are 859 children and 19 mothers whose families still do not know where they are buried. What is the Government's position? It is that an intervention under the Institutional Burials Act cannot proceed because the burial locations have not been established. How can the Government use the fact that these children's burial places remain unknown as a reason not to investigate? Meanwhile, planning permission has been upheld for 106 apartments on part of the former Bessborough grounds, despite the unresolved questions about where these children are buried. The then Minister for children who oversaw the commission of investigation, Katherine Zappone, has questioned whether sufficient efforts were made to establish the locations of these burials. Why has the Government declined to pursue a comprehensive investigation of the site? Why are we contemplating further development before these fundamental questions have been answered? I acknowledge the extraordinary persistence of the survivors, their families and other campaigners who have fought for answers for years. We are legislating today to extend the rights of families to participate in identifying remains. That is welcome, but what use are those rights to the families of Bessborough if the State has no credible plan to establish where their loved ones are buried? The Government must now act on the entirely legitimate demands of survivors and campaigners to protect the site, investigate it properly and establish what happened to these children and mothers, including where they are buried.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I too welcome the two elements of this Bill. Speaking first to the gender pay gap issues, the transparency of the central availability of this information will be a step forward. I would disagree slightly perhaps with the impact this potentially has on SMEs as overly bureaucratic because, of course, any companies under the 50 threshold will not be impacted by it. However, I emphasise the point that knowing about a gap and doing something about it are two very different things. Gender pay discrepancy persists in this society and we must do more than simply finding out the information. I appreciate that this phase of the work is about establishing that, but it is slow going. Until we have that complete picture we really cannot make meaningful change because what we cannot measure we cannot change. Unfortunately, as long as gender pay discrepancy exists in our society, then we are working for free, and that is at a time when women also provide the unpaid care of much of society, disproportionately to men. All of these elements compounded mean we face serious disadvantage.

The separate piece of this legislation around access by cousins to the institutional burials scheme is really important. However, as others have raised, the arbitrary nature of different sites being excluded, and the ways and the justification the Government has brought forward for those sites being excluded, is hugely problematic. Arbitrary decisions and metrics that have applied to various schemes associated with mother and baby homes mean this is not taking a human rights-based approach and it is not trauma informed.

Once again, victims of State wrongdoing are treated with suspicion and mistrust instead of the care and compassion this State should be showing them. I urge that every effort is made to make sure that those people who have relations associated with other sites, not just Tuam, get

access to the schemes that are appropriate to them and finally find justice. I have dealt so much with this community of survivors. People spend their whole lives upskilling in human rights and getting master's qualifications in order that they can fight for their cause. We have heard about them today, including Catherine Corless, as an investigator, Noelle Brown, as a survivor, and others. They must get the justice they seek.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Seán Canney): A Cheann Comhairle, thank you for allowing me to speak. I very much welcome the amendment to this Bill reaching Second Stage. I want to speak to the fact that first cousins can now use their DNA for testing at the former mother and baby institution in Tuam. This is very welcome to a number of people who believe they may have family members buried there. Since this legislation was enacted, DNA testing has been limited to parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, grandnieces and grandnephews. This has been an issue of concern for some relatives who wish to participate in the programme, some of whom I have worked with closely. As time passes, the opportunities to identify those buried at the site becomes more challenging. In some families, those who will have been eligible to provide DNA may no longer be alive. Extending the programme to include first cousins is therefore a very important and practical step. It gives more families an opportunity to participate in the identification process and, hopefully, get answers to questions they have carried with them for many years. The identification programme is extremely important to people who believe they may have family members buried at the former mothers and babies institution in Tuam. As a local TD, I know too well how important it is. These are people at home and abroad who want to have a connection with their loved ones and bring some closure for their families. We must ensure that every reasonable opportunity is provided to families who wish to participate in this process. They have waited a long time for answers, and it is important that we continue to support them as this difficult and very sensitive work progresses. I compliment the director in Tuam, Daniel MacSweeney, and his team on carrying out the excavation in such a professional, diligent and humane manner. This is so important for those who are buried there and for their families. I also pay tribute to the local community in Tuam for what they have had to endure over a number of years, with the media coming from all over the world to invade their privacy and they not knowing what is going on. It was not an easy situation for them but they have dealt with it extremely admirably. I acknowledge that as well as their co-operation with the director.

Ultimately, this work is about treating those who died with dignity and respect and giving their families the best possible opportunity to find the answers they deserve. I also thank the former Ministers, Katherine Zappone and Roderic O'Gorman, who progressed this, and now the Minister, Deputy Foley, for the great work they are doing. I acknowledge that and, indeed, the officials within the Department. It is not an easy task but they are doing a very good job in these circumstances.

Deputy Emer Currie: I also welcome this Bill. It requires employers to submit gender pay gap information to the central portal, making reports easier to find, compare and scrutinise. It also extends eligibility under the Institutional Burials Act to first cousins, an important compassionate change for families seeking answers.

On the gender pay reporting, transparency matters, but what matters most is what we do with the information. Ireland's gender pay gap is reported to be at 8.3% and, according to the

CSO, the number of women in employment has increased by 82% since 2000, so there has been progress, but being in employment does not necessarily mean having an equal opportunity to progress. I have spoken repeatedly in this House and in the Seanad about the motherhood penalty. Maynooth University research found a 27% fall in earnings immediately after childbirth among female graduates, and that is from 2023. Behind those figures and others are women reducing their hours, turning down promotions or leaving careers they have had to work hard to build because the struggle to juggle is still alive and well. Families are working harder than ever, juggling jobs, commuting, childcare, school collections and caring for relatives.

Too often, making that work still falls to women. When it does not work, women are more likely to pick up the slack. Women have spent generations levelling up in education, employment and leadership, and men now need the opportunity and support to adjust their working lives and share care equally. That requires a change in culture. People need to know that taking parental leave or requesting flexibility will not damage their career or invite judgment. When I proposed amendments to the work-life balance Bill in the Seanad, I argued that flexible work should be available to all employees and I still very much believe that. If flexibility is treated as an exception for mothers we risk reinforcing the motherhood penalty. If it becomes normal working practice, care can be shared more equally.

A review was promised, including consideration of extending the right to request flexible work to everyone. I am wondering where that review stands and when its findings will be published. We also need a clear timetable for full implementation of the EU pay and transparency directive following the deadline in June. Reporting reveals inequality. Our responsibility is to change the conditions producing it through accessible childcare, flexible working and supportive family leave. Women should be able to become mothers without sacrificing their careers. Men should be supported to share care. Families should be able to earn a living while still having time for each other, particularly when their children are young.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I wish to address the part of the Bill that relates to institutional burials. I acknowledge that the legislation in a small way advances the ability of relatives of those who are survivors of the Tuam mother and baby home, and of those who were buried there, to access full truth and justice. There is a great deal more that needs to be done right across the State to ensure that survivors, their families and campaigners receive justice. I am thinking particularly of Bessborough in my own county and city. We still do not know where over 800 children and many mothers are buried. The decision of An Coimisiún Pleanála to grant planning at that location was received with profound grief, shock and anger, not only by survivors and their relatives, although most particularly by them, but also by the people of Cork and the people of Ireland. It was through their campaigning that the Taoiseach agreed that all options would be on the table. I am taking this opportunity to encourage that. I am not sure whether a mediator has been appointed yet. I believe that the State and the Government need to throw their weight behind ensuring that discussions between the city council and the property owner lead to the outcome we all want to see, which is a site of conscience, and to ensure there is no development on a place the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes said was very likely to have children buried. That cannot happen.

One other key demand came up through those campaigners, the survivors and their relatives. They were shocked and angered in the past when legislation sealed the burial records of institutions such as the mother and baby home in Bessborough. The Minister has the

opportunity in this legislation. This is appropriate legislation to amend to ensure that is reversed. I encourage the Minister to do that in the Seanad. I know it is too late on Second Stage today but I encourage her to do that. The technical report on the mother and baby home at Bessborough also needs to be released. The Minister has the power to do that.

Deputy Mark Wall: I welcome the Minister to the House today. I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Employment Equality and Institutional Burials (Amendment) Bill 2026. The Bill before the House today deals with two separate issues, both of which are very welcome steps.

The first issue I will deal with is gender pay gap reporting. I welcome the Government's move towards establishing a more central reporting portal but we need to see more urgency on pay transparency. For example, the Government, disappointingly, missed the deadline to transpose the EU pay transparency directive, which should have been legislated for in June of this year. Even after this Bill is passed by the Oireachtas, a number of key provisions of that directive will not be transposed.

Under the terms of the directive, employers must inform prospective employees of the pay or pay range for particular roles before any interviews and will not be permitted to ask interviewees about their salary history. Why is the Government dragging its heels on implementing this provision? It has had three years to get it done but has still managed to miss the deadline.

A survey in September 2026 found that just 20% of employers always post salaries in job advertisements. It also found a rise in the number of employers opposed to the proposed reforms. The Government should be making a considered argument for why the directive is good for workers and for business. The Irish Congress of Trade Unions, ICTU, has shown that the Government's failure to transpose it on time will cost working women more than €570 million per year in lost wages.

The directive's measures for tackling the gender pay gap are not limited to reporting. Where such gaps persistently exceed 5%, employers would be required to consult with unions or other employee representatives on the measures required to address the situation. The Government needs to spell out what policy responses will be put in place to give real teeth to the reporting requirements in the Bill. It is all well and good having a reporting portal but it will not address the problems on its own. The Government talks a good game on its European credentials but it cannot keep ignoring and delaying following through on European directives when it suits it to do so.

The second issue addressed by the Bill is institutional burials. The provisions close a significant gap in the 2022 Act by allowing for first cousins to take part in identification programmes. It is a very welcome change. We are glad to see it will apply retrospectively to enable first cousins to apply to participate in an identification programme that is already under way.

We all know about the horrors that went on behind the high walls of institutions in so many cities, towns and villages across the country during the previous century. The vital work of people like Catherine Corless laid that bare and made sure that we, as a society, could no longer turn away and ignore the wrongs that were done. The 2022 Act was the response we made as

legislators. It was not perfect but it was important that we took the steps to legislate for the cases where we know inappropriate burials took place inside institutions, many of which had shockingly high mortality rates.

One such institution was Bessborough Mother and Baby Home in Cork, which has been raised with me by people all over Ireland and raised by colleagues in this debate. While the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes estimated that 923 babies died at Bessborough, just 64 burial locations could be identified. Burial records for 859 children and 19 women were missing. According to the commission, it is highly likely that some of those babies are buried in unmarked graves on the grounds. That is why such deep dismay was caused when An Coimisiún Pleanála granted planning permission earlier this year to build on that site. Bessborough should be a place of memorial and a site of conscience. We cannot cement over Ireland's dark history when there are so many questions left unanswered. Survivors have been let down many times previously by the State. The Bessborough site should be secured through compulsory purchase, if necessary, or by negotiating with the developer.

I thank my party colleague Senator Harmon, who has been at the forefront of raising this issue in the Seanad. We should remember the images from International Women's Day in March. When teddy bears and candles were laid at the gates of Bessborough, it brought home the message that this place should never and must never be forgotten. It is welcome, therefore, that the Government is closing the gap in the 2022 Act through this Bill. However, if it is serious about doing right by survivors of institutions and their families, it must step in to ensure the Bessborough site is protected. We cannot and should never forget Bessborough. I look forward to working with the Minister to progress the Bill through the House. We have some amendments that we look forward to discussing with her.

Deputy Keira Keogh: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Employment Equality and Institutional Burials (Amendment) Bill 2026. While appearing technical in nature, it provides for two vital measures that will make a real difference in people's lives.

The first concerns gender pay gap reporting. The Bill requires employers to report data directly to the Minister, thereby creating a centralised national system and comparison mechanism. We know that transparency is one of the most effective tools we have against inequality. We cannot fix what we cannot reliably measure. In Ireland right now, two graduates who leave university on the same day with the same qualifications and the same ambitions can go on to have very different earning experiences.

The latest figures from the Central Statistics Office for 2025 show that women's median weekly earnings are almost €152 less than men's. That amounts to nearly €7,900 over the 52 weeks of the year. Behind those figures are real people, real careers and real financial consequences. Moving beyond individual company reports to accessible cross-sector data will empower employees and legislators with the confidence to ensure that equal work receives equal treatment.

The second part of the Bill extends eligibility for the Institutional Burials Act identification programme to first cousins. This is particularly crucial for the ongoing work in Tuam. I acknowledge the sensitive, professional and compassionate work being led by Daniel MacSweeney and his team, which I witnessed at first-hand this summer during my visit to Tuam. Many immediate family members have unfortunately passed away. In these cases, the

first cousins are the closest living relatives capable of assisting with identification. Extending participation to them is both practical and deeply humane. I urge the House to pass this legislation as quickly as possible. At the core of the Bill is transparency in the workplace and dignity for families seeking closure. I am pleased to support it.

Deputy Aisling Dempsey: I welcome the employment equality provisions contained in this Bill and the clear commitment they represent to fairness, dignity and equal opportunity in our society. The Irish gender pay gap currently stands at 8.3%, below the EU average of 11.1%. It is also lower for newer entrants to the job market. That is welcome news but, even still, only one in ten CEOs are female. The gender pay gap portal is a centralised reporting database. It is an important element of employment equality. It creates transparency and fairness. It should, and will, I hope, highlight discrepancies quickly that will be swiftly and appropriately addressed.

Employment is about far more than earning a living. It provides independence and security, which is particularly relevant to women. It is imperative that we know what the gender pay gap is. Even more crucial is that it continues to narrow and, ultimately, disappears. While the Employment Equality Act 1998 and subsequent legislation have helped advance the principle of equal pay and treatment, the gender pay gap has shown that legal equality alone is not enough. Progress has been made, but women remain under-represented in many of the highest employment positions, demonstrating that the work of achieving gender equality in the workplace must continue.

I visited a school yesterday in my constituency of Meath West, St. Nicholas Primary School in Longwood. We talked about politics and the school's student council elections. Those children do not need gender quotas to ensure that enough women are elected. They see everyone as equal. Some time later in their lives, however, we are failing them somehow. Many are adopting gender inequality beliefs. The measures before us strengthen our commitment to ensuring that nobody is disadvantaged in employment simply because of their gender. Equality in the workplace cannot simply be an aspiration. We must continue to back it up by law.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: I support this Bill. It goes some way to helping people find truth, information and justice. Earlier this month, I had the chance to watch "The Lost Children of Tuam", the film telling the story of Catherine Corless and her determination to uncover the truth about 796 children who died at the mother and baby home in that town. The film, like Catherine Corless's important work, forces us to confront how our society treated women and children. Children were neglected, bullied, starved and oftentimes abused, put to work, trafficked and, in some cases, disappeared. Women were mistreated and had their babies taken from them. Their choices were taken away. Again, they were put to work and their spirits were often ground down. People were discarded, hidden away and forgotten. In the days since watching that film, I have had conversations with people whom I have known for years, who have told me things and shared things with me that I never knew about them and that they never told me before.

Yesterday morning, in my constituency office, I sat down with a man in his 80s. He shared his experience with me. Decades later - an entire lifetime later - he is still living with the consequences of what happened to him as a small child. He told me about his life and

childhood, the feeling of abandonment, neglect, pain and shame, and about an idea he has had for a long time that he feels would go some way towards healing him and, he believes, others.

He spoke about a national day of learning and remembering, a day to ensure that what happened in mother and baby homes, industrial schools, reformatories, Magdalen laundries and other institutions is never forgotten, so that future generations know the truth of what happened and that we, as a society, never again allow people to be treated this way.

This is not just something that happened in the past. The consequences are still being lived with today, and that hit home yesterday. Trauma and loss have followed this particular gentleman and many other people around every single day of their lives. People are still waiting for answers and carrying that pain. We owe them truth and justice and we owe it to the next generation of children and young people to make sure that we, as a society, never allow that to happen again.

Deputy Grace Boland: A central system for gender pay gap reporting is a very sensible reform. It should make information easier to find, compare and track over time, giving policymakers, researchers, employees and the public a clearer picture of where progress is being made and where further action is needed. Transparency is not compatibility, however, and the key question is not whether information is published. The key question will be, what happens when it is not? Therefore, if an employer fails to report, reports late or provides incomplete information, who identifies that failure, who follows it up, what is the escalation process and, ultimately, what are the consequences for employers who do not comply?

Existing legislation provides enforcement mechanisms, including powers for the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, IHREC, to seek a court order requiring compliance with pay gap reporting obligations. However, does anybody have a clear duty to proactively identify employers who do not report? If that compliance role is to sit with IHREC, it must be properly resourced to carry out that function. That is why the regulations that will underpin the Bill are so important. If this legislation is to have any real impact, they need to set out a practical process for reporting, identifying issues, following them up and enforcing compliance, where necessary. Without that clarity, there is a risk that we improve reporting without strengthening accountability.

We must also address the causes of the gender pay gap. We know the gap widens when children arrive and caring responsibilities fall unequally. Paternity leave in Ireland remains at just two weeks, and just over half of fathers claim paternity benefit. I welcome the fact that the Tánaiste is taking paternity leave. That sends out a really important signal, but we need to create a system that makes it easy, affordable and culturally acceptable for both parents to take time away from work to care for their children. I have repeatedly raised the need for the State to do more to promote awareness of the leaves that are currently available, including paternity leave and parent's leave. We should also continue to make progress towards earnings-related leave for parents so that taking time to care for a child does not result in a financial penalty for families. If we want greater equality in the workplace, we also need greater equality in caring responsibilities in the home.

As colleagues have noted, we need to see urgent progress being made on the transposition of the pay transparency directive. The success of this Bill will depend on whether employers are supported to understand what is required of them. We know from research that many of

them do not understand their obligations and whether there is a clear and effective system for identifying, following up and enforcing non-compliance.

I welcome the extension of the education programme under the Institutional Burials Act to first cousins. For families still seeking answers, that change will matter greatly.

Deputy Albert Dolan: I welcome the Bill and the proposals the Minister is bringing forward to strengthen gender pay gap reporting. The gender pay gap has real consequences for women throughout their lives, in their earnings, opportunities for promotion and pensions. Requiring employers covered by the legislation to report through a central portal will make that information more accessible. It will help people compare employers, assess progress and see where further action may be needed. Publishing the figures has to lead to change, however. Employers need to examine what is driving the gap in their organisations and take practical steps to address it, including supporting women into senior positions and improving access to flexible working.

I welcome the Minister's commitment to greater transparency and accountability.

Turning to Tuam, I particularly welcome the provision to extend participation in the DNA identification programme to first cousins of children believed to be buried at the former institution. As a representative for Tuam, I know how important this is for families still searching for answers.

So much time has passed. Some of the closest relatives of those children are, sadly, no longer alive. Parents, brothers and sisters may have passed away without ever knowing what happened to their loved one. That makes the connection through first cousins all the more important. It provides another opportunity to establish a family link and we must make every possible effort to support that. There are still many unanswered questions. Families deserve the opportunity to engage with this deeply difficult and sensitive matter at their own pace with clear information and compassionate support.

I wish to pay tribute to Catherine Corless for her extraordinary persistence and determination to ensure that these children were remembered and the families' questions were heard. I also wish to pay tribute to the community in Tuam, particularly those who have supported families and helped preserve the memory of these children over many years. I sincerely thank Mr. Daniel MacSweeney and his team for the work they are doing and for the care, sensitivity and respect with which they are approaching it. Their ongoing engagement and briefings are really appreciated. Keeping families and public representatives informed matters enormously, especially when this work is so sensitive and the expectations are deeply personal.

Our responsibility is to ensure the support continues throughout this process. Families have to be listened to, kept informed and supported through whatever lies ahead. Every opportunity to provide the families with the answers they require matters and extending this programme to first cousins is a very welcome and meaningful step.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I wish to raise the issue of Bessborough. The Minister will be well aware that mediators between Cork City Council and landlords and landowners have been

appointed. This was confirmed in the media on 8 September. After a month, will the Minister update us on the progress of the mediation?

I reached out to those involved in the campaign group today and they asked me to ask the Minister these questions. I hope the Minister will not dismiss them. Who has been appointed? How many meetings have happened? What progress, if any, has been achieved? Has this progressed beyond initial meetings? Most importantly, has the Government earmarked funding for the purchase of the Bessborough site, and if mediation leads to an agreement, is the Minister ready to step in, provide the necessary funding and not let this drag on any longer?

This is urgent. The survivors and loved ones of those who did not survive Bessborough deserve answers and they are anxiously waiting on them. I will not allow them to be brushed under the carpet, as has been done to so many women and babies who perished and died in Bessborough over the decades. I will not allow their voices to be silent. They are currently living in limbo, with the potential that apartments will be built on their loved ones' graves. It is beyond belief. They need answers and certainty and I appeal to the Minister to hear the questions they have asked me to ask her. Will she ensure the money is there to buy Bessborough and preserve it?

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. I call Deputy Gogarty.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I ask the Ceann Comhairle to bear with me for one second because I am up slightly earlier than I thought I would be. Is Deputy Tóibín coming?

An Ceann Comhairle: No, I cannot see him.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I have got longer than I thought, which is good.

I welcome the opportunity to speak a little longer on the Employment Equality and Institutional Burials (Amendment) Bill, which is a constructive piece of legislation. We need provisions relating to the gender pay gap reporting. It is always important to have transparency for policymakers, employers and workers in improving things but we obviously still have the existing inequalities.

The creation of this central reporting mechanism is going to make information easier to access, analyse and compare notes on, so to speak.

The Government itself stated that the purpose of the portal was to enable clear examination of pay disparities across sectors and to support responses aimed at reducing the gender pay gap, which, unfortunately, is still evident in many areas. With the technology we have had over the past couple of years, you would argue that gathering this data is not rocket science. I want to put a related point out there or ask a rhetorical question as to why it has taken so long to roll out. There have been comparable systems in the UK for quite a number of years, whereby the gender pay gap data are reported to the central government service that allows users to search and compare different organisations and sectors. It is a much bigger jurisdiction with bigger resources to match, but it should not have taken us so long. Internationally, this has been seen as best practice in many countries for a long time.

In 2025, the Department stated that a centralised portal had been a long-held policy intention. It was "long-held" in the sense that during the period of Gender Pay Gap Information Act 2021, it was announced that the portal was forthcoming. It took four to five years for it to be launched on a voluntary basis in November 2025 before becoming publicly accessible in June 2026. That was quite a long time. We have to ask ourselves why it took so long. It was mostly not during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic. Getting this information reporting on a statutory basis should have been a priority for the previous Government.

