

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM GHNÓTHAÍ EACHTRACHA AGUS COSAINT

JOINT COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

Dé Máirt, 31 Lúnasa 2021

Tuesday, 31 August 2021

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 5 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 5 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Cathal Berry,	Catherine Ardagh,
John Brady,	Gerard P. Craughwell,
Sorca Clarke,	Joe O'Reilly,
Barry Cowen,	Diarmuid Wilson.
Gary Gannon,	
James Lawless,	
Brian Leddin,	
David Stanton.	

Teachta / Deputy Charles Flanagan sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Appointment of Special Envoys and Update on Afghanistan: Minister for Foreign Affairs and Defence

Chairman: As I have not received any apologies, I take it we have a full complement of members. I am pleased we are meeting with the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Defence, Deputy Coveney, to discuss the appointment of special envoys and receive an update on the current situation in Afghanistan. The Minister is very welcome. I also welcome from the Department of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Niall Burgess, Secretary General, and Ms Sonja Hyland, political director. I thank them for the briefing material we received in the past few weeks.

The format of the meeting is that we will first deal with the appointment of special envoys, after which we will move to questions and discussion in respect of Afghanistan. Details of the recent envoy situation caused some concern over the course of our vacation. I am pleased we have the opportunity to deal with certain issues that generated, and were the subject of, public controversy.

As time is limited, the Minister's opening statement will be brief. Before going into a questions and answers session with members of the committee, I ask the Minister to make some brief opening remarks on both subjects. I ask members to indicate, by means of the hand-raise function, if they wish to be called. I will take members, in order, by party and group. I will take a number of members' questions together before returning to the Minister to respond. As time is limited, I also ask members to be concise in their questions and the Minister to be concise in his response. I propose to set a limit of three minutes in the initial round for each member and, time permitting, we can come back with supplementary questions of one minute each. I also propose to allow five minutes for the Minister's response to each group of questions and one minute in the supplementary round. Is that agreed? Agreed.

I have a note on privilege. The Minister and members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against any person outside the Houses or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable. I remind members they are only allowed to participate in this meeting if they are physically located on the Leinster House complex. For anybody watching this meeting online, some Oireachtas Members and witnesses are accessing the meeting in remote format due to these unprecedented circumstances. I understand this will be the last of our meetings in such circumstances. With regard to the fact that people are attending remotely, I ask that everybody bear with us if any issues of a technical nature arise.

With that and having regard to the fact that our time is limited, I ask the Minister to make his opening comments and thank him for making time available to be with us this evening.

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I have been asked to give opening comments on both issues and then take questions in two different segments, first with regard to the special envoy process and then on Afghanistan. If members will bear with me, I will make an opening statement on both. I will not then make any more formal statements and will focus on answering members' questions as best I can. I thank the Chairman and members of the committee for inviting me to attend.

Developments in Afghanistan in recent weeks have shocked the world, and with good reason. I welcome the opportunity to update the committee, including on the recent mission of our diplomatic and military team in Afghanistan, as well as on active discussions at international

level on the crisis in the context of Ireland's forthcoming Presidency of the UN Security Council, which begins on Wednesday.

I am also pleased to have the opportunity to address the committee on the issue of special envoys and to clarify any questions that may arise. Special envoys have been deployed by my Department and by the Government over many years in order to advance specific Government priorities. The duration, tasking and support provided has varied in accordance with the nature of the role. Ireland is not an outlier in this regard. EU partners and like-minded states such as the US and Canada also deploy special envoys to highlight and build networks of influence on thematic priorities or to deepen engagement in particular geographic regions. The committee will be aware, for example, that US special envoys to Northern Ireland have played a particularly important role in contributing to the peace process on this island.

Ireland currently has two special envoys. Mr. Tom Arnold is serving as Government special envoy on food systems, a role which was jointly proposed by the Departments of Foreign Affairs and Agriculture, Food and the Marine, and which is linked to preparations for the UN Food Systems Summit 2021 on 23 September next, and the Tokyo Nutrition for Growth Summit 2021 in December. Mr. Kenneth Thompson is serving as special envoy for francophone Africa and the Sahel, a role linked to Ireland's term on the Security Council. It is of great value and importance in a region that features prominently on the Security Council's agenda and where Ireland does not yet have an embassy network.

I also recall the contribution made by a number of time-limited special envoys deployed by the Government in the course of Ireland's campaign for membership of the Security Council. These envoys, who were mainly serving or recently retired Irish diplomats, engaged with and travelled to a wide range of countries and regions to promote Ireland's candidacy, particularly to countries where Ireland does not have an embassy or established diplomatic relations. They also undertook meetings at the UN, the African Union and other international and regional organisations. I have no doubt that the sustained engagement by these envoys was critical to a successful outcome for Ireland in what was a very competitive election campaign.

I also acknowledge the work of former Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Katherine Zappone, as a special envoy for the Security Council campaign while she was a serving Minister. The decision to appoint her in September 2019 was taken to bolster Ireland's profile in the final months of the campaign. During her nine months in this role, Ms Zappone led 25 bilateral meetings in which our candidature was raised, mainly with countries where we do not have embassies on the ground. These meetings took place in the margins of the UN General Assembly in September 2019, at the International Conference on Population and Development in Nairobi in November 2019 and in parallel with official engagements in New York in March 2020. Katherine Zappone stepped down and left politics last summer. She moved to live full time in New York. She reached out to me last summer and in a brief conversation mentioned that she would be available to help in any way she could in our work at the UN. Katherine Zappone and I spoke now and again, as former colleagues do. I remember, for example, speaking to her the morning of the US presidential election result. She had been involved, I believe, in the Biden campaign.

We spoke in February and Katherine Zappone told me of work she was doing in the UN system. At no point in that conversation did I consider that she was lobbying me for a specific job. Following on from that conversation, however, I reflected on the fact that Katherine Zappone was a former Irish Minister, had been heavily involved in our Security Council campaign, had campaigned all her life on issues of equality and was now living in New York. On 24 February,

I met with the Secretary General of my Department to review our first months on the Security Council. We were also meeting to consider a range of new ambassadorial appointments. At the end of that meeting, I asked him for his view on whether Katherine Zappone could be of any use to our team in New York in light of the nature of the work in which we were involved. He told me he would reflect on it.

As members of the committee will be aware, we are currently seeing an increasingly polarised debate on human rights internationally, and even within the EU. There is significant push-back against the very definition of human rights by certain states. As a result, many states that would share Ireland's approach to human rights have appointed special envoys with mandates in this area.

In light of this, officials in my Department recommended a role with a broad mandate, focussing on freedom of expression. The Department believed this would provide enhanced capacity for high-level engagement on established Irish human rights priorities, including the human rights of LGBTI+ persons, civil society space, freedom of the media and freedom of association.

I approached Katherine Zappone and asked if she would be interested in taking this role in principle. She said she would and I handed the process back to the Secretary General. I was not involved at any point in discussions around terms and conditions, which is not unusual.

As Minister for Foreign Affairs, I made the decision to ask Katherine Zappone if she would consider the role of special envoy. That was on the basis of my Department's view that there was a substantive body of work to do to advance Ireland's priorities in the areas of freedom of opinion and expression and I look forward to taking the committee's questions on that.

I will turn now to the situation in Afghanistan. Since capturing Kabul on 15 August, the Taliban has sought to communicate an image of moderation, promising amnesty to former rivals and peace and rights for women - "within the limits of Islam", which they have not defined - and calling for recognition from the international community. However, the scenes of panic at Kabul Airport demonstrate the scepticism of most Afghans, especially urban women and those raised since the previous Taliban administration was forced out of office in 2001. This also reflects the violence perpetrated by the Taliban in recent months as they retook territory outside the capital.

Ireland's approach to Afghanistan has been consistently clear. We have called for an end to the violence and for negotiations between all parties to reach a negotiated political settlement. We have called for the Taliban to work with others to build a peaceful and inclusive transition government that serves all Afghans. Any future Afghan administration must protect civilians and fulfil Afghanistan's obligations under international law. Human rights, especially for Afghan women and girls and minorities, must be respected, protected and upheld. Afghanistan must never again become a haven for international terrorism. All foreign nationals and those Afghans who wish to leave Afghanistan, including those to whom Ireland has offered resettlement, should not be hindered in doing so. The Taliban must guarantee safe access for humanitarian aid and those providing vital and life-saving assistance to the Afghan people.

These are the principles that are guiding Ireland during our Presidency of the Security Council on Afghanistan. The Security Council discussed the situation in Afghanistan in emergency session on 16 August. Ireland also joined with 96 other states in a statement on 29 August, reminding the Taliban of their assurances to provide safe passage to those who wish to leave

Afghanistan. Last night, the Security Council adopted Resolution 2593 which reaffirms the importance of human rights, humanitarian assistance and the need to allow safe passage. Ireland was very involved in the drafting of that. The Security Council is also scheduled to discuss the situation in Afghanistan and the UN assistance mission in the country, UNAMA, on 9 September. Afghanistan will also be a key focus of an informal meeting of EU foreign ministers – the so-called “Gymnich” meeting - later this week in Slovenia and I will be there.

The rapid takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban led to the rapid evacuation efforts at Hamad Karzai International Airport which became one of the most complex operations of its kind ever managed by the international community. My Department and the Irish Embassy in Abu Dhabi have been providing consular assistance and advice to Irish citizens wishing to leave Afghanistan since mid-August. Close co-operation and co-ordination on the evacuation process through Hamad Karzai International Airport was also ongoing with EU member states, the UK, the US and, indeed, other partners. Ten Irish citizens were successfully evacuated between 17 and 22 August.

