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**Wednesday,
17 May 2006**

DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—*Neamhcheartaithe*
(OFFICIAL REPORT—*Unrevised*)

Wednesday, 17 May 2006.

[illegible]

SEANAD ÉIREANN

*Dé Céadaoin, 17 Bealtaine 2006.
Wednesday, 17 May 2006.*

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach i gceannas ar 10.30 a.m.

*Paidir.
Prayer.*

Business of Seanad.

An Cathaoirleach: I have received notice from Senator Wilson that, on the motion for the Adjournment of the House today, he proposes to raise the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Defence, in view of the great success of the recent Easter 1916 commemorations, to clarify the current arrangements for the replacement of 1916 and War of Independence medals; and if he has any proposals to review these arrangements this year.

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

The need for the Minister for Education and Science to confirm the retention of four full-time teaching posts at Kilcooley national school, Loughrea, County Galway, given that the pupil intake for 2006-07 will be the same as to the intake for 2004-05.

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

The need for the Minister for Education and Science to clarify the current position on the proposed amalgamation of St. Jarlath's College, Tuam, and St. Patrick's College, Tuam, and the proposed amalgamation of Presentation Convent, Tuam, and Mercy Convent, Tuam.

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

The need for the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children to indicate the help available for young people who suffer from Asperger's syndrome; and the services available for people who reach the age of 18.

I regard the matters raised by the Senators as suitable for discussion on the Adjournment. I have selected those raised by Senators Wilson, Ulick Burke and Kitt and they will be taken at the conclusion of business. Senator McHugh may

give notice on another day of the matter he wishes to raise.

Order of Business.

Ms O'Rourke: The Order of Business is Nos. 1, 2, 3 and 25, motion 23. No. 1, a referral motion whereby the subject matter of motion 14 on today's Order Paper is being referred to the Joint Committee on Justice, Equality, Defence and Women's Rights for consideration, concerns the examination of measures aimed at simplifying the exchange of information and intelligence between law enforcement authorities of member states, to be taken without debate; No. 2, statements on waste management, to be taken on conclusion of Order of Business and to conclude not later than 1.30 p.m., with the contributions of spokespersons not to exceed 12 minutes each, and those of other Senators not to exceed eight minutes each, and the Minister to be called upon to reply not later than five minutes before the conclusion of statements; No. 3, statements on ageism, to be taken at 2.30 p.m. until 5 p.m., with the contributions of spokespersons not to exceed 15 minutes each, and those of other Senators not to exceed ten minutes each, and the Minister to be called upon to reply not later than five minutes before the conclusion of statements; and No. 25, motion 23, to be taken from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. There will be a sos from 1.30 p.m. to 2.30 p.m.

Mr. Finucane: When Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats first came to power in 1997, their concerns about increasing house prices led them to commission Peter Bacon and Associates, a firm of economic consultants, to produce a report with the objective of dampening house prices. The firm followed up with two further reports in 1999 and 2000. However, house prices have since escalated out of all control, with the average house price in the first quarter of this year standing at €375,000 in Dublin and €245,000 outside the Dublin area, and the interest expressed in 1997 with regard to reducing prices has gone by the board. The Taoiseach recently said the property market is doing well but I would point out to him the market is doing well for people who already own houses but is impossible for those trying to get on the property ladder or stuck on local authority housing lists.

I remind Senators that when we bought our houses, mortgage institutions lent on the basis of twice the annual salary. They now provide 100% mortgages on the basis of five or six times borrowers' annual salaries. Even those who were successful in getting mortgages are in danger of falling into an economic trap in the future. While the Government will point to the 70,000 or more new houses built each year, a lot of houses in estates are being bought by investors on the basis of low interest rates and leased to people from eastern Europe. First-time buyers are in the minority on

[Mr. Finucane.]

many estates compared with those from eastern Europe who are renting.

I want to know how the Government intends to address the issue of escalating house prices. Has it given up hope at this stage? People are concerned about how they can cope with these prices. The Bacon reports have been long since forgotten and the promises made in 1997 have not been fulfilled.

Mr. O'Toole: Yesterday, another incident took place involving a school bus, bringing the total number of such incidents to about six in the past year. Thankfully, nobody was injured in yesterday's accident. The previous accident was also a fire in which, luckily, nobody was injured. This must be taken in hand and if money must be invested, so be it. Anybody regularly driving around this country will have noticed that one can turn the corner of a quiet road and see the same school bus with the same registration number in the same place for the past 30 years. Some of these would not be useful as hen houses yet are being used to transport children to schools. I would like a full statement from the Minister for Education and Science, or whoever is the responsible Minister, outlining the condition of these buses, how often they are checked, how many have seat belts, the normal capacity and the qualification of the drivers. These issues have come to the fore in recent times and the least we can do for the parents, pupils and school authorities is to reassure ourselves about these buses. They cannot be passing the type of NCT tests we require for ordinary road users. This responsibility must fall on us as legislators and public representatives.

I recently noted that the Minister for Defence made a proposal to the Government, which was accepted, to increase the pensions of survivors of the 1916 Rising and nobody would have a problem with that but would welcome it. To reiterate a point I made here some months ago, with the increased interest around the 90th anniversary of the Rising, many people are trying to do research into that area. Most of the information is available from the Bureau of Military History, which is unable to deal with the demand. I have spoken to the staff there. There are fewer than 20 chairs and there is a two month wait to get a space for a number of hours in a day. The staff is superb and enthusiastic about the work and has had assurances from everybody right up to the Taoiseach. It would be useful for the Minister for Defence to come here and tell us the plans he has to give public access to the records available in the Bureau of Military History, including statements taken in the 1940s and 1950s from survivors of those times, which give vital information on local and national history. It is the least he could do and would be more useful and helpful than some of the commemorative events.

Ms Tuffy: I support Senator Finucane's comments on the housing crisis we face. I recently listened to Professor PJ Drudy speaking on the radio about this issue. We all know the year on year rise in house prices is unsustainable. We have been listening to the vested interests, such as auctioneers, developers and right-wing economists, telling us the prices will reach equilibrium. That will not happen. There will be either a soft or hard landing and we must ensure it is a soft one. What happened to the report of the All-Party Oireachtas Committee on the Constitution on property rights? I am a member of that committee and that document contains proposals to deal with this issue. It was announced at the time with great fanfare by the Taoiseach. That report has not been implemented and the issues raised in it have not been addressed. They should be addressed as a matter of urgency. If not, we could face a situation of negative equity, and we must ensure that does not happen to present and future homeowners. Housing is a right and it should not be left to the private market to deal with people's right to a roof over their heads. I support calls to have this issue debated in the House.

I welcome the campaign by Treoir, which represents unmarried parents. The campaign, funded by the Family Support Agency, is about the importance of children having contact with both parents and raises the issue that many children are born without the right to know and have contact with their fathers because their parents are not married. This concerns the rights of the child. It is important that the child, if possible, has contact with both parents. I support the campaign and we should debate the matter in the House. Unmarried fathers do not have automatic guardianship rights to their children. They can get those rights only if the mother gives permission or by going to court. Many other countries have addressed this and extended rights of unmarried fathers to guardianship rights. We must introduce that type of legislation here as a matter of urgency.

An Cathaoirleach: There is a telephone ringing. I asked before that telephones be silenced as they interfere with the electronic equipment.

Mr. Glynn: Recent newspaper reports stated that people walking on the boardwalk along the River Liffey adjacent to Liberty Hall were heckled and verbally abused by people who were high on drugs and openly injecting themselves and by others selling drugs. This is unacceptable and I call on the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform and the Garda Síochána to address this as a matter of urgency.

An Cathaoirleach: Another telephone is ringing. They should be turned off completely and not set to silent. I apologise for interrupting the Senator twice.

Mr. Glynn: Tá sé múchta. Last week I asked the Leader about the position of the Medical Practitioners Bill and when it would be brought before the House and I seek an update on that.

Ms Terry: The Leader may have seen last night's "Prime Time" which presented a worrying report on the effect on babies of mothers drinking alcohol while pregnant. We are unsure whether the results are true. There is some doubt about the findings. However I would be interested in the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children coming here to give us the opportunity to debate the issue of prenatal health. Apart from the dangers to the unborn of the effects of the mother's drinking, there is also the effect of drug taking. We need to examine drugs generally in terms of the health of our future generation. When one considers the high incidence of ADHD among children one wonders if it is true that Irish mothers drink more than they used to while pregnant. The findings of that programme showed that pregnant mothers should not drink at all. Other drugs including tobacco and hard drugs have a serious impact on the unborn child. The issue was well highlighted and we should campaign on it. An advertising campaign should highlight the dangers of drinking or taking other drugs while pregnant. I would be glad if the Leader would invite the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children to come here and give us the opportunity to raise those issues.

An Cathaoirleach: As many Senators are offering, I ask that contributions be as brief as possible.

Dr. Mansergh: I will be brief. I welcome the return of the train drivers to work and thank the mediator for his successful and professional input; indeed I welcome his return to work in the public interest, from which he had to temporarily step back last year.

On housing, in most of the towns earmarked for decentralisation houses are available at or below the national average.

Mr. Quinn: From today, every home in Northern Ireland will receive a disk entitled "How to use the Internet". This is a very interesting concept. Ten years ago, this State decided it wanted to get to the top of the league regarding information technology but it has failed miserably to do so in the area of broadband. We need somebody to highlight the opportunity that exists for us and argue that we cannot be left behind. An initiative such as the one in Northern Ireland should be copied here.

Mr. Kitt: The Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy Roche, has spoken quite often about the need for dedicated personnel in each local authority to deal with the affordable housing scheme. He gave

examples of the good work being done in south Dublin but these should be taken on board by every local authority, especially at a time when there is a lot of land available from the HSE, county councils and VECs. Affordable housing could also be provided on agricultural land, including Teagasc lands. I believe it will be provided and if sufficient personnel were in place, the scheme would be more user-friendly for those who badly need houses. I agree with all that has been said on the need to build more houses. The affordable housing scheme should be promoted further by each local authority.

Mr. Coonan: I support Senator Finucane's call for a debate on housing. Half the population live on the east coast and the rest live in the remainder of the country. It might be useful if the Leader arranged for us to have a breakdown of the figures pertaining to house construction across the country. In Templemore, which is in my part of the country, not one local authority house has been built in at least four years, maybe longer.

A Senator: The Senator should be ashamed of himself.

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Coonan without interruption.

Mr. Coonan: That is an indication of how the Government treats the people in rural Ireland.

I ask the Leader to arrange a debate on agriculture. Normally when one calls for such a debate, one asks for the Minister for Agriculture and Food to come to the House. However, the Minister seems to have lost control of what is happening in agriculture and we possibly need a debate involving the Minister for Finance and the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government. The Government made great play of getting an additional 10% to cover the cost of construction of projects under the nitrates directive programme but we now discover the Department is operating on costs based on figures for 2004. Costs have escalated significantly since then and any increase has been well and truly eroded.

The Government has made 3,700 beet growers redundant. If we want to keep farming alive we need a revised farm retirement pension that will make land available to young people. I ask the Leader to arrange a debate on these issues.

Mr. Dooley: Will the Leader organise a debate regarding a review of the safety standards that apply to school buses? A number of other Senators have called for such a debate. It is important because there is real concern among parents over the safety of their children who travel on school buses every day. To some extent, the issue is hyped up and I still believe that travelling to school on a school bus is one of the safest

[Mr. Dooley.]

methods of doing so. However, there are still concerns, particularly regarding buses that have passed the test but which nevertheless find themselves involved in very serious accidents within a number of months of their having done so. There needs to be an audit of standards and I would like to see both relevant Ministers in the House to allay parents' fears and, if necessary, introduce amending legislation to upgrade the standards.

Ms O'Meara: I, too, call for a debate on school buses. It is inevitable that there is concern when one hears of incidents such as that which occurred yesterday. Buses are passing the test but do not appear to be up to the desired standard. One must question the quality of the tests because there is now widespread concern over the safety of school buses. I listened to the Minister of State on the radio this morning and she was being as reassuring as she could be, but when an incident such as the one that occurred yesterday takes place, one must be very concerned.

I very much welcome the memorandum of agreement between our Government and that of the United Kingdom in respect of the list of sex offenders. A number of issues need to be explored in this regard, one of which has potential legal implications. I am referring to the Garda having and being able to make available information on potential sex offenders or people suspected of sex offences who have not been convicted. This is a very difficult area legally. It is being managed in the United Kingdom but appears to be subject to serious difficulties in Ireland. I ask the Leader to return to us on this matter. If there is a need to explore the legal issues, we are clearly the ones who should do so.

The Garda vetting office is in need of further resources and should therefore get them. Considering what is at stake, it is simply not acceptable that it would be short of such resources.

Mr. J. Walsh: Will the Leader arrange a debate on wind energy, particularly on the need for relevant guidelines to be issued to local authorities? There are lobby groups in many counties both for and against wind energy and windfarms. Some local authorities have taken a very restrictive view in that they are refusing to grant planning permission for wind energy schemes. As part of our commitment under the Kyoto Protocol and our commitment to have a sustainable supply of energy and independent energy resources, it is important for the Department to issue guidelines such that a uniform position will be adopted across the country.

I support Senator Tuffy's call for a debate on the report from Treoir, which is worthy of support. The organisation is seeking that all children would have a right to the support of both their parents and to know their identity. We should support its call to ensure that the name of the

father is included on birth certificates when they are being issued. This does not always happen. We could have a useful debate on this subject.

Mr. Coghlan: I support Senator Finucane's comments. It is not just house prices that are increasing. The Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy Martin, promised great reductions on foot of the abolition of the groceries order but, as we know, prices have continued to increase steadily. A reduction of up to €1,000 per year was promised but the exercise is beginning to look like it was a total con-job. Mr. Eddie Hobbs, who ran a series of programmes entitled "Rip Off Republic"—

An Cathaoirleach: We cannot refer to names.

Mr. Coghlan: The point is that he said a reduction of up to 20% should be available. What the blazes is going on?

Mr. Finucane: Hear, hear.

Mr. Coghlan: When can the Minister come before the House to explain what he intended? What he promised simply did not happen.

Mr. Daly: There is growing anxiety in many communities over the escalation in the number of applications for telecommunications masts. People are worried about them on environmental and health grounds. Will the Leader invite the Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources to the House to indicate whether, in an effort to deal with these fears and anxieties, he proposes to introduce new legislation in this area or to modernise the guidelines, which were set down ten or 12 years ago? This subject is related to Senator Jim Walsh's comments on masts in general. It is felt that it is necessary to modernise the guidelines and perhaps introduce new legislation.

Dr. Henry: I support Senator O'Meara's comments on the availability of the memorandum on sex offenders in both jurisdictions. I was very worried to hear a senior official in the Home Office tell a committee in the Houses of Parliament, Westminster, that the authorities had no idea of the location of thousands of illegal immigrants. Is it possible some of them are here?

Ms O'Rourke: It is quite possible.

Dr. Henry: Is there any co-operation on this issue? Foreign nationals in the United Kingdom who have been convicted of crimes and served their sentences have not been deported. Have we received any communication on this? I would be grateful if the Leader could ask the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform to address this issue.

Mr. Bannon: I support the call for a debate on housing and have called for one in the past. House prices have gone through the roof and young people find it difficult to get on the bottom rung of the property ladder. Local authorities have zoned sufficient land for development but it is not being released. Much of it is in the hands of developers who are not releasing it. We must take action soon.

I call for a debate on illegal moneylenders operating in many large towns. The less well-off are the victims of these moneylenders, some of whom charge 140% on money borrowed. This causes serious family problems for those who cannot afford to pay. Greedy moneylenders must be put out of business because they are a blight on our society.

Mr. Ross: I refer to an important issue that has been raised so many times that I am tired of raising it. The British Prime Minister made a speech on nuclear waste and nuclear energy last night. In the height of arrogance in dealing with the Irish republic, he decided to approve another generation of nuclear plants in the United Kingdom. This morning the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy Roche, made the same noises I have heard for the past ten to 15 years about protesting about Sellafield and taking a case to the European court of this and that. The British are laughing at us on this issue and the Government seems to have decided nothing can be done. Ireland has a vital interest in the dangers of waste in the Irish Sea and a possible serious explosion.

Can the Leader ask the Minister for Foreign Affairs to attend this House to explain why he has not called in the British ambassador and made a formal protest, pointing out that this is not the action of a nation that is, in other areas, a friendly nation? Sellafield poses a serious danger and if production of nuclear power increases we are in greater danger. I am worried by the placid and calm response. The British Government has worn us down and won the battle. Irish Governments are lying down and taking it. We should issue a formal, serious protest.

I propose an amendment to the Order of Business, that No. 22, in the name of the Independent Senators, be taken today.

Mr. Norris: I second the amendment.

Mr. Feighan: I ask the Leader to invite the Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children to explain to the House the diabolical decision taken by the HSE western area not to grant free ambulance transport services to people who do not hold medical cards. This is vital to those on dialysis and is not available through private health insurance. Removing the transport facility to those who do not hold medical cards is punishing rural patients, most of whom must travel over 500 miles per week. This affects very weak people,

oncology patients, transplant patients and acute lower limb patients without medical cards. I ask the Tánaiste to reverse this draconian decision immediately. My father was on dialysis until he died three years ago and the transport service was of great assistance to families. We are told that the country is awash with money. For this reason the decision should be reversed.

Mr. Norris: I second the amendment proposed by Senator Ross. I share these concerns, especially about the arrogance of Mr. Blair to which Senator Ross referred, and the fact that he pre-empted a report he commissioned. He announced a decision before he had received the report, a curious way of behaving.

I ask the Leader about the fate of the insurance Bill promised to groups such as the Irish Haemophilia Society to cover those who have contracted diseases due to blood transfusions. I have been contacted to find out the status of the Bill and when it will be debated in the House.

If Senator Quinn's suggestion is taken up and discs are provided to explain computers to the Irish public, could this be extended to the north inner city? I am still awaiting my millennium tree, my candle and my iodine pills. I hate to be excluded from the disc as well.

Mr. Dooley: Senator Norris should contact his local Deputy.

Mr. Norris: On the subject of technology, I received a curious circular from the Cathaoirleach about the prohibition of blackberrys in this House. Is it intended to extend this to cover raspberries also?

Ms O'Rourke: Sméara dubha.

Mr. U. Burke: I ask the Leader to arrange a debate on the BMW region. A recent report of the Western Commission indicates a widening gap between development in the west and other areas of the country. For several years, the west has had Objective One status yet expenditure on infrastructure shows the widest gap between east and west. The gap is now increasing in employment and other services and, if it continues, there will be a serious decline in employment opportunities in the west. I hope the relevant Minister will attend the House. The Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs can spend €19 million on administration in his Department. Is it any wonder there is inequity in expenditure on infrastructure and development projects?

Mr. J. Phelan: I call on the Leader to invite the Minister for Finance to discuss a number of issues. There has been a worrying increase in inflation and this month's figure is the highest in four years.

While the Minister is here perhaps we could raise the issue of decentralisation. We had a

[Mr. J. Phelan.]

debate on it two months ago in which the Minister of State, Deputy Parlon, outlined the Government's firm commitment to achieving its objectives as set out by the former Minister, Charlie McCreevy, in the budget three years ago when all on this side of the House and many on the Government side knew the timeframe set could not be achieved. Perhaps the Minister of State would outline the timetable and the proposals for decentralisation, which we welcome but which must be put in place on the basis of an agreed and workable schedule. I hope we can have that debate as soon as possible.

I join with a number of Senators opposite who raised the issue of wind energy on which I recently called for a debate. A debate is needed because there is a serious problem not so much with local authorities and their guidelines but with the ESB in terms of ensuring wind farms, which have planning permission, can be connected to the national grid. A number of wind farms in my area have been given planning permission but they have faced serious difficulties connecting to the national grid and obstacles have been put in their way by the ESB. If we are to have a debate on wind energy, we could usefully spend time discussing the problems affecting those people.

Mr. McHugh: Will the Leader invite the Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources to the House for an urgent debate on broadband? This call is in light of a comment from our colleague, Senator Quinn, that information packs on how to use the Internet are being distributed to households in Northern Ireland. It is important to remember people in Northern Ireland are in a very fortunate position in that there is 100% roll-out of broadband there. That is not the case across the Border, so it is very much in our interest to roll out broadband before we even start to think about giving out information on how to use the Internet. Inishowen is in close proximity to Northern Ireland and it is very hard for small businesses there to compete with Derry and Tyrone where there is 100% roll-out of broadband.

Recently, the Taoiseach visited Inishowen to open a half finished road, switch on the lights in a community centre and switch off the lights in Fruit of the Loom in Buncrana. The next time a Taoiseach visits Inishowen, we want to hear him or her make an announcement in respect of broadband which is the key to the survival of the small to medium-sized enterprise sector there. We need to remain competitive with our neighbours across the Border. I would like the Leader to expedite a debate on broadband with the Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources.

Mr. Scanlon: Following on from Senator John Paul Phelan's comments on decentralisation, we

noted with interest the Taoiseach's remarks at the weekend that perhaps the timeframe was ambitious. The Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, which is to move to Knock, has acquired temporary accommodation in Tubbercurry, County Sligo. The Office of Public Works will take over a building on 1 June and 77 people will be employed in the next two and a half months. There are successes, although I know there are problems. The action, in principle, is good and it will be beneficial to rural areas. It should be given a fair chance because it is easy to sit back and do nothing.

Ms O'Rourke: Senator Finucane, the acting leader of Fine Gael, raised the serious matter of housing. All of us who conduct public business at weekends will know it remains, and has always been, the biggest issue affecting people. I now notice parents becoming very much involved. Parents come to us about their son or daughter who needs a house. They are very willing to put money down or to help financially. Some parents are remortgaging their own houses so that their child will get a start in life. It is a very serious issue. Senator Kitt said it is down to local authorities how they implement social and affordable housing schemes. County Westmeath has a very good record of social and affordable housing and it has been taken up most enthusiastically by builders and by people who need completed houses. We would benefit from a debate on the provision of housing. It is a serious matter, which Senator Finucane was right to raise.

Senator O'Toole spoke about school buses which Senator Ulick Burke raised comprehensively yesterday. There is nothing, however, to stop anybody else raising it the next day. We have asked that the issue be discussed, so we will see when that happens. Senator O'Toole said he was glad the rail strike is over and the mediator is back at work. The mediator has always been an extremely useful person and I used him on many occasions for that same purpose. Senator O'Toole asked if the Minister for Defence could provide more space and staff to the military history bureau.

Senator Tuffy echoed the calls for a debate on housing but also asked what had happened the recommendations of the All-Party Committee on the Constitution. Those recommendations went to the Taoiseach and I suppose they will emerge in due course. She also raised the important issue of the rights of children to have access to both parents.

For some time Senator Henry has asked that the Minister for Social and Family Affairs come to the House. He will be here next week to give a statement on his plans regarding lone parents. We will ask that he include in his statement the rights of children to have access to both parents. The Minister is very keen to come to the House because he has developed his thoughts which are

reforming and informative and I am sure the debate will be such.

Senator Glynn spoke about people walking on the boardwalk along the River Liffey being jeered by people who had taken drugs. That is reprehensible behaviour. He also asked about the Medical Practitioners Bill which will be introduced later in the year and not in this session. Senator Terry spoke about "Prime Time", by which I was very struck, and whether alcohol affects the baby in the womb. Even Dr. Peter Boylan was not sure and he expressed some ambiguity. We need some certainty about it and the Senator called for a debate. She spoke about children with a propensity for attention deficit disorder as a result.

Senator Mansergh thanked the CIE mediator and said he is glad he is back at work. We are all glad about that and that the cloud has been lifted. The Senator noted the towns to which Departments and offices are to be decentralised have average house prices which is good to hear. Senator Quinn said that from today, an informative disc on how to use the Internet will be provided to every home in Northern Ireland. That is an excellent point. I do not know how the Senator manages to pick up these nuggets but he is great at producing them.

Senator Kitt said it was up to each local authority to promote social and affordable housing. Senator Coonan called for a debate on house construction and on agriculture and the 3,700 redundant sugar beet growers. He said there should be a redundancy pension scheme for them which would free up the land for young people. Senator Dooley raised the issue of the safety of school buses, which was also raised yesterday. We are endeavouring to arrange a debate on it.

Senator O'Meara also raised the issue of school buses. She welcomed the memorandum between Ireland and the UK on sexual offenders but she is worried about potential sexual offenders or people likely to be a threat in that regard. Senator Browne yesterday asked that the vetting powers of the Garda be increased and accelerated.

Senator Walsh spoke about wind energy. I remind Members that there will be a debate for two hours tonight on energy policy. I look forward to seeing everybody who raised the topic this morning here tonight to talk about it. I hope all the Members read their *clár*. The debate will take place from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m., courtesy of the Independent Senators.

Senator Coghlan raised the issues of house prices and the groceries order, asking where Eddie Hobbs's promise is.

Mr. Coghlan: I asked where the Minister's commitment is.

Ms O'Rourke: This debate is quite foolish. I do not mean the Senator is foolish — I know well he is not one bit foolish.

Mr. Coghlan: Will the Leader tell us when the prices will come down?

Ms O'Rourke: There was no way there would be significant price reductions in local supermarkets the day after the order was rescinded. That was never going to happen. I agree that we need to know what the passage of time will reveal in that regard and that is the type of debate the Senator seeks.

Senator Daly mentioned the proliferation of communications masts. That is a constant concern. Some companies are seeking to modify and modernise their masts. Senator Henry is worried about the BBC report of thousands of illegal immigrants not deported from the United Kingdom who should have been. She wonders are some of them coming in here. The Senator can bet her bottom dollar they are.

Senator Bannon said developers are not releasing land. It is their land. That goes back to the Kenny report. What can one do?

Mr. Bannon: Many of them are Fianna Fáil cronies.

Ms O'Rourke: Under the Constitution no land can be snatched from anybody, thankfully.

The Senator also mentioned illegal moneylenders. The Consumer Credit Act should take care of them. The Money Advice and Budgeting Service, MABS, is a marvellous facility for helping people who cannot manage their money. I am sure the Senator has recommended MABS to many people.

Mr. Bannon: Most definitely.

Ms O'Rourke: I have done so and it has proved worthwhile. Nevertheless, I will ask if we could debate illegal moneylending.

Senator Ross spoke about nuclear waste and energy. I was amazed at the ferocity of the Prime Minister across the water when he said nuclear energy is back on his agenda with a vengeance. He used those words, which was terrifying in its own way. The Senator said we should stop pussy-footing and make a definite, formal protest by calling in the British ambassador and asking him what his Government is doing about it.

Senator Ross also moved an amendment to the Order of Business, regarding No. 25, motion 22, in the names of the Independent Senators. The amendment has been seconded by Senator Norris.

Senator Feighan said that rural people who do not have medical cards are being penalised by the removal of ambulance cover. People are very ill when they go for treatment and the Senator asked for that rule to be rescinded.

Senator Norris has no tree, no candle and no iodine tablets. I hope he will not disappear soon. I do not know why North Great Georges Street has missed out.

Mr. Dardis: The independent republic of North Great Georges Street.

Ms O'Rourke: Indeed, the independent republic of North Great Georges Street. Everybody got a tree. I cannot figure out how the Senator was not told about that.

Senator Norris also mentioned the insurance Bill. That was raised yesterday and it will be taken before the summer recess.

Senator Ulick Burke asked for a debate on the Border, midland and western region. He spoke about the widening gap between east and west.

Senator John Paul Phelan asked that the Minister for Finance be invited to the House to discuss the increase in inflation and to brief us on the changed agenda on decentralisation. He very properly said that he is in favour of decentralisation. I listened to the Taoiseach yesterday speaking on the Order of Business in the Dáil where he said that if one does not set the bar high one will go nowhere. The bar was set high but he is man enough now to say that perhaps not everything encompassed in the calendar for implementation will happen. If one does not aim high, however, one will achieve nothing. It will work very well in Westmeath, in Athlone and Mullingar, where things are moving ahead at a great rate, I am glad to say, to echo what Senator Scanlon said.

Mr. U. Burke: Is there anything happening in Longford?

Ms O'Rourke: Yes. We are all bidden there quite soon for development. Our two counties are very happy.

Mr. Bannon: For the fourth time we will have a public launch——

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Bannon has already contributed. He should allow the Leader to speak without interruption.

Ms O'Rourke: I do not mind if it is launched ten times, as long as we get it.

Senator John Paul Phelan also mentioned wind energy. He will be here tonight to talk. Good man.