Because this is an omnibus Bill, I want to add to the discussion of the provisions relating to the Institutional Burials Act 2022 which extend the participation in the identification programmes to first cousins. I have listened to a few of the speeches about the traumatic impact on many survivors and families. This amendment, following on from Forensic Science Ireland's confirmation that you can reliably get the DNA information from cousins, is going to help in some cases. It will, we hope, give more answers to extended family members who are seeking to identify remains at the site of the former mother and baby institution in Tuam, where forensic excavations began last year.

On the wider picture, and this is a point that other Deputies have raised, we have to question the barriers being thrown in front of people. The forensic barrier might be lowered to some extent with this widening of the DNA identification process, but survivors, their relatives and legal advocates will tell you that our historical culture of State secrecy has stopped people from getting information. It has improved in recent years, but the institutional records and commission archives were sealed for 30 years. If closure for survivors includes finding out and identifying, but also getting proper information, we need to make it as easy as possible to access the archives. In the scope of this omnibus Bill, which is small but important, can we, as Deputy Currie and others have asked, accommodate further measures to access information on the pay gap side and especially in relation to survivors? If first cousins are now legally recognised as eligible family members for the purposes of physical identification, they should also have a right to access institutional administrative records that concern their families. We should consider whether amendments could be introduced on Report Stage to link the physical identification rights with meaningful access to information. We have been gradually pulling aside the squinty curtain in our society but many things are still hidden. If anything, we should be trying to get more information into the open and once and for all rid ourselves of that shameful period.

4 o'clock

Deputy Peter Roche: I welcome the provision in the Bill to address the gender pay gap. I also welcome the inclusion of first cousins to support DNA identification in the context of institutional burials. Exactly ten years ago, I was cathaoirleach of Galway County Council, which was a very privileged and honourable position to be in. Council officials from the housing, environment and libraries departments, myself and the law agents were invited to meet with the commission of investigation in Dublin regarding the Tuam mother and baby home. To say that it was very much like a courtroom setting would be an understatement. I listened a lot to the questions that were asked. Of course, those questions were very pertinent and relevant to what we were discovering on a daily and weekly basis with regard to the number of babies who were interred at Tuam. I came away with comfort knowing that in view of the line of questioning that was put to council officials and me, as cathaoirleach, no stone would

be left unturned. That was ten years ago. For many people, that delay would have been painfully slow and arduous, but we have got there and have reached a point where the remains of 109 infants have been recovered. What pleases me most is that all of those 109 infants were coffined. They were placed in little timber coffins that were painted white, albeit some of them have disintegrated. That is what pleases me most.

I genuinely and sincerely thank Daniel MacSweeney. He has been an outstanding individual in the context of the preparation to inform local authority members and, indeed, the town of Tuam, of which I am a native. I felt that there was a comfort in that because everyone was informed about the next steps. That was the process from the start, and it continues. I thank Mr. MacSweeney and his team for their ongoing engagement. I offer a special mention to the survivors, campaigners and families that have been affected. This matter has brought significant hardship, hurt and pain to many. I recall all too often meeting with the survivors and listening to their really heartfelt stories about what they wanted and how much of a hurry they were because of their age. We cannot change the past but we can certainly ensure that how we respond to it reflects the future of Ireland.

Deputy John Connolly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a bheith linn agus as na leasuithe a chur os ár gcomhair don dhá Acht seo atá thar a bheith tábhachtach. I welcome the opportunity to make a brief comment on the two amendments the Minister has brought before the House today regarding the Institutional Burials Act 2022 and the Employment Equality Act 1998. I compliment her on the amendment to the Employment Equality Act. It is a simple but important gesture that has to be made because there should not be any impediment to making sure that we get the data on pay equality. It should not be the case that we cannot get this data because there is no centralised reporting portal. When it is developed, this tool will have a crucial role to play in assisting with the gathering of data and making sure that we have such data across various sectors of employment. It should be there, it should be used and it should not be impeded.

In the context of the existing legislation, should we look at the rule regarding organisations that have fewer than 50 employees and make sure that they report their data? Just because companies are smaller, would it not be better to ensure that there is no discrimination or inequality in the workplace across gender? Irrespective of the size of a company or industry or the number of employees in a company, should we not ensure that companies report pay data and that the information provided meets the standards that have been set in terms of gender equality? I very much welcome the fact that mandatory reporting will come into effect from 1 November and that the legislation before us will ensure that employers must use the portal to report pay data relating to their employees.

I want to mention one matter that is relevant to the Minister's portfolio. We welcome the changes made in last week's budget to make childcare more affordable. We all know that one of the challenges in that sector is the recruitment of staff. We also know that another challenge in that regard relates to the fact that, unfortunately, lower paid workers work in the sector. It often amuses me that people in our financial institutions who mind our money are paid multiples of what we pay people to care for our children. This is something we should tackle over the coming years in order to ensure that we can increase the salaries of those working in childcare and preschool services. I know that is something to which the Minister is committed in terms of trying to reduce the cost of childcare and preschool services for parents.

Debate adjourned.

Message from Select Committee

An Ceann Comhairle: The Select Committee on Justice, Home Affairs and Migration has completed its consideration of the Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation Bill 2026 and has made no amendments thereto.

Employment Equality and Institutional Burials (Amendment) Bill 2026: Second Stage (Resumed)

Question again proposed: "That the Bill be now read a second time."

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to have the opportunity to talk about the two topics covered in this Bill. First of all, I cannot understand why the gender pay gap and allowing first cousins to be part of DNA testing with regard to institutional burials have been lumped in together. It is only right that everything possible is done to identify the remains of babies that have been identified heretofore. I have no problem with that and will be supporting it.

Regarding that desperate time in our history, 180 days or six months was determined as the amount of time people needed to be in a home for. I met people in recent times who had been in homes for four months. I met someone else who was just two weeks short. This is very wrong. It is a travesty that these people, of whom there are many, are not being included because they are short a number of days. I am asking the Government to recognise that and to ensure it is addressed, because what is happening is not fair. If people were in one of these mother and baby homes at some time in their lives because they did not have a father or they did have a father or something happened to the mother, regardless of the amount of time involved, they should be included. In fairness, there is a lot of money going different ways, and these people should be included and helped at this time.

Regarding the gender pay gap, there should be no gap. If a woman and a man are doing the same work in an equal fashion, they should, of course, be paid the same, but I do not think that is a problem at all. It is well recognised and addressed, but if the Government has to give something legal effect, that is fine. There are problems that have been created in recent times, however. Employers are telling me that they are facing insurmountable problems regardless of whether they employ men or women. Take last week's budget. The minimum wage has been increased. I have no problem with the people working and getting as much as they can, but increasing the minimum wage increases every wage.

I am concerned about the employers because if we increase the minimum wage, all the wages up along the line as far as the maximum wage then increase. It is all loaded on the employers, whether they are businesspeople in Killarney, farmers around the country or contractors. It is the employer and not the Government that pays the extra in the minimum wage or all the wages up along. I am asking the Government to remember that. A number of adverse things have happened to employers in recent times, including auto-enrolment.

Many employers are telling me that a number of things have hit them, such as auto-enrolment for pensions, which I mentioned, and the extra cost of rates. I met a man in Killarney yesterday evening who said his rates had gone up by 305%. He said he did not know if he could keep going or keep his doors open. That is tough. We have raised this issue here several times and I do not hear the Government coming back or anyone listening. I have raised it with the staff of Kerry County Council. The way rates have gone up is a serious problem. All these things are hitting employers at this time. I was told that this could be the straw that breaks the camel's back, and did it ever.

If the Government thinks it can keep increasing wages when employers have to pay them, it could find that a lot of these fellows will not be able to keep going. Many doors have closed in shops and pubs around County Kerry in places like Cordal and Castleisland. The Government has to be aware of what is going on and affecting employers that are employing men and women. Everything is coming together and it is being directed by the Government. Employers are not getting the help and attention they need. I ask the Government to address it and ensure it is rectified because we could lose many of them. It takes a fair man or woman to open the door and keep a business going. They are telling me that it is becoming harder and harder to do that under the rules we have. The Government has to recognise that employers do not have an endless pot of money or a leprechaun's purse. They need assistance. Look at the costs. The cost of electricity and energy has gone up. Employers are all feeling the pinch. I ask the Minister to remember that and the fact that they need help. The Government should recognise that.

I am pleased to see that we have a Minister from Kerry at the table. I ask her to ensure that when things like this are happening, something else has to happen to help employers that are feeling the pinch because they are struggling at the present time. We had a great summer in Kerry because of the weather and it helped a lot but the long winter is coming and wages and energy costs are going up. Everything is going up and it is affecting the employers. We want them to open again next year. I appeal to the Minister to listen to what I have said.

Minister for Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Norma Foley): I thank Deputies for their presence today and their continued engagement on these important matters. The Bill provides for two separate and important issues, notably amendments to the Employment Equality Act 1998 and amendments to the Institutional Burials Act 2022. I will speak directly to those as they are the issues at hand.

I thank all employers who have made an account on a voluntary basis on the gender pay gap portal, as well as our social partners which have continually encouraged use of the portal. I am grateful to the House for facilitating consideration of the Bill so that legislation can be passed in time for mandatory reporting of the 2026 gender pay gap reporting cycle, which begins on 1 November.

I also thank the House for facilitating the amendments to the Institutional Burials Act because of the age profile or health status of some of the first cousins who wish to participate in the Tuam identification programme to help with the identification of their relatives. As we move to the next Stage, I thank Deputy Wall in particular for his amendments to the Bill. I also thank him for his careful scrutiny and detailed engagement with the Bill. I am happy to accept some of his amendments and I will speak to the specific amendments on Committee Stage.

Question put and agreed to.

Broadcasting (Amendment) Bill 2026: Report and Final Stages

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Erin McGreehan): Amendments Nos. 1 and 13 are related and will be discussed together.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: I move amendment No. 1:

In page 8, between lines 1 and 2, to insert the following:

“ ‘new audiovisual works’ where it is referred to in section 159F(2) shall be interpreted to include but not be limited to feature films, animation, drama, and documentary programmes;”.

This amendment is based on a number of proposals put forward by Screen Producers Ireland, SPI, that we feel did not get sufficient discussion on Committee Stage but are still crucially important. We have engaged with the Minister on this on a number of occasions. SPI, which represents over 200 member companies across the independent productive production sector, is concerned that there is a substantial change in language regarding what sort of programmes are to be funded under this legislation. While the previous Sound and Vision fund of the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland, BAI, was established in line with section 154 of the Broadcasting Act 2009 to fund programmes, including feature films, animation and drama, these words are missing from the new sections in this Bill relating to its successor teams within Ciste na Meán to be operated by Coimisiún na Meán. News and current affairs are now included but these other forms of programming should not lose out. Funding provided to films, entertainment, drama and factual programming under the old BAI Sound and Vision fund should be maintained and enhanced, not written out of the law. We are proposing the inclusion of documentary programming as well as the old wording. We would welcome clarity from the Minister. I understand that he is not here today but we are seeking that clarity as to whether he will accept this proposal or insist on the inclusion of these genres of programming in future Ciste na Meán funding and the potential impact of that in the sector in terms of employment and output foregone.

The audiovisual sector is deeply concerned that Government is abandoning commitments and SPI put forward a number of other amendments in the hope that the Minister would demonstrate sufficient commitment. SPI is concerned at inaction in relation to the Future of Media Commission's recommendation that the percentage of RTÉ's public funding that should support independent production should be increased to 25%. It is concerned about the failure to deliver adequate, sustainable and predictable financial resources to public service broadcasters in line with Article 5.3 of the European Media Freedom Act, which has been compounded by budget 2027, has left TG4 facing real-time cuts to deal with inflation and has seen the restructuring commitments for RTÉ torn up. All of this will harm the independent production sector, which relies on RTÉ and TG4 for commissions.

Budget 2027 failed to mention any regional uplift for the film tax relief. Sinn Féin has called for this to be developed in partnership with the sector. SPI also raised concerns about the administrative burden of new regulatory review and reporting requirements. We are

looking to see if the Minister has considered how to ease that burden while ensuring prudence in public spending. Lastly, would the Minister ensure that the wording in the Bill is inclusive so that Ciste na Meán does not exclude feature films, animation drama and documentaries?

Deputy Micheál Carrigy: I commend this Bill. There are a few things I wish to highlight. The first is the levies that have been charged by Coimisiún na Meán, particularly over the past 12 months. We have seen a significant increase in the levy as a percentage of costs that it has put on original local radio stations throughout the country. These are significant costs in the region of 30% to 40% after those local stations would have put their budgets together for the year so I ask that consideration be given to this. It needs to be reduced to the previous level. I ask that Coimisiún na Meán would make sure in its budget for 2026-27 that this is dealt with sufficiently to make sure that we support local radio stations in particular that provide trustworthy news and information to us throughout the country, as was particularly the case during Covid a number of years ago. It was there that we listened to get all that local news - as I said, trusted news - in all our local communities. They provide a fantastic service so there has been a difficulty with that increased cost and I ask that this be robustly changed to make sure that those increased costs are not carried on to the stations but are absorbed by Coimisiún na Meán.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I will speak to amendment No. 13. In this Bill, the broadcasting fund or Ciste na Meán is restricted to the private sector - the commercial, independent or - whatever words we want to use - creative sector. This has real potential consequences for RTÉ and TG4. In particular, it has implications for TG4, which has a treasure trove of archived material that could be repackaged and repurposed for broadcast. This takes money so it needs to access funding to be able to do that. Given that we have seen no increase for TG4 in this year's budget in terms of funding, it seems that it would be prudent to give Coimisiún na Meán the remit to potentially provide funding to TG4 in particular but also RTÉ from that funding. That is what this amendment proposes.

Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I will deal first with amendment No. 1, which aims to expressly provide that the types of programming that may be funded through the proceeds of the European works levy may include certain specified types of genre. The Broadcasting (Amendment) Bill is not intended to restrict funding to a particular type of genre whether in relation to public service content schemes funded through Ciste na Meán or in terms of any European work scheme that may be funded by the European works levy. Instead, section 59 of the Bill includes provisions to align the terminology used as it relates to programming that may be funded under the European works scheme, with several of the categories set out in respect of public service content in section 5 of the Bill. These categories refer to various types of subject matter rather than genre. For example, a previous reference to Irish culture, language, history, heritage, society and sport is being replaced with a reference to the culture, language, history, heritage, society, music and sport of Ireland and of the people of the island of Ireland. This reflects that some people living on the island of Ireland do not consider themselves as Irish as recognised in the Good Friday Agreement.

I understand that there is some concern that the inclusion of news, current affairs and international affairs in the category of programming that may be funded may imply, first, that it refers to the genre of news, current affairs and international affairs and, second, that it is the only genre that may be funded. I assure Deputies that the use of the term "news, current affairs and international affairs" in this context is intended to refer to the subject matter of news, current affairs and international affairs rather than a specific genre or programme format such as a documentary panel show or daily news broadcast. Given that the Bill refers to subject matter rather than genre, I do not think there is a need to refer to any specific type of genre and, accordingly, I do not accept the amendment.

Amendment No. 13 would allow RTÉ and TG4 to apply for public service content schemes funded through Ciste na Meán.

As the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, set out on Committee Stage, there is a clear rationale for excluding RTÉ and TG4 from directly applying to Ciste na Meán. Both providers have been assigned a clear public service remit under sections 114 and 118 of the Broadcasting Act 2009. This statutory remit includes the media services that RTÉ and TG4 are required to provide to the public, including the maintenance of archives and libraries, the types of values that should underpin those services and specific programming obligations in respect of those services.

RTÉ and TG4 are provided with significant public funding to fulfil that statutory remit. If RTÉ and TG4 were to continue to be allowed to apply directly for funding under Ciste na Meán, this would amount to a type of dual funding. Unlike other media providers, they would receive funding directly from the State as public service media providers and then be permitted to compete with other media providers for funding under Ciste na Meán. Accordingly, I cannot accept the Deputy's amendment.

However, I want to assure the Deputy that independent producers that receive funding under Ciste na Meán will still be able to partner with RTÉ and TG4 to make funded content available to the public and to enter co-funding agreements with those independent producers. This is a particularly important consideration given that at least 25% of funding in any scheme must be for content in the Irish language. We would expect that those independent producers in receipt of that funding would continue to make content available primarily on TG4.

Finally, I note Deputy Carrigy's contribution in that regard. I acknowledge the importance of trying to ensure that as much communication as possible is in place between Coimisiún na Meán and local independent radio stations on the issue of the levy, how it is set and when decisions are made around that.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: For the record, I also want to extend my best wishes to the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, for a speedy recovery today.

In response to the Minister of State's comments on TG4, in particular, I appreciate that it can work with independent or commercial providers, as he outlined. Nonetheless, it is in a unique position, given the trove of extensive cultural material it has, and RTÉ too, which is not going to be possible to do with independent partners. It could use that material for the purposes of fulfilling its public service broadcasting mandate. That is the issue for me. Bit by bit, we are chipping away at that public service broadcasting mandate in all the various ways the

Government is choosing to transform broadcasting in this country. I do not think there is any issue with a State agency accessing dual sources of funding. I appreciate it is the case that they would be able to do it in both instances but I do not think there is any issue in terms of precedent. I do not think there is any governance issue with them being able to access two different sources of funding. It is not rationale enough to vote down the amendment. I urge the Minister to reconsider that and adjust the provision so that TG4 and RTÉ can access that same pot of money.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank Deputy Gibney. I will certainly pass on her best wishes to the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan. All of us in the House extend them to him today.

I take the point and argument the Deputy is making in her amendment. The position from a Government point of view is that we are already funding both TG4 and RTÉ in their public service remit. It is important that we also ensure that public service is provided to others outside of RTÉ and TG4. That is the objective behind this fund. There is a mechanism for the Government and it will continue to be there. We would all agree on the absolute importance, particularly in the world we live in at the moment, of protecting and ensuring that we have strong public service broadcasters to carry out that work and make sure the public are getting accurate, independent information and programming. That will be done through the public service funding we provide. This fund is targeted outside of RTÉ and TG4. That is the objective behind it.

Amendment put and declared lost.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Erin McGreehan): Amendment No. 2, in the names of Deputies Ó Snodaigh and Byrne, arises out of committee proceedings.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: I move amendment No. 2:

In page 12, between lines 5 and 6, to insert the following:

“and

(b) by the insertion of the following after subsection (3)(i):

“(j) support the development of arts broadcasting and promotion, including by progressing the incorporation of regular arts bulletins akin to existing sports bulletins as part of the news service of public service media to inform the public of developments and achievements across all artforms of local and national significance, drawing attention to the launch and exhibition of new artistic, literary and musical works, upcoming performances, competitions or funding opportunities.”.”

Deputy Ó Snodaigh withdrew this amendment on Committee Stage on the basis that the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, promised to come back with a formula that allows this to be achieved. The Minister said there should be provision, particularly in the so-called flagship news bulletins, for arts and culture reports on a regular basis, as was set out in that amendment, and that he would return with an amendment on Report Stage or in the Seanad. As no such amendment has been brought forward on Report Stage by the Minister, is he accepting this amendment, which is based on the recommendations not only of the cross party pre-legislative

scrutiny of this Bill but also on the committee's 2024 report entitled Future Business Model Plans and Long-term Vision for the Media Sector and the Report of the Future of Media Commission? If not, we need an update on what amendments will be tabled before the Bill goes to the Seanad, if possible.

I appreciate that the Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, is only stepping in at the last minute. I thank him for being here.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank Deputy Byrne for the amendment. As the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, set out on Committee Stage, he agrees with the intention underpinning the amendment. He asked officials to examine the issue to formulate a legislative provision that would have the effect of promoting the coverage of the arts in broadcast media while respecting the editorial independence of broadcasters. Given the need to enact this Bill as soon as possible to assign the Comptroller and Auditor General as auditor of RTÉ, there will not be time to include a provision in this Bill. However, given the pace of change in the media sector and legislative developments at European level, there will be a need to bring forward successive media legislation in the coming period. There will be an opportunity to address the issue in that context. Taking on board the issues and suggested approach raised by Deputies Byrne and Ó Snodaigh, the most effective mechanism may be to require Coimisiún na Meán to prepare a media service code providing for standards and practices for the promotion of culture and the arts, including up-to-date news about culture and the arts. Such a code would cover not only RTÉ and TG4 but all licensed broadcasters. This may strike the balance by respecting editorial independence while also setting out clear best practice. However, I am conscious that the Deputy may have another perspective on the best way forward on this. The Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, will continue to engage with her and other Deputies on this point in the context of forthcoming legislation.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Erin McGreehan): Deputy Gibney wishes to come in there.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Deputy Ó Snodaigh and I were the only two members who brought forward amendments on Committee Stage. Deputy Ó Snodaigh withdrew a few different amendments on the basis that they would be addressed. I have to say, the whole tone of the session was very much that nothing was getting passed. Deputy Ó Snodaigh withdrew amendments in good faith so that they could be worked out by the Government in that time. This was a few weeks ago. The fact is that this has not happened. I hope we do not see this pattern repeated for the rest of these amendments because that would be quite shocking. We are trying to make things work here. The Government is not allowing any amendments past just because they have been put forward by the Opposition, and then when we try to work with the Government, as Deputies Ó Snodaigh and Deputy Byrne have done, by withdrawing them to go back to the drawing board and allowing it to help elsewhere, this is not happening.

This is an absolutely vital amendment. We see a huge amount of sports promotion, for example, increasingly in broadcasting and we do not see the same matched for arts. That is what this amendment chooses to do. It is trying to inject back into that public service broadcasting remit the priority of arts announcements, arts information and arts news and

current affairs. That is what it is trying to do. It is really regrettable that nothing has been done to address this.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: I echo everything Deputy Gibney said. A level of faith was provided to the Minister by my colleague Deputy Ó Snodaigh. I am also a member of the Committee of Public Accounts, so I am aware that the delay in passing this legislation is causing problems for the Comptroller and Auditor General. I respect that there has to be some balance, but that that cannot be used as a catalyst to bypass genuine intent for the good of the arts sector, as set out in a lot of these amendments.

I will take the Minister of State's word that he agrees with the intention underpinning these amendments and that there is a commitment to work towards that objective in other upcoming legislation. If that does not happen, we will be back to the drawing board at any opportunity to ensure we revisit these amendments through whatever channels are open to Deputy Ó Snodaigh and me.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: As Deputies Gibney and Byrne have outlined, there was a meeting of minds on Committee Stage regarding the objective behind this amendment. I agree there is an urgency to this because we want the Comptroller and Auditor General to have the legal capacity to have RTÉ and TG4 under his remit for the purposes of auditing their 2026 accounts. We are trying to get the Bill through both the Dáil and the Seanad in as good a time as possible to facilitate that objective and outcome.