It became clear, however, that it was increasingly complex for family groups to gain access to the airport. On the recommendation of the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Department of Defence, and taking into consideration the security advice and a threat assessment from the Defence Forces, I approved the deployment of an emergency civil assistance team, ECAT, on the evening of Monday, 23 August. The ECAT team comprised two officials from my Department and nine members of the Defence Forces, or the Army Ranger Wing as it is known. The ECAT deployed in the early hours of Tuesday, 24 August, with the support of the French armed forces. This was a short-term support to the consular response to the situation in Afghanistan.

The goal of the ECAT mission was to provide consular advice and assistance, including by assisting in the safe evacuation of the Irish citizens and dependants who had been identified. The ECAT mission remained in the environs of the airport at all stages of the mission. With the support of ECAT, 26 Irish citizens, family members and residents were successfully supported to evacuate Afghanistan.

I sincerely thank the members of the ECAT team for their efforts in such a challenging and complex environment, and all those who have supported the overall consular response. I also thank sincerely our international partners for their assistance. Without that assistance we simply could not have done what we did.

I know many in Ireland today are deeply concerned for family members, friends and colleagues who remain in Afghanistan. I can give full assurance that the overall consular effort is continuing and we remain strongly committed to assisting those requiring ongoing consular support in Afghanistan. We are liaising with partners, including those who have a presence on the ground, to advise on safe options for remaining Irish citizens and dependants who wish to leave the country to do so in the period ahead. We will also continue to provide guidance to people who have a right to Irish residency who are in Afghanistan. I have asked my team to treat both with equal priority.

Ireland has also offered resettlement to approximately 280 vulnerable Afghans’ including human rights defenders, those working to protect rights of women and girls and those working with NGOs and international organisations. The Department of Justice is also working to facilitate family reunification visas.

We support a recent call on the international community by the President of the European

Commission to support the many Afghans displaced in recent months in neighbouring countries.

In the same spirit, Ireland signed up to a joint statement with a number of countries on Sunday with regard to travel assurances from the Taliban on evacuation. It is our sincere hope that all foreign nationals and all Afghan citizens with travel authorisation from another country, including Ireland, will be allowed to proceed in a safe and orderly manner to points of departure and travel outside the country. We will carefully monitor the situation on the ground in the coming days and weeks and work with other Departments, in particular the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and the Department of Justice. I put on record my appreciation for the excellent co-operation and flexibility we have witnessed in recent weeks from those Departments. I hope in doing so we have saved some lives. I look forward to members' questions.

Chairman: On the matter of questions, we are now dealing with the special envoy issue. I call Deputy Cowen, followed by Deputy Brady and Senator Joe O'Reilly.

Deputy Barry Cowen: I thank the Minister for his presentation and for the clarifications he has sought to provide us today. As I have said before, I found the appointment bizarre, notwithstanding, as the Minister has mentioned, other successful envoy appointments that have been made previously. I also found the Cabinet approval of the appointment bizarre. I am glad that Katherine Zappone recognised that there was not sufficient and widespread support for her appointment, and subsequently declined the role.

I have some questions arising from what the Minister said. I might give all of them for him to answer rather than taking up time answering some and not answering others. The Minister said he spoke to Katherine Zappone in February. He said she told him of the work she was doing in the UN system. What date in February was that? What work in the UN system was she doing? Was it full time or part time?

The Minister said he did not consider that Katherine Zappone was lobbying but it obviously planted a seed in his head given that he took up the matter later in February when he asked the Secretary General to give his opinion on whether he thought she could play a role in the Department's workings in the UN. What date was that? Did the Minister discuss the matter again with the Secretary General or was it only mentioned again to him when the Minister asked that he agree terms and conditions of the appointment which the Minister had offered to Katherine Zappone at that stage in principle? On what specific date did the Minister offer that role in principle? Can the Minister inform us when the Tánaiste became aware the role of such an envoy was under consideration in the first instance? Notwithstanding that, if he was not aware of that aspect of the work going on within the Department, when did he become aware or informed that an offer had been made in principle or subject to Cabinet approval to Katherine Zappone? When the role was offered, the Minister outlined it was subject to Cabinet approval. Was that normally the case in previous instances or was it specifically the case in this one?

With respect to the members of the Cabinet not being informed, I can accept the Minister's bona fides in that regard. It is unfortunate but I know a mistake may have been made. However, I understand that the Minister, or somebody, prepared a memo for Cabinet that included appointments to various ambassadorial roles. Why did it not include this appointment also?

Chairman: I thank Deputy Cowen. I call Deputy Brady.

Deputy John Brady: I thank the Minister for attending the meeting. It is unfortunate this meeting could not have been held earlier, as it has been an issue of serious concern during the summer months. Many outstanding questions need to be answered with respect to the creation of a well-paid position for a friend, a former Cabinet colleague of the Minister's, which was not openly advertised or subject to competition. Certainly there was no transparency around the whole process and even to this date, there is still an attempt to deny any notion of transparency.

I have a number of questions for the Minister which I hope he will answer fully. The Minister had a brief conversation with Katherine Zappone last summer. When did that conversation take place? Was it before or after we had secured our seat on the UN Security Council in June? The Minister said he spoke to Katherine Zappone again in February. On what specific date in February was that and who initiated that conversation? Was it the Minister or did Katherine Zappone reach out to him?

The Minister said with respect to that conversation he did not feel Katherine Zappone was lobbying for the position and he made reference to that specific conversation but he did not make reference to the conversation he had last summer. Did he think she was lobbying? Lobbying is clearly defined in the Regulation of Lobbying Act. Did she specifically ask for a position within the UN or for a position to be made up? When did the Minister offer the position in principle? Can he give that exact date? When did he offer that position to Katherine Zappone?

As for the issue with the Tánaiste, when did the Minister notify the Tánaiste he had been in conversation with Katherine Zappone? When was the Tánaiste informed she had agreed to take the position in principle? Can the Minister give exact dates in that respect?

Regarding Katherine's Zappone's event in the Merrion Hotel, was the Minister invited to that gig in the hotel? Obviously at one point Katherine Zappone came back to Ireland from New York. At any point prior to Cabinet approval between February and July did the Minister have any other further communication with Katherine Zappone by way of email, phone call or in person? Many demands have been for the full attendance at the event in the Merrion Hotel to be made public. Does the Minister support that call? Does he think there should be full transparency around the attendance list? I find it bizarre, and the Minister might clarify this point, that he, a personal friend and someone who is in regular contact with Katherine Zappone, may not have been invited to that event yet we are now aware of some of the other people who have stated they had either been invited or were in attendance.

As regards freedom of information, FOI, requests that have been made to the Department by several journalists, it appears that the Department is shutting down requests relating to the appointment by publishing redacted records and thus closing off the right of appeal of the requesters. It certainly appears that the redactions are being made on fairly spurious grounds. Why are FOI requests being redacted? Does the Minister support that practice? Will he make all documentation relating to the entire process available for public scrutiny?

I find it bizarre that a position such as that in question would be created for a former Cabinet colleague. It is a position that no one within the Department had thought necessary until it was created. I am sure the Department and the Minister have been contacted by many members of the public who have serious expertise in many different fields and who have offered their services. I find it bizarre that those individuals were never considered for any special envoy position, yet a former colleague, a person with whom the Minister was in regular contact, made an offer of her services and this position was created. How often are the Minister or his Department contacted by people offering their services, expertise, knowledge and skills? What process is

taken to analyse those proposals?

Two other UN envoys are in place. I ask the Minister to outline and expand on how they were appointed.

Chairman: I thank the Deputy. I am very conscious of time and am anxious to have time for a second round. We do not have jurisdiction over or a role in the matter of private parties in Dublin hotels. However, the Minister can answer for himself. As regards FOI requests, there is an accepted practice and procedure that I am sure has not been departed from, but the Minister might be able to assist in that regard.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: I welcome the Minister and thank him for his presentation. I had the privilege of leading the Irish delegation to the Council of Europe for several years. For part of that time, Katherine Zappone was a member of the delegation. I wish to put on the record that she was an exemplary member of the delegation and an exemplary networker. I know that is not the kernel of the discussion, however.

Does the Minister believe, with hindsight or on reflection, that a process offering opportunities to multiple applicants, such as this committee shortlisting candidates to go the Minister and the Cabinet, would be helpful in the context of positions such as this as we proceed to appoint envoys if required? How, specifically and in practical terms, did the Minister see a special envoy advancing LGBTQI rights? What additionality does he believe the former Minister, Ms Zappone, would have offered in that regard? Is the Minister clear that the need preceded the appointment rather than the appointment being adjusted to fit the set of qualifications Ms Zappone possesses? Does the Minister believe that Ms Zappone can or should be involved in future appointments or should go through a process whereby she could be considered for future appointments?

I ask the Minister to remind the committee of the specific achievements of former envoys for Ireland. I ask that some of those achievements be drawn to the attention of members and, in particular, those listening in. Do we run the risk of complexity overlap and a duplication of roles if we employ envoys in addition to ambassadors and the Minister and his officials? The latter is a question that would reasonably occur to those observing this meeting.

Chairman: I thank Senator O'Reilly. I will revert to the Minister. Questions were posted by Deputies Cowen and Brady and Senator Joe O'Reilly. I will give the Minister a couple of minutes to respond and will then come back in. There are nine members offering. I will resume with Deputy Gannon, Senators Craughwell and Ardagh and Deputy Clarke, in that order. I call on the Minister to respond to the three sets of questions posed.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I thank the Chair. I might bring the Secretary General in on the process that took place in order that people may fully understand it. Members do not have the right to ask questions of an official. If it is helpful to broaden the explanation, however, I can certainly ask Mr. Burgess to do that.

I will address Deputy Cowen's questions first. I stated earlier that Katherine Zappone spoke to me in February in order to update me on work that she was doing in the UN system. I do not have written documentation of that call. My recollection is that the call took place in the second half of February. She updated me on her work with the United Nations Population Fund, UNFPA, and said that she hoped to work with it until the end of June or so. I also spoke to her after the US presidential election. Like many of us, she was hugely involved in following that

election. She texted me around that time and I spoke to her.