Mr. Minihan: The Senator will not be able to watch the match.

Ms O'Rourke: Senator McHugh asked that the Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources be asked to attend the House to explain why broadband is available in the North of Ireland while we do not have it. The Senator cited the example of the Inishowen peninsula which is quite near the North but lacks this service. Small businesses there are trying to compete with businesses in Northern Ireland.

Senator Scanlon flew the flag for Tubbercurry and Knock and reported decentralisation is going well there too. It is a good news story.

Senator Coonan said Templemore has not had something for four years — what was it?

Mr. Coonan: It has had no local authority housing.

Ms O'Rourke: I cannot understand that. I am aghast. Why does the Senator not do something about it?

Mr. Coonan: Fianna Fáil controls North Tipperary County Council and Templemore Urban Council.

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Ross has proposed an amendment to the Order of Business: "That No. 25, motion 22, be taken today." Is the amendment being pressed?

Mr. Ross: Yes.

Amendment put.

The Seanad divided: Tá, 20; Níl, 27.

Tá

Bannon, James.
Bradford, Paul.
Burke, Paddy.
Burke, Ulick.
Coghlan, Paul.
Coonan, Noel.
Cummins, Maurice.
Feighan, Frank.
Finucane, Michael.
Hayes, Brian.

Henry, Mary.
McHugh, Joe.
Norris, David.
O'Meara, Kathleen.
O'Toole, Joe.
Phelan, John.
Quinn, Feargal.
Ross, Shane.
Terry, Sheila.
Tuffy, Joanna.

Níl

Brady, Cyprian.
Brennan, Michael.
Callanan, Peter.
Daly, Brendan.
Dardis, John.
Dooley, Timmy.

Feeney, Geraldine.
Fitzgerald, Liam.
Glynn, Camillus.
Kenneally, Brendan.
Kitt, Michael P.
Leyden, Terry.

Níl—continued

Lydon, Donal J.
MacSharry, Marc.
Mansergh, Martin.
Minihan, John.
Morrissey, Tom.
Moylan, Pat.
Ó Murchú, Labhrás.
O'Brien, Francis.

O'Rourke, Mary.
Ormonde, Ann.
Phelan, Kieran.
Scanlon, Eamon.
Walsh, Jim.
White, Mary M.
Wilson, Diarmuid.

Tellers: Tá, Senators Norris and Ross; Níl, Senators Minihan and Moylan.

Amendment declared lost.

Order of Business agreed to.

Treaty of Amsterdam: Motion.

Ms O'Rourke: I move:

That the proposal that Seanad Éireann approve the exercise by the State of the option or discretion provided by Article 1.11 of the Treaty of Amsterdam to take part in the adoption of the following proposed measure:

a proposal for a Council framework decision on simplifying the exchange of information and intelligence between law enforcement authorities of the member states of the European Union,

a copy of which proposed measure was laid before Seanad Éireann on 15 May 2006, be referred to the Joint Committee on Justice, Equality, Defence and Women's Rights in accordance with paragraph (1) (Seanad) of the Orders of Reference of that committee, which, not later than 30 May 2006, shall send a message to the Seanad in the manner prescribed in Standing Order 67, and Standing Order 69(2) shall accordingly apply."

Mr. B. Hayes: I second the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Waste Management: Statements.

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Mr. B. O'Keeffe): I thank the House for this opportunity to address Members. This is an extremely important topic and one of major concern to all of the stakeholders involved, be it the Government, the wider political system, the statutory authorities, the waste management industry or the general public. Waste management is truly a collective, shared responsibility which requires a significant degree of consensus if we are to achieve progress on the different issues and challenges that face us as a society. That type of collective approach has underpinned policy on waste management for several years.

Waste management has been at the top of the Government's agenda going all the way back to 1998 when the aptly named Changing Our Ways

policy document was published, which was followed by Delivering Change in 2002 and Taking Stock and Moving Forward in 2004. This policy cycle was completed recently with the publication of a national strategy on biodegradable waste, which charts a ten-year strategy for the diversion of this waste from landfill. All these policy documents are grounded on an integrated approach that follows the internationally accepted waste management hierarchy. This prioritises waste prevention and minimisation, followed by reuse and recycling, recovery and, finally, safe disposal.

Policy, good planning and comprehensive legislation are the bedrock of any effective waste management system. We have set out our stall in terms of policy in the documents to which I referred, which are a good example of the Government's joined up thinking on this complex and diverse issue. In regard to waste planning, the system of regional waste management plans is well established. Most regions have completed their five-year reviews and have adopted their revised plans. These will provide the statutory basis for the meeting of waste management needs on a regional basis and I welcome the fact that this revision process is now all but complete.

At the heart of these plans is the need to ensure that the necessary infrastructure is in place to manage our waste in accordance with national and EU policy. We are all aware of the difficulties that have been experienced in delivering infrastructure in key sectors. I welcome the fact that significant thermal treatment and landfill projects are now being progressed. It is particularly essential that we have in place the waste to energy plants necessary to ensure we can progressively divert waste away from landfill.

While this type of heavy infrastructure is properly funded from user charges in accordance with the polluter pays principle, my Department is active in grant aiding local authority recycling facilities. Some €90 million has been committed since 2002 and communities right around the country are seeing the benefit and helping us meet our ambitious recycling targets. There are, however, those who persist in disposing of their waste illegally. Local authorities and the Office of Environmental Enforcement have been taking a robust approach to such criminal activity and I stress the word "criminal", on which I commend them. The requirement that most households must meet the cost of dealing with their waste is

[Mr. B. O'Keeffe.]

no excuse for this type of behaviour and it will not be tolerated.

We have a comprehensive waste code in place and we have been rolling out new legislation to implement EU directives on producer responsibility initiatives. Last year saw the introduction of new regulations for the EU directive on waste electrical and electronic equipment and work is nearing completion to transpose and implement an EU directive on end-of-life vehicles. We have also been running an effective Race Against Waste campaign over the past three years, which is contributing in a major way to increasing public awareness of the waste issue but, more importantly, to persuading people to integrate this new consciousness into their daily lives.

All these policies have borne fruit and it is instructive to mention a few key statistics which neatly illustrate how much we are changing our ways. In 1998 we were at the back of the class with an overall recycling rate of only 9%, this had risen to 34% by 2004, only one point short of our national target set for 2013; our recycling of packaging waste over the same period rose from 15% to 56%; construction and demolition recycling is at a high of 85%; and landfilling generally has fallen by 9% in four years, even in spite of the massive economic activity that is taking place.

The waste electrical recycling scheme, which commenced in August 2005, has been successful. Ireland was only one of a handful of countries to fully implement this EU directive on time and its successful implementation has led to a fourfold increase in the level of recycling of this important and hazardous waste stream.

The continued roll out of segregated kerbside collection of dry recyclables — over half a million households now have this service — followed by the introduction of a brown bin service in built up areas to collect compostable waste, the expanding network of local authority civic amenity sites and the added recycling dividend from existing and new producer funded schemes, will all help to drive us on to greater success.

I stress that we must not become complacent. Formidable challenges remain and an equally formidable range of resources and policy tools supported by a strong commitment from all the stakeholders involved will be needed. The new strategy on biodegradable waste is a case in point. Almost three quarters of waste going to landfill is made up of biodegradable waste. It includes garden and kitchen waste, wood, paper, textiles and the like. The strategy targets an 80% diversion, or 1.8 million tonnes, of projected biodegradable municipal waste arising from landfill by 2016, up from the current 32.6% diversion or 630,000 tonnes, which is a considerable challenge. An innovative aspect of the strategy is the introduction of national waste prevention targets which will rise gradually from 2% to 6% from now to 2016.

Market development measures are required to ensure there are outlets for the products derived from waste diverted from landfill. The group will later this year publish a national market development programme. The waste market generally has undergone rapid and radical transformation in recent years. We now have a vibrant, growing and responsible private waste industry working alongside the local authorities. This has inevitably raised issues about how this new market should be regulated. We need to ensure that a proper level of transparency exists as to how prices are set in the sector and achieve a level playing field in terms of competition between service providers. My colleague, the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy Roche, has been considering these matters and will shortly bring proposals to Government.

Before concluding, I want again to express my appreciation for the opportunity to address the House today. I have outlined, in a broad sense, the current state of play in terms of waste management in Ireland and I hope I have demonstrated to Senators that with policies, plans and legislation now well embedded, work on the critical area of implementation is proceeding apace on a number of fronts.

As I mentioned at the outset, waste is a collective responsibility and it requires collectively-based solutions. From my point of view and that of the Government, leadership, drive and determination will continue to be needed if we are to continue to transform waste management in Ireland. We are well on the way towards achieving what a new EU strategy on waste prevention and recycling has as its underpinning principle — the transformation of Europe into a recycling society. We in Ireland are on the way to becoming such a society. We have the right policies in place. We need to drive ahead now to ensure that we will be playing in the premiership of top recycling nations. I welcome the House's interest in the process and look forward to hearing the valuable views of Members. All policy benefits from informed discussion and I am sure this debate will be just that — informative and beneficial to us in Government.

Mr. Bannon: I welcome the Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy Batt O'Keeffe, to the House to debate the very important issue of waste management.

Urban and rural areas of the country are choking on waste. It is imperative that the Government finally takes responsibility for its actions and ensures that our environment is handed on to future generations intact and enhanced. The issue of farm plastic raises questions as to the Government's commitment to the effective disposal and recycling of rapidly increasing business generated waste. It is totally unacceptable that the Government is washing its hands of the issue

of farm plastic, especially when it has turned a blind eye to the importing of this material from Northern Ireland, which is not liable to the recycling levy.

The importation of plastic from the North has totally undermined the scheme here and the Government must now take action to address this problem. Farmers have already paid up front for this service and are bearing the brunt of the Minister's mismanagement of this particular issue. There is a vast tonnage of plastic still uncollected on farms, even though more than €3 million has been paid for its collection by farmers. This plastic, used for storing silage during winter months is building up throughout the country, creating a 23,000 tonne environmental time bomb and in many cases jeopardising farmers' REPS plans. Farmers at my clinic in Longford and throughout the constituency every other week criticise the Government for its inaction.

Mr. Dardis: They do not want to make silage, so they put plastic on top of it.

Mr. Bannon: They are furious at the manner in which the Government has ripped them off as regards charging a levy and then failing to provide the facilities to collect waste. Senator Dardis is well aware of the position.

Mr. Dardis: If they could not bring it in from Northern Ireland, they would be whinging.

Mr. Bannon: He should go and speak to farmers in any part of the county. He is somewhat removed from the farming community in recent years.

Mr. Dardis: I am not.

Mr. Bannon: He has not got his finger on the pulse like I have or he would know the situation in rural Ireland. In 2005, some 3,000 tonnes of plastic waste were left uncollected on farms, despite the fact that farmers had paid a levy for its collection. When this is included with the farm plastic, which is illegally imported into the country — an estimated 30% of the total — and sold to unknowing farmers, it means the total volume of uncollected plastic over a two-year period has reached 23,000 tonnes. Farmers have paid levies of €1.27 million to the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government for the collection of plastic waste and a further €1.6 million on illegally imported plastic, which has not been returned to the State. Due to the Minister's gross incompetence in turning a blind eye to the importation of illegal farm plastic, the whole recycling scheme has collapsed. The hard pressed farmers pay, yet again. They have been held to ransom and have had their livelihoods threatened over and over by the Minister, Deputy Roche. They are now expected to pay an additional €2.3 million to get the plastic collected.

The Department must fund and establish collection points for the recycling of farm plastic through local authorities. This should be co-ordinated with the current processors of farm plastic to ensure that material does not build up further.

As regards the nitrates directive, I have described the Minister, Deputy Roche, as "the grim reaper of Irish farming".

Mr. Dardis: Oh my goodness.

Mr. Bannon: His aim, and indeed that of the Government, seems to be the destruction of Irish farming, for which they could yet be single-handedly responsible. That may be said of several Ministers.

Mr. Dardis: Fine Gael will have talked them out of business well before that ever happens.

Mr. Bannon: Senator Dardis gets angry when it hurts.

Mr. B. O'Keeffe: They are telling lies.

Mr. Dardis: Deputy Hayes got his answer in the Dáil from the Commissioner.

Mr. Bannon: Farmers need the support of a strong Government, and Fine Gael will provide that.

Mr. Dardis: With the Green Party and the Independents.

Mr. Bannon: Our farmers need the protection of a strong Government. They are certainly not getting it from Fianna Fáil or the PDs.

Mr. B. O'Keeffe: Just imagine the colours — green, red and blue. What a concoction.

Mr. Bannon: Waste facilities throughout the country are not up to scratch, with a lack of emphasis on recycling and problems arising with refuse collection and private waste facilities. Changing Our Ways of September 1998 set out the broad policy approach to waste management in Ireland: "Policy is based on the integrated approach, based on the international recognised waste management hierarchy of prevention/minimisation, significantly increased levels of recycling, energy recovery and finally, utilising landfill as the last resort for residual waste that cannot otherwise be recovered."

Reduced reliance on landfill is a key policy priority and to that end a range of ambitious targets was set for delivery over a 15-year period involving: a diversion of 50% of overall household waste away from landfill; a minimum 65% reduction of biodegradable waste consigned to landfill; recycling of 35% of municipal waste; and recycling 85% of construction and demolition

[Mr. Bannon.]

waste with an interim target of 50% recycling by 2003.

I stood in this Chamber last year and said that Ireland's record on recycling was deplorable by European standards. We recycle less than 8% of our household waste compared to 46% in Austria, 44% in Holland, 40% in Belgium and 30% in Denmark. Already our landfill is at 86% capacity.

So much for aspirations. There is a total lack of political will in Government to drive the environmental agenda forward. We are faced with the shocking fact that almost

12 o'clock 70% of Ireland's recyclable waste is exported. Private sector environmental service companies are currently gearing up to invest €1 billion in developing the structures necessary to cope with the country's growing waste problem. Local authorities through the country are finalising waste management plans with businesses to provide most of the services. Local authorities outside Dublin are likely to rely heavily on private sector involvement and will contract most of their services to waste management companies. This was pointed out to us in the recent presentations by local authorities to the Joint Committee on Environment and Local Government. These services will include bottle banks, green waste facilities — sorting, recycling and other treatment and civic amenity centres. Biological treatment for waste water, sewage and waste will require considerable outlay, as will recycling related services such as materials recovery facilities.

Fine Gael policy is to extend the rate of recycling to European standards before considering incineration. Along with my colleague, Deputy O'Dowd, I support an alternative policy based on recycling. The State currently recycles less than 8% of waste, which is well below European levels. When in Government, Fine Gael will have a target of recycling 50% of household waste.

Figures published by the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, in March of this year have shown that after two years of decline, Ireland's greenhouse gas emissions have climbed by 0.15% to the equivalent of 68.46 tonnes of carbon dioxide in 2004. Electricity generation accounts for the bulk of the 23.2% of Ireland's greenhouse gas emissions, which points the finger at the State-owned ESB which produces more greenhouse gases than all other Irish companies put together. Moneypoint power plant, which is coal-powered, and the peat burning electricity plants are the main offenders.

Under the 1997 Kyoto Protocol on climate change, Ireland is supposed to restrict its greenhouse gas emissions to 113% of its 1990 level between the years 2008-11. Based on the efforts of the Government to rectify the problem, we will be nowhere near achieving this target.

Of particular concern in terms of waste management is the newspaper and magazine mountain which looks set for volcanic eruption. Unsold paper items account for 113,000 tonnes of waste annually. To put this in context, approximately 96,000 tonnes of cars go into the end-of-life scrap scheme annually. Retailers are forced, as part of their supply arrangements, to accept boxed-out unsolicited magazines. For years, the Irish Retail Newsagents Association, IRNA, has been campaigning on the unfairness of this arrangement but the Minister, Deputy Roche, has failed yet again to find a solution to a major environmental problem. An agreement needs to be brokered between the retailers, publisher, printers, wholesalers and the IRNA.

Unless a recycling charge is applied at the print run stage or a full copy returns policy is allowed then the issue of box-outs and unsolicited titles will remain a problem. With 4,300 different newspaper and magazine titles available on the Irish market it is essential that the Minister takes the matter seriously. It must be given the same priority as the car scrappage problem.

Fine Gael recognises that something must be done about Ireland's waste management problem but, unfortunately, the Government does not. Only a handful of the 46 waste management facilities in the national development plan have been built. We have a severe lack of sites, which is pushing up the cost of waste disposal. The average cost of sending something to landfill in Ireland is €180. Waste mismanagement will be the legacy of this Government. Its "live for today and squander money and resources" mode of operation will be felt for generations to come.

We want action, not cheap talk on this issue. I urge the Minister of State, Deputy Batt O'Keeffe, to listen to the people in rural areas and constituencies. People are fed up with the manner in which the Government is mismanaging the issue of waste disposal. One only has to drive up to Dublin——

Mr. B. O'Keeffe: That is why Fine Gael is so high in the polls at the moment.

Mr. Bannon: ——via the motorway to witness the amount of litter strewn around. The same is true of any county road, back road or cul-de-sac.

Mr. Dardis: How does Senator Bannon propose to stop that?

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Senator Bannon should be allowed to speak without interruption.

Mr. Bannon: I accept people have filthy habits but the Government is doing very little to resolve this matter. Cameras should be put in place on those back roads and culs-de-sac to eliminate the problem of litter because it is having a serious impact on the tourism industry and the enviro-

onment. It is important that the Minister of State give up the cheap talk and act on the problem.

Mr. Kitt: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Batt O'Keeffe. I am delighted we have this opportunity to discuss waste management. I take a different view from that of Senator Bannon on the farm plastics issue. I have lobbied with my colleagues for a number of months to get the Minister to announce a new scheme.

Mr. Dardis: Hear, hear.

Mr. Kitt: I was delighted that the Minister, Deputy Roche, announced a revised farm plastics scheme on 3 May this year.

Mr. Bannon: With an extra charge involved.

Mr. Kitt: This shows the Minister is listening.

Mr. Bannon: It is a rip-off of the farming community.

Mr. Kitt: The farming organisations made a strong case and they have welcomed this scheme.

Mr. Dardis: The polluter pays.

Mr. Kitt: The spring clean project announced by the Minister applies to local authorities in five counties — Galway, Clare, Mayo, Offaly and Waterford. It has been very much welcomed by the farming organisations in the west.

Mr. Bannon: When?

Mr. Kitt: If this scheme is successful it will be rolled out to other counties. It is planned to provide the service free to farmers due to the backlog of plastic waste. A charge of €50 will be levied for each lift and this will be the average cost for farmers. I spoke recently to the environmental officer in Galway County Council and she told me there will be smaller collections at recycling centres for smaller producers.

We have got off to a good start. It was a very successful scheme in the past but perhaps it was a victim of its own success. Now that the scheme has been reinstated we can build on it and provide it in all counties. It shows that this scheme and the Government waste management scheme is working. We are turning away from being a throw-away society and our recycling rates are increasing rapidly. We are putting modern, environmentally safe methods in place for the final disposal of non-recyclable materials. This is most welcome.

The Government is making a major effort to stop the illegal dumping we know has been taking place. If we invest in putting the infrastructure in place we will be able to make further progress. In 1998, we were recycling only 9% of waste. The Minister of State indicated that by 2004 this had climbed to 33%, which is higher than the UK and

approaching the European Union average. We have now almost reached our national target of 35% of municipal waste recycling and we will reach it by the year 2013. We have been most successful in our packaging waste recovery rate. We exceed the EU average in this area. Commercial premises are now obliged to segregate at source and present certain specified packaging waste materials for recovery, leading to an effective ban on putting these materials in landfill.

The majority of households now have separate bin collections for recyclables. There is a strong push by my local authority in Galway to have the extra brown bin put in place for the collection of organic household waste. The environmental officer in Galway County Council has visited many towns and villages in the county where she has talked about the benefits of composting and using wormeries. Many schools now have wormeries for dealing with waste, which is a positive approach. Many local authorities have begun to move to a pay-by-weight or pay-by-use system which rewards those who recycle more. That is a positive move from the local authority.

We are one of only two European Union member states to fully implement the European directive on electronic waste on time. Many good things are happening here, such as the green flag initiative. I attended a school recently which was the 25th in County Galway to be awarded a green flag. That is very positive.

Progress has been made on waste reduction and prevention. The Race Against Waste advertising campaign is ongoing on television and radio and it has been very effective because it has increased our awareness of how we can reduce waste at home and in the workplace. The national strategy on biodegradable waste was published last month. It is a major policy document, which sets out the measures by which Ireland will achieve 80% diversion of such waste from landfill by 2016, which amounts to 1.8 million tonnes a year currently. For the first time, we have a national waste strategy in which targets have been set for waste prevention and minimisation. Recycling by way of organic treatment is also a major component of the plan.

All waste cannot be recycled and environmentally progressive countries in the EU rely on thermal treatment to convert waste to energy. This is an emotive issue, as evidenced when it was raised at a recent meeting of Galway City Council. We need to discuss further how we will approach such treatment. Earlier I received an e-mail from Friends of the Earth. When I printed the attachment, it ran to 78 pages because, unfortunately, the document only printed on one side of the page. When I receive the Whip from Senator Moylan, at least he prints it on both sides of the page. However, this is a large document, which I have not read yet. It takes the point made by Friends of the Earth that waste incineration must be examined again.

Mr. Bannon: Is the Senator accusing Friends of the Earth of creating waste?

Mr. Kitt: The 78 pages are all printed on one side but both sides of the page should have been used.

Mr. O'Toole: Printing on one side of the page is not the problem of Friends of the Earth, it is the problem of the man who printed it who did not choose the option to print it on both sides.

Mr. Kitt: Friends of the Earth correctly raises the option of using methane gas from landfill, which is happening in Ballinasloe where the local landfill has been closed. The organisation also refers to its worries about waste incineration, an issue that should be re-examined.

Significant funding has been invested and research conducted on the uses of the gas emitting from the landfill in Ballinasloe. I am glad local authorities have moved from using small landfills to using major landfills, which can be used as a last resort, as described in the Government's strategy.

We have some way to go in providing an appropriate waste infrastructure. The Government has mentioned the need for a waste regulator to ensure the market functions properly and fairly, which I welcome. Emphasis should be placed on improving public understanding of waste disposal because the community will gain. A landfill is run in Kilconnell, County Galway, by Greenstar, a private operator that came in when the local authority would not decide where its landfill should be. Additional funding has been provided for environmental facilities, road development and amenities in the area. However, local input is needed in conjunction with that of the company and the local authority and much discussion is taking place to improve local amenities.

The Office of Environmental Enforcement has also published a report dealing with illegal waste activity. I am glad large-scale dumping is being tackled because it was horrendous, especially in 2002. Improved North-South co-operation has also reduced illegal cross-Border movement of waste. However, fly-tipping must be tackled, as must door-to-door operators who collect waste illegally and burn it in their backyards, resulting in significant toxic emissions.

The local authority system to license operators is welcome but I do not like illegal operators participating in waste disposal. The Office of Environmental Enforcement has powers under 2003 legislation and can impose penalties for illegal waste disposal. The message should be sent out loud and clear that anyone who damages the environment or puts public health at risk will be held to account for his or her actions and the Minister has, on many occasions, reiterated this message.

The Environmental Protection Agency published a report recently on drinking water in Ireland. This is important in the context of the threat of pollution from waste. I am glad public water supplies scored positively but there is concern about private water schemes, which use wells or springs as their source, because they are not monitored sufficiently. The EPA stated 10% of private schemes and 26% of public schemes were not monitored, which is worrying. Local authorities should address the issue.

The EPA has also invited local authorities to participate in a waste prevention demonstration grant aid programme with an emphasis on packaging and I hope every local authority will avail of it. Local authorities have identified 280 major producers that are not enforcing packaging regulations. However, 138 producers have joined REPAK while 40 intend to do so so they are in compliance with the scheme. At least 37 producers are non-compliant and I presume action will be taken against them by local authorities. Incentives have been provided while fines, penalties and so on can be imposed. I would like more progress on that scheme.

Mr. O'Toole: I wish to share time with Senator Henry.

I welcome the Minister of State to the House. This is a matter of crucial importance to every community. When debating Ireland's energy needs recently, I suggested to the Minister for Finance that if communities in a clearly defined area were prepared to take complete control and responsibility for all their own waste and energy needs, they should be entitled to a tax break. Waste management is an issue of social as well as Government responsibility and it will only work when both citizens and Government are pulling in the same direction.

We do not know enough about the question of waste management. I know a bit about recycling and renewable energy, but not so much about waste. I live in north Dublin and Fingal County Council has been the most progressive council in dealing with waste. For a number of years, the council has had a system of payment by volume. There is a charge per collection rather than an annual charge. Payment by weight or volume makes much sense and it should be in every single local authority. The polluter pays principle also needs to be applied rigorously.

I support the idea of having a regulator in this area. Reasonably sized waste operators have been going out of business, pushed out by bigger operators who take over the job at an increased rate. There was such a case recently in Limerick city. We are heading towards a monopoly or duopoly situation as some of the operators are getting very big. In such cases, a regulator would be very useful to introduce guidelines. However, Friends of the Earth is right to state that we are not doing enough recycling. Every single local authority should be required to have a green or a brown

bin. In the argument about one-off housing, conditions could be imposed on planning permission to include composting and so on. If every house had a composter and a choice of bins, many strides would be made. In his speech, the Minister stated that 80% of the waste in landfill is biodegradable. There is no reason we cannot deal with that.

Collections and bring centres will not work because it is too much effort for most people to take material to a bring centre. However, they will put it outside their gate for collection. The composter does not take biodegradable cooked foods, but people still do that. Some people do not know about composters. We have not emptied our composter in four years and it has never overflowed. When it arrived, I thought it would only last a month yet it is still stacking up years later. There are ways of speeding up composting by heating it or by wrapping it in insulation that breaks down the waste.

I have done my best to read about incinerators. I have listened to all the arguments and I have tried to approach the issue with an open mind, but I do not know where I stand. I read the Friends of the Earth document on incineration and I was disappointed that it only focused on one issue. It dealt with incineration that regenerates electricity, which although a very important issue, is not the general argument about incineration.

However, the case is made that for an incinerator to be effective, there is a certain critical mass of waste which it must use. Therefore, where incinerators have been established, there is an encouragement to bring more waste to it. If that is the case — it has been put forward by Friends of the Earth and others — we should look at it very carefully.

It seems that modern incinerators, provided they are kept to the terms of planning and to the temperature levels required, are safer than any other form of waste disposal. If they are not maintained according to the most stringent regulations, then they can release gas, ash and other waste into the atmosphere that will create dioxins. If that happens, we cannot support them at all.

I do not know how this can be effectively monitored, but it should be. In the Minister of State's own constituency, I read that a chemical plant had exceeded the waste output level on 30 or 40 occasions. The plant was not an incinerator, but it produced chemicals. There was a way to check that, so there must be a way to check incinerators.

Incinerators reduce the amount of waste by about 90%, which is a very positive thing. On the other hand, that leaves 10% that must be disposed of. That 10% has been used in roads, footpaths and infill but I am not sure what damage it does to the environment if it leaks into the surrounding countryside. Can the Minister of State outline the arguments for and against incinerators? I suspect that he is regularly forced to take

a line on certain issues and there is nothing wrong with that.

This is an issue about which many of us know little. If we keep hearing the arguments for and against incineration, we will come to our own conclusions. Once people are polarised about this issue, we will not make progress. Technology is improving and it probably makes incineration safer. However, dealing with the residue is an important issue.

I would like to know about the efficiencies that arise from methane production in landfill sites. Is it being extensively carried out or is it being done as a sop? I agree with the point made by Friends of the Earth that selling the idea of incineration on the basis that it produces electricity is not an argument that stands up to close scrutiny. It can be done, but it is highly inefficient. However, if it sorts out the waste problem, it might be worth examining.

We are entitled to light a fire in our back yard on a certain number of days in the year, such as bonfire night. I used to hear that farmers could burn waste two days a year. What does someone do with a large quantity of hedge clippings? If someone cuts down a 15 ft. Leylandii hedge, what does he or she do with the result?

I have heard Senator Dardis make comments similar to these. I too live on the edge of the metropolis, and not a weekend goes by without my seeing a mattress or bed dumped at the edge of some quiet road. That is inexcusable, and I would love to catch those responsible. I would be very happy to report them, since we never find them.

