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**Thursday,
23 October 2008**

DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

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

Thursday, 23 October 2008.

[illegible]

SEANAD ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 23 Deireadh Fómhair 2008.
Thursday, 23 October 2008.

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach i gceannas ar 10.30 a.m.

Paidir.
Prayer.

Business of Seanad.

An Cathaoirleach: I have notice from Senator Frances Fitzgerald that, on the motion for the Adjournment of the House today, she proposes to raise the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Education and Science to provide an update on plans to acquire a site from County Dublin Vocational Education Committee for the provision of a new school building for Gaelscoil Eiscir Riada, Lucan, County Dublin.

I have also received notice from Senator John Paul Phelan of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Education and Science to clarify when funding will be made available for the construction of premises for Marymount national school, the Rower, Kilkenny, given that the funding has been awaited for a number of years.

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

The need for the Minister for Finance to clarify the reasons for the delay in building Carndonagh Garda station in Donegal, given the urgent need and the length of the process to date.

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

Order of Business.

Senator Donie Cassidy: The Order of Business is No.1, statements on health promotion priorities, to be taken at the conclusion of the Order of Business, to conclude not later than 2 p.m., spokespersons to have ten minutes, all other Senators to have seven minutes, on which Senators may share time, and the Minister to be called upon ten minutes before the end of the debate for concluding comments and to take questions from spokespersons or leaders.

Senator Frances Fitzgerald: Yesterday, we saw people power at the gates of Leinster House, when tens of thousands of elderly people came to protest at the budget, as well as thousands of young people who also felt threatened by the decisions in the budget. The budget is unravelling and has become, as Deputy Enda Kenny has said, a discussion document. I am concerned about the figures contained in the budget, especially the projections for economic growth and consumer spending as well the savings arising from changes to the medical card

[Senator Frances Fitzgerald.]

scheme. Many questions arise and I have heard the Minister for Health and Children quote many different figures for the actual savings. I do not have confidence in the figures that have been put forward by the Government.

This was a very rushed budget, containing a bucket of indiscriminate measures, and we are seeing the effects of that now. It seems very likely that we will have another budget very soon to correct the figures in the current budget. It is a very worrying time indeed and it is very difficult to have confidence that this Government can manage the current difficult situation. There is no doubt that it is at a time like this that one sees the values of Government coming through. The only guiding principle the Government has had for the past ten years is a taxation principle. We saw in the decisions made this week that no guiding principle existed with regard to children and the elderly and no values came through in the budget. When will the Social Welfare Bill be discussed in the House? This side of the House has many questions on it.

Will the Leader and Senator Boyle clarify the Government's position on incineration? The Green Party has stated it is against incineration. A new waste policy will be introduced and an important hearing will take place next week with regard to a large incinerator planned for Rathcoole. An EU directive states people who oppose such a development should have the resources to ensure an even playing field at a hearing. This will not happen and it does not happen in this country. Will the Leader investigate whether the principles contained in the EU directive can be applied to hearings in Ireland?

Senator Joe O'Toole: For the past two or three days I have called for a debate on the topic being discussed by the entire country, which brought tens of thousands of people to the gates of Leinster House yesterday, aspects of which were voted on in the Dáil last night and which we refuse to acknowledge exists. What has happened has brought a great deal about these matters to the fore.

The Leader knows me long enough to know I try to get a disinterested view on issues. When I hear Members on the other side of the House making speeches about the bad manners of those aged over 70, I wait for further elaboration. If such views are expressed it must be asked how the elderly came to take this action. We do not hear views expressed on that aspect, which indicates a lack of balance.

People seem to be in denial. Last night, I heard Ministers and Members of the Government in the other House apologise and it was healthy to hear it. It would good to hear something similar in this House. I do not necessarily call for apologies but I would like to hear from my colleagues on the other side of the House that they have a clear understanding of what happened.

I would like to discuss aspects of the budget which we have not discussed in this House. We saw the people outside the gate yesterday. We need to examine the implications of the budget for education and agriculture and we should do so before these become issues which must be discussed due to the action taken by forces outside these Houses. I propose that in addition to the matter we will discuss today, we will also discuss the issue of the implications of the budget for education and agriculture and I propose an amendment to the Order of Business in this regard.

These issues have caused hurt and anger. It is not about the increase in class sizes or the lack of implementation of education measures for persons with special educational needs or the removal of special needs assistance. It is about the fact that people were working on a promise, commitments were given and expectations were raised. Now parents, management and teachers are devastated and pupils, who are the focus of it all, will suffer for all of this.

We need to discuss these matters. There is a better way of doing it. Nobody is arguing about the state of the economy or the need to raise more money; we are arguing about the how. We need a discussion to allow people on the other side of the House to go on the record and make clear points. The most recent recorded comments during last week's proceedings by people on the Leader's side of the House are that it was a great budget. They should be afforded the opportunity to ameliorate and modify their position.

Senator Phil Prendergast: I add my congratulations to the thousands of our elderly who came to the gates of Leinster House yesterday and demonstrated that people will not be ignored. Yesterday, we had to listen to nonsense in this Chamber——

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Hear, hear.

Senator Phil Prendergast: ——about suggestions that the Opposition were busing people to Dublin.

Senator Nicky McFadden: Hear, hear. It was unreal.

