



## SEANAD ÉIREANN

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*Déardaoin, 11 Bealtaine 2006.*  
*Thursday, 11 May 2006.*  
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Chuaigh an Leas-Chathaoirleach i gceannas ar 10.30 a.m.

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*Paidir.*  
*Prayer.*  
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### Business of Seanad.

**An Leas-Chathaoirleach:** I have received notice from Senator O'Rourke that, on the motion for the Adjournment of the House today, she proposes to raise the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Education and Science to detail the steps taken to implement the plans for a new secondary school in Kilbeggan, County Westmeath.

I have also received notice from Senator Morrissey of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Education and Science to indicate the number of post-primary places available in Swords for September 2006-07 given the anxiety created recently when parents queued overnight to enrol their children in Loreto College, Swords.

I have also received notice from Senator McHugh of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Agriculture and Food to consider a review of the current mechanisms in place to assist farmers in accessing information at departmental level.

I regard the matters raised by the Senators as suitable for discussion on the Adjournment and they will be taken at the conclusion of business.

### Order of Business.

**Ms O'Rourke:** The Order of Business is No. 1, statements on the Joint Committee on European Affairs Report on Migration, to be taken at the conclusion of the Order of Business and to conclude not later than 1.30 p.m., with the contributions of spokespersons not to exceed 12 minutes and those of other Senators not to exceed eight minutes, and the Minister to be called upon to reply not later than five minutes before the conclusion of the statements.

**Mr. B. Hayes:** The Leader of the House will be aware, more than any other Member, of the exacting standards set out for officeholders in

respect of records of official meetings. Section 2.2.6 of the guidelines for officeholders refers specifically to the question of having officials and notetakers in attendance at a meeting a Minister would have with a third party. Will the Leader care to comment, as a distinguished former Minister who served in various Departments in various Governments——

**Ms O'Rourke:** I will not fall for that but go on.

**Mr. B. Hayes:**——on the fact that the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform had a meeting on 11 June 2005 with a private investigator? It is not clear whether a notetaker or an official was present at that meeting but will she comment on whether it is a clear material breach of the code for a Minister to attend such a meeting without a notetaker or official present?

Will she further agree that it was not appropriate for the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform to meet with such a person, given that the person could well be, if he is not already, a material witness at the Morris tribunal? Will she further agree with me that given that this was only a few days before a significant debate in the other House on the Morris tribunal, for which the Minister has direct ministerial responsibility to both Houses of the Oireachtas, that it was also inappropriate——

**An Leas-Chathaoirleach:** Is the Senator calling for a debate on this matter?

**Mr. B. Hayes:** I seek the view of the Leader of the House as to whether it was a clear breach of the ministerial code. That is my question and I would be interested to hear the Leader's reply.

On a second matter, Senator Quinn had the courage some weeks ago to raise the controversial issue of nuclear energy in this country. He was shot down by some Senators on both sides of the House but the point he raised is important.

The Government has given a clear commitment that we should have an interconnector between Britain and Ireland as a means of supplementing our energy sources in the future. However, if and when that interconnector is in place, as I understand it the Government has yet to decide whether it would accept energy from the United Kingdom, 25% of which is derived from nuclear power.

We now have a typical Irish solution to an Irish problem. We do not want nuclear energy. We rightly believe it to be dirty but we are prepared to accept nuclear energy from another country once it supplements our energy supply and we are prepared to link into a European grid, 70% of which is powered by nuclear energy.

If we are honest about this issue, the point Senator Quinn raised is central to this debate. If we are in favour of the interconnector, that is fine, but part and parcel of that is accepting energy, 25% of which could be derived from

[Mr. B. Hayes.]

nuclear technology. We must get our thinking straight on this issue. I want people to go on the record in regard to it. There is an opportunity for a significant debate with the Minister with responsibility for energy on the question of an interconnector to determine the exact position of the Government on the question of nuclear energy.

**Mr. O'Toole:** I understand Senator Quinn will give the House an opportunity to discuss that matter on Private Members' business next week.

I raised a related matter in the House on a number of occasions, namely, the question of where we stand on renewable energy. A man who was far too bright to be retained in the public service, Eddie O'Connor, has put forward a clear proposal for a linked series of windfarms from the Baltic to the Mediterranean. It is the most creative and progressive proposal to deal with wind energy I have seen. Using more than the regular 150 km or 200 km length of typical weatherfront would provide us with a constant stream of energy, as there would be wind on one end if there was none on the other. Storms in the Baltic might be creating energy while there was no wind in the Mediterranean. Linking them and Ireland would deal with the issue of the non-uniformity of wind energy.

Will the Government explain where it stands on the EU's consideration of Airtricity's proposal? It is far too progressive, creative and imaginative for Europe to jump on, but I hope the Government will recognise that the man who could have turned Bord na Móna around but was sacked by the State more than ten years ago for invalid reasons has a significant contribution to make to the matters raised by Senators Brian Hayes and Quinn.

A matter that has been often raised, including by Mr. Maurice Manning, the former leader of Fine Gael in the House, Senator Brian Hayes and the Leader, is the press council and actions against the press. A story culminated yesterday. Two years ago, the story of a County Roscommon footballer allegedly playing snooker in the nude gave the country a laugh but undoubtedly damaged his business. He has needed to wait two years to prove his case, to the incalculable damage to his business, his family and himself. He endured much pressure before *The Sun* conceded it was wrong and paid him a significant amount of money.

Will the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform inform the House where the State stands on defamation laws and all that relates to them? This matter raises the question of whether there is a case for having an investigatory group within the press council to whom a person could bring a grievance against the media. It could make the case to the newspaper in question after concluding something was an unfair comment. Most people are afraid to go to court due to the costs,

pressure and descriptive prose that will subsequently appear in the media. We need to make it easy for people to find justice.

A number of days ago, a mobile telephone interrupted while I was speaking. I made it clear to the Leas-Chathaoirleach that the telephone was not mine, but it was. I found out that it had a fault. I apologise to the House.

**Mr. Ryan:** I love to see Senator O'Toole in his apologetic mode.

**Mr. Dardis:** There is no chance of that with Senator Ryan.

**Mr. B. Hayes:** He should try it sometime.

**Mr. Ryan:** I am naturally humble.

**Mr. O'Toole:** He has much to be humble about.

**Mr. Ryan:** That is a bit old. First, I must apologise to the House.

**Ms O'Rourke:** I will need to think of something.

**Mr. Dardis:** It is a virus.

**Mr. Ryan:** Instead of leaving it to land on everyone's lap, I should have done my colleagues the courtesy of telling them the Labour Party is publishing a Bill. I am speaking about the genealogy and heraldry Bill and would be happy to arrange a briefing during the coming weeks for anyone who is interested, courtesy of the Genealogical Society of Ireland, at the insistence of which we will publish the Bill. It has legitimate concerns. This matter is a classic example of something that is important but not urgent and can, therefore, be left off of political agendas.

**Mr. B. Hayes:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Ryan:** I agree with my colleagues about the need for a broad debate on energy. On energy supply, one of the critical issues for ordinary people is the price they are paying. I have received a number of allegations that every time Bord Gáis increases gas prices because of increased wholesale gas costs, the standing charge increases proportionately. I can understand that Bord Gáis needs to increase the price of gas because of the price at which it buys gas, but I cannot understand why the entirely unconnected standing charge increases proportionately. Attaching a 40% increase in standing charges is in the territory of a clever rip-off, as it has nothing to do with the wholesale price of gas. Will the Leader arrange a debate on this issue?

Of more immediate concern are the statements in this morning's media that even after improvements, Ireland has some of the lowest levels of maternity benefits. Extraordinarily, the European countries at the top of the world competitiveness

league and ahead of us are those with the best maternity benefits. The argument made by employer groups and the Department of Finance that extending maternity benefits would undermine our competitiveness is contradicted by the facts. While it seems too soon after discussions in recent years, I would like a debate on the maternity benefits package. We are underproviding for those who experience difficulties in combining their work and family lives. It is our job as legislators to deal with this matter and I ask that the Leader arrange a debate.

Previously, I told the Leader that people can no longer make intelligent decisions about what they purchase from abroad irrespective of their disapproval of certain Governments. For example, textiles no longer carry country of origin markings. Yesterday, my friend and colleague from Cork, Deputy Coveney, MEP, raised the issue of slave labour camps in China and called for a boycott of its produce. I would be happy to do so but the country of origin will not be marked on the produce.

I do not understand how this has happened. If I travel to the United States, everything I buy carries country of origin markings, but the European Union has decided to make this impossible. The Minister of State responsible for this matter has informed me that there is a European problem but my colleague in the European Parliament, Proinsias De Rossa, MEP, said there is not. Will the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment address the House on fair trade and the capacity of consumers to influence the behaviour of multinationals in terms of minimum labour standards in developing countries? It is an extremely important issue. Will the Leader arrange a debate on this matter?

**Mr. B. Hayes:** Hear, hear.

**Dr. Mansergh:** While it is desirable to have as many ministerial meetings minuted as possible, taoisigh and Ministers of all parties had informal meetings without notetakers. It would have been impossible for them to carry on their business if this had not been allowed.

As a country, we have benefited from the euro in terms of lower interest rates, an absence of exchange rate speculation and sheer convenience when travelling. We could debate the Minister for Finance's consideration of the applications of some of the Baltic countries to join the euro in January 2007, in particular Lithuania. There is a difficulty about the inflation rate being 0.1% above the limit. We all remember that Italy and Belgium joined the euro with considerable public debts of more than 100% of GDP when they should have been 60%. I hope the latitude shown to a number of older EU states will be shown to the Baltic countries and that Ireland will be on the side that does not adopt too rigid an attitude.

I wish to clarify a matter debated without conclusion on yesterday's Order of Business. I

checked the record of Report Stage of the Garda Síochána Bill 2005, Volume No. 180, column No. 2190 of 28 June 2005.

The Fine Gael Party is correct in suggesting, as the Minister stated himself, that he had originally provided for a 12-month moratorium between the Bill being brought into effect and the possibility of a reserve being created. However, Deputy Jim O'Keeffe argued that the proposal was surplus to requirements—

**Mr. Cummins:** Did he say that in this House?

**Mr. B. Hayes:** On a point of order—

**An Leas-Chathaoirleach:** Senator Mansergh—

**Dr. Mansergh:** I was about to finish my point.

**An Leas-Chathaoirleach:** We cannot have a rehash of yesterday's Order of Business today.

**Mr. B. Hayes:** On a point of order—

**An Leas-Chathaoirleach:** We cannot have this.

**Dr. Mansergh:** I am sorry, a Leas-Chathaoirleach—

**An Leas-Chathaoirleach:** I will not tolerate a rehash of yesterday's Order of Business.

**Mr. B. Hayes:** Reading from prepared notes—

**An Leas-Chathaoirleach:** Order, Senator.

**Dr. Mansergh:** They are not prepared notes.

**Mr. B. Hayes:** I know the Senator is relatively new to the House, but the long-standing precedent that has not been—

**Dr. Mansergh:** Deputy Jim O'Keeffe was the person responsible and he agreed to the delay—

**Mr. B. Hayes:** He is not even present to defend himself.

**Dr. Mansergh:** The Fine Gael Party—

**An Leas-Chathaoirleach:** Senator Hayes, Senator Mansergh has the floor, but I will not tolerate—

**Dr. Mansergh:** — suggested that the moratorium should be—

**An Leas-Chathaoirleach:** Senator Mansergh, please.

**Mr. B. Hayes:** I know the Senator is new to this House. That is what makes it difficult.

**An Leas-Chathaoirleach:** Senator Mansergh.

**Dr. Mansergh:** —that is why the reserve force is being brought in correctly.

**An Leas-Chathaoirleach:** Thank you Senator. I call Senator Coghlan.

**Mr. B. Hayes:** That was helpful.

**Mr. Coghlan:** The House is not normally so lively on a Thursday morning.

**Dr. Mansergh:** The Fine Gael Senators do not like it, do they?

**Mr. Coghlan:** I strongly support my colleague, Senator Brian Hayes, in his request for clarification from the Leader regarding the appropriateness or otherwise of a Minister meeting someone who is a witness or is due to be a witness before a tribunal. I am aware that Ministers are subject to somewhat more strict guidelines than other Members of the Oireachtas. While all Members are subject to the ethics legislation, I understand that Ministers are also subject to something known as the Cabinet Handbook. Obviously, I am not familiar with the guidelines. However, I take it that greater restrictions are imposed on Ministers.

While I accept Senator Mansergh's point, Senator Brian Hayes's point made a distinction, in that it pertained to dealing with a person who was to be a witness before a tribunal.

As Senator Brian Hayes noted, this is a question of appropriateness. I recently saw another Minister behave most correctly when some people raised matters of serious concern with him. He had a notetaker and he made a decision as to how he would refer it and deal with the matter. Everything was minuted.

I wish to expand this point slightly. I ask the Leader—

**Mr. O'Toole:** Was the Minister from Kerry?

**Mr. Dardis:** The next time Senator Coghlan meets a Minister in a bar, he should bring notepaper with him.

**Mr. Coghlan:** I am aware of the existence of some ethical guidelines and standards—

**Ms O'Rourke:** Is it about the money one does or does not receive?

**Mr. Coghlan:** No. I refer to a State document which I understand is issued and which lays down guidelines for all semi-State companies. In this regard, I also understand the Government has a gender balance policy for the State. I understand — the Leader may correct me — that the ratio is 60:40 for State companies. Perhaps some of them, and Fáilte Ireland in particular, do better than that.

Recently, however, I witnessed a case in which a State company owned 75% of another company which was operating through trustees. The trustees held a meeting to nominate a person to fill a vacancy on the board and they divided six to three on the issue. Their attitude was “hump the State and its policy”. They thought that there should be horses for courses and that they knew best. They went ahead with a man.

**An Leas-Chathaoirleach:** Is the Senator seeking a debate on this issue?

**Mr. Coghlan:** This is a company with which both the Leas-Chathaoirleach and I are familiar, through a pastime of which he is more fond than me.