One of the reasons that they do that is that they must pay to bring things to the official dump. People should be allowed to bring outsize items such as parts of beds or other furniture without charge. In some countries, there is a special collection every few months for such things. I am not sure if it is done anywhere in Ireland, but it is certainly the case in parts of France and elsewhere. It might be our bridge to doing something, and I ask that the Minister act accordingly.

Dr. Henry: I thank Senator O'Toole for sharing time with me.

I welcome the Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy Batt O'Keeffe, to the House for these important statements. His figures on the improvement in recycling and reuse in this country were very encouraging.

The first issue I wish to address is packaging waste. We are not making enough effort to reduce the amount of packaging around goods. Considerable quantities of goods are imported, but we also produce goods ourselves, and not much effort is being put into reducing the packaging around them. Unfortunately, packaging helps sell goods, and that is among the reasons that so many firms are reluctant to deal with the issue.

[Dr. Henry.]

When this House passed legislation on packaging, I thought that in the case of large items such as refrigerators, washing machines, and cookers, the shop would be obliged to take their packaging away again when they were delivered to people's houses. The packaging in question is cardboard and, worse still, polystyrene, but I have discovered that the onus is on the householder to bring the packaging back to the shop. Perhaps that might be changed, since it is much more difficult to get people to gather all the packaging together — particularly the polystyrene, which disintegrates so easily — and bring it back to the shop than to have those delivering it take it straight back. I was under a misapprehension when the legislation was passed, since I assumed that to be the case.

There has been a great increase in the number of motor vehicles in this country and at the same time a drop in the recycling of tyres. The result has been a build-up of scrap tyres. I have some knowledge of and interest in the area, and they cannot all be put on silage pits around the country. Many are dumped, sometimes in watercourses, with very serious effects on the quality of water in the area.

It is important we try to ensure that a facility be established to deal with such scrap tyres. There was one, but unfortunately it suffered a serious fire, so that I gather it is out of action. Tyres must be reduced so that the valuable metal in them can be removed, sold and reused. Whatever rubber remains can be cut up to various sizes. It is good to put such rubber into roads, since it reduces the noise from traffic. We must consider this area as soon as possible. One notices tyres in the most inappropriate places, particularly on farms and in watercourses.

On the question of incineration, Senator O'Toole has rightly addressed the disposal of residual waste, which is a serious issue, since it can have a very undesirable component. To date, we have exported much of it, but we may not be allowed to do so for much longer. The one problem I always see with incineration is that it encourages neither reuse nor recycling. I read about the proposed incinerator in Poolbeg, which is near where I live. People are concerned that there may not be enough waste in the area to keep it in operation, so that it may be necessary to import waste from outside the area to make it economic. That would be very unfortunate, since there would be a great increase in the volume of traffic locally, particularly of heavy vehicles in an urban area.

Being able to feed incinerators is a problem, and we must ask ourselves whether it is really what we want. It would currently be better to concentrate on reducing, recycling and reusing, and I am delighted to see that we have made such progress in those areas.

Mr. Dardis: I propose to share my time with Senator Brennan.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Mr. Dardis: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Batt O'Keeffe, to the House for what is obviously an important matter. When we look back on this period 20 years hence, we will wonder how society allowed our environment to be damaged to such an extent. We have remembered other times where people suffered physical and sexual violence, major sources of anger, controversy and pain. In 20 years, we will look back and ask how we allowed ourselves to treat the environment like this.

Happily, however, matters are improving, and in my experience of being a member of a local authority, from the time that I joined it until today, there has been an enormous improvement. We had a landfill site close to my home from which methane gas leaked. People had to be evacuated when it got into fissures in the rock, since it had not been properly sealed. The management was totally inadequate, and people simply did not know the effects of landfill, both in the immediate vicinity and, probably more importantly in the long term, on ground-water. They were badly managed, and part of the problem was that the resources to deal with it were simply not there.

Fortunately, that is no longer the case, and now at the same landfill facility we have a recycling part. When I started using it, one could drive to it quite easily on a Saturday or any other morning. Now there is a traffic control system, since so many people are using it. They must pay for it, and while they are not charged at the gate, bringing materials there has its cost. The public has some appetite for recycling and separation, and happily that is happening before our waste is collected from outside our homes.

Senator Bannon made a reasonable point regarding farm plastics, the situation regarding which has fortunately improved. I can recall farm chemicals and how one wound up with a store of half-empty cans and so on of which one simply could not dispose. Now I can bring them to my local landfill site free of charge for disposal, a very positive development. There have been heartening changes.

The Minister of State made a valuable point when he said that we must all make an effort, since a consensus is involved in this question. That means everybody, every home, workplace, farm and business. We are definitely in a transition from the unsophisticated kind of system of which I spoke to one that is much more multi-dimensional. We have moved from total dependence on landfill to, one hopes, new practices.

Ultimately, it may lead us to the point where we will have to consider burning waste and recovering the energy. As fossil fuels become

more limited and energy more expensive, that source of energy will have its attractions. For years I watched how methane gas, an obvious source of energy, was flared from a landfill. Now Kildare County Council is harnessing that energy, which is going into the national grid. The requisite technology exists, although I agree that it must be done on a large scale to make it economic and derive the greatest benefit.

I wonder about those who get so excited regarding the possibility that dioxins might emerge from a chimney stack with very new technology, despite their happily burning material in their back garden, probably creating far more dioxins in their immediate environment. They would also allow landfill to pollute waterways and ground-water, but that does not seem to register with the public, something I cannot understand. Reference was made to the waste hierarchy of prevent, minimise, reuse, recycle, recover and safely dispose, while the polluter pays concept is also important.

I concur with the remarks made by Senator O'Toole with regard to composting. My local authority, Kildare County Council, has been proactive in terms of explaining how composting works because only about ten people originally applied for bins, even though the council was offering them free of charge. I appeal to the Minister of State to ensure that people are given information because, while the appetite exists to make use of compost bins, people have concerns about issues, such as vermin, which can be readily resolved. Kildare County Council has held a number of well attended meetings to explain composting and continues to do a good job in this regard.

The Government is to be commended on launching the waste management grant scheme in 2002 to provide funding for the provision of waste recycling and recovery infrastructure. I understand that several tens of millions of euro have been spent under that scheme.

Local authorities have primary responsibility for waste management but an exclusive focus on them may lead us to neglect the responsibility of the individual. Information is important in ensuring that individuals can exercise their options but responsibility rests with each of us to prevent, minimise and reuse. The duty of the State and local authorities is to facilitate rather than intervene or hold hands. As we have learned from the smoking ban, changing individual behaviour is a difficult and slow process but change can be affected if a proactive and supportive approach is taken. Society as a whole would derive enormous benefits from change in the area of waste management.

A lot of progress has already been made with regard to recycling centres but more facilities are needed. Bottle banks and other local facilities have to be well managed if they are to be effective. It can be unpleasant, when recycling bottles or cans, to find a recycling facility covered with

other people's litter. Litter wardens in my local authority area have been very active in this regard, despite being subjected to extensive abuse. However, more should be done on the issue of fly-tipping. I dreamed up a law, the first law of takeaway, which states that the average family in the average car travelling at the average speed consumes one takeaway meal in 1.5 miles. I know this because I live 1.5 miles away from a takeaway and have to pick up the rubbish thrown from cars passing my gate. I am not claiming that Supermacs or McDonalds should be forced to pay for the disposal of this waste because that is the responsibility of the person who takes away the food. However, litter wardens can help control this problem.

The plastic bag environmental levy was a successful initiative. When the 15 cent charge was introduced on 14 March 2002, the number of stray and waste bags along our roadways decreased significantly. It was estimated at the time that approximately 1.2 million bags had been provided for free. About six years ago, I met a senior executive from an American corporation who was holidaying in the west of Ireland. He told me that his two dislikes about Ireland were litter and smoking in pubs. I thought at the time that something could be done about litter but smoking in pubs could not be addressed. However, we have perhaps been more successful in stopping the latter. A strong case could be made for doubling the levy because anecdotal evidence suggests its effect is wearing off. It is increasingly common to be handed a plastic bag when shopping and the incentive is diminishing as money becomes less valuable.

While I concur with some of Senator Bannon's remarks on waste, I consider the revised farm plastics scheme announced two weeks ago to represent a major improvement. We are all aware that difficulties existed but funding will be supplied by means of a combination of levies paid by the producer members who run the scheme and charges from weight-based collections.

The standard cost bin system did not provide an incentive to separate and recycle. People who reduced the amount of waste they put in their bins did not do so to reduce their charges but because they were good citizens. There should be some integration in this area.

Senator O'Toole raised the issue of a regulator but I am unsure whether one is required. The Environmental Protection Agency, which has greatly improved its licensing procedures, may already be fulfilling the role of regulator in respect of its issuing of licences and oversight of the system.

People need an incentive in terms of reducing their charges. I have a holiday home in Galway, where waste is divided among blue, white and green bags. These bags have to be individually purchased from shops, which provides an incentive to separate waste. Good citizenship is also required but a lot of people will, if given the

[Mr. Dardis.]

opportunity, follow the proper procedures. I urge the Minister of State to ensure they are encouraged to be responsible, so we can look back on the present as a time of transformation in terms of how we treat our waste and look after our country. Our tourism and food industries would benefit from a clean, green and pollution-free island.

Mr. Brennan: I welcome the Minister of State to this House. My party colleague, Senator Dardis, outlined our views on waste management. I commend the Government on the progress made towards ending the discharge of untreated sewage from cities and towns, providing projects for secondary treatment and meeting the requirements of the urban waste water directive.

This week, the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy Roche, approved funding of €8.5 million for a unique design, build and operate contract which will see new state-of-the art water treatment plants at 33 locations in six counties. I am not concerned about the provision of resources for waste management but about the spending of those resources. It was reported last weekend that, because of concerns that capital spending was running behind schedule, the Minister for Finance, Deputy Cowen, instructed Ministers to ensure Departments spend their budgets.

I am aware that the Minister, Deputy Roche, has already pressed local authorities to begin construction of the schemes approved under the Water Services Investment Programme 2005-07. Red tape has been cut in the area of water and sewerage schemes and the same should be the case for the waste management plans adopted at regional level because many communities await the approval of these works with anxiety. The Minister can announce schemes and provide the necessary funds but local authorities, which are controlled by parties across this House, must implement them. Many Senators have outlined the need for education and facilities to improve waste management and local authorities have a critical role to play in this regard. We should also commend the community initiatives, such as the Tidy Towns competition, which involve co-operative efforts by volunteers, Department and local authority officials and schools to turn our towns into places of which we can be proud.

Waste management charges represent a substantial portion of the weekly income of old age pensioners. I urge the Minister for Social and Family Affairs to investigate whether a scheme can be introduced to alleviate this problem.

Mr. U. Burke: I welcome the Minister of State to the House and the opportunity to contribute to this debate. We are all aware that over the past four or five years various local authorities throughout the country have adopted waste management plans with two priorities. These are the

provision of landfill sites in practically every county and the proposal to have incinerators throughout the country. The reports prepared for the local authorities have one common ingredient. They were practically all produced by the consultancy MC O'Sullivan. Unfortunately what was provided for one county was replicated in most other counties.

Most local authorities are trapped into a policy of landfill and incineration. To keep what is known as a "written balance" we have the concepts of reuse, recover and recycle but the input is, with a few exceptions, minimal. Galway city has set an example in waste management. In the first year or two it achieved 35% recycling and reuse, which has not been matched anywhere in the country.

Waste is the 21st century goldmine. As a result, various private commercial companies have entered the waste management and recovery business. The Minister is familiar with this. In County Galway private enterprise has taken over a landfill and denied public access to it. This is new. Local authority landfills were always open to the public and one could dispose of waste for a fee. Greenstar at Kilconnell in County Galway will not allow any private individual on site. It will only allow registered, licensed contractors.

Disposal of waste has become an expensive item in the household budget and elderly people have a particularly serious problem. If an elderly person has a bin he or she pays €360 per year regardless of whether he or she fills the bin. In the past, elderly people would save money by dumping their rubbish at the local landfill. If anybody from Clifden wanted to dispose of something he or she would have to go to the landfill in Athlone. Private, commercial facilities that have planning permission from the local authorities should allow public access to their landfill sites. They have never been asked and a good planning authority would have made it a condition of planning that they would provide a public facility.

The Minister is aware that in certain parts of the world resource recovery parks are being successfully operated. They are part of the overall waste management process in the US, Nova Scotia, New Zealand and parts of Australia. They demonstrate that one can make money out of waste. People are doing so. Many people who dealt with items such as scrap metal, which was waste to somebody, made a fortune from it. Some 90% of the material deposited in resource recovery parks can be reused, not just recycled, and manufactured into new items.

We are all aware that the Dublin Glass Bottle Company, which operated for years, went out of business because of the costs of processing recycled bottles. The use of technology enables places in the country to recycle that glass into a type of sand that can be manufactured into a host of different materials and products. It can be used for road metalling and to make tiles, flooring and other products. Ground glass is used as sand in

an equine centre in Ennis, County Clare. It is the most efficient material for maintaining the exercise tracks and is ideally suited.

There was a time when various groups collected waste paper and cardboard and brought it to centres from which we were told it was taken away and recycled. However when one of those trucks was followed, it was found that it went to the Kill landfill in north Kildare. Senator Dardis is familiar with that situation. We now have uses for paper and cardboard that did not exist before. In my constituency, in Gort, County Galway, a group has formed consisting of business people in industry of all kinds, householders and an imaginative person who has put together a proposal for a resource recovery park.

However the local authority will not entertain this, even on a pilot basis. It is a pity because 94% of products imported are disposed of within six months. The packaging and other recoveries are wasteful and go to landfill. I ask the Minister to take the proposal on board. It should be supported financially as a one-off pilot scheme until the concept takes root. A site is available in Gort but because the local authority has adopted MC O'Sullivan's management plan, it finds it difficult to deviate from it. I ask the Minister to recognise this project as a pilot scheme, support it and see what can be done if people are serious about using, not necessarily recovering, all the items that go to waste, 90% of which can be recovered. If that were done there would be a new orientation in Government waste disposal policy away from the publicly disowned incineration and landfill. The people want an alternative but there is none. I ask the Minister to provide one. Everybody is concerned about the disposal of waste.

Many Senators referred to the level of consciousness of the environment among schoolchildren. The children in the schools in Gort have latched on to this subject and have said that if only somebody in authority would recognise the potential of recycling, the disposal of waste would no longer represent a cost but serve a profitable industry. I ask the Minister of State to take on board the idea behind the pilot scheme and make contact with those concerned. The personnel involved have been in contact with the Department and I ask the Minister of State to reconsider the proposal.

Mr. Brady: I, too, welcome the Minister of State to the House and the opportunity to debate waste management. Other Senators have pointed out that it affects everybody, regardless of their age, profession or location. The management of what we produce as consumers must be taken extremely seriously.

I recently visited the headquarters of the Environmental Protection Agency in Johnstown Castle in Wexford. I congratulate Dr. Mary Kelly and her crew on playing a considerable role in controlling our waste and pollution in general.

The agency has a crucial role in the licensing of all major landfill and disposal sites. That the agency's staff are discussing issues that arise with community representatives is to be welcomed greatly.

In the not too distant past, I examined some of our recycling statistics and noted that we had a recycling rate of 7.4% in 1993. The Minister of State outlined the current percentages, which can only be regarded as representing progress. We have made great strides legislatively over recent years and the Department must be congratulated on these. The current and preceding Governments have done a lot in the past ten years to tackle the issue of waste management.

Local authorities play a considerable role in waste management and waste management plans are crucial in enforcing legislation that is introduced. Dublin City Council is extremely proactive and has a very good grasp of what is needed in the city. There are very significant issues to be addressed. It is not just in the back lanes and by-lanes in rural areas that fly-dumping is practised — it is also evident in the city. Plastic bags are dumped in laneways, as are sofas and beds, but the council is tackling this problem.

Until the passage of the Waste Management Act 1996, we had not defined "waste". The Act represented the first serious attempt to do so.

It always amazes me that the economic benefits of recycling are not taken seriously. Companies in the United States that recycle tyres comprise a huge and very profitable industry. Sunflower Recycling, a company in North Strand in my constituency, employs people profitably to collect waste. They are employed full-time and as part of community employment schemes.

I was very happy to hear the Minister of State talk about the market development group, which is crucial to the future of waste management. As Senator Ulick Burke stated, we must determine how we can get private concerns to become involved in wholesale recycling.

A number of different programmes, from Changing our Ways to the present one, have been launched over the years and have proved to be very successful. Strategic and sustainable waste management plans are needed and many of the initiatives of the Department over recent years have been very sustainable. This debate is all about looking to the future.

One of the major debates at the Joint Committee on Environment and Local Government concerned the disposal of electronic and electrical items. This has proved to be extremely successful. The WEEE directive had to be implemented and Ireland was one of the first countries in Europe to do so fully. The polluter pays principle is the main plank of much of our legislation and the producer take-back scheme is proving very successful.

We have come a long way in dealing with hazardous waste and have a high rate of recovery, but we need to consider the matter further. Some

[Mr. Brady.]

years ago the Oireachtas committee visited a thermal treatment plant in the middle of a residential and business area in a large city in Switzerland. The plant was thermally treating hazardous chemicals such as paint and turpentine very successfully. Its technology was the most modern available and it was supplying approximately 40% of the locality's heating and electricity needs. The technology exists and it is up to us to take advantage of it.

The debate on incineration will continue no matter what happens and we must adopt a strong, pragmatic approach to it. Much progress has been made in this regard. The rate of disposal of construction and demolition waste is now 85%. In Dublin city, where there has been significant development of apartments, etc., over recent years, waste disposal is a major issue. We have built up expertise and it can be built up further in the areas I have mentioned. We aim to reuse and recover 95% of end-of-life vehicles by 2015 and are well on the way to doing so.

I congratulate the Minister. Waste management affects everybody, regardless of where they come from, and we are well on the way to playing our part. If the Government continues as it is doing, we will be very successful.

Mr. J. Phelan: I welcome the Minister of State, whose opening remarks I did not hear. We have had a number of debates on the important issue of waste management in my four years in the Seanad.

As a former member of a local authority, I am well aware of the difficulties that exist throughout the country with regard to the disposal of waste. A number of Senators on both sides have referred to the considerable change in attitude that has occurred nationally over the course of the past five to eight years. Some seven or eight years ago, there were very low levels of recycling, at approximately 2% or 3%, but now the rate is between 20% and 30% in some categories. This is because of the great change in the attitude of ordinary members of the public. I welcome this fully as it demonstrates how people's attitudes can change if they are presented with the full facts and realise their attitudes need to change.

I wish to emphasise a number of points to which previous speakers have referred. I refer to illegal dumping, a pet hate of mine. Improvements in recycling have coincided with a worsening of illegal dumping. Sofas, mattresses and washing machines are strewn on quiet roads and forested areas throughout the country. This is a grave issue facing the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and local authorities. I support Senator O'Toole's suggestion that a free collection for larger products take place every few months. This could alleviate the incidence of illegal dumping.

I live in a rural area and a State forest covering thousands of acres lies between my house and

Waterford city. Rubbish is dumped there on a weekly basis and I continually contact Coillte and the local authorities to clean it up. As soon as it is clean, more rubbish is dumped. Perhaps we need to name and shame those convicted of illegal dumping or we could introduce the scheme proposed by Senator O'Toole. We must do something dramatic to end this scourge.

The Government is proposing to build incinerators around the country, to which I am implacably opposed. I have no scientific proof of the damage caused by incineration although studies suggest possible negative effects. The crucial reason for my opposition is that building thermal treatment plants will remove the incentive to reduce, reuse and recycle the waste people produce. These incinerators will be privately built, owned and operated and will require a continuous stream of waste in order to be successful. If this happens, the incentive to reduce waste will be removed. The majority of households in my area do not put out a bin every week. The Government has put resources into bring centres and bottle banks throughout the country and we cannot reverse engines now by building incinerators that will need a constant stream of waste.

Those in favour of incineration suggest it will remove the need for landfill but that is not the case. Residual waste, in the form of ash, will have to be placed in a landfill and will be more toxic than what we store in landfill at present.

Ms White: One minute Senator Phelan is in favour of incineration, the next he is against it.

Mr. J. Phelan: I am completely opposed to incineration and was never in favour of it.

I agree with previous speakers who referred to packaging waste. Many of us buy products wrapped in four layers of packaging. Legislation was passed some years ago to reduce packaging but this has not had an effect on the majority of products. This should be addressed as soon as possible.

The Government has provided some €90 million over the past six years but this is not a major investment. In order to build on the achievement of recycling 30% of waste we must invest more money to build state-of-the-art bring centres in every major provincial town. I encourage the Government to increase expenditure under that heading.

Ms Ormonde: I wish to share time with Senator White. I welcome the Minister and congratulate the Government, whose plan began in 1998. I compliment South Dublin County Council, the leader in piloting schemes and introducing initiatives in the Dublin area. The public now understands the need to recycle and has changed its thinking. The grey bins, which changed the environment, are evidence of this, as are the new green bins and the pay per use scheme. This allowed the householder to reduce bin collection to once

per month in winter. The public has grasped the need to keep the environment clean and to be proud of it. Under the new waste management plan, powers exist to challenge illegal dumping.

Seaside rural areas with mobile homes are littered by evening time during the summer months. Local authorities must be vigilant about this issue. Although enforcement officers are on patrol, resources must be increased because we must create an image during the summer when tourists are visiting. A bad impression is created by litter and illegal dumping.

I welcome the WEEE scheme, which has been a major success. At the time I was not in favour because prices increased and there was considerable opposition to it.

However, it has exceeded its target beyond all expectations and is one of the best measures I have seen in recent times.

An awareness campaign is very important. We must adopt a holistic approach and continue to promote this issue in our schools. The national spring clean campaign is important. Leadership is important; we need drive, motivation and resources. We are well on our way to achieving our goals. We have already achieved success and we should strive towards further successes. All we need to do is to co-ordinate all the stakeholders to ensure we have a smashing environment.

Ms White: I compliment the Minister of State on his first class contribution which I will file away and use as a source of information on the great progress made in waste management. I refer to two words in the Minister of State's contribution, that is, "consensus" and "planning", which are critical. I draw attention to the proposed incinerator on the Poolbeg Peninsula in Dublin. I have spoken to the Minister, Deputy Roche, and have tabled a motion at a Fianna Fáil Parliamentary Party meeting in the presence of the Taoiseach and the Minister indicating my objections to the Poolbeg incinerator because of bad planning and lack of consensus among the local people.

I have engaged with local community groups, including the Combined Residents Association Against Incineration and the Sandymount and Merrion Residents Association. I have advised Dublin City Council that I am opposed to the bizarre planning of the proposed incinerator on Poolbeg. Locating an incinerator on a cul-de-sac, which Poolbeg peninsula is, and in the vicinity of a built-up residential area without the necessary supporting infrastructure defies all logic. The quality of life of the residents of Bath Avenue, Ringsend, Irishtown, South Lotts Road, Sandymount and Merrion will be seriously undermined if the incinerator goes ahead.

It is proposed to bring 500,000 tonnes of domestic refuse from Fingal, Dublin city, South Dublin County Council and Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council through the roads of Sandymount and Irishtown to this cul-de-sac.

Originally when this incinerator was proposed, it was believed that the Dublin eastern by-pass would be built, that a tunnel under Sandymount Strand would connect with the M50 in south Dublin. This road will not go ahead and there are no plans for it in the Government's 2015 road plans. Only money for a feasibility study has been put aside. This road may never be built.

The ideal place for an incinerator is on a ring road around a city as happens in Vienna and on the Continent. Sandymount, Irishtown and Merrion were little villages and the roads in the area are still village roads. Bringing 400 trucks per day through these roads will seriously damage the quality of life of the residents. I travelled on these roads each day for 16 years when I went from Dundrum to the East Wall and I know them inside out. I have seen trucks break the speed limit on the Strand Road. The 400 trucks which would travel on these little roads each day would be heavy and not easily turned or manoeuvred, and they would impede on the quality of life of the residents in this area. Good planning requires consensus and the residents in the area I have named do not want this incinerator built on this peninsula because of the absence of the ring road.

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Mr. B. O'Keeffe): I ended my earlier contribution by anticipating that the debate would be informative and beneficial, which it has proved to be. The contributions from Senators were knowledgeable and constructive and demonstrated an understanding of the importance of waste management and the challenges our society faces. All societies generate waste but one of the hallmarks of a sustainable society is its ability to deal with waste in a manner which does not pose a risk to human health or the environment.

I have sympathy for Senators who expressed concerns about incineration. Unfortunately, some seek to misrepresent our approach to what is an energy recovery technology. Like Senators, I acknowledge it is no coincidence that those countries on mainland Europe which are rightly regarded as leaders in environmental commitment and performance, such as Germany, Austria and the Netherlands, rely to a significant degree on thermal treatment while also achieving an exceptional level of recycling. We cannot wish our waste away but we can achieve best practice in terms of recycling and we are well on our way to doing so. However, for the foreseeable future, we will have significant quantities of waste which will either be landfilled or thermally treated. I have no doubt which is the best option; it is not to pass the bulk of it on to future generations. We generate waste and it is up to us to deal with it. Those who speak of a zero waste option are simply not living in the real world. I would say to Senator O'Toole that, of course, incinerators must meet strict EU standards.

[Mr. B. O'Keeffe.]

I agree wholeheartedly with those who commended the public's effort on recycling. What has been achieved to date has been remarkable. A visit to a recycling centre is now becoming part of the social fabric, and so it should be. We all know we need to further expand the number of such facilities and Senators can be assured that my Department will continue to grant aid local authorities to ensure more facilities are provided.

Senator O'Toole spoke about pay by weight and the fact it applies throughout the country. I agree with the Senator that this is how charges should be levied. I also agree on the issue of segregated collection. Over 0.5 million homes now have a green bin. Brown bin services have been introduced in Galway and Waterford and they will be rolled out throughout the country in the coming years leading to a dramatic increase in the recovery of biodegradable waste.

As regards composting and organic waste recovery, in 2004 we generated almost 2 million tonnes of biodegradable waste. We recovered, including through composting, 33% of material up from 11% in 1995. We accept we still face a major challenge in this area. The new national strategy on biodegradable waste will ensure further rapid progress in this area.

I refer to public information. Senator Ormonde mentioned the spring clean campaign and the green schools initiative. The Race Against Waste campaign also provides magnificent information implementation packages. This is probably the leading country in Europe in terms of the green schools competition in which 55% of all schools are involved. We firmly believe we can take a step in the right direction through young people in our schools who are highly motivated. My Department will ensure we continue the momentum which has started. Local authorities are now employing environmental awareness officers.

Uncontrolled backyard burning of refuse, which is a serious issue, was the source of 73% of dioxin emissions in Ireland in 2004. Neighbours engaging in backyard burning are not looking after the health of the immediate community. The above statistic is from the Race Against Waste fact sheet. Therefore, the need for stringent enforcement by local authorities is clear.

The aim of the strategy in respect of composting is that we want to ensure 33% of biodegradable waste is composting by 2016 and we want home composting to reach 16%. These are serious targets.

I wish to take issue with Senator Bannon on farm waste plastics. We have regulations in place under which 55%, or 8,500 tonnes, of plastic waste was collected in 2004. This increased to 12,500 tonnes in 2005. Improved arrangements are in place and we will continue to make improvements. The average cost to a farmer will be in the order of €50 per lift. We will continue to provide designated facilities to deal with the backlog.

Senator Bannon's figures for recycling are incorrect. The figure was approximately 34% in 2004 and this will increase for 2005. Producer responsibility initiatives are an important contribution to this issue. The Minister is in discussions with newsprint producers about the amount of paper they produce.

In response to Senator Ulick Burke, I cannot comment on access to particular facilities without knowing all the circumstances. We should, however, distinguish between landfills and recycling facilities. Landfill sites can be dangerous places, whereas recycling facilities are designed for safe public access. There is a significant difference. My Department has provided some €90 million for such facilities since 2002 and will continue to do so.

I agree fully with Senator Phelan about illegal dumping. It was to combat this type of activity that the Office of Environmental Enforcement was established. It has been in operation for a little over a year and has made significant progress. It is working with the local authorities and the Garda to stamp out illegal activity, which there is reason to believe has significantly reduced. There is a growing network of recycling facilities around the country. Many types of waste are collected free of charge. Therefore, there is no excuse for illegal dumping.

We do not accept that there are issues surrounding the regulation of the waste sector, including the determination of charges. The Minister will bring a proposal to Government on future regulation of the sector. He is considering setting public service obligations as a priority.