Senator Phil Prendergast: It was an unreal and unpleasant situation. Yesterday morning, I heard the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, Deputy Brendan Smith, pronounce on the radio that the Government's changes to the scheme for those aged over 70 was being warmly welcomed throughout the country. What we witnessed outside Leinster House would give lie to that.

Will the Leader arrange a debate on the Morris tribunal report? The report expressed a catalogue of corruption and abuses perpetrated by a small number of gardaí in a way which was unprecedented in our history. As was stated by my colleague, Deputy Brendan Howlin, Irish citizens had their basic rights crushed to a degree that is scarcely believable. One family in particular suffered years of harassment and abuse with devastating and ongoing consequences for each of them. This House should debate the contents of the report. The Garda Ombudsman is now in place, which I welcome. We must debate the other steps we need to take to ensure nothing like this ever happens again.

I call for the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform to come before the House to take this debate. If he does so, I hope he will not repeat the scurrilous allegations that he and another colleague made against my colleague, Deputy Brendan Howlin, and Mr. Jim Higgins, a member of Fine Gael and a former Member of the Dáil. For a while yesterday, it seemed the Minister was more interested in grasping any opportunity he could find to launch a gratuitous attack on a respected member of the Dáil who did no more than carry out his duty as a public representative than dealing with the contents of the report itself. In a week when the word "apology" is on the lips of every Government representative perhaps the Minister would use the opportunity to apologise.

Will the Leader organise a debate with the Minister for Health and Children so she can answer serious questions that have arisen over the past couple of weeks? I want the Minister to confirm the number of beds in the public health system which will close. The HSE stated it will save €40 million per month in October, November and December. My colleagues in the nursing sector inform me that there has been a significant increase in the number of people on trolleys by comparison with this time last year. Are accident and emergency departments a cheaper way of dealing with patients than admitting them to hospital beds?

I also want the Minister to answer how many of the recommendations of the report undertaken by Justice Maureen Harding Clark on maternity services at Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Drogheda have been implemented and how long it will be before all of the recom-

[Senator Phil Prendergast.]

mendations are implemented. How many front-line posts, such as nurses, mid-wives, allied health professionals and ward support staff have been left vacant since 4 December 2007 when the HSE, in breach of the national partnership agreement Towards 2016 as determined by the Labour Court, introduced the staffing restrictions? How does the Minister intend to address the severe shortage of midwives in all of the major maternity hospitals and units throughout the country?

Senator Terry Leyden: Will the Leader arrange a debate for next week on the concept of universality? When Charles J. Haughey was the Minister for Finance and Jack Lynch was Taoiseach we introduced the concept. Fianna Fáil Governments introduced free fuel, electricity, television licences, gas and travel. At the time, Dr. T.K. Whitaker begged the Minister for Finance not to introduce the concept because we could not afford it. I checked with both people involved and it is fact. We were able to afford the measure introduced in 2001 and in my opinion we can afford it in 2008 but that is another day's work.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Hear, hear.

Senator Frances Fitzgerald: The Senator is right.

Senator Liam Twomey: Senator Leyden will not vote for it.

Senator Terry Leyden: Apart from that, we are where we are and during a debate we can discuss and expound on the concept. No Fine Gael led Government ever introduced universality for anything. Yesterday, I was embarrassed to see the Leader of the Fine Gael Party stand on a platform and expound this issue. It is our policy.

Senator Frances Fitzgerald: No it is not. The Minister for Health and Children, Deputy Mary Harney, has abandoned it.

Senator Paul Coghlan: That is slightly at variance with the facts.

An Cathaoirleach: I do not want a Second Stage speech from Senator Leyden.

Senator Frances Fitzgerald: Fianna Fáil bought into Progressive Democrats policy.

Senator Terry Leyden: I commend those who travelled to Dublin yesterday. They are fabulous people. The salt of the earth came to Dublin yesterday.

Senator Frances Fitzgerald: It is too bad that Fianna Fáil bought into the Progressive Democrats' philosophy.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Why did Senator Leyden not go out to meet them? He was afraid.

Senator Terry Leyden: They did not need Fine Gael to bring out placards with signs on them. Yesterday, I witnessed Fine Gael workers in this House——

An Cathaoirleach: That is not relevant.

Senator Terry Leyden: ——bringing placards to the gate to incite the population outside. That is a fact.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Senator Leyden ran for cover.

Senator Terry Leyden: Fact.

An Cathaoirleach: It is not relevant to the Order of Business.

An Cathaoirleach: That is not relevant to the Order of Business. I call on Senator Nicky McFadden.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Senator Leyden did not go outside the Leinster House gates yesterday.

Senator Terry Leyden: I walked around outside yesterday.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: The Senator did with his head down.

An Cathaoirleach: Will Senators be fair to Senator Nicky McFadden? She wishes to make a contribution.

Senator Frances Fitzgerald: The Government side should respect the independent decision of the elderly to march on Leinster House yesterday.

An Cathaoirleach: Would Senators please refrain from interrupting?

Senator Terry Leyden: They are inviting me to interrupt.

An Cathaoirleach: The Senator should refrain from interrupting.

Senator Nicky McFadden: I want to raise the serious issue of the closure of Connolly barracks in Longford. On “Morning Ireland” this morning a distraught wife of one of the soldiers, who is to be transferred to Athlone, explained how it would affect her home and family in Longford. While I warmly welcome people coming to Athlone, it is a terrible indictment on the Government that it will remove 180 people from the Longford economy. Last month, Century Homes went out of business in Longford. Will the Leader invite the Minister for Defence to the House to debate the imminent closure of army barracks around the country and what it will mean for the affected communities?