When Deputy Brady said that I was clearly a close friend and had regular contact with Katherine Zappone, I do not think that would be an accurate assessment. I had a good professional relationship with Katherine Zappone, but I would not regard us as close friends *per se*. I worked with her on many projects when we were in government. She was very involved in the final nine months of our Security Council campaign. She was on the road travelling, lobbying and campaigning, as I was, to try to get support for our campaign. That is when I got to know Katherine.

The meeting with the Secretary General was on 24 February. We have a record of that in my diary and in that of the Secretary General. We checked the position in that regard. That was a meeting to discuss a number of things. The first was our first couple of months in the Security Council and the second was to look at a list of ambassadorial appointments that we had to make the following month. It would be perfectly normal that the Minister and Secretary General would talk to each other about trying to match up the right people with the right appointments in different parts of the world. It was at the end of that meeting that I spoke to the Secretary General. It was not something that was on the agenda or anything; rather, I made an informal comment at the end of the meeting. I had spoken to Katherine Zappone a few days earlier. I asked if Katherine Zappone could add value to our team in New York. It was as simple as that. The Secretary General said to let him think about that and he would come back to me. That triggered a process that I will ask Mr. Burgess to brief the committee on because it is important that people understand what happened. A lot has been said in recent weeks and this is a good opportunity to try to put the record straight.

There have been a number of questions regarding when the Tánaiste knew what happened. To be perfectly honest, he was not involved in these discussions. I did not involve him in them. The only time I briefed him in any detail was in advance of bringing this matter to Cabinet. We did not have a detailed proposal until mid-summer. I can go through that timeline if it would be helpful for people. Genuine mistakes were made in the build up to the Cabinet meeting itself and I regret that. We should never have a situation in a Government meeting where the Taoiseach learns something for the first time, and that is what happened on 27 July. I am sorry about that and I apologised to the Taoiseach for it. I was bringing quite a lot of memos that day. We had a memo on new ambassadorial appointments, a memo on new embassies opening up, and a memo on Expo. We also had a memo on a proposal around Ireland competing for the America's Cup, and an update memo on Brexit, as well as an update memo on Ireland's first six months on the UN Security Council.

For those who have been involved in Cabinet meetings, what generally happens is that in the build-up to the Cabinet meeting, advisers talk to each other, they prepare for the meeting, they try to find out if anything controversial is coming up and they try to find solutions. For whatever reason, and this is my fault, I did not see the appointment of Katherine Zappone as a particularly big deal. Clearly many others do see it as a very big deal. It did not come up in the briefings between the party leaders and their teams. It should have, but it did not. The Taoiseach raised it in Cabinet that day, there was not a big deal made of it, we moved on and the appointment was approved, but I rang him after that to say that should not have happened and it will not happen again.

This was, by the way, in the Cabinet memo, but it was not spotted by some people. I have the page from the Cabinet memo in front of me, which mentioned a special envoy for freedom of opinion and expression in terms of an appointment. It outlined in brief terms what that was

about and that the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Defence requested the approval of Government for the appointment of Katherine Zappone as that special envoy. It was actually in the memo.

Can I just say for the record, and I hope members will take this at face value, I did not even have to bring this to Government if I did not want to. If you look at the Kenneth Thompson appointment as special envoy for the Department of Foreign Affairs to the Sahel and Francophone Africa, that appointment never went to Government. He was a civil servant. We needed somebody in that part of Africa in the context of the work we were doing on the UN Security Council, and he was a special envoy for the Department as opposed to the Government. If I was trying to hide something here, I could have sought to make Katherine Zappone a special envoy for the Department of Foreign Affairs. We did not do that. I was anxious to bring it to Government as part of a series of other ambassadorial appointments we were making at the time, because I thought it was a good news story. I thought, in terms of her record and her credibility in this space, that Katherine Zappone was a very positive story and I brought it to Government. However, we did not lay the groundwork properly, and that was a mistake which should not have happened.

On Deputy Brady's question, he framed this in the context of a well-paid position for a friend. All I can say is in regard to Katherine Zappone is that even when I mentioned to her whether she would consider taking up the role of special envoy in this space, we never spoke about money. I asked the Secretary General to talk to her directly about that and to work out terms and conditions, and what he used precedent in the context of the Kenneth Thompson appointment in terms of how Katherine Zappone would be supported financially. It is important to be accurate.

On whether Katherine Zappone was lobbying, I can honestly say that she was not. She spoke to me in late summer but I can not remember whether it was before she left for New York or after she got there. However, she had been involved with my Department for about 18 months in advance of her leaving politics. It was linked to the UN Security Council work that we were doing. She said she was moving to New York and she simply said that if there was anything she could do to help my team in New York, she would be really interested in doing that, either in a private capacity or a professional capacity. That was it. It was a conversation, effectively, wishing her well for the future, no more or no less than that. It was many months later when I spoke to her in the context of the presidential election and then I spoke to her again, briefly, in February. That is what happened. I ask people to take that at face value.

In terms of the Merrion Hotel, I got a text telling me that it was on. However, I did not get a formal invitation or anything like that. I had no interest in going and I did not respond to the text. I was not in the country. I had no connection, knowledge, or interest, to be honest, in that event. I did not even know it was taking place. Afterwards, obviously, it became a big issue. I think many people regret that. It is up to the people who were there whether or not they want to make that known. My job is not to chase people on that. However, I had no involvement or knowledge whatsoever around that event.

Sorry, I am just trying to make sure I answer the questions-----

Chairman: What about the FOI request to the Department?

Deputy Simon Coveney: The FOI request is a legal matter for the Department. It might be helpful if I ask the Secretary General to talk the committee through what happened after I

had a conversation with him. I mentioned the issue of whether Katherine Zappone could add to our team in New York. It is important the committee and the public know that there was quite a process in the Department, much of which I did not even know about, assessing whether or not there would be a useful role here that would add value so that the Secretary General could then come back to me on the issue, having looked at it.

Chair, would it be helpful if I asked the Secretary General, Mr. Niall Burgess, to give a brief outline?

Chairman: I am conscious that there are nine members on my list for questions. I ask the Secretary General to be brief and concise. Perhaps he might like to deal with the issue of the FOI request, as raised by Deputy Brady. I call on the Secretary General.

Mr. Niall Burgess: I thank the Chair.

On the process, I should add that we had one brief conversation after 24 February 2021. This was because a colleague told me that the Biden administration was going to appoint a special envoy for LGBTI+ rights. I remember mentioning that to the Minister in an informal conversation shortly afterwards. I told him that we would look particularly at that area of the Department's work, because the Department is active in the area of promoting LGBTI+ rights internationally. In fact, I think we took about two months to look at this from a number of different perspectives, before we had any further conversation. Initially, I asked a colleague to look at our own responsibilities under the National LGBTI+ Inclusion Strategy 2019-2021. Under that strategy, the Department has a responsibility for integrating the promotion of LGBTI+ rights across our foreign policy, for promoting that work at the United Nations and in regional organisations, for working with other countries and civil society organisations globally, and for improving outreach and support to LGBTI+ communities within our own diaspora.

In fact, that month, the Department briefed the interdepartmental committee in this regard. We got some input that basically told us that there would be value in trying to put more resources behind this work. At the same time, we undertook a review of practice on the part of EU partners and other countries with which we work particularly closely in the human rights field. EU partners, the UK, and the US all use dedicated envoys to support their promotion of human rights. I should say that these are not just for the promotion of human rights; the mechanism is increasingly deployed by other partners' foreign ministries. That shows that the practice is well-regarded by most partners. Eamon Gilmore serves as the EU's special envoy for human rights. Partners with which we work closely, for example, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Italy and Lithuania - quite a number - are using the mechanism. Finally, we took a broad look, not just at LGBTI+ rights, but at the work we are doing across the spectrum in human rights. Having reflected on that, we felt if we were appointing a human rights envoy, we were better to do it at a higher level and to look at some of the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. That led us to look at the idea of a mandate for the promotion of freedom of opinion and expression. The idea behind that is that these are enabling rights which are enshrined in the universal declaration, are fundamental to the functioning of democracy and are under growing threat in many parts of the world.

That was the deliberative process that took place over a period of two months. We had no further discussion on the work during that period.

Chairman: Will the Secretary General comment on the charge that in this case the Department has departed from the accepted practice and procedure on the matter of freedom of infor-

mation requests?

Mr. Niall Burgess: I am not directly involved in the deliberation on individual requests but I know we have between 20 and 30 requests under the freedom of information provisions. The intention is to release all of the information in one go, to answer the questions and make the information freely available. We are using publication as a route to do that. The intention is to use this as a way to make the information available, not to withhold it.

Chairman: I revert to members of the committee, commencing with Deputy Gannon.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I did not get a chance to answer Senator Joe O'Reilly's questions.

Chairman: I ask the Minister to send a note to the committee. We can have a look at that. I am keen to let Deputy Gannon in, as well as others who have been waiting.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Okay.

Chairman: I call Deputy Gannon, to be followed by Senator Craughwell, Senator Ardagh and Deputy Clarke.

Deputy Gary Gannon: My first two questions relate to some of the responses the Minister has given. The Minister mentioned that in the conversation he had with Ms Zappone in the summer, she mentioned she would be open to doing some work for the Department at UN level in a personal or professional capacity. Did the Minister consider that to be lobbying for a job? If not, what did he think she was doing?

The Minister mentioned the Tánaiste knew in advance of the Cabinet meeting. How long in advance of the Cabinet meeting did the Tánaiste know Ms Zappone would be appointed as special UN envoy?

I want to talk about the role. The Minister said we have "a substantive body of work to do to advance Ireland's priorities in the areas of freedom of opinion and expression". Given that substantive body of work, can the Minister confirm a new special envoy will be appointed? When will this take place? Is there a template of a job description given previously to Katherine Zappone for the role? Did the Minister tell any member of the Government or of Fine Gael previously that Katherine Zappone would be appointed to this role?