**Ms O'Rourke:** It is golf.

**Mr. Dardis:** The Senator is well over par.

**Mr. B. Hayes:** It is a golf club.

**Mr. Coghlan:** I never mentioned golf. I ask the Leader about State policy regarding gender balance. I would be interested to hear her views on the subject.

**Ms O'Rourke:** The Senator is a champion of women. Good for him.

**Mr. Moylan:** I support Senator O'Toole's comments regarding a press council. The publication by *The Sun*, which I consider to be a rag of a newspaper, of the information in respect of the prominent Roscommon footballer, who was a former all-star, was damnable. It was circulated widely in my locality and damaged that man's prospects in both football and business. I understand his business suffered as a result of what was published. Something must be done.

It is not good enough for the insurers of such newspapers to pay out large sums subsequently. The point made by Senator O'Toole is valid and has been raised by many Members previously. Something must be done. Many people, including politicians and footballers, are fair game. However, when they are not involved in any way, it is wrong that their position should be highlighted in such a fashion.

**Mr. Quinn:** While I was about to apologise, as that appears to be the thing to do, I will not. My apologies would have been for missing a debate on which I wished to speak yesterday. Hence, I was delighted to discover that Second Stage debate on the Road Safety Authority Bill did not conclude. This will provide me with an opportunity to speak on it whenever it comes before the House. Can the Leader inform the House as to when the Road Safety Authority Bill is likely to come before the House for the resumption of Second Stage?

I was not present because I was attending another European meeting in Helsinki. I was interested to learn of one aspect of road safety there. I am aware the Finns have a good record in this regard. I was informed that one step taken there was to link penalty points fines to income. A rather wealthy individual was recently fined €300,000 for speeding on his motorbike, because the fine was related to his income.

**Mr. Ryan:** In that case, Senator Quinn should mind himself.

**Mr. Quinn:** I was reminded that the introduction of this Bill provides Members with an opportunity to table amendments and make proposals, and it is good to see its introduction.

I also thank Senator Brian Hayes for referring to my request to hold a debate on energy. I will use my Private Member's time next week to facilitate a discussion on the Government's energy strategy. Regardless of whether this includes nuclear energy, this will provide Members with an opportunity to discuss the issue. It will also provide the Government with an opportunity to outline its views in this regard. I was impressed with the information imparted by Senator O'Toole in respect of the proposal to connect windfarms throughout Europe. I had not heard of it.

I also wish to support Senator Ryan's call for a debate on labelling non-food products. In Europe, we insist that food products imported from every country in Europe are labelled. It would be a useful debate because there is a strong view that we should not insist that every product, be it a cap, shirt or hat, be labelled with the country of origin. Such labelling is used by many countries as a protectionist policy to try to avoid the Internal Market which we are trying to create in Europe. Hence, I would welcome the opportunity to have such a debate in the near future.

**Mr. Hanafin:** I join other Members in their call for a debate on energy, especially on foot of the apology made by the managing director of Shell, which was a good start. In the wider context, while I am not personally in favour of the nuclear energy option, it is interesting to note that Ukraine, in which Chernobyl is situated, is considering an increase in its number of nuclear reactors. Hence, this debate would be worthwhile.

Evidently we have some resources. I refer to the gas that is offshore, in an area which is three or more times greater than our land area. Recently, some Opposition Members called for the State to become involved in exploration, which may be an answer. However, as for discussing the terms given to oil companies to induce exploration, it was not possible to induce anyone to go offshore and spend €40 million or €60 million per well at a time when oil cost \$5 per barrel. Realistically, one cannot expect an entrepreneur, who by definition is a risk-taker, to risk money

with no chance of return. Evidently, the laws reflected the reality at the time.

We cannot act like *el Presidente* of some South American country and decide that as the situation has changed, the rules for such individuals may be changed. That would be unfair. The oil companies came here under certain conditions and while we will ask them to apply those conditions, vast areas have yet to be explored. I look forward to the day when we are a major producer.

**Mr. McHugh:** I also welcome the calls for a debate in this regard, as well as welcoming Senator Quinn's intervention to facilitate next week's debate in respect of energy. It is unfortunate that whenever we debate energy we do so as a reaction to price increases. However, much good work is being done at local authority level where the debate is ongoing. A conference on renewable energy is taking place in Donegal on Friday, 19 May. Donegal County Council is being very proactive in examining the choices and solutions with which we are faced.

It is a problem that there is a 90% reliance on fossil fuels. Nuclear energy is also an option which is not sustainable in the long term. We must consider other options and solutions. Perhaps local authorities could get involved in rolling out their own energy options and solutions, including methane from former landfill sites or taking ownership of tidal power or wind power. We are all aware that the financing of local authorities is becoming unsustainable in the long term. This is a debate which must also take place.

Perhaps the Leader of the House will intervene in regard to the Youth Work Act. It has been on the table for a considerable time and many youth practitioners are getting very worried about their jobs and the sustainability of youth work programmes. Some 17 full-time youth work jobs in Donegal will be on the line at the beginning of 2007. These jobs are funded through the peace and reconciliation fund programme. As ADM-CPA will no longer be able to provide funding for jobs, it is important to implement the Youth Work Act provisions through the VEC and put in place the proper mechanisms to employ full-time community development workers and community youth workers. It is preventative and important work which should be rolled-out.

**Ms O'Rourke:** I thank Senator Brian Hayes for raising the point about Ministers' unofficial meetings with people. I can answer from my vast experience. One has many unofficial meetings because otherwise one would get no work done.

**Mr. O'Toole:** Absolutely.

**Ms O'Rourke:** I used to have very clandestine meetings with Senator O'Toole and Mr. Kieran Mulvey of the ASTI. These meetings were often held before attending a conference in order to

[Ms O'Rourke.]

hammer out points of view. I recall that we met in the Gresham Hotel. Ministers hold clinics all the time. I never had a note taker in my clinic; I took my own notes. People come to see their representatives in their clinics. If a man or woman expresses a wish for a meeting, one must meet them, and one does not have a note taker in one's handbag. I recall circular 20/87 was issued when I was Minister for Education. Things were so difficult there used to be five and six buses outside our house transporting whole schools, including boards of management and parents. My husband, Enda, used to say that he would set up a burger stall.

To go back to the point the Senator raised, it is a good Minister who has the confidence to meet someone and get various points of view without having a civil servant tucked in his or her pocket. Obviously, if one is meeting someone in the Department, there are plenty of note takers and plenty of people to kick one under the table and say, "No, we are not doing that. You cannot do that. You cannot say that." However, one must get informed informal opinion, which is good for equity in a situation.

The debate on Senator Quinn's energy policy next week will be welcome. Senator Hayes also raised the issue. We did not shoot down Senator Quinn on nuclear energy. We said the issue should be debated. The Senator raised the ethical aspect of taking nuclear energy via the interconnector. As a Senator said, various bits do not come out labelled as coming from a nuclear plant. It is all muddled in together and it all comes out together. We already do the same with electricity from Scotland, which has approximately three nuclear plants. It is one of these principles which, in theory, one should be ethical about, but because it all goes into the mix, what comes out is mixed up anyway. I recall having that discussion when I was Minister for Public Enterprise. I look forward to the debate with Senator Quinn. I thank him for his letter of apology for not being here for a particular debate because he was travelling to Helsinki. During the debate next week, he will be able to tell us about his experience in Helsinki. The debate will be extended for an hour and a half next week because several Senators who wanted to contribute were not able to do so.

Senator O'Toole referred to Mr. Eddie O'Connor's renewable energy proposal for a linked series of wind farms from the Baltic countries to the Arklow banks, which sounds an amazing adventure. It would be wonderful if this could happen. The principle is exotic and interesting. One can imagine the wind that blows in the Baltic blowing again in Arklow because of the energy created. I agree that Mr. O'Connor is a genius. What he is proposing is very adventurous.

The Senator asked about the press council, as did Senator Moylan. The defamation Bill is expected to be published during this session.

However, a prior debate on the issue might be helpful because we could express ideas on the matter. Senator O'Toole expressed an apology, as did Senator Ryan. I am so perfect; I am searching my mind for an apology. I apologise if I was nasty to anyone. Senator Ryan expressed an apology regarding the Bill, which I opened this morning with great excitement. We will debate the need for a genealogical aspect to be included in the Bill.

The Senator made a valid point about the latest horror story of energy charges increasing by 40% to 80%. They always begin at 40%. An increase in the standard charge is stupid because it has nothing to do with the price of the original component. This matter will also be debated next week. I have a horror story to tell about the ESB.

The Senator said that countries with the highest maternity benefit have the greatest competitiveness. This is because women return to work delighted with themselves and full of energy having had time off to care for their babies. He also raised the question of the country of origin of textiles not being noted on garments, with which the EU has difficulty. Senator Quinn explained about this later.

Senator Mansergh said that Ministers of all hues hold clinics and informal meetings. He also referred to the fact that the moratorium was lifted in the other House arising from the input of a Deputy from another party. I thank him for bringing the matter to our attention. It was good research.

The point raised here was that a moratorium was in place, which was then lifted, although we did not know that. I thank the Senator for his research. Dr. Mansergh also talked about the Baltic countries who wish to join the eurozone, but whose inflation rates are 0.1% above the limit. He asked that their applications be considered with the same tolerance as those of countries with enormous monetary difficulties.

Senator Coghlan raised the matter of the ministerial handbook and the ethical guidelines for semi-State companies. He spoke of one State company that threw away the book and insisted on nominating a man to the board. I have always felt that more women should be involved but one cannot force that on people. A woman is a woman, a man is a man, and the matter cannot be forced. I remember during one general election campaign, a slogan was used which said "Why not a woman?" Its aim was to encourage people to vote for a woman but I found it very derogatory. Why not a woman? Why not a mermaid? Why not whatever? I did not like the idea behind it. One votes for a person based on his or her competence, hopefully.

Senator Moylan asked for a debate on the press council. We might have a preparatory debate on the issue, with reference to the Roscommon footballer. Senator Quinn referred to the Road Safety Authority Bill and Private Members' time next week. He also said that he understood the EU

caution on labelling. I did not quite understand his point and perhaps he will explain it to me later.

Senator Hanafin raised the matter of energy policy. I accept his point that Shell has issued an apology and I hope that whatever thread contained therein can be drawn out to create a new atmosphere whereby what is a most desirable commodity can be brought ashore for the people of Ireland. However, many people remained quite hardened in their positions on the issue.

Senator McHugh referred to a conference on renewable energy. The local authorities have been very proactive in this regard. Two weeks ago Longford County Council hosted a remarkable conference on renewable energy, at which a professor from Finland spoke. Kildare County Council has solar panels to light all of its premises. The Senator also asked about the Youth Work Act, to be administered by the VECs. I will follow up on that issue.

I received a telephone call yesterday from Mr. Tom Butler of ComReg. He previously worked in the Houses of the Oireachtas and was a Labour Party activist. I knew him quite well and recognised his voice when he called. He watches "Oireachtas Report" and heard what was said in the Chamber about mass and community news broadcasts for elderly and isolated people. He was very interested in the discussion and was most complimentary about the comments made. He asked me to explain to the House that ComReg is working on the issue and has benign feelings about it. It hopes to be able to resolve the matter soon and I am glad to report that to the House. It is not often that one gets feedback such as that. I asked Mr. Butler how he knew about our discussion and he said he watches "Oireachtas Report". He also said that he finds the Order of Business in the Seanad fascinating.

**Mr. O'Toole:** Mr. Butler also received telephone calls from at least three Members of this House making him aware that the issue would be raised here.

**Ms O'Rourke:** Nonetheless, he telephoned me and did not need any ethical guidelines to do so.

Order of Business agreed to.

### **Report on Migration: Statements.**

**An Leas-Chathaoirleach:** I welcome the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy Martin, to the House to discuss the report on migration produced by the Joint Committee on European Affairs.

**Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Mr. Martin):** It is appropriate that we discuss the report of the Joint Committee on European Affairs on migration today, in the same week in which Europe Day falls. Ireland has been a full and enthusiastic participant in the develop-

ment of the European Union from the start. We actively contributed to all of the major developments of the Union from economic and monetary union and the euro, to the opening of labour markets to new members.

I am pleased that the Joint Committee on European Affairs made immigration part of its work programme. I agree with the committee that immigration is a significant issue for Irish society, and the Oireachtas should give particular attention to all of its facets. It is a new challenge for Ireland, and in many ways, it is an indication of our successful performance in growing our economy, creating jobs and ending the historic blights of emigration and mass unemployment.

Ireland has moved away from its history and tradition of outward emigration to become a country of extremely rapid significant inward migration. This has happened to such an extent that 9% of our workforce, or 170,000 workers, are now foreign nationals. In 1999, that figure was only 3.5% of a much smaller labour force. Our labour force has doubled to 2 million in a decade. While other EU member states have similar proportions of foreign national workers, in those countries these proportions were built up over a generation. We reached this level within a few short years and that is an important point. In 1999, 5,000 work permits were issued. By the end of 2003, 50,000 work permits per annum were issued.

In May 2004, the decision was made to open up our borders to the citizens of the ten new member states, which has led to 160,000 to 200,000 people coming to and leaving Ireland. It is a rapidly developing situation which presents us with significant challenges. Members of the other House and the committee were clear that the decision by the Government to grant immediate free access to the labour market for nationals of the new ten member states from May 2004 was correct. It demonstrated in a positive and meaningful way Ireland's commitment to the European ideal. From an economic migration policy perspective it was also the right decision.

This commitment was influenced by our positive experience of participation in Europe and how we benefited from it. Only 20 years ago we dealt with economic, budgetary and unemployment challenges similar to those which our new European partners face today. In the 1980s, Ireland had economic growth of approximately 1% to 2%, a debt to GDP ratio of more than 100% and an unemployment rate of 17%. As a result, Ireland experienced significant rates of emigration. In that decade as many as 65,000 people left Ireland each year.