The Army’s chief of staff is visiting Longford today but he has been sent to placate the people. I find it despicable that he is sent to do the dirty work for the Government, closing down the barracks in Longford. As it is in his constituency, will the Leader appeal to the Minister to put off the closure of the barracks? We went through difficult times from the 1960s to the 1980s and managed to hold on to these barracks. The last attempt to close the barracks was in 1991. Will the Leader request the Minister for Defence to attend the House for a debate on this matter and ask him not to close the barracks?

Senator Ann Ormonde: I, too, call on the Minister for Health and Children to attend the House to discuss the 5% bracket who will not be eligible for the medical card. There are so many rumours and false information circulating that the entire population is confused. No one can hear anything because once people begin to make statements, they are shouted down. The public cannot understand what is happening. I would welcome a proper debate and not these awful interruptions that we are getting constantly. I find it disgusting that I cannot even make a straightforward statement without being interrupted.

Senator Frances Fitzgerald: That is because the Government keeps changing its mind.

Senator Nicky McFadden: What about a pay freeze?

Senator Ann Ormonde: It does not do any of us any good. The public is getting fed up with all of us in here the way we are behaving.

[Senator Ann Ormonde.]

I ask for a debate with the Minister for Education and Science on where we can find the money if we do not reduce the pupil-teacher ratio.

Senator David Norris: That is what we are asking for today.

Senator Ann Ormonde: I would be pleased if we did not have to go down that route. We must have a debate on the matter rather than shouting down each other in a most unprofessional behaviour.

Senator Shane Ross: Hear, hear.

Senator Ann Ormonde: I am sick of it. I hope we can have an at-ease discussion with the two Ministers——

Senator Jerry Buttimer: How about today?

Senator Ann Ormonde: ——and not these awful interruptions and ugliness that is happening in the Chamber. It is getting very ugly which I do not like.

Senator Terry Leyden: Well said.

Senator David Norris: I take it Senator Ann Ormonde is seconding Senator Joe O'Toole's amendment to the Order of Business. If not, I am happy to formally do so.

Senator Terry Leyden: The Minister for Education and Science is in China and, therefore, cannot come to the House for a debate.

An Cathaoirleach: Please, Senator Leyden.

Senator David Norris: For the past several weeks I have attempted to highlight the manner in which the Government is using the budget to dismantle all those organisations which speak for the vulnerable and the oppressed, such as Combat Poverty, human rights agencies and the Equality Authority. That is the real danger. The Government has failed to listen to the people. Now the people will not listen to the Government. It has already managed to reverse some aspects of the budget and has, therefore, created a precedent. There are masses of other groups queueing up. It was not just the over 70s who protested outside the gates yesterday; the students also did so.

Yesterday, Senator Joe O'Toole outlined the position in regard to education. I received a waft of e-mails from people today about the impact of these budget cuts on their schools. Senator Terry Leyden said these people are the salt of the earth. Yes, they are but too much salt is bad for the cardiovascular system. If this country breaks down because of a lack of authoritative government giving into sectorial interests, however valuable they are, and if no one is prepared to take the pain which we must all take, the system will grind to a halt.

Yesterday's scheduled meeting of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs was cancelled. The Office of the Refugee Appeals Tribunal informed the clerk to the committee that the tribunal's chairman — I will not put his name on the record — would be unavailable for the next meeting scheduled for next Wednesday. The clerk was also informed that the chairman was not agreeable to nominating a senior official from his office to attend in his place.

When will the immigration Bill be introduced to the House? I went to a briefing on this Bill which is extraordinarily defective and violates the Constitution. Once more, it will penalise the most vulnerable in society. The gentleman who refused to turn up at the foreign affairs commit-

tee meeting was involved in proceedings, partly initiated by a former Member of this House, Michael O'Kennedy, in which it was clear he had given false evidence to a very high court in this land. If this had been allowed to proceed to judgment, he would have been found in contempt. That person has been proposed to continue as chairman of the new tribunal. There is a stink about this which will escape from the corridors of Leinster House. No one will be able to contain the scandal involved in this, yet this man refuses to attend an Oireachtas committee.

When will the immigration Bill be introduced? Is the Government going to stick to the Bill's proposals or will it subject it to scrutiny in order to amend it? Will the Government give us an assurance that the bad policies, represented by this person who refuses to obey the wish of the Oireachtas, are not continued?

Senator Dan Boyle: The decision to bring forward the budget date was made in the heat of international and national economic uncertainty. It was made on the basis of bringing about greater certainty and confidence in the economy. In doing so, several measures were introduced that were ill-thought out as regards their full consequences. I regret this.

The ongoing debate on the budget, led through public pressure, is healthy for our democracy, something we should all acknowledge. I ask the Leader to include debates on budgetary matters as a regular part of the House's agenda.

We should be honest enough to admit that, despite €2 billion in additional taxation measures and €2 billion in spending cuts, the deficit is still only reduced by €1 billion. The borrowing we are making just to stand still as a country is €12 billion. Much of our additional current expenditure is servicing this additional deficit. In any debate on the budget, I ask Opposition Members to debate not just this budget but the next two and suggest alternative curbs in public expenditure and additional taxation measures.

Senator Nicky McFadden: We did.

Senator Frances Fitzgerald: Senator Boyle certainly has not listened to us in the past week.