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I thank the Minister for his attendance. Thirteen envoys were used in securing the seat at the United Nations Security Council. Were any of the other 12 approached with a view to filling this role? What duties or role was this special envoy for freedom of expression going to undertake which were not already covered by the permanent mission of Ireland to the United Nations, involving Ambassador Geraldine Byrne Nason and her team, in New York and at the Department of Foreign Affairs? If staff members were needed to enhance and strengthen the right of freedom of expression, should such staff not have come from the ranks of the career diplomatic corps and career civil servants who have given decades of unwavering loyalty and commitment to this country?

The Minister is aware of issues impacting residents of the United States working for foreign governments. I am anxious to know, and a "Yes" or "No" answer will do, whether the Minister provided Katherine Zappone with a diplomatic passport or whether he would have provided her with such a passport, had she continued in the role.

Regarding the event at the Merrion Hotel, I take the point made by the Chair. For clarity,

however, it is important that the Minister advise us as to whether a member of his staff attended that event on his behalf. Did the Department of Foreign Affairs pay for Ms Zappone's flight to return to Ireland? Was this an official event under her appointed role as the special envoy? It is probably too late to do anything about this now, but several announcements were made at the final Cabinet meeting by the Minister regarding appointments to foreign offices around the world. Some of those were made with months to go. I find it disturbing that we hear of these appointments being brought to Cabinet months before they were due to be filled. I will leave my contribution at that. I thank the Minister.

Senator Catherine Ardagh: I thank the Minister for attending. From reading the statement he provided and listening to his testimony, I refer to the major role that former Minister Zappone played in securing the seat at the UN Security Council. Was it the case that the Minister felt compelled to give her a job to thank her for that role? Did he feel like he owed her for all her hard work? I ask that because from reading the notes, it is unclear whether her appointment was based on the role the Minister said Ms Zappone played in securing the seat on the UN Security Council or on her well-known record on LGBT rights in this jurisdiction. I will be interested to hear the Minister's comments in that regard.

The Minister also mentioned that he did not know about the event in the Merrion Hotel but that he did get a text. Will he tell the committee when and from whom he got that text? The Minister was not clear on that point. In addition, did members of his staff attend the event in the Merrion Hotel in his absence? I ask the Minister to confirm the position in that regard for us as well.

My final question is for the Minister and the Secretary General and concerns the sharing of documentation. The Secretary General commented that he has fewer than 30 FOI requests under review. That is very few for a Department of this size and it is quite shocking that it has been unable to get through that number of FOI requests. Will the Minister or his Department be in a position to share documentation-----

Deputy Simon Coveney: Those are 30 FOI requests on this issue.

Senator Catherine Ardagh: -----with this committee from the date the Department was considering this post to the date when former Minister Zappone decided not to take it up?

Chairman: I thank Senator Ardagh. We will have some more questions now before returning to the Minister. I call Deputy Clarke.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: I thank the Minister for coming before the committee. Starting with the day the Minister brought this memo to the Cabinet, he mentioned that a considerable number of memos were put before the Cabinet then. Was that date brought forward for any reason? Why it was on that day that this matter was brought forward? Why wait until the last days of the Dáil to bring this in if conversations had been going on since last summer about this matter? What was the urgency in respect of that day? Surely the Minister could have waited until September? The appointment could also have been brought forward a couple of months beforehand if conversations had been happening early in 2021.

I do not think that it is appropriate for this committee to move on from this issue until a full and detailed timeline has been provided of all communications to do with this appointment, whether that is through FOI requests or not. This committee has a job of work to do and for us to do that properly and effectively we should have been provided with a complete timeline of

communications on this issue. The Minister was correct when he said that much has been said on this issue. Many varying and contradictory statements have been put out by members of the Government regarding this matter. That has not been helpful at all. The Minister also said that he did not see this as a big deal, that he saw it as a good news story and that there was no mention of money. Regarding those statements, was the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform contacted about the level of pay that Katherine Zappone would have been receiving? If so, when did that take place?

Does the Minister now accept, understand and relate to the level of hurt and insult caused to many people who are carers in this State or who are in receipt of State pensions by the flippant and throwaway remarks made concerning a nominal salary of €15,000 a year? That is more than our State pensioners and carers get. I would like to back up a little and ask the Minister to outline the process whereby Article 19, which outlines the right to freedom of opinion and expression, including the freedom to hold opinions without interference, was chosen? Why was that article from the charter of human rights chosen as opposed to, say, Article 26.2, which focuses on the right to education, or Article 4, which prohibits slavery and servitude and reflects a growing concern globally about human trafficking? What was the background to that? On that same note, does the Minister now accept that this special envoy position, and our standing as a State, has been tainted because of this debacle? The Minister is correct in stating that these positions are well regarded internationally. We have been provided with a list of countries that have special envoys who do similar work. However, the question must be asked as to how many of those special envoys are former Ministers. I imagine the answer is very few.

The Minister said he was not in the country when the Merrion event took place and I accept that. However, he is a Minister who attends Cabinet and this event took place because of a decision he made. What does he say to the partners and husbands throughout this country who have sat outside maternity hospitals while their partners inside have been told that their babies no longer have heartbeats? This shindig took place following a decision he made. Does he accept the anger of owners of businesses and recreational venues that have been closed for an inordinate amount of time? Does he accept the anger of families who have grieved, mourned and watched family funerals online, alone, over the course of this pandemic? If he had not made this decision, that event would not have taken place.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I thank members for all those questions. I will answer them in reverse. Of course, I can understand the anger of people who have made extraordinary sacrifices in the context of the restrictions they have had to abide by during the Covid pandemic. Certainly, the perceptions that many people have of the event in the Merrion Hotel generated a lot of anger. We heard that being expressed at the time. Has the appointment been tainted? Absolutely. The concerns that people have expressed is the reason Katherine Zappone decided not to take the job. She said she would not accept it because of the publicity around it. Clearly, the process and her appointment did not have public confidence and so it did not go ahead. That is the unfortunate consequence of what happened and of some of the mistakes that were made on our side.

I will address how we can take matters forward, about which Senator O'Reilly also asked a question. First of all, we have an obligation now to review the special envoy process in its entirety given the public commentary and the criticisms that have been made. One thing that may be useful is to try to get agreement with this committee on a way of appointing special envoys in the future if we are going to use that diplomatic tool to advance Irish interests in different areas. I would be very happy to do that. This should not be in any way party political or a matter of

Government versus Opposition or anything like that. Special envoys represent Ireland in a non-political way in an area where we think we need added value. Special envoys were always, as far as I can remember, appointed on the basis of a Minister effectively headhunting somebody he or she thought would be very good, qualified and suitable for that job. Sometimes a special envoy role lasts for as little as six months and sometimes it lasts for a couple of years. A good example occurred in 2008 during the lifetime of a different Government when the then Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform, Dermot Ahern, appointed Nuala O'Loan, a former Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland who was very highly regarded. She was appointed as a roving ambassador for conflict resolution and a special envoy to East Timor. That is the kind of role involved. We appointed Tom Arnold to do a specific job, in terms of the context and the skill set we knew he had, that would add credibility to what Ireland was trying to say on food systems and nutrition internationally. That is what makes special envoys and their appointment different from advertising a job with the Department of Foreign Affairs. It is an appointment as opposed to an advertised position. Clearly, the criticisms and concerns raised about Katherine Zappone's appointment require me to put a new process in place and to get all-party agreement on that in terms of how that will be done in the future, something I am happy to do that through this committee.

If you turn a special envoy position into a normal advertised job, if you like, in some ways, it defeats the purpose of what you are trying to do. When there is an opportunity or when there is a short-term requirement to do a piece of work, often senior civil servants are asked to do it, some of them serving and some former. In terms of what many other countries have done, it is often the case that former Ministers or former politicians, as well as former senior civil servants, scientists or experts, are asked to do special envoy jobs. I can give lots of examples of special envoy roles in the US, Canada, the UK and Germany.

In response to what Senator O'Reilly said and what has been asked of me, I am happy to come back with a proposal around how we manage special envoys in the future, learning lessons from what has happened here, and looking to get all-party agreement on how we do that in a way that is transparent and has public confidence in the future. I am more than happy to do that given the experience of recent weeks.

On why this was done in the last days of Government before the summer recess, I spoke to my Secretary General and it was I who said we were bringing a whole series of appointments to Government, it was the last Government meeting before it broke up for the month of August, there were things happening in September we would like to have this envoy in position for, which I can talk about in a moment, and I thought it made sense to add this appointment to the appointment of multiple ambassadors.

On the salary, I have never described the amount of €13,000 to €15,000 in the way that has been described here, as a nominal salary or anything. I let that salary issue be negotiated by the Department with Katherine Zappone. I was not involved in it. The point I made earlier on it was that I never spoke to Katherine Zappone about money relating to this role. I did not think it was appropriate. Does the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform need to approve it? Yes, it does. It needs to approve any expenditure. I understand there was some correspondence on that and I presume that will come out under the FOI process.

In response to Deputy Ardagh and whether I felt this was a reward, no, not at all, but I had seen that Katherine Zappone had done a good job with us and for us in her role as a special envoy for the Security Council campaign. I also know Katherine Zappone has campaigned all her life on LGBTQ issues, freedom of expression and so on. Just like how other special envoys are

asked to consider a role because people think they can add value, that was the context in which I asked Katherine Zappone whether she would do this. It was no more complicated than that. What has made it controversial, of course, is that she is a former politician and Minister. If I had asked Nuala O'Loan or Tom Arnold or a senior civil servant or a former Secretary General of a Department to take up this role, I suspect there would have been little or no comment about it. That is the truth of the situation.

With regard to sharing documents with the committee, of course we will try to share as many documents with the committee as we can. If we are going to be releasing them under freedom of information, there is no reason that we cannot share them with the committee as well.