How different the picture is now. Irish economic and employment growth is the envy of our European neighbours. Since the enlargement of the European Union on 1 May 2004, Ireland is now an integral part of a single European labour market of approximately 210 million people. The Irish labour market in many ways represents a



[Mr. Martin.]

regional labour market within this larger single European market.

Workers from the ten countries which joined the EU in May 2004 now make up 3% of our workforce, or 62,000 workers. We know from Revenue data that the number who worked here at some time since May 2004 is greater, at approximately 135,000. Many worked here for a while before returning to their countries of origin. The principal sources of European Union migrant workers are 55% from Poland, 18% from Lithuania, 9% from Latvia and 8% from Slovakia. It is not surprising that the greatest numbers come from Poland as it is the largest accession state. Ireland is now the fourth most favoured destination for Polish migrants after the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany.

Workers from these countries have significantly contributed to our economic growth through a diverse range of activities and occupations. Many work in the construction sector in particular, and this has allowed us to address our infrastructural deficit more quickly than we would otherwise have been able to do. Many others have been engaged in the manufacturing, catering, hospitality and agricultural sectors to the benefit of both businesses and consumers.

Most sectors of the economy in which a high proportion of the EU-10 nationals work also show fairly robust levels of earnings growth. For example, many EU nationals work in the construction sector and the latest figures for that sector show fairly strong annual wage growth to the third quarter of 2005 of 6.8%.

As regards future accessions to the EU, in particular that of Romania and Bulgaria, and our policy on access to our labour market of their nationals, the Government will take a decision in this regard before the accession of those countries and after consultation with the social partners.

The Employment Permits Bill will come before this House shortly, at which point I will move an amendment to provide me with a legislative mechanism to make a decision in the autumn on Bulgaria and Romania. A number of factors will be taken on board, such as labour market trends, the degree to which other European countries have embraced the position on open access of Ireland, Sweden and the UK and consultation with the social partners. It depends on the Commission's response to both countries. Accession has been deferred until the autumn and the countries have yet to satisfy the Commission on a number of conditions.

The new Employment Permits Bill is a significant addition to developing an economic migration policy. Within two weeks, Members of this House will have the opportunity to participate in Second Stage of the Bill. The Bill will put in place a statutory framework within which to implement an active, managed economic migration policy. This active management will

give priority to migrants in sectors with strategic skills shortages.

As part of these new arrangements, we will introduce a new green card system for those from outside the European Economic Area for occupations where strategic high skills shortages exist which cannot be met from within the European Union. Under this system, green cards will be issued for two years initially and will normally provide a pathway to long-term or permanent residency and citizenship thereafter. It will also involve immediate family reunification. The Immigration Bill brought forward by the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform will include a series of measures which will dovetail with the Employment Permits Bill in terms of family reunification and a more liberal approach to families of those on work permits. It will represent a significant enhancement of the situation and a sensible approach.

This approach will help to address the skills deficits which are likely to persist for some time yet in key sectors of the economy particularly information technology, health care, construction professionals, internationally traded services within the financial services, and pharmaceutical or bio-technology sectors. We have had a great deal of discussion on displacement, as there are two sides to that issue. The work of Forfás and the expert group on future skills needs carried out a comprehensive analysis on economic migration, which informed much of the thinking on the Employment Permits Bill. Within that analysis, sectors where we are still significantly short were clearly identified. The logical conclusion is that economic migration will be necessary to make up those shortages. When I meet employers as I travel throughout the country, it becomes even clearer.

In sectors such as construction and hospitality we understand the key issue in social partnership talks is to develop and genuinely put in place an extremely robust mechanism for compliance to ensure exploitation does not take occur. We must ensure employees who come here are looked after and that a deliberate exploitative undercutting of our labour law and Irish workers does not occur.

The Bill provides a number of new important protections for migrant workers who work in Ireland. Most people would see that as reasonable and right. The Irish economy is projected to grow by approximately 4.6% this year and strong growth is also expected for 2007. It is expected that employment will rise by more than 3% or 60,000 this year. The unemployment rate at present is 4.5%. A number of factors have given rise to that figure and we expect it to remain approximately the same until the end of the year.

The challenges before us are brought about by rapid economic growth. One of the key challenges for us is the integration of those who came from abroad to work here. While we have to a certain extent been concentrating on the econ-

omic side of migration, we clearly need a strong multidisciplinary approach to the issue which will take into account the social side. Other Departments are dealing with such issues.

The joint committee report was very clear on the need to have a joined up Government approach and proper co-ordination between Departments on economic, social and educational issues for migrants who come here. We must be flexible in our responses to issues as they arise.

It should be categorically stated that employment is an essential first step for integration. It provides a regular income and economic independence, security, status and opportunities for interaction with people from the majority community. I have taken note of the committee's recommendations on ensuring that information is co-ordinated and that there should be greater co-ordination with regard to workers' rights. My Department has a wide and well-established role in providing information to the workforce at large regarding entitlements under employment rights legislation. Adjudication bodies such as rights commissioners and the Employment Appeals Tribunal are also in place to permit workers to vindicate their entitlements.

In the ongoing social partnership talks the Government has indicated it will ensure that workers who have relocated to Ireland from abroad will be subject to a particular focus. A publicity campaign will also be undertaken to set out employee rights in a number of languages, with an emphasis on workers from overseas and on the sectors in which they are employed. In addition, a specific budget will be provided for education and promotion to be delivered in conjunction with the social partners and other civil society organisations.

The employment rights compliance section of my Department currently provides information to the public through call-centre, website and personal interactions on an individual and group basis. It also interacts with a wide range of bodies and organisations in pursuance of its objective of employment rights compliance. The information unit interacts with the labour inspectorate, which in turn inspects or investigates individual cases with a view to attaining compliance, failing which the enforcement section initiates prosecutions and associated recoveries of moneys through the courts.

The labour inspectorate has been increased by over 50% in the past year. It initiates investigations of complaints and engages in planned and targeted sectoral and random inspections throughout the country. The prosecution and enforcement unit processes the enforcement of awards of both the Labour Court and the Employment Appeals Tribunal through the courts. This protection and redress machinery is available to all workers and I enjoin foreign employees to avail of this to the fullest extent. It is in nobody's interest that abuse and exploitation of workers should go unpunished.

I would also particularly like to acknowledge the committee's recommendation that there should be close co-operation with the Governments of sending countries. In this regard I mention the FÁS Know Before You Go initiative, which promotes the integration of workers from the new EU member states. This initiative provides information to workers in sending countries on how to get a job. It also aims to encourage people to equip themselves with all the necessary information they need so they understand our employment rights and are aware of how and where to get help from support agencies in Ireland.

In order to raise awareness of employment rights, statutory entitlements, taxation and social welfare systems in Ireland, FÁS has produced a DVD in the Polish, Czech, Latvian, Lithuanian and Slovak languages and a suite of brochures and posters are available in all ten languages. In addition, FÁS has also developed a free telephone interpretation service, which is available in all FÁS employment services offices.

Senators may also be aware that the National Economic and Social Council has commissioned the International Organisation for Migration to undertake a major study on the management of migration in Ireland, including both its economic and social implications. I understand the council is currently formulating its comments on this study and that this work will be completed over the next few weeks. I look forward to the outcome of the council's work on this, which, without prejudging its recommendations, I am sure will also help us to put in place policies and programmes to deal with migration in an integrated manner.

I thank the joint committee for its work in this area, which will provide a useful input to an important issue and will contribute significantly to the formulation of migration policy on an ongoing basis.

**Mr. Coghlan:** I welcome the Minister to the House and thank him for the overview of the issue as he sees it. As part of the Europe day activities in the Oireachtas I am glad to have an opportunity to speak on the issue of European Union migrant workers. This is not the first time the Oireachtas has done so. Two Bills of relevance — the Employment Permits Bill and the Employees (Provision of Information and Consultation) Bill — have been before the Houses, and the Minister mentioned one of these.

Both the Dáil and Seanad debated the recent revelations regarding the shabby treatment of migrant workers in this country which brings disgrace on us all and on which there was unanimous agreement that everyone involved should be ashamed of themselves. Fine Gael also succeeded in having the business of the Dáil suspended in order to discuss the disgraceful situation in Irish Ferries, another sorry episode in our industrial

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history, which directly involved migrant workers from another EU country.

The report which has been referred to is worthy. It makes a number of recommendations, including a network of drop-in centres for migrants and greater co-operation and co-ordination in inspecting and enforcing the range of legislation already enacted to protect workers' rights. Most important is the recommendation that Irish agencies involve themselves with Governments of sending countries "to publicise the appropriate routes for finding jobs in Ireland, and restricting the activities of unscrupulous or careless employment agencies". I commend the Polish Government on its recent campaigns along these lines.

From an Irish perspective, revelations regarding foreign workers in Gama Construction and other documented cases of exploitation are shameful. I sincerely hope the labour inspectorate with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment continue to investigate, prosecute and punish those responsible for any impropriety, exploitation and fraud that may have taken place.

With regard to exploitation and fraud, although I did not see the "Prime Time" programme on television this week, I believe it detailed horrendous exploitation of girls as young as 14. These girls are effectively sold into the slave trade, and we, in holy Catholic Ireland, have had such activity in our midst unknown to us. I commend any and all agencies fighting this, as it is an activity which must be immediately stamped out.

On the issue of fraud, nobody is perfect and people are only human. However, there is increasing anecdotal evidence of people from eastern European countries milking the system. The evidence is anecdotal and I do not know if the Minister's Department or any other agency has any concrete proof. I have heard of instances where people have mounting bank accounts and they may be on social welfare and working. I hope it is a tiny minority which is adept at utilising the facilities to their own benefit but in a fraudulent manner.

If any good is to come from this development, it is that perhaps we may finally see the emergence of a proper rational debate on immigration and a proper, thought-out Government policy on the subject. Fine Gael believes the country should be up-front and honest about the need for immigration, the benefits it can bring and the repercussions of not welcoming inward migration. It is a simple fact that Ireland will need to import skills to ensure that we remain a world-class player.

The economy has the potential to post cumulative growth of 45% between now and 2016, with the performance to be fuelled by immigration. Growth of this magnitude would see Ireland expanding at more than twice the rate of the average eurozone economy over the next decade. I am tired, as a public representative, of this

phony debate. I am tired of the constant problematising of the immigration issue. It may be politically astute to give the nod to the baser instincts of some of the electorate, but it is foolish to think that without a flow of migrant labour to staff the service and construction industries, the economy can survive.

Earlier this week, shocking figures emerged from the Health and Safety Authority showing a huge increase in workplace fatalities involving non-Irish workers. I wish to put on the record of the House that Fine Gael is calling for an independent investigation into irregularities in FÁS construction site training in light of the 44% increase in construction site deaths last year. It emerged recently that false accreditation letters are being sold illegally for approximately €50, often to foreign nationals eager, as everyone is, to find work. These false letters allow people to work on construction sites without finishing the safe pass safety course. This comes against the background of a 44% increase in on-site fatalities in 2005.

The Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy Martin, should order an independent investigation into the false letters, which is only the latest training scandal to emerge from within FÁS. Perhaps he is already dealing with it. The Minister must also clarify whether training levels have improved on construction sites. It is totally unacceptable to allow workers onto building sites without necessary training, which puts fellow workers and the general public at risk.

I call on the Minister to carry out an independent investigation into the training and supervisory procedures operated under the aegis of FÁS in respect of safe pass courses and other training that is appropriate to the construction industry. The law states clearly that no one should be allowed to work on a construction site unless he or she has received adequate training. However, 23 people lost their lives on sites in 2005, compared to 16 in 2004. This is despite the introduction of the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005, which was designed to eliminate dangerous activities and improve safety levels.

This appalling safety record indicates that all is not well in terms of safety and training levels in the construction sector. Fine Gael recently asked the Minister in the Dáil to detail the training levels of the 23 people who died tragically last year. The Minister chose not to answer that question, but did indicate that a number of cases had been passed on to the Director of Public Prosecutions. The situation is becoming even more urgent with the increased number of foreign nationals working on construction sites. Many do not have an adequate command of English and would not be familiar with minimum safety levels. They are an easy target for exploitative employers, and a number of fatalities in 2005 involved non-nationals.

Close attention must also be paid to the standard of training being provided. Last year we revealed that 2,000 FÁS trainees had not received adequate training, and a Garda investigation is ongoing. We need an independent verification system to ensure that safety courses have a minimum standard imposed by FETAC, involving sporadic spot checks. Meanwhile, immediate measures should be taken to address safety levels, such as the introduction of on-the-spot fines for safety and training breaches. Penalties must be made available to bring this message home to employers.

Does the Minister propose a green card for Americans, in light of the problems encountered by Irish people in America? I welcome Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy Killeen, to the House.

**Mr. Hanafin:** I welcome the Minister of State to the House. I also welcome the report of the Joint Committee on European Affairs on migration. The background of the committee's report concerns the wider questions of immigration and integration, and not just economic integration. The committee acknowledges that the Government decision of 2003 to allow access to the labour market to workers from the new member states of the European Union was the correct one and has had a beneficial result.

I will deal with the general background to the report. The joint committee states that the submissions it has received to date treated immigration purely as an economic issue. It raised the question of what would happen in the event of an economic downturn and the resultant demands on the levels of social support, were migrants not to return to their countries of origin. Reference is also made to the trade off between the increasing wealth brought about by the growth of population and increased congestion, higher density of housing and higher demands on services. On the question of integration, the committee refers to the implications for health, education, anti-racism and housing arising from increased migration. Anti-racism policy demands constant vigilance and this Government is committed to it on all fronts.

The committee's primary recommendation is for clear responsibility for the support of social and economic integration of immigrants to be given to one Department. It also recommends that the designated Department should, as a matter of urgency, deal with ongoing efforts to co-ordinate information, which are crucial and should be undertaken with as much speed as possible. Irish agencies should be asked to work even more closely with the governments of countries from which immigrants come to publicise the appropriate routes for finding jobs in Ireland and to restrict the activities of unscrupulous and careless employment agencies. There should be greater co-operation and co-ordination between the bodies involved in inspecting and enforcing

the range of legislation already enacted to protect workers' rights.