In relation to the commitment given by the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, on Committee Stage and here today, he is open to, and will continue to engage across the House on, this proposal. One way forward might be, as suggested, to have Coimisiún na Meán prepare a media service code, which could help to address the issue and would apply not just to TG4 and RTÉ but to all licensed broadcasters. That can be discussed and examined to see whether it could be an effective way forward. In terms of drafting such a code and considering the detail as to how something like it might be transposed into legislation in a way that is effective and proportionate, there has not been sufficient time to tease that out in the context of this Bill. There will be other opportunities to do so. In advance of those opportunities, there will have to be discussion and engagement on how it might work. How it can best be achieved might be something that needs to be teased out at the Oireachtas committee in advance of legislation. Everyone is on the one page in terms of the objective behind the proposed amendment.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: I move amendment No. 3:

In page 19, between lines 35 and 36, to insert the following:

"Insertion of new section 46MA into Principal Act

19.The Principal Act is amended by the insertion of the following section after section 46M:

"Duty to the whole community of the island of Ireland

46MA.(1) RTÉ and TG4, whose national television broadcasting services shall be made available, in so far as it is reasonably practicable, to the whole community on the island of Ireland, in accordance with section 114(1) (a) and section 118(1)(a) respectively, shall pro-actively make every reasonable effort to end the practice of geo-blocking and exclusion of audiences in that part of the island not currently under the jurisdiction of the State from their services, including programming content, audience competitions and visual cartographic depictions of the island and its population.

(2) In the interests of fulfilling their duty in line with subsection (1) as national broadcasters for the whole nation, RTÉ and TG4 shall pro-actively seek to resolve any competing claims to licencing rights across the island with the objective of ensuring equal access to programming content north and south across service providers, particularly where that content relates to their participation in events of importance to the nation, including in terms of news, current affairs, sport and culture, in line with the entitlement and birthright of every person born on the island of Ireland to be part of the Irish Nation under Article 2 of the Constitution.

(3) The Commission shall, no later than six months after the enactment of this Act, prepare and publish a report setting out ways in which RTÉ

and TG4 could be facilitated, assisted and required to make available these services in full to the whole community of the island of Ireland,

including how they could work to achieve a resolution and cooperation across rights holders in the case of competing claims across jurisdictions, and toward removing any obstacle or barrier, such as the geographical restriction of their broadcasting rights to one part of the

island or the use of geo-blocking to enforce such a restriction, to their equal availability across the whole island.

(4) The Minister shall engage with the British government, and with international organisations responsible for the licencing of rights for

international events, with a view to establishing an all-Ireland market for television licencing rights, and to resolving any competing claims

across jurisdictions, and shall lay a report outlining all such engagements made over the previous year on an annual basis starting

from one year following the enactment of this Act.

(5) The reports and engagement referred to in subsections (4) and (5) shall pay particular regard to the importance of supporting the fulfilment of commitments in the Good Friday Agreement relating to the widespread availability of services provided by TG4, and acknowledging the public service duty of RTÉ to the whole community of the island of Ireland, to better facilitate equal access to programming content by the whole community of the island of Ireland.

(6) The Commission shall pay due regard to the need for equal and widespread availability of services across the whole of the island of Ireland when agreeing licences for television broadcasting services."."

This amendment relates to the geoblocking of all users in the Six Counties, which Sinn Féin has been raising consistently for a number of years. There was widespread support across all parties on Committee Stage for tackling the issue, with agreement to engage with the sector on it. Deputy Ó Snodaigh was happy to withdraw his amendment in light of the Minister's commitment to escalate the matter politically, including through engagement with the British Government.

We have tabled the amendment again on Report Stage to put on the record that this issue still demands our attention and to give the Minister of State an opportunity to provide any updates he might have on efforts to engage with the Minister's counterpart in London or through the various regulators and broadcasters North and South. I thank him for those efforts, if there have been any, and ask that he pass those thanks on to the Minister. I presume there is no update at the moment. We were hopeful there would be because we plan to raise the issue at the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly this weekend.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank the Deputy for this amendment. I am conscious, as she outlined, that the amendment was discussed in some detail on Committee Stage and that there is no disagreement on the principle underpinning the amendment. As the Deputy who probably lives closest to the Border, it is something of which I am very much aware. I think I am closer even than the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach to the Border.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Erin McGreehan): I think that is right.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: I will not argue the point.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I am very much aware of the impact and effect of this issue on a practical basis. That view was shared among all speakers, both Government and Opposition, in the discussion on Committee Stage.

As the amendment recognises, as part of their statutory public service remit under sections 114(1)(a) and 118(1)(a) of the Broadcasting Act 2009, both RTÉ and TG4 are required to operate free-to-air services and to make them available, insofar as is reasonably practicable, to the whole community on the island of Ireland. The qualifier "in so far as it is reasonably practicable" is there to recognise that international rights holders are invariably outside the jurisdiction of the State and, therefore, neither RTÉ nor TG4 can control the pricing of rights or the geographical or territorial distribution decided by the rights holders.

As recognised by the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, and by many Deputies on Committee Stage, this gives rise to practical difficulties in terms of audiences in the North being able to access certain types of programming. I agree completely that this is a source of ongoing and significant frustration, particularly in relation to sports events such as the Olympic Games, where Team Ireland includes athletes from across the island. I understand that RTÉ has stated its preference to acquire all-island rights. Where possible, both RTÉ and TG4 make broadcasts available on an all-island basis, in line with their existing statutory duty. However, as I have

mentioned, there are cases where rights restrictions preclude them from broadcasting certain content outside the State. In some cases, a British broadcaster will have acquired exclusive rights to the content, which includes exclusive rights in the North. These are commercial and legal matters for the rights holders and broadcasters and we must recognise there is an extra-jurisdictional element to that.

Before considering any legislative amendment to address this issue, it is necessary to fully understand and scope out the range of issues that impact various types of content and rights packages. As the Minister indicated previously, Coimisiún na Meán has been engaging on this matter with counterparts in Ofcom Northern Ireland for some time. An coimisiún proposes to address the issue further at the next meeting of the Television Broadcasters of Ireland Group, to be held in Belfast in early November. That group consists of RTÉ, TG4, Virgin Media, BBC and UTV and is facilitated by Coimisiún na Meán and Ofcom Northern Ireland. All of those parties recognise the complexity of this issue. The forum provides a useful way to identify the challenges and to propose possible solutions. The Minister recently discussed this matter with the British ambassador and will shortly be writing to the British Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.

Given the complex commercial and contractual limitations that we all acknowledge exist, continued engagement between officials in both jurisdictions to encourage practical solutions is the most effective way forward. Departmental officials will continue to engage with their UK counterparts on the matter. I do not think there is an immediate Irish legislative solution to this matter and, accordingly, I do not propose to accept this amendment today.

Deputy Micheál Carrigy: I support the amendment. There was cross-party support for the same proposal on Committee Stage. The Minister highlighted that work is ongoing on the issue, which should be acknowledged. The Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, has outlined the significant engagement there has been. At a later stage, when those discussions have taken place, the Minister might come back to the committee to outline where we are in terms of the possibility of addressing the issue and to discuss it.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: I will take the Minister of State at his word on this matter. There is cross-party acknowledgement that it needs to be worked through and teased out a bit further. I sincerely hope the engagement does not stall at writing to the British Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. We need actions to follow up on that engagement. If that happens, the Minister of State will have the support of the Sinn Féin team to ensure we can overcome geoblocking for the sake of all our family members, friends and fellow citizens in the Six Counties. They are missing out on so much. The Minister of State mentioned the Olympic Games but we have had other monumental moments in sports alone, including from the Irish football team and Katie Taylor's historic night in Croke Park. I could go on all evening listing the events in respect of which people are being held back from cheering on their fellow countrymen and countrywomen.

I look forward to working with the Minister on this issue. It is of particular interest and significance to both Deputy Ó Snodaigh and me. We will pursue it with him, once he is back with us, over the coming weeks and months.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I thank Deputies Byrne and Ó Snodaigh for bringing forward this amendment, which is the same one they proposed on Committee Stage.

Once again, I find it disappointing that in that time we have not seen the co-operation that we had hoped for come forward from the Department. Within that 90-minute session, I remember the words of the Minister that it had not been all bad when he discussed the geoblocking because he finally felt there was an issue that he could work with the Opposition on and bring it forward.

As Deputy Byrne outlined, there are always, and there always have been, opportunities missed because of the geoblocking issue, and there are plenty more stacked into our calendar for the next 12 months. This legislative process is known to the Government. It knew that there were a few weeks between Committee and Report Stages where it had the opportunity to develop it. This was a piece of legislation that was available to the Government to address this. I appreciate there are lots of different ways to tackle it but it knew this was coming. It should have knuckled down, done the work and found a way to get it into this legislation because we cannot just say that fixing the C and AG issue is the reason this has to be rushed. The Government knew this was coming. We knew it was on the books and there was plenty of opportunity to do it. It is real shame that we have not seen greater co-operation and collaboration from the Government on the amendments Deputy Ó Snodaigh withdrew in good faith that they would be worked on.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: The Government's position is entirely reasonable in relation to the approach that it is taking here. We agree and share the view on the issue and the desire to try to improve it and change the situation whereby programmes can be accessible all across the island. As I said in my contribution at the start, there is already provision in legislation under the Broadcasting Act requiring RTÉ to provide free-to-air services and make them available across the island as far as is reasonably practical. That is already in the legislation. We all have to recognise that there is not a straightforward legislative fix here. Were we to put a blunt requirement into legislation that RTÉ shall only broadcast programming that is only available to all of the island and that there is no geoblocking, which is the objective we would like to see, the net effect would be that certain types of programmes would simply not be possible to broadcast on RTÉ or TG4 because the rights had already been sold by international providers to, for example, BBC for Britain and Northern Ireland. If we say that RTÉ can only broadcast something if it broadcasts it to the whole of the island, then it would not be able to broadcast it at all. That is the type of outcome we want. We want it to go to the whole island but the actual net effect would be that we would be blocking certain types of content from even being broadcast in the Twenty-six Counties.

This just goes to prove the point that we do not have a legislative fix. By working with Ofcom in the North and broadcast providers internationally, we want to achieve the objective whereby content is available to the whole of the island as much as is practicable. That is certainly where all of our minds are at, and we are happy to continue to engage cross-party in relation to any steps we can take. As I said, the Minister has raised it with the British ambassador already and will be engaging with the relevant minister in Westminster to see how we can make progress here. We, along with our officials, are happy to work across Government and to engage on any suggestions and proposals around it so we can make progress here.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I move amendment No.4:

In page 20, to delete lines 21 to 24 and substitute the following:

“(iii) by the insertion of the following paragraphs after paragraph (b):

“(c) the broadcast in programmes broadcast on sound broadcasting services of a diversity of music composed or performed by persons with a connection with the island of Ireland;

(d) the broadcast in programmes broadcast on sound broadcasting services of music in the Irish language.”.”.

This is a fairly straightforward and short amendment to recognise and ensure the promotion of Irish composed and Irish performed music, as well as music in the Irish language, to make sure it is included in the remit for sound broadcasters. It is just a simple amendment that we believe is very important in making sure that those who are culturally keeping alive our Irish language and traditions are supported in doing so by their broadcaster.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I know the Deputy will be aware that the Future of Media Commission recommended a comprehensive review of the provision of Irish language services and content across the media system and that this is to be undertaken by Coimisiún na Meán. Coimisiún na Meán's Irish language action plan is now at an advanced stage. The plan will be informed by the comprehensive review, a feasibility study into a new radio service for young audiences and the other research commissioned and carried out by Coimisiún na Meán.

The Irish language action plan is currently open to targeted consultation. I understand the consultation will further inform the plan. The action plan is a thematic plan which will include a detailed implementation timeline, and I expect the final version to be published by the end of the year.

I appreciate the intention of the Deputy's amendment. Regulatory provisions such as that proposed by the Deputy can make a difference, particularly when they includes requirements to measure types of content. At this point, however, it is prudent to wait on the measures that will be contained in the Irish language action plan and the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, will examine whether any further legislative measures are required on foot of that plan. Given the pace of media legislation and forthcoming European legislation, any required legislative change can be accommodated in a future Bill.

Amendment put and declared lost.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Erin McGreehan): Amendments Nos. 5 and 7 are related and will be discussed together.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: I move amendment No. 5:

In page 25, line 19, after “TG4” to insert “, and, in the case of at least 50 per cent of the members of the board of RTÉ, to the board of RTÉ,”.

Deputy Ní Raghallaigh will speak on the amendment.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: Baineann leasuithe Uimh. 5 agus 7 ó Shinn Féin le hinniúlacht sa Ghaeilge a chinntiú do leath na ballraíochta ar bhord RTÉ, craoltóir atá in ainm a bheith dátheangach, agus don bhallraíocht ar fad ar chomhairle lucht féachana TG4, atá ina chraoltóir náisiúnta don Ghaeilge. Faoi láthair tá an tAcht Craolacháin, 2009 soiléir gur chóir go mbeadh inniúlacht sa Ghaeilge ag gach ball den chomhairle lucht féachana. De réir alt 96(5) den Acht sin:

In appointing the members of its audience council, TG4 shall endeavour to ensure that the members of the audience council are able to communicate proficiently in the Irish language.

Bhí tuiscint ann i gcónaí gurb é príomhról TG4 ná freastal ar lucht féachana na Gaeilge. Ba TG4 agus Raidió na Gaeltachta ina dtorthaí ar ghluaiseacht cearta sibhialta na Gaeltachta. Is féidir leis na stáisiúin seo tacú le foghlaimeoirí agus is féidir le daoine gan mórán Gaeilge sult agus tairbhe a bhaint as ábhar orthu ach, chun tuiscint a bheith ag duine ar ábhar i nGaeilge, teastaíonn inniúlacht sa Ghaeilge. De réir alt 96C, alt nua a mholtar sa Bhille, is féidir leis an gcomhairle lucht féachana comhairliúchán a lorg le dream ar leith sa phobal, mar shampla foghlaimeoirí, daoine óga, daltaí scoile nó daoine den phobal gur mhaith leo féachaint ar spórt, ach caithfidh an chomhairle féin a bheith in ann ábhar an chraoltóra a thuiscint.

De réir an dlí, tá comhairle lucht féachana TG4 ag feidhmiú go hiomlán trí Ghaeilge faoi láthair. Mar sin, cén fáth a bhfuil an tAire ag iarraidh comhairle lucht féachana TG4 a Bhéarlú? Dúirt an tAire go mbeadh sé "exclusionary" dá mbeadh ar gach ball de chomhairle lucht féachana TG4 Gaeilge a bheith acu. An bhfuil comhairle lucht féachana reatha TG4 "exclusionary"? Mar atá ráite cheana, beidh an chomhairle ag iompú ar an mBéarla má tá daoine gan Ghaeilge ann. Beidh costas sa bhreis ann ó thaobh ateangaireachta agus an t-airgead sin ag teacht as buiséad TG4, atá níos ísle i mbliana de bharr boilscithe. In aighneacht ar an mBille seo mar chuid den phróiseas grinnscrúdaithe réamhreachtaigh, dúirt TG4, "All of the members of the TG4 audience council must be competent in Irish." Cén fáth a bhfuil an tAire ag déanamh neamhaird ar mholadh TG4? Luaigh an tAire go bhfreastalaíonn TG4 ar dhaltai scoile nach bhfuil inniúil ar an nGaeilge. An bhfuil sé ag rá go mbeidh páistí scoile gan Ghaeilge ar chomhairle lucht féachana TG4? An mbeidh sé sásta glacadh le páistí scoile gan Bhéarla ar chomhairle lucht féachana RTÉ? An mbeidh sé sásta daoine gan Bhéarla a bheith ar chomhairle lucht féachana nó ar bhord RTÉ? Ní bheadh an comhrá seo againn faoin gcomhairle lucht féachana nó bord RTÉ. Tá sé inghlactha go mbeadh Béarla acu mar phríomhtheanga úsáide na seirbhíse. Níl aon duine ag iarraidh a admháil gurb í an Ghaeilge príomhtheanga oifigiúil RTÉ de réir an Bhunreacht.

Tá comhairle Raidió na Gaeltachta ag feidhmiú freisin trí Ghaeilge in aitheantas go bhfuil an stáisiún ag freastal ar phobal teanga ar leith, bunaithe ar ghluaiseacht cearta sibhialta, cé nach bhfuil stádas sa dlí aige. Ó 2022 go dtí 2025, ní raibh aon chomhairle ann. Mhol Sinn Féin leasú go mbeadh sé sonraithe sa dlí go mbeadh comhairle lucht éisteachta ann féin ag Raidió na Gaeltachta. Dúirt an tAire ar Chéim an Choiste, "It is not wise to create an audience council for a specific service provided by RTÉ", cé go bhfuil a leithéid i bhfeidhm cheana féin.

5 o'clock

An bhfuil an fhoráil sin ag lorg fáil réidh le comhairle Raidió na Gaeltachta nó an rabhthas aineolach go bhfuil sé ann? Ar a laghad, ba chóir go nglactar le ball le Gaeilge ar chomhairle lucht féachana RTÉ, mar a mhol an Teachta Gibney i leasú Uimh. 6; le comhairle lucht féachana lán-Ghaeilge ag TG4, mar atá ann faoi láthair; agus le bord dátheangach ar RTÉ. Vótáil baill an choiste, idir bhaill Rialtais agus bhaill Freasúra, i bhfabhar moladh sa ghrinnscrúdú réamhreachtach "that a proportion of the Board of RTÉ would also have proficiency of Irish at the level of B2". Cén fáth a bhfuil Fine Gael agus Fianna Fáil ag tarraingt siar óna moladh féin anois? Cén fáth a bhfuil an Rialtas ag diúltú leis na moltaí go léir faoin nGaeilge?

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I commend amendment No. 5. I will speak to amendments Nos. 6 and 7. Amendment No. 6 essentially seeks to copper-fasten what already exists in the RTÉ board, where at least three members should be competent in the Irish language. In some ways we can call it a quota but, as I said, there is a level of competence in the RTÉ board at the moment. That competence is vital because the board needs to be able to oversee RTÉ's Irish language and general public service remit. Addressing the Irish language remit has been a weakness for RTÉ in the past, so it is vital that the language is adequately supported.

In reality, this number of board members are usually in place but that is not good enough and it is not enough to mean it will be maintained in future. What we need, copper-fastened in the legislation, is the requirement for three members of the board to be sufficiently competent in Irish to do their job. It is good governance. We see different requirements and quotas for different competences on all sorts of State boards. This one makes sense for the RTÉ board to fulfil its mandate.

RTÉ is an organisation that has to serve the Irish speaking community and support the Irish language and the Gaeltachtaí. Having struggled to do so in the past, this is what we need to see happen to make sure the position improves into the future. RTÉ's audience council already has around that number of people with Irish on it and, as I said, this amendment proposes to simply provide for it in legislation.

There was a very heated discussion on amendment No. 7 on Committee Stage. It was quite surprising to see the Minister's reaction to it. As matters stand, all members of TG4's audience council speak Irish. What we are trying to do with our amendment is to make sure that remains the case. The Bill, as it stands, seeks to reduce the number of TG4 audience council members with Irish from all of them to at least ten out of 15. That would leave the TG4 audience council having to conduct its business as Béarla, with interpreters and translated documents as required, because there will not be the competence to continue to operate as Gaeilge. That is simply not good enough.

We also heard the Minister confirm in the committee that this would come at the cost of TG4, which would have to pay for the translation services. It would mean a simple slowdown for TG4 as an organisation to have to facilitate that. The response of the Minister, that the proposal is "exclusionary" and does not speak to the diverse culture we now have in Ireland, is really insulting to those people who have come to this country, for example, and learned Irish. The idea that one should not be able to speak Irish to be on the TG4 audience council simply does not make sense. If we cannot have an audience council of our Irish language broadcaster conducting its business in Irish, it is a poor sign for the future of the language and the present ability to protect what little space there is for it in our institutions. That is a really important

point - that we are trying to protect a very small level of compliance that preserves the Irish language. That is what we are trying to do. We should be bolstering the presence of Irish speakers and their experiences in our institutions, not rowing back.

Taispeánann an cinneadh seo dímhéas iomlán ar TG4 ar bharr an easpa measa do mheáin na Gaeilge a léiríodh sa mbuiséad. Is údar díomá é, go háirithe ó iarAire Stáit le freagracht as an nGaeltacht. This move shows complete disrespect for TG4 on top of the lack of respect for the Irish language media shown in the budget. To be clear, TG4 does not want this. The Irish language community does not want this. This audience council should be preserved to be able to conduct its business and work as Gaeilge. This legislation chooses to erode that - in fact, it will completely abolish it - so we must include this amendment.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank the Deputies for the amendments. I will go through them in the order that they were raised.

Amendment No. 5 provides that 50% of the members of the RTÉ board should be competent in the Irish language. As the Deputies are aware, there is currently no requirement for a minimum percentage of the RTÉ board to be competent in the Irish language. Section 27 of the Broadcasting (Amendment) Bill introduces a number of reforms to the criteria for membership of the board of RTÉ and TG4, following on from the recommendations of the expert advisory committee on governance and culture in RTÉ, chaired by Professor Niamh Brennan. In accordance with those recommendations, board members of both RTÉ and TG4 must now have experience and expertise relevant to the oversight of an organisation of the size, range of activities and level of complexity of RTÉ or TG4, as the case may be, in one or more of a range of listed areas of expertise.

There are a number of new key areas of expertise, such as corporate governance and risk management, which have been included on foot of the experience of the issues with RTÉ governance. However, existing areas of expertise have been retained, including the development of the Irish language and Gaeltacht affairs. This necessarily means that a number of members of the RTÉ board will need to be competent in the Irish language. As the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, set out on Committee Stage, given the criteria in place, there is no need for specific Irish language requirements for the RTÉ board. The provision requiring all members of the TG4 board to be competent in the Irish language has been retained and has been updated in light of provisions of the *Údarás na Gaeltachta (Amendment) Act 2026*. This will ensure that the same level of competence required of the board of an *t-údarás* will be required of the board of TG4, ensuring an alignment of approach to two of our largest Irish language bodies.