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Boyle without interruption.

Senator Dan Boyle: Every week there will be an issue *du jour* and some interest group will be affected by the nature of this country's finances. It is a responsibility of all of us in the political system to suggest how this country can work best.

Senator Terry Leyden: We need another Tallaght Strategy.

An Cathaoirleach: Please Senators.

Senator Joe O'Toole: That is a fair point; let us do that.

Senator Dan Boyle: Responding to the point of the Opposition leader on incineration——

Senator Eugene Regan: It is for the Leader to respond.

Senator Dan Boyle: ——just to repeat, the policy of the Government is, in the words of the Minister, that incineration is not the preferred waste disposal option, and that continues to be the case. We await the result of an international review of best waste management practice and I hope that will inform decisions being made in areas like Rathcoole.

I agree with, and point out, some of the areas about which Senator Norris spoke on the amalgamation of agencies. The budget brings about 32 new agencies from a previous list of 56. I regret the loss of independence for the Combat Poverty Agency, but we should acknowledge

[Senator Dan Boyle.]

also some of the good amalgamations that are being suggested and we should debate those in this House. For instance, I refer to the combination of the National Consumer Agency and the Competition Authority. I, for one, will not regret the passing of the Competition Authority given that organisation's ill-judged contribution to dealing with the medical card issue this week.

To put right one of the points Senator Norris made, my belief is that the full operations of the Equality Authority and the Irish Human Rights Commission are unaffected. The only measure being proposed in the budget is they are sharing a secretariat, and I welcome that.

A Senator: Their funding is being cut by 43%.

Senator David Norris: By 43%.

Senator Frances Fitzgerald: On a point of order, could I ask the Deputy Leader why the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government is meeting representatives of proposers of an incinerator if it is against Government policy?

An Cathaoirleach: No. That is not a point of order. That is only a question. I call Senator Regan.

Senator Terry Leyden: We need him back.

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Regan, without interruption.

Senator Eugene Regan: The budget was brought forward as a major initiative by the Government, and it was a political stroke which has turned sour.

Senator Donie Cassidy: Speech.

Senator Eugene Regan: It was to buy time because it had not——

An Cathaoirleach: A question to the Leader, please.

Senator Eugene Regan: It is a preliminary remark to the formulation of the question.

Senator Paul Coghlan: A new line for them.

Senator Terry Leyden: Law Library stuff.

Senator Eugene Regan: The budget was brought forward, there were no ideas but it built up expectations that there would be a budget which would deal with and restore order to the public finances and which, we were told, would be fair and balanced but tough. What we got was a budget that was essentially an attack on the young, the old and those on low incomes. As Senator Boyle stated, it was not thought through. On every policy initiative, from the medical cards to the 1% levy, the education cuts to the parking levy, there is no detail. By bringing forward the budget the Government did not allow time for itself to think through its policies.

11 o'clock

Senator Frances Fitzgerald: That is correct.

Senator Eugene Regan: That is why it has fallen flat on its face.

The budget is also based on assumptions of economic growth, tax revenue and expenditure which are faulty. The better course would have been not to have tried to pull this political stroke but to have introduced a budget at the standard time.

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Regan can raise that on a debate on the budget.

Senator Eugene Regan: This is my question for the Leader.

An Cathaoirleach: That is what I want to hear.

Senator Eugene Regan: It should have been at the standard time so that these issues could have been fully thought through and also that the November Exchequer returns would have been available. Then we would have had a budget that was based on proper assumptions and was properly thought through.

I would ask the Leader, as distinct from the Deputy Leader, whether he would agree that it was a fatal error to try to pull this political stroke and that it is damaging, not just to the Fianna Fáil Party and the other Government parties, but to the proper management of the economy.

Senator Ivor Callely: Will the Leader consult individuals and political groups in the House to explore what steps we can take to help economic recovery, not just with proposals, policy initiatives or suggestions of such nature, but with our actions? It is important when things are so difficult, and likely to remain difficult for a considerable period, certainly throughout 2009, into 2010 and perhaps into 2011, that no one underestimates the scale of the challenge facing us and the need for us to reposition ourselves. I understand that as a European Union member state, Ireland adheres to EU rules and regulations. However, I would ask the Leader to explore what pragmatic measures we can take to promote and encourage the support of Irish-based products and companies which operate, produce and employ and which pay into and generate revenue for the Irish system. I certainly would promote and support locally based industries. Every little step will help, whether we do it as individuals, collectively or as political groupings. I would ask the Leader to explore what we can do in this regard.

Senator Dominic Hannigan: The National Property Services Regulatory Authority is now in existence for the guts of a year. I have been to its offices in Navan. We all welcomed the introduction of that agency but we still await legislation on property management companies. Although we have been promised on numerous occasions that legislation is just around the corner, it is not the case and there are thousands of families who literally are at the mercy of some unscrupulous management companies who can increase their charges at will. We need legislation on this issue and I ask the Leader to find out when exactly we can expect to see such legislation in this House.

I noted Senator Boyle's earlier comments on the medical card fiasco, and his apology. I heard his colleagues in the other place, Deputies Cuffe and Mary Alexandra White, apologise yesterday. I heard Deputy Gogarty of his party state this morning that the Greens were committed to change. Are they committed to changing the policies on education in the budget? Are they committed to changing the policies on incineration? Are they committed to changing the proposal to reduce the income of those aged 16 years with mental and physical health issues? I do not think so because they got what they wanted. They got a few light bulbs, they got a few State bicycles and that is all they will look for. Senator Boyle's party has sold out its voters and itself cheaply.