Officials from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment visit employers to ensure correct practices and rates of pay are applied. Judging by the report on "Prime Time" earlier this week, it is imperative we introduce legislation quickly to deal with trafficking and human slavery in 2006. It is hard to credit that human slavery continues to exist in this day and age but there are no other words to describe it. I hope the most severe penalties apply to those guilty of such offences. We take the most malign view of those who sell drugs and offer young people the means of degrading their lives. However, legislation is not currently in place to deal as severely with people traffickers as with drug traffickers. I regard both crimes as of the most serious nature.

A study should be made of the possibility of establishing networks of drop-in centres for migrants. They would have been very useful for the Irish in London and we can learn from the experience of those people we sent to the UK as to what supports are required in such a situation. We can share that knowledge with migrant countries so that they can implement best policy.

The principal issue concerning EU migrant labour was highlighted as the need for ongoing co-ordination between the Department of Social and Family Affairs and the Central Statistics Office to track immigration flows. The report highlighted the role of FÁS in administering European employment services, which cover the European economic area and Switzerland, whereby vacancies must first be advertised for a period of four weeks before an application for a work permit will be entertained.

Other issues were the potential for abuse resulting from the unscrupulous practices of employment agencies, the enforcement of employment rights, greater transparency in the administration of the habitual residence conditions and the ineligibility for child benefit. The report also dealt with homelessness, migrant welfare and the feasibility of establishing drop-in centres. While EU workers are entitled to the same access to training as Irish workers, no particular measures are envisaged for them.

We in Ireland have been full and enthusiastic participants in the European project from the beginning. Freedom of workers to move from each member state to find employment is a cornerstone of the European Union. We have participated constructively in all major European initiatives, from economic and monetary union and the adoption of the euro to the opening of labour markets to new members of the European Union. Even though we are a very small country we have played an important part in the development of the EU, not least in the contributions our EU Presidencies have made to progress on key issues on the European agenda.

Inward migration is a new problem for us. It is a sign of our success in growing our economy and

[Mr. Hanafin.]

in creating jobs that our problems have changed from those connected with emigration to those associated with inward migration. We have experienced significant inward migration in a relatively short period. Some 9% of our workforce, or 170,000 workers, are now foreign nationals. While other EU countries have similar proportions of foreign national workers those proportions were built up over a generation, whereas we have reached that level within a couple of years, which provides us with challenges. Those from the EU-10 countries, which joined the EU in May 2004, now make up 3% of our workforce or 62,000 workers. We are aware from Revenue Commissioners data that the numbers who have worked here since May 2004 are sometimes greater, at approximately 135,000. Many will have worked here for a while before returning to their native countries.

The decision by the Government to grant immediate free access to the labour market for nationals of the new member states from May 2004 was the correct one. Workers from these countries have significantly contributed to our economic growth through a diverse range of activities and occupations. Many of them have worked in the construction sector and this has allowed us to address our infrastructure deficit more quickly than would otherwise have been possible. Many others have been engaged in the manufacturing, catering, hospitality and agricultural sectors to the benefit of both business and consumers.

I welcome the new arrangements for the labour market participation of workers from outside the European Economic Area, which will be in place at the end of this year after the Employment Permits Bill is passed by the Oireachtas. As part of these new arrangements, a new green card system will be introduced for people from outside the European Economic Area for occupations where strategic high skills shortages exist which cannot be met from within the EU. Under this system, green cards will be issued for two years initially and will normally provide a pathway for long-term or permanent residency thereafter.

This will help to address the skills deficits which are likely to persist for some time in key sectors of the economy, particularly with regard to information technology, health care and construction professionals and in the financial services, internationally-traded services and the pharmaceutical and biotechnology sectors. It appears that we will need the contribution of foreign nationals to our economy for some time into the future. The Irish economy is projected to grow at approximately 4.6% this year and strong growth is also expected for 2007. As a result, total employment will rise by over 3% or 60,000 this year while unemployment will be at a low rate of 4.3%.

The challenges we now face are those associated with success. One of these challenges is the

integration of those who have arrived from abroad to work here and to ensure they benefit from the same rights as Irish workers. Integration is a multidimensional process, as is stated in the committee's report, so we must deal with the economic and social issues that it raises in a cohesive manner. We must also be flexible in the way we respond to changes and issues as they arise.

I note the committee's recommendation that information should be co-ordinated and that there should be greater co-ordination with regard to workers' rights. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment has a wide and well-established role in providing information to the workforce about entitlements under employment rights legislation. Adjudication bodies such as the rights commissioner and the Employment Appeals Tribunal are also in place to permit workers to vindicate their entitlements.

In the ongoing partnership talks, the Government has indicated it will ensure workers who have relocated to Ireland from abroad will be the subject of particular focus. A publicity campaign will also be undertaken to set out employees' rights in a number of languages, with an emphasis on workers from overseas and on the sectors in which they are employed. In addition, a specific budget will be provided for education and promotion, to be delivered in conjunction with the social partners and other civil society organisations.

The employment rights compliance section, ERCS, provides information to the public through call centres, websites and personal interactions on an individual and group basis. The information unit interacts with the labour inspectorate which, in turn, inspects or investigates with a view to attaining compliance. Failing this, the enforcement section initiates prosecutions and associated recoveries of money through the courts. The ERCS also interacts with a wide range of bodies and organisations in pursuit of its objective of employment rights compliance.

The National Economic and Social Council commissioned the International Organisation for Migration to undertake a major study on the management of migration in Ireland, including both the economic and social implications. The council is currently formulating its comments on the study and this work will be complete over the next few weeks. We welcome the council's work on this issue and, without prejudging its recommendations, hope it will help us put in place policies and programmes to deal with migration in an integrated manner in the future.

I welcome the joint committee's report. It will be a useful input on an important issue for Ireland in the future.

**Mr. Quinn:** I welcome the contribution by the Minister, Deputy Martin. He gave us a great deal of information. He spoke about the change that

has taken in place in our economy since the early 1980s. The Minister, like me, will remember how things were at that time. There are students from St. Fiachra's senior national school, Beaumont, in the Visitors Gallery this morning and none of them will understand the type of life we had in the mid-1980s. My daughter finished university in 1986. There were 38 students in her class and 37 of them emigrated.

I was talking to a man yesterday on an aeroplane who told me that his son is currently working in a bank in London. When he had mentioned this to another person, the reaction was, "Is it not a shame that he had to emigrate?" However, the son had gone to work in the bank in London because he likes working there and is gaining experience before returning to this country. I mention this because the next generation will not understand the threat of emigration and how much our economy has changed, to the extent that we now have immigrants.

I have some concerns. The *New York Times* last Saturday published a series of letters from people complaining about the protests organised in the United States by illegal immigrants. A number of the immigrants were Irish. It was interesting to note the tone and tenor of those letters. The clear attitude was, "Who are these people? Why do they not adjust? Why do they not learn English? Why do they not accept our way of life?" That reflects some of my concerns.

I once visited Salt Lake City in Utah. The room my wife and I stayed in had been in a boarding house and had been the room of a polygamist's wife in the 1890s. Until 1890, polygamy was permitted in Utah. However, when Utah became part of the United States it was told it could no longer permit polygamy and that it must adjust to the way of life in the United States. The people had to learn English and adjust to the union.

Senator Hanafin spoke about the different traditions of people who come to this country, perhaps even in regard to drugs, which we do not share. We must find a way of having these people understand our way of life. I have dealt with many employees. It has been a joy to see employees from other countries settle in Ireland and accept our way of life. They have blossomed and grown and mixed with our culture. They have become Irish and readily learned to speak English. However, I have also seen other employees who have come here to work, usually in menial and unenviable jobs, and often they do not learn the language. The people with whom they work, speak their native languages and, when they go home, they go to what is almost a ghetto somewhere in Dublin. They do not accept the new life.

I was one of the members of the Joint Committee on European Affairs who asked that we discuss this issue with FÁS. When representatives from FÁS came to discuss this with the committee, we asked them whose job it was to deal with this issue. That is probably partially responsible

for this debate because we realised that no single person had that job.

The most shocking thing that emerged from the work of the committee and that gave rise to the report is the fact that no person or organisation is responsible for overseeing the all-important task of integrating our immigrants into society. There are plenty of people and bodies foostering around on the edges of the problem but there is nobody in charge or taking responsibility for ensuring the job is done. Above all, there is no political responsibility for this task.

The Minister, Deputy Martin, gave us interesting and good reports on all the work being done but it is not being co-ordinated. There is no single person, agency, Department or Minister with responsibility for this area. Perhaps this headless chicken approach is borne out of an idea that, willy-nilly, integration will look after itself or will happen automatically over time. That assumption is fatally flawed and if we persist with it, we will store up trouble for the future.

One can see in Europe that integration of immigrants does not just happen by itself. It is a difficult and time consuming process which must be managed carefully and actively. The consequences of failure to do this are not difficult to find. Consider what happened in France last summer. France paid lip service to the idea that the people who came to the country from north Africa over the previous 40 years or so would integrate. However, nothing was done over almost half a century to make it happen in practice and to change and integrate the lives of the immigrant population.

The riots of last summer were an indication of how deeply rooted the problem is. It did not happen overnight but was festering for a long time.

Every new person who comes to live with us brings his or her own culture and language which each highly values. When people choose to emigrate, they come into new challenges. If immigrants are to integrate properly in their host country, they must recognise they have two cultures and two languages. Immigrants need not turn their backs on their original language and culture but must expand their horizons of their new homeland. Some will readily accept this challenge. In the time-honoured phrase to describe the Normans, there will be those who will become more Irish than the Irish themselves.

Not everyone, however, is like that. Vast numbers of immigrants need to be helped to integrate into our society. It is our responsibility as the host country to take the lead in this respect. Doing so is not an act of generosity but one of self-interest. I have spoken before of how easy it is for new immigrants to live within a cultural and linguistic bubble and, usually, find themselves at the bottom of the pile. Some immigrants will only interact with their own compatriots, working and living with them. While it is natural to cling to one's own, it is a bad sign if it has the effect that

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they remain separate from the language and culture of our country. This problem must be addressed.

Our experience is different from that of most other countries. I know of nowhere where immigration has happened so fast and on such a large scale. The upshot of this is while other countries have had a long period to adapt to it, we do not have that luxury. What happened in other countries in 30 years happened in Ireland in ten years. As a result, we run the risk of being swamped by the problem and its sheer size.

The past few years have seen an enormous influx of immigrant children into our schools. The Minister covered many areas in his speech but not this issue. Few schools have no immigrant children. In some schools, the majority of pupils are immigrants. If a child arrives at a school without being able to speak English, he or she is at a major disadvantage. Children cannot be expected to pick up English as they go along, particularly if their native language is spoken at home. If one relies on that approach, the child will always lag behind, not just in English but in every other subject. When these children arrive at a school, they require a specialised instruction in English as a second language and not as a first. Until the child is reasonably competent in English, he or she will not be able to take a full part in the class.

The Department of Education and Science has responded to this challenge by allocating 800 English language teachers. When I first discovered this, I believed the figure was mistaken. It may seem an enormous number of teachers. However, when the figure is considered nationally, it is an inadequate response to a large problem that has suddenly crept up on us. The Department is to be commended for reacting at all and so quickly. The heart-breaking fact is that its efforts are only a drop in the ocean compared with what is needed.

If we do not grasp this nettle and teach all immigrant children a competence in the English language, we know for certain what will happen. They will become the backward ones in school. They will become the ones turned off school because they cannot do well. These are the kind of children who drop out of school along the way. Even if they do persevere, many of them will leave without sufficient qualifications. We have seen the consequences of this with our own disadvantaged children. Doing badly at school and dropping out is a ticket to failure in life and drug and crime problems. We have been trying to grasp this, unsuccessfully, in the case of Irish children.

Overnight, the problem has mushroomed into a challenge of enormous proportions. To address it properly will require much manpower and financial resources. This is the price we must pay to ensure a future without social unrest. We must invest in our immigrant children. This will not happen if different Departments and Ministers

are asked to take an interest in it. I am not particularly keen on the term "co-ordinate", which has popped into the debate in recent years. This is an area where the responsibility is given to one Minister and Department. If this is done, we will have got to the start of solving the problem.

**Mr. Dardis:** I join with other Members in welcoming the Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy Killeen, to the House. I, along with Senators Quinn and McDowell, am a member of the joint committee that produced the report. The report represents consensus but inevitably with consensus there are nuances and some Members may take a different approach to aspects of the report.

When Senator Quinn spoke about the multicultural aspect of our schools, I noted a class of schoolchildren in the Visitors Gallery. It was evident from looking at the class that what he was referring to was in our midst. Each day we are reminded how much the country has changed, even without the arrival of people from other countries who have come to live with us. An article in today's edition of *The Irish Times* highlighted that 200,000 immigrants from the former EU accession states are registered to work in Ireland. More than half of these workers are Polish. Newbridge, County Kildare, has a large Polish population and a Polish mass is held on Sundays. Polish, African and Chinese groups participated in the town's St. Patrick's Day parade. Immigrants participate fully in the life of the town and they have improved society enormously. It has given the Irish a much broader view of the world. While I welcome these changes, I accept there are important challenges which are dealt with in the report.

As mentioned by Senator Hanafin, the Irish, with their experience, should empathise with immigrants. Christy Moore, in his song "The Rose of Tralee", tells of going looking for digs in London and being told by the woman of the house, "There'll be absolutely no blacks nor Paddies gettin' in here." This was, unfortunately, the situation faced by many Irish migrants. We must learn from the experience of finding a home for so many of our people in other cultures. It should be easy for us to understand and accommodate those who come to live with us.