Amendment Nos. 6 and 7 relate to the audience councils of RTÉ and TG4, respectively. The reforms to the audience councils of TG4 and RTÉ set out in the Broadcasting (Amendment) Bill are based on a recommendation of the Future of Media Commission that there should be an enhanced role for audience councils, which, first, reflects the definition of "the public" adopted by the Future of Media Commission, and, second, supports diversity, inclusivity and democratic engagement with wider public sphere issues.

Regarding the definition of "the public", the Future of Media Commission set out that it should mean "the total population that is the intended recipient of media content" and reflect the principles of universality, diversity and inclusivity. To implement this recommendation,

section 38 of the Bill provides that Coimisiún na Meán shall, following an open selection process, seek to appoint an audience council that ensures a diversity of membership, inclusion of a number of members who are actively engaged with Irish communities outside the island of Ireland and inclusion of members who are active in underserved audiences. Following a recommendation arising from pre-legislative scrutiny, a specific reference to underserved audiences identified by reference to disability has been included.

In respect of the TG4 audience council, membership must include at least ten members who have the required level of competency in the Irish language and, following a recommendation arising from pre-legislative scrutiny, at least five members representative of Gaeltacht communities. The rationale for allowing up to five members who may not have the requisite level of competency in the Irish language rests in the statutory public service remit of TG4, which makes specific reference to its role in catering for "the expectations of those of all age groups in the community whose preferred spoken language is Irish or who otherwise have an interest in Irish".

As we all know, and in line with its public service remit, TG4 plays an important role in promoting the Irish language through its programming. There are many viewers who watch TG4 for its high quality and standards of programming who would otherwise not be as exposed to the Irish language in their daily lives. The TG4 audience necessarily includes many who will not have the requisite level of competence in the Irish language. The Bill is an attempt to recognise that and, if a number of persons without the requisite level of competency apply and qualify for the audience council, to incorporate that perspective onto the audience council of TG4.

I acknowledge the practical and other difficulties raised by Deputies and that what is being proposed is something of an experiment. The Department and Coimisiún na Meán will work with TG4 to address any of these difficulties, should they materialise in the lead-up to and following the open selection process to ensure the work of the TG4 audience council continues to take place in the Irish language.

Regarding the RTÉ audience council, I recognise there is no minimum requirement for a number of members to be competent in the Irish language. There is a requirement inserted on foot of a recommendation arising from pre-legislative scrutiny that both the RTÉ and TG4 audience councils have regard to the Irish language and the needs of Gaeltacht communities. There is also the requirement on Coimisiún na Meán to ensure a diversity of membership in both audience councils. Given the specific role of the RTÉ audience council, I trust that Coimisiún na Meán will ensure an appropriate number of persons with competence in the Irish language.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: We are getting the same argument again that it is discriminatory to require language proficiency for the Irish language broadcaster, which is absolutely ridiculous. It erases the many people across Ireland who are from overseas, who have learned the language and who are now fluent. They are able to provide a learners' perspective, if that is what is wanted here. That is what we are talking about. TG4 has a mandate to promote the Irish language. Nobody is suggesting preserving its ability to do its business as Gaeilge compromises those who are not Irish language speakers from watching what it is putting out there.

This year during the by-election, I had the privilege of travelling around the Gaeltacht in the west of Ireland. I now work with a native Irish speaker and I have worked with native Irish speakers in the past. I can tell you that TG4 wants and needs to do its business in Irish. That is absolutely clear, right through to the audience council, but it will not be able to do that if this legislation passes.

Nothing of what the Minister of State has said deals with the challenges arising here. We might not see anybody come through who does not have the right level of proficiency in this first round but dropping it from 15 to ten might ultimately bring it to that point. Government will have these council meetings, operations and interactions run with the need for the facilitation of translation and interpretation of documents, meetings and everything it is doing for its business. The Minister of State's suggestion that maintaining the operations being run in Irish is exclusionary is ridiculous. I am not an Irish language speaker and I watch TG4. I consume Irish language media. None of that is compromised by the organisation maintaining its ability to do its business in Irish. That is what is quite shocking here.

I want to correct something. I mentioned the board of RTÉ in relation to amendment No. 6 but I was, of course, speaking about the council. I apologise for any confusion there.

Going back to TG4 and amendment No. 7, it is absolutely shocking that this legislation proposes to do this. We know it is not what TG4 and the Irish language community want, and it is very sad that we are rowing back on that facility to protect and preserve our language in this legislation rather than continuing to bolster it further into our public institutions and law.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I see the argument Deputy Gibney is making but there is a fair point in the alternative in terms of the way it is presented in the Bill at present. For example, if we were to follow the Deputy's approach, it would mean somebody who is not proficient in the Irish language would not be able to be a member of the audience council. As I said, there are many people who watch TG4 as it stands.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: They can still watch it.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: They can continue to watch TG4.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Of course, they can continue to watch TG4-----

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: That is not what the audience council is. It does not need to be representative-----

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: -----and we want them to but were we to accept the amendment, they would not be able to take part in the audience council. They would be legislatively prohibited from taking part in it. I do not think that is appropriate either.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: It has been appropriate until now.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: The legislation does not prohibit all 15 being proficient in Irish but it requires that at least ten must be.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: It fundamentally changes the way it does its business.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: It provides the opportunity for somebody who is not yet proficient. Somebody, for example, who is on the journey of learning Irish but is not yet proficient, who is keen and who feels they have a contribution to make to the TG4 audience council; people whom TG4 is assisting on their journey in becoming proficient in the language.

The Deputy's amendment would prohibit them from being able to contribute to the audience council, even if they really wished to do so and had exceptional ideas to bring to the audience council. That would be the effect of the Deputy's amendment. I take her other point, and we fully expect nothing other than TG4 conducting its business in Irish. However, we think it is fair to provide this.

Looking back at my previous constituency colleague, Joe McHugh, for example, who was appointed Minister of State with responsibility for the Gaeltacht, to much criticism at the time. However, his particular journey became one of the best examples of how one could learn Irish and how this learning can be accessible. He also went on to publish a book on his experience.

We should ensure the audience council is open and accessible to everyone of all perspectives. If somebody has something of value they can contribute to that audience council, but they have not yet become proficient in Gaeilge, we should not be prohibiting them from making that contribution and being a part of it.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Erin McGreehan): Did Deputy Gibney want to come back in?

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: No.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Erin McGreehan): Apologies, I thought because it was grouped that we could bring the Deputy back in.

Amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 58; Níl, 79; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Bacik, Ivana.	Aird, William.	
Boyd Barrett, Richard.	Ardagh, Catherine.	
Brady, John.	Boland, Grace.	
Buckley, Pat.	Brabazon, Tom.	
Byrne, Joanna.	Brennan, Brian.	
Carthy, Matt.	Brennan, Shay.	
Clarke, Sorca.	Brophy, Colm.	
Collins, Michael.	Browne, James.	
Conway-Walsh, Rose.	Burke, Colm.	
Cronin, Réada.	Burke, Peter.	
Crowe, Seán.	Butterly, Paula.	
Cummins, Jen.	Buttimer, Jerry.	
Devine, Máire.	Byrne, Malcolm.	

Donnelly, Paul.	Cahill, Michael.	
Ellis, Dessie.	Callaghan, Catherine.	
Ennis, Daniel.	Calleary, Dara.	
Farrelly, Aidan.	Canney, Seán.	
Farrell, Mairéad.	Carrigy, Micheál.	
Gannon, Gary.	Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	
Gibney, Sinéad.	Chambers, Jack.	
Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	
Gould, Thomas.	Clendennen, John.	
Graves, Ann.	Collins, Niall.	
Guirke, Johnny.	Connolly, John.	
Hayes, Eoin.	Cooney, Joe.	
Healy, Seamus.	Crowe, Cathal.	
Hearne, Rory.	Cummins, John.	
Kenny, Martin.	Currie, Emer.	
Kerrane, Claire.	Daly, Martin.	
Lawlor, George.	Dempsey, Aisling.	
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	Devlin, Cormac.	
McGettigan, Donna.	Dillon, Alan.	
Murphy, Paul.	Dolan, Albert.	
Mythen, Johnny.	Dooley, Timmy.	
Nash, Ged.	Fleming, Sean.	
Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	Foley, Norma.	
Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	
O'Callaghan, Cian.	Geoghegan, James.	
O'Donoghue, Richard.	Grealish, Noel.	
O'Donoghue, Robert.	Harkin, Marian.	
O'Gorman, Roderic.	Heneghan, Barry.	
O'Hara, Louis.	Heydon, Martin.	
O'Reilly, Louise.	Higgins, Emer.	
O'Rourke, Darren.	Keogh, Keira.	
Ó Broin, Eoin.	Kyne, Seán.	
Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	Lahart, John.	
Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	Lawless, James.	
Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	Lowry, Michael.	
Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	McAuliffe, Paul.	
Quaide, Liam.	McCarthy, Noel.	
Quinlivan, Maurice.	McConalogue, Charlie.	
Rice, Pádraig.	McCormack, Tony.	
Sheehan, Conor.	McEntee, Helen.	
Smith, Duncan.	McGrath, Séamus.	
Stanley, Brian.	McGreehan, Erin.	
Tóibín, Peadar.	Moran, Kevin Boxer.	
Wall, Mark.	Moynihan, Aindrias.	
Ward, Mark.	Moynihan, Michael.	
	Moynihan, Shane.	
	Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	
	Murphy, Michael.	

	Naughton, Hildegard.	
	Neville, Joe.	
	O'Brien, Darragh.	
	O'Callaghan, Jim.	
	O'Connell, Maeve.	
	O'Connor, James.	
	O'Donnell, Kieran.	
	O'Meara, Ryan.	
	O'Shea, John Paul.	
	O'Sullivan, Christopher.	
	O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	
	Ó Muirí, Naoise.	
	Roche, Peter.	
	Scanlon, Eamon.	
	Smith, Brendan.	
	Timmins, Edward.	
	Troy, Robert.	
	Ward, Barry.	

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Joanna Byrne and Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh; Níl, Deputies Emer Currie and Paul McAuliffe.

Amendment declared lost.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I move amendment No. 6:

In page 34, line 11, to delete “inclusion of members” and substitute “inclusion of at least 3 members in the case of the audience council of RTÉ”.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: I move amendment No. 7:

In page 34, line 12, to delete “at least 10 members” and substitute “all members”.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: I move amendment No. 8:

In page 38, between lines 1 and 2, to insert the following:

“Insertion of new section 105A into Principal Act

41.

The Principal Act is amended by the insertion of the following section after section 105:

“Duties of a Corporation to ensure revenue supports sustainable employment

105A. A corporation shall support sustainable employment where its revenue is used to fund productions, performances and commissions, including by ensuring—

- (a) that no revenue is used to fund the production of content by artificial intelligence;
- (b) full compliance with the Copyright and Related Rights Act 2000 and the Directive (EU) 2019/790 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 April 2019;
- (c) performers, writers, composers, artists or other workers are not required to sign away their rights to future residual payments for their work, or to agree to a so-called ‘buy-out’ contract, as a precondition of work;
- (d) that the principle of equal pay for equal work is upheld;
- (e) the publication of and adherence to objective criteria for determining employment status and for using contracts of service, which abide by both the judgement of the Supreme Court in the case of the Revenue Commissioners and Karshan (Midlands) Ltd t/a Dominos’ Pizza on 20th October 2023 and the Code of Practice on Determining Employment Status.”.”.

This amendment relates to the rights of creative workers and attempts to enshrine in law the principle that additional criteria and safeguards should be included with any money that goes towards production. On Committee Stage, the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, outlined that he agreed with all that was being proposed but said that he could not agree to the amendment as he believed it replicated existing legal requirements. The truth is that the existing requirements have been ignored or not enforced. Whether in relation to buy-out contracts for copyright, bogus self-employment or equal pay for equal work, they have been ignored. That is why the amendment was proposed. With the additional focus on workers' rights and conditions this week, it is a shame the Government still has its head buried in the sand.

The Minister also objected to prohibiting the use of RTÉ funding for the production of content through the use of artificial intelligence - a measure he seemed to agree with - on the basis that the amendment could be interpreted as including the use of AI as a research tool. The wording regarding the production of content by AI was very clear but we were open to changing the wording if the Minister had a better suggestion that would make the intent clearer. With artists gathering in Leinster House this evening to speak about this issue and in light of the Dáil's unanimous vote in July that no public money should be spent on AI-generated content that undermines artistic content, it would be better for us to work together on a workable wording for this Bill rather than simply dismissing the amendment. I urge the Ministers to reconsider and to use the Seanad debates as another opportunity to address this issue.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I strongly support this amendment. It relates to a later amendment of my own, which proposes the deletion of the section requiring 40% of all revenues that go to RTÉ to be spent on production outsourced to the independent sector. The amendment requires that employment rights and workers' rights be properly upheld, that the use of buy-out contracts for actors and performers be avoided, and that public money not be used for that.

I do not know what assurances the Government is giving but I do not credit them. I will tell the Minister of State why. I have just come from a meeting of the Committee on Budgetary Oversight where representatives of Irish Equity, SIPTU and film crew were pointing out what

happens if you try to assert your rights in the Irish film sector, as they have been doing for about a decade. We are now going to insist that 40% of revenue that goes to RTÉ be spent on productions outsourced to this sector. The Bill explicitly mentions section 481. Companies that are in receipt of what is now €177 million in tax relief are now also going to get 40% of RTÉ's revenues. The people who work in that sector, which is funded by section 481 tax relief, are in this building as we speak and they are saying that their rights are being trampled on. They have been saying that for a decade.

This Bill is about the governance of RTÉ. We have heard about excessive salaries and all of that stuff. That is true. We want the Comptroller and Auditor General to look at that. However, does the Minister of State know what nobody is scrutinising? It is the private companies RTÉ's money is now going to go to. This Bill requires that 40% of all the money that goes to RTÉ be given to private companies that are subject to no scrutiny at all. This well thought-out amendment proposed by Sinn Féin proposes that we at least put some conditions on that. My own amendment goes further and says that we should not be doing this. This is essentially a mandatory requirement to hollow out RTÉ and to outsource productions to the private sector, over which there is no scrutiny. In responding to the governance scandals and excessive salaries in RTÉ and saying that we need more oversight, why would we insist that most production be outsourced to a sector where there is no oversight? It is bonkers. They can do what they like.

What the actors and performers were saying in the Houses again today is that, in this sector, you are blacklisted if you do not accept a buy-out contract. Under EU law, you have a right to royalties from the future exploitation of your work in film or whatever. If you do not accept a contract that buys you out of those entitlements and rights, you do not get the job, you are blacklisted and you will not work again. It is similar for film crew who insist that their service to the industry be recognised. For example, you might say that you have been working as film crew for the same producer, a producer who is getting all of this public money, for 20 years and insist that your service to the industry be recognised. However, these producers refuse to recognise that service. They hide behind the DACs set up in respect of all of these independent productions. That allows them to say that you were employed by one DAC, which does not exist any more, and that neither they nor any new DAC has any responsibility to you whatsoever. They will say they do not have an employment relationship with you and that, if you dare assert your rights, you will not work again. Some of the people who were here today said that, since they first came to these Houses and brought these issues to the attention of an Oireachtas committee, they have not worked. These are people who worked in the industry for 20, 30 or 40 years.

Blacklisting is rampant in this sector, which this Bill insists will get 40% of all RTÉ's revenues. That is absolutely unacceptable. This amendment at least tries to put some conditions on it. It says that there can be no use of buy-out contracts. Every single contract given to actors and performers in this country requires them to give away their rights to future revenues. Most of the revenue that is generated from these productions comes from downstream revenues.

A film or drama does not make revenue while it is being produced. It makes revenue down the line. However, the people who are in the film are being asked to sign away that entitlement and the Government is doing nothing. In fact, it is now going to give *carte blanche* to those

companies to have even more public money but not guarantee the rights of actors not to have to work under these contracts. That is in sharp contrast with every other jurisdiction. In Britain, they do not have to sign buy-out contracts. Even in the United States, they do not have to sign buy-out contracts. In many of the countries in Europe, they do not have to sign buy-out contracts. The situation is similar for crew, or the below-the-line workers, as they rather insultingly call them. Their service is recognised. In the Irish film industry, however, your service is not recognised. I am against that.

The Sinn Féin amendment is at least trying to say that there should be some conditionality on this money going to this sector, but in reality, we should not be insisting on what is essentially the backdoor privatisation of RTÉ to the benefit of producers who will then trample on the rights of actors, performers and film crew.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank the Deputies. I will reiterate what the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, said on Committee Stage about our clear expectation that State bodies comply fully with all applicable law, whether it be employment, copyright, social protection, tax law or any relevant case law. This includes the principle of equal pay for equal work as set out in the employment equality Acts and the protections for rights holders set out in the Copyright and Related Rights Act 2000. We also expect State bodies to comply with all relevant guidance, including the code of practice on determining employment status published by the Revenue Commissioners, the Department of Social Protection and the Workplace Relations Commission; the code of practice for the governance of State bodies; and any other guidelines issued by regulatory bodies, such as Coimisiún na Meán, and, likewise, for every other independent body and company as well, which are equally subject to the law in the same way.

In the context of the Deputies' amendment, it is important to note that the most recent iteration of the code of practice on determining employment status contains a five-step framework included in the Karshan judgment, which provides a decision-making model to determine the employment status of workers.

I am conscious that artificial intelligence is a new area presenting both challenges and opportunities for the media and creative sectors. In this context, I acknowledge the work done by Deputies Ó Snodaigh and Joanna Byrne in highlighting the massive challenge AI can present to our creative sectors.

From an AI transparency perspective, we have introduced regulation at EU level, which I would expect RTÉ and TG4 to fully comply with. Article 50 of the AI Act, which came into force in August of this year, sets clear transparency requirements, including a requirement on a provider such as RTÉ or TG4 to disclose if an AI system has been used to generate or manipulate text that is published with the purpose of informing the public on matters of public interest.

The supervisory responsibilities in this area as they relate to the media sector have been assigned to Coimisiún na Meán as the independent regulator. The Deputies have proposed that no revenue should be used by RTÉ or TG4 to fund the production of content using artificial intelligence. I recognise that this builds on the Dáil motion on the impact of AI on creative workers, proposed by Deputy Ó Snodaigh, which was passed this summer. This would be quite a wide-ranging provision to include in Irish law at this stage of the development and

deployment of AI, particularly in the absence of accompanying guidance and consideration of the degree to which AI could be used to assist in creative or journalistic work funded or undertaken by RTÉ and TG4.

Given where we are in terms of policy development on artificial intelligence, it would be premature to introduce a measure of this nature, though I understand the intention and the concern the Deputies have for the rights and position of creative artists in this context. As the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, set out on Committee Stage, ultimately this amendment cannot be accepted, not only for the uncertainty regarding AI but also because it replicates many of the legal requirements that apply to RTÉ, TG4 and other public bodies.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The companies are not complying with the law. They are not complying with the EU copyright directive, which relates to buy-out contracts. They are not complying with the law when it comes to the fixed-term workers legislation. Not a single worker in the Irish film industry has a contract of indefinite duration. That is after approximately €5 billion has gone into the industry. Do I trust them with AI? If they are not vindicating those rights, I absolutely do not.

Amendment put and declared lost.

An Ceann Comhairle: Amendments Nos. 9 to 12, inclusive, are related and may be discussed together.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I move amendment No. 9:

In page 48, to delete lines 28 to 38, in page 49 to delete lines 1 to 41, and in page 50, to delete lines 1 to 38.

This amendment follows directly from the previous point. I will elaborate. This amendment deletes the section. The Broadcasting Act contains a figure for the amount of revenue that has to go to the independent account. I think the relevant figure is €40 million. That amount would go up to 40%, as far as I understand. We are hardwiring that into the public funding for RTÉ. In fact, it is not 40%. Some 25% must go to the independent sector. One quarter of all the money that goes to RTÉ does not actually go to RTÉ but to the independent sector for outsourcing to private companies.

The Government's amending legislation also refers to section 481. I will repeat that it is €177 million and rising. It went from €122 million in 2024 to €177 million last year. It is rising all the time.

Do not get me wrong, I am for funding the Irish film industry, but it is conditional on quality employment and training. There is no quality employment and training. The actors and performers are having their royalties, which used to be known as residuals, effectively stolen from them. There is no other way to describe it. They are forced to sign contracts whereby they sign away their rights to future residuals for ten years. Actors and performers would normally get a small cheque every time a production they were in aired again. They do not get them any longer because they have to sign them away. If they do not sign them away, they will not be in the movie. That is the way it works. Our committee heard testimony recently, for the umpteenth time, saying that is the case.

Similarly, we have film crew who have worked for the same producer companies to which the Minister of State now wants to give an even higher percentage of our RTÉ money. Those companies refuse to acknowledge an employment relationship with people they have employed again and again over periods of 20, 30 and 40 years. The clock goes back to zero for people who have worked. Imagine every single day the workers came in here and were told they were only employed for a day, and that if they were to say anything, they would not be employed the next day. That is how it is in the film industry. We would not accept that anywhere else. Why do we accept it in the film industry?

We are insisting on that 40% of RTÉ money. What we are doing is replacing proper jobs in RTÉ with no jobs and giving the money to film producers who deny their relationship with the employees, and who rob the actors and performers of their future rights to residuals. I do not believe we should do that. No oversight mechanisms are included anywhere in this legislation to prevent that from happening. There has been no serious enforcement despite the Committee on Budgetary Oversight producing a report on section 481 recommending a whole series of actions. Representatives of the trade unions came in to say that all the bits that suit the producers have been activated and that all the bits that would help the workers have not. That is what is happening. Workers, as usual, lose out. Public money is subsidising an abuse of workers' rights. I do not think that public money should be used in that way.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I will speak to amendments Nos. 10 to 12, inclusive, which are grouped alongside this amendment. We have taken a slightly different approach. We recognise that promises have been made to the independent sector, the commercial sector, regarding the 25% level of funding but we would like to see Coimisiún na Meán having the discretion to go above or below that. We have introduced that in amendment No. 10. It would allow the commission to meaningfully react to the financial situation and public service remit of RTÉ when deciding to alter the percentage in the independent productions account. We have seen such uncertainty in RTÉ funding. We need to ensure that if circumstances outside its control mean that RTÉ cannot meet its financial obligations or execute its strategy that the media regulator can assess those situations with regard to ring-fencing one quarter of its budget.

With amendments Nos. 11 and 12, we are trying to include reporting on staff wages and collective bargaining for workers' rights in the reporting of independent commissions from RTÉ.

As Deputy Boyd Barrett has just noted, with this shift away from State-provided employment in this sector, we are seeing all of this being pushed towards the commercial sector, which is how it should be described as opposed to the independent sector. We are seeing an erosion of workers' rights as a result of that.