Senator Larry Butler: Given our serious financial position and having assessed our position after the budget, will the Leader consider the great number of eminent persons on both sides

[Senator Larry Butler.]

of this House who will be important in the future and look at setting up a new committee of this House with teeth that could produce facts and figures and look at what Senator Callely was talking about for the next budget? We can do little about what we have done.

Mistakes were made in the budget. One of things I would like to do this morning is apologise to the elderly of this country because we made a wrong call in that regard. We have now done our best to put it as right as possible.

However, we find a much worst position for next year. As paid Members, taxpayers will not appreciate if we do not produce good working policies for the next budget. We should not go into a budgetary situation next time without having the complete input of everyone in this House. I call on the Leader to set up an all-party committee that would deal with financial matters heading towards the budget. As Senator Callely said, it is terribly important that we get the people currently made redundant from small businesses back to work.

The budget will not expand the economy in any way. In fact, it will probably hold the economy as it is and that is not good enough for the future. We must raise imaginative ideas in this committee that we would set up. Will the Leader look seriously at this because there are Senators on both sides of the House who can make a significant contribution in this regard? The small business sector is suffering. We can make a difference, so we should do this.

Senator Eugene Regan: That is the job of the Government.

Senator Paul Coghlan: It has been admitted that the budgetary arithmetic was seriously out of kilter. In light of the faulty assumptions and the changing figures, which are unfortunately still changing as matters are being rejigged, when does the Leader think there will be corrective measures or will there be an early further budget in the new year?

Recently, the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government wrote to the county managers about some necessary modifications and variations required in county development plans with regard to the so-called locals only rule. This matter was referred over a year ago to the European Commission because it was alleged that it breached several internal market rules and was blatantly discriminatory. I accept that the correspondence between the Department and the Commission must remain confidential at this stage but if the Minister's letter to the county managers was based on a ruling, we are entitled to know that. I am unable to obtain this information. Could the Leader enlighten the House on the precise position? Is something still outstanding and ongoing or has the matter reached finality?

Senator Hannigan referred to the Property Services Regulatory Authority Bill. I asked the Leader about the Bill a few days ago but perhaps inadvertently he overlooked replying to my question. Perhaps he would address it this morning. Senator Hannigan pointed out that he has visited the body. I have not. There is a shadow body in existence in Navan, which is good for that town, but it appears to be operating without any legal framework. I doubt that anybody knows what that body is doing. If it is operating without a legal framework, how can that happen? We need an answer in that regard.

Senator John Hanafin: Following the successful management of the financial crisis——

Senator Paul Coghlan: Run that by us again.

Senator John Hanafin: ——and comparing what happened in Ireland with what is happening in Iceland——

Senator Liam Twomey: I think we missed something.

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Hanafin without interruption.

Senator John Hanafin: In Iceland the IMF has moved in — a commentator said this morning that the economy is imploding due to the debt bubble — while all our banks are stable and secure and our economy is being well managed. We should now consider the realities of the current situation and how this House could deal with them. We should take proactive measures, as Senator Callely said, to promote a buy Irish campaign, within the EU guidelines. This would help to promote and sustain jobs. The Minister could be invited to the House on this issue while Members could adopt the agenda of promoting the buy Irish campaign and examine what we can do to promote jobs for Ireland.

Senator Ivana Bacik: It is interesting to hear the extraordinary division of views on the Government side of the House regarding the budget. It is welcome to hear some Government Senators acknowledge that the budget was ill-advised, but to hear others describe it as successful management of the economy beggars belief, particularly when one considers the tens of thousands of people who demonstrated in the streets yesterday. I support Senator O'Toole's call for a debate on the cutbacks in education in particular and also in agriculture. Everybody in the country is talking about this. Few would suggest that there has been successful management of the education system. Appalling cutbacks are being perpetrated on that system and they will affect the most vulnerable. There will be an undermining of the educational needs of children with special needs, Traveller children and children in disadvantaged schools. It is most unfortunate that after years of the boom these benefits are being cut back.

Yesterday, I was proud to speak at the student demonstration, where 15,000 third level students came out to protest at the signal that there could be a return to third level fees. Again, this proposal would be an enormous encroachment on the principle of universality. I am delighted that a Member on the Government side acknowledged that a debate on universality was necessary. I renew my call on the Leader to arrange a debate on universality and universal provision of social services, such as health and education.

Senator Terry Leyden: I thank the Senator for her support.

Senator Ivana Bacik: If we accept that education is a right, not a privilege, as the 15,000 students argued yesterday, we must accept that it should be free at the point of access. Of course the rich should pay more but they should do so through a fair and progressive taxation system. Let us have a debate on taxation. I suggested in the House that we should not stop with 2% for people earning over €100,000 per year. Let us debate increasing the rate to 3% for people earning more than €150,000. There are people in this country earning that amount of money and they should be taxed more. I call for a debate on fair taxation, which would allow us to continue with the proud tradition of universal social benefits such as health and education. We should have more universality, particularly in the health system.

Will the Leader clarify his response yesterday regarding the civil partnership Bill? When is it proposed to introduce it? He suggested that it would be in the next session but it was promised before the end of this year. Among many other U-turns, there has been a U-turn on that Bill by the Government.