Sitting suspended at 1.35 p.m. and resumed at 2.30 p.m.

Ageism Policy: Statements.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. Fahey): Say No To Ageism week takes place from Monday, 15 May to Friday, 19 May 2006. It is an initiative of the Equality Authority, the Health Service Executive and the National Council on Ageing and Older People. Say No To Ageism week provides a valuable opportunity to reflect on the barriers to equality for older people created by ageism. Ageism diminishes the status of older people in society and limits their access to economic resources. It generates negative attitudes towards older people such as being treated with disrespect or being patronised. It disempowers older people and limits their capacity to participate in making decisions that impact on them. Ageism ultimately prevents older people from participating in and fully contributing to society.

Say No To Ageism week seeks to stimulate cultural change in how society views and values older people. The week will involve the use of billboards showing a long line of birthday candles which seek to celebrate ageing, and national and

local radio advertisements which encourage all to reflect on how we can so easily stereotype older people. The National Union of Journalists is organising an event to highlight the role of the media in challenging ageism. The Say No to Ageism week seeks to support institutional change in the way organisations provide services to older people. A publication entitled, *Towards Age Friendly Provision of Goods and Services*, which provides practical guidance for organisations, is being widely distributed. The Health Service Executive will launch an action programme during the week involving 16 different health service organisations. The transport sector will launch an action programme during the week involving Dublin Bus, Bus Éireann, the rural transport initiative, Luas and Iarnród Éireann.

Some commentators regard our changing demographic which predicts an increase in the median age of the population as a liability but I regard the unexpectedly rapid increase in life expectancy as an unalloyed blessing. The majority of older people are healthy and fit. Unjustified discrimination on the ground of age is not only hurtful to those who are its victims but also represents a dramatic waste of knowledge, experience and wisdom. At a time when employers are finding it difficult to recruit and retain competent workers, a prejudice against older people is bad business sense.

Our booming economy has already transformed the economic reality of women shown by an unprecedented increase in participation rates by women in the labour force. Progressive employers are now identifying the particular advantages older people can give to an increasingly diverse workforce.

The Employment Equality Acts and the Equal Status Acts outlaw discrimination on the ground of age. The provisions with regard to age were strengthened in the Equality Act 2004 which gave effect to the EU anti-discrimination employment directive. The Employment Equality Acts are framed on the basis of a general principle that where the employee is willing to undertake or continue to undertake, or will accept or continue to accept, the conditions under which the duties are required to be performed and is fully competent and available to undertake and fully capable of undertaking the duties attached to the position, there ought to be no discrimination on the ground of age. Certain exceptions are provided for in cases such as the emergency services and the Defence Forces.

The Equality Act 2004 amended the exclusion in the 1998 Act from discrimination on the age ground in respect of persons less than 18 years of age or 65 years or over. In the former case, a provision based on the statutory age for school leavers is provided and employers may continue to set minimum recruitment ages where these do not exceed 18 years. Both of these are intended to avoid any undermining of State policy to discourage early school leaving which might result

from the anti-discrimination code. No upper age threshold is provided for but compulsory retirement ages may continue to be set.

To fit the equality provisions with the more general body of employment protection law, the Equality Act 2004 made two consequent provisions in respect of older employees. The first is to allow employers to offer fixed term contracts to persons over the set retirement age without being in contravention of employment protection law governing permanent and temporary employment and employees' rights in this context. The second provision extended the employment protection law governing unfair dismissals to persons regardless of their age, so long as they are still in employment.

The Equal Status Act 2000 prohibits discrimination on the ground of age in the access to and the supply of goods and services. This Act has already shown it has teeth when it comes to protecting the rights of older people. In the case of *Ross v. Royal and Sun Alliance*, the equality officer found that the operation of an across the board policy of refusing motor insurance quotations to persons over 70 years of age is in conflict with the Act. The general principle of equality requires people in the same situation to be treated equally. Conversely, it requires different treatment for people in different situations. Older people can have special needs, for example, in the areas of housing and health. For this reason, the Equal Status Act specifically permits housing authorities to provide priority in housing for older people.

In the budget of 2006 the Government allocated additional funding for health services for older people and palliative care amounting to €150 million. This amounts to an additional €110 million for 2006 and an additional €40 million for 2007. Approximately two thirds of this money was allocated to community support for older people. This is in line with the focus on keeping people in their own homes, in independence and dignity, with a well-funded and viable alternative to residential care with proper health and social support systems in place in the form of, among other supports, home care packages. This year Health Service Executive staff throughout the country will take part in initiatives in the workplace that will challenge ageism and promote awareness and understanding of the issues of ageism. The HSE is involved for the third year in organising and promoting this campaign.

I thank the Equality Authority, the HSE and the National Council on Ageing and Older People for organising Say No To Ageism week and I wish them well in their endeavours.

Ms Terry: I welcome the Minister of State who is taking this debate, the holding of which I very much support. I congratulate the Equality Authority on taking on board the campaign of Say No To Ageism. It is timely and it should be run on an annual basis. Our population is ageing. The

[Ms Terry.]

performance of a country and a Government can be judged on how well they look after their older people. The Government's performance can be judged by examining how well everybody in our community is looked after, particularly our older people.

Some people cope much better with the challenges presented by advancing years than others. This depends perhaps on their health. Luckily many of our older people are much healthier and fitter than the previous generation and, therefore, they will live longer. However, many others will encounter difficulties. It is those difficulties and barriers they encounter in their older years that will present the greatest challenge for them. Ensuring that they have the respect, dignity and independence they deserve depends on how well we address those difficulties and barriers.

Many people are not being well looked after and ageism is a factor for them. Many of them encounter great difficulties in accessing health services. The Minister of State referred to the allocation in the 2006 budget for services for older people and palliative care. As we have often discussed here, we know that level of funding is not sufficient to keep many of our older people in the manner in which any of us would want our ageing mothers or fathers to be kept. Many more older people should be living at home rather than in nursing homes or hospitals but because they do not have the necessary support services to do that they end up in nursing homes, which is not the best place for them.

Many older women in particular, women who had to leave the workforce because of the marriage bar, are dependent on their spouses for their pension. This matter, which I have raised on a number of occasions, needs to be tackled. To give women in their older years the independence they deserve, we should give their portion of the pension directly to them, and that should be mandatory. They get their pension by choice, but it is discriminatory that they do not get it as a right, rather they have had to seek it. There may be special family circumstances which prohibit them from seeking this portion of their pension directly in their own name. I ask the Minister of State to use his power to change that aspect and thereby grant those women the independence they deserve.

We could address this matter in another way by extending the homemakers' scheme to those women who chose to stay at home and to the many women who were forced to do so. That includes a large number of farmers' wives who worked on the farm and women who worked in their husband's business or the family shop, as relatives assisting, as they were termed. The homemakers' scheme should be extended to those women to enable them to be given a pension in their own right. I hope the Government will take on board that suggestion.

A large number of people are approaching the age range of 60 to 65 and will retire in the next few years. However, many of them are fit and healthy and do not wish to retire. We should examine measures that could be put in place to allow people to work beyond the ages of 65 or 66 if they want to do so. Such a measure should not be mandatory, which some other countries are considering. Some countries like France, Spain and Germany considered going down the mandatory route of extending the retirement age, but that met with great opposition. Germany has pulled back from that suggestion and is considering extending the retirement age by one month per year from 2008 up to 2032. Perhaps that is a proposal we could consider. Choice should surround such a measure.

If people want to work longer or if they would like to work in a more flexible fashion, employers should be compelled to allow them to work part time. In doing that they will defer taking up their pension and when they subsequently retire, their pension will be higher. Finland has introduced a measure in this area whereby bonus pensions are given to people who do not retire until the age of 68. If people here chose to work longer, they will receive a higher pension, the Government will benefit as a result of the additional tax revenues and the economy will also improve. The measure introduced in Finland has been proven to work well.

Many people approaching retirement age find their pensions are inadequate. They find they will not realise the value they expected from their pension scheme despite having paid into it for many years. Extending the retirement age is a way of assisting people in funding their pension. We should facilitate that. Furthermore, it is a proposal that the Pensions Board has recommended and the Minister for Social and Family Affairs is interested in examining, but it should be a matter of choice.

We should not force people to work beyond retirement age. Many people would not be able to do the same type of job that they have done for many years, particularly if it consisted of hard physical work. For example, a labourer would not be able to continue after retirement age doing the type of work he did in the past. Therefore, we must consider the element of flexibility and provide a flexible workplace for older people in the same way as we must do for people with young families, particularly women. We can examine both ends of the spectrum and accommodate people by making the work-life balance much better for people. Ireland is in the happy position of having a large pool of young workers. It is not like other countries where there is a shortage of workers and they are considering the introduction of regulations to force the older workforce to continue at work. Happily, we are not in this position and can therefore extend the retirement age, by choice, for those who want it. We have to work at changing attitudes and I wel-

come the Equality Authority's billboard campaign in that regard. There are those who have stereotypical attitudes about older people. That is hard to take if a person is the subject of some ageist remark. It is something that needs to be tackled and I believe this campaign will work. However, we need to keep at it.

While the population is aging at the moment, the older age group is nonetheless becoming a force to be reckoned with. I welcome that and believe that the Government and political parties will listen to what they have to say. They are telling us that they need more recognition. Those who shout the loudest tend to get what they want. I welcome the fact that older people and their organisations are getting stronger and looking for their rights. They are looking for better health services and community care, better pensions etc. Unfortunately, successive Governments, not just this one, have ignored older people for far too long. I welcome the fact that there are good organisations in place now. Older people are themselves very vocal in expressing what they want. Of course, there is a large group of people, too, who cannot voice their opinions and we must do it for them. We must ensure that we look after much older people, in particular, those who are ill or have disabilities and those in their 80s and 90s. We are not looking after them very well, however, in terms of delivering the health services they require.

I welcome this campaign and believe there is a great deal to be done. The Equality Authority has said discrimination based on age has accounted for just over 12% of cases of alleged discrimination under employment equality legislation. That figure is very high and is something we need to look at. We must do everything we can to ensure that such discrimination does not continue and to put in place practices that will help to eliminate it. We can help to avoid ageism by ensuring that all our legislation is "equality proofed". Local authorities must be vigilant as regards their policies, whether on housing or whatever. They must ensure that any policies they introduce will not discriminate against people in terms of access to buildings, office opening times etc. This initiative is to be welcomed. I hope it is something we can come back to because this is a growing issue and needs to be addressed.

Mr. Kett: I welcome the Minister of State to the House and am glad to have the opportunity to say a few words on this very important subject. It will occupy debating time in both Houses of the Oireachtas more and more as time goes on.

Research from the Central Statistics Office shows that older people experience discrimination in Ireland. The most common form of such discrimination is ageism. The CSO points out that the situation is not peculiar to Ireland, but is to be found right across Europe. The European Network of Older Volunteers points to a range of areas where discrimination is prevalent. It has

highlighted in particular the problems of accessing education, the health services and financial services. This week, as the Minister of State has said, we see the launch of the second annual Say No To Ageism campaign, which is being promoted jointly by the Equality Authority, the HSE and the National Council on Ageing and Older People. The latter is an organisation, which along with many others, is doing fine work on the whole area of ageism.

The first national equality survey in this area that I am aware of, tells us that more than 10% of adults experience discrimination at work and in accessing services. Common in such discrimination is ageism. Ageism is now challenging racism and sexism as one of the main offenders in this whole area. The findings will probably come as no surprise to the Equality Authority. It has become more and more common for it to be dealing with ageism complaints. In 2003 something in the region of 9% of complaints to the authority were on the grounds of ageism. We are doing a certain amount in this regard, but as the population grows older it will become a bigger issue. At present some 450,000 people are over 65 years of age. Out of every 100 people over 65, 30 have some form of disability. Organisations that work with older people should consider teaming up with those bodies which have now become a real focus in society and are major advocates for people with disabilities. Such bodies are well informed and because the two areas can overlap, both groups should form an alliance which could be a major tool for exploring and advancing common opportunities.

One in three persons over 65 suffers disability of one type or other and two-thirds of people over 85 have disabilities. Older people are experiencing many of the difficulties that younger people with disabilities suffer. They experience problems moving around their own homes, to start with, and in accessing shops, restaurants or pubs — if they so desire, turning on the television, listening to the radio etc. Traditionally, many of those difficulties have been viewed by society as greater dependency. Disabled people will argue, however, that far from being dependent on society, many of the issues involved are caused by environmental barriers. Older people come into this category. If we were to ensure that the barriers which prevent older people and those with disabilities from doing what they should be able to do were removed, there would be a major saving, apart from anything else. One could look at the whole area of assistive technologies. Assistive technologies are used for people with disabilities and could also be used for those who find it difficult to do various tasks as they get older. Technologies now exist which allow disabled people to live independently in their homes, when heretofore this could never have been considered. This could also allow older people to live independently, doing things with the aid of

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[Mr. Kett.]

technologies which they would not otherwise have been able to do. While I do not wish to reduce this issue to one of money, in many ways it is a cheap option for people to live at home on their own with the aid of technology. This would save money that could have been spent on paying for care. Carers are a tremendous asset who do an unknown quantity of work. If the retired people who do caring work were to stop in the morning we would find out how much they contribute to society with no recompense, although I accept the recompense for those who are officially considered as carers has improved in recent times.

We are told that education is a tremendous way for older people to engage with society. Research tells us that people enjoy life more in older age if they embark on a course of study. Other studies tell us that older people who study find it one of the most liberating things they can do. Completing a course of study can improve one's self esteem enormously. I am aware of quite a few people who have done this and they have recounted to me the great sense of achievement they experienced. This is something we should encourage and not hinder.

In many ways we are at a crossroads as a society in terms of our relationship with our older citizens. If we do not reach a positive conclusion about their place in society it will be difficult for us to move forward with any kind of orchestrated plan of action to help them. We need vision and leadership as we progress on this issue. The vision that is required is one that will give people the best possible opportunity as they grow older. We are all guilty in some way or other of having made the odd comment about that "auld wan" or "auld fellow" or whatever the case may be. We need to gain a better understanding of the contribution older people make to their communities and families. It has always been the case that older people have contributed a great deal to society but much of that work has gone unrecognised.

We must also agree the respective roles of the agencies involved, be it the State, the family or the community. There must be a clear role for everybody involved in this area. The goal should be to allow older people the greatest amount of independence and self-fulfilment possible. There is little doubt there is a major challenge ahead for us all in this regard. Perhaps the most serious barrier is the culture of ageism that permeates negatively through society, although I am led to believe there has been an improvement. Everybody is guilty of this at some stage.

The debate on older people in society must also address the issue of long-term care. This must include looking after the social, psychological and spiritual needs of older people. One cannot just land people in long-term care and forget about them. One must look after them and manage their way forward. Connectivity is the key word in all of this. When people require long-term care

we cannot allow them to be removed from family, friends, neighbours and all the things with which they are familiar.

The financing of long-term care is an important aspect of the matter. We must examine whether it should be the responsibility of the State or of individuals. I was delighted to hear the Tánaiste, Deputy Harney, speak on this issue on the "Marian Finucane Show" on Saturday morning. She was tremendous. Older people would have been heartened with what she said in regard to people growing older and outliving their money. She said the State would not be found wanting, which is most encouraging to people who are in, or may find themselves in, that situation.

We have probably all experienced older relatives having difficulties. My father lived to the great age of 99. We were blessed to have him. The last seven years of his life were spent in a home. I saw at first hand the problems that can present in that regard. I remember having to drive to Galway to convince a GP that the medical problem my father had was not age related and when the doctor saw the light he was able to cure this minor problem. My father was lucky that he had me to advocate for him. Many people out there suffer in silence.

Advocates are so important in this area, as they are in other areas, such as disability and so on. It is key to a problem to have someone advocating or looking out for one. I welcome the opportunity to say a few words on this issue. I hope it will be one of many debates held both in this House and in the other House as we move towards legislating in this regard.

Ms Tuffy: I wish to share time with Senator Ryan.

Acting Chairman (Ms O'Meara): Is that agreed? Agreed.

Ms Tuffy: I welcome the campaign against ageism and the Say No To Ageism initiative. We should remember that age discrimination affects people of all ages. In launching such a campaign we should acknowledge there is common ground between discrimination against both younger people and older people. The Minister of State has alluded to this to some extent. There is a particular problem in regard to ageism in terms of older people but there is also a problem with age discrimination against other age groups. For example, we do not fully recognise the rights of children and we have much work to do in this regard, which is also age related. We should take this approach in the future.

We should get rid of the way we categorise people in terms of their age. Discrimination against older people on age grounds is one of the last bastions of acceptable discrimination. It is almost politically correct to discriminate against people in this cohort. Political commentators often make an issue of the age of politicians. For

example, they use “middle age” as a term of abuse. They have a certain attitude towards older people in politics. It is as if they consider that if a person is old, he or she is past it and should not take part in politics. Older people are as under-represented in politics as are younger people. This is something that needs to be addressed. I believe Senator White has carried out a study on this. We should not accept derogatory comments relating to a person's age, be it in regard to politicians or people in any other job. People bring something to careers, including politics, no matter what their age or the sector of society from which they come. We need as much diversity in the workforce and society in general as possible.

Bob Carroll, director of the National Council on Ageing and Older People, published an article on an equality website recently. He stated ageism is an endemic cultural problem and referred to a study conducted by his organisation on our health and social services. The study found evidence of upper age limits for intervention, which directly exclude older people, and evidence of a lack of referrals of older people to specialist services. Our constituents also provide us with anecdotal evidence that this is happening and it is not acceptable. The report recommends that future national statements and strategic plans relating to social care for older people should acknowledge the importance of eradicating ageism in the health and social services. This should also apply to local authorities, of one of which I was a member.

The Minister of State referred to supports the Government is providing to house the elderly, which are welcome, but much more needs to be done in that regard because local authorities are not housing older people. The National Council on Ageing and Older People and the Equality Authority jointly published a document entitled *Towards Age Friendly Provision of Goods and Services*, which was intended to provide guidance for organisations that provide age-friendly goods and services. Account needs to be taken of the specific needs, experiences and situations of older people and other age groups in the design and delivery of goods and services. Local authorities do not do this and they are reluctant to provide housing for the elderly. Their failure to do so is discriminatory. I urge the Minister of State and the Government to tackle local authorities on this issue and ensure they draw down funding to house the elderly.

Mr. Ryan: I will be 60 in August.

Mr. Kett: I do not believe that.

Mr. Fahey: The Senator does not look it.

Mr. Ryan: I am not aware of anything that has changed about me apart from when I look in the mirror and see grey hair, which used to be black. I do not feel older intellectually. When I was

younger I was more conservative in many ways but my politics have shifted to the left because I have developed an even healthier scepticism of all forms of power and authority as I have gotten older. I should be classified as an anarchist rather than a socialist because my views on authority have become so dimmed by my experiences, whatever about my views on the complexities of a number of issues which, perhaps, have been attuned a little.

I am glad the debate is moving on to ageism and not ageing. One of the most fundamental issues about ageism is we move on from it so quickly to talk about ageing that it immediately becomes a problem. The symptoms of ageism are not illnesses, no more than the symptoms of childhood. The characteristics of a six-month old baby are not an illness and, for example, a great deal of time is spent treating pregnancy as an illness. We should be wary of allowing the medical profession to take over the debate about ageing. We must recognise the process of life's transition as normal and deal with it accordingly. We should address issues as they come up, for example, the problem of adolescent hormones should not be considered an illness while considering the absence of similar hormones in older people a relief to society.

These issues are symptoms of different ages and they should never be allowed to be turned into categories of illnesses because, once that happens, they must be cured whereas many of the issues related to ageing should be experienced and addressed. The categorisation of these symptoms as problems makes life difficult for people as they get older because they begin to feel they are at one remove from society.

We need to recognise joyfully that it is good that people live longer, even though it creates issues that did not exist previously. However, the fact that people live longer should not be a problem for the individuals and, most assuredly, it should not be one for society. The focus, therefore, should be on people's lives and, for example, the question of work.

Ageing needs to be addressed but it is not entirely an accident that at a time our society has significant spare cash, pension fund managers have suddenly discovered a crisis. We need to be careful not to be “shanghaied” into taking actions with the money of individuals and society that are not justified by well-grounded objective evidence.

A number of the reports I have read about the alleged crisis in 2050 are based on negative perceptions of economic growth and incorrect forecasts on population growth, particularly in light of the evidence of the past few years. If Ireland experiences a significant influx of young people of child bearing and child rearing age — this is a horrible phrase — the projections of the age structure of our society in 50 years will be way off the mark. I do not wish to get into a debate with actuaries but when dealing with every issue, the truth should stand up.

[Mr. Ryan.]

I refer to the issue of learning. Changes in technology can lead to the exclusion of older people. For instance, those who cannot handle the Internet have become dependent when it comes to arranging holidays, travel and so on. Therefore, we must make sure a process is built into our lives that not only kicks in at 65 years but is present throughout our lives so people are encouraged, enabled and facilitated to renew their learning and embrace new technologies, otherwise barriers and problems will be created. The same argument applies to recreation. There is no reason to believe that participation in all forms of sport should end when one turns 33 having damaged a knee, a finger and so on. There should be a transition to different levels of activity.

Relationships are also an issue as people get older. There is no reason older people should be condemned to solitude or celibacy. It was not part of the deal and it should not be made, as a result of societal norms or ignorance, part of the deal. With regard to the aesthetic, a country with a limited culture imagines that beauty is the preserve of the young. The great photographers, painters and writers of the world have portrayed older people and ageing with a degree of sensual beauty that is as real as that in younger people. It is a little less superficial but very real for all of that.

Ms White: Hear, hear.

Mr. Ryan: Sean Connery is regularly selected as one of the sexiest actors in the world. He is even older than I am, although I do not aspire to be him. However, this is a serious issue, which concerns integrating the fact that our population is ageing into a single view of society, which is not made up of younger and older people but which recognises that older people will frequent the same places as younger people and older people can start from the presumption that these things happen all through life and can be replicated all through life.

One of the things that fascinates me about our current society is the extraordinary ignorance of the marketplace. There is a large population between 55 and 70 years of age consisting of people with extraordinary amounts of disposable income, yet the market has decided that the demographic to chase is the 15 to 24 age group, who have not got a bob when compared with the older age group. I do not wish to ignore those who are in deprivation, but the average middle class citizen in his or her late 50s has far more disposable income than the average 15 to 24 year old, who generally is still in college, can afford to drink and not much more.

It is extraordinary that there is such a limited focus on this older age group. It may be due to the fact that older people are not easily persuaded to part with their money, but that does not mean they will sit on it forever. Most of my

friends are in my age group and they have no intention of leaving vast sums of money to what they regard as children who are well looked after. They will not be seduced by bland advertising into buying things they do not need, or be persuaded to buy labels that have become the fashion of the moment. Nevertheless, older people can be persuaded to spend money on a product that they want, will use and that has a point to it. However, they will not be persuaded to buy a car every year, rather than every two years.

To combat ageism, there is a need to integrate. There is a need not to have a view of aging or youth, but to have a view of a society which is made up in an holistic way of all sorts of people with different limits and abilities. We must make sure that there are no little categories into which we squeeze people.

Mr. Minihan: I welcome the Minister of State to the House, as well as the comments made by Senator Ryan, including the admission of his great age. At times when we debate, I might say that I think he is six, not 60. I am glad that point has been clarified today.

We had statements in this House only last month on the recent publication of a report entitled *Inequality and the Stereotyping of Young People*. It seems that at both ends of the human life-cycle there can be negative attitudes, understanding and treatment. This is not acceptable in either case. I add my support to Say No To Ageism week and congratulate the Equality Authority, the Health Service Executive and the National Council on Ageing and Older People for their initiative this year. The aim of the week is to promote new awareness and understanding of ageism. The website, the advertising campaign, the billboards and the anti-discrimination phone-in are all great ideas. When I visited the Equality Authority website, I did not see any mention of today's statements in the events taking place during the week. Perhaps this is something we should address for next year. At times we need to promote our role in this House.

Ageism is both distressing and paradoxical. The National Council on Ageing and Older People stated that ageism promotes the idea that older people are a burden, it can lead to neglect and social exclusion, diminish older people's self-esteem, reduce their participation in society and restrict the types and quality of services available to them. Ageism should be identified and eliminated. The Progressive Democrats Party takes a determined stance that ageism, like so many other pernicious "isms" is tackled at every turn. We are currently looking at new ways to ensure that policy and debate are not framed in such a way that they affect outcomes for older people, or attitudes and behaviour towards them. Ageism is seen as a pervasive problem that has profound effects on relationships between older people and society, as well as on the identity of older people

themselves. We are not prepared to tolerate it and will continue take active steps to challenge it.

Ageism and attitudes to older people in Ireland throws up something of a paradox. I was fascinated to read an article by Bob Carroll, the director of the National Council on Ageing and Older People, which pointed to research that indicates attitudes to older people are overwhelmingly positive, despite some differences in the strength of the attitudes according to age group. However, despite these positive attitudes, the article states that research showed there is an overwhelming perception that older people are treated less favourably because of their age. Most worryingly, the research suggests the State does not do enough for older people. There is onus on all of us to address the root of that paradox, not only by taking steps to counter ageism, but to highlight the positive steps that are being taken for older people.

The Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Children has a personal dedication to improve the lives of Ireland's older people. This is not just rhetoric and it means action. She responded to the report to which I referred, *Perceptions of Ageism in Health and Social Services in Ireland*. She also affirmed her commitment to promoting healthy ageing and to an age-friendly society, to ensuring that older people, who have contributed to the development of our society, are treated with dignity and respect when receiving health care services. The Department of Health and Children is liaising with the HSE to deal with the recommendations in the report.

Take the most recent budget as another example. The Tánaiste ensured that dedicated funds were made available for wide-ranging new services for older people. She secured approximately €150 million for this, which is the largest ever increase in funding for services to older people. Her work will mean a major improvement in home and community-based support for older people. It will mean that thousands of older people needing care will receive new services and support. The Tánaiste explicitly stated her determination to put in place comprehensive health and social care for older people, in a way that is reliable, that respects and values older people, and that is fair financially to them, their families and taxpayers alike.

I referred earlier to the perception that the State does not do enough for older people. This additional funding comes on top of the extra funding for disability, mental health and primary care in the Estimates for 2006. The Government has pursued a policy to develop the general primary care programmes so that acute hospitals and residential care will not dominate extra investment for health care, as they have in the past. Ageism must be tackled by listening to older people. These initiatives are a direct response by the State to the preference of older people to be cared for at home rather than going into residential care. It is estimated that 28% of nursing home

residents have a low to moderate dependency level. Many of these residents might very well have continued to live at home if the right supports had been made available to them at the appropriate time. Research shows that people who are cared for in their own homes live longer and with a better quality of life.

This initiative by the Tánaiste is sometimes referred to as the "multimillion euro home care package". However, that title does not reflect the detail of the excellent broader measures provided by the Minister. For example, some €55 million has been provided in home care packages. However, there is additional funding, including €33 million for home helps, €9 million for day and respite care, €13 million for specialist palliative care, €5 million for meals on wheels, €1 million for sheltered housing, €4 million for initiatives in primary and community care for older people, and €28 million for development of the subvention scheme and 250 extra beds.

Significantly regarding today's discussion, €2 million has been provided to tackle the ugliest and most evil manifestation of ageism, elder abuse, something of which we should all be very conscious. It is not merely physical, since there is also psychological and sexual abuse and the intimidation of older people. The National Council on Ageing and Older People, whose function is to advise the Minister on all aspects of ageing and the welfare of older people, particularly on measures to promote their health, described the Tánaiste's work as both positive and significant. I know the House will share the view that we are making progress, although there is no doubt we have more to do.

I said a few moments ago that the onus to address the paradox of ageism falls on us all, not only by adopting measures to counter it but by highlighting the positive steps being taken to benefit older people. A 72 year old woman from Tipperary was recently on the waiting list for cataract removal for two years, and I found an interview with her very interesting. The mid-western area of the HSE had arranged for her to have them removed under the National Treatment Purchase Fund. As a result of the treatment, which I believe was undertaken in Tralee, she now has 20-20 vision. We must bear in mind how the quality of life of a 72 year old woman was improved so dramatically through that intervention. Those who speak so positively of initiatives being undertaken by the Department of Health and Children to improve their lives should be listened to.