RTÉ has assured me it follows through the public service mandate in the commissioning process, but we know the same does not happen with workers' rights. That is a reality. Broadcasting is already a precarious sector in which many people have incredibly precarious working conditions and very little access to the workers' rights they would have in other public or State-funded bodies. This is essentially what amendments Nos. 10 to 12, inclusive, seek to achieve, while still recognising that the 25% commissioning level has been worked through, that Coimisiún na Meán should be able to put that in place, if necessary, and should also be able to react to the financial circumstances of our State broadcaster, if required.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Amendment No. 9 proposed by Deputy Boyd Barrett would remove all of the proposed changes to the RTE independent programmes account set out in the Bill. In addition, it would remove the proposed requirement on TG4 to publish an annual report on its commissioning of productions from the independent sector. As the Deputy will be aware, section 116 of the Broadcasting Act 2009 currently provides that RTE shall pay a fixed index-linked sum into the independent programmes account. For 2026, this sum was €49.1 million. The independent programmes account was first introduced through the Broadcasting Authority (Amendment) Act 1993.

An Ceann Comhairle: As the time has for the debate has elapsed, I am now obliged to put the question, "That Fourth Stage is hereby agreed and the Bill is hereby passed." Is that agreed?

Deputies: Not agreed.

Question put: "That Fourth Stage is hereby completed; and the Bill is hereby passed."

The Dáil divided: Tá, 133; Níl, 3; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Healy, Seamus.	
Bacik, Ivana.	Stanley, Brian.	
Boland, Grace.		
Brabazon, Tom.		
Brady, John.		
Brennan, Brian.		
Brennan, Shay.		
Brophy, Colm.		
Browne, James.		
Buckley, Pat.		
Burke, Colm.		
Butterly, Paula.		
Buttimer, Jerry.		
Byrne, Joanna.		
Byrne, Malcolm.		
Cahill, Michael.		
Callaghan, Catherine.		
Calleary, Dara.		
Canney, Seán.		
Carrigy, Micheál.		
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.		
Carthy, Matt.		
Clarke, Sorca.		
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.		
Clendennen, John.		
Collins, Michael.		
Collins, Niall.		
Connolly, John.		
Conway-Walsh, Rose.		

Cooney, Joe.		
Cronin, Réada.		
Crowe, Cathal.		
Crowe, Seán.		
Cummins, Jen.		
Cummins, John.		
Currie, Emer.		
Daly, Martin.		
Dempsey, Aisling.		
Devine, Máire.		
Devlin, Cormac.		
Dillon, Alan.		
Doherty, Pearse.		
Dolan, Albert.		
Donnelly, Paul.		
Dooley, Timmy.		
Ellis, Dessie.		
Ennis, Daniel.		
Farrelly, Aidan.		
Farrell, Mairéad.		
Fitzmaurice, Michael.		
Fleming, Sean.		
Foley, Norma.		
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.		
Gannon, Gary.		
Geoghegan, James.		
Gibney, Sinéad.		
Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.		
Gould, Thomas.		
Graves, Ann.		
Grealish, Noel.		
Guirke, Johnny.		
Harkin, Marian.		
Hayes, Eoin.		
Hearne, Rory.		
Heneghan, Barry.		
Heydon, Martin.		
Higgins, Emer.		
Kenny, Martin.		
Keogh, Keira.		
Kerrane, Claire.		
Kyne, Seán.		
Lahart, John.		
Lawless, James.		
Lawlor, George.		
Lowry, Michael.		
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.		
McAuliffe, Paul.		

McCarthy, Noel.		
McConalogue, Charlie.		
McCormack, Tony.		
McEntee, Helen.		
McGettigan, Donna.		
McGrath, Séamus.		
McGreehan, Erin.		
Moran, Kevin Boxer.		
Moynihan, Aindrias.		
Moynihan, Michael.		
Moynihan, Shane.		
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.		
Murphy, Michael.		
Mythen, Johnny.		
Nash, Ged.		
Naughton, Hildegard.		
Neville, Joe.		
Newsome Drennan, Natasha.		
Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.		
O'Brien, Darragh.		
O'Callaghan, Cian.		
O'Callaghan, Jim.		
O'Connell, Maeve.		
O'Connor, James.		
O'Donnell, Kieran.		
O'Donoghue, Richard.		
O'Donoghue, Robert.		
O'Gorman, Roderic.		
O'Hara, Louis.		
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Reilly, Louise.		
O'Rourke, Darren.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Broin, Eoin.		
Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Ó Murchú, Ruairí.		
Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.		
Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.		
Quaide, Liam.		
Quinlivan, Maurice.		
Rice, Pádraig.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Sheehan, Conor.		
Smith, Brendan.		

Smith, Duncan.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Tóibín, Peadar.		
Troy, Robert.		
Wall, Mark.		
Ward, Barry.		
Ward, Mark.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Emer Currie and Paul McAuliffe; Níl, Deputies Richard Boyd Barrett and Seamus Healy.

Question declared carried.

6 o'clock

Employment Equality and Institutional Burials (Amendment) Bill 2026: Committee and Remaining Stages

SECTION 1

Deputy Mark Wall: I move amendment No. 1:

In page 3, between lines 22 and 23, to insert the following:

"(3) The Institutional Burials Act 2022 and *Part 3* may be cited together as the Institutional Burials Acts 2022 and 2026 and shall be construed together as one Act."

Section 1 does not provide a collective construction for the Institutional Burials Act 2022 in Part 3 of this Bill. This matters because section 4 of this Bill does not consist of insertions into or amendments to the 2022 Act. It is a stand-alone provision yet it uses terms from the 2022 Act without defining them. We are raising this because providing a collective citation and construction means that terms such as "director", "eligible family member" and "objection" have the meaning provided for in the 2022 Act.

Minister for Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Norma Foley): I thank Deputy Wall for this amendment. While I appreciate the intention behind the amendment, I am not in a position to accept it. The amendments to the 2022 Act contained in section 3 of this Bill are textual amendments to the existing Institutional Burials Act 2022 and, therefore, those amendments are automatically construed with that Act. If the amendments are enacted, they will form part of the 2022 Act, rather than provisions establishing a new stand-alone Act. The transitional provision set out in section 4 will only have temporary application for first cousins who have already made an application to the identification programme currently under way in Tuam.

This section does not rely on any term defined in the 2022 Act, except the definition of "Identification Programme", which is also defined in this legislation. Accordingly, the amendment is not necessary.

An Ceann Comhairle: Does the Deputy wish to press the amendment?

Deputy Mark Wall: No.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Section 1 agreed to.

SECTION 2

Deputy Mark Wall: I move amendment No. 2:

In page 6, between lines 8 and 9, to insert the following:

“(9F) Where the Minister -

(a) ceases to publish information or a relevant statement under subsection (9B)(b),

(b) ceases to continue to publish relevant information and applicable statements under subsection (9D)(b), or

(c) ceases to make available relevant information under subsection (9E)(b), the Minister shall as soon as reasonably practicable thereafter lay a statement before each House of the Oireachtas setting out his or her reasons for so doing.”.

Under subsection (9E)(b) the Minister can stop publishing certain information with no criteria and with no reason. The amendment simply requires the stated reasons and that notice should be laid before the House.

Deputy Norma Foley: I thank the Deputy for the amendment. Regrettably, however, I will not be accepting the amendment. The reason being that a report that would be removed from the public side of the portal would be where a person has been directly or indirectly identified by the publication of the report. In such circumstances, it would not be appropriate for me to lay a statement before the Houses of the Oireachtas as this has the potential to bring further attention to the person or to their personal data that this Part of the Bill seeks to protect. While I understand the principle of transparency the Deputy is trying to highlight with this amendment, the unintended consequences would not be in the best interests of the persons whose personal data or identity had been inadvertently published.

An Ceann Comhairle: Does the Deputy wish to respond?

Deputy Mark Wall: No. I am happy with that.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Deputy Mark Wall: I move amendment No. 3:

In page 6, line 21, to delete “information referred to paragraphs (a) and (b)” and substitute “information referred to in paragraphs (a) and (b)”.

This is a technical amendment and I just ask the Minister to respond.

Deputy Norma Foley: I agree to it.

Amendment agreed to.

Section 2, as amended, agreed to.

NEW SECTION

Deputy Mark Wall: I move amendment No. 4:

In page 6, between lines 28 and 29, to insert the following:

“Interpretation (*Part 3*)

3. In this Part, “Act of 2022” means the Institutional Burials Act 2022.”.

An Ceann Comhairle: Amendments Nos. 4 and 7, which are related, will be discussed together.

Deputy Norma Foley: I thank the Deputy for bringing forward the amendments. I am happy to accept the amendments, which are technical in nature and improve the drafting clarity of the Bill. As the Bill was restructured into separate Parts and sections during drafting, an interpretation provision that was intended to apply more broadly came to apply only to section 4. These amendments insert a new interpretation provision at the start of Part 3 from the defining Act, the Institutional Burials Act 2022. For the purposes of that Part, these amendments also amend section 4(6) to remove a reference to the definition of the Act of 2022. This will ensure consistency and clarity in the operation of Part 3 and I am happy and to support the amendments.

Amendment agreed to.

Section 3 agreed to.

SECTION 4

Deputy Mark Wall: I move amendment No. 5:

In page 7, to delete lines 12 to 14 and substitute the following:

“(ii) an appeal was made against that determination and that determination was confirmed on appeal, or

(iii) an appeal was made against that determination and was withdrawn before a decision was made.”.

Section 4 is a transitional provision dealing with the status of family members of a deceased person who have made applications before the law is changed by this Bill but the section does not cover all scenarios. In particular, section 4(1)(c) deals with cases where a family member has applied and has not either appealed against a refusal or has appealed and lost. It does not cover the case of someone who simply withdrew the appeal knowing that the law as it then stood was against them. The amendment inserts a provision to cover this.

Deputy Norma Foley: I thank the Deputy for bringing forward the amendment and I am happy to accept the amendment, which is technical in nature and improves the clarity of the Bill. The amendment provides for an additional circumstance that may have occurred in relation to a determination and appeal to be included as part of the transitional arrangements. In this regard, it explicitly ensures that if a first cousin has appealed a determination by the director but withdrew that appeal before the determination was confirmed they could also reapply. This approach reflects the policy intention that first cousins who withdrew an appeal before it was determined should not be precluded from participating in an identification programme. I am happy to support the amendment. I thank the Deputy.

Amendment agreed to.

Deputy Mark Wall: I move amendment No. 6:

In page 7, between lines 18 and 19, to insert the following:

“(3) Where, on the coming into operation of *section 3* -

(a) an application has been made under section 48 of the Act of 2022 by a person referred to in *subsection (1)(a)* in respect of which a determination has not been made, or

(b) an appeal has been made under section 81 of that Act by such a person in respect of which a decision has not been made, the application or appeal (as the case may be) shall be determined or decided in accordance with the Act of 2022 as amended by *section 3*.”.

This amendment covers another scenario under transitional provisions cases in hand. It clarifies that where an application was made but not determined, or an appeal was made but not decided, then the case should be dealt with under the law as amended.

Deputy Norma Foley: I thank the Deputy for tabling the amendment. While I appreciate the intent behind it, I am not in a position to accept the amendment. If this legislation is enacted the amended provisions will apply to any applications or appeals, including those that may have been received but have yet to be determined. The amendment is, therefore, not necessary but I thank the Deputy for his consideration of the provisions.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Deputy Mark Wall: I move amendment No. 7:

In page 8, to delete lines 1 to 3 and substitute the following:

“(6) In this section, “Identification Programme” has the same meaning as it has in the Act of 2022.”.

Amendment agreed to.

Section 4, as amended, agreed to.

Title agreed to.

Bill reported with amendment, received for final consideration and passed.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 6.17 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 6.26 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 6.17 p.m. and resumed at 6.26 p.m.

Home Heating Oil Costs: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

— approximately 700,000 households across the State depend on home heating oil to keep their homes warm, with many families facing unprecedented financial pressure as winter approaches; and

— the cost of filling a home heating oil tank has increased by more than €700 since the beginning of 2026;

further notes that:

— in the hours after the Budget was announced, wholesale home heating oil prices increased by €100 for a fill, with a further increase projected;

— households now face bills of over €1,600 on a 1,000-litre fill of home heating oil;

— despite these extraordinary increases, Budget 2027 delivered a reduction of just €43 on a 1,000-litre fill of home heating oil;

— increases over recent days demonstrate how quickly the Government's inadequate €43 reduction has been wiped out;

— Sinn Féin has consistently called for the removal of carbon tax from home heating oil, including through legislation brought before the Dáil, to deliver immediate and meaningful reductions in household heating costs;

— Budget 2027 also failed to introduce any further reduction in petrol and diesel prices, leaving workers and families facing continued high transport costs, and changes in the fuel allowance have actually left recipients worse off; and

— despite the strength of the State's finances, the Government has failed to deliver sufficient immediate relief to households struggling to afford the basic necessity of heating their homes; and

calls on the Government to immediately remove all carbon tax from home heating oil, delivering a meaningful reduction in costs for the approximately 700,000 households dependent on it.

As winter approaches, workers and families will be forced to pay more now to keep their homes warm. This Government's response in the budget to rising prices is a token gesture and bears no relation to the bills landing on kitchen tables.

The Government is out of touch with what the people are saying. It is not listening. These are people who are paying these bills and the Government is removed from the reality of their everyday lives. It defends a tax on home heating oil that is ripping people off and then it expects people to be grateful to it because it delivered a pathetic reduction of €43.

So many people are working every hour they can. They are cutting back wherever they can and they still find that the money simply does not stretch far enough. They are telling the Government plainly that they cannot cope but it is not listening.

Before Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael vote against cutting their bills once again, they should listen to what people are actually saying to them. A person from west Limerick contacted me to say that they work full time. They take on extra shifts and work the weekends also. They cannot afford to turn on the oil to heat their water. They describe taking cold showers and then getting into a cold bed. They are working all week, including the weekends, and are still unable to afford the basic comforts in their own home. What is the Minister of State's answer to that person?

It is not just him. Another person told me about the previous winter, when they and their partner ran out of home heating oil. Between them, they had just €8 per day to live on. Refilling the tank was out of the question. They huddled together on the couch and in bed, wearing layers of clothing to keep warm. They used an electric heater for half an hour before bed and they could not afford to leave it on any longer than that. They now live with their partner's parents. They are trying to save enough money to move out - that is another challenge - but the cost of living keeps on pushing them further away. They are unable to afford warmth in the home they had or to save for the home they want.

One woman told me that last October, she got 500 litres of kerosene and it cost her €505. Today, the suppliers in her area are charging her €800 for the same amount. She has half a tank left, she tells me, and she will not be refilling it for the foreseeable future. Another person who came to me told me they are buying oil 100 litres at a time. They are carrying the drums from the station down to their home and filling the tank themselves because they cannot afford it any other way. Another reported paying €1,600 for 1,000 litres just recently.

Behind every one of those bills in those households are real people who are trying to make money stretch across food, rent, the mortgage, going to work and keeping the lights on. That is a challenge that so many people have and now, it is the fear of the oil running out. These people need meaningful relief from this Government. A pathetic €43 reduction on 1,000 litres of home heating oil comes nowhere near meeting the pressure they are under.

The Government keeps pointing to global events but they do not absolve the Minister of State and his Cabinet colleagues of their responsibility. The Government cannot control every movement in international oil prices - we get that - but it can control the tax it charges the people of Ireland to heat their homes. That is on the Government. That is the Government's decision, so it should own it.

Irish workers and families deserve better than this. For many families, filling the tank is one of the biggest expenses they will have this winter. People are saving for months. They are cutting back on all their spending, dipping into savings and borrowing money. They do whatever they can. More than 700,000 households rely on home heating oil and they do not need Government lectures. What they need is no more Government excuses. They need lower

prices and that is why Sinn Féin is once again calling on the Government to completely remove the carbon tax from home heating oil. That is why we are bringing this motion again before the Dáil and why every TD in this House should support it.

This is the ninth occasion that Sinn Féin has brought forward this proposal to cut the cost of home heating oil - nine opportunities to help households, nine opportunities to reduce their bills and nine opportunities to stand up for workers and families. Every TD has a choice tonight. They can stand over a policy that has already been overtaken by rising prices or they can support meaningful action. They can support more Government spin or support workers and their families struggling to heat their homes. They cannot blame international crises on the vote they cast in this Chamber.

I am calling on all TDs from all parties to send a clear message. When the Irish people who elect them to this House need them to step up, they have a duty to act. When people are struggling, TDs have a duty to do what is right, which is backing Sinn Féin's motion. Scrap the carbon tax from home heating oil and put workers and families first.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Last week was really hard for people. People had been holding out on getting oil since the spring, expecting that something would happen in the budget that would allow them to get a fill of oil, to be able to put the heating back on and to live a good quality of life in their homes. Not being able to put on the heating is not conducive to a good quality of life. Straight after the budget was announced, I got loads of messages asking what was happening with the home heating oil and the carbon tax. The Government had bigged it up so much that people were expecting something that would actually make a difference in their lives but the reality was that there was nothing, tada, faic. That was the message from the Government last week. That was the message to people across the west of Ireland who have been relying on home heating oil and who have not been able to get a fill of a tank. These are people who have no oil left and have no ability to heat their homes.

When we saw the prices increase, we got another swathe of messages. One man contacted me saying, "I was waiting too. Then, I looked and it is the same price or higher everywhere. Might hold off another week or two and see." That man should not have to hold off another week or two. He should be able to heat his home. He should be able to put a fill of oil into his tank and heat his home. It should not be the case that he cannot afford to do that because the Government has decided to keep a tax on the oil he is trying to buy to heat his home. The Minister of State has the opportunity today to change that by backing this motion to cut the carbon tax fully on home heating oil and to make people's lives easier by enabling them to put oil in their tanks and heat their homes.

Deputy Thomas Gould: A man contacted me today. It cost him €1,400 to put 800 litres of oil into his tank. That is not even a full fill but that is all he could manage. This is an ordinary person who, as members of the Government say, gets up early in the morning to go to work. He cannot even afford to fill his tank with oil because of the carbon tax. If that carbon tax was removed, as Pearse Doherty suggested, he could have filled his tank. That would have made a real difference to him. This man is angry like so many other people who are doing everything they can and who are working every hour God sends and yet this Government is taxing them out of existence. These people are looking for help but the budget last week did not deliver that. Pearse Doherty is trying to deliver help.

We cannot sort everything out but for those 750,000 people who rely on home heating oil and who are looking for support, this would make a real difference to their lives. I think of pensioners in their homes. I know pensioners living alone and widows getting their sons or daughters to dip their tanks to see if they can fill it or half fill it.

Is the Government so out of touch with ordinary people that it will not support them? Why will the Government not support ordinary workers, families, pensioners and people with disabilities? Who is pulling the strings behind the scenes? Ordinary people and families need help and the Government is not delivering for them.

There will be protests this winter because as prices go up, people will get more angry and frustrated and they are looking at this Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Government and saying that it has broken every promise to them. Where are the energy credits? Where is the tax on the profits of the big energy companies? Where are the cuts to the carbon tax that it should have delivered but did not deliver? Once again, this Government forgets about ordinary, hard-working people who get up early.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: Last week's budget was a Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael one designed with the interests of the elites and wealthy in mind. It was anti-worker, anti-rural and anti-young people. It will do nothing to bring costs down and protect households from the cost-of-living crisis. It will do nothing to alleviate the burden on households that do not have alternatives but yet have been punished by successive carbon tax increases from successive Governments. These are the people in rural Ireland who have to use their cars to go to work, to pick up their kids from school and go about their daily lives and who have to rely on home heating oil to keep their home warm through the winter months. Families have seen the cost of oil skyrocket by hundreds of euro and all year we have been telling the Government that it needed to intervene. We brought forward nine separate proposals to the Dáil to remove the carbon tax from home heating oil but the Government did nothing. It sat on its hands while people struggled. Days before the budget, Simon Harris said that help was on its way, and what did people get? A measly €43, even though prices have gone up by €700 this year alone and now by another €150 since the budget. It is gone before you even get it.

Today with this motion, the Government has an opportunity to do the right thing and stand up for households who are being fleeced left, right and centre and to offer them real support, to remove the carbon tax completely from home heating oil and to deliver the maximum possible reduction to households at a time of soaring prices. It is the right thing to do because these prices affect all 700,000 households that rely on home heating oil but they are felt the most by the most vulnerable in society. One woman described to me how she is dreading this winter because of the high cost of home heating oil. Another old-age pensioner told me that she simply will not be able to keep her house warm because of the current prices this winter and that is the reality people are living right now.

Being able to heat your home is one of the most basic of essentials that everybody needs, yet this Government has only offered up half measures and that is because of the political choices it has made. It prioritises the big energy companies, vulture funds, developers and landlords over vulnerable people who need to heat their homes. Nobody should be going cold in a country that has billions of euro of surplus and in a wealthy country such as ours. Do the right thing, support this motion and remove the carbon tax.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: It should not be news to the Minister of State that families across the State are struggling to keep their heads above water. On his watch, record numbers of households have fallen into arrears on their electricity bills. Now, the winter is here and pensioners and families are terrified of the cost of heating their homes. The most common question in rural Ireland these days is, "Have you dipped your tank and how long more is it going to last?" People waited and waited for this budget and they did not get what should have been done in the budget. The Government has turned its back on the people and people in rural Ireland certainly know that.

Since January, the cost 1,000 litres of home heating oil has soared by over €700 but the Government has given back a measly €43. Nobody can afford to fill their tank in the first place, so it is even less than that. It is an absolute insult to the households already at breaking point and totally wiped out by further price increases since budget day.

In rural counties like Mayo, home heating oil is not a luxury. Families have no alternative. People cannot simply switch to another source of heat this winter. Instead of backing Sinn Féin's motion this evening, the Government amendment delivers another slap in the face. The Government tells people it will keep the situation under review and protect those most vulnerable. The Government is not protecting the most vulnerable because the people I meet every day are extremely vulnerable.

If people cannot heat their home, they are, due for that mere reason, vulnerable.

The time for reviews is long gone. Shall I forward the Minister for Finance the emails and calls my office is receiving from pensioners afraid to turn on their heating and from families facing the prospect of freezing in their own homes? The budget was the Government's opportunity to act. On this side of the House, we are often accused of not coming up with solutions. We have gone to the Government eight times to give it the solution as to what needs to be done here. This is the ninth time. It is never too late to do the right thing. This is the ninth time and the Government needs to act.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I was on my way home the week before last when I pulled into a filling station and there was a couple there with five-gallon drums in the boot of their car that they were about to fill with heating oil. I was chatting to one of them and he said he hoped after the budget they could fill the tank properly and they would be getting a bit of relief. There is no relief; that is the reality. What was taken away in the budget was already gone before they got it. That is the reality for the vast majority of people. This goes across every aspect of heating, fuel for the car and electricity.