I agree with Senator Hanafin's comments on the backup the State provides for migrants' organisations in London and elsewhere. There are obligations on those states whose citizens come to live in Ireland. They should provide supports so these people do not experience what many Irish people did in London, arriving off the boat with no idea of where to sleep or get a job. Some Irish people fell through society and wound up sleeping rough on the streets of London and other cities.

The integration of newcomers to our society is a major challenge. The Celtic tiger economy is an economic magnet for immigrants from the EU

accession states and elsewhere in search of a new life. The challenge is made that more difficult by the overall pace of change in the country. Between 1990 and 1994, Ireland was the only country of the EU 15 with negative net migration. I recall how depressed the country was in the decades before then. Between 1995 and 1999 the average annual migration rate was second only to Luxembourg in the EU so that is a dramatic change.

There are no signs that immigration will end soon. NCB stockbrokers recently stated that the population of the Republic will grow by 30% to over 5.3 million by 2020 and to 6 million by 2050. We also await the results of the recent census with interest. Migrants could account for 20% of the population by 2020, something on which we as policy makers must focus and which will require a change in mind-set. The challenge 20 years ago was to staunch the flow of emigration and the haemorrhaging of our younger people while today the challenge is how to integrate new immigrants into Irish society.

There is a need for accurate assessment of developments and challenges so that we form the right policy. In that respect, I welcome the work of the committee and the production of the report because it highlights an important subject that was being neglected to an extent. The report may not be perfect — the size of the challenge makes that impossible — but it is a valuable step forward by the Oireachtas to assess the position of migrant workers in Ireland over the last two or three years. Ireland needs these workers to keep the economy going and we must assess the experience of these welcome and valuable members of our society.

The report is based on information gleaned from engagement with the many groups and Departments and sets out what the committee sees as the background to the challenge, the nature of integration, how other countries have acted in this regard and then makes some recommendations. It demands debate and the complexity of immigration in Irish society calls for our close attention.

I have some constructive criticisms of the report, mainly on how it sets out and reaches its conclusions. It would have been useful to set out some of the statistics illustrating the extent to which inward migration has been much greater than anticipated. This would have indicated how Departments and agencies made assessments and would help us to avoid similar underestimation in the future. There is an early statement of the committee's view that a single Department might take overall responsibility for immigration and integration. It is not, however, until later in the report that there is a justification for this proposal, that such a step would be a welcome political statement. That is not unimportant but it is hardly the foremost catalyst for a significant step.

The report describes an aspirational Ireland as an exciting, young, highly skilled, outward look-

ing society where wealth is created to the benefit of all and where the contribution of each member of society is recognised and cherished. I accept that today's Ireland is not without its problems but it is fair to say that notwithstanding a utopian view of the country, Irish people have created a society not so far removed from that description. The report also employs strong language such as "wasted lives" and poses questions where answers, even if tentative, would have been more useful.

Another concern is the reference to three alternative objectives of integration, namely, multiculturalism, assimilation and exclusionism. A fourth objective favoured by the Progressive Democrats should have been included, that is, interculturalism. The excellent work of Philip Watts and others in this respect should have been considered.

The report's claim that a new self-image has not been created in modern Ireland is inaccurate. Ireland has become a much more positive, outward looking, innovative and enterprising nation, with many successful international cultural, sporting and economic reference points, all of which, combined with our collective experience and history, give us a definite, positive self image. Senator Quinn mentioned the 1980s. Those of us who recall times before entry into the Common Market remember how depressed the country was. We had no positive self image, our nearest neighbour was dominant in our psyche. There has been a hugely positive effect on our image of ourselves and our confidence as a nation as a result of our membership of the European Union. That was one of the huge benefits that is not alluded to; we frequently talk about the economic aspect but our self image has been utterly transformed by the European experience.

The conclusion in the report that a single Department take responsibility for immigration and integration is problematic. I do not disagree fundamentally with Senator Quinn, there is a need for a single guiding hand, but taking the elements out of the different Departments that are competent to deal with them would be a questionable aspect. The final section of the report sets out individual immigration activities and challenges facing the Departments of Health and Children, Education and Science, Arts, Sport and Tourism and Enterprise, Trade and Employment. That demonstrates the complexity of the challenge. This argues in many ways against having a single Department for immigration and integration. The issues are so complex, diverse and specific to the various agencies that bringing them together may not be the best choice.

The idea, perhaps, had its genesis in the confusion between the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform on overlapping aspects and responsibilities. To go beyond that, however, into a single Department is going too far, although there must be co-ordination. Why would we



[Mr. Dardis.]

remove responsibility for language education in primary school from the Department of Education and Science or responsibility for vaccination programmes from the Department of Health and Children? Whatever about duplication, is this the best way to serve new members of our society?

I have a Nigerian friend who made the point that there should be more consultation with the various national groups that come to our country. Leadership is important in achieving the objectives mentioned by Senator Quinn in bringing the community with us and the best way to do that is to have a close working relationship with the leaders of the individual national communities. That is not as formally institutionalised as it should be.

The challenge today is to integrate new immigrants into Irish society and this challenge is good news, not a threat. The Progressive Democrats believe that immigration has no downside, economically or socially, and if there is a downside, it will be a result of a failure of policy and governance. There are important obligations on Government but we must be careful to resist racism, exploitation and trafficking. The focus must be on those areas and attempts to understand the cultural and ethnic elements that make up society. I was in Estonia last week and asked if there was any evidence of difficulties being experienced by those who had come to Ireland. I was told there was none but that does not mean exploitation has not taken place.

I welcome the committee's report, the work that went into it and, most importantly, the debate being precipitated in this and the other House. The Progressive Democrats are proud of the part we have played in shaping modern Ireland and driving the economic prosperity that pulls newcomers to this island to participate in our growth. It follows, therefore, that we have a major responsibility to avoid the mistakes of other countries who have failed in this area.

We must especially avoid the creation of an underclass because we have seen what happened in other European countries. There have been riots and other major social difficulties and it is all because of exclusion. People were put into ghettos and left to fend for themselves without the state taking an interest in them. That has implications for all of us, not just those people who come to live here. All parties and groups must engage as fully as possible in the process for the benefit of the Irish people, old and new. We look forward to the day soon when we will have representatives of the communities that have come to live here represented in our Parliament.

**Mr. McDowell:** This country has changed enormously in the two years since 2004, but there is difficulty in assessing the nature and extent of the change. The Minister's speech, while healthy, has somewhat confused the issue. Information that

has come into the public domain shows that approximately 200,000 PPS numbers have been issued to nationals of the new member states since 2004. The Minister said today that Revenue reckoned that about 135,000 had worked here at some time or other since May 2004, although it does not know how many are still here. The Minister also gave us a figure of 62,000 workers, approximately 3% of our workforce, as an estimate of those currently working here.

The lack of information is hardly surprising as none of us anticipated this rush. I remember participating in debates in 2003 and 2004, before and during the course of the Nice Treaty referenda, when most of us were confident we would not see a tide of immigrants remotely like the one we have following the accession of the new states. Some people gave the example of the enlargement that brought Spain and Portugal into the Union when there was little or no immigration into Ireland.

It is worth looking at today's figures in some detail. They confirm what we knew instinctively, that the propensity of people to emigrate is directly related to their prospects at home. There is only slight immigration from countries such as Cyprus or Slovenia, which are doing quite well, whereas where countries are poor and have poor employment prospects, for example the Baltic states, emigration is at a high level.

While we have poor information on what is happening, we have even less of a basis on which to make a sensible prediction as to what will happen in the immediate future. It is essential that we try to get a handle on the issue. In particular, we must get some idea of how many of our new immigrants we can reasonably expect to stay. In other words, we must discover how many are immigrants and how many are transient workers. It is reasonable to presume many of them may not know when they arrive whether they will stay. They may even end up remaining when they had intended to only stay a short while.

If we are to make any sense with our planning, we must get some idea of the numbers in order to form a basis. It is reasonable to assume that from 10% to 20% will stay, at least for a period, and that they will bring their families and have children here. We need to cater for them on that basis. The report focuses exclusively on immigration from EU states and does not deal with those from elsewhere who want to stay, such as asylum seekers and refugees.

I have some sympathy with the view expressed by Senator Dardis that having a Minister to deal exclusively with immigration matters may not be the most sensible idea. When we discussed this in committee, the view was that this was an acknowledgment that it was not purely an employment issue but also related to housing, social welfare, education and the health needs of new immigrants. The committee felt that in order to reflect that it was such a diverse issue, there

should be a Minister with sole responsibility for immigrant affairs.

Having reflected on this in the meantime, I believe Senator Dardis has a good case. While there may be a case for a Minister who will co-ordinate and have primary responsibility for dealing with these issues, to remove them from their Departments would not make much sense and could have a negative effect and pigeonhole immigrants in a way we do not want.

Perhaps the most useful function fulfilled by the process of producing the report is to start a debate on the nature of assimilation or integration or exclusionism — an awful word used in the report — we might consider adopting. We should take the assimilation route for those who want to stay for a long period. If people just come here for six or nine months to make some money to take back to Poland or the Baltic states, issues about assimilation do not arise. However, if people want to remain and bring up their children here, we must have a firm view on how this will proceed. We must offer them, as best we can, a means to assimilate and integrate into Irish society. This is in Ireland's interest, as well as in the interest of those who come to stay.

There is a real danger that we could end up, as have many countries in Europe that have traditionally welcomed immigrants, with a situation like that in banlieues in Paris or various boroughs in London or the north of England or in Turkish ghettos in Berlin. This is something we do not want to see happen. Immigrant communities here typically do not form a full community. They mainly consist of young males who do not of themselves constitute a Polish or Latvian community in Ireland. I do not need to spell out the obvious difficulties that can arise when a community is dominated by people who are mostly males of the same age with a few bob in their pockets who are away from home and the roots of their society.

I endorse the caution exhibited by the Minister and articulated by the Taoiseach on the issue of Romania and Bulgaria. Ultimately, we should open our labour markets to these two countries. However, we need to carry out a more intelligent assessment this time of the likely impact on Ireland of doing so. In so far as we can divine, there is little indication there will be significant immigration from Bulgaria into Ireland if we open our labour market.

The position could be different with regard to Romania. The Romanian ambassador attended a meeting of the Joint Committee on European Affairs a few weeks ago where she was asked how many Romanians were currently in Ireland. She spoke frankly and replied that she did not know, nor did the Irish authorities, but they estimated the number was approximately 20,000, of whom possibly half were illegal. That figure could be wildly wrong. She was, more importantly, asked how many she thought would seek to leave Romania in the event of labour markets opening up

to Romanian nationals. She said the estimate — guesstimate might be a better word — was in the region of 300,000 to 400,000. Her view was that many of those would chose to go to southern Europe.

This is a relatively benign scenario from the Romanian point of view and in terms of the capacity of European labour markets to absorb them. We must be cautious and acknowledge that there is a risk, however high it may be, that there will be a significant exodus from Romania and that Ireland will end up welcoming many of them, without a serious effort on our part to assess whether we have the capacity to absorb them. To put it bluntly, the Taoiseach is right to be cautious. Having made an intelligent assessment of the likely outcome, it would be sensible to open our labour market, preferably in the context of other countries doing the same.

Some people mentioned the issue of racism. This is something we must not sweep under the carpet but acknowledge. People react differently to difference. Some people embrace difference and like the fact that people speak a different language, eat different food, behave differently, have different cultural backgrounds and deal with the arts in a different way. I suspect this is true for the majority in this country. There are, however, a significant minority who do not. They are conservative in their outlook and find difference difficult to tolerate and more difficult to understand.

There is not a great deal we can do about some of these people, but there are some things we should do. We must challenge stereotyping and the myths which abound. We must ensure people know the facts about the impact of migrant workers on the economy. We must say clearly, explicitly and often that immigration is positive and point out that the notion that immigrants from Poland are taking Irish jobs is wrong. There is no evidence to support that, bar a few isolated cases.

It is also important that we challenge the myths about social welfare. Anybody who knows the facts is aware that it is almost impossible for anybody from eastern Europe to claim social welfare in Ireland, certainly within the first two years. One will hear regularly on the doorsteps myths from people who suggest that immigrants are treated better than Irish citizens. That is simply untrue and all of us in this House and in positions of leadership have a responsibility to ensure that the facts are made available, that people are made aware of what is happening and that the myths, many of which are dangerous and insidious, are challenged.

The most important aspect of the report is that it makes the point powerfully that this is not just an employment issue and that there are other issues with which we must deal. As I understand it, the immigrant supports in this country have been put together largely by immigrants themselves working voluntarily or with a relatively small amount of grant aid or subsidy from

[Mr. McDowell.]

Ireland. We need to move from that. We must acknowledge that there is a huge number of people who are in Ireland for the first time and it is important that we provide whatever supports they need to integrate into Irish society. That is in our interest and in theirs also.

It is in our mutual interests also that immigrants have as much information about Ireland as possible before they come here. I am not sure we have done enough to ensure that people in Poland, who may believe that the roads in Ireland are lined with gold, get all the information and realise that while they might be paid a good deal, they also have to pay higher prices for rent, food or whatever. Getting information into the public domain is not something we should leave to the voluntary bodies or immigrant groups; it is something in which we should be actively involved. The Minister's Department has a role in that too. The report is quite limited in its extent. It is not ambitious in what it seeks to do and should be just one part of what is an important debate in terms of future years.

**Ms White:** I welcome the Minister and compliment him on the tremendous work he is doing in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. The recent increase in carer's leave to two years is a tremendous support to people who are caring for those who suffer from long-term illness. They can now be off work for two years and are guaranteed that they will get their job back after that time. Neither do they have to be related to the person for whom they are caring. I want to record my appreciation of that.

The joint committee report on migration contains a powerful and enlightened sentiment on the contribution of immigrants to our society. It echoes the ideals of the 1916 Proclamation when it states that immigration has the potential to create in Ireland an exciting, young, highly-skilled and outward looking society where wealth is created for the benefit of all and where the contribution of each member of society is recognised and cherished. That philosophy of inclusion presents all of us with a challenge, especially Oireachtas Members, to provide laws that foster inclusion and prevent exploitation of migrants.