This week we were asked by the Equality Authority, the Health Service Executive and the National Council on Ageing and Older People to Say No To Ageism, drawing public attention to its existence in society and identifying ways to address and overcome it. Today's statements are one example of how that can be done. The measures I mentioned as having been taken by the Government are only some examples of how

[Mr. Minihan.]

the State can make a positive contribution and respond to older people's needs. However, if we are truly to address this issue we must all, as individuals, listen to older people, challenging others who exhibit ageist attitudes and behaviour, and most of all challenging ourselves to be vigilant and proactive regarding anything that we might do, even inadvertently, to propagate negative attitudes towards older people in Irish society.

Mr. Quinn: I welcome the Minister of State to the House and the opportunity to speak on this topic, in which I have a personal interest. I am delighted to see the Leader of the House, Senator O'Rourke. Some 12 years ago, as Minister, she introduced a Bill on unfair dismissal. It had passed through the Dáil, and in my first few weeks in the Seanad I examined it and discovered that age had not been included as a wrongful reason for dismissal. I raised the matter and was delighted to see my first amendment accepted by the Minister on the basis that it was a clear example of unfairness.

The second reason is that, now that I am well into my 60s and approaching the next big round, I have a personal interest in this matter. However, I also have a personal interest in recognising, with regard to ageism, that there is no single cut-off point. That someone can step down, as I did a few months ago, from full-time, day-to-day work means that he or she can be busier than ever in many other ways. I recognise that it is possible for individuals not to assume that they must stop work because they reach a certain age.

Ageism is a complex subject with wide ramifications, on one of which I wish to focus my remarks, namely, retirement. Recently there has been a great deal of discussion of the issue, and the idea now seems to be gaining ground that people should have more flexibility regarding when they choose to retire. I have used the term "choose" on purpose, since many people literally cannot wait until they are 65 and opt for early retirement where it is offered. Others are quite happy to wait until they are 65 but are determined to stop working at that point.

I have no problem with either choice, which have been the only options available hitherto. One option not available to most people but increasingly sought is that of continuing to work after the age of 65; I stress that I mean it only as an option. It seems madness to prevent a person from working who wants to do so and is physically capable simply because he or she happens to have reached an arbitrary age. The notion of having a fixed retirement age dates from another era, when people did not live as long as they usually do now and when they were generally not as healthy in their advanced years.

I think of an employee, whom I will simply call John, who came to me ten years ago. He told me that he would be 65 on 31 December that year. He had worked in the company for nine years

and attended every day looking forward to work. He also said that many times during those nine years, he had looked at his watch thinking it was 4 p.m. only to see that it was 6 p.m., and I was very impressed.

Unfortunately, he died on Christmas Day that year, six days before being due to retire on his 65th birthday. Three days later his wife also died, so we had two funerals that week. I remember thinking in church of his words, which were a great challenge and a target. Irish employers must see the benefit and value of being able to give that to older people. From an employer's perspective, we must use the talent we can garner from older people. Over the years, I have learned that the talent in question has been wasted where people have been forced to retire.

There are many reasons people wish to continue working. They may enjoy the job so much they dread a life without it. They may not enjoy the work all that much but highly value the social life and contacts that accompany it. On the other hand, they may simply need the money. Whatever the reason, it can be a real tragedy if someone who wishes to work may not do so simply because of reaching an age limit. Apart from the personal side, from a national perspective, to end an employment in that way means a loss of resources to the company and the country as a whole. We currently have more vacancies than people to fill them, and it makes no sense to throw people on the scrapheap without good reason.

Having said that, I am not sure that I support moves in some quarters to raise the retirement age. The beady eyes of bean-counters in Merrion Street have spotted the fact that if we raised the retirement age, it would cost the State less. Of course, they are all in favour of it. Raising the official retirement age involves a degree of compulsion that should be absent from the discussion.

It would be better to focus on creating a situation relating to people's needs and wishes rather than to economic implications. In employment and taxation policy, we should focus attention on ensuring we place no obstacles before anyone who wishes to work past 65. I would like to see a further refinement introduced to the discussion, namely, the idea of partial retirement. Just as we need flexibility regarding the age at which people stop work, we should also consider greater flexibility regarding how people retire.

Instead of a sharp cut-off point whereby one works one day but not the next, a far better approach would enable people to gradually reduce their involvement in the job. A full five-day week would be beyond the wishes and capability of many over 65, but they would be willing and able to work part time. That way, their knowledge and expertise would continue to be available to their employers, but those concerned would have the benefit of a more relaxed lifestyle, being able to secure some of the leisure we associate with retirement.

We will only move in the direction I am suggesting if we value the input of older people. While some older people feel overwhelmed by the pace of modern life and, in particular, the technological changes we have seen in recent years, many others are as smart and up-to-date as any youngster, while also benefitting from greater experience and accumulated wisdom.

It is particularly appropriate that we are holding this debate during the annual Bealtaine festival, a month-long nationwide celebration of older people's creativity and participation in the arts. I am delighted that Senator White has also expressed her enthusiasm in that regard. The festival serves to remind us that our older generation represents a resource which this nation cannot afford to neglect.

Mr. Norris: As someone who has almost reached the age of 62, I have a vested interest in this issue.

Ms O'Rourke: The Senator is only a child.

Mr. Norris: I feel a certain sense of triumph at my survival to this age, although I have reached the point where I review death notices with increasing interest. I pay tribute not only to the agencies mentioned in the Minister of State's speech but also to Age Concern, with which I have worked, on its efforts to inform the general public.

I have noticed that men seem to die very soon after retirement, one of the reasons for which is because they lack interests. We should prepare people for retirement by encouraging them to broaden their interests beyond a tunnel like focus on their jobs. It is important that we provide such training.

The Minister of State referred to the refusal by insurance companies to provide insurance to those over the age of 70. I have heard a number of complaints from tourists on this issue. Ireland receives a lot of American tourists who, although over the age of 70, are competent to drive. These visitors are automatically refused insurance cover without being tested in any way. That has an impact on our tourism industry.

As regards our general attitude towards older people, when the nursing home problem was raised in this House, old age pensioners living in homes were insultingly advised that they could retain a certain amount of pocket money. We have to be careful not to patronise by using terms such as "pocket money", which reduce the status of older children to the level of children. I was asked by Age Concern and other groups to make a short radio insert about the mistreatment of elderly people and, *mea culpa*, I told a story about my adored aunt. When she was in her late 90s and living in a nursing home, I decided to recover an 18th century wing armchair as a birthday present. I thought I was doing the devil and all but she was absolutely livid with rage and accused

me of destroying the chair. That was not the case because the cover she claimed was an 18th century original was in fact a piece of horrible Edwardian fabric. However, the real reason for her anger was that I had taken her last vestige of control over her life and the disposition of her goods. I was extraordinarily insensitive to do so and I learned from the experience not to make these kinds of interventions without consulting the people concerned.

It is a source of concern that public nursing homes are not subject to inspection because I think the incidence of bed sores is frequent among elderly people in these homes. This matter should be thoroughly investigated in light of the scandal caused by the inspection of private nursing homes.

Some years ago, Sandymount's 102 year old postmistress stopped driving after being crashed into by another driver. She said she had to retire because road manners had deteriorated too much. In her own mind, she was still capable of driving but she was worried about the bad behaviour of other road users. That is an example of the spirit of older people, whose ranks we will all join if we are lucky.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Before calling on the next speaker, I welcome the delegations from the Bulgarian Parliament and Banda Aceh, Indonesia, to the Distinguished Visitors Gallery.

Ms White: I welcome the Minister of State to the House and thank the Leader, Senator O'Rourke, for facilitating this debate during Say No To Ageism week. I am sure the Minister of State will agree this has been one of the most interesting debates to have been held in this House. Every speaker has pushed out the boat and we are all agreed that a new approach to ageing is needed. The Equality Authority, as one of the sponsors of Say No To Ageism week, has pointed out that the two main complaints it receives from older people concern higher insurance costs and service provisions. Ageism is at play in both instances.

A semi-State body, VHI, charges those aged 64 or under a worldwide travel insurance charge of €49 but that charge increases to €149 for those turning 65. This black and white discriminatory practice is outrageous and does not reflect the graduated risks associated with normal ageing.

In respect of service provisions, the Equality Authority has stated that older people are being refused access to some public houses because they are deemed too old.

Ms O'Rourke: Are they too old to have a drink?

Ms White: It appears that bar owners fear that well-mannered and respected older people will not fit in with younger clients, some of whom, as reports indicate, drink too much and become

[Ms White.]

involved in anti-social behaviour. If an older person does not look the part in a sexy, jazzy bar, he or she is not allowed to enter.

Ms O'Rourke: I never knew about that.

Ms White: Senator O'Rourke is here to learn new matters. Negative stereotyping is out of step with reality. Attending a meeting of the Joint Committee on Social and Family Affairs last February, the chair of the National Economic and Social Forum, Dr. Maureen Gaffney, stated:

Not only is our view of old age increasingly out of synch with the capabilities of older people, but we now know from psychological literature that...one can predict almost nothing about people on the basis of their age.

I will shortly be launching my policy document, *A New Approach to Ageing*, which will outline how the Government and society must deal with the major issues facing older people in Ireland today. I want to take this opportunity to raise a few of these issues.

Perhaps the clearest example of ageism in Irish society can be found in the health service where free BreastCheck screening for women ends at the age of 64 despite medical research that indicates that the risk of getting breast cancer increases with age. This policy is a symptom of the ageist view held by some that health treatments are better directed towards younger people. In May 2005 the National Council on Ageing and Older People produced a report entitled *Perceptions of Ageism in Health and Social Services in Ireland*. It involved research and interviews with 450 older people and 150 health and social services staff. I have many quotations from it but will read just one:

The older people consulted in this study cited numerous examples of having health complaints dismissed as part of the aging process. Many felt that their doctors were not taking their health needs and concerns seriously.

This is the point that Senator Kett made in his opening speech earlier, that he had explained to his father's GP that his problem was related to health and not age, and could be easily resolved. This is a shocking indictment of ageism in health and social service provision in Ireland.

I am now looking at community care options. Older people who fall ill have few care options and many see nursing home care as their only option in spite of Government policy. In 1988 the Department of Health produced a policy document entitled *The Years Ahead*, and this policy should have been carried out since then. There has been no revision of it and the policy, which was the ideal way older people should be looked after, has not been implemented. Although the policy specified that older people should stay in their homes and have a backup care support

system, 50% of the budget spend on older people goes on residential care. This is the opposite to the policy. Although the money was to go into home care to keep people at home as long as possible, half of the €1 billion spent every year goes to residential care. We must redirect more resources into home care packages, home help and respite care services that reflect the wishes of older people, who want to stay in their own homes as long as they can.

Subventions are inadequate for people in nursing home care. There is a shortage of public beds while there is an oversupply of private beds. That will be news to Senators. Those who qualify for a public bed, but where none is available, must take one in a private nursing home, where weekly bed costs range from €700 to €1,000. As the ordinary maximum subvention is €190, the older person who cannot get a place in a public nursing home must produce €600 to €700 per week to pay for a private nursing home, or his or her family must pay it. Yesterday I received from the National Council on Ageing and Older People a document entitled *Improving the Quality of Life for Older People in Long-Stay Care Settings in Ireland*, which goes deeply into the topic on which Senator Norris spoke. It compares private and public nursing homes and finds that in many cases the public nursing homes are better because the ratio of nurses to assistants is greater.

Mr. Kett: There is no profit line.

Ms White: I recommend all Senators read this. It is fantastic. To return to what Senator Quinn said, in my document I will have approximately 19 propositions on which the Government should deliver. The first deals with mandatory retirement.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: The Senator has one minute remaining.

Ms White: It is worthwhile. We have to get it all in.

Ms O'Rourke: We must hear this.

Ms White: For God's sake the Leas-Chathaoirleach must listen. I must get it on the record. We are trying to create a revolution in society. We are all getting older and want to be feted, looked after and appreciated. Civil servants who entered the public service before April 2004 are forced to retire at the age of 65 regardless of their wishes. I have had approximately six public meetings in the Dublin South-East constituency on a new approach to ageing and ageism and there have been continuous outbursts of emotion from attendants whose hearts are broken because they do not want to retire. Perhaps more people want to retire, but a considerable number who are reaching the age of 65 do not want to retire for many reasons including economic, intellectual

stimulation and social networking — three good arguments for staying in a job. Most older people love their jobs and do not find them a bore.

I propose that mandatory retirement in the public and private sector must go and that we introduce phased retirement. One day a person has a job and the next day he or she has no job. A gradual form of retirement should be introduced, for example, working every second week. People drop dead after retirement because they loved their jobs. Professor Seamus Caulfield spoke at one of my meetings and said that a person goes to bed at the age of 64 as an asset to the State and wakes up on his or her 65th birthday as a liability to the State, which has to start paying his or her pension.

I do not want to detain the Leas-Chathaoirleach, who has been patient.

Mr. Bradford: The Senator has 18 more recommendations.

Ms O'Rourke: They will be in the document.

Ms White: I am not going to tell the House all my recommendations. Senator Bradford must be joking. I am sweating blood and tears over my document so I am not going to throw them all away. However, I would like to put something on the record that Senator O'Rourke and I discussed this morning.

Ms O'Rourke: The Senators should listen to this one.

Ms White: It fascinates me that politicians and party leaders have not woken up to the fact that 72% of people over the age of 50 vote. This is the highest proportion of voters of any age group in society. They should wake up. We spoke earlier about companies selling products to younger people. If they get some common sense the Government and politicians will sell their policies to the people over 50, of whom 72% vote.

Mr. Bradford: I am glad of the opportunity to say a few words and to follow Senator White, who will recall that in last weeks debate we discussed facials in the follow-up to her contribution.

Ms White: Who was talking about facials?

Mr. Bradford: It related to migrant workers and the service work they do. I listened with great interest to Senator White and particularly her indication that she is about to publish a document on ageism and the elderly. Her previous such document related to child care. We have had extensive debates on child care and services for young people while at the earlier part of life's spectrum we have had vigorous policy debates on the unborn. These are all serious and appropriate matters.

It is opportune that we debate ageism. There is a fine line to be drawn between ageism and

services for the elderly and the debate will overlap. We must address the concept of ageism, as opposed to the challenges faced by the elderly. We live in the Western hemisphere and are very dominated by its culture. If one were to try to sum up Western culture, the two words that would spring to one's mind would be "productivity" and "disposability". Our society and economy are run on the basis of productivity. At the other end of the scale, it is a question of how disposable a concept, politician or even a person might be. Given the mix of productivity and disposability, we must try to address the needs of our maturing citizens. It is very opportune that this is Say No To Ageism week and it is important that we listen closely and address the problems that exist.

Approximately 15 years ago, I read a very fine autobiography called *Wild Swans* by a Chinese lady whose name I cannot remember. The book covers the era from the Chinese revolution to the time in which it was written. It is a brief history of China and its society. One aspect of it that I recall very strongly and which had a great impact on me was the description of the elderly and the role they played in China. The people of that vast country, which has many faults and failings but is enjoying great economic growth and advancing to some degree politically, have great respect for the elderly. Not only do they play a great role in family life but also in village, community and political life.

My former colleague in the other House and friend of all of us, PJ Sheehan from Cork South-West, often remarks in jest when asked if he will be standing again for election to the Dáil that Chinese politicians only come into their own when they are 90. It is ideal that we are talking about ageism in the Oireachtas because politics is probably the one occupation in which a person's age is not the main issue. It presents no great barrier regardless of whether a candidate is 21, 75 or 80. I was 21 years of age at my first meeting as a member of Cork County Council and I sat beside a former member of this House, John L. O'Sullivan, who was 84 on that very day. We were both equal members of the council and nobody asked us our ages. Fortunately politics seems to be almost exempt from ageism, and rightly so, and we must now try to spread that exemption across society.

Pensions, housing and options for work have been mentioned and all require further study. Most people are speaking about retirement age. Senator White made the point that one goes to bed at 64 as a so-called plus to society——

Ms O'Rourke: A useful member of society.

Mr. Bradford: ——but are deemed to be of neutral value, at best, if not of negative worth, a few years later. We must certainly change this attitude. If people want to work in the conven-

[Mr. Bradford.]

tional workplace beyond the age of 65, we must make provision for them.

I heard the Minister for Social and Family Affairs talk about ageism last week and he tied it to the issue of pensions and perhaps deferred pensions. This subject requires in-depth study. The Pensions Board may be considering the issue at present and I hope it will be positive in its recommendations and allow people to work for as long as they are willing and able.

The concept of step-down retirement must be taken on board. Consider the position of those who lose their jobs, be they in their 40s or 50s. We rightly feel very sorry for those who go to work on a Friday and are redundant or unemployed on a Monday. We try to offer them resources and supports, including financial supports, and also retraining to prepare them for employment elsewhere. The very same problem is faced by those who have to retire from work at 65 or 66 because of their age. On retirement they are consigned to some sort of economic scrapheap. This is very unfair and needs to be addressed.

Care of the elderly is a separate subject but requires further study in respect of ageism. Many studies have been carried out and I agree wholeheartedly with attempting to allow people to remain in their own homes for as long as possible. Every report published promotes this concept but we do not do so at a political level. The Opposition is either asking for extra money to be poured into the nursing home subvention scheme or the Government side is telling us about the money being provided or about the extra beds, including public beds, that are being made available. These should only comprise a small part of the solution and we should be trying to concentrate on services for people who wish to remain at home, be it through additional home help payments or changes to the means-testing system to allow the carer's allowance to be paid to a greater number of family members. Society would benefit to a degree that we do not wish to quantify from having an increased number of elderly people looked after in their own homes by their own families. This should be our political priority.

The nursing home and public hospital bed solutions are poor second-bests. They represent something of a political excuse for our failure as a society to promote the idea of allowing people to remain where they are undoubtedly happiest, that is, at home with or near their families and in their communities, supported by their neighbours. Any initiative to achieve this will have my full support.

Housing issues obviously affect the elderly. When we make inquiries on behalf of middle-aged or elderly people looking for local authority accommodation, we get the distinct impression that they are not a political priority. Those who are advancing in years still have housing needs, as well as human needs, and we must try to be

more generous. It is a question of attitude and not just of valuing the contribution the elderly have made to building our nation. It is a matter of recognising and anticipating the ongoing contribution they make to society in all its aspects.

Senator White referred to the voting turnout among various age groups and warned that we should take strong political note of what is called the "grey vote". This concept is now universally accepted and we should take note of it. We should do so not just because of some sort of political threat but because of the benefits that would accrue to our country from ridding society of ageism and valuing people for what they are worth and what they can contribute, regardless of their age.

I welcome the Minister of State to the House. This is a very interesting debate and is probably the sort of debate the Seanad can engage in best. There is no political division and it is a question of our trying to combat ageism such that everybody, be they 25, 55 or 75, can play a full role in society. All age groups can do so. Although not everybody in the House might agree with the politics of Ronald Reagan, they should note that he became President of the United States when he was 70 and was re-elected at 74. This demonstrates that people sometimes allow limits to be imposed upon themselves. We should try to break down the mental barriers and say that age is no limit.

Ms O'Rourke: I am pleased the Seanad is debating this issue. Senator White suggested the topic to me and I found the Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, Deputy Fahey, most willing to attend the House. I find the billboards advertising Say No To Ageism week very attractive. One would be a long time blowing out all those candles. This issue is becoming prominent and many interesting points have been made by Members. The most telling way of making a point is by telling a personal story. This may have no relevance in the wider realm but I thought it was interesting.

When I was going before the selection convention those who wanted another candidate to be elected, namely, the incumbent — no Lochinvar was he himself — used my age against me. He really was not involved himself. The first instance of this was a bogus telephone call to "Liveline". I agreed to take a call from the show because I believe one must set out one's stall and state one's case. Joe Duffy was genuinely puzzled that I was a candidate and asked whether I would prefer to put my feet up or go on a cruise. I can sail my boat anytime I want to and I do not wish to go on a cruise. It is difficult to believe people would think that way.

Even though that episode worked overwhelmingly in my favour, campaigners were told to use it against my campaign. They approached a cumann secretary who, in Fianna Fáil parlance, controlled the three votes. They suggested that it was

ridiculous that I was a candidate. When asked why, they trotted out the age issue. He went into his kitchen and emerged with his lovely wife. He stated that his wife was the same age as Mary O'Rourke and asked if he should discard her. The candidate's campaigners left and I received the three votes.

Ageism is a stupid policy. There are horses for courses. Some are old at 20 and others are young at 90. I have met young fogeys one wants to encourage to get a life and have met older people who are more lively than many young people.

Ms White: Hear, hear.

Ms O'Rourke: A particular Minister says "Hello, dear" every time he meets me. I have made a vow that the next time he says it I will slap his face publicly. I do not care who is coming or going.

Mr. J. Walsh: That is assault.

Mr. Bradford: He has been warned.

Ms O'Rourke: Indeed. Ageism puts a tag on a person whose qualities do not bear witness to that tag. Some people may wish to put their feet up at a certain age. Not everyone has to run the marathon and if they wish to go on a cruise, that is fine. Putting someone in a corner because of his or her age and saying "stay there dear" is a ridiculous policy. It is better to confront people who attempt this and to argue that wisdom, knowledge and experience have a price tag, one which enables people to progress. When life expectancy was only 70 perhaps it was a good idea to put up one's feet at 65. Life expectancy is much greater now and people are in the 80s when they hang up their boots.

Keeping one's mind and body active keeps one in better shape. When my mother, God rests her soul, was 84 she played bridge five nights a week until the week before she died. She had represented Ireland in bridge 50 years earlier. She was capable of calculating the hands, the suits, the points she had and the necessary bids to make until the week before she died in hospital. She also lived on her own and was glad to return home on Sundays after we took her out. Her mind was sharp, which is a blessing because acuity of mind is of great importance.

Being in one's home is a great blessing. Nursing homes bring to mind people getting up, getting dressed and sitting in a corner all day, gazing out the window with no stimulation. Some people have medical difficulties and must be cared for in nursing homes but old people are better off if they can be cared for in their own homes.

We must focus on people's attitudes when debating this issue. Not intending any offence to Senator Bradford, the idea that youth is the repository of all that is good in life is quite ridiculous. Youth has vim and freshness but not experi-

ence, which allows one to stay the course and be active.

Many in the media do not understand that one should not espouse ageism. Joe Duffy did not mean any harm but another chat show host, who presents "The Late Late Show", interviewed me when I lost the last election. He told me, with relish, that he expected me to be finished with politics. When I asked why he referred to my age. I asked if he had spoken to Mr. Brian Farrell recently, who was ten years older than me but was still capable of grilling people with his piercing eyes on television programmes. Mr. Gay Byrne, who is 72, was interviewed by the same chat show host last week. Was Mr. Gay Byrne asked if he was too old for his new job? Not at all. Mr. Gay Byrne had the audience in the palm of his hands within minutes and won the encounter. Unconsciously, those in the media engage in ageism.

Ageism must be combatted in terms of services but also in the way we regard older people. We do not want patronage and we do not want "hello dear". We are adults like everyone else.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I hope it is not Senator O'Rourke's nephews who refer to her as "dear".

Ms O'Rourke: No, all of us were reared properly to treat people with respect so the Leas-Chathaoirleach can take that idea out of his silly little mind.

Those of us who believe ageism is incorrect must be clear that we will not entertain it. I appeared on a programme on NewsTalk 106 at lunchtime and referred to the point made by Senator White, namely, that 71.9% of those over 50 vote, compared with 24% of the 18 to 26 year age group. Our job is to get votes so we should appeal to that section. Anyone considering denigrating older people should think of the cumann secretary who neatly disposed of the three people at his door.

Dr. Henry: I congratulate Senators White and O'Rourke for arranging this debate. I also welcome the Minister of State and his contribution. The ushers in Leinster House are noted for their intelligence and tact, an example of which I encountered the other day. I had been to get my bus pass and I was showing it to two ushers in the hall when one of them said "I did not realise they were giving them to underage people now."

Ms O'Rourke: The Senator should have said "Only to Senators".

Dr. Henry: Although it is quite reasonable to walk from O'Connell Street to the House, I took the bus for two stops to see if the bus pass worked, which it did. Members will be surprised where they will see me going with it now.

Ms O'Rourke: Not if there is a strike.

Dr. Henry: Thank God the trains are starting to run again.

It is very unfortunate people talk about so many negative aspects of getting older because there are so many positive ones as well. One is supposed to have a bit more time, although I have not noticed that yet but I am sure I will shortly. Senator O'Rourke spoke about the reason she is running again for the Dáil and I was delighted to hear she believes she has a huge contribution to make, which she has. However, I will not run again for the Seanad because there are so many other things I want to do. I have loved being a Member of the House for the past 14 years but there are many other things I must do. One thinks when one gets older, one will have more time but I have found one does not and that things creep up on one all the time. People keep saying to me that I have time on my hands now because I have retired from medicine and they ask if I would mind doing this or that.

Ms O'Rourke: They say "Don't forget to put your feet up and go on a cruise."

Dr. Henry: I have not had a chance to do so yet.

It was interesting to hear reports of what the Minister for Finance stated this morning that our demography is good and that we still have many young people. In many parts of Europe, older people are obliged to continue to work because businesses could not keep going without them. I was in a hotel in a small village in Bavaria last year and it seemed it was being run by people who were all well over 60 years of age, or perhaps over 70 years of age. I was going out for the evening and I was asked if I would be late back.

Ms O'Rourke: If the Senator met a nice Bavarian, she would be.

Dr. Henry: I said I would certainly be back by 9 p.m. or 10 p.m. but I was told I would have to take a key because they had to go to bed so they could get up at 7 a.m. These people had full and active lives. I do not believe anyone worries about getting older but only about the ill health one may run into. It is important the rest of the population concentrates on that area of our health system. One very rarely hears about people being refused any type of medical treatment because of their age. A friend of mine who is in his 90s went into hospital recently to get a new pacemaker. He was asked if he wanted a three year or a nine year one to which he replied he would like the nine year one because he did not want to come back in three years. One's attitude towards illness is important, although some of us are blessed with better health than others.

We need to address some areas of the health service. BreastCheck should be extended as soon

as possible to cover those who are 70 years of age because the current cut-off point of 65 years is very early. When it is being rolled out in other parts of the country, it should be extended to 70 years of age.

The problem of hiring cars has been raised, which is serious. One cannot hire a car once one is over 70 years of age. A considerable number of tourists come to this country and many Irish people go abroad. I go abroad quite a bit with a group of people and I am now one of the young ones who must do much of the driving. It is an issue at which we must look because people are being discriminated against for no other reason than their age rather than their lack of ability or otherwise.

There is just not enough time to do everything and sometimes I regret I take on so much. The other day I bought two books on the birds of Ireland. I could recognise lichens, wild flowers, leaves and so on but I could not recognise many birds. I put one book in the car and the other in the kitchen. I think I saw a mistle thrush this morning. I had the book to hand but I did not have my glasses so it was difficult to identify it. There is a problem in regard to the decrease in the number of thrushes in this country and we must all keep our wits about us so we can let the ornithologists know if we see one. One can take on many useful projects as one gets older.

The poems we learned about old age when we were young were extraordinary they were so doleful. I am sure some Members will remember the poem "To Daffodils".

Fair daffodils, we weep to see
You haste away so soon;
As yet the early-rising sun
Has not attain'd his noon.
Stay, stay
Until the hasting day
Has run
But to the evensong,
And, having pray'd together, we
Will go with you along.

[The next verse is even more gloomy.]

We have a short time to stay, as you,
We have as short a spring;
As quick a growth to meet decay,
As you, or anything.

Everything was about our lives fading. I much prefer the poem such as the one about the woman who said she was going to become eccentric and wear a red dress and purple hat.

Ms O'Rourke: I know that one.

Dr. Henry: It is wonderful. I always thought that poem was much better.

Ms O'Rourke: Or the Dylan Thomas poem entitled "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night".

Dr. Henry: That poem included the line “Rage, rage against the dying of the light”. Those poems are much better than the other sad one. I loved the poem about the old woman in Italy who was going to refuse to be moved from the square. She was not able to move around very much but she could take part in what was going on the square. They were trying to move her to a house on the hill but she was going to resist.

We must determinedly resist any changes in our lifestyle which people want us to make. We have a responsibility to help those of our colleagues who are finding it more difficult to resist and to help them to ensure they get everything to which they are entitled and that they continue to mind their bank accounts and pay their bills. It is always good to try to keep control of financial affairs and to ensure older people do so. If one loses control of something such as one's financial affairs, a huge part of one's life is taken away. Anytime I have been involved in financial dealings with older people, I make sure I deal with them and not with go-betweens who sometimes believe one should let them take over.