All the measures that the Government had an opportunity to something about, it did nothing on. Home heating oil is a particularly sore one for people who live in rural areas in poorer houses and who have no option other than to heat their home using home heating oil. That is the only option they have and yet the Government chose to do little or nothing about it, suggesting that leaving the carbon tax on home heating oil means they will be able to get a grant to insulate their home. They cannot afford to get a grant to insulate their home because they cannot afford to pay a mortgage or pay to get their children through college and everything else that is going through the roof as well.

There is a total disconnect with the Government when it comes to all these issues. While it can point to Putin, Trump and the wars as causing all of this, suggesting it is international factors and all that, the reality is that the Government has an opportunity to do something about it here in this country and it does not do it. Instead, it turns its back on people and points to somewhere else. That is no good to the people out there who have five-gallon drums in their boot of the car to fill with home heating oil. It is no good talking to them about Trump and Putin; that will not solve the problem for them. The Government had the opportunity to solve it by taking away the carbon tax. It is already making bumper profits on the VAT, excise and other duties on home heating oil, other fuel, electricity and everything else. The ordinary people out there who have to go with five-gallon drums in the boot of their car are not data centres and cannot get cheap energy. That is the difference. The Government looks after one sector of society and it lets down the others, the ordinary people out there who go and vote for Government Members and put them in here. Nobody in data centres is putting them in here, but yet they are the ones they look after.

What is wrong? Where is the disconnect? What is the ideology that means the Government looks after people who do not actually elect it? What is happening here? Why do we have this society where people trust democracy and democracy fails them? It is not just in Ireland but in many countries across Europe that there is this neoliberal style of economics where the well-connected are looked after and the ordinary people are told to suck it up. That is basically what is happening and it is wrong. That is why we brought this motion. The Government needs to take away the carbon tax and do something to help the ordinary people. This is one opportunity to do it but there are many others that should be taken as well.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: A few days before the budget, the finance Minister was asked about the crippling cost of energy and he said that help was on the way. Why anyone would want to listen to him is a mystery to me, but there you go; some people do. Following that message, people waited because they thought the Government would be as good as its word, that help was on the way. People waited, not to fill their tanks because they do not do that any more, but for the half-fill they thought they could afford. They waited for the help that they thought was coming from the budget and they got crumbs. What they got will be quickly swallowed up, as the Minister of State knows. Everybody is calling the budget the gone-before-you-get-it budget and this is a very good example of that.

We in Sinn Féin have offered solutions. This is the ninth time the Government will get a chance to help families struggling to keep their homes warm. Will it ignore this one as well? Its amendment tells me that it will, and shamefully so. People who use home heating oil to heat their homes know that winter is coming and they are panicked. I want to be very clear with the Minister of State. We have talked this evening about the people bringing drums to fill them in the garage. Their neighbours see that and they know what that means. Does the Minister of State have any idea of the crippling shame of people making an announcement to their community that they cannot afford to heat their home? It not their fault. It is not because they are not working hard. Jesus Christ, they are getting up early. It is not because they are not paying tax; they are paying plenty of tax. It is not because they are not doing the right thing. They are doing the right thing but they have a government that is against them at every single turn.

The people in my constituency have a very clear message for the Government and they were not shy in telling me about it. They need help to heat their homes. They need the carbon tax taken off home heating oil so that they have a chance to be warm in their homes this winter. That should not be an aspiration. This is Ireland in 2026. People should be able to heat their homes.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Robert Troy): I move amendment No. 1:

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

"recognises:

- that the Government remains deeply concerned about the ongoing conflict in the Middle East and Gulf, and recognises that de-escalation will have the single greatest impact on reducing prices on home heating oil and other oil-based fuel products;
- that the Government continues to monitor increased energy prices that are felt across Europe and the globe;
- that the Government fully understands the pressures on households that have arisen due to rising home heating costs, and has continuously acted to allay these pressures;
- successive Budgets have provided targeted support to help households with cost-of-living pressures, and re-affirms that energy affordability is a priority for the Government;
- that the Government remains committed to decarbonising our society, increasing investment in renewable energy sources and recycling carbon tax revenues to protect those most vulnerable to fuel poverty through targeted welfare interventions;
- Ireland's obligations in respect of European Union (EU) legislation pertaining to fossil fuel taxation, and that abolition of the carbon tax may result in Ireland losing a derogation under European law;
- that the Government continues to use the funding from carbon tax to help farmers, businesses and households with increased energy prices;
- that the Government continues to monitor the economic impacts carefully, having already taken actions to mitigate energy increases, and provide certainty for families and businesses against the backdrop of global instability; and
- that the Government continues to invest in retrofitting, boiler scrappage, wind energy and many other measures to help alleviate costs in the medium-term;

notes that:

- the Government has delivered one of the largest support packages in the EU per head capita, amounting to over €1.7 billion in supports from March 2026 to June 2027, to assist households and businesses;
- excise reductions have been extended until February 2027, retaining a 30 cent reduction in diesel and 25 cent reduction in petrol;

— Budget 2026 and 2027 have expanded fuel allowance payments to 50,000 more households, and increased the weekly payment;

— the trajectory of the carbon tax has been altered to ease pressure on households, with the rate on home heating oil and gas reduced and paused for the lifetime of the Government; and

— a series of new schemes have been developed to help people make the transition away from fossil fuels; and

confirms that the Government will continue to:

— keep the situation under review in the time ahead; and

— respond in a way that protects those most vulnerable to fuel poverty."

Like many of my colleagues across this Chamber and in government, I hold weekly clinics in my constituency. I engage with family, friends and supporters. Every week we sit down with people from across communities. We listen to their concerns, the challenges they face and the issues impacting their daily lives. Like my colleagues across government, I do everything I can to help them. Any insinuation otherwise is completely false. One of my colleagues opposite gave an example of people working overtime. Because of budgetary changes introduced last week, people doing overtime will now earn more before going into the higher tax bracket. That was a change made last week, one that put more money back into individuals' pockets.

I do not know who pulls strings in the party opposite us in terms of running that party, but there is no one pulling strings in terms of who is running the Government, which was democratically elected by the will of the people a number of years ago. I acknowledge that the cost of living is the number one issue affecting people across the country. I and my colleagues hear it and we understand the pressures families are facing. These pressures are being driven by circumstances far beyond the Government's control, with households across Europe and beyond facing similar challenges. That is something that was not really acknowledged in the last 20 minutes, or at most maybe once or twice. The most effective way to bring about an end to current pressures on fuel prices is through a de-escalation of the conflict in the Middle East. The disruption to shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, through which approximately 20% of the world's oil supply normally passes, has profound consequences for international energy markets. Ireland continues to use its diplomatic influence wherever possible but we must recognise our influence alone cannot resolve this crisis.

However, that does not mean the Government cannot or will not respond. We have responded and we will continue to do so. As I have said before, the Government will respond to those most in need when they need it most. We have a strong record of doing so during Brexit, the Covid pandemic, inflationary prices following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the challenges we face today. Supporting people does not mean that we can afford to be reckless. We have a responsibility not only to those who need help today, but also to those who may need help tomorrow. That is why the balance we sought to strike in budget 2027 responded to the challenges of today while protecting our ability to respond to the crisis of tomorrow. It is because of the prudent management of our economy over the last number of years that we have

full employment, we are running budget surpluses and we were in a position to announce a number of interventions last week.

Let us consider where some other European countries stand at the moment. In France the government is proposing tax increases. In Spain the government fell because of its inability to introduce the taxation measures it needed to introduce. Because of the prudent management of our economy, we have been able to make interventions.

Budget 2027 introduced targeted measures to provide relief to households and businesses facing rising costs. They included increasing the fuel allowance by 13% to €43 per week and expanding eligibility criteria to approximately 50,000 additional households, bringing the total coverage to more than 465,000 households nationwide.

A total of 465,000 households are getting over €1,200 a year towards their fuel costs. We are extending the 9% VAT rate on gas and electricity until 2030, continuing temporary reductions in fuel excise duties with the overall cost of these interventions expected to exceed €1 billion, enhancing social protection supports and extending the €400 income tax disregard for households involved in microgeneration until the end of 2028. These measures will not eliminate every pressure households face and we have never suggested otherwise but they will provide some relief, particularly to those in most need. Importantly, they have been designed to provide that support in a sustainable way, ensuring we retain the capacity to intervene again if necessary.

Of course, the Opposition will argue that we should have spent more, done more and taxed more but the decisions we make today have a direct impact on our ability to respond tomorrow and, as a Government, we do not have the luxury of ignoring that. We must consider both. What confuses me about Sinn Féin's position is its fundamental contradiction. Sinn Féin supports many of the measures funded by carbon tax. It regularly raises concerns about waiting lists for schemes supported by that revenue yet it opposes the very tax that helps fund them. The reality is that these schemes are popular because they provide meaningful long-term supports to households to help families reduce their energy bills, improve the energy efficiency of their homes and become less dependent on volatile international energy markets.

Every cent of carbon tax revenue is allocated towards measures supporting households, communities and our transition to a more sustainable economy. These include the fuel allowance, SEAI retrofitting grants, agriculture environmental schemes, such as ACRES, peatland rehabilitation, greenways, electric vehicle supports and the just transition fund for the midlands. Between 2020 and 2026, €4.2 billion in carbon tax revenue was made available for these purposes. In 2026 alone, €566 million was made available for retrofitting, just transition and climate measures; €350 million was made available for targeted social protection supports, including the fuel allowance; €173 million was made available for sustainable agriculture, principally schemes such as ACRES; and €20 million was made available for transport measures, including greenways and electric vehicle infrastructure.

As of October 2026, 287,000 households have qualified for home energy improvements since 2019. Of the most vulnerable, such as people who are dependent on the fuel allowance, 39,500 households were fully funded for deep retrofit grants. These are households that have had their windows replaced, have had their walls pumped with insulation and have had new energy-efficient heating grades installed. These households will not be left to the volatility of

the energy markets in terms of keeping their energy costs at a sustainable level in the future. This is making a permanent difference to the households that benefit and we want to do more in that regard. We want to continue to support families to make the change and make the improvements. It is fully funded for people in receipt of fuel allowance. Quite frequently in parliamentary questions, for example, Sinn Féin asks when people can access these schemes but today it is talking about taking away part of the funding that would help fund these schemes, which would mean a longer waiting list for people to access these schemes.

Research using the ESRI switch model has demonstrated that low-income households particularly benefit from social protection measures funded by carbon tax. These are not simply one-off interventions. They are investments that help address the underlying causes of high energy costs, so I put a simple question to Sinn Féin. How does it propose to continue funding these measures if it abolishes the very tax that helps pay for them? It cannot support the expenditure while ignoring the revenue that makes it possible. Sinn Féin cannot have it both ways.

We must be honest about what is possible both in providing immediate relief and in protecting households over the longer term. Any changes must be carefully calibrated. That is precisely what this Government has sought to do. We have listened and we have responded. The carbon tax on home heating oil has been reduced to 2023 levels, delivering savings to households. Furthermore, by maintaining this reduced rate for the lifetime of this Government, those savings will continue into the longer term. No government can fully shield every household from the consequences of international crises but this Government has consistently demonstrated its willingness to intervene, provide supports and protect those who need it the most. We will continue to do so while ensuring that the decisions we make today do not compromise our ability to respond tomorrow. The Government proposes to adopt the counter-motion that we have tabled.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I really wish the people who voted for Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael got to hear the Minister of State's speech in full because they would see a Government that is out of touch and completely detached from the realities people are going through. Without an ounce of shame, the Minister of State talks about France and talks about everything apart from the issues that are being discussed around kitchen tables across Ireland tonight, namely, how are we going to make ends meet? When Sinn Féin brought forward motion after motion and proposal after proposal that would give workers and families a break, people heard Simon Harris tell them that help was on the way. What help actually came for people relying on home heating oil? We got a €43 reduction that does not even match the increase that we have seen since the budget announcement itself. The Minister tried to defend that and to point to people in my constituency and, to his shame, in his constituency who have no option but to use home heating oil to keep their house warm and heat their water. They have no other option and yet the Government has sat by and watched their costs soar with zero support or empathy for them.

What is the Government's answer? It is that carbon tax funds other things. For most people with whom I speak, the carbon tax is simply a mechanism that makes their lives more difficult because they do not get any of the support the Minister of State outlined that could be funded through other mechanisms just as easily. They could be funded through the Government actually the banks or taking away the sweetheart deals it has given to developers but instead it expects people in rural communities to pay more and more carbon tax to fund retrofitting for

somebody else and to fund somebody else's purchase of a brand new electric vehicle. It is unfair.

I really hope the Minister of State's speech circulates far and wide because if it does, I think people will realise Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael no longer have their backs. They are not even in touch with the realities of the Irish people.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I want the Minister of State to hear directly from my constituents in Meath East. A number of them have been in contact with me. One pensioner said, "It's so expensive that you have to spare the oil and just put up with the cold, which the elderly shouldn't have to do. We paid taxes all our lives and at the later years of our lives, we should at least be able to afford food and heat." Another said, "I went to work at 16 years of age until I was in my 60s always paying my taxes but now I have cancer so I'm unable to work. I get €250 a week to pay for food, heating, rent and all other bills and ESB. Where does the Government think I can live on that? Let one Minister live for on that money for a week." Another said, "The poor haulage companies need help. Look at the haulage company closing in Cork. We all need help with diesel to get to work. It is just so much pressure. We're avoiding filling up the oil tank and switching on the heating. We both work." Another said, "We need the energy credits brought back please" while another said "Home heating oil is more expensive today than it was the day of the budget - €43 off a fill gone before you get it. They need to scrap the carbon tax on home heating oil." Another said, "For 500 litres, €809" while the last one said, "Kerosene has gone up so much since the day of the budget. We buy by the can. I'm on invalidity pension and going on old age pension. I'm excluded from the disability payment." The Minister of State needs to listen to these people and support the Sinn Féin motion.

7 o'clock

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: Tá daoine ar fud Chill Dara Theas ag braith ar Kerosene, agus tá siad ag breathnú chun cinn le himní agus éadóchas agus geimhreadh fuar, crua amach rompu. Ní dhearna beartas an Rialtais maidir le kerosene aon difríocht do na teaghlaigh mar tá na praghsanna tar éis ardú ó fógraíodh é ar lá na cáinainéise. I mo Dháilcheantar féin, tá an praghas ar líne ola méadaithe 80% ó mhí Dheireadh Fómhair na bliana seo caite. Teastaíonn ón Rialtas beart a dhéanamh de réir briathair agus gach cáin a bhaint de kerosene go dtí go bhfeicimid athrú suntasach ar an staid geopholaitiúil.

Government failed to deliver meaningful relief for families dependent on home heating oil in this year's budget. The meagre €43 reduction delivered on the price of 1,000 litres of oil was completely wiped out following its announcement as wholesale prices increased by €150 in the days after the budget. So much for the Tánaiste's promise that help is on the way. This means that families across my constituency of Kildare South, along with another 700,000 households nationwide continue to struggle.

The average price of 1,000 litres of oil in Kildare has increased by 80% since this time last year, with families now paying €1,641 for a fill. That is shocking. A warm home should not be a luxury, yet that increasingly seems to be the situation this Government is presiding over. Older people, disabled people and people in rural areas are being disproportionately affected by the Government's frugality. If people are to be able to heat their homes, prices have to come down. It is as simple as that. It is within the Government's gift to make that happen by

temporarily removing all tax from kerosene. This is the right thing to do to support families who are increasingly feeling abandoned and hopeless heading into winter.

Deputy Johnny Guirke: The Minister of State talks about prudent management. One would not think Fianna Fáil was the party that brought this country to its knees and broke the country. It is very hard to listen to the Minister of State.

There are real and serious pressures facing households across County Meath and, indeed, the State as we approach winter. Many people in County Meath and across rural Ireland are hit with higher costs than normal. People are fed up with increased fuel costs every time they go to the pump or get a fill of oil. Oil is how many families heat their homes, older people keep warm during the winter months, and parents ensure their children are living in a warm and comfortable environment. Many people in rural communities have little choice but to depend on home-heating oil. They cannot simply change their heating system overnight, nor can they avoid the ever-increasing costs when their tank runs dry.

The Minister of State will have heard the term "heat or eat" used in this Chamber when discussing families struggling with mortgage repayments, rent, food costs, electricity bills and childcare costs. When the price of a fill of home-heating oil rises by hundreds of euro, that money must be taken from somewhere else in the household budget, with a fill of oil now at €1,685 in County Meath.

So many families are forced to make very hard decisions that no one should have to make. They are forced to choose carefully if they should heat their home or put food on the table. This is a result of the Government's political choices. The elderly, the sick, and people with disabilities need heat all year round, not just in the winter months. Sinn Féin's proposal would help thousands of struggling families. People are being pushed further into debt and poverty.

Budget 2027 has gone down like a lead balloon. We all know that this was not a budget for workers. If the Minister of State asks the workers, they will tell him that themselves tomorrow when they are on the picket lines. His party colleagues and councillors throughout the country are saying in council chambers that this was not a budget for people who get up early in the morning.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I do not think any of us doubt the Minister of State engages with constituents, the same as the rest of us, but there has to be some level of embarrassment in relation to Simon Harris saying help is on the way. There is a €43 reduction on a 1,000-litre fill. What are we talking about? In County Louth, the average cost of 1,000 litres of oil is €1,653.05, while the lowest is €1,610 and the highest is €1,680. I accept this has been caused by geopolitical circumstances and by the madness of Donald Trump and genocidal Israel. I have no doubt the Government will do what it can in relation to playing its part and hoping that sense is brought to that part of the world. There are limits to what can be done there but there are definite limits to what the Government has done to help people who have absolutely no choice but to use home-heating oil. Who needs heat more? We are talking about older people and those with disabilities who feel really let down. For those who can avail of the cost-of-disability payment, it is going to work out at less than a tenner a week.

I accept the Government cannot do everything but it could have done a hell of a lot more for people who are under severe pressure. We deal with people who are suffering as a result of the housing crisis. We are talking about those impacted by the failures in health. Regarding the cost-of-living crisis, the Government has failed miserably. The Minister of State talked about taxation. For those on lower incomes, what are we talking about? They may be €5 a week better off. The Government did not look at any of our proposals, like reducing the USC on the first €40,000, putting real money into the pockets of people who are under severe pressure.

I ask that the Minister of State go back to his Government partners and have a bit of sense. This is the ninth time we have put it to the Government, namely, to cut all carbon taxes and excise on home-heating oil so we can give people a small break which they deserve. These are people who work every day of the week and who are under severe pressure. None of this is good enough.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: As I rise, we have an enormous set of interconnected problems in Ireland. Our country is an island, and is almost entirely reliant on foreign energy in order to function. The vast majority of that energy is still in the form of fossil fuels. So many households are still dependent on fossil fuels, and there is no better example of that than home-heating oil. As a result of this reliance on imports, we are in a position of extreme energy insecurity, which puts us at the mercy of international oil market pricing.

The surge in oil prices arising from geopolitical events has been drastic and catastrophic for many families, households and businesses. An energy crisis has now contributed to what is a major cost-of-living crisis. PwC recently estimated that home-heating oil costs have surged a stunning 175% since August of 2020, one of the largest percentage increases in an essential item cost in Ireland in the past six years. Given that more than 40% of households are reliant on home-heating oil, the cost pressure is particularly acute and felt widely across society.

We have a full-blown energy crisis and an accelerating cost-of-living crisis and all of that is happening against the backdrop of climate breakdown brought about by the release of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere from the combustion of fossil fuels. Extreme weather patterns, the collapse of ecosystems, rising sea levels, a degradation of our air, water and soil can all be traced back to a fossil fuel and petroleum dependence in our global economy, which has only grown since the 19th century.

In the context of these three interconnected crises, it is incumbent upon us as the people's representatives to understand these problems and put forward clear and compelling solutions. In that context, the Social Democrats are clear: we must initiate a strong and just climate transition that relieves the financial pressures on people and households, charts a secure renewable energy future for our country, which simultaneously secures us more energy security, and do so in a way that protects our environment. This is not an easy thing to do. It requires thoughtfulness and vision - a politics that does not ignore the problems facing households and or succumb to the anger and ignorance which climate denialism breeds but charts a bold vision for the future.

Over the past number of months, we have put forward several solutions. We appreciate tax increases and fuel excises should be temporarily suspended, and we have voted to support that. However, it is worth noting that, despite tax cuts brought in by the Government last week,

home-heating oil is still more expensive now than it was then. The measures we in the Social Democrats have proposed have sought to materially support households struggling the most with the costs imposed by the energy crisis, with a targeted €400 energy credit for households earning less than €70,000 per year.

Dealing with a tripartite crisis like this requires more than just one intervention, and so we wanted to go further. Responding to a crisis like this requires targeted supports on social protection payments, or extensions to home benefits packages, and proper increases to social protection payments to support our most vulnerable, like the elderly living alone or those with disabilities and their family. It also requires urgent and important infrastructural work and expanding access to solar energy, like our Solar for All plan. It requires applying the brakes to rampant profiteering through restoring temporary extra taxation measures on energy companies.

It requires using the full power of the State, through its investment arms, to properly expand renewable energy, including offshore wind, without delay. It requires actively promoting active travel and public transport, not increasing public transport fares as the Government has. Most importantly, it requires us to choose those who are struggling over investors who want to boost their own coffers. In short, responding to a crisis like this one requires leadership, and today we see very little of that on the Government benches. It is a Government at sea in a world of chaos, with no clear plan on how to weather the storm other than by giving people flimsy umbrellas. I do not have confidence today that the current Government can navigate these crises. It will continue to do what it has always done: make minor adjustments, spin on the airwaves and retreat into its privilege. However, one day someone will have to pick up the pieces of this ineptitude. We will decry the day we had a chance to act boldly, yet there was no courage on the benches opposite.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Barry Heneghan): Sula mbogfaimid ar aghaidh, I welcome the Clontarf senior team to the Gallery. Glaoim ar an Teachta Hearne.