I want to make four points. Our economy could not achieve or sustain its current growth rates of some 5% per year without the contribution and skills of the migrant workers who have come here over the past few years. Generally speaking, Irish people do not realise how disabled our economy would be if we did not have immigrant workers. We hear much rhetoric and small talk but people generally do not realise that our economy would fall flat on its face without economic immigrants.

The 2002 census indicated that 6% of our population were immigrants. The word from the new census being carried out currently is that immigrants will make up 10% of our population, and there is no reason to believe that growth will

not continue. Until now, only the United Kingdom, Sweden and Ireland allowed free entry to people from the EU accession states but three or four other countries, including Spain and Portugal, have agreed that in future they will allow free access from EU countries. Immigration may ease off here, therefore, when the immigrants go to other countries.

The report dated April 2006 states that 62,000 people who came here in the past two years were from the last ten EU accession countries but a report in one of today's newspapers states that 200,000, not 60,000, came here in the past two years from those ten accession countries. The figure, therefore, is far beyond what we had predicted. The report is dated April 2006 but already the figure has increased from 62,000 to 200,000.

Immigrants here work in restaurants, hotels, shops, IT customer support companies and on building sites. I find them an inspiration. Their work ethic, dedication and enthusiasm in customer service is outstanding. It may not be politically correct to say so but it is a major contrast to our workers. Last night on the way home I went into a beauty salon in Dundrum at around 8.45 p.m. An advertisement for a new service was displayed and I went in——

**Mr. Bradford:** There is no need for the Senator to go there.

**Ms White:** I thank Senator Bradford for the courtesy. I went into the salon and there were four Irish girls behind the counter who told me the salon was closed. I said I wanted to make an appointment but they said they had nothing available until next week. This was Wednesday night. We all know that foreign people working in shops, or the service industry generally, cannot wait to pack the bags properly and so on. They smile and talk to everyone.

The Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism, Deputy O'Donoghue, made a good point recently about the Ryder Cup tournament, to be held in the autumn. He said that he hopes we give good service and value for money to the visitors who will come here for that event and not exploit them. The standard of service has increased greatly because of the work ethic of our immigrants. My image of Chinese people was that, under communist rule, they did what they were told; it was the ultimate in bureaucracy. I asked my daughter where they got their work ethic and she said that under Mao all they were allowed to do was work. These immigrants are the children of people who lived under Mao, who made them work. It was the other extreme with Mao, as we know, but it was an interesting point.

The report suggests setting up a Department but I do not agree with that. Under the Constitution only 15 Departments are allowed and, as far as I know, we currently have 15 Departments. I suggest a semi-State body or part of a Department be set up to look after immigrants.

I am involved in the Catherine McCauley centre in Baggot Street. The centre was opened 250 years ago by Catherine McCauley, who founded the Sisters of Mercy. Her work was to educate poor Irish women and help them to get jobs. That organisation is now teaching immigrant women IT skills and English. I record my appreciation of the Sisters of Mercy and the Catherine McCauley centre on what they are doing for immigrant women and what Catherine McCauley did 250 years ago for poor Irish women in helping them to get jobs.

The illegal trafficking of women, which was the subject matter of Monday night's "Prime Time" programme, has not caught the imagination of the country as an issue. The alarm bells are not ringing. At an exclusive apartment in Dublin 4, young women who were kidnapped from eastern Europe were being raped and exploited all day long. It is not only pimps who are at fault, but also the customers, whether they are Irish or another nationality.

Something must be done and the people exploiting the women must be dealt with through the law. The Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform is quick in terms of deporting people, but what is being done to protect women from this serious slave labour and illegal trafficking problem? Today's edition of *The Irish Times* states, "Ireland, uniquely in the EU, has no law specifically designed to outlaw the trafficking of women for sex. Under European law, we were supposed to have enacted such provisions by 2004."

**Mr. Bradford:** I congratulate Senator White on her broad-ranging discourse on this topic and, while it is not totally related to this debate, I agree with her comments on trafficking. It must be taken seriously. I am a member of the Council of Europe's sub-committee on equal opportunities for men and women, which is currently making a report on the possible danger of the trafficking of women as a result of the World Cup in Germany. We have no control over the fact that prostitution is legal in Germany. In advance of the World Cup, the German authorities are bizarrely putting in place centres for prostitution. There is considerable fear that there will be significant trafficking of women from all over the world, particularly Africa, to these so-called purpose-built centres in Berlin and elsewhere. We must show our concern, not just about the moral issues, but also the exploitation of women. The Council of Europe is gravely concerned about this subject.

I welcome the opportunity to speak on migration and concur with Senator White in that it is bizarre to listen to the criticism of migrant workers in this country. Ireland would shut down but for them. Our hotels, petrol stations and many of our large shopping centres would not be staffed and our infrastructural projects, which are being effectively and thoroughly carried out,

would not be completed. We need immigrant workers. Oireachtas committees on European affairs, foreign affairs and others have examined the statistics and there is a conservative estimate that we will need another 40,000 migrant workers each year for the next 20 years. This statistic stands up to scrutiny and we must provide for it politically.

This report is important if we are to put structures in place to deal with the issues of migration and the new Ireland. It is not an exaggeration to say we are beginning to build a rainbow nation. We should be proud of this fact. Senator White referred to the possibility that the census will show 10% of our population comes from nations other than Ireland. This diversity is good as long as we put in place structures to facilitate newcomers and allow the Irish to deal with it progressively. We face challenges and certain dangers but we must also take advantage of the opportunities provided by this emerging picture.

I do not agree with Senator White's opinion on a Ministry. I accept her statement that there is only constitutional provision for 15 Ministers but one of the weaknesses of politics in this State during the past 50 or 60 years is that we practically set Cabinet portfolios in stone. Issues change and problems emerge, but from an institutional point of view, we do not always respond as thoroughly or quickly as we could. In the next five to ten years, there could certainly be a place for a Department to deal with migration and labour affairs. These crucial issues must be addressed.

Semi-State bodies may be okay and Ministers of State, such as the man sitting in the House, are often effective, but I would like to see a Minister taking charge of related matters, including work permits, equality, housing and education. Senators McDowell and Quinn spoke about the educational aspects of this issue. We must ensure that the children of migrant workers are facilitated to the full extent. It will not only be good for them, but also for this country. If managed properly, migration should result in a win-win situation but there must be a greater political grasping of the nettle. As such, the possibility of a Minister in charge of migration and broader labour issues should be actively considered by the Government.

Senator McDowell also spoke about the stereotypical phraseology we use. For example, we speak about foreign labour, but the majority of these people are not foreigners — they are fellow Europeans. They are doing what Irish people needed to do for generations and what we did so effectively in the United States, Britain, Australia, New Zealand and, to a lesser extent, other European countries, that is, carving out livelihoods, new opportunities, new ways of life and helping to build new communities. We should try to see the positives of migration, not just from the urgent labour point of view, but the new mix of people and nationalities coming to

[Mr. Bradford.]

Ireland with their own cultures and backgrounds. It should enrich this nation.

I concede that it is a challenge and, as is always the case everywhere in the world, a small number of people can view matters negatively and from a racist perspective. Our political challenge is to reject this type of racist thinking and ensure the new Ireland to which everyone is contributing has a space for our migrant population, some of whom may only be here for 12 months or two years but many of whom wish to make their futures and the futures of their families here. We can go forward together. This report provides us with a chart to do that. I hope we will study it in detail and respond to it. From a political perspective, matters could be better dealt with if there were a strong Department taking charge of the issue.

**Dr. Mansergh:** I welcome the Minister of State and this debate. What has happened has partly been the result of making Ireland one of the most attractive countries in the EU in which to do business through, for example, corporation tax policies. That, along with having an open regime for the ten accession countries, has worked out extremely well from our perspective. It enables us to meet needs and because we have such a wide pool from which to draw, most sectors, particularly in the productive economy do not experience labour shortages.

Last week, as a member of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Finance and the Public Service, I attended a conference called the Munich Economic Summit, which devoted itself entirely to the question of migration, offshoring, outsourcing, etc. Even before anyone from Ireland spoke, it was referred to many times by speakers from both North America and especially from continental Europe as a country which had got its migration policy broadly right. There was much criticism of German and Austrian decisions on the subject and of German ones in particular. One might imagine that their policy was understandable, given their high rate of unemployment of approximately 11%, as well as their geographical proximity. Nonetheless, even with that rate of unemployment, they experience acute shortages in certain areas of industry, notably in engineering and so on.

Naturally, if it is extremely difficult to enter Germany from somewhere like Poland, it is understandable that Poles would bypass Germany and come to somewhere like Ireland where, in principle, they can enter without problems and, if they are well-trained, get a job. The overwhelming consensus, both in the EU Commission report and among the economic views I heard at the aforementioned conference, is that the decision to open up was correct and that those countries which had opened up had done better.

I am glad that three or four other countries have decided to open up from 1 May 2006 as this means that people from the ten accession countries now have a wider choice of country to which to travel. While people may be worried about the risks we have taken, within another three or four years all countries will be obliged to open up. Hence, the pressure on countries like Ireland, which opened up when others did not will not be so great. Nonetheless, I agree with Senator McDowell that we would be wise to be cautious about Romania and Bulgaria for a variety of social reasons. Apart from anything else, they are considerably more heavily populated countries than were most of the ten accession countries, with the exception of Poland.

I am glad that the employment inspectorate is to be beefed up. This is important and will be essential to maintain employment standards. I hope the social partnership agreement, whenever it is concluded, will adequately cover that point. Nevertheless, the Oireachtas Joint Committee on European Affairs is correct to suggest that some kind of basic safety net must be put in place. I refer to the provision of drop-in centres etc., rather than the full panoply of social welfare.

Some reference has already been made in this debate to some limited resentments. However, at a constituency level, I cannot remember when I last had a serious complaint about immigrants, with the exception of the manner in which they drive and similar matters. However, some in our society, particularly outside the cities, have fewer employment opportunities. Hence, it is important that initiatives such as community employment schemes, which have worked well in the past, are fully utilised or even restored in order that people are not laid off while simultaneously witnessing immigrants getting jobs. This small measure would not involve high costs.

It is also good that we have finally eased restrictions on those in receipt of various forms of social assistance, to enable them to earn up to €100 per week. Everyone else, including teenage children and students had means of supplementing their income and the only people who were not allowed to do so were those in receipt of social assistance.

I am somewhat sceptical about what might be described as departmental juggling. I have watched the relabelling or shifting around of Departments at close quarters. It may not be well understood that this is often done to tailor Departments to individual Ministers on their inclusion in the Cabinet. It is not a panacea for problems.

I wish to make two brief points. The first mainly relates to those immigrants from outside the EU. It is quite difficult for public representatives to get any answer in reasonable time in respect of people whose employment is clearly valued in local communities, but who have been served with orders to depart. I have encountered a case involving a South African chef who

attended an employment session organised in South Africa in 2000 by the Tánaiste, Deputy Harney, in which we tried to recruit people from abroad. Nevertheless, the person in question finds it extremely difficult to remain in this country.

My final point is that we should be pragmatic and should not adopt overly-rigid theoretical models of multiculturalism or assimilation. The attendance of children at school and learning Irish constitutes an element of assimilation, which is good. Many countries which have experienced major problems had significant colonial empires and so on. Their problems have different roots to ours. Hence, we should note that while we must reflect on this issue, we should remain pragmatic.

**Mr. O'Toole:** I also welcome the Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy Killeen, to the House. I also wish to thank him and show appreciation for the work he does in his Department.

This issue demands much of our time. This morning's debate has been extremely positive and supportive of the issues, which demonstrates a great understanding on the part of Members. What bothers me most about this debate is the manner in which it is conducted in the pubs and clubs. Senator McDowell made the point earlier that when one hears of "them" taking "our" jobs, one must inquire as to which jobs are at issue and should ask someone to point them out. What jobs do immigrants perform which we want either our children or ourselves to do? In other words, the question should not be permitted to hang rhetorically, but should be addressed each time. People should be pushed to explain and articulate their exact viewpoints.

Although Members have failed to promulgate this point, the reality is that the economy would die on its feet were the hundreds of thousands of migrant workers to leave. People do not understand this point. People in receipt of social welfare benefits or pensions do not realise that nowadays, the people who create the requisite wealth come, in large part, from outside this country. Not only should we tolerate them, we need them and must acknowledge and appreciate them.

There is another issue which has not been considered, namely, that the ordinary citizenry do not accept or recognise that in every country in the world where there has been a wave of immigrants, the children of these immigrants have given a major boost to the economy. We are getting something which is quite novel. We are getting a significant fillip from current immigrants and we can look forward to a further fillip from their children when they contribute to the economy of the country.

Their commitment to education is extraordinary. I visited a school in the Minister of State's constituency last year and the principal said that, given all the difficulties, she would be quite pre-

pared to have a whole school full of non-nationals, particularly English-speaking non-nationals in terms of their interest, enthusiasm, appetite for education and the interest and support of their parents. She gave me chapter and verse in explaining how well the system operated. She said she wished some of the indigenous parents had the same interest and commitment to education. One can imagine the added value these children will bring to our economy when they come through third level education or whatever.

The Minister of State should use every opportunity to sell this message. He has a significant brief dealing with workers' rights and the need to protect immigrants, the positive aspect of which is escaping the notice of many elected public representatives. However, this debate has been very positive. It is also a fact that the work the Minister of State is doing to protect foreign workers from exploitation is crucially important. If we get the reputation of being other than fair to all workers, we will no longer be seen as an attractive country in which people will invest. There will be a spin-off in this regard in the future.

I agree with the point made by Senators Dardis and Mansergh on the need for a Department to deal with the issue. I disagree slightly with Senator Mansergh about the renaming and rejuggling of Departments. I always thought it had more to do with beginning a new contract for secretaries general, so they could start the clock on a new seven years, rather than with the appropriate needs.