I agree with Senator O'Rourke in that I would be terrified of going on a cruise. What would one do if the people were dreadful and one wanted to get off the ship? How would one manage that?

Ms O'Rourke: Swim.

Dr. Henry: I very much agree with Senator O'Rourke in that regard.

Ms O'Rourke: I would not be terrified. It would be boring.

Dr. Henry: No one wants to be sent on a cruise. We want to be allowed to do what we feel like doing and a great number of us have a huge contribution to make. Anyone running for election should be careful to be nice to older people because as Senator O'Rourke and others said, we are very good at voting. We usually continue to live in the same place which, with the electoral register in its current state, is a big help. We are also usually very good at getting involved in the process of keeping our democracy going. Again, I commend Senators White and O'Rourke on this debate.

Mr. J. Walsh: I welcome the Minister of State. The topic has been well articulated by many of the speakers. It is a timely debate, particularly given the recent Say No To Ageism week which was promoted by the Health Service Executive, the Equality Authority, the National Council on Ageing and Older People and the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform. It is good to see such an initiative.

As has been said by a number of speakers, it is about changing the culture. In the past 15 years we have seen, in the number of larger corpora-

tions in particular, a trend towards the American way of trying to shift people into retirement in their early 50s. The banks have been particularly active in this regard. Often a valuable resource is lost as a consequence of such action.

I agree with Senator Quinn that often as people reach a certain age they may not wish to work a disciplined 40-hour week and scope should be given for phased retirement so people can scale back but continue to participate. It is sad to see the health of people who worked actively all their lives go quickly downhill on reaching retirement age at 65 years, and leaving their place of employment. This may be because they have made no plans and have no training to deal with retirement, and feel their value to society has been diminished. It is particularly sad when they have accumulated wisdom and experience which could contribute to the benefit of society in many areas, and give them self-fulfilment.

There are many good active retirement groups around the country which provide and involve people in alternative activities. It would be useful to look at practices in other countries. Some years ago I visited China and early one morning we visited a location that looked like a playground but in fact was for elderly people doing their morning exercises, the Chinese equivalent of yoga, I suppose. We spoke to a few of them afterwards and discovered that some were well into their 80s and had served as editors of local newspapers and in other senior positions.

This was a way of socialising in the morning and above all keeping active and alert. Within the facility was a place to watch certain programmes, debates were going on and there were back-up health services available, to take blood pressure and run other basic checks. While we may value the benefits old age can bring to society, the Chinese have a long tradition of doing so and we could learn from their example.

I have always been interested in seeing people who remain active in their old age. When I was president of the Irish Road Hauliers Association, our secretary was a man who had retired from the B and I. He was rather conscious of his age although he was active. Shortly after I took over, a septuagenarian was elected President of the United States. Ronald Reagan was in his early 70s and our secretary who was in his late 70s delighted in the fact that someone could assume such a responsible position at that age. Anybody who was inclined to criticise his age after that was quickly put in his or her place.

The local gardaí have a nice tradition of inviting some of their retired colleagues to the station at Christmas for a few drinks. One of them, a man aged 91 years, said at the party that his greatest concern was that he was having difficulty with the gear stick in his car and he felt he would have to change to an automatic. That said something about his mentality.

Ms O'Rourke: Yes, there was nothing wrong with him, it was the gear stick that was wrong.

Mr. J. Walsh: That is a good role model for older people. When they have their health they should avail of it. I recently met a couple from Santa Barbara who had just turned 70 years of age and had sailed down the Pacific in their 36 ft. boat, and were travelling through Fiji and Tonga, to New Zealand and Australia, covering the South Pacific. They were updating their website as they went along and taking plenty of photographs. It was an extraordinary adventure for them to undertake and a great example of what people who remain active can do.

This is a worthwhile initiative. I agree with Senator Henry that the introduction of the free travel pass was a good initiative——

Ms White: Mr. Haughey did that.

Mr. J. Walsh: Yes, Mr. Haughey introduced it as Minister for Finance. It is highly valued by elderly people who avail of it to visit relatives and travel around the country. We can take those kinds of initiatives but, as Senator Henry said, that requires planning. There are many things people wish to do with their lives and the Government could consider holding regional training seminars to prepare people for activities in their old age, liaising with active retirement groups and so on. I have seen too many people who find it difficult to move from full employment to retirement.

I wish Senator White, the Minister of State and all who participate in promoting this initiative, well. We all hope to live to old age. It is a great blessing if one does and the more State support there is for it the better we will enjoy it and the better society will be.

Sitting suspended at 4.40 p.m. and resumed at 5 p.m.

Energy Strategy: Motion.

Mr. Quinn: I move:

That Seanad Éireann recognises the need to develop a national energy strategy that will address Ireland's over-dependence on oil and replace it to the largest possible extent by energy derived from renewable sources.

I deliberately worded this motion in what I call non-confrontational terms, in the hope that it would not provoke the usual knee-jerk amendment from the Government and that the House would have a mature and thoughtful debate on this most important national issue. I would like to avoid the kind of partisan mud-slinging that characterised a debate on the same subject in the Dáil last week. I was disappointed when I discovered that the knee-jerk reaction from the

Government had occurred. My motion was worded in a manner which I hoped would be non-confrontational.

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Mr. B. O'Keeffe): That is a subjective view on the part of the Senator.

An Cathaoirleach: Please allow the Senator to speak without interruption.

Mr. Quinn: I appreciate the Minister's decision.

Mr. B. O'Keeffe: We take the objective view.

Mr. Quinn: One of the reasons I like this House is because it avoids the confrontational issues that often occur in the other House. I went to some pains to word the motion in that manner.

Energy is an issue that is far too important in national terms for us to allow it become a political football. We have a serious problem with energy and if we do not get it right we put at risk our entire future as a modern, prosperous society.

In 2003 I went to Dubai for the first time. I had not been there before and I did not really want to go there because it sounded like Las Vegas. When I got there I discovered this wonderful tourist and sporting resort which has the best hotels in the world. The reason this all happened was that Sheikh Mohammed had identified that oil and the production of oil would run out at some point in the future and decided to make plans to prepare for that day. Dubai decided to become the best tourist resort in the world. I can understand the reason it did that. The authorities in that country were sufficiently far-sighted to recognise that it is likely that the supply of oil will run out at some future date.

Around that same time I picked up the June 2004 edition of *National Geographic*, a publication with which I am sure the Minister of State is familiar. That edition included a smashing article entitled *The End of Cheap Oil*. When I read it I wondered how dependent we are on oil and I subsequently raised this subject on a number of occasions. I was jolted to discover only this year that we are the most dependent of all the European nations on oil. We do not seem to have taken the first steps countries such as Dubai and others have taken.

It is not true to say, as some might argue, that we are not doing anything about addressing this problem. I am sure the Minister of State will say what we are doing. We are moving forward strongly on a number of different fronts. I would like to acknowledge that progress, to recognise what has been done and I give full credit to those responsible. No doubt we will hear more from the Minister of State along those lines.

However, it is true to say that we are not moving forward anywhere near fast enough. Our

response to this issue is not commensurate with the size of the threat we face. What I am arguing for is a strategy that will take this issue by the scruff of its neck and push it up the list of national priorities — which it is currently nowhere near — such that it becomes not merely another task of Government but one of its most important projects. That is my purpose in tabling this motion.

We are in the position we have reached today where Ireland is the most oil-dependent country in the world mainly because we do not have the kind of strategy that we should have in place. We have reached the edge of this particular precipice because instead of a strategy we have simply muddled along while being caught up on the tide of our newfound prosperity, which seems to make possible all things for which we wish.

Members may have read the heading “Britain goes nuclear to beat energy crisis” carried in today’s edition of *The Times* of London. I know France quite well and when I have travelled there, particularly to the north of that country, I have noted the level of energy produced from nuclear power. I am not arguing for following the nuclear energy route by any means, but merely pointing out that France thought this issue through. Britain also thought it through and faced up to it, albeit with its policy posing potential grave dangers for us. We have not yet faced up to this issue but we must now do so. This motion is being debated on the day this issue hit the headlines in Britain after Tony Blair spoke on it and decided the direction Britain will take in the years ahead.

In today’s Ireland, we have coddled ourselves into thinking we are so well off that we can have anything we want whenever we want it. Sadly, this is not the case. Due entirely to circumstances outside our control, we are in danger of finding ourselves unable to guarantee the constant and uninterrupted energy supply our economy demands and which our people have grown to expect. Even more important, by our thoughtless over-dependence on oil we have lost control over a key element of our cost base, thereby putting our future competitiveness at the total mercy of external forces. We saw what happened earlier this year in the Ukraine and Belarus in eastern Europe, which rely on Russian oil.

We could have avoided this situation if we had in place a proper national energy strategy. If we had such a strategy, we would not have ended up where we are now, but that is water under the bridge. I do not want to waste the time of the House in wringing my hands about what might have been. The important point is what we do from here. I hope to learn something from the Minister of State in that respect.

Our first task is to realise the seriousness of the problem we face. If we persist in our denial and continue to persuade ourselves that the tiny steps we are taking now will make a serious impact on

the challenges we face, then we condemn ourselves to a bleak future. I do not exaggerate or overstate the problem. Considering the issue in purely economic terms, it is a cliché that we have a serious competitiveness problem. Many elements add up to make that problem, which we are addressing with perhaps something short of the right degree of seriousness.

The issue of competitiveness is important. However, even if we were to get everything else right, and still did not grasp the nettle on energy costs, that single element alone is enough to fatally undermine our competitiveness on world markets. This is because we are more oil-dependent than any other country. The price of oil if it continues to increase, as it surely will, will increase in every country but the economic impact the price rise has in a particular country will be a function of the level of that country’s oil dependence. The more oil dependent the country, the greater the impact on it of a further rise in the price of oil. The equation is a simple one, and the outlook for our country is nothing short of catastrophic.

That view simply considers the picture in monetary terms. It assumes, which is certainly not the case, that the only challenge we face is paying a higher price for the oil we use. The truth is that an equally important problem may well be the difficulty of getting supplies. Currently, there is enough oil in the world to meet everybody’s needs providing they are willing to pay for it, but if we look ahead to the future — on which the article in June 2004 to which I referred focused — we have no guarantee that this will remain the case. Oil is a finite resource; there do not exist unlimited reserves of it. In the not too distant future, we can easily envisage a scenario in which demand from fast-developing countries such as China will outrun supply. There simply will not be enough oil to go round, and the people who will get supplies will be those who can afford to pay the most.

Where would that leave Ireland? What would happen to our prosperity and way of life if daily power cuts and load-shedding became the norm, as happens today as a matter of course in many Third World countries? Anyone who has travelled to such countries will be fully aware of how constrained all aspects of life become under such circumstances, particularly economic activity.

To sail into that future without an effective strategy would be exceedingly foolish. That is why I welcome the Government’s intention to produce a Green Paper on energy later in the year but I look forward to it with more than a little trepidation. We have had so many examples over the last decade of grandiose Government plans that were either fatally misconceived or good in themselves but never carried through to implementation. Members know the kind strategy planning to which I refer. This is

[Mr. Quinn.]

emphatically not what we want need now if we are to correctly address our energy problem. Any national strategy for energy must take as its starting-point our over-dependence on oil. The whole strategy must develop out of that reality; that is the threat we face, and which we must work to counter.

In addressing the threat, our policy must rest on two pillars, each of which must be pursued with equal commitment. The first pillar is one we tend to forget, namely, energy conservation. The energy we do not consume is energy we do not have to find or pay for. Part of our national energy problem is that we are recklessly profligate in the way we use it. It is an unfortunate side effect of our current prosperity that we behave almost as if it were a virtue to waste energy. It applies to the way we build our houses to the way we get around, even to the way in which we do not bother to switch off lights or appliances that we do not need. Everywhere one turns one will observe the waste of vast amounts of energy. Today that is foolish, tomorrow it will be madness. Energy conservation is a matter that a national strategy must address before we think of anything else.

Only when we have developed a full-scale strategy for energy conservation should we begin to address the question of producing the energy we need. This is where the issue of renewable energy sources comes into the picture. All I want to say on this aspect is that we must pursue not one or two but all possible alternative sources of energy. Wind power, biomass, wave power and other energy sources all have their devotees. We need a contribution from them all if we are to build a strong portfolio of energy sources that will make a dent on our present over-dependence on oil.

Above all, where renewable energy is concerned, we must not fall into the trap of what has been called the pilot scheme trap. Too often in this country, across a wide range of activities, we cod ourselves into thinking we have solved a problem when we have got a pilot scheme up and running. Some pilot schemes have been running for 20 years or more and have never progressed into the mainstream. If we persist in treating our energy challenge on a pilot basis, we will never get anywhere.

I look forward to hearing what the Minister of State has to say on this issue. Bringing it to the forefront at this stage, particularly on the day that Britain indicated it will take steps to address it, makes us realise its importance.

Dr. Henry: I thank Senator Quinn for asking me to second the motion. This is an area which has sadly been neglected by the Government. Senator Quinn was tactful in the wording of his

motion. I am only sorry that an amendment has been tabled.

As Senator Quinn was reading the article on oil in the *National Geographic*, I was reading a book which was colourfully called *The Party's Over*. This is about the fact that oil and gas are running out on this planet and that oil and gas reserves have probably been overestimated. It is interesting to see how cagey many countries have become about their oil reserves. We hear that places such as Saudi Arabia are re-estimating them. However, we do not hear what the re-estimated figures are, but there is little indication that they will make us feel jolly. There appears to be a dramatic change in the amount of reserves being held as well as a great increase in the use of oil, as Senator Quinn pointed out, not just by Europe, North and South America but by China and India as well, which were not major consumers until recently.

Senator Quinn has rightly pointed to our enormous dependence on oil and said that replacing it by any renewable means is extraordinarily important. I support his point that we ought to conserve whatever energy we acquire from the oil and gas we are using. Any gas we may have around our coasts is now even more valuable than it was a couple of years ago. We mostly use oil and gas to generate electricity. This is not a very efficient way to make electricity as an enormous amount of heat is lost. We need to make more of an effort as regards the conservation of this heat.

Heat energy converts chemical energy into work, but unfortunately most of it is thrown away in the form of heat. The figures for a typical spark ignition engine, running on natural gas, show that only 25% to 30% of the energy input is converted into electricity. I am grateful to my research assistant, Mr. Niall O'Brien, for these figures, because I am not a great expert on the spark ignition engine. Some 10% of the heat produced in fact goes up the flue. If we put forward combined heat and power systems, to deal with the remaining 50% to 60% of heat produced, it can be recovered and not wasted.

This technology has been in existence for decades and has been promoted since the early 1980s. It was not commonly used until then, but the last oil crisis in the 1970s probably encouraged people to modernise the technology. It is now being used on a relatively wide scale on buildings in many countries. I am delighted to say that some of these buildings in Ireland have proven that they can very successfully lower the amount of fuel they require, which of course means great savings. A good example of one of these units is the Jurys Doyle-owned Burlington Hotel. This hotel, which has 500 bedrooms and a large conference facility, has been running on a Limerick-supplied technology unit for many years. The installation takes advantage of the ESB's maximum demand tariff. That means that

as well as saving the heat from its engines the hotel can reuse it in its grid when tariffs are high in the ESB system.

They have a large diesel engine which has been converted to burn gas, and it does two jobs. It heats the buildings and provides hot water for the guests and the cooling water is then fed into a heat exchanger which passes the heat into the boilers to warm the rooms. The savings are of the order of €100,000 a year, which is a substantial contribution to the group's profits. The group has the same technology in the Berkeley Court Hotel and I know there is a similar system in the Davenport. I hope that other hotels which have this technology will forgive me for not mentioning them.

Some of our hospitals have this technology, too, for example Our Lady's Hospital for Sick Children, Crumlin and the Blackrock Clinic. One must ask why other hospitals are not using such technology. In both of these hospitals some of the fuel to run the system comes from the burning of clinical waste. We have to think more imaginatively and ask our institutions to examine the way they deal with fuel. In the educational sector, the King's Hospital is a school which uses this technology. As well as heating the rooms, hot water is provided and the swimming pool is heated in this way. This technology should be promoted. It is being much encouraged in the United Kingdom. It is interesting that Prime Minister Blair did not promote this initiative, rather than the nuclear one, last night. It would have been received far more favourably.

We have seen that this system can be used by councils. Local authority representatives from Ireland can go and look at schemes in Britain, for example in Woking where a local authority supplies customers with electricity on a private wire combined heat and power exchange and renewable energy network. As well as energy generation, there is an enormous environmental impact. Other councils are following suit. We are all well aware of global warning by now. Scorn was poured on this when it was first mooted in the 1970s, but now we know that any unnecessary escape of heat into the atmosphere must be halted. There are difficulties involved in calculating the carbon emission accuracy, as we have recently seen publicised within the EU. Anything that can be done to prevent further atmospheric pollution is important as well. If we bring forward this technology we can reduce our fuel costs and promote environmental issues at the same time.

Mr. Kenneally: I move amendment No. 1:

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

"welcomes the Government's intention to publish a Green Paper on Energy Policy which will address the key challenges for Irish energy

to 2020 including strategies to reduce Ireland's dependency on imported fossil fuels through the accelerated development of renewable energy sources and enhanced energy efficiency."

I accept what Senator Quinn said earlier as regards his motion, but the amendment is non-contentious in that we all welcome the intention to publish a Green Paper. I hope we can all be positive in this debate. I had called for a debate on this matter on the Order of Business within the last couple of weeks as I believe it is a very pressing matter for this country in particular, which has little in the way of natural resources and is 100% dependent on imports for our oil supply. Accordingly, I am glad the Independent group tabled the motion.

The first reaction of most people when faced with how to reduce dependency on fossil fuels is to look to motor vehicles for an alternative supply of energy. There is no doubt that there is much scope for savings in this sector, but it is not the only area which needs our attention. Renewable sources of energy offer sustainable alternatives to our dependence on fossil fuels, a means of reducing harmful greenhouse emissions and opportunities to reduce our reliance on imported fuels. For these reasons, Irish and European policies support the increased use of renewable energy from such sources as wind, solar power, wood, waste and water, as these are abundantly available in Ireland. Several renewable energy technologies are now economically viable and capable of supplying clean, economical heat and power. Indeed, the higher the price of oil, the more economically viable previously unviable sources will become. Alternative energy must be further developed and positively encouraged through substantial assistance to the industry. The growing of rapeseed and other crops should be actively promoted among a farming population which is finding itself increasingly isolated, with reduced income and disused or underused land. That is not a natural condition for good farmers and I am sure they would welcome any positive measure which would bring them back into productive and useful farming again.

In his 2006 Budget Statement, the Minister for Finance, Deputy Cowen, introduced excise relief for biofuels in order to achieve a target of 2% of the fuels market to be taken up by biofuels by 2008, with a targeted five years excise relief starting this year at a cost of €20 million. That will be increased to €35 million in 2007 and to €50 million in each of the following three years. This relief, when fully operational, is expected to support the production in Ireland of some 163 million litres of biofuel every year. This is 20 times the current level of biofuel that qualifies for excise relief, so it should make a significant difference over time. We must remember this is only a start but it will establish valuable precedents and

[Mr. Kenneally.]

give positive indications of the direction in which this Government wants the country to go.

We should think of setting even more ambitious targets because, like the Members who have framed this motion, the public also know that the writing is on the wall for oil supplies and it is only a matter of time before they run out. This is currently suggested to be 50 years hence, but in view of the rapid development of the economies of countries like China with its huge potential for energy usage, we must realistically revise this figure downwards.

We may all be wrong and I hope we are, but it is only prudent to provide for a reduction in the use of fossil fuels due to the potential shortage of supply and environmental considerations. Again, being realistic, we know that we have done great damage to the environment. We have jeopardised the health of future generations and we must begin to row back some of the negative legacy we have generated for our children.

The time is right for initiatives within the alternative energy field. The public are thinking of ways to reduce their energy costs and the growing number who are so minded are looking at ways to help the environment and meet our requirements in the reduction of harmful emissions. On Monday evening last, "Nationwide" on RTE featured people who are installing their own small wind turbines on the roofs of their houses. I know this has yet to be developed in any meaningful way but it does show a mindset which was not present before.

A constituent of mine who has a stream running through his land has set up a company to develop a hydroelectric scheme with a view to selling the energy created to the national grid. This is not pie in the sky; the excavators are already working and power will be generated within months. This must be replicated on a large scale and the ground must be properly prepared for such development. I get very annoyed with people who use blanket arguments against the use of wind power. Whether their point is that such turbines are noisy, or that the towers impinge on the landscape, we have to face up to the fact that we must find an alternative to oil and the wind option is especially suited to this country.

It will take a large investment and may mean hefty subvention by the Government but unless we promote these cleaner forms of energy we will leave the door open to those pushing the nuclear option. This would be disastrous and regardless of what official agency might suggest it, or how many experts support it, we must not consider nuclear power. If our resolve ever flags in this regard then we need only look at Chernobyl, or invite Adi Roche to address the Oireachtas.

There is some drawback attached to every means of generating electricity. When the first

Ardnacrusha hydroelectric station was set up three quarters of a century ago, the landscape had to be changed radically to allow for the new route of the headrace and tailrace to accommodate the assisted flow of water. When the Turlough Hill project was suggested and constructed over 30 years ago, many environmentalists condemned the interference with the mountain and surrounding countryside. That pumped storage station soon became a showpiece and while small enough by today's standards, it still represents go-ahead thinking in the power and energy industry.

Wind energy is not perfect but it is way ahead of other forms of electricity generation. It has been argued that Ireland has the most abundant and reliable supply of wind in Europe. It is bordering on the sinful that we are not using it to its fullest effect. I accept that wind turbines are not silent but the perception that wind farms are noisy developments is not necessarily an accurate one. As the technology gets better, so too the disadvantages and misgivings reduce and I believe that in time we will come to look on wind energy as our saviour.

We are also best placed in Europe to take advantage of wave power, the returns for which are enormous. I am sure the technical people will readily tell us just how many megawatts can be generated by a single wave, but I know from reading and from watching television programmes that wave power also has much to offer our country.

It would be easy to despair about the future of oil but I have every confidence in the motor industry to come up with an alternative fuel for vehicles and we have clean and bountiful natural resources on our side to tackle domestic and industrial requirements.

As I pointed out previously in this House, Cork local authorities have shown the way ahead in the use of alternative vehicle fuels at moderate cost and the investment in converting fleets is not enormous. Unfortunately, time does not allow me to develop this further. We must make a start in these new areas. We must encourage further investment and development where a start has already been made and we must do it now. We are on notice that oil supplies will become scarce and common sense tells us we must look to the welfare of our environment. That is why we must develop alternative energy and do it soon. As much as it grieves me to quote Winston Churchill, his wartime motto holds good in this debate: "Action this day."

Mr. Finucane: I wish to share time with Senator Bradford.

Acting Chairman (Mr. Leyden): Is that agreed? Agreed.

Mr. Finucane: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Batt O'Keeffe, to the House. This debate

is timely and I compliment the Independent Senators for tabling this motion. The joint committee, of which Senator Kenneally and I are members, has been debating energy for a period of time. I hope we will soon publish a document on energy policy for the future. However, I wish to express my disappointment with one aspect of the approach taken by the committee which has put a great deal of work into this matter and has employed a consultant. Unfortunately, we are doing our work very much in a vacuum. The most definitive document that has emerged on energy policy in recent times is the Deloitte & Touche consultants report which was published before December last and remains an ongoing secret to the Minister and his senior officials, as well as to the wise men within the energy regulator's office who tell us their lips are sealed in terms of revealing the contents of the report.

In framing a policy document for the future, it would be interesting if the committee had access to that definitive report because it parallels what we are doing. It is unfortunate that the Minister is producing his own policy on energy up to 2020. One should not forget that it is taxpayers' money that is paying for this consultant's report which cost in excess of €1 million, and, accordingly, it should not be regarded as a secret document—

Mr. Ryan: Hear, hear.

Mr. Finucane: —for the Minister and his officials. It belongs to all of us who are trying to do something about the concerns on energy.

I am one of the many people around the country who have embraced wind energy technology. Many people who are enthusiastic about the possibilities in this area and who have sought to advance private wind energy developments have met with disappointment due to the bureaucracy that appears to retard such developments. In many cases these people have paid substantial money upfront to the ESB in order to connect them to the national grid at some future date. That future date causes me some concern because there appears to be many impediments to getting connected to the national grid. This is probably due to the monopoly situation that exists whereby if a company seeks access to the national grid, it must gain the consent of the ESB. If the Minister is serious about energy policy, he should ensure he expedites the process to connect wind energy operators, who have received approval, to the national grid. Much of the enthusiasm for such projects when they were launched has dissipated because of the ongoing delay.

We are all conscious of the increasing cost of oil and the corresponding increase in the cost of electricity. Liberalisation of the market has been a joke as far as the domestic consumer is concerned because when he or she receives a bill, he or she does not have the liberty to shop around

for an alternative supplier. Successive Ministers have been cocooned by a regulator who has protected them. When there is odium among the public about increased costs, the regulator is blamed and it is deflected from the Minister. It has suited the powers that be, therefore, to appoint a series of regulators. The overall target for wind energy production should be increased and the impediments removed. I will hand over to Senator Bradford who will refer to biofuels.

Mr. Bradford: I thank Senator Finucane for the opportunity to support the motion. I am disappointed the Government felt obliged to table an amendment because every Member recognises the need to develop an energy strategy to address our dependence on oil and to replace oil with renewable resources.

Significant research is available on alternative energy sources but I will concentrate on the production of ethanol and biofuels generally. I have become more interested in this subject because of the scenario that has arisen in north Cork. As a result of a decision taken at European level, our sugar industry has been shut down. The sugar factory in Mallow could be demolished but if a different set of circumstances prevail, it could be converted to produce ethanol from a variety of crops, including sugar beet and wheat. I call on the Minister of State to enter into urgent negotiations with all those involved in the sugar industry, including Greencore, the beet growers, the Minister for Agriculture and Food and EU Commission officials to ensure the compensation package resulting from the cessation in sugar production is not dependent on the factory being demolished.

At the most recent European Council meeting, Heads of State declared energy policy to be their main political priority for the next 12 months and declared their intention to work towards the development of renewable energy production. However, the Agriculture and Rural Development Commissioner appears to have signed a directive indicating that compensation to the Irish sugar producers will not be paid in full unless the former factory in Mallow is demolished. The cessation of sugar production at Mallow should be enough. The plant should not be demolished because a number of organisations and companies are considering whether to use it to produce ethanol. This technology is in use worldwide and it is not rocket science. Large volumes of ethanol are produced in north and south America.

The factory in Mallow could produce fuel for cars throughout the State with minimal adjustment needed to the plant and it could also play a major role in keeping the tillage industry alive. It is a win-win scenario and I appeal to the Minister of State to discuss with the Minister for Agriculture and Food the need to review the fine print of the EU sugar proposals agreed last November

[Mr. Bradford.]

in Brussels. The aim of the proposals was to cease sugar production in Ireland and other member states, which has been achieved. Why is it necessary to demolish the plant in Mallow, which is 75% ready to produce ethanol? A minor adjustment is needed to enable the plant to produce ethanol to run cars, vans and trucks. This opportunity is staring us in the face and it would be disappointing, and politically wrong, to fail to secure the plant for the future needs of the ethanol industry.

The production of biodiesel should also be encouraged. I welcome the incentives proposed by the Government in this year's budget but, as a first step, a minimum of 5% of all diesel sold at the pumps should contain biodiesel and 2% of all petrol sold should contain ethanol. This is not rocket science and Fine Gael and others have made this proposal. Germany and Italy introduced these thresholds at their pumps this week. They will have no impact on the price of the product or on engine performance. A minor legislative amendment in this regard would produce an overnight demand for biodiesel and ethanol. Incentives are needed to ensure farmers produce the necessary crops and to ensure people use alternative fuels. Oil supplies will not increase, prices will continue to increase and oil will become scarcer over the next 25 years. Ireland has an opportunity which should be grasped with both hands to incentivise the growing of crops to produce biofuels. The Government needs to address the incentives required to produce biodiesel, notwithstanding the positive step taken in the budget.

However, in the short term, the sugar plant at Mallow could easily be converted into an ethanol plant. While there is commercial interest in the plant, many issues still need to be addressed but it would be a shame and a sad reflection on all of us politically if its demolition were permitted. An opportunity exists to build a renewable energy industry for the State in Mallow and that plant needs to be retained because it could play a major role in an alternative fuel industry.