Senator Camillus Glynn: Recently, the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Deputy John Gormley, and the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform, Deputy Dermot Ahern, launched the MPCs, the municipal policing committees. Today I received a welcome letter from Longford County Council which asked me on which of the three policing committees — Granard Town Council, Longford Town Council or Longford County Council — I wished to serve. Initially, it was not proposed to include town councils but

[Senator Camillus Glynn.]

following representations from me and the AMAI, Association of Municipal Authorities of Ireland, to the then Minister, Deputy Willie O'Dea, this point was conceded. I exhort every Member of the House, the Lower House and every elected member of a local authority who will be entitled to serve on those committees to participate. As everybody is aware, most of the crime is committed in towns and cities, and this is an ideal opportunity for Members to play a role in dealing with this by serving on those committees.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I support the call of some of my colleagues for a debate on the budget. Given that the budget is now a rolling maul that is changing every day, it is urgent to debate it in the House. Unlike some of the Members on the Government side, the people heard and understood the budget and were aware of the fact that Fianna Fáil and the Green Party raised income tax and penalised the elderly. They heard that clearly.

Senator Terry Leyden: The Senator is no Alan Dukes.

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Buttimer without interruption. Senator Leyden must not interrupt or I will ask him to leave the House.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I understand that Senator Leyden is upset and I feel sorry for him. He is a decent guy and should not be under that type of pressure.

An Cathaoirleach: Do not mind Senator Leyden. The Senator should address his remarks through the Chair to the Leader.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I am aware the Leader will——

Senator Donie Cassidy: Share the labour panel view.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: We are on the same panel. The Leader will ensure that we have this debate. It is very important. For years Fianna Fáil complained about the Progressive Democrats in Government and said they were the tail wagging the dog. Now, Fianna Fáil is biting off the Green Party tail. There is nothing in the budget for ordinary people. Senator Boyle should re-read his remarks on the budgets of 2004, 2005 and 2006. He has abandoned his core principles.

An Cathaoirleach: The Senator must put questions to the Leader on the Order of Business. The time is almost up.

Senator Dan Boyle: I am glad somebody paid attention to them.

Senator Paul Coughlan: We are well read.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Can the Leader invite the Minister for Health and Children to the House today? We have spoken about the relevance of Seanad Éireann. Everybody is talking about cutbacks in the universality of medical card provision. This is the second Chamber of the Oireachtas, yet we cannot debate that fundamental issue. It does us no service. I implore the Leader to invite the Minister for Health and Children, Deputy Harney, to the House today.

Senator Labhrás Ó Murchú: Those of us who can look back on the 1960s will recall the very exciting protests that took place in that decade. There was not a week in which there was not a protest on the streets, generally led by university students. We owe them a great debt of gratitude for what they did at that time. Most of the causes they promoted were not mercenary in that they were not looking for anything for themselves. They were usually providing a voice for somebody else in respect of either a national or international incident.

This spirit of protest has been dulled by affluence and we now live in a time when we think specifically of ourselves. One can use the word “greed” if one wishes; it has been used in this House many times by Members on both sides. What happened yesterday was another robust exercise in democracy and there is no reason we should not welcome it. Legislators have no choice but to listen when such a protest occurs. Let us hope more people express their views also.

We must remind ourselves that we should recognise where we stand economically at present, as we did during the long night on which we discussed the guarantee to the banks. It behoves legislators to strike a balance between principle and pragmatism. Nobody has a monopoly on either. We will be tested and the Government’s job is to govern and listen to and take cognisance of the views of members of the wider community.

It is being impressed upon us all the time that we have not yet seen the worst of the circumstances that obtain. If there are more difficult times ahead, we had better prepare and position ourselves for them. This is no longer a domestic issue but a global one, and we will only succeed in serving our people properly and productively if we try to do the best we can with the resources we have. I refer to human, financial and infrastructural resources, and principle and pragmatism all put together.

I do not blame anybody on either side of the House for scoring political points at this time. Doing so is part of democracy. However, if we are to serve the citizen as we should, meet the challenges in the best and strongest way possible and, above all, call on the spirit of the people, as witnessed in the 1960s and 1970s, courageous leadership will be required.

Senator Mary M. White: Hear, hear.

Senator Liam Twomey: I agree with many of the Senators that we should have a number of strong debates. Our first should be on democracy because the comments of the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform yesterday in the Dáil were more akin to those that would be made by some jack-boot Minister in a Nazi country than those of a Minister responsible for justice in a democracy like ours. Many Members on the Government side in both Houses of the Oireachtas are very supportive of the principle of universality but none of them is saying he or she disagrees with its termination or is voting in accordance with his or her views. The only one who has done has left the Government side. To say the Opposition is bussing people up from the country to organise a protest against what the people disagree with is arrogance at its worst.

Senator Paul Coghlan: It is not true either.

Senator Liam Twomey: It is arrogance. The people who arrived in Dublin yesterday were very annoyed over what happened in the budget a week ago, a budget in favour of which many Members on the other side of the House voted.

An Cathaoirleach: The Senator should ask a question to the Leader.

Senator Terry Leyden: The Senator’s party brought out the placards.

Senator Liam Twomey: Senator Leyden is seeking a Tallaght strategy-type approach. There may be merit in it and we should consider it. We could start by sacking the Minister for Finance, Deputy Brian Lenihan, and replacing him with Deputy Richard Bruton because the latter has been well recognised nationally and internationally for having handled this crisis very well. The Leader of the House should consider this proposal, which I am sure many Members on the Government side will support.