Deputy Rory Hearne: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward the motion and keeping the focus on this because the Government completely failed to address the cost-of-living crisis in the recent budget. It has fundamentally failed to address it because it does not change the situation whereby Bord Gáis customers have seen a €177 annual increase in their electricity bills, a €140 annual increase to their gas bills and 322,000 households in arrears. The cost of home heating oil is up 60% in the past year. For so many people who are really struggling, this budget simply did not come near addressing the scale of the cost-of-living crisis. What the budget said to me was that this is a Government that is utterly out of touch with what ordinary people are going through in this country. Anyone going to the shops to buy food has seen the massive increase in prices in recent years, particularly children, older people, lone parents and disabled people. These groups are really struggling, and the budget took no serious account of the fact that prices have increased year after year, with no fundamental addressing of this situation whereby people are choosing between eating and heating. I raise again what the Minister, Deputy Calleary, said earlier this year when we brought forward the motion on the cost-of-disability payment. He said people were using emotive language and criticised organisations and representatives of disabled groups for saying that people were choosing between eating and heating when, in fact, they could just go down to the social welfare office

to see whether they could get some support from people. It was completely out of touch with the reality that people are facing.

What this Government has not addressed are fundamental issues like why houses are cold, why they are damp and why the heating is not covering the costs. It is, of course, because the Government has failed to deliver on matters such as retrofitting. Fundamentally, when we look at local authorities, the area for which the Government is responsible, only 2,671 local authority homes were retrofitted in 2025, an increase of just 37 houses on 2024. The Local Authority Performance Indicator Report 2025 unsurprisingly found that the Government's target of retrofitting 36,500 homes by 2030 is unlikely to be met. The very thing the Government could and should be doing, that is, investing in retrofitting homes, it is not doing.

We have put forward, as my colleagues said, numerous solutions in our alternative budget. We laid out very clearly what the Government could have done, such as providing an energy credit of €400 to households with an income below €70,000, postponing all fuel excise increases until March 2027, incorporating easy-install heat pumps into the existing heat pump system grant scheme, increasing the weekly fuel allowance, increasing household benefits and ring-fencing funding to increase the number of social homes being retrofitted, but it is not doing it. Fundamentally, it is not changing things and it is not addressing why electricity prices are so high. The fundamental thing it has failed to do is put a windfall tax on energy companies. Again, something it has not answered is why it will not put a windfall tax on energy companies. Why is it refusing to do that?

Tomorrow we will see public sector workers in the biggest strike we have seen in many decades. Public sector workers are absolutely right to go on strike because the Government has ignored them. It has completely failed ordinary workers. In the midst of a cost-of-living crisis, nurses, teachers, SNAs, and civil and public servants cannot afford to pay for the basics. Most fundamentally, there are nurses and teachers who cannot afford to buy a home. Today's figure for the median price of a home is €400,000, ten times the salary of a civil or public sector worker on €40,000. They cannot afford the rent. Thousands of public sector workers are going home after a day's work or a night shift to their childhood box room because they cannot afford the most basic thing, buying or renting a home of their own. Thousands more are struggling with the basic costs of groceries or energy, but the Government does not take them seriously. It has completely failed to value the essential work that public sector workers do. We in the Social Democrats completely back these workers. They should have decent pay and conditions so that they can buy or rent a home affordably and cover the cost of living. We believe in decent public services being delivered by decently paid public sector workers, and that is why we will be on the pickets tomorrow.

It is important that this strike is going ahead because it is sending a message very clearly to the Government that public sector workers will not be taken for fools. They will not just be ignored, failed and not listened to by this Government. They are taking this action because the reality is people are choosing between eating and heating, between paying the rent and putting food on the table, and 200,000 children in this country are living in poverty. However, Ministers and the Government have made commitment after commitment to address the issue of child poverty, but it just one more broken promise. It can be added to the list of affordable childcare, affordable housing and actually addressing these issues properly. The Government completely fails to do it, despite having billions in a budget surplus and having the potential to

raise significant amounts from a windfall tax and from wealth taxes. It could actually invest in fundamentally changing this country so that we would not have the poverty we have and so that older people would not be going to sleep at night pulling the blankets up. I was contacted by one of my constituents in Beaumont just this morning. A man in his late 80s-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere): Thanks, Deputy.

Deputy Rory Hearne: -----said he was quoted more than €1,000 for 600 litres of home heating oil. He is afraid to turn on the heating as we approach the winter months. This is a man in his 80s afraid to turn on the heating. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael talk about their great achievements in the economy, but here we have-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere): Thanks, Deputy. We are moving on.

Deputy Rory Hearne: -----someone in his 80s who cannot afford to turn on the heat.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere): The next speaker is Deputy Nash.

Deputy Ged Nash: On the elevated cost of home heating oil, as my colleague Deputy Ó Murchú mentioned earlier, in Louth this week, the average cost of filling an oil tank is just over €1,600, and it is rising. This is leading to enormous anxiety, not just across rural parts of my constituency. My constituency, as the Minister of State will know, also has Ireland's two largest towns, Drogheda and Dundalk. The reliance on kerosene to heat homes is not merely a rural phenomenon; it is also the experience of many thousands of homes in places like Drogheda and Dundalk, notwithstanding the availability of natural gas and potentially other sources of heat as well. It has been the case that large urban areas have also been depending on oil. We need to ask ourselves those questions. Why do working families feel excluded from many of the schemes the Government will rightly promote as the solution to decarbonisation and excessive reliance on fossil fuels?

We need to ask ourselves why large-scale retrofits and the technology we need to apply to every home are simply out of reach of people who would regard themselves as having decent, secure jobs, despite the supports that are available from the SEAI. I have said here and elsewhere that retrofitting is often a middle-class pursuit and beyond the reach of many people I represent. We have not tackled that challenge because there is not the energy or ambition to do so.

We have had everything from back-boiler replacement grants to small contributions to the introduction of solar and other initiatives. However, we do not have the vision and ambition that is needed at scale to finally grapple with this problem and withdraw from carbon-producing energy generation. As we have said time and again, the answer to less carbon tax is less reliance on carbon. It is that simple. It would cost money. We have resources now to be able to tackle the problems we could not tackle in the past, but what we have in money we lack in vision. This is the problem.

Some 700,000 homes are still dependent on home heating oil. We all want to see a transition to alternatives, but there are families and businesses that simply need their bills to be paid this autumn and winter to heat their homes and premises. I was looking at figures earlier and the cost of filling a home heating oil tank has increased by €700 since the beginning of the year. I have encountered, on many occasions recently, constituents who shared stories with me about placing an order, often for a half-fill of oil because they are so concerned about their ability to find the €1,600 they need to fill the tank, and said that by the time they ordered and the oil was delivered the price had moved and it only moves up. We heard earlier across the Chamber that the Tánaiste promised during Leaders' Questions two weeks ago, before the budget, that help was on the way. Help to fill a tank with oil amounted to a paltry €43 reduction on 1,000 litres. We have said time and again that the Government needs to seriously scrutinise the VAT rate on home heating oil and align it with the 9% VAT rate for gas. That would be the fair thing to do. The Government is being selective about its alleged inability to reduce that rate to 9%. It conveniently reduced, on a selective basis, the VAT rate for its friends with large-scale hospitality chains, but it cannot seem to address the issue of a lower VAT rate for households that rely on kerosene.

It was mentioned by colleagues beside me that what we require - we have routinely called for this over many years - is a targeted energy credit for 1.2 million households with a cumulative income below €80,000. It would be a €400 energy credit to assist families with rising energy and electricity costs. With the increase in wholesale gas prices in recent times, if we think electricity prices are elevated now, after Christmas and coming into January, "We ain't seen nothing yet" because there is a lag. We are far too reliant on imported gas to generate electricity and we have not met the moonshot moment famously described by then Deputy Leo Varadkar a few years ago. That moonshot moment was supposed to be the development of large-scale offshore wind generation to provide us with the energy security we need and clean energy that would ultimately see Ireland become a net exporter of energy. Again, the vision simply does not seem to be there.

The need to move to solar energy and democratise access to renewable energy, for example, by introducing plug-in solar technology, has been mentioned. It is technology that is suitable for all kinds of households. It has been done elsewhere. It is taken for granted. It is *de rigueur* in continental Europe. These opportunities are there and, as I said, we have to turbocharge retrofitting. We need a retrofitting revolution.

Like other colleagues, we understand we have to move on reducing the burden on all households this year. One way of doing that is to relax the carbon charge applied. I mentioned that the Labour Party also favours a reduction in the VAT rate on kerosene, but the best way - the very best way - to reduce carbon tax in the longer term is to reduce our reliance on carbon. It is as simple as that.

We need to focus on permanent reductions to energy costs. It will not be the first time the Minister of State has heard me say this but it is beyond me why, with all the rich data we have available, we cannot develop a targeted energy credit system. We managed to introduce and turn around a sophisticated wage subsidy scheme overnight at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic to save and protect jobs and businesses. That was a credit to the public service. We have the capacity in the public service to do this. We know who is earning what and, through the social protection system, who needs additional supports. Revenue has incredible datasets

that would allow us to target supports. We have the meter point reference number, MPRN, information and a certain amount of building energy rating, BER, information.

The energy affordability task force the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, convened still has not issued its updated report. A response I received from him in recent days suggests to me that the report made available to people involved in that task force has been out since August. They are due to come back to the Minister and he will publish it shortly. We were told it would inform the initiatives taken in the budget. I am also told there may be propositions in the report about the targeting of energy credits, but it may not be possible for it to happen until next year. Why is that the case? It is extraordinary when we are four years on from Putin's invasion of Ukraine where we saw the introduction of universal energy credits, which was not necessarily warranted. It was in many cases a waste of public funds. We know the composition of the families who need support. Why can we not get resources to them when they need it? It baffles me. It is important we do.

People made their minds up about the budget quickly. It was trailed as a workers' budget, but when the Government decided to pull the rabbit out of the hat of cutting capital gains tax and inheritance tax, and tried in a half-hearted way to make up for the two fingers given to PAYE workers last year by indexing bands this year and adding a little more on, people will make their minds up about it. Can we stop the nonsense of describing what happened in the PAYE system of moving the tax bands as anything other than indexation? It is not a tax cut. It is indexation, something that is simply taken for granted in other, well-off sophisticated European Union states. Many countries do it as a matter of routine. They index social welfare rates as well. That did not happen this year or last year. We favoured other economic sectors over PAYE workers and, in many ways, the anxieties people are experiencing now can be traced back to those mistakes made by Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil in that budget, which have made working people less able to absorb the rising energy and grocery prices they are experiencing at the moment. People have made up their minds about this budget already and this winter will be all about energy and the absence of any meaningful assistance for people, most notably the absence of energy credits, which people will really feel this year.

Ahead of the publication of the finance Bill in a couple of weeks' time and the social welfare Bill around the same time, it is important the Government reflects on that and reviews its position on targeted energy credits.

Deputy Brian Stanley: Middle- and low-income households are under pressure like never before. General inflation, according to the most recent ESRI figures, has jumped even higher than we realised over the past month. It is at an all-time high. Overall inflation does not show the full picture, of course, because the items going up are disproportionately hitting middle- and low-income households the hardest. This is due to the sharp rise in outgoings on essentials for those households. Rents in Laois have gone up between 11% and 13% in one year. Across the State, mortgages are up 10%, diesel is up over 22%, gas and electricity are up 15% to 16% and home heating oil, on which 13,500 households in Laois depend, is up in excess of 60%. Households are under serious pressure. They are all essential items. People are expressing feelings to me of being overwhelmed and stressed and unable to keep up.

Unfortunately, the budget did little for these workers and households. Analysis by Social Justice Ireland and others showed that those on the highest incomes who have the most wealth

did the best again. Workers on €40,000 gained just €3.34 when all other factors are taken into consideration. Workers, be they single or couples, on €30,000 are actually worse off when all the adjustments are taken into consideration, according to Social Justice Ireland and others.

The gap between the wealthiest and ordinary working households and workers continues to widen. The ESRI report published today underlines this. The top 10% of the wealthiest own as much as the other 90% of us. One in ten owns more than the other nine. That is how it is working now in this country. That gap continues to widen.

It is little wonder we are having strikes and protests. I will support the workers in their claim. Any percentage increase needs to be highest for those on middle and low incomes in the public sector. If it is a flat percentage across the board, it will not benefit the low-paid and middle-income workers in the public sector as much. Those workers need to get the highest lift.

In relation to energy, while we have to transition and there are SEAI grants available, if you are on the lowest income and on the fuel allowance, it is free but there is a two-year waiting list for that. For the grant assistance for other upgrades, people need to have substantial amounts of money if they want to carry out a retrofit to their home. There is a cohort of people on middle and low incomes in the middle who do not qualify for the fuel allowance or the free scheme and do not have and cannot raise the money to pay for retrofits. These working-class people need a just transition. In the case of counties Laois and Offaly, a huge number of households, higher than across the State, depend on solid fuel because of the presence of the peat industry in our two counties. There needs to be a special energy upgrade grant for those households. We should have a special energy upgrade grant for solar panels to reduce dependency on fossil fuels.

There are also needs to be a €400 winter credit - the Government ignored this in the budget - for households with a gross income below €75,000. It must be a targeted payment, not untargeted. It should be for households with incomes below €75,000 gross. The carbon tax take should be reduced to ease pressure on households, including the 13,500 households in Laois, that depend on home heating oil. The Government failed in the budget; it is essential now that it take measures to ease the burden on those households.

Deputy Seamus Healy: Some 700,000 houses depend on home heating oil to heat their homes for their families. The cost of a fill of home heating oil has increased by €700 since January. In September, home heating oil prices had increased by 58.6% compared with the same month last year. They are astronomical increases, particularly at time when families are devastated by a cost-of-living crisis. Budget 2027 last week, in the teeth of those increases, gave relief of only €43 on 1,000 litres of oil, a remarkable slap in the face for 700,000 households.

The carbon tax is another unfair tax heaped on families already reeling from the cost-of-living crisis. It should be abolished on home heating oil, together with a reduction in VAT to give real relief to families. This is all the more necessary against the backdrop of soaring electricity, gas, diesel and petrol prices. There was no relief on any of them in last week's budget, meaning we will continue to pay the highest electricity prices in Europe with no energy credits and we will face increased petrol and diesel prices from February 2027.

There is also the lack of public services. I raise again the fact that there has been no public eye care ophthalmic service in south Tipperary going into a third year. This is beyond shameful. Clonmel and Cashel have no consultant-led ophthalmology clinic, optometry clinic or nurse-led clinic. The Government and the Health Service Executive are failing the people of south Tipperary. The Government has no excuse. A vacant consultant post was a planned retirement known for years by the Health Service Executive. As a result of this failure, there is now a huge and growing waiting list stretching for up to five years for many patients. There are 2,300 children waiting, of whom 1,783 are awaiting treatment, with 541 relating to public health nurse referrals awaiting triage. Hundreds of adults, including patients with conditions like glaucoma, are also on the waiting list. This is not good enough. South Tipperary eye patients are entitled to the same quality of service as people elsewhere. It is time for the Minister to roll up her sleeves and get this service up and running immediately.

There is also huge dissatisfaction across south Tipperary in relation to Irish Water. Some 11,000 customers on the Ardfinnan regional water supply scheme were thrown into confusion - despair even - last Friday evening when a "Do not consume" notice was issued because of high levels of aluminium. Boiling will not make this water suitable to drink. This was on top of a boil water notice in place on the scheme since 7 June. A further 5,000 customers on the Tipperary town scheme have been on a boil water notice since 11 February. There is no end to the incompetence of this organisation. It can give no indication of when these problems will be solved.

Irish Water is an unaccountable quango. It has no respect for public representatives and no public offices. There must be a full debate in this Chamber on the future of Irish Water, its incompetence and its arrogance. It must be abolished. Water services must be handed back to county councils.

Deputy Brian Stanley: Hear, hear.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: On Tuesday evening last week, the Dáil voted to cut the carbon tax on home heating oil from €63.50 to €48.50 per tonne of CO₂. It was argued then that the move would save roughly €25 to €40 on a standard fill. I voted against that resolution because I believe that using climate action as a scapegoat when it is fossil fuels that are hurting families is wrong. It misleads the public as to why fuel prices are increasing and, in a cruel irony, it makes households more vulnerable to the next crisis. The Dáil passed that resolution on Tuesday. By Saturday, the cost of home heating oil had already risen by more than the cut in carbon tax. The €40 saving on a 500-litre fill was wiped out in four days by the volatility of oil prices and demand for the product.

Tonight's motion would give approximately an €80 reduction on a 500-litre fill. How long will that really last? Will it last until the Houthis hit the next oil tanker in the Red Sea, until the next drone strike on a Russian oilfield in Siberia or until President Trump has his next tantrum in the White House? It is not a question of "if" with fossil fuels; it is a question of "when". We have a huge energy affordability problem in this country. The problem is not the carbon tax; it is the oil. It is dirty, expensive and comes from a long way away. The motion before us does nothing to resolve the problem for the hundreds of thousands of households who will still pay far too much for a dirty fuel even if the carbon tax is abolished completely. Where

are the long-term solutions for these families? They will not find them in anything Sinn Féin is bringing forward tonight.

What about the Government? When we have hundreds of thousands of families who still depend on expensive home heating oil, it is so frustrating to see that the Government has only grown the budget for home retrofit by 2%. That is a mere €15 million increase in budget 2027. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, is out announcing all these extra grants. The SEAI has told us already that there has been a doubling in the number of people seeking retrofits between 2025 and 2026. Yet, all these new grants have to be paid to all these new applicants from a pot of money that has only expanded by 2%. There are going to be a lot of very disappointed households across this country in 2027 when they realise the SEAI does not have the money to help them with their retrofit.

Too many families are suffering right now from energy costs that are too high. They need real short-term support to make it through this winter and they need a long-term plan to make sure they are not in this situation again. In my view, cutting the carbon tax does neither. It is a populist move that will make the next crisis worse because we will have fewer homes insulated and fewer oil central heating systems replaced. The Green Party proposed a targeted energy credit this winter to support families through this crisis. It is what we did the last time this happened and it is the right thing to do now. The targeted energy credits we propose would more than cover the cut in carbon tax that has been called for this evening and, crucially, it would not undermine the funding base for these solutions that will safeguard our communities from the next spike in the price of kerosene. That spike in the cost of home heating oil will come irrespective of whatever this House decides to do on carbon tax.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere): We will move to the Independent Technical Group now. The first speaker is Deputy O'Donoghue.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: This country celebrated 100 years of people who fought for it which created the people who sit in this Chamber. They were supposed to be representing this country and were once known as the worker's party and the farmer's party. In April, we saw the hard-working people of Ireland go out and protest because they could see no future in the hard work they were doing and they could not survive. Tomorrow, our colleagues in Leinster House and across the country will be out protesting as well. Their ancestors fought for the freedom of this country and to protect the hard-working people of Ireland. I see what has happened in the last couple of months since April. The hard-working people of Ireland could see no future for themselves or their children and the Government failed to listen to them. The public sector will be out tomorrow on the very same thing. Some 300,000 people will be out protesting tomorrow because this Government does not listen.

This is what is wrong today. The Government has forgotten about its colleagues. It has forgotten about the hard-working people of Ireland. There is no reward for them. All the Government can do is take them to the rates commission and the courts. Now, it wants to tax the food producers of Ireland. We are already in a crisis and now it wants to tax the food producers because a judgment was made that it is a process. When spuds are taken from the ground and put into a shed for storage, it thinks it is a process. When milk is taken from the cow and put into a tank, is that a process? When the silage is taken from the field and brought

in for the cows to have, is that a process? This is what the Government represents. It no longer represents the workers of Ireland.

Deputy Michael Collins: This is a crisis situation for many people. I have said in this Chamber over the last number of weeks, especially since the budget, how 350,000 are in ESB arrears and a large number of families are in mortgage arrears. The Government did not grab that moment last week because it needed a bold budget that stood with the people. It is afraid to stand with the people. It ran along with the same bland old budget. It is the same old give a euro, take a euro, rob Peter to pay Paul scenario. That is the type of budget it ran with.

Independent Ireland was the only party and the only group sitting in this Chamber that gave a very strong and fair proposal to take carbon off production and delivery and put it on aviation. We were not saying give this, that and the other thing free. We put forward a very sensible proposal. We put that proposal forward too in the negotiations for Government and each time it was rejected because the Government seems to think that the best cash cow is the hard-working mother and father out there - beat them down, knock them out, do everything it can to take a euro out of their pocket, but do not reward the hard-working people. The Government needed a bold budget last week. It was afraid to do that. Now, we are in a crisis situation.

It has this crisis situation tomorrow where the public sector is going out, with over 300,000 people out on the streets. Who does the Government blame this time? The last time it was the farmers and the hauliers. Is it going to get the Army after people this time? Is it going to chase them off the streets because they are in a desperate situation? The last time it was the farmers and the hauliers. The Government did not listen to the ordinary mothers and fathers. It did not listen that time. They went out on the street. What is going to happen next year? The Government is so out of touch. It does not understand the pain people are going through and it is absolutely forcing people to strike tomorrow.

I heard astonishing carry-on from the Green Party today saying we should be fairer and this is what it would have done. It was a number of years in government and it did not deliver for anybody.

Deputy Peadar Kirby: According to Eurostat, Ireland is now the most expensive country in the whole of the EU for a range of different issues, including housing, electricity, health services and fuel. Ireland is the most expensive and that is not by accident. The Government is an engine of inflation. The actions the Government is taking are actually putting up the prices of goods in this country. What that means in real terms is that people's real income is falling. People see that their income is evaporating in front of their eyes because of this Government's insistence on putting up the prices of so many products.

Carbon tax is in many ways a ghost from the Green Party that existed in the previous Government. The Minister of State will remember well what happened to the Green Party. It was eviscerated in the most recent election because it refused to listen to the people in relation to carbon tax. The Government said that the objective of carbon tax is to push fuel up to a price so people move over to alternatives, but what happens if they cannot afford an alternative? What happens if they cannot take the boiler out of their home and put in another source of heating? What happens if they cannot get a bus? I am the chair of the Meath on Track campaign, which has been seeking to get a railroad into County Meath for the last 15 years.

Most people in Meath would give their right arm not to have to drive petrol or diesel cars to Dublin on a daily basis but instead get into a train to do so. The fact of the matter is that most people cannot get out of carbon taxes. The idea that this winter there will be elderly people - pensioners - who will have no alternative but home heating oil to put into their house, and the Government is going to inflict a carbon tax on them at this moment in time, is absolutely wrong.