Mr. Minihan: I welcome the Minister of State and his officials to the House. The recent EU Council meeting in Brussels, our recent annual party conference and the previous two Private Members' debates in the other House have all had discussions of energy policy at their heart. It was also the subject of a recent major policy discussion document published by my party. Energy policy finds itself in an unusually high position on the political agenda for obvious reasons, including concerns about security of energy supply, ensuring the continuing competitiveness of our economy and promoting environmental sustainability. How best to make progress on these issues is still far from settled and, in this

context, I welcome the topic chosen by the Independent group. The Minister has spoken at length about the steps the Government has taken to promote renewable energy, so I do not intend to repeat them. Rather, I wish to focus on a few specific points and break the motion into its constituent parts, namely, our national energy strategy and renewable energy sources.

The Government intends to publish an energy policy consultation paper before the summer to set out medium and long-term perspectives for our national energy policy. There is no doubt this is needed, but the paper also needs to take account of the considerable and complex challenges for our energy policy into the future. The Minister has said it will deal with all aspects of the energy sector, including alternative energy.

The views of the Progressive Democrats are set out in Deputy Fiona O'Malley's discussion paper published last month. It deals with the most pressing energy issues in a seven-point action plan designed to develop Ireland's renewable energy supplies, protect the environment, thus fulfilling our obligations under the Kyoto Protocol, secure our fossil fuel supplies and minimize the overall cost of energy to the economy, thus maintaining Ireland's competitiveness. This plan requires the following: that we promote the development of renewable energy for power generation; the use of renewable energy for space and water heating; the production and utilisation of biofuels for transport; energy conservation; fossil fuel exploration, production and supply security; the creation of new market structures and improved regulation; as well as the research and development of energy technologies of particular importance to Ireland.

We hope that all interested parties will read our paper and engage in this discussion process. Ireland is the last stop on an extremely long oil pipeline and our dependency on imported sources cannot continue in this way. We have set our policy for discussion and refinement, but I wish the same clarity were forthcoming from the Opposition. This is a pity, given the importance of the topic.

During the first week of Private Members' time in the Dáil on this issue, Fine Gael failed to devise a counter motion of its own on energy policy. It aligned itself with a madcap protectionist motion on energy resources, a motion its own spokesperson described as crazy. In week two, to make amends for the previous shambles, the party proposed a hurried motion of its own. This contained a less than nuanced approach to the promotion of indigenous biofuels production. In its contribution to the motion, the Labour Party confined itself to knocking the policy and progress of the Government, while conveniently neglecting to mention any of its own policies. I am not sure what is at the end of the rainbow, but there is no energy policy. The Independent group

is at least making a good fist of opposition this evening.

The second issue is renewable energy. My own party's discussion paper, notwithstanding the obvious potential of biomass and biofuels, refers to Ireland having some of the best wind and wave energy potential on the planet. It discusses how Ireland could aim to produce 30% of its electricity supplies from renewable sources by 2015. Ireland is fortunate to have the expertise of the sustainable energy research group, based in University College Cork. The group was formed in order to investigate and promote the efficient use of renewable and non-pollutant energy sources. It carries out extensive research into energy policy, wind and hydroenergy systems, wind energy conversion systems and energy storage. The group has experts such as Professor Tony Lewis, Brian Ó Gallachóir and Eamon McKeogh, researching and writing on the very issues at the heart of this debate. In an article published last month, the group stated:

In the long term, with fossil fuel reserves depleting, the key component of improving Ireland's security of energy supply is to gradually diversify completely from gas. Given that oil is in shorter supply than gas and the environmental concerns associated with coal and nuclear energy, including safety in the case of the latter, this points clearly to the increased penetration of renewable energy. Wind is the lowest-cost electricity source for the foreseeable future for Ireland. There is also significant potential for biomass energy in the first instance, as co-firing within the existing peat-fired power plants. Wave and tidal current energy also offer significant resource potential and require significant development and deployment effort, with potential export spin-off benefits.

We have the experts in Ireland. We should utilise and listen to them as they are a resource. They make reference to Ireland's utilisation of other resources and the potential export spin-off benefits, such as wave energy. Wave energy has possibly the greatest potential for energy production in Ireland, given our location, but many of the wave technologies are still at prototype stage.

The Progressive Democrats Party is a small party specialising in big challenges, and in the 21st century energy is the big challenge. Tony Blair exemplified the complexity of the debate on nuclear energy by saying yesterday that new nuclear plants were back on the agenda with a vengeance. Today he said nuclear energy is not the sole answer to meeting UK energy needs, but that failing to consider it would be a dereliction of duty. That is three views in two days from one individual.

Ireland rejects nuclear energy production here, but may benefit from its production elsewhere, if we are to be linked to interconnectors. We must get real about our discussions. The Progressive Democrats support the efforts undertaken by those in UCC and elsewhere to research and develop renewable energy sources. We support the greater use of biofuel, onshore wind and wave energy, which given recent oil and gas prices is very much an economic proposition. In the longer term, we believe that offshore wind and wave energy can make a major contribution to our energy needs.

Irish engineers are also working to develop technology that would allow us to anchor wind-farms off the west coast and out of sight of land to exploit the wind resources of the north Atlantic. The Government will soon publish an ocean energy strategy that will set out a development path for ocean energy technology in Ireland. The Marine Institute and Sustainable Energy Ireland, in conjunction with the Government, recently opened a wave energy test site a mile and a half off the coast of Spiddal, County Galway. The 37-hectare site will be open to entrepreneurs and engineers to test prototype ocean energy generators. The first wave energy generator, the 'WaveBob', has been deployed on the Spiddal site. When such technology becomes commercially available, Ireland could become an exporter of energy to Europe. It is in this context that the construction of the interconnector becomes increasingly important, the planning for which has begun. We must be very serious about the contribution we can make to a European grid and we should not become dependent on what could ultimately be nuclear energy.

The potential market for commercial wave energy is very large. Denmark established itself as the world leader in wind energy production in the 1990s. Perhaps Ireland might do the same with wave energy, which could have spin-off benefits for other less obvious industries such as barge-making, since barges are submerged to harness tidal energy. When one thinks of Ireland's ship-building industry, it becomes apparent that we have the skills. This could be a whole new generation of skills to export. We have new initiatives such as biofuels, mineral oil tax relief schemes, the five-year package of excise relief valued at €250 million announced in the budget, and many other support schemes. Most of all, the initiatives, talents, and research and development skills of Irish and international experts are being brought to bear on this scientific field.

Significant progress is being made in the two areas highlighted by the Independent group. Both the energy consultation paper and the ocean energy strategy are on the way. As the Minister has set out extensively, much has been done regarding renewable energy generally. The Pro-

[Mr. Minihan.]

gressive Democrats support those and further measures.

Mr. Ryan: I might mention CIT, which has been doing those things for longer than UCD.

Mr. Minihan: It is partnership.

Mr. Ryan: It is a pity that Senator Minihan decided to make unnecessary party political points. I am really not interested in what happened in the Dáil, which can be a place of irrational confrontation and perhaps not the right setting to discuss political or other major strategic decisions.

Energy is not the only issue about which we should concern ourselves. There has been a great surge in the price of a whole range of commodities. The British Royal Mint is in something of a tizzy, since any penny or two pence piece made before 1992 is now literally worth twice its nominal value. The copper content of a twopenny coin made before 1992 is worth approximately three pence or four pence, and the mint is genuinely worried that millions of its coins will be melted down and sold for the sake of the 100% profit to be made from them. It has warned people of the illegality of the practice.

However, that is only a symptom of a problem. Owing to the welcome spectacular economic growth of China — and India, which we sometimes forget when we discuss the former — there is surging demand for oil commodities. What we are going to say about energy and the need to identify new sources could be said of copper, aluminium and all other commodities. The idea that even an ounce of any of the basic metals could go to landfill is economic nonsense, and it is time for us to face up to that.

There are two issues regarding hydrocarbon fuels and the apparently permanent fact of higher prices, the first being the environment, as this is not the cleanest way to supply energy. There are few people, even in the White House, who do not accept that human activity has caused a potentially catastrophic increase in global temperatures, the outcome of which we are far from clear about. No one disputes the fact of the problem.

The second question is not directly related, although there are overlaps. It is the strategic issue of our extraordinary dependence on one form of energy. Ironically, that oil has become more expensive does not mean that it is about to run out. I saw an advocate of nuclear energy on “The Late Late Show” trying to give people the impression that, some Monday morning in 2049, someone will announce that there is no more oil. It will never be like that. Rather, there will be a gradual transition to an ever higher price.

Questions arise regarding existing sources of poor quality hydrocarbon fuels and at what price they become economically attractive. One need

not envisage an absolute end to hydrocarbon oils on any foreseeable horizon. It is a matter of relative and comparative choices, and the price alone is what should trouble us. Oil will become more expensive but will not disappear. Some people say that if the price of oil settles at \$50 per barrel and people can be guaranteed that it remains there, Venezuela will become the biggest oil producer in the world, since it has enormous supplies of heavy oil that it is currently uneconomic to break down chemically in order to produce lighter, commercial oil. However, it would become economic if the price surged and stabilised sufficiently to justify the long-term capital investment.

That issue is more complicated, but there are good environmental arguments against taking that route, as well as profoundly important strategic reasons for not relying on it, in addition to its becoming extremely expensive. There is a great need for the Government to develop a strategy, and I am more than a little disappointed in its failure to deal with it. In this country of all places, there has been toing and froing regarding biofuels in recent years. We all know that the huffing and puffing about alleged problems with the EU originated in the Department of Finance’s resistance to moving away from traditional sources of revenue through taxing petrol and diesel. There had to be an economic incentive, and because oil was unnaturally, artificially and unrealistically cheap we delayed when we could have been world leaders. We are failing ourselves strategically in becoming excessively dependent and in not becoming the innovators and leaders of change.

The same is true of wind and wave power, seen in the saga of problems that generators of wind energy have had with the regulator regarding cost and instability. The storage of energy is a very important issue. Energy is difficult to store, and the electricity that we use is not stored, except in Turlough Hill. It is generated, transmitted and used. However, those problems are not insurmountable, since they all depend on the economic choices that we make.

It is worth mentioning for all of us who are profoundly hostile to nuclear power that, were it not for the ultimate nuclear power of continuing fission in the sun, we would all be dead. The sun is a source of nuclear energy on which, together with gravity, we rely for all our energy. Gravitational and nuclear energy are our two primary sources of energy. Hydrocarbons store solar energy from millions of years ago, while wind, solar and wave power are influenced either by gravity or by the sun. We have only a limited number of choices.

We must make choices and to do so we must make alternatives economically attractive. If that means restructuring the tax system so that biofuels become as attractive as traditional petrol

and diesel, let us do so now. Sooner or later, we will need to do it. We must accept that, despite what is being said, there is no guarantee that oil prices will remain at current levels. If there were an outbreak of stable democracy in Iraq, a resolution to the crisis in Iran, and a recession in China or India, it is conceivable that oil prices would fall considerably, before inevitably rising again. If we do not create a climate in which those who take the risks of beginning to move to alternatives are secure, there will be a great move away from alternative energies and into what is stable and reliable. We need to build a strategy based on the best estimate of where oil prices are going. Is it our strategic belief that a barrel of oil will cost \$50, \$70 or \$100 in five years time? Until recently, our strategy was based on the assumption that oil would cost \$20 per barrel and only three years ago, I read a lot of nonsense from commentators who assumed that oil prices would remain low and stable forever.

It is a matter of regret that, when the European Council decided to reopen the issue of nuclear energy, our Government remained silent. Only the German and Austrian Governments raised concerns about the issue. Given the passion with which the Taoiseach and Ministers have denounced the idea of nuclear energy, it is a pity they sat silently in Europe. We could be put under considerable pressure from France, in particular, to make greater use of nuclear power. I have no problem with living next door to a nuclear power plant because the background radiation is probably higher from Moneypoint than from a nuclear facility but I have significant concerns about the ethics of producing waste which will remain dangerous for 50,000 years. In addition, the economics of nuclear power are false because the development costs are not considered.

Mr. MacSharry: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important issue and support the amendment because, as Senator Kenneally noted earlier, it is non-contentious. We are all aware that continued dependence on fossil fuel is unacceptable in this country and our combined efforts will be required if we are to develop a more sustainable future.

Ireland's 90% dependency rate on fossil fuels compares unfavourably with the EU average of 50%, which itself is too high. With regard to the EU targets for renewable energy of 13.2% by 2010 and 20% by 2020, it could be argued that we are not ambitious enough and should set the bar much higher. While I commend this and previous Ministers with responsibility for energy on the initiatives they have taken, we are not doing enough in this regard. Senator Ryan pointed out that nobody will turn off the tap overnight but supplies of fossil fuels will only last a few more

decades and we need to be more imaginative on this issue.

It is inconceivable that we can continue to be 90% dependent on fossil fuels when mother nature has provided us with so many possibilities in terms of wind energy. It is unacceptable that a queue has formed for connection to the grid, although the announcement by the Minister of a renewable energy feed-in tariff represents progress on this issue. Senator Kenneally discussed his constituent, whose wind turbines face planning objections. We should encourage rather than impede these developments.

We should also encourage the development of ethanol plants in the former sugar factory in Mallow and elsewhere, not least because the increased production of rapeseed and sugar beet would throw a lifeline to farmers. These crops would not grow well in my part of the country but farmers there have other options, including willow and miscanthus. I am not sure if we are regarding these matters with the importance they deserve. They must go to the top of the Government's agenda. Other welcome initiatives include the greener home scheme but we should give people incentives to do more.

Senator Minihan discussed the ocean energy strategy, which was published some weeks ago and has massive export potential. However, I cannot overemphasise the need for investment in research and development so that projects can come onstream as quickly as possible. Instead of merely trying to meet our European commitments, we should strive to become leaders in the field.

In terms of security of supply, we have storage for 100 days of oil but no large-scale storage facility for gas supplies. This issue needs to be addressed.

As Tipp O'Neill said, all politics are local, so I want to discuss the supply of natural gas to the north west. I have it in writing from the former Minister of State at the Department of Public Enterprise with special responsibility for energy, Deputy Jacob, that gas would be supplied to the region. In a debate some weeks ago, I inquired about advertisements for tenders for a feasibility study on the construction of a gas pipeline to County Donegal via County Sligo and was told that the study was to be made available in early 2007 and would comprise a cost-benefit analysis and an examination of the possibility of connecting a gas-fired electricity generation plant to the pipeline. However, that is unacceptable because it was announced in the past that gas would be supplied to the region. I have claimed on a number of occasions that the people of the west of Ireland feel that the Corrib gas field belongs to them. The great British colonists came and took resources back to their motherland without sharing the benefits with local inhabitants. There are no natural gas facilities north of

[Mr. MacSharry.]

a line between Dublin and Galway and west of Mullingar. We do not want any more feasibility studies. DKM already carried out a study for Bord Gáis and, in any event, it should not require one and a half years to complete.

Without Government subvention, a cost-benefit analysis will indicate that the construction of a pipeline to County Donegal is not viable. However, a true spatial strategy requires the building of capacity to create demand and correct regional imbalances. It is a no-brainer. The people and the industries of that region feel they are entitled to it. There have been announcements in the past. Why is there another feasibility study? What will it show that we do not already know? Can we not proceed, make the subvention available, remind Bord Gáis Eireann that the subvention allows it to be true to its commercial mandate while supplying natural gas to the people of the north west? The Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources, Deputy Noel Dempsey, in a contribution on a Private Members' motion in the Dáil some weeks ago mentioned in his opening line: "The Government has one aim in managing Ireland's oil and gas resources, to benefit the citizen." I could not agree more, but the citizens of Sligo, Leitrim and Donegal are no less citizens than those in Carlow, Mallow and Cork city. I am deviating slightly from the motion but I appeal to Deputy Fahey, while it is not his Department's direct responsibility, to talk to his colleagues and encourage them to move it forward. It is in the national development plan and is one of the recommendations of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Communications, Marine and Natural Resources. Let us dispense with reports and feasibility studies and move forward. Like Senator Kenneally I will paraphrase Winston Churchill and say action is needed now.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (Mr. Fahey): I thank Members of Seanad Éireann for raising the important issue of energy policy and the role of renewable energy in addressing Irish energy needs. This motion has given the Government a valuable opportunity to set out the range of initiatives under way to drive forward the sustainable energy agenda. Irish energy policy belongs in the global and EU context. Global demand for energy is growing faster than ever and we are in an era of sustained high oil and gas prices. Growing energy demand coupled with a decline in new oil and gas reserves will keep prices high for the foreseeable future. Security of supply concerns are not helped by supply disruption and instability. Energy policy for all economies must address environmental challenges, notably climate change.

The European Union is the second largest energy market in the world. Europe has a growing dependency on energy imports. The sharp rise in oil and gas prices also has an impact on jobs and economic growth. Europe has been to the forefront of the climate change agenda, setting ambitious targets for emissions reductions, promoting new and renewable energy sources and developing new technologies. The Government welcomes the renewed focus at EU level on energy issues. The Commission's Green Paper on energy policy sets out the framework for a common energy strategy encompassing security of supply, sustainability and competitiveness. The Government is working positively with Europe to address the collective energy challenges. We welcome the strategic focus on infrastructure, renewable energy, energy efficiency and research and innovation. We also welcome the explicit recognition by the Commission and the European Council that certain decisions including energy mix remain the prerogative of member states.

Ireland's strong economy gives rise to increasing energy demand. Our distance from the main EU market and small scale present challenges in security of supply and competition. We have few domestic fossil fuel resources and no significant hydro resources. We have opportunities also. The all-island energy market will increase the scale of the market and improve competition. We are well placed to develop renewable energy with consequent economic, social and environmental benefits. We intend to give particular focus to energy efficiency over the short to medium term with direct benefits for consumers, the economy and the environment.

I can advise Senators that the Government intends to publish an energy policy Green Paper shortly. This will set out the framework for national energy policy and will address the challenges of security of supply, competitiveness and environmental sustainability. Senator Finucane mentioned the Deloitte & Touche report, which will be published in the context of the forthcoming energy policy paper as an input into the process of reviewing the electricity sector. Working together, ministerial colleagues have developed a series of integrated and innovative programmes that are addressing energy production, supply and demand across the entire economy, from the farmer in the field to the electricity supplier, the business community and the private individual, all of whom have an interest in the strategic development of this resource.

I would like to set out the Government's key priorities and achievements to date. We have doubled our renewable electricity capacity in the past two years and are on track to meet our 2010 targets, if not exceed them. Our current capacity is 846 MW. A further 630 MW has signed connection agreements. To ensure that these projects are delivered, we have launched the renewable

energy feed in tariff, REFIT, programme. This programme, which will cost in the region of €119 million over 15 years, will underpin the viability of these projects by offering 15-year contracts to developers. In addition to these initiatives, a further 1,300 MW of wind projects were released into the connection process in the last few weeks. Recognising that bio-energy offers particular benefits for electricity production and dispatch is of increasing importance in terms of security of supply, environmental objectives and development of the rural economy. We have provided for a significantly higher biomass feed-in price in the REFIT programme. Biomass will attract a tariff of €72 per megawatt hour, compared to €57 for wind-powered plant.

In addition to our renewable electricity programme, we have rolled out a series of initiatives to stimulate the development of a renewable transport fuel market, which will further develop Ireland's bio-energy sector. In 2005 we launched an innovative pilot biofuels excise relief programme, which has resulted in eight biofuels projects coming on stream, and 16 million litres of biofuels being placed on the Irish market over a two-year period from 2005 to 2007. Building on the success of the pilot programme, we have put in place a new five-year excise relief package of €205 million which will see Ireland exceed 2% market penetration of biofuels by 2008 and will result in 163 million litres of biofuels being placed on the Irish market by 2008. The programme will be underpinned by capital grant aid for biofuels facilities and will be rolled out this year.

We are delivering an ocean energy strategy, which will put Ireland at the forefront of ocean energy development and position us to capitalise on this resource. The programme, which was developed by the Marine Institute and Sustainable Energy Ireland, was launched last month in Galway. As the first stage in implementing this strategy, we have opened an ocean energy test site a mile and a half off the coast of Spiddal, County Galway. This 37-hectare site will be open to test prototype ocean energy devices. The first wave energy device, WaveBob, has already been deployed on site. We have also upgraded the Hydraulics and Maritime Research Centre in UCC. SEI and the Marine Institute are currently supporting a number of other ocean energy research and development initiatives. Ireland has one of the most promising ocean energy resources in world and we are positioning ourselves at the forefront of development of this resource. The wave power off the west and north-west coast is the second most significant wave power in the world.

We are supporting important EU initiatives in energy efficiency, energy research, biomass and biofuels, including the Green Paper on energy policy, biomass action plan, biofuels communication and the Commission paper on energy

efficiency. We are establishing an Irish energy research council to advise on energy research priorities. Our objective in this area is to ensure that research policies and programmes are fully aligned with overall energy policy as well as with policies for transport, environment, agriculture, enterprise, science and education. We have launched a €27 million domestic renewable heat grants programme, which has been greeted with enthusiasm by the public. Some 1,100 grants have already been approved in just over a month since the programme was launched. The five year greener homes grants programme provides grants of up to €6,500 for renewable heat technologies, including wood pellet boilers and stoves, solar heating and heat pumps. Our aim is to provide renewable heat systems for at least 10,000 homes. This is a real boost for individual householders who face rising fuel bills and are anxious to play their part in developing a sustainable energy economy.

We are launching a major grant aid package for commercial-scale wood chip and wood pellet boilers. The scheme builds on the success of the pilot bioheat programme which Sustainable Energy Ireland launched in 2005. It will allow businesses to avail of lower-cost heating and is designed to facilitate the development of a biomass sector in Ireland. Energy crops and energy from waste materials and the forestry sector comprise a growing part of Ireland's renewable energy mix and are providing new opportunities for both farmers and foresters.

We will launch a combined heat and power programme, which will provide funding for commercial interests to install their own electricity generation and heating systems. The programme will include funding for combined heat and power generated from natural gas, as well as from biomass, reflecting our ongoing policy to promote market penetration of biomass technologies.

To complement the demand-side initiatives for bio-energy, we are introducing a number of initiatives on the forestry and agriculture side of the supply chain, which include a grant scheme to promote and develop sustainable forestry. We are finalising a scheme of supports for the purchase of specialist wood biomass harvesting equipment and we are considering proposals to reactivate establishment grants for SRC. We are undertaking research trials on miscanthus and providing direct funding, to support priority research projects on biofuels through the Department of Agriculture and Food's research stimulus fund programme.

We are developing renewable and sustainable energy policies on an all-island basis. The 2004 all-island energy market development framework sets the blueprint for the achievement of an all-island energy market. The all-island 2020 Vision, published as a consultation paper last July, will also culminate in an agreed joint policy paper

[Mr. Fahey.]

later this year, with a particular focus on renewable electricity and generation. To ensure the implementation of the strategy for renewables, we have commissioned a joint all-island grid study into the accommodation of different renewable technologies in the electricity grid systems.

We are supporting the deployment of renewable and sustainable energy through a range of innovative programmes delivered by Sustainable Energy Ireland. These are aimed at the industrial, commercial, public and domestic sectors and we have achieved significant results in this regard. For example, Sustainable Energy Ireland's large industry energy network currently has 80 members, representing 51.3% of the total primary energy requirement for industry in Ireland. In total, the emission of over 580,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide has been avoided by this group since the scheme commenced. In addition, Sustainable Energy Ireland's low-income housing programme has addressed fuel poverty in almost 8,000 homes. The agency's public sector programme has seen the building of several superior-quality, energy-efficient public buildings across the country. It has also included an initiative in which four Dublin colleges have been assisted in cutting their energy bills by 6.3%.

Sustainable Energy Ireland's house of tomorrow programme, which complements the greener homes domestic grants programmes, provides funding for housing developers and for the development of superior energy-efficient homes. Some examples of typical energy-efficient refurbishment projects last year include an energy-efficiency retro-fit of 100 Dublin city flats, the development of 100 low-energy houses in Castleblaney, County Monaghan, and the Elm Park development, which comprises hospital consulting suites, a day-care centre, a residential block of 110 apartments, a crèche, a leisure centre, a pool and 100 senior citizen apartments.

Sustainable Energy Ireland is also critically involved in energy research and development and runs extensive programmes to increase awareness of energy efficiency. In addition to these programmes, we intend to launch a major national energy-efficiency campaign targeting individual consumers as well as specific economic sectors through industry, SMEs, schools and the public sector. This multi-annual campaign aims to persuade consumers of the benefits of more efficient use of energy, thus changing behaviour and reducing consumption through more energy-efficient equipment and processes.

These existing and proposed policy actions will be set out in the energy policy Green Paper which will provide the framework for national energy policy for the medium to long term. The Government has adopted a cohesive and dynamic approach to delivering on our sustainable energy agenda, the fuel diversity imperative and the

national potential for renewable energy. The Government is working as a team to deliver on the cross-cutting issues, including bio-energy and biofuel strategies. We are working with colleagues in the North to progress the all-island energy market and in Europe to optimise benefits for Ireland under EU energy initiatives and to play our part in addressing the energy challenges for Europe. This constructive, forward-looking approach will continue to be the hallmark of the Government's energy policy. I commend it to the Seanad.

Mr. Norris: This motion is very timely. It addresses one of the burning issues of the day in a non-aggressive, non-confrontational way and I do not understand why every Member of this House cannot support it as originally placed on the Order Paper. It states: "That Seanad Éireann recognises the need to develop a national energy strategy that will address Ireland's over-dependence on oil and replace it to the largest possible extent by energy derived from renewable sources." Nobody could argue against this. It involves no confrontation and no attack on the Government and therefore I want the Government side to explain to me — an Independent Member — why it was necessary to table a totally fatuous amendment full of exhortation and pious good wishes but without the slightest bit of strategy. The year 2020 is invoked as a kind of visionary period but there is not much vision. The Swedish Government, on the other hand, has committed itself to putting a total end to its dependence on fossil fuels by 2020. This, rather than the pathetic statement made by the Government tonight, is what I call real 20:20 vision.

The Minister of State's contribution contains some facts but so much of it refers to the vision for renewable energy, the consultation paper of last July, the agreed joint paper due later this year and the intention to launch a national energy-efficiency campaign. This is all pie in the sky and it is a little too late for this kind of stuff. Let us have a real, substantial plan and an environment in which we are friendly towards this sort of development.

Instead of taking the advice in the motion in a non-argumentative, non-confrontational way, the Government sought, in its ridiculous amendment, to dilute it so it could produce this waffle, a paean of praise for itself. It alludes to its ambitions, hopes, consultation papers, Green Papers, White Papers and intended plans for this, that and the other, yet we know perfectly well that we will not meet our targets under the Kyoto Protocol. We are well short of meeting them already. We may be reducing the rate at which we are exceeding the thresholds but that is about all. Even the Kyoto Protocol will do very little to address global warming, the effect of which we must now all

acknowledge. All in all, the Government's response is pretty pathetic.

The Minister of State referred to an initiative in which four Dublin colleges succeeded in cutting their energy bills by 6.3%. More power to them — it was their initiative and it did not come from the Government. I launched the initiative two years ago during Green Week and went back this year to Trinity College to look at the results. I am very proud of what the colleges are doing. The Government should follow their example instead of quoting them as an easy example in which they can idly luxuriate.

We have not met our Kyoto goals and we will have to buy carbon credits in the market.

There will be a cost for this. We need to provide an environment that is friendly to the development of alternative fuel sources. I am not convinced this has been done.

The matter of wind power has been ventilated today. The manner in which Airtricity was hamstrung by legal red tape and the constraints of the ESB grid does not suggest the Government has managed to create an environment that is friendly to the development of alternative fuel sources. We know that wind farms are successful. The first one was started in Bellacorick, County Mayo over ten years ago. We now have 186 wind turbines in 45 locations throughout the country. These contribute 500 MW to the grid system, the equivalent of 315,000 households. Removing that many households from fossil fuel use is a significant achievement. The Government should assist where these developments are being hampered by red tape. The latest figures available, from December 2004, indicate that 5.2% of our electricity is supplied by wind power.

Many of my colleagues will remember former Cathaoirleach Charles McDonald. Ten years ago he drove a very nice Mercedes car fuelled by rapeseed oil. He took me for a drive around Merrion Square and it drove perfectly. The only downside was that it smelled like a chip van. He was able to sustain his fuel needs from one acre of rapeseed.