On Senator Craughwell's questions and 13 special envoys for the UN Security Council, I cannot remember if it was 13 but there were a number. We were sending them to different parts of the world, effectively canvassing for support for Ireland. It turned out to be very successful. The truth is that, in my view, none of them was as qualified as Katherine Zappone was for this role. Ms Zappone had worked effectively with the Department and that is why I asked whether she could add value after that work. It was no more complicated than that. Should I have asked a serving civil servant? I could have, but I believe Ms Zappone was better qualified for this particular job. I have no idea whether we gave Ms Zappone a diplomatic passport. If she had got the role as a special envoy, she probably would have been entitled to a diplomatic passport, but she certainly would not have been in the absence of representing the Government, which she was not doing after she resigned as Minister. Certainly, there was no question of her travelling home to Ireland and claiming expenses from the Department. The role had not even been put in place at that stage.

I asked my Secretary General to speak to Katherine Zappone in terms of trying to finalise the arrangements. I think we shared the job specifications with the committee in terms of tasking to support the Government's objectives with a particular focus on the UN framework, including the UN General Assembly Third Committee, which is October to December of this year, the Freedom Online Coalition, which is December of this year, the UN Commission on the Status of Women, which is March of next year, and the UN Human Rights Council, which is June to July of next year; to support the implementation of LGBTI+ at international level, which is action 25 of the national LGBTI+ inclusion strategy which is led by the Department of Foreign Affairs; to support Ireland's international advocacy and initiatives on key annual events, such as World Press Freedom Day, International Women's Day, Pride Month and so forth; and to support the in-country advocacy work of Ireland's missions network through country visits. We were going to give her a specific list of countries where we thought we could benefit most from those visits. We agreed a timeframe with her and the next steps in terms of how we would launch her position and so forth. There is quite a lot of transparency about that and I am happy to share any other documentation that should be available to the committee.

Deputy Gannon asked if there is a template for special envoy roles. The answer to that question is "not really". The process is sometimes different depending on the type of role one is asking of a special envoy. Sometimes it is a special envoy for the Department of Foreign Affairs. That does not go to the Government. In this case, I believed it would be useful to go to the Government and get a special envoy endorsed by the Government, rather than just by me and the Department of Foreign Affairs. However, there are many examples of special envoys. I can send the Deputy details on each of them, if that would be helpful to the Deputy in terms of the process that was followed.

One of the other questions the Deputy asked was about how long in advance of the Cabinet

meeting the Tánaiste knew. In terms of detail, I informed the Tánaiste and the other Fine Gael Ministers an hour before the Cabinet meeting. We were going through the agenda and I raised it as something I was bringing to the Cabinet. I had assumed the same was happening with the Green Party and with Fianna Fáil. That was not the case because of issues that I raised earlier. I mentioned it to the Tánaiste a few days earlier. He had texted me to say he would be seeing Katherine Zappone, who was coming to Dublin. I had made no connection that this was the Merrion event. I said to him at that stage that we had not finalised anything yet, but that we were working on whether Katherine Zappone could play a role as a special envoy. However, I did not give him any detail on that until in advance of the Cabinet meeting. I have answered the questions but people can come back if I have missed something.

Senator Catherine Ardagh: The Minister did not answer two questions I asked on when he got the text and sent the text.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Sorry, yes.

Senator Catherine Ardagh: I also asked whether any of his staff went the Merrion event.

Deputy Simon Coveney: None of my staff went to the Merrion. I can honestly say I did not even know the Merrion event was going on. I knew Katherine Zappone was in Dublin because I asked the Secretary General to speak to her about the terms and conditions as we wanted to try to finalise them before I brought the recommendation to Cabinet. I knew she was in Dublin. I was in Africa. I was in Kenya and Somalia at the time of the Merrion event. I was not thinking about it. Katherine Zappone texted me but it was a banner freeze-frame of the event, if you like. There was no formal request to me to attend. To be honest, I kind of ignored it. I did not focus on it. The event happened and obviously became highly controversial afterwards.

Chairman: On that point, did the Minister see any connection between the function in the Merrion Hotel to which he was invited by text and the appointment?

Deputy Simon Coveney: No, I did not. The appointment process was well under way long before that event. The paperwork in the Department that had come back in terms of detailing the appointment and why it would add value was well in advance of that. When that event took place Katherine Zappone was in Dublin. I asked the Secretary General to speak to her about finalising the appointment.

Chairman: Did she have any reason-----

Deputy Simon Coveney: That event-----

Chairman: -----to suspect the matter might have been on a Cabinet agenda?

Deputy Simon Coveney: -----at that stage was completely irrelevant to all of that. Will the Chair repeat his question?

Chairman: Had she any reason to suspect the matter might have been the subject of a Cabinet agenda item ten days later?

Deputy Simon Coveney: That is a matter for Katherine Zappone to answer. My understanding is she was in Dublin. She organised an event to recognise work she had been doing previously as a Minister. I was not involved in that. I did not know who was going. That event was not a factor in the considerations we were making.

Chairman: I am conscious of the fact we have a number of members who have not come in.

Deputy Barry Cowen: A question I asked earlier has come up again. It was not specifically answered. The Minister mentioned he did not tell the Taoiseach in any great detail until such time as immediately before the Cabinet meeting. He did say he mentioned it to him a few days earlier because the Taoiseach had mentioned he was attending an event-----

Deputy Simon Coveney: No.

Deputy Barry Cowen: -----organised on his phone.

Deputy Simon Coveney: It is important for me to be accurate. I got a text from the Tánaiste. I was away at that time. The text said that he would be meeting Katherine Zappone in Dublin. She was in Dublin. He asked whether I had been speaking to Katherine Zappone and was there anything he needed to know. I texted him back to say we were looking at a concept of a special envoy role for Katherine Zappone in the LGBT and freedom of expression space. That was the only conversation.

Deputy Barry Cowen: If the Tánaiste knew nothing about it, why would he ask whether there was anything he should know when attending this with regard to any conversation he might have with Katherine Zappone?

Deputy Simon Coveney: He did not mention anything about attending anything. I would have remembered that and it would have triggered something. He said he was going to see-----

Deputy Barry Cowen: I am sorry but did the Minister not just say the Taoiseach contacted him-----

Deputy Simon Coveney: The Tánaiste.

Deputy Barry Cowen: -----to say he was attending an event-----

Deputy Simon Coveney: No.

Deputy Barry Cowen: -----and Katherine Zappone would be-----

Deputy Simon Coveney: I said the Tánaiste texted me to say he was going to meet Katherine Zappone when she was in Dublin.

Deputy Barry Cowen: Yes.

Deputy Simon Coveney: He did not say anything about going to an event or where it was at or anything like that.

Deputy Barry Cowen: Okay, but he was going to meet with her.

Deputy Simon Coveney: If he had, I would say it to the Deputy because it would not make any difference what the event was.

Deputy Barry Cowen: That is no problem. He did say he was going to meet with her.

Deputy Simon Coveney: He did, yes.

Deputy Barry Cowen: He wanted to know from the Minister whether there was anything-----

Deputy Simon Coveney: He needed to know.

Deputy Barry Cowen: -----the Minister knew that he could relay to her. Why would that be the case? Was he going to meet her in a personal or professional capacity?

Deputy Simon Coveney: I do not know.

Deputy Barry Cowen: Did the Minister find it necessary-----

Deputy Simon Coveney: I have texts back and forth with the Tánaiste all the time. He was meeting Katherine Zappone and was looking for an update from me about whether there was anything he should know. I texted him back to say we had been working on a concept of a special envoy role and that was it.

Deputy Barry Cowen: What relevance had that? Was the Minister going to offer it to her? Had he offered it to her?

Deputy Simon Coveney: Please do not read-----

Deputy Barry Cowen: I am not. I am trying to ascertain.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I am just giving the Deputy the facts as I have them.

Deputy Barry Cowen: Others in the Cabinet were not aware of this at all.

Deputy Simon Coveney: The Tánaiste had no hand, act or part in the process of appointment of Katherine Zappone. That was my decision on the back of the work my Department had done on it. The Tánaiste had no hand, act or part in it. He was simply inquiring. He had no hand, act or part in it right into the Cabinet meeting because the Taoiseach did not even know about it. If the Tánaiste had been involved at any point, he would have said.

Deputy Barry Cowen: The Minister just said he told the Tánaiste in the days previously that he was considering her for a position.

Deputy Simon Coveney: That was work we were doing. The Tánaiste had nothing to do with it.

Deputy Barry Cowen: Had the Minister relayed that to Katherine Zappone or did the Tánaiste relay it to her?

Deputy Simon Coveney: I did not relay anything to Katherine Zappone because I did not speak to her when she was in Dublin.

Deputy Barry Cowen: The Minister said to the Taoiseach he was considering her.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I told the Tánaiste, not the Taoiseach, when he asked me if there was anything he should know, since he was meeting Katherine Zappone the next weekend. I said we were working on a special envoy role I thought she would be suitable for. I cannot remember the exact text of what I said.

Deputy Barry Cowen: Does the Minister know if he relayed that to her?

Deputy Simon Coveney: I have no idea. Katherine Zappone herself would have known much more detail about this than the Tánaiste because she-----

Deputy Barry Cowen: The Minister had not offered it to her at that stage.

Deputy John Brady: It seems bizarre the Tánaiste would remember solely for a few minutes just to relay that information to Katherine Zappone. While we are on this issue, can I ask-----

Chairman: I ask Deputy Brady to desist for a moment. I will let him in before the end of the meeting but I am conscious Deputies Lawless and Stanton have not had an opportunity to ask questions. I will call Deputy Lawless, Senator Wilson and Deputy Stanton, who have been waiting, and then we may have an opportunity for supplementary questions, as I indicated earlier. I ask that the questions be direct and concise if we are going to make progress.