An Cathaoirleach: The Senator's point is made.

Senator Liam Twomey: That is how we can adopt a bilateral approach to government to get out of this mess——

(Interruptions).

Senator Liam Twomey: The Government got us into this mess over recent years and it should let the Opposition help it to get out of it in the next two to three years.

Senator Terry Leyden: Where was Deputy Richard Bruton yesterday?

Senator Liam Twomey: We would be more than willing to do it for the Government. I thank the Members for their support.

(Interruptions).

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Leyden has been interrupting continually and I will ask him to leave the Chamber if he does not stop.

Senator Jim Walsh: I support Senator Callely's call for the Leader to endeavour to determine, perhaps in conjunction with the leaders of other parties, what initiatives might be brought forward to promote indigenous business and industry. At a time of severe economic difficulty, we must get back to basics. Doing so represented one of the cornerstones of the approach in the past. We should consider what we can do in this regard.

We need to examine a number of our regulatory authorities which have a remit and certain responsibilities but whose endeavours are now very anti-business and adding to some of the difficulties small businesses face. I refer in particular to the National Employment Rights Authority, which I know from experience is approaching restaurants in my constituency and imposing regulations, which we introduced, requiring the payment of double pay on Sundays.

Senator Joe O'Toole: Impossible regulations. The Senator should not blame the regulator for implementing them.

An Cathaoirleach: The Senator's time has concluded and I have one more Senator to accommodate. I want to conclude.

Senator Jim Walsh: It is against the wishes of the employees and will give rise to job losses. We need our ideology to favour pragmatism at this difficult time.

There is an air of unreality in the comments made in the debate on financial issues in recent weeks. I commend Senator Norris on his insight in stating it is time for authoritative action to be taken, particularly in the face of sectional interests. If we are to promote sectional interests when every Government in the world is implementing extreme measures to meet the unprecedented challenges posed by the financial crisis and if we fail to respond adequately to those challenges, we will consign a generation of young Irish people, who may be well educated, to unemployment and emigration.

An Cathaoirleach: The Senator's point is made.

Senator Jim Walsh: It is in our interest to put the national interest first. The Government parties have no option but to do that.

An Cathaoirleach: We can discuss that during the debate.

Senator Jim Walsh: The Opposition Members do in that they can either promote themselves, their parties——

Senator Nicky McFadden: The Government has been doing it for ten years.

Senator Jim Walsh: ——or the national interest. The choice is theirs.

Senator Paul Bradford: I welcome the robust debate we have been having on the economy. We require much more time to deal with all the issues that have been raised by so many of my colleagues.

I am taken by the call of my colleagues on the other side of the House for more suggestions, ideas and assistance from the Opposition. This represents a dramatic turnaround over the past 15 to 18 months because, in the run-up to the last general election, Fianna Fáil presented itself as the only political party with the magic formula for running the country and keeping the economy in shape. Scorn was poured on all the Opposition parties in the belief that they were bereft of ideas and had incorrect policies. We now know the presentation by Fianna Fáil was very much out of touch.

We need a much more substantial debate on economic issues. Arising from last week's debate, educational interests are rightly up in arms and the elderly are deeply concerned. Farming organisations feel the threat to rural Ireland is very grave. Most of these groups have been represented over the past ten to 15 years in the partnership process. However, many individuals, particularly my colleagues, have made the point that the partnership debate has almost totally excluded Oireachtas Members. Some of those who are now demanding urgent public meetings with the Government to discuss many of the economic issues facing the country have been involved in the partnership process. Perhaps they have been hoodwinked by the Government. We are on the verge of agreeing a new so-called partnership agreement, yet the elderly and those in agriculture and the education sector are facing grave problems. Where is the partnership process now?

We need greater Oireachtas input into economic debate, certainly in the short term, because last week's budget is unravelling by the day. We had statements in the House last week but in the course of the next two to three weeks, the debate in this House must concentrate on economic issues. Our party spokesperson, Deputy Richard Bruton, put forward a substantial document in advance of the budget, *Recovery through Reform — A Budget Perspective*. That is on the table. The Labour Party presented certain proposals also so there is no shortage of ideas on this side of the House, but it is not our responsibility to have all the answers, and we certainly are not responsible for the financial mess in which the country now finds itself. That is solely as a result of Government action and inaction in the past 12 years.

Senators: Hear, hear.

Senator David Norris: With your indulgence, a Chathoirligh, I would like to withdraw a word I used during my contribution. You have not asked me to and neither have any of my colleagues, but I used the word “perjury” and that was in anticipation of a hypothetical Supreme Court judgment. The privilege we all have in this House is something very precious. It needs to be used judiciously. I would wish to do so, and I look forward to making strong comments on the analysis of the Bill, but out of a sense of justice and because it was anticipating a hypothetical judgment, I would like to withdraw it.

Senator Terry Leyden: Very honourable.

An Cathaoirleach: I did not hear you using that word but if you did use it, I accept that you have withdrawn it.

Senator Donie Cassidy: Senators Fitzgerald, O'Toole, Prendergast, Ormonde, Boyle, Regan, Callely, Bacik, Coghlan, Hanafin, Buttimer, Ó Murchú, Twomey, Walsh and Bradford raised various matters pertaining to the budget, the economy and the global downturn, which Senator Ó Murchú correctly pointed out to the House.