In the nature of economic cycles one market, namely sugar beet, has disappeared but farmers affected by this could diversify into growing rapeseed for the purposes of producing oil. I listen to agricultural programmes on RTE because they are very interesting. The woman who presents them has a lovely midlands voice and is a joy to listen to. She interrogated a farmer who stated that there are two varieties of rapeseed that can be sown in spring or in October. The yield and profitability of rapeseed are equivalent to barley and, in the better seed, wheat. The profitability they provide is not far from that of sugar beet. This would provide a method of reducing dependence on fossil fuels.

I strongly support this motion. I understand my colleague Senator Quinn may not put this motion to a vote. If it were me I would do so to show up

the Government side. Every time a motion is put down by Members on this side, particularly by the Independents who are distinct from the Opposition, the Government gets hoity-toity and insulted and puts down a fatuous amendment. Perhaps a wind farm could be created on the Government side. I am irritated by this politically irresponsible behaviour, a real error of judgment. The Government has exposed the weakness in its argument.

Mr. Scanlon: I commend the Independent Senators on proposing this motion on an important issue. The increasing price of oil, the need to significantly reduce our carbon and greenhouse emissions and the growth of dynamic new economies has placed the need for alternative energy firmly on the Government agenda. The Government is aware of the importance of the matter and has made progress on it. The €27 million greener homes initiative launched by the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources has been a major success. The scheme allows individual householders to receive grants for the installation of renewable technologies including wood pellet stoves, boilers, solar panels and geothermal heat pumps. Grant aid of €1,100 to €6,500 is provided, depending on the technology used. Some 1,600 applications were received in the first month. Of these, 1,100 have been approved. The scale of this programme and the level of grant available, typically 40% of the capital cost, underlines the Government's commitment to encourage people to install renewable heat technology in their homes. The programme will support the conversion of renewable energy in more than 10,000 homes.

Biofuels are being developed because we need to decrease our dependence on fossil fuels. Growing energy crops for the development of biofuels offers new opportunities to rural communities and economies. Irish agriculture has a major role to play in the development of a sustainable bio-energy industry. I commend the Ministers for Agriculture and Food and Communications, Marine and Natural Resources on pursuing a coherent approach. Agriculture and forestry have the potential to be the source of many feedstocks for biofuels. Rapeseed oil, wheat and sugar beet have the potential to be used for the manufacturer of liquid transport biofuels. Forestry, farming and food by-products such as meat, bonemeal and tallow can be used for heat generation. Tallow can also be used for biodiesel production.

Brazil has processed sugar beet and sugar cane into ethanol since the 1980s. Today, it is the lead producer of ethanol. Recent tax breaks and technological advances have provided the industry with greater impetus. In 2003 the Brazilian Government cut tax to 14% for cars using ethanol compared to 16% for those using petrol. Flex fuel cars have been developed that can run on alcohol,

[Mr. Scanlon.]

petrol or any blend of the two. Drivers can fill their cars with ethanol at 29,000 locations. Last year flex fuel cars accounted for 50% of the market of new cars.

Many countries can see the wisdom of the Brazilian approach. British Sugar has signed a contract with Green Energy, a private company, to produce bioethanol blended petrol to retailers in England, including Tesco. The US is producing almost as much ethanol as the Brazilians, although the raw material used is maize rather than sugar cane.

Support for energy crops may only be granted to farmers in accordance with EU regulations. Such support is currently provided by the energy crop scheme, introduced under the CAP reform programme and administered by the Department of Agriculture and Food. Under this scheme energy crops may qualify for aid of €45 per hectare if they are intended primarily for the production of biofuels and electric thermal heating produced by biomass. The EU has agreed that sugar beet will be eligible under the scheme and may also be grown as an energy crop on setaside land. This may not be seen as a great deal of money but the Minister for Agriculture and Food assures me that the European Commission has undertaken to review the operation of the scheme. The commitment was reiterated by the Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development, Mariann Fischer Boel, in Dáil Éireann last week. Ireland has an excellent climate for growing a supply of raw materials for wood fuel. Wood residues are used to produce heat for sawmills across the country. The wood energy market is poised for growth with the emergence of new commercial start-ups and supply chains. The €27 million greener homes grants will help to drive demand for wood biomass. The levels, which will be announced in the coming weeks, will stimulate demand further. The Department of Agriculture and Food is actively promoting the use of wood biomass through grants to promote and develop sustainable forestry, including alternative timber uses. The Department of Agriculture and Food, in conjunction with Teagasc and COFORD, has examined the potential of energy crops, wood biomass and farming food bi-products. Last year it started to provide direct funding on a competitive basis to support priority research projects relating to biofuels. Three of the projects selected in 2005 contained proposals relating directly to biofuel energy crops. They received grant assistance of nearly €900,000. The funding available under the programme has been substantially increased. A further call for projects was recently advertised in the national press. This call also relates to non-food uses of agricultural land.

The Government's policy to integrate renewal energy with the development of the rural econ-

omy is particularly evident in the development of renewal transport fuels. Biofuels offer major potential to support the development of the rural economy. In the Finance Act 2004, the Minister for Finance introduced a relief for mineral oil tax for biofuels produced or used in certain pilot projects. The relief has been granted to eight pilot projects for a period of two years. In this year's Finance Bill, the five-year scheme of mineral oil tax relief to commence in 2006 and end in 2010 was greatly expanded. The scope of the relief now extends to projects which are not of a pilot nature. This relief scheme, when fully operational, is expected to support the use and production of 163,000 million litres of biofuels per year. In budget 2006, provision was made for VRT relief of 15% for flexible fuel vehicles. The scheme is intended to encourage the purchase of a series of production flexible fuel vehicles able to use bioethanol — a blend of a minimum of 85% bioethanol and 15% petrol.

The Minister of State referred to ocean energy, which is important. Much work is taking place in Galway. The hydraulics at the marine research centre in UCG have been significantly upgraded and it has developed a 37 hectare site in Galway Bay to ensure that devices can move up to the next level of testing in their development and cycle.

The Corrib gas field was mentioned. I was heartened to hear the Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources state yesterday that a feasibility study will be done on the Corrib gas and on supplying the north west through Sligo to Donegal. We should support the Government in every way we can in that regard.

Mr. Browne: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Brendan Smith. It is like musical chairs here with Ministers of State coming and going. I hope this Minister of State shows more enthusiasm for this topic than the previous one who looked bored out of his mind. If the Minister of State and the Government could pick up on the energy from Senator Norris's contribution, perhaps we could have a more comprehensive debate on this topic.

It is time for a real debate on this issue. Everyone agrees we need to reduce our overdependence on oil. This country is very vulnerable in that regard. We all agree that if energy costs go up, it has a major effect on the economy. If the cost of transporting goods goes up, shops must up their prices and the consumer must pay more which adds to inflation.

Sweden is cited as a country which will reduce its dependence on fossil fuels but I understand that it will still depend on nuclear energy. It is, therefore, important to compare like with like when we debate this issue. I am not hung up on nuclear energy. It is a little farcical and represents gombeen politics for us to go on about Sellafield

every day of the week because we have achieved nothing in that regard. Prime Minister Blair has indicated that he will revitalise Britain's nuclear industry and will shut down the current phase but will construct new nuclear energy power plants. I accept as opposed to welcome that because it is more realistic. Every few months we see the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government of the day go to the UK beating his chest and demanding the closure of Sellafield. That will never happen. At least what Prime Minister Blair has said he will do is more feasible and realistic. Ideally, it would be better if there was no nuclear energy but there is and we must be realistic. Unfortunately, the UK has a major problem with energy and it views the nuclear option as its best avenue. It is important we adopt a practical and realistic approach to that. It would be more realistic for us to argue for the closure of the current phase of nuclear plants and for their replacement with modern, safer plants.

Senator Scanlon referred to Brazil. Iowa in America has led by example as well. Biofuels must be freely available at petrol stations. We can talk until we are blue in the face about this issue but until biofuels are freely available at petrol stations, we will achieve nothing. Ireland should continue to set an example as it has done with the smoking ban and the tax on plastic bags. We should lead the way in Europe in regard to alternative fuel.

This issue was brought home to me lately with the closure of the Carlow sugar factory. We need to address the production of biofuel, possibly using the Mallow plant. The EU Commissioner indicated the Mallow plant could be used without affecting the compensation scheme. I welcome the grant for thermal heating in houses, which is a good idea. We should continue to move in that direction. We should also consider capping the amount of VAT on fuel as it is adding to inflation as fuel prices increase.

Mr. J. Phelan: I welcome the Minister of State and his official. I am delighted the Independent Senators tabled this motion, which I fully support. I am surprised an amendment has been tabled. I did not hear all the debate or the Minister of State's contribution but I heard some of the Government speakers. I have been calling for a debate on energy for a long time, so this one is timely.

Senator Browne is right that we need to reduce our dependence on oil but I do not share his enthusiasm for nuclear energy.

Mr. Browne: It is not enthusiasm; it is acceptance.

Mr. J. Phelan: I do not share his acceptance of nuclear energy. We must examine every other renewal energy option. The Government has taken tentative steps towards examining those

options but it has not done enough. The two principal issues are the cost of energy and the problem of supply into the future. If we cannot resolve those two problems, consumers will continue to find their ESB and gas bills increasing. Businesses will suffer an even greater competitive disadvantage than at present in terms of our energy costs *vis-à-vis* some of our neighbours. We need to tackle this issue.

Renewal energy is a win-win situation. From the consumer's point of view, it provides the possibility of some stability in fuel supply and fuel price into the future. From an environmental point of view, the reduction in our reliance on fossil fuels has obvious benefits. There are also benefits for producers, on which Senator Browne touched. I do not need to tell the Minister of State, Deputy Brendan Smith, of the difficulties in farming at present. This is an alternative enterprise for farmers in the aftermath of the destruction of the sugar beet industry by this Government. This alternative enterprise could be viably developed and expanded into the future and it should be done as soon as possible.

I also welcome the Government's announcement of the green energy grants for the installation of pellet burners, solar panels and renewal energy appliances in homes. It is a step in the right direction. On the Order of Business this morning, a number of Senators raised the issue of wind energy. They referred to planning problems in different parts of the country but that is not the problem in my area. In my parish, approximately two fields from where I live, a wind farm with five turbines has been granted planning permission. A quarter of a mile away another small wind farm with three turbines has been granted permission. Those permissions have existed for over two years and neither wind farm has been constructed because the ESB continues to place every possible obstacle in the way of the developers. Unlike some, I have no problems with wind farms. They look well and if they are correctly situated in the landscape they blend in well and are an excellent, readily available renewable source of energy.

I urge the Minister of State and the Government to do what they can to ensure that the ESB is not allowed to monopolise the electricity supply situation particularly with regard to wind energy and that the obstacle is removed at the earliest possible opportunity. The ESB does not wish to face any significant competition from other suppliers in the wind energy sector. That is why people have a problem connecting to the grid.

Mr. Quinn: I thank all those who spoke tonight, and the Minister of State for attending the debate. I spent most of my life in the business world where, if one sees a crisis coming one panics and does something about it. I fear that I do

[Mr. Quinn.]

not hear that sense of urgency coming from the Government. It happens that this motion which I put down over a week ago, overlaps with the headline in *The Times* today: "Britain goes nuclear to beat energy crisis". I do not get a sense of that crisis here. As I said in my opening proposals, this was already headline news in 2004, and even ten years before then. This applies to Ireland much more than elsewhere.

Forfás published last month an interesting document, which was not mentioned today, on our oil dependency. This country is more dependent on oil than any other country in Europe. Another figure in that document is that we are the third largest consumer of oil *per capita* in the 25 EU countries. This Government does not recognise that sense of urgency.

This has been a good debate in which we have learned about several initiatives, including alternative sources, such as ethanol. I read recently that Richard Branson is investing \$400 million in ethanol in the belief that it represents an opportunity. A hero of country music fans some 20 or 30 years ago, Willie Nelson—

Mr. J. Phelan: He is still on the go.

Mr. Quinn: He is still going although he is in his 70s. He advocates biofuels which he uses in his car and has started a company to produce them around the United States. There is a recognition of the problem and the opportunities but too few people are taking steps to deal with it. Three American states, Minnesota, Montana and Hawaii have legislated to the effect that 10% of all gasoline and diesel must contain ethanol or some biofuels.

It is not understood here that there is a crisis. I quoted James Lovelock saying that civilisation is in imminent danger. He also said biofuels will not solve the problem, they are part of the solution but would require areas of land that the world cannot spare if it is to feed its population in the future. Although he is anti-nuclear energy, he has decided there is a need to investigate the nuclear option. I do not know enough about the subject but I hope today to progress the debate a little further, not just on nuclear energy. We have a crisis and must solve it one way or another but the Government does not seem to recognise this. Some of the steps taken are correct and the Government says that it has a plan.

A few weeks ago I mentioned on television my interest in sustainable energy and have been very impressed at the number of people who have contacted me since then in Ireland who are doing interesting things with wind, waves and biofuels. Much is happening. The Government said it will encourage this area but we have not tapped the resource of manpower and inventiveness, by giv-

ing people incentives to think their way through this problem.

One of the mistakes we have made in the past is to try to invent something new. We do not always need to reinvent because developments are taking place around the world that we can copy. Some were mentioned tonight and from that point of view it has been a useful debate. I am disappointed, however, in the Government's insistence on tabling an amendment to the motion. I have said I will not call a vote on this. Of course I support what the Government is doing but it is not enough.

The Minister's speech included the following phrases: "We are well placed . . . I can advise Senators that the Government intends to publish an energy policy Green Paper shortly . . . we have rolled out a series of initiatives we have put in place a new five-year excise relief . . . We are delivering an ocean energy strategy . . . We will launch a combined heat and power programme . . . we are introducing a number of initiatives . . . will also culminate in an agreed joint policy paper . . . The Government is working as a team . . .". There is no sense of urgency in these words. I urge the Minister of State and the Government to recognise that sense of urgency.

Alfred Cavallo, a physicist, said "People should be doing something now to reduce oil dependence and not waiting for Mother Nature to slap them in the face". The Government must act much more quickly or it will not be mother nature who will slap it in the face but the voters who will say the Government let them down because it did not move fast enough or with enough determination.

Amendment put and declared carried.

Motion, as amended, put and declared carried.

An Cathaoirleach: When is it proposed to sit again?

Mr. Kenneally: Next Tuesday at 2.30 p.m.

Adjournment Matters.

Military Medals and Awards.

Mr. Wilson: I welcome the Minister for Defence, Deputy O'Dea, to the House and I thank him for addressing this matter. It was with great pride that I watched the Easter parade on Sunday, 16 April. I was delighted the Taoiseach took the initiative to reinstate this important event. The Minister can be justly proud of the members of the Defence Forces who took part in the parade on that historic day.

I welcome the announcement by the Minister to increase the War of Independence pensions by

50%, as part of the commemoration of the 90th anniversary of 1916 and that the Minister for Finance is preparing to sign off on the proposal, which will benefit a total of 730 pensioners and their dependants. This 50% increase in the pension is a fitting tribute to our veterans and their families.

In light of these celebrations, it has been brought to my attention by a number of family members of those who served during the 1916 Rising and the subsequent War of Independence, that there is no mechanism for the issuing of a replacement medal. It has been a long-standing policy of the Department of Defence to issue a standard letter to the family stating that no replacements can be provided. I am anxious to hear if the Minister has any proposals to review these arrangements.

Minister for Defence (Mr. O'Dea): I am glad to have the opportunity to address this matter and I thank Senator Wilson for raising it. It is not necessary for me to dwell on the importance to the nation of the 1916 Rising and the War of Independence. Together they led to the establishment of the State in which we live today and to the freedom we now enjoy. The importance of these events is also reflected in the fact that we have five military medals related to that period of our history.

For the information of the House I will give some brief background to each of the five medals. The 1916 medal was awarded to persons who participated in the Rising during the week commencing 23 April 1916. Some 2,000 of these medals were awarded. The 1917-1921 service medal with bar was awarded to persons who rendered active military service during the War of Independence. More than 15,000 medals were awarded in that category.

The 1917-1921 service medal without bar was awarded to persons whose service was not deemed active military service, but who were members of *Oglaigh na hÉireann*, *Fianna Éireann*, *Cumann na mBan* or the Irish Citizen Army continuously for the three months which ended with the Anglo-Irish truce on 11 July 1921. More than 50,000 medals were awarded in this class.

The 1916 survivor's medal was created in 1966 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Rising of Easter Week 1916. The medal was issued to those who had been awarded the 1916 medal and who were still alive at the time.

The 1921 truce commemoration medal was created to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the truce that ended the War of Independence. The medal was issued to veterans of the War of Independence who were alive on 11 July 1971 and who had been duly awarded the 1917-1921 service medal, whether with or without bar.

The Department receives requests from time to time for the replacement of lost, stolen or destroyed medals awarded to veterans of the 1916 Rising and the War of Independence. It has been the settled policy of the Department of Defence for many years that replacement medals were issued on a once only basis on receipt of a bona fide request from the veteran to whom the original medals were awarded. This policy was adopted in the interests of preserving the intrinsic value of the medals and to strictly limit the number of medals issued in any particular case. Although almost all the veterans are now deceased, the rationale for restricting the issue of replacement medals is still valid.

Apart from the intrinsic value of the medals, their monetary value on the open market is also a factor. Some indication of their value can be gleaned from the recent sale by auction of a posthumously awarded 1916 medal that achieved a price of €105,000 on 12 April 2006. Other 1916 and War of Independence medals, sold at the same auction, fetched amounts ranging from €3,200 to €14,000.

While this has been the long-standing Departmental policy, I can understand the feelings of the family members of veterans whose requests for replacement medals are refused. These families feel rightly proud of their respective ancestors' service and contribution to the birth of this State and would like some visible expression of it. With this in mind some weeks ago I initiated an examination in my Department of the possibility of issuing some form of official certificate for such cases.

I envisage that the certificates would confirm that one of the medals in question had been issued to the named veteran. If more than one medal had originally been issued, a separate certificate could be provided for each medal. Officials in my Department are currently examining a number of options, including possible designs and formats for these certificates. I am confident this initiative will go some way to addressing this problem and I expect the examination in my Department will be completed very shortly.

On a related note, I was very pleased to be able to announce recently a substantial increase in the War of Independence pensions. The 90th anniversary of the 1916 Rising was an appropriate time to show the country's appreciation of the major part played by veterans in the foundation of the State. The pensions are being increased by 50% retrospectively to 1 April 2006. They were last increased in mid-2004 when a 50% increase was also applied. I trust this clarifies matters to the satisfaction of the House.

School Staffing.

Mr. U. Burke: I thank the Cathaoirleach for selecting this matter and the Minister of State for

[Mr. U. Burke.]

replying. Kilcooley national school is a small rural school outside Loughrea, County Galway. It was classified in 2000 as being in a very bad condition, one of the worst in the country. The Minister for Education and Science has indicated that a substantial reconstruction and extension programme is to be carried out on the school. It is hoped that the new extension will be occupied by the beginning of the new academic year. The enrolment was 82 students in the 2004-05 academic year but this number has temporarily decreased in the current year. It is hoped that in September 2006 the enrolment will rise to 81 with a potential for more.

The parents and the school management are concerned that the school will lose a teacher if the Minister does not give a concession to this school to retain that teacher until the following year when the numbers will increase again. The new school extension will provide four new classrooms to allow each teacher have a classroom each if the teacher is retained. If the teacher is not retained, it will be a return to a situation of overcrowding. This is an ideal opportunity for the Minister to show her commitment to the reduction of the student-teacher ratio by allowing the carry-over for just one year.

As is the case in every other school, there is a cohort of students with special needs. The additional teacher has proved to be a clear benefit to the children. It is hoped to continue what would be regarded as sound educational practice to allow the school to retain the fourth teacher until the enrolment figures show an increase at the start of the new academic year in September. The parents, the parents association of the school and the school management are greatly concerned that if the school loses a teacher, they will face a battle to restore the complement of teachers. Furthermore, many students will lose out in terms of the benefit of an additional teacher.

I ask the Minister of State to arrange for this matter to be examined with a view to allowing this school to retain the additional teacher until the number of students are up to a level that justify the current complement of four teachers.

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (Mr. B. O'Keeffe): I am pleased to have this opportunity to outline on behalf of the Minister for Education and Science, Deputy Hanafin — who is currently responding to a Private Members' motion in the Dáil — the position on school staffing and particularly the staffing in Kilcooley national school. The Government has provided the largest increase in teacher numbers since the expansion of free education. The incredible progress that has been made in this area in recent years is evident from the fact that next

September there will be no fewer than 4,000 extra teachers in our primary schools, compared with 2002. Not only is the average class size in our primary schools down to 24, but there is now one teacher for 17 pupils at primary level, when the thousands of extra resource and other support teachers are taken into account.

Children with special needs and those from disadvantaged areas are getting more support than ever before to help them to reach their full potential at school. On top of all the progress that has been made in recent years, the Minister for Finance has committed to providing more primary classroom teachers for next September and for September 2007 through a reduction in the mainstream staffing schedule.

As the Senator may be aware, the number of classroom, as opposed to resource and other support, teachers who are allocated to a primary school is determined by reference to the enrolment of the school on 30 September of the previous year. A staffing schedule issues by circular to schools each year setting out the enrolment figures that will apply for each staffing post in the next school year. The 2006-07 schedule issued more than a month ago, therefore, each school is aware of its mainstream staffing arrangement for the next school year.

Under the staffing schedule for the 2005-06 school year, the general rule is that at least one classroom teacher is provided for every 29 pupils in the school. Schools with only one or two teachers have much lower staffing ratios than that — with two teachers for only 12 pupils in some cases and so on — but the general rule is that there is at least one classroom teacher for every 29 children in the school. For the 2006-07 school year this is being reduced to 28 children per classroom teacher and in 2007-08 it will be reduced to 27 children per classroom teacher.

The school referred to by the Senator had an enrolment on 30 September 2004 of 82 pupils which warranted a staffing for the 2005-06 school year of a principal and three mainstream teachers. In addition, the school has the service of a learning support-resource teacher based in the school and shared with Scoil Aindreis Naofa. It also receives the service of a learning support teacher based in Kilimor national school.

The mainstream staffing of the school for the 2006-07 school year will consist of a principal and two mainstream class teachers. This is based on an enrolment of 76 pupils at 30 September 2005. The school will continue to have the learning support-resource post based there and additional resource hours made available in respect of any pupils with low-incidence special educational needs.

To ensure transparency and openness in the system an independent appeal board is now in place to decide on any appeals on mainstream staffing in primary schools. I understand that the

board of management of the school has submitted an appeal to the staffing appeal board. The appeal will be considered by the appeal board at a meeting which is scheduled to take place on 25 May 2006. The board of management will be notified of the outcome of the appeal as soon as possible thereafter.

The independent appeal board on mainstream staffing was established in August 2002 and commenced operation at the beginning of the 2002-03 school year. The purpose of the appeal board is to allow for the independent consideration of appeals, under certain criteria, against the mainstream staffing schedule as issued to schools. The appeal board allows for equitable and transparent treatment of all primary schools and its decision is final. It is not open to the Minister for Education and Science or her Department to interfere in any way in this process.

I thank the Senator for giving me this opportunity to outline all the progress that has been made in school staffing in recent years and to clarify particularly the position on Kilcooley national school.

Mr. U. Burke: In the event of the appeal not being successful, can I take it the Minister for Education and Science will give official sanction to increase the pupil-teacher ratio in that school?

Mr. B. O'Keeffe: My understanding is that the appeal board's decision is final and there is no recourse to appeal it. Based on the enrolment figure for September 2005, it appears that the school will be entitled to one principal and two mainstream class teachers. I do not envisage that position will change unless the appeal board makes such a decision on 25 May.

Mr. U. Burke: The Minister of State might convey to the Minister that the number to be enrolled for the next academic year will increase to 81. While this year the number enrolled has fallen, in respect of which the criteria outlined apply, next year there will be an increase in the number of enrolments.

Mr. B. O'Keeffe: I will convey that to the Minister but if it is the position, the board of management will have made that case in its submission to the appeal board, and it will be a matter for the appeal board to take a decision on that basis.

Schools Amalgamation.

Mr. Kitt: I thank the Leas Cathaoirleach for allowing me to raise this matter and the Minister of State for taking it. I am sure the Minister of State is aware that there are five second level schools in Tuam. Some years ago it was proposed to amalgamate the Presentation Convent and Mercy Convent secondary schools and to amalgamate St. Jarlath's College and St. Patrick's

College. The Minister for Education and Science has taken a particular interest in the two amalgamations. She met the four principal teachers of the four schools last autumn when she was in Tuam.

An advertisement for the provision of a site for the amalgamation of the Presentation Convent and Mercy Convent was placed in local and national newspapers this week, in respect of which the closing date for receipt of applications is 26 May. I hope that advertisement will be successful in securing the provision of a site.

It appears the site for St. Jarlath's College and St. Patrick's is already available. There is a question over whether these amalgamations will be dealt with separately or jointly by the Department. I am aware of the location of the site for the amalgamation of the two boys' colleges. I am a past pupil of St. Jarlath's College and I understand the site is the location of the hurling pitches. Some questions have been raised about access to this site. The Minister of State might be able to clarify that aspect. There are also issues about the possibility of the relief road going through some of these lands.

In light of the delay and the lack of progress on the amalgamation, I wish to highlight that the facilities in St. Patrick's College are very poor. Even though the school is not very old, it is in a poor condition and that has an impact on enrolment to it.

It would be a great vote of confidence for the students, hardworking teachers and parents if progress could be made on the proposed amalgamations, about which there has been much talk for a long time. It was a hopeful development when the principals got together and decided to proceed with two amalgamations of four schools in Tuam, which would result in three education centres in the future. That is what everybody would like to happen, but there is frustration about the delay in the decision in this respect. I would like the Minister of State to reply to the points I have raised.

Mr. B. O'Keeffe: At the outset, I wish to thank the Senator for raising the matter as it affords me the opportunity to outline to the House the Government's strategy for capital investment in education projects and also the position regarding the development of education provision for the proposed amalgamation of St. Jarlath's College and St. Patrick's College, Tuam, and the proposed amalgamation of Presentation College and Mercy College, Tuam.

Modernising facilities in our 3,200 primary and 750 post-primary schools is not an easy task given the legacy of decades of under-investment in this area as well as the need to respond to emerging needs in areas of rapid population growth. Nonetheless, this Government has shown a focused determination to improve the condition of our

[Mr. B. O'Keeffe.]

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

As evidence of this commitment there will be approximately 1,300 building and modernisation projects active in our primary and post primary schools during 2006. Over €500 million is being spent on primary and post primary projects throughout the country. This unprecedented level of capital investment is testament to the importance the Government places on improving the quality of accommodation in our schools.

Turning to the matter in hand, as the Senator may be aware, agreement was reached some time ago on the rationalisation of post-primary education provision in Tuam. Essentially, the agreement reached with the relevant trustees involved the formation of a single boys' and a single girls' school, each to cater for a long-term projected enrolment of 700 pupils. Amalgamation in each case is dependent on the availability of suitable accommodation. In each case a decision has been taken to provide a new school on a new site.

As regards the girls' school, the property management section of the OPW, which acts on behalf of the Department of Education and Science in relation to site acquisitions generally, is considering a number of proposals with the intention of acquiring a suitable site to facilitate the development of the new building. Due to the commercial sensitivities of site acquisitions, it is

not proposed at this stage to identify the specific sites being considered. With regard to the boys' school the position is that the patron has offered to provide a site to accommodate the new school and communications are ongoing on the matter. As soon as the site issues are finalised in each case, the building projects required to deliver the appropriate accommodation will be considered in the context of the school building and modernisation programme 2006-10.

The two projects at Tuam, arising as a result of the proposed amalgamations, have been assigned a band 1.4 rating by the Department. This will positively influence the timescale for delivery of the projects. Ideally both will be progressed at the same time. However, this is dependant on the outcome of the individual site acquisition processes and on whether both projects will be ready to progress through the architectural planning process at the same time.

I want to thank the Senator once again for raising this matter and allowing me to outline the progress being made under the school building and modernisation programme and the position with regard to the proposed amalgamation of St. Jarlath's College and St. Patrick's College, Tuam, and the proposed amalgamation of Presentation College and Mercy College, Tuam. The Department will do everything in its power to advance both projects as soon as possible.

The Seanad adjourned at 7.35 p.m. until 2.30 p.m. on Tuesday, 23 May 2006.