Deputy James Lawless: The problem of coming in at this stage is that much of the ground has been trawled but I will try to be succinct and get to the point without going all round. The Minister said a few times, but I am still not entirely clear, that he briefed the Tánaiste in some detail. He also said he mentioned it to the Tánaiste a few weeks beforehand. Despite briefing the Tánaiste in some detail, he did not mention it to the Taoiseach. I appreciate that the Minister has apologised for that. I take that at face value and in good faith. It is far from ideal for the Cabinet, with collective responsibility etc. The Minister might come to that. I am still lost about why the Tánaiste was briefed when the Taoiseach was not. Is it because of his party? This is a coalition Government and the Cabinet has collective responsibility. I am confused about that and would be concerned if a similar situation were to arise again.

Is this position now defunct? Has it been abandoned? Is it gone or will somebody else be sought for this role? Was it purely a one-off role, unique to the person, or is there still a vacancy? If there is still a vacancy, is there a job description and what is the process to fill that? If it is not to be filled, why was it important if Katherine Zappone did it but not someone else? When the Minister answers about the job description, there are many areas that could benefit from a special envoy for freedom of expression. We see academic freedom under attack in Hungary and judicial freedom under attack in Poland, to mention two within the EU. We are all aware of Belarus. We see Russian and Chinese influence in different jurisdictions in the Middle East and eastern Europe. We see attacks on freedom of expression and opinion, which include judicial opinion, academic opinion and press freedom in many countries. I have given a list of four or five. I am not sure if those countries were on the list for special envoy Zappone to visit or tackle. Could the Minister confirm whether they were because they seem to be the countries where these issues are at a peak? Alternatively, was it to be a softer role - possibly deployed on the fringes of the UN, etc. - where it could be useful or perhaps less useful?

My last question concerns the process by which Ireland secured a seat on the Security Council. The Minister mentioned that 25 special envoys were appointed at that time. It seems, based on my understanding of the statement and from listening to what has been said today, that Katherine Zappone was the only serving politician to be appointed as an envoy at that time. Other people may have been appointed as envoys but they were diplomats so they were in other roles. Why was Katherine Zappone given this type of role over and above any other Minister, Deputy or Senator? Did she have spare capacity? Did the Minister see her as being particularly suited to it? Was the Department not particularly demanding on her time? Was there a reason the Minister could not have done this job? I do not suggest that I was operating on the same level but I attended an IPU event a few months before that vote. I am sure all Members of the Oireachtas who had the option to travel did so. We made a case to colleagues from elsewhere as we went about our business. I would have thought that this was part and parcel of being a Member of the Oireachtas and serving our country without needing any title to do it. I am bit

confused about why, to my knowledge, only one Member of the Oireachtas was appointed as an envoy among the 25. Why did she need that title at the time? What was the point of it all? What was its purpose at that time?

Chairman: I call Senator Wilson, who was the first to contact me seeking this meeting when the controversy erupted towards the end of July.

Senator Diarmuid Wilson: I welcome the Minister and his officials to this evening's meeting to discuss this very important issue. I agree with Senator Joe O'Reilly. I also hold Katherine Zappone in very high regard. This has nothing to do with her. It is to do with the process surrounding her appointment as a special envoy.

I have quite a few points to raise but I will be very brief. In his answer to some of the questions, the Minister mentioned that the memorandum was on the agenda for the Cabinet meeting. When - on what date and at what time - was the memorandum entered on the e-Cabinet system? How long in advance of the Cabinet meeting did that happen? Was the memorandum circulated to other Departments for observations? I think the Minister may have alluded to that. In the media and here today, the Minister said the memorandum was not raised by his special adviser at the meeting of ministerial advisers held on the day before the Cabinet meeting. Why was it not raised? My understanding is that at these pre-Cabinet meetings of advisers, each adviser is asked to brief other ministerial advisers about memorandums their Ministers will be bringing to the Cabinet. Was the special adviser aware of this memorandum and did they see it in advance of the meeting? If the adviser was aware of it, why would they neglect to inform their colleagues about a memorandum emanating from their Department? Was the memorandum on the Cabinet agenda at that point and if so, how was it skipped over? Were the contents of the memorandum discussed with the Secretary General of the Department of the Taoiseach and the Cabinet secretary in advance of the Cabinet meeting?

Regarding the FOI requests that have been submitted by various journalists and others that have been alluded to by Deputy Brady and Senator Ardagh, I understand that a little over a week ago, the Department decided to issue a blank refusal to an FOI request from a very highly regarded journalist. That request asked for "copies of any records held referring or relating to the appointment of Katherine Zappone as a special envoy to the United Nations on freedom of expression and copies of any letters or representations received by the Department relating to the above." This refusal, I understand, was based on administrative grounds under section 15(1)(f) of the Freedom of Information of Act as the Department plans to publish the records, as the Secretary General has outlined, but with redactions, by 8 September. Have these records been published? If not, why are we not in possession of them today if we are to have all the facts and come to some sort of decision on the process?

In a follow-up to queries from my colleague, Deputy Cowen, the Minister said the Tánaiste was not involved in any detailed discussions in advance of the Cabinet proposals. Will the Minister clarify what he was told and when, and on what date Ms Zappone was offered the job, subject to agreeing terms and conditions? Finally, on what date were terms and conditions agreed with the Secretary General of the Minister's Department?

Deputy David Stanton: I will not repeat any of the questions that have been asked. I will declare one thing at the beginning. When I was Chairman of the justice committee a number of years ago, I served with the then Senator, Katherine Zappone, and found her to be an independent thinker, courageous, brave, very talented, very diplomatic, highly respected, hard-working and selfless. I want to put that on the record because too many times we have had hearings,

debates and media reports about colleagues and former colleagues after which they were totally exonerated. I am referring to people such as the former Minister, Alan Shatter, one of the most amazing Ministers I have ever come across. He is extraordinarily hard-working and talented and was virtually hounded out of office, as was Frances Fitzgerald when she was in the same Department. Again, both of them were totally exonerated later. In my experience of working with Katherine Zappone, she was exemplary: very caring, very hard-working and selfless. It is a missed opportunity that she has now decided, because of the controversy, to walk away from this position.

I have just one question for the Minister. I note a number of reports state democracy is in decline around the world. My colleague, Deputy Lawless, mentioned a number of countries where this is evident, and there are far more. We have seen 15 consecutive years of decline in global freedoms. We see 38% of the world's population now living under regimes which are not free. Most recently, of course, we have seen reports of what could happen or might be happening in Afghanistan, which we will come to later. That is one country which is getting the spotlight at the moment but there is so much more happening in many more jurisdictions, and democracy, even in parts of Europe, is in retreat, as, again, Deputy Lawless said earlier. In March of this year Freedom House said the share of the countries designated "not free" had reached its highest level since the deterioration of democracy began in 2006 and that countries with declines in political rights and civil liberties outnumbered those with gains by the largest margin recorded during the 15-year period since. We are, therefore, living in a time when, more than ever, we need people advocating for freedom of expression and of opinion if we value democracy as we practise it.

There are some countries which say our form of democracy is wrong and what they are doing is correct. Obviously, I do not agree with that and I am sure most colleagues here do not either. Across the world we see media, including independent media, being attacked, reporters being executed and jailed, opposition groups being banned, leaders of opposition groups being jailed and so on. Will the Minister comment on that? Is there anything in these reports to influence his thinking in appointing somebody to be our advocate for freedom of expression and of opinion globally? I ask colleagues to join me in saying that, now more than ever, when democracy is under such threat internationally, we need to be vigilant. It is happening internally in countries where alt-right and alt-left groups are coming forward and it is happening across Europe. We saw it happen in the United States as well earlier this year. We have to be vigilant, therefore, and look at the bigger picture.

Again, I hold the former Minister, Katherine Zappone, in the highest regard. She is a woman of exceptional ability and courage, as she has shown by what she has done throughout her life. She was an inspired choice for this particular position as she was living in New York. We have got to raise our gaze a little here and look at the bigger picture. That is hugely important. That is all I have to say on the matter. I feel that it is a missed opportunity and big mistakes were made that were not intentional.

I thank the Minister and his officials for being here with us. However, I think we have got to be more vigilant. Perhaps later on the committee should have a look at what is happening with respect to democracy, freedom of the press and freedom of expression and opinion across the world to see what we can do to strengthen freedom for people who are not experiencing it. In fact, when you look at it, Ireland is very high on the human freedom index. We are very much up there. We are also very high on the world press freedom index. Therefore, we are very fortunate in this country, but we should not take it for granted.

Chairman: I thank Deputy Stanton. I think it is timely, having regard to what Deputy Stanton said, that I should intervene on the basis that our meeting must come to a conclusion in about 25 minutes' time. A number of direct and serious questions have been put to the Minister for response. I am very keen that he has the opportunity to respond. I am conscious of the fact that I still see the hands of Deputies Brady, Gannon and Cowen and Senator Ardagh raised. We have not had a round of supplementary questions. Is it the view of members, in particular Deputies Brady, Cowen and Gannon and Senator Craughwell, that we should defer a consideration of Afghanistan until the earliest opportunity the Minister is available, having regard to the fact that might be some days away given his diary and the fact he has international commitments or should we cease this discussion and proceed with what will be a very limited discussion on the situation in Afghanistan in any event? Where do we stand? Should we proceed on this issue?

Deputy Gary Gannon: I do not think we have enough time to give the issue the due process it deserves. Perhaps it would be better to defer it.

Chairman: It appears to be the consensus of the committee that we continue, allow the Minister to respond and deal with a number of outstanding issues. We will defer the matter of Afghanistan until the earliest possible opportunity, which will, at the earliest, be the end of next week or probably the week after. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I am in the Chair's hands, so whatever he prefers. I am happy to answer any questions of the Opposition.