**Dr. Mansergh:** The Senator might be correct.

**Mr. O'Toole:** Perhaps the truth is somewhere in the middle. After reading the report and listening to the comments in this debate, I do not like the idea of ghettoisation, even though I know it is not what the committee intended. There is an element of ghettoisation in hiving responsibility off to another new Department. This would mean that immigrants could be told to deal with the Department of Education and Science or the Department of Health and Children. I do not think public representatives or trade unions representing people with a need should have to deal with a Department of immigration, which would then have to deal with the Department of Health and Science or the Department of Education and Science or whatever. It would result in a new tier of bureaucracy. While the proposal is well made in the report, I did not find it convincing. The issue of newcomer children in schools should be dealt with by the Department of Education and Science rather than trying to create a whole series of people with expertise in education in a brand new Department, which would not work.

We also need to consider the cultural element. While many people do not like to hear it, it is worth stating again that the second most spoken

[Mr. O'Toole.]

language in this country is Mandarin Chinese. It is a very significant change from people's expectations. Given the numbers of people who have come to this country from Poland and other countries, the position of Gaeilge could soon drop from third to fourth or fifth.

We also need to examine how to integrate these people so they can make a positive contribution in order to develop our culture. While the Minister of State's county is the home of aspects of Irish music culture, I have also met some old-fashioned people who feel that the music of 100 years ago should never change. They believe that if Ms Shannon gives the odd extra burl when playing a jig or reel, it should be questioned. Bringing new instruments or new people into our culture is important, and the musical fusion this could create will be important. Organisations such as the GAA, the FAI and the IRFU will also welcome new blood.

We should have outgrown the concept of multiculturalism because it gives a completely wrong impression. This idea of giving each group their own space within society is not what should happen. The object must be interculturalism, where people from different cultural backgrounds merge together and work together to create a new integrated community. The words "assimilation" and "integration" raise peoples' hackles. However, it depends what is meant by these phrases.

Integration and assimilation should not mean telling people that they cannot speak Chinese and stick to their own games, that they must play our games and speak our language. It should mean they should speak our language and play our games also so we can learn from them and they can learn from us. We should try to establish a quality of engagement between both cultural groups, not create ghettos where each culture looks after their own space. There is nothing to be proud about having a Muslim school in Dublin. While there is nothing wrong with it, it is not a recognition of a great leap forward. It is more or less saying to people that we do not want them, even though that is not the intention. My concept of interculturalism is people growing, being educated and living together.

I believe our gene pool needs a bit of help from some outsiders. I would welcome some additional new and different blood with new ideas. Perhaps we would be less pale or less ruddy like me. I say that as someone who comes from a part of the country, west Kerry, where the only definition of a true west Kerry person is that he or she will not have pure blood.

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Mr. Killeen):** I thank the Senators who participated in the debate, which has been interesting, stimulating and enlightening. I also thank the joint committee for preparing the report. It is fair to say

that the title of the report is an initial assessment of the position of European Union migrant workers in Ireland, which suggests that further positions will emerge. It is fair to say that in the context of the entire debate.

We must also acknowledge that Ireland has played a constructive role in Europe down through the years. Migration has recently become an issue for us in a way that was not the case in the past. The contributions of Senators indicate how significant an issue inward migration has been for the past three or four years and is likely to be in the future. Mobility of labour is very important in the global economy. It is a reality as our economy prospers.

The key point made by most speakers, which is a major factor in the report, is that immigration and migration are not just about economics. We are scampering to catch up with the challenge in economic terms and, as Senator O'Toole and others said, the challenge in regard to the rights and entitlements of workers. However, there is another agenda in regard to the issues raised by migration. People who come to Ireland from other countries need housing, health care, transport, education and so on. As there are costs involved in this regard, there are issues that must be addressed in the short to medium term.

Integration is not a simple issue. It involves many policies and many agencies. I have some sympathy with the underlying theme of the report which suggests that it needs to be brought together in a more comprehensive manner. I do not think it is possible to do that under one Department, as a number of speakers said. Work remains to be done in that regard if we are to avoid the mistakes made in other countries.

The changes in our economic fortunes have meant that we are confronted with new and positive challenges. The growth of inward economic migration is one such challenge, and is likely to remain so in the future. A central part of that issue will be addressed, in legislative terms, by the Employment Permits Bill, which has been through the Dáil and is likely to be dealt with in the Seanad in the next two or three weeks. Issues relating to migration and labour law are addressed in that Bill but there are many other areas that must be examined and these are highlighted in the report very effectively.

We await with interest the forthcoming report from the National Economic and Social Council, being prepared by the International Organisation for Migration. We must pay attention to the findings of such reports. Last year I had the pleasure of launching a report for Dr. Martin Ruhs of Trinity College, Dublin, which set out, in a very comprehensive manner, the economic challenges of migration. We must also look closely at other challenges that might arise.

I was invited by FÁS to be in Riga today for the promotion of its Know Before You Go campaign. Other commitments meant that I could not attend but the Senators who spoke today have

convinced me that it is important that members of the Government travel overseas and state openly the issues at play in Ireland. Clearly we have a need for people with particular skills because we have labour shortages here, as many Senators have pointed out. However, we must tell people that it is expensive to live here, that housing and food are expensive and that such realities must be taken into account before people move here. I was somewhat reluctant to go but having heard the comments of various Senators, I now accept that it is incumbent on all of us to do our best in this regard.

**Ms O'Rourke:** We will all travel with the Minister of State on the next occasion.

**Mr. Killeen:** I am sure there are several people who would be more than willing to go.

Senator Coghlan referred to Irish Ferries and employment agencies and a number of related issues which are being dealt with in the context of the partnership talks. Ultimately, we will reach agreement on these matters. The Government will not be found wanting in addressing these issues. It intends to do what is required in this area and hopefully everyone will be in agreement at partnership level.

He also referred to the important matter of irregularities concerning Safe Pass and the area of safety at work generally. I launched a report for the Health and Safety Authority two days ago. That report states that the fatality rate for non-national or foreign workers in construction is 22.1 per 100,000, while the rate for Irish workers is seven. Of course, both figures are entirely unacceptable but the fact there are more than three times as many fatalities among non-Irish workers is a cause for the gravest concern. Whatever action is required to deal with that will be taken by the Government. Almost 6,000 workplace inspections took place last year and that number will increase this year. We must state publicly and acknowledge openly that there are problems in this and other areas. We must acknowledge the problems in order to deal with them effectively.

Senator Coghlan also asked about green cards for US citizens, which will be addressed in the context of the Employment Permits Bill.

Senator Hanafin and several others referred to the "Prime Time" programme broadcast last Monday night, which I did not see. However, I have heard so much about it that I intend to obtain a copy and watch it. The issues raised in that programme, as Senators White and Bradford pointed out at considerable length, are very important. One could very easily dismiss such issues, but it would be very foolish to do so. In so far as they are of import to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, we will certainly try to play our part.

Senator Quinn referred to the current French and North American experience of migration,

both of which highlight the difficulties that Ireland needs to avoid. We have no excuse when we see what happens elsewhere and know that we might be the victim of the same negative experience in the future. The Senator also made an important point that people of my age tend to forget, and perhaps he was reminded of it by the presence of children in the public gallery, namely, that children in Ireland today have no idea what we are talking about when we discuss Ireland's experience of emigration in the 1980s. It is important that those of us who do remember that experience take it into account as we go forward. Senator Quinn also raised the important matter of education and language, which I hope will not be lost on the relevant people.

Senator Dardis referred to the Know Before You Go campaign organised by FÁS and stressed the importance of support for that campaign at a political level. In view of what he and others have said, the Government may well do more than it has done to date in that regard. He also made the point that accurate data and good quality research are essential when planning for the future, in terms of migration and many other areas.

Senator McDowell mentioned the debate on the nature of assimilation. We have not quite bridged the gap with regard to exactly what we mean when we use that term. Senator O'Toole referred to the difference between interculturalism and multiculturalism and the fact that we have not yet worked out exactly what we are talking about and where we need to go in that regard. Sometimes it means going much further than we do currently, while at other times it means not bending over backwards to the extent we have done in the past. That is a question that must be decided at national level, preferably in the national Parliament.

Senator McDowell made a number of other interesting points, particularly with regard to the ongoing debate about Romania and Bulgaria. He pointed out that Ireland's decision is made easier if other countries allow access but is made considerably more difficult if they do not do so. He also argued that there is an element of racism in Ireland. While it does not reside in a majority of people, it does exist. We do not do ourselves any service by pretending that is not the case. Racism exists and we must acknowledge and deal with it.

Senator White described the report as "powerful and enlightened" and I agree that it makes a very substantial contribution to the debate. She also made an interesting point about the work ethic and customer service that one can experience from many non-nationals. That must be acknowledged and dealt with. The Senator also said that alarm bells should be ringing on foot of the "Prime Time" report and she is correct in that regard. She pointed out that the exploitation is not just the responsibility of the pimps and others who are the direct beneficiaries of the appalling



[Mr. Killeen.]

treatment of young women. Many others also bear a responsibility and this must be addressed.

Senator Bradford agreed with Senator White in the strongest terms. He mentioned a report from the Council of Europe, of which I was not aware, dealing with prostitution and the forthcoming World Cup in Germany. That highlights the exact nature of this appalling industry. He argued that this issue is not about morality in the old sense of the sexual morality that once exercised the minds of many people in Ireland. It is an entirely different issue in terms of morality which centres on exploitation. Senator Bradford and others also mentioned the Irish experience abroad.

Senator Mansergh pointed out that despite the fact that Germany has an enormous number of unemployed people, it still has skill shortages in certain areas. That is a reality we also face in Ireland. The Senator also referred to the labour inspectorate and community employment schemes. If Irish people are losing their jobs, they have a right to be concerned and to have their difficulties taken into account. Community employment schemes play a very important role in that regard.

Senator O'Toole spoke about the debate in the pubs and clubs, to the effect that these people are, as some would say, "taking our jobs". However, we do not say often enough that we would have an enormous shortage of services and funding for pensions and other benefits if we did not have these people here. Often we do not engage in that debate or we ignore the ill-informed comment and Senator O'Toole argued that we should not do so. We should respond to the comments and ask people who fills their petrol tanks and who does numerous other jobs for them.

**Ms O'Rourke:** Who serves them their food in hotels?

**Mr. Killeen:** We should acknowledge the contribution migrants have made. Senator O'Toole also referred to the enthusiasm for education displayed by migrant parents and their children. People of my parents' generation also displayed such enthusiasm and perhaps we are not doing the same for our children. The Senator pointed out that the children of migrants will make an enormous contribution here. He also drew a distinction between interculturalism and multiculturalism and made a very interesting point, partly in devilment I suspect, about the Irish gene pool.

I thank all of the Senators for their contributions and acknowledge the positive impact of the report which, as the cover states, is an initial assessment of the issue. In that context, I hope the Joint Committee on European Affairs will continue to examine the issue and contribute further to this debate.

**Acting Chairman (Mr. Walsh):** When is it proposed to sit again?

**Ms O'Rourke:** Next Tuesday at 2.30 p.m.

### Adjournment Matters.

#### Schools Building Projects.

**Ms O'Rourke:** I thank the Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy Killeen, for his attendance today and his summing up of our debate, which was remarkably lucid. I followed it on the monitor.

This motion concerns a secondary school in Kilbeggan. A commission on education stated a considerable time ago that Kilbeggan should have a new secondary school on a greenfield site. To that end, the Minister for Education and Science, Deputy Hanafin, met with a delegation from the Kilbeggan secondary school, including the principal and two of the trustees, who are nuns of the Mercy order, myself and Deputy Cassidy. We had an extremely good meeting, during the course of which the Minister stated she would ask the Board of Works to assess various sites, see what was available and at what price range. Total silence has ensued. I receive a massive number of letters from parents quite rightly wondering what is happening. They read the commission report, heard of the meeting with the Minister and want to know what is happening regarding the new secondary school in Kilbeggan.

Kilbeggan is a growing town. The rise in numbers in the secondary school is remarkable. It has a well-deserved reputation based on the tradition of the Sisters of Mercy, who opened a secondary school there when nobody else was willing to do so. Be that as it may, it is a live issue. A remarkably wide range of subjects is offered, with teachers to match. Students come from all over rural south Westmeath, including Streamstown, Dysart, Bohar, Horseleap, Ballinagore, Castletowngeoghegan and Kilbeggan itself. Will the Minister bring this matter to a conclusion as quickly as possible so the people of Kilbeggan will know when the provision of this new secondary school will definitely progress?

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Mr. Killeen):** On behalf of the Minister for Education and Science, I thank Senator O'Rourke for raising this matter. I will reply in her absence.

At the outset, modernising facilities in our 3,200 primary and 750 post-primary schools is not an easy task given the legacy of decades of underinvestment in this area, as well as the need to respond to emerging needs in areas of rapid population growth. Nonetheless, since taking office, this Government has shown a sincere determination to improve the condition of our

school buildings and ensure that appropriate facilities are in place to enable the implementation of a broad and balanced curriculum.

In this regard this Government invested in the largest school building programme in the history of the State. Between 1998 and the end of 2004, approximately €2 billion was invested in school buildings and in the region of 7,500 large and small projects were completed in schools, including 130 brand new schools and 510 large scale refurbishments and extensions. Funding for school building and renovation projects has increased five-fold since 1997. In 2006, €491 million will be spent on school building projects, compared to just €92 million in 1997. The 2006 allocation is, in its own right, an increase of over 9% in real terms on the 2005 allocation.

As Senator O'Rourke will be aware, at the end of last year the Department of Education and Science outlined its spending plans for primary and post-primary schools for 2006. With €491 million to be spent on school buildings, more than 1,300 projects will be active in schools all over the country. This significant investment will allow the Department to continue to progress its major programme of school building and modernisation which includes improving equipment needed for new technologies and ICT.

The Senator may also be aware that, from a planning perspective, the school planning section of the Department has introduced a new planning model for educational infrastructure to ensure that, in future, school provision will be decided only after a transparent consultation process. In this regard, trustees, parents, sponsors of prospective schools and all interested parties from a locality will have the opportunity to have their voices heard in the process.