I want to draw the dots for the Minister of State in terms of what is happening on the streets of Dublin and the rest of the country tomorrow. We had the country brought to a standstill in April by protestors with no other choice but to block roads, streets, ports and the oil refineries in this country because their money and income are evaporating. Now, 300,000 public servants will find that they have no alternative but to protest. The thing about it is that the Government showed a shocking arrogance to the protestors back in April in refusing to negotiate with them. Here we have *déjà vu*. The Government is showing a shocking arrogance again by not properly negotiating with the unions. What is happening? It is plunging this country into chaos again tomorrow with no light at the end of the tunnel in terms of what is going to happen the following week and the week afterwards.

I appeal to the Government. The price of fuel has already reached a price on the international markets so that anybody who could get out of diesel, petrol or home heating oil would be out as fast as they could only they do not have an alternative. We do not need carbon tax to nudge or push people towards an alternative when there is no alternative there. I want the Minister of State to think long and hard about the pensioners who this winter will be rationing the heat in their own homes because of the carbon tax the Government is inflicting on them.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I do not care if it is a carbon tax cut or a rebate but we have to help people who are suffering and who cannot afford the current short-term increases in fuel. However, some people come out in a rash if you mention the words "carbon tax". It is the great populist stick to hit people with. Everything is: blame the carbon tax or blame my former Green Party colleagues. The carbon tax, when it is working properly, is supposed to encourage people to change their modes, work towards cleaner and greener methods of energy and raise the money to fund other things. Unfortunately, that has not happened enough. The people who are stuck with kerosene cannot afford to heat their homes. People in social housing are not getting the retrofits they need. The money has to come from somewhere for that and I have pointed that out before. We need to give the short-term help but we also need to look at the bigger picture. I referenced that in my budget speech.

I want to focus on another element. COM(2026)502 is a European Parliament proposal for the regulation of measures strengthening Europe's cloud and artificial intelligence, AI, ecosystem, the Cloud and AI Development Act, CADA. That basically says that Europe wants to invest more in its own cloud storage, which means a lot more data centres in Europe. It means that even though we are under pressure and people's consumer prices are impacted without corresponding measures because of a reliance on data centres in this country, Europe is going to be looking for more. In my budget contribution, I said we need to spend €20 billion on grid, €10 billion on hydrogen and another €20 billion on other things. Why do we not get the European Union to fund our grid upgrade? Then we can have as many data centres as we want and we will also have affordable electricity while exporting like the Arabs are with fossil fuels at the moment.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. What politicians always need to do is nip something in the bud before it gets out of hand. In the line of home-heating oil, there was so much speculation before the budget. People had built their hopes up that 16 cent or 18 cent were going to come off it. Unfortunately, what has happened now is that a lot of people can only afford 200 litres. When you are buying 200 litres, you will probably pay 15 cent more per litre because the lorry that goes out has to be covered. That is a fact. Lorries do not travel around for nothing. Those people who are basically struggling will end up paying maybe €1.75 or €1.80 per litre because the lorry has to be covered, and they can only afford 200 litres. If you can buy 1,000 litres, you will buy it for a bit less but with the price of it at the moment, a lot of people do not have the money to buy 1,000 litres. That is why that decision should have been made early.

We hear from oil companies that there is no word on the rebate they were going to get on the 5 cent on oil. Some bit of clearance is needed there or someone needs to talk to someone.

What is worrying is that a 94-year-old woman rang me today. She said, "Michael, things are tough enough, so I will try to keep a drop of oil." She said the price of oil was cruel. She said that on top of that she got a phone call today to say that her carers would not be in tomorrow because they are going on strike. I am not blaming the carers. This is what I am saying about nipping things in the bud. The strike tomorrow should have been averted because talks should have happened and calls should have been made at the right time. No more than when things started going out of control in the line of the fuel, etc., you must nip things in the bud. It is like housing. You can give all the pay rises you want over the next few years but, at the end of the day, there is one common denominator, and that is the price of a house. Until we bring that down or make it affordable, people will constantly need more and more in pay rises.

Deputy Michael Cahill: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion on home-heating oil this evening. It is an issue that matters enormously to people in my constituency of Kerry and right across rural Ireland. As I stated previously, when we talk about energy prices in this House, we have to remember that behind every statistic is a family or an individual trying to heat their home, a person trying to get to work or a small business trying to keep its doors open and that is extremely difficult and challenging today. In Kerry, many households are particularly exposed to the cost of home-heating oil. For those families, filling an oil tank can mean a very significant once-off expense. It is very different from receiving a monthly electricity bill and, for many people, it can create a very serious cash flow challenge.

I was speaking with a constituent today. They told me that it cost them €1,700 for 1,000 litres. It is robbery, to be fair. We all know that energy bill arrears remain at historically high levels. The Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, reported earlier this year that 316,000 domestic electricity customers and 179,000 domestic gas customers were in arrears, with average debts of €492 and €207, respectively. There is no question that affordability remains a very serious issue.

We also need to be honest about what the Government can and cannot control. Energy prices are heavily influenced by international wholesale markets and geopolitical developments. We all know the State cannot determine the international price of oil or gas. What the Government can do, however, is decide how best to protect households from these pressures.

There are already very significant responses in place. We have strengthened supports for people on lower incomes, including through the fuel allowance. We have invested substantially in energy efficiency and retrofitting. These measures are very important because we should not simply be dealing with high energy bills year on year. We also need to reduce the amount of energy households need to purchase in the first place.

There are also measures taking effect in the electricity market from October. The public service obligation, PSO, level is being reduced by 66% while the CRU has reviewed network charges to limit the impact on customers. These are very practical interventions and they can make a difference to household bills.

The Government has already introduced a package of measures around taxation, energy costs, income supports and the cost-of-living crisis. Government has also looked at the evidence by insuring that whatever measures are introduced are targeted towards those experiencing the greatest pressures. For people in County Kerry who are dependent on home-heating oil, I would certainly be looking at what more measures the Government can introduce to address these pressures. We should continue to invest in retrofitting and energy efficiency because making a home warmer and more efficient provides a longer-term benefit to a family than simply responding to a price spike.

The CRU has also highlighted that suppliers have obligations to work with customers experiencing payment difficulties, including affordable repayment arrangements and protections against disconnection where customers are engaging with their supplier. There is a very big role for Government to play, a role for the regulator and one for the energy industry.

Ultimately, our objectives should be very straightforward - keeping energy affordable, protecting households from the worst effects of international price shocks and reducing our exposure to those shocks over the longer term. That is particularly important for all rural communities such as the one I represent.

I welcome the debate this evening. I look forward to seeing further measures being brought forward by Government. It must also be pointed out that home-heating oil is subject to a reduced VAT rate of 13.5% and, under European Union VAT directives, it is not eligible for the lower 9% rate as is applied to electricity or natural gas, or like the 9% for the hospitality sector. Ireland is only permitted to maintain its long-standing 13.5% rate under the historic exemption and EU rules do not allow the Government to lower it further. It is black and white and that needs to be driven home because the general public still does not understand that. They are not being told the full truth, I suppose. That is the point.

Ireland, as an island nation, is completely isolated when it comes to oil, gas and electricity, so we do need to get our act together and to act quickly.

8 o'clock

We need to start investing significant funds in offshore wind farms. The ESB is one of the biggest investors off the coast of Scotland, supplying energy to hundreds of thousands of houses. Our people can do this. We need to engage with them and start working sooner rather than later.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I am glad to have the opportunity to speak in this debate. When we talk about the cost of home heating oil, we are talking about a fundamental issue of security and comfort in people's lives. I see this anxiety first-hand when I go around County Clare each week holding advice clinics. Of course, granny's hip operation comes up and people talk about their long-standing application for social housing, but time and again, they talk about the cost of running their household. It is very sad when I call into older people's houses in places like Tuamgraney, Corofin and Kilkee and find they are colder than the street I have come in from. These people have pensions. There could be money in the bank, but they do not want to have the heating on because they are worried about the bill that will come. When people go into a supermarket they pay the bill and will know what the costs are generally. However, energy bills come with a sting for people because they arrive two months later. People fear what is ahead and whether they will be able to pay the bill. These worries are very real and they deserve a constructive, honest response from this House.

The reality that we all face is that the drivers of these oil costs are global, volatile and deeply tied to international commodity markets and the uncertainty that continues in the Middle East. As a small open economy, Ireland cannot fully insulate households from these global shifts. As we cannot control the international markets, our focus as a Government must be on what we can control, providing meaningful, targeted and sustainable relief to those people who need it most. Budget 2027 and our broader response represent a massive €1.7 billion package designed to do exactly that. We have intervened directly on the carbon tax trajectory for home heating oil by pausing the tax and locking it at 2025 rates. We have delivered a direct saving of roughly €64 on a 1,000-litre fill today. By May of next year, that saving will rise to around €80. By 2030, the rate will be halved. This measure is extremely costly but pausing the tax makes a direct intervention and a difference in people's pockets.

We are heavily focusing on the most vulnerable. There was some confusion around the fuel allowance winter heating period. To clarify for anyone worried at home, the winter heating period has not been shortened. What happened earlier this year was a temporary once-off four-week extension to help with a specific spike in costs. The core heating period remains fully intact, and we have expanded the scheme to include some 50,000 more households while increasing the weekly support. We have also extended the excise reductions on petrol and diesel until February to ease the broader pressure felt by families who have to travel to work, school and elsewhere.

Members of the public are not looking for political point-scoring or arguments in this Chamber. They want to know what the Government can do, that the Government is listening, that expenses they cannot avoid are being kept down and that there is a long-term plan, for example, retrofitting schemes. Earlier this evening, Deputy Cahill and I were in a briefing with our colleague, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, at which he outlined the extensive plans, all funded by carbon tax, for home heating systems, retrofitting, windows, doors and insulation. These are incredible schemes that so many people are availing of. Some of the schemes were oversubscribed last year. That tells us how successful they have been.

We must remain flexible because global markets remain uncertain. We must also be responsible with public funds to ensure we can weather any future economic storms. This Government's approach is about balancing immediate practical relief for families in Clare and throughout Ireland with the long-term stability that our country needs.

While all of these interventions have been well intentioned and well received in many quarters, recently a number of taxi drivers have told me they are locked out of the diesel rebate scheme. When someone gets into a taxi - I am sure the Members present will have taken taxi rides recently - there is a technology charge because people usually book taxis nowadays through an app. The minute a passenger opens that door, there is €7 or €8 on the meter to begin with. Then there is the cost of diesel or petrol in the car and the journey. Taxi journeys have become very difficult and expensive for people. Meanwhile, the Government is doing the right thing in increasing public transport. It is a very tough time for those who drive a taxi or own a taxi business. The taxi sector needs to be brought into the scheme.

The budget brought in measures to ease costs on families. It also included measures for schools, as Deputy Cahill mentioned. It is important that school capitation rates were increased. As with homes, I have walked into schools around my county where on chilly days the heat is not on. They, too, fear the energy bill. School buildings are difficult and costly to heat. The increase in capitation has been good. The education committee made a number of recommendations earlier this year, many of which have been acted, including as regards school meals. One cost that has never made sense to me is the charge for water use in schools. We give schoolchildren free lunches, books are free and there are allowances for uniforms and shoes, but schools pay for the water. That just does not make sense. It is one Department that it is paying. I know of one school that has gone into arrears of tens of thousands of euro. I do not imagine anyone is going to shut off the water to the school, realistically. To do so would be outrageous. I do not imagine a court is going to send a board of management chairperson or the principal off to prison for not paying these arrears. Who is going to collect this debt? I am not suggesting that anyone should. I am suggesting that it be written off and schools be made exempt from water charges.

Minister of State at the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Alan Dillon): I fully appreciate all the Deputies' contributions and the concerns they raised. We are living through a period of exceptional uncertainty and exceptional measures have been taken, not only by this Government but by governments across the world, in response to heightened fuel prices. As a Government, we do not control the wholesale price of oil or home heating oil, but we have acted in a very significant way to assist households with the real impacts of the current energy crisis.

The Sinn Féin Private Members' motion does not fully reflect the considerable supports which have been implemented by this Government. As the Opposition is well aware, the Government has delivered one of the largest support packages in the European Union *per capita*, with supports and tax measures costing over €1.7 billion from March 2026 to June 2027. We have also delivered a budget that will put money back into people's pockets. We have delivered a €1.3 billion income tax package, reduced the carbon tax on home heating fuels to 2023 levels and increased the fuel allowance by 30% over the past two years and expanded the eligibility criteria, providing critical support for those who need it most.

The Government has not just looked at the here and now. We have also invested in Ireland's energy security into the future. We want as many households as possible to reduce their energy bills and make their homes more comfortable to live in. The best way of insulating our economy and society from fuel price shocks is to reduce their dependence on fossil fuels. Capital expenditure of over €2 billion has delivered over 287,000 home energy updates from

2019 to the end of August this year. This includes over 39,500 fully funded upgrades for households at risk of energy poverty under the warmer homes scheme. In January this year, we expanded the reformed retrofitting scheme to ensure more households receive grants. This new measure included increased attic and wall insulation supports, an increased grant for heat pump installation and new grants for windows and doors. Almost 89,000 applications have been processed to the end of August 2026, an increase of 116% on the same period last year.

In September this year, we announced another package of enhanced renewable energy and retrofit grants. This is designed to help households and businesses reduce energy costs, lower dependence on fossil fuels and strengthen Ireland's energy security. A particular focus of the package of measures announced in September this year is ensuring that households most exposed to high energy costs benefit from the energy transition. These enhanced supports for households at risk of energy poverty, medically vulnerable customers, low-income householders and renters will help to ensure that those who need support most can access the benefits of lower energy bills. Key measures announced last September included that solar PV and batteries will be offered as standard under the fully funded warmer homes scheme.

There will be more generous grants for solar, attic and cavity insulation for certain social welfare recipients and households in receipt of the housing assistance payment, the rental accommodation scheme and the rental accommodation scheme pilot tenancies. There will be more favourable eligibility for solar PV and solar thermal. There will be fossil fuel boiler scrappage supports of over €2,000, effective immediately for energy applicants, while an enhanced support for businesses will save thousands of euro in energy costs.

The revenues raised by carbon tax also help to fund actions today that will bring benefits long after tomorrow. It is also worth noting that the carbon tax element of home heating oil will comprise around 7 cent of the total cost on current average prices, while the non-carbon component of excise duty on home heating oil is already set to zero. The Sinn Féin motion would have us believe that carbon tax is driving energy prices and that abolishing it is the panacea for the increased cost of home heating oil. We need to be realistic and honest with the people who are here in the House but also watching from afar. Ours is an island nation and we are dependent on imported fossil fuels. Of course, we need to reduce our dependency and continue to invest in energy security measures funded by carbon tax to achieve this. Sinn Féin's motion also disregards our obligations under the European emissions trading scheme, ETS2, legislation and the conditions of Ireland's derogation, which the Government has negotiated with the European Commission. I will be interested to listen to Deputy Doherty's response later in regard to the derogation and Sinn Féin's theory on it. Losing the derogation could result in Ireland having to join the European carbon pricing system for buildings, road transport and other sectors. It would reduce the funding available for our national programmes of home energy upgrades and retrofitting, investing in the electricity grid and the development of indigenous renewable energy at the required scale.

As we have done since the outset of this crisis, we will continue to keep the situation under review in the time ahead. We will continue to respond in a way that protects those most vulnerable to fuel poverty. For the reasons I have stated, I again press the Government's amendment.

Deputy Ann Graves: Sinn Féin is calling on TDs from all political parties to stand up for ordinary people, put workers and families first, and support our proposal to deliver a real and meaningful cut in the price of home heating oil. The Government's €43 reduction on 1,000 litres was wiped out by a price hike of €150 within days of the budget. The average cost of 1,000 litres of home heating oil in Dublin is now €1,631. This is a massive jump from last year's €936. This price hike is coming straight out of the pockets of workers already struggling to make ends meet. A record number of people cannot pay their energy bills. Some 320,000 people cannot afford electricity, while one in four cannot afford to pay their gas bill.

In my constituency of Dublin Fingal East, people are really struggling. An elderly man in Malahide, who unfortunately does not qualify for a fuel allowance because he has a small private pension, has not been able to afford to fill his tank in months. As we face into winter, he has no chance of heating his house properly because of the increased cost of home heating oil. He goes to bed at 6 o'clock every evening covered in blankets and with hot water bottles. It is absolutely shocking. Yesterday, despite Sinn Féin councillors' best efforts to reduce local property tax by the maximum 15% in Fingal, he is expected to pay more tax on his home because it is worth a lot more than when he bought it 65 years ago. He is asset rich, but money poor and struggling. Sinn Féin's proposal to remove carbon tax on home heating oil would reduce the cost of a 1,000 litre refill by €183. I appeal to TDs of all parties and none to stand with ordinary workers and families and to support the Sinn Féin motion and make home heating oil more affordable for those who are struggling.

I want to end by expressing solidarity with civil and public servants, who are forced onto the streets tomorrow for fair pay.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: The rising cost of home heating oil is a significant concern for households across Ireland. Heating oil is not a luxury, and when heating costs rise, low-income families, older people, those with disabilities and families with young children must decide how to divide their limited household income between heating, food, electricity, transport, crèche facilities, mortgage or rent payments, and other essential expenses. The average cost of 1,000 litres of home heating oil in September 2025 was €909. In September 2026, it was €1,444, an increase of approximately 59% in one year. This is according to RTÉ's report on the national average prices. These increases are especially difficult for households that need to purchase a large quantity of oil before winter. Living in a cold home can be particularly concerning for older people, young children and people with existing health vulnerabilities. No household should have to choose between keeping warm and meeting other basic needs. The escalating costs are also having a disproportionate effect on rural communities where alternative heating options are not available.

The minimum relief offered by the Government in the most recent budget has already been wiped out. Sinn Féin is proposing to give immediate relief to households by removing carbon tax on home heating oil. If this happens, households will see a significant reduction in their heating costs, as they could potentially save as much as €183 on a 1,000 litre refill. This would be especially helpful during the winter months, when heating demands are at their highest. This is a way of offering direct financial relief to households, leaving families with more money for essentials such as groceries, electricity, mortgage or rent payments, and other household expenses, and would help reduce the risk of fuel poverty.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: When I talked to constituents about the budget, there were two particular things they found inexplicable. Looking at it myself, there are many more things I found inexplicable. If people knew half of what kind of favourable treatment some of the higher earners, vulture funds and landlords get from the budget, it would make their heads spin, but two particular items stood out to most constituents I spoke to. The first was the energy credits. They could not understand how the Government had not learned its lesson. It had been warned by the Opposition right across the board, by every single party, and by the energy regulator that if it got rid of energy credits, people would end up in arrears. Lo and behold, record numbers of people are in arrears with their bills, and we are now facing into another winter with potentially record-breaking, absolutely back-breaking energy bills for homes, and the Government has not reintroduced energy credits.

The other one was about home heating oil. The Government did nothing on this last year and this year it is talking about €47, while people have seen increases of about €700 in some instances over the course of the last year. The change the Government has made has been completely swallowed up and then some, by the €150 increase. People feel short-changed. Many people who rely on home heating oil are among the most vulnerable and are on low incomes, with very few alternatives. The Government has delivered them very little relief.

The budget follows a pattern from last year. During the last election, Fine Gael promised to get rid of third level fees and the means test for carers and promised a limit of €200 per month for childcare. None of those things is anywhere close to being delivered. People feel short-changed and they are right to do so.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Gabhaim buíochas le achan duine a labhair ar son an rúin seo inniu. Mar a dúirt daoine, is é seo an naoú huair a bhfuil rún mar seo tugtha ós comhair na Dála ag Sinn Féin. Dúirt muid le go leor leor daoine amuigh ansin go mbeadh muid ansin gualainn le gualainn leo agus ag iarraidh ar an Rialtas an brú ollmhór a thuiscint atá ar teaghlaigh agus ar oibrithe fud fad na tíre seo, go háirithe agus iad ag iarraidh a gcuid tithe a choinneáil te agus muid ag díriú isteach ar an ngeimhreadh. Dúirt an tAire Airgeadais go dtuigeann sé. Dúirt sé go mbeadh an cuidiú ansin. Ach tá a fhios againn, seachtain i ndiaidh na cáinainéise, go bhfuil costais ola le tithe a théabh níos daoire inniu ná mar a bhí siad seachtain ó sin. Is iad sin na fíricí.

I thank everybody who supported our motion. As has been said, this is the ninth time we have brought forward this proposal to the Dáil. Nine times, and we are not going to give up.

We will not give up because we have made pledges to too many people right across the State. I have told the Minister of State their stories. I have told him the challenges that they have faced. I have told him what it means to them when they cannot put oil in their tank, how they have to stretch or what they have to go without because of the price of home-heating oil. Some 700,000 families right across the State have seen the cost of that fuel increase dramatically. It has increased by over €700.

Nine times we have brought proposals before the Dáil and finally the Minister for Finance said he got it. He promised the Irish people that he would act. He promised the Irish people that he understood it and what did the Government come forward with? A pathetic €43 cut. What an insult to people the length and breadth of this State who are struggling with keeping

their heat on and struggling with the cost of home-heating oil. In the days after the budget announcement, the price of a fill of home-heating oil went up by €150.

This Government is living on a different planet. Ministers are sitting around the Cabinet table, all well healed and all well paid. They do not understand the pressures that people are under. They have had to rise before. They did it in April when the Government did not listen and again, they are pleading with it to do the right thing. I have heard Government TDs saying that they understand the challenges that people face. Tonight is the time for them to put their money where their mouth is. Tonight is the time for them to stand up for the people who elected them to this position because we have a duty to protect those people who sent us here. Tonight, I am being their voice. I am telling the Government very clearly that it needs to act. Government needs to protect them and it should have their back. The way to do that is to do the right thing and remove carbon tax completely from home-heating oil. It needs to give people a real reduction in the cost of fuel and, by God, it can afford it. Those people have worked hard, they have built this economy and they have ensured that the taxes are there to support them now. However, time and again, Government Members show us who they really are. When it comes down to the crunch, do they support the individuals trying to heat their home? By God, they do not.

When it comes to it, there are always money, always support and always tax breaks for those at the very top. Tonight should be different. Tonight, every single TD will have to stand up and be counted. Here on these benches, those of us in Sinn Féin will have the ordinary Irish people's backs. We will never give up until they get what they deserve. What they deserve is the right thing. The Government needs to remove carbon tax from home-heating oil, give them the break they deserve and reduce the cost of home-heating oil for once and for all.

Amendment put.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is deferred until next week's division time.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 8.23 p.m. go dtí 8.47 a.m., Déardaoin, an 15 Deireadh Fómhair 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 8.23 p.m. until 8.47 a.m. on Thursday, 15 October 2026.