Chairman: I think we have reached agreement on that with Deputies Gannon, Brady and Cowen and Senators Ardagh and Craughwell, who I cannot see, but who I think has indicated that he wishes to ask a further question. I ask the Minister, having regard to the time for this section of the meeting in which we have 25 minutes remaining, to respond to Deputy Lawless and others. I am anxious to come back for a supplementary round with Deputies Cowen and Brady.

Deputy Simon Coveney: First of all, the comments of Deputy Stanton really sum up why we thought this role was useful and would add value to the work of the Department. It was my judgment that Katherine Zappone was someone who was very suitable for this role. That is the way special envoys are appointed. If there is a role the Department or the Minister thinks needs a new focus or added value, then you pick someone who you think could do a good job. That is what we did in the context of this, initially. As I said in the media, and as the Secretary General said, initially we looked at an LGBTIQ+ special envoy because Ireland is doing, and continues to do, much work in that area, but the view of the Department was that broadening it out would allow that person to be more effective in terms of getting access to countries and raising questions in a broader human rights context. That is why the role developed into what it was.

There was a suggestion earlier that perhaps the Tánaiste had some involvement in the build up to meeting Katherine Zappone in Dublin in terms of getting an appointment across the line or something. I would have spoken to Katherine Zappone long in advance of that to ask her whether she would be interested in taking up this role. The Department was working on what the job specification might look like and so on. At that stage, I was asking the Secretary General to try to finalise that. This would have been going on for weeks in advance of that. The Merrion event, which I think was on 21 July, had no involvement whatsoever in this process. In fact, I did not even know the event was of any significance. We were trying to finalise this process - ironically, while I was out of the country - in advance of bringing something to Cabinet.

Senator Wilson asked whether there was a memorandum on the agenda for Cabinet. Yes, there was. What often happens when making an appointment is that a memorandum goes to the Government the previous week. Normally, the deadline for that is the Friday before a Tuesday Cabinet meeting. If there are names of persons to be appointed, those names are provided in the couple of days before the Cabinet meeting takes place. Otherwise, names can be leaked and so on. This is why, in the build-up to a Cabinet meeting, the advisers' meetings go through all of these appointments and if there is something controversial, they will raise it, try to solve problems and so on. It was at that point that I should have ensured the Taoiseach or his advisers were aware of this, and the Green Party for that matter. That did not happen. This was a genuine mistake that we will try to ensure is not repeated.

With regard to freedom of information, my understanding is that we want to publish all of the papers in relation to this affair at the same time. Obviously, they can then be shared with the Oireachtas. As to whether the contents of the memorandum were discussed among Secretaries General, I do not think so. Certainly, if the Secretary General of the Department of the Taoiseach knew about this, I am sure he would have raised it with the Taoiseach. This was in my Department and it should have been communicated earlier. As I said, it was my fault.

Is the position now defunct? I hope not, but I would like to come back to the committee and get agreement on how we approach special envoys in the future. This is what I said earlier. Every time I make a suggestion that we should have a special envoy in a certain area, which, by the way, is something virtually every country in the Western world is doing, I do not want it suggested that somehow I am appointing somebody in a way that is inappropriate. I do not want that for future Ministers and I do not want it for my own role either.

Chairman: Thank you.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I would like to come back to the committee to try to get an agreed process that recognises the special envoy selection process.

To clarify for Deputy Lawless, I believe 12 special envoys were deployed to advance Ireland's regional and bilateral engagement as we tried to get support in the build-up to the vote on the Security Council. Nine months in advance of that vote, the Government asked Katherine Zappone, who was a serving Minister at the time, whether she would be a special envoy in this area. She had been interested in it and had been campaigning on the issue when she was abroad. She took a real interest in it and I thought she would be a good additional support. Having a Government Minister looking to get support adds an awful lot of value.

I could only do too much. I was not travelling much, mainly because I was involved in a lot of Brexit issues. Having a second Minister who was willing to put time into campaigning for the Security Council role was very helpful. Katherine Zappone was very helpful and genuinely interested in the issues. It was no more complicated than that. She was not paid anything extra. She simply received expenses for some of her extra travel linked to Ireland's campaign to get onto the Security Council. That would have happened through the Departments as would normally be the case.

Chairman: I thank the Minister. I am still conscious of the clock. I will now proceed to the round of supplementary questions. I ask members to be concise, not to be repetitive and not to go over ground on which we have received answers. I will call members in the following order: Senator Ardagh, Deputies Gannon, Brady and Cowen, Senator Craughwell and Deputy Clarke.

Senator Catherine Ardagh: I know I am being very pedantic but the Minister did not clarify exactly when he got the text message. He said he was in Africa when the event was going on, but he did not say when he received the text message. The reason I am being so pedantic is we are looking for a complete timeline and we may not get access. The Minister has agreed to share the correspondence with the committee. I do not know if it is appropriate for us to have access to the text messages between him and the former Minister, Katherine Zappone. I am looking for a little more detail on the text communication.

Chairman: I ask the Minister to respond on the timing of the texts insofar as he can.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I want to add Deputy Stanton's contribution that across the world democratic values are under threat. One of the factors that contributes to that is the public perception that insiders are often given jobs without fair process or open process. That is why this is particularly important. In that regard, I want to raise the following issue again. The Minister mentioned Katherine Zappone contacted him in February when she outlined her work with the UNFPA and he said very specifically he did not feel he was being lobbied at that point. He also referenced a conversation he had with Katherine Zappone late last summer when she made herself available for either professional or personal work with the Minister's office and the UN. At that point, did the Minister feel he was being lobbied by Katherine Zappone for a job or a role as an envoy or any other position?

Chairman: I ask the Minister to address the issue of lobbying and conversations. I call Deputy Brady, following which I will call the Minister.

Deputy John Brady: A spokesperson said on behalf of the Minister that the Minister first heard about the gig in the Merrion Hotel from a report in a national newspaper. That is incorrect in that the Minister has stated he received a text message from Katherine Zappone. I want to follow up with the Minister on the specific date of that text message, which I would deem to be an invitation to that gig. Can we have a specific date in that regard and a specific date for the text message the Minister received from the Tánaiste, Deputy Varadkar? The Minister might also clarify if the text from the Tánaiste was received before or after the invitation. The Minister said that was the first time he had any kind of engagement with the Tánaiste on the appointment of Katherine Zappone. Am I correct in that regard or did the Minister have communications with the Tánaiste on previous occasions on a proposal or an offer of that role to Katherine Zappone?

On freedom of information, a request has been already turned down. I would like to know on what grounds it was refused and if text messages are subject to FOI. That is critically important. In other jurisdictions, private text messages are subject to FOI. The same should apply in this instance. Can we get a commitment from the Minister that text messages between him and Ms Zappone and between him and the Tánaiste on this specific issue will be made available under FOI and to all members of this committee?

Chairman: There is a legal procedure for FOI requests and an accepted practice and procedure in that regard. I remind members of the comments of Secretary General, Mr. Burgess, earlier in the meeting. I call the Minister on the matter of the direct questions as put, following which I will return to Deputies Cowen, Senator Craughwell and Deputy Clarke for a final wrap-up.

Deputy Simon Coveney: On Senator Ardagh's question, to be honest I do not have the exact date for when I got that text but I remember seeing it after the event because of the furore

around it. I did not take any notice of it at the time I got it and I did not answer it. I did not go and I was not there. So, I just do not have that date, I am afraid.

Deputy Gannon suggested that democratic values are under threat partly because insiders get jobs without process. There was a process here and the Department went through quite an extensive process in looking at whether there was added value in the role subsequently offered to Katherine Zappone. Looking at the roles that people like Nuala O'Loan, Tom Arnold and Kenneth Thompson played, these are all people who were in or around government. They are connected and proven to be good communicators and that is why they are asked to do these jobs. That should not be seen as them being insiders. I take the point made by the Deputy, which is why we can look at a new process that members feel is more likely to gain the public trust with roles like this. I would be more than open to that.

There was a question on lobbying that was asked twice. I am sorry because I should have answered it the first time. I did not regard Katherine Zappone as lobbying me. I had a conversation with her after she left office, when she was essentially ringing me to say goodbye. She was heading to New York or else she was there. I think she spoke to me before she left for New York. She basically said as part of that conversation "good luck with the UN Security Council job and if I can be of any help in a private capacity or a professional capacity, I would be delighted to be". It was not a phone call to make herself available for that. I suspect she rang around to a number of her colleagues to effectively say she was starting a new life in New York. I had a subsequent conversation with her around the United States presidential election because she was following it closely and suspected I would be doing so too. She updated me about her working with the United Nations Population Fund, UNFPA.

It is not fair to turn this into an assumption that every time she contacted me, she was lobbying me for a job. That is not how I saw it. I was the one who asked for my Secretary General's view on whether Katherine Zappone could add value to our team, given that she had worked with us quite a lot in the build-up to the role with the UN Security Council and that she was now living in New York. That is essentially what happened.

In response to Deputy Brady, like many people on this call, I do not hold on to text messages for long periods in terms of data on my phone and so on. From recollection and in an effort to try to be as open as I can with the committee, I got a text from the Tánaiste and I think it was the week before. He said in the next few days Katherine Zappone would be in Dublin and he was meeting her and was there anything he should know, basically. I do not remember the exact text but that is effectively the content. I got back to him to say I had been talking to her about a special envoy position that the Department is working on. Effectively, that was it. He essentially wanted an update on whether there was anything he should know. It was no more or less than that.

On the question of freedom of information, I will make available anything that is appropriate to be made available under that process. There is no issue or anything to hide.

Deputy John Brady: Is the Minister saying he has deleted all the texts relating to this? Will he confirm which text came first, the one from the Tánaiste or Katherine Zappone? I find it unreal that the Minister would delete texts like this if that is the case.

Chairman: I do not think the Minister has that information at his disposal as we speak. I call Deputy Cowen.