The main feature of the new model, being introduced initially on a pilot basis in five specific areas, is the publication of an area development plan, which will set out a blueprint for future education infrastructure in the particular area. Draft area development plans provide details of existing primary and post primary provision; an examination of the demographics of the area; commentary on the data and recommendations for the area into the future. Following publication of each draft area development plan, the commission on school accommodation conducts a public engagement process to which all interested parties can make submissions. All of these submissions are published. The process in each case culminates in the publication of a final area development plan against which all capital funding decisions will be made over the next decade.

One of the areas chosen for the pilot project was the N4-M4 corridor running from Leixlip to Kilbeggan and I am pleased to inform the House that the entire process through to publication of the report of the commission on school accommodation has been completed for this area. In its report, the commission recommends that Meán-scoil an Chlochair, Kilbeggan be relocated to a

greenfield site and that it should cater for 500 to 550 students. It further recommends that a strict enrolment policy should be in place to ensure that priority is given to students within the catchment area.

While the report in itself forms a vital framework in which future decisions about school planning in an area will be made, it is important to understand that all of the recommendations are subject to the normal processes which apply when progressing large scale building projects and that progress on projects themselves is subject to the published prioritisation criteria applicable to all large scale projects throughout the country.

The next step for the proposed project in Kilbeggan is an architectural assessment of the existing accommodation to ascertain whether there may be a more cost-effective solution to the school's accommodation needs in the interests of obtaining value for taxpayers' money. This is standard practice for all large scale projects. This assessment will be arranged in the context of other competing priorities under the Department's capital programme. When a decision has been taken as to how best the needs of the school can be met, the project will then be considered for inclusion in a capital programme. I thank the Senator once again for affording me the opportunity to outline to the House the current position in this case and the process which the school can expect to ensue as its project moves forward to delivery.

**Ms O'Rourke:** We knew all of that.

**Mr. Killeen:** There is not very much in it.

**Ms O'Rourke:** Not at all.

I thank the Minister of State. He is only delivering the speech on behalf of the Minister for Education and Science. Until the last paragraph I knew everything included in the reply. I wanted to know when it will progress to the next step. I did not get an answer and that is a matter of great regret. Perhaps somebody in a Department is peeping into his or her screen and might give me an answer.

**Mr. Killeen:** I will convey that to the Minister.

**Acting Chairman:** I wish to clarify with the Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy Killeen, that he will respond to another Adjournment matter on behalf of the Minister for Education and Science. The Senator who will move that matter is not present.

**Ms O'Rourke:** Senator Morrissey is not here.

**Acting Chairman:** He may be here before we finish.

### Departmental Information Services.

**Mr. McHugh:** I welcome the Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture and Food, Deputy Brendan Smith, to the House. My Adjournment matter involves an issue close to his heart as the Minister of State's constituency has many agricultural issues.

The specific issue concerns farmers' access to information. Mechanisms are in place which work, and many advisory bodies such as Teagasc do a phenomenal job in getting information to farmers and clarifying matters in the bureaucratic regime in which we live. Diligent people work at departmental level and perform in the face of many constraints because they must deal with a plethora of issues. As more legislation is introduced, more issues will raise their heads.

However, we have entered a new period in agriculture with an increasing amount of legislation coming from European directives and at national level, and it is becoming more of a headache for farmers. More information and clarification is required on a daily basis, not on a weekly or monthly basis. Increased legislation and bureaucracy creates a need for more information. We must also take into consideration that farming practices have changed. In the past, a farm set-up could have two heads of household. A husband could be in the farmyard while his wife was at home. Farming practice has changed, and many farmers involved in part-time farming are therefore not as available as much to make phone calls to the Department's offices. They may be at other work, for example.

I am specifically calling for the Department to look at the possibility of introducing lo-call numbers at a regional level, or even a freefone number for farmers, where they can have 24-hour access to information at departmental level. With advanced communications systems and technology, as well as information systems, this is not too much to ask. It is important that the idea of having access to information for farmers is put on the record and advanced at least to a debating stage.

Extra staff are required. The staff currently working at Department level, in the midlands or in the peripheral areas that have Department offices, are overworked. They must deal with many information queries, and in doing this they are not able to facilitate every farmer every time. Farmers can become infuriated and frustrated, perhaps as a result of having to stay on the phone line for an hour or an hour and a half. Time is premium for many people, no more so than farmers. If we are to introduce layers of bureaucracy and legislation, making it ever more difficult and turning farming into an administrative business, it is important we facilitate the new measures.

We should facilitate farmers with regard to their time constraints as they may be working on a part-time basis. Such farmers do not have time to be on a phone call for an hour or an hour and

a half, waiting for a person on the other end to give them a small piece of information. It is imperative that something is done sooner rather than later. Farmers are stellar custodians of the landscape and are still fighting a battle. Future generations of farmers still wish to partake in farming practice. It is incumbent on us to make it easier for this to happen and to facilitate farmers.

**Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture and Food (Mr. B. Smith):** I thank Senator McHugh for raising this issue and his complimentary remarks on the officials in the Department and Teagasc.

Dissemination of information to farmers is accorded a very high priority by the Department. The full range of communication channels are employed to ensure widespread availability of information on the schemes and activities of the Department of Agriculture and Food. Each year, the Department produces a booklet entitled Schemes and Services, which is distributed widely and is also available on the Department's website. This sets out details of the schemes and services operated by the Department along with basic conditions, rates of payment and administrative locations for these schemes. These are available free of charge from headquarters or from local offices of the Department. They are also made available at events involving farmer participation, such as the national ploughing championships.

In addition, the Department publishes details of new schemes in the national press and the dedicated farming press by way of press releases and public notices. An indication of the activity of the Department in this area can be seen in that last year the Department issued 263 press releases and 934 public notices.

The Department also operates campaigns and information meetings on issues of interest to the farming community. For example, following the launch of the mid-term review of the Common Agricultural Policy, the Department organised a series of information meetings throughout the country, which were well received and allowed farmers to make an informed decision in regard to the single payment scheme. Last year, the Minister, Deputy Coughlan, had a meeting on REPS 4 in Donegal and I attended one in Cavan. We covered different areas of the country and the meetings were well-attended, useful and informative for farmers.

Advances in information technology have changed the way in which business is carried out by allowing the Department's customers to interact directly with the Department in order to record and view information on-line over the Internet and by using their mobile phones. The Department is at the forefront in deploying the latest information technology and mobile phone services to facilitate its clients and other clients.

One of the major tasks undertaken by the Department in recent years has been the implementation of the single payment scheme. This

huge task was successfully implemented when over €1 billion in single payments issued to 118,500 farmers last December, meeting the target we had set ourselves of making the payments on the first possible date. This was a major undertaking and the outcome, after painstaking preparatory work in establishing individual entitlements, was by any standards a major achievement. It was a great credit to all the officials involved in both local offices and the head offices of the Department. Currently, total payments amount to €1.161 billion, involving 99% of farmers who hold entitlements and applied for the single payment scheme.

In recognition of the significant number of queries farmers had on the new single payment scheme, the Minister decided in September 2005 to establish a dedicated call centre in the Portlaoise office of the Department. This centre, which was staffed by 35 officials on a full-time basis, dealt with up to 2,500 calls per day. In addition, certain actions were taken to assist in the information dissemination, such as information meetings for advisers and the use of generic emails for various type of queries, for example, start date, consolidation, etc.

Subsequently, this call centre was replaced by a system of dedicated lo-call numbers, which provides direct access to both the county sections dealing with the processing of individual single payment scheme applications and those sections dealing with the processing of applications under the inheritance, new entrants, consolidation and *force majeure* measures of the scheme. Currently, calls to these lo-call numbers are in excess of 5,000 per week. It will be appreciated, therefore, that significant staff resources are occupied in dealing with these enquiries.

However, I am determined that the best possible service will be provided to farmers and, in this regard, will continue to review the allocation of resources on an ongoing basis to ensure that this is achieved. I have asked that the telephone systems available to the single payment unit should be reviewed and upgraded. The level of staff resources made available to the single payment unit for the medium term is also being reviewed to ensure it is capable of operating the scheme efficiently and delivering payments within the appropriate timescales.

As I mentioned, where issues arise during processing of single payment scheme application forms which require to be satisfactorily resolved before payment can issue, correspondence is issued to the persons concerned outlining the nature of the given problem. As prompt written replies to these queries allow such cases to be processed speedily to completion I again urge all farmers to reply quickly to any correspondence received from my Department.

The changeover to the single payment scheme has presented significant challenges to the Department and involves change and re-organisation in the unit in Portlaoise, the 28 local offices,

the former regional office in Castlebar and the inspection regime. The introduction of the single payment scheme, falling disease levels and efficiency gains means that staff numbers are currently on a downward trend in the Department.

It is anticipated that there will be a reduction in the number of office staff by 400 on 2005 levels, resulting in lower staff numbers in local offices. This process has already commenced and a significant number of staff has already been deployed to other Departments. The Department will manage the reduction and redeployment of staff numbers while maintaining the coherence, efficiency and effectiveness of the Department and continuing to provide quality services to its clients. I thank Senator McHugh for raising this important issue.

**Mr. McHugh:** The last part of the Minister of State's speech has summed up the issue. The concern is that there will be major reductions, which will leave existing staff under severe pressure. The question of whether there will be enough resources to accommodate the existing queries of farmers generally will be highlighted.

Some farmers have compared their farming business to people on the minimum wage. Farmers do not have a minimum wage. A statistic being disseminated now is that a farmer would need to be paid €300 for a ewe in order to make the minimum wage. As it stands this week, a farmer would be lucky to get €40 or €50 for a sheep come next autumn. The farmers have not put themselves in such a position. With more bureaucracy, more information will be required. More resources will be needed for dissemination of this information, including more IT resources. We still need human contact. Farmers cannot be left to deal with computers and recorded voice messages. Human interaction between the farmer and the Department is necessary.

**Mr. B. Smith:** The Senator and the House can be assured there will be adequate human resources to deal with the ongoing work of the Department in administering our various schemes. The fact that we paid out over €1 billion on the first day of a new scheme illustrates the efficiency of the Department in that regard. Our neighbouring jurisdiction has not yet issued its payments but over 85% of farmers, some 118,500, received payments to which they were entitled on the morning of 31 December 2005. It was a mammoth task.

I, together with the Minister for Agriculture and Food, Deputy Coughlan, and senior management at the Department will ensure that adequate resources are provided, in terms of personnel and information technology, to ensure these schemes are run in the most efficient way possible and that we have appropriate interaction with the farming community. Farmers with queries can be assured they will receive the utmost

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assistance from our Department's offices, both at headquarters and locally.

**Mr. McHugh:** It is important to keep the resources or they will be taken away.

**Mr. B. Smith:** The Senator has nothing to worry about on that score.

#### School Enrolments.

**Mr. Morrissey:** I apologise to the Minister of State for detaining him. This is the second year parents have queued overnight to seek enrolment for their daughters at Loreto College in Swords. This year the queue started 48 hours in advance of the allocation of places. We all know there have long been queues for housing in Dublin but when parents queue for school places we must do something about it. I hope the Minister of State's reply will state that there are sufficient places in the Swords catchment area.

Does the school's board of management have responsibility for enrolment procedures or can the Department of Education and Science do something about the situation? Is there some way of avoiding it next year?

**Mr. Killeen:** I thank the Senator on behalf of the Minister for Education and Science, Deputy Hanafin, for raising this matter as it provides an opportunity to outline to the House the current position on post-primary places in the Swords area.

Despite attempts in the media to create an impression that there is a shortage of pupil places in the Swords area, this is not the case. This has become an annual media event because of the way in which one school in particular implements its enrolment policy. It is unfortunate that this type of coverage creates an inaccurate picture of the actual position and I am glad of the opportunity to put the record straight.

There are four post-primary schools in the Swords area, three of which enrol girls. One of the schools, namely the Loreto College, is an all girls' school. The type and level of provision in the area provides considerable choice for parents. Between them the four schools cater for pupils from the Swords and north Dublin area. Crucial to the essence of this debate, enrolments at these schools have remained stable since 1997-98, showing only a 0.5% increase. There is no question, therefore, of a shortage of places arising. Parents themselves pointed out in media reports

that they were simply exercising choice by queuing for the school in question because the school operates enrolment on a first come, first served basis and has done so for some years.

The main responsibility of the Department of Education and Science is to ensure that schools in an area can, between them, cater for all pupils seeking second level places. This may result in pupils not obtaining a place in the school of their first choice, hence the scenario of parents queuing to enrol at Loreto College last weekend. Again, this occurred because of a combination of parental choice and the enrolment procedure operated by the school's management authority.

Furthermore, while the Loreto College has an application with the Department for ancillary accommodation it has not applied for additional classroom accommodation to cater for increased capacity. Having said that, the Department accepts that Swords is an area of population growth and while there may be a demand in future years for additional provision at post-primary level, the Department is satisfied that currently, between them, the four existing post-primary schools have adequate provision to cater for existing demand.

Officials in the school planning section of the Department of Education and Science are carrying out a review of educational needs in the north Dublin east, Meath south and Louth area, including Swords, by way of a draft area development plan. The need for additional future post-primary provision in Swords as a whole is being considered in this context.

The draft plan is nearing completion and will be published shortly. Following this, a public consultation process will be conducted by the commission on school accommodation. The process will culminate in a final area development plan, which will provide a blueprint for educational infrastructure in the area for the next decade, including the need or otherwise to provide additional post-primary school provision in Swords.

Again, I thank the Senator for raising this matter and I hope that I have given assurance to parents seeking places for their children at second level in Swords that any panic created by media reports is misplaced and that places are available for all those seeking them.

**Mr. Morrissey:** I thank the Minister of State for his comprehensive reply.

The Seanad adjourned at 1.45 p.m. until 2.30 p.m. on Tuesday, 16 May 2006.