Deputy John Brady: Sorry, but which text came first? Was it the text from the Tánaiste or the invite to the party?

Chairman: Does the Minister have that information? He may not have it.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I do not know. I do not really see the relevance either way but I am not sure which came first, to be honest. I was not aware of the event. I largely ignore these. A lot of people get texts with branded images, photographs or whatever. I was not even in the country so I was not focused on the event one way or the other. As it happens, I did not make the connection between the event and the text I got from the Tánaiste. I am just being open with the committee; that is what happened.

Chairman: That is acceptable.

Deputy John Brady: I asked a question previously-----

Chairman: No, I believe the Minister-----

Deputy John Brady: -----on the engagement with the Tánaiste on the process. Prior to the text message from the Tánaiste, were there any conversations about Katherine Zappone, the process, the appointment or the proposal?

Deputy Simon Coveney: No, there were not.

Deputy Barry Cowen: I am glad the appointment did not go ahead. I made that point earlier. Lessons have to be learned. New processes and procedures have to be put in place. Simply saying that envoys were employed previously without such a furore is not good enough considering that the appointment in question was of a former Minister and close colleague in the last Government.

I am aware that there are much more pressing items this week, such as Afghanistan, the removal of the Covid restrictions and the Housing for All document. I do not want to play “gotcha” but when this was an issue some months ago, I was led to believe or I understood that the Tánaiste only became aware of the details associated with the appointment immediately before the Cabinet meeting at which the proposal was made. I now believe the Minister is saying he was contacted by the Tánaiste by text saying that he would be meeting Katherine Zappone in the coming days and that he needed to know whether there was anything he should be aware of. The Minister informed him that he was considering her for a role as a special envoy. There is a lot of information in that alone that would suggest the Tánaiste knew a lot more than might be suggested by the view that he got the specific details immediately before the meeting. On what exact date did the Secretary General and Katherine Zappone agree terms, given that the Minister offered her the post subject to those terms being agreed? On what date was the Tánaiste informed? On what date was the Cabinet meeting? I want to know in order that we can see a timeline. I ask these questions with the best will in the world. Thankfully, the appointment did not take place. Lessons have been learned and we have to move on. At the time the appointment was made, the inference was that the information mistakenly only came to bear immediately before the Cabinet meeting. That is not exactly correct, for whatever reasons. Could the Minister clarify the issue so we can put it behind us, move on and deal with much more pressing and important matters from here on in?

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: Perception is everything. If a clerical officer was to be appointed in the morning, there would be an open and transparent competition. I fail to under-

stand how the Minister could appoint somebody to such an important global position without bringing that appointment to this committee first and having it discuss it and take some notice of it. I am really disturbed by some of the last-minute appointments made at the last Cabinet meeting of the last Dáil session. I find it very disturbing. It is clearly being interpreted by members of the public as a matter of those in the club getting all the goodies that are going and of those who are not in the club having no chance whatsoever in this country. That is the way the Zappone appointment has come across, notwithstanding that the woman would have been an excellent choice under normal circumstances. It is also the way the appointment of some ambassadors that have to take up their positions in ten months' time is being interpreted. If you are in the club, you are being looked after; if you are not, you are not being looked after. I ask for a process to be put in place in order that this and other committees will have sight of envoy appointments before they are made in the future.

Chairman: I do not know what other appointments Senator Craughwell is referring to. There were several appointments, as the Minister said, but we are dealing with the issue of special envoys. It would be unfair to the process and to everybody involved to raise at the last minute issues that are unrelated to the appointment of special envoys.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: I find it difficult to believe that before coming to this meeting, the Minister did not have his ducks in a row and did not know what text messages had come in from whom and when. I also find it difficult to believe that it is standard practice for people to delete text messages. I respectfully suggest that the Minister invest in either a new phone or some cloud back-up because that is not standard practice among people I know. I asked the Minister to provide a timeline on the run-up to this appointment and three times he referenced FOI and papers. Am I now to believe that he will provide to the committee a timeline of events in respect of this appointment only subject to FOI? Do we, as a committee of the Oireachtas, have to wait in line, like journalists who wish to report on this event in the media, in order to get access to this information and a full timeline relating to calls, text messages, WhatsApp messages, emails and conversations? Is the Minister telling the committee that it has to abide by FOI rules?

Chairman: It is important that we are fair to the Minister. We have been discussing this issue for almost two hours and have been provided with a great deal of information. There are some outstanding issues to which reference was made and we ask that they be followed up in writing. We should be fair to the Minister insofar as the process is concerned. I ask him to respond to the recent questions.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I am happy to answer the question on timelines. I have provided a number of timelines in the context of the first conversation I had with my Secretary General on 24 February. A food-for-thought paper was then prepared in the context of the Department's responsibilities and the implementation of the national LGBTI+ inclusion strategy. That food-for-thought paper, which followed the conversation with the Secretary General, was published on 25 March. An overview of practice in other EU member states, the UK and the US, in respect of the appointment of ambassadors and envoys with human rights responsibilities, was then prepared on 29 March. There was an exchange between different divisions within the Department and with our team in Geneva, which is where our expertise is on human rights, and a concept note setting out the rationale and scope for the appointment of an envoy in the human rights space was prepared on 18 April.

I had a conversation at the end of February. A process was taking place within the Department and I was getting on with other things. This issue was under consideration and I was wait-

ing for people to come back to me. There is nothing unusual about that. Towards the end of the process, in the build-up to a Government decision on 27 July, I felt it would be useful to try to bring it to a conclusion for that meeting because, in effect, it was the final Government meeting of the term. Moreover, we were appointing a series of ambassadors, so I thought it was a good time to appoint this special envoy role. On 19 July, I asked the Secretary General to discuss the proposed role with Katherine Zappone and he met her in order to do so. A process was under way and it had nothing to do with any other Ministers or anybody else. This was a process under way between the Department of Foreign Affairs and Katherine Zappone. What happened at the Merrion Hotel and all of that is a completely separate issue, which is why I did not take any notice of it. I was out of the country and had no involvement or interest in it one way or the other. On 22 July, a special envoy terms-of-reference paper was prepared on the rationale, tasking, timeframe and support, and my understanding is that was shared with the committee. The mandate and appointment was approved by me on 24 July in order that we could put together the Government memo before the Government meeting on 27 July.

That is the timeframe people are asking for. This was a process under way in parallel with all the other things going on at the same time. There are some inferences that somehow something inappropriate was going on. That was not the case, which is why I brought it to Cabinet for approval. What I should have done is had the conversation in advance of Cabinet to make sure that the other two parties in government knew about that. I raised it with my own colleagues, effectively for the first time in any detail, including with the Tánaiste in any detail, in the meeting before the Cabinet when I explained what the job was about, how it came about and so on. I had not gone through it in any detail with anyone before that.

Senator Craughwell's commented that if one is in the club, one gets appointments. Senator Craughwell seems to be raising a concern in terms of how we appoint ambassadors. We announced the appointment of new ambassadors to London, Paris, Washington and the UN. These are all very senior roles. It is absolute normal practice in the Department that one would announce ambassadors in terms of transitions, particularly for big appointments as all of those appointments are, months in advance before they actually happen because then people, essentially, change their lives. They have got to bring their families with them and in many cases, they are moving to a different part of the world for the first time. That process takes time and one needs to give people notice. There is not anything unusual about that. I really do not want the appointment of ambassadors to be somehow rolled into the appointment of a special envoy here because they are entirely different processes.

As I say, the whole point of the special envoy role is that there is flexibility. If one has a specific task that one wants done and one has someone who has the skill set to do it, then the Minister can appoint a special envoy to get that job done. That is what happened here. There were not other considerations involved.

Chairman: I am obliged to bring matters to a conclusion in accordance with the current Covid restrictions, hopefully for the last time. I thank the Minister, Deputy Coveney, on behalf of the committee for meeting us here and for dealing with members' questions in the manner as dealt. I thank the officials for being present, namely, Ms Hyland and Mr. Burgess.

On behalf of the committee and on my own behalf, I want to wish the Secretary General, Mr. Burgess, well. This is the last meeting of the foreign affairs committee that he will attend in his capacity as Secretary General. Dare I say, this is the last meeting he will attend in his capacity as Secretary General because I think he steps down this evening. I thank him for his leadership and stewardship in the Department as Secretary General over the past seven and half years. He

is stepping aside as Secretary General but he will continue in the Department of Foreign Affairs as the ambassador to France and we wish him well in that regard.

I thank members for their contributions and for the process that we deployed. My two takeaways from the meeting are that the Minister has acknowledged, as he did shortly after the controversy, that some mistakes were made and that the process is somewhat less than satisfactory. He acknowledged here this afternoon that he is considering a revised process and that this revised process would involve reference to this committee. We would agree that there should be a role for this committee in the context of such appointments, that is, in regard to special envoys.

I am sure that Senator Craughwell did not mean to cast any adverse aspersions or otherwise on the appointment of ambassadors. I think it was regrettable that towards the end of the meeting, that implication was made. I am sure it was not meant and I see Senator Craughwell indicating that he agrees with me on that point. The second takeaway, as well as the process, is the issue of the communication and the timelines. I acknowledge what the Secretary General, Mr. Burgess, said about the Department wishing to provide information rather than in any way hinder or restrict the provision of information. There is some more work to do in that regard either directly under FOI requests or, equally as important, by requests from members of this committee through our channels as the parliamentary committee on foreign affairs and defence. There are some documents and records that we are anxious to see. I acknowledge the documents and papers already furnished in that regard and I thank officials for the briefing.

With that, I will bring matters to a conclusion. We trust that the Minister will be in a position to join us for a meeting in respect of the situation in Kabul and Afghanistan at the earliest opportunity as soon as his diary permits. We will be very anxious to accommodate him for such an engagement. Since our meeting started I have received an apology from Senator Ó Donnghaile.

The joint committee adjourned at 7.07 p.m. *sine die*.