I wish to inform the House that, following the request made of me in the past two days, the Minister for Health and Children, Deputy Mary Harney, will be in the Seanad to discuss all matters pertaining to her portfolio on Wednesday, 5 November, after the Order of Business. As Members know, we will continue the debate on the Harbours (Amendment) Bill on Wednesday and on Thursday we will discuss the Morris tribunal report. That is also in response to requests. Senator Prendergast asked me about that this morning, and many Senators on all sides of the House requested it last week. At all times the Leader is a servant of the Seanad and I do my best to have Ministers come to the House to discuss the various topics as soon as possible after the request is made of me on the Order of Business.

Listening to the matters outlined to the House, one would think there was nothing of benefit in the budget, especially in respect of matters pertaining to social welfare. As we all know, the total spend on social welfare this year is €19.6 billion, which will benefit more than 1.5 million people. That is a considerable sum and is an increase of almost €2.6 billion. Improvements in social welfare will cost €515 million in 2009. As I said in the House last week, I welcome the increase of €7 per week for all pensioners and carers aged over 66 years and €13.30 of a weekly increase for pensioner couples.

An extra €30 million has been allocated for the energy package, and I got a great response from senior citizens in my area for the increase in the fuel allowance of €2——

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Two euro.

Senator Nicky McFadden: Half a bale of briquettes.

An Cathaoirleach: The Leader to reply without interruption.

Senator Donie Cassidy: ——and the extension of the fuel allowance period by an extra two weeks. The weekly rate is now €20 per week.

A total of €56 million in supports for families with children has been allocated. In particular, the qualified child payment will increase by €2 to €26 per week. Some of us remember what the children's allowance was in the bad times and how difficult it was for our parents to rear us all, but the fact is that from 1997 there has been an increase in children's allowance of 500% . It has been increased five times since 1997. I welcome that and want to introduce some balance in the House this morning in terms of what is being done for the underprivileged——

Senator Mary M. White: And for older people.

Senator Donie Cassidy: ——both old and young, whom we are all proud to represent here as Members of the Upper House.

It has been said in the House that we will not be debating budgetary or financial issues. We had a debate last Wednesday evening when Fianna Fáil allocated its Private Members' time, and extended it by one hour to allow colleagues express their views on the budget. Both the Social Welfare Bill and the Finance Bill will be published and debated in the House before

Christmas. As I have already outlined, the Minister for Health and Children, Deputy Mary Harney, will be in the House to debate the issue of health. I will also endeavour to have the Minister for Education and Science in the House, when he returns with the Taoiseach from the trade mission in China, to discuss matters pertaining to education.

On education, an extra €302 million was allocated in the budget to bring the spend on education up to €9.6 billion. Those are the facts. In framing a budget the Government faced a serious difficulty in terms of choices. However, the increase in the Department of Education and Science allocation reflects the Government's commitment to prioritising investment in the sector in very difficult economic circumstances. There has been an increase of €302 million for the Department of Education and Science.

Senator Joe O'Toole: What was taken out of it?

Senator Donie Cassidy: I know it may not be enough, but in these difficult times there is an increase. The capital allocation for next year will amount to €889 million, which is an increase of €79 million or almost 10% on the 2008 outturn.

I will always allow Senators who have major concerns about any topic the opportunity to highlight them on the Order of Business. That is my duty and I am committed to that happening in the coming weeks.

Senator McFadden called for an urgent debate on the closure of Longford Army barracks. That is an issue dear to me because Senator McFadden and I shared the constituency with Senator Glynn and our Dáil colleagues. In our constituency we have been fortunate in having three Army barracks — Athlone, Mullingar and Longford — serving the Defence Forces. It could be said that in terms of the difficulties experienced in Northern Ireland since the foundation of the State, much progress has taken place. Perhaps this is something for the current Chief of Staff, who is committed to the midlands area and who wore his provincial colours with great distinction and is a GAA all star. In response to Senator McFadden, I will allocate whatever time is deemed necessary for a debate on this issue. I will put that in place after the Order of Business.

Senators O'Toole, Ormonde, Norris and Bacik called for an urgent debate on education. I covered that earlier and will endeavour to have that take place at the earliest possible time. Senator Norris raised the issue of the Immigration, Residence and Protection Bill. I will carry out inquiries into that after the Order of Business and come back to the Senator directly.

Senators Hannigan, Coghlan and Walsh expressed their concerns regarding the regulatory authority and legislation due. I will have those inquiries made after the Order of Business.

On the issue Senator Walsh brought to the House, I will arrange an urgent debate on the restaurants issue in the next few weeks. We have heard that issue debated on the radio. It does not make sense. If something that is too draconian has been put into legislation, we must correct it and have the Minister in the House to debate the issue. I assure the House and Senator Walsh that this debate will take place in the next two weeks.

Senators Leyden and Bacik raised the universality issue. I have no difficulty arranging a debate on that matter. Members on this side of the House can reflect with great pride on and take kudos from what has occurred. I am sure all Senators will engage in a vigorous discussion in respect of this issue and I look forward to allocating time for a debate on it.

I welcome Senator Glynn's announcement in respect of municipal policing committees and town councils. The Senator has been a distinguished representative in the House of the Associ-

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ation of Municipal Authorities of Ireland. I support his call that all Members should make themselves available and should be honoured to serve on these committees. I congratulate the Senator on all his hard work and endeavour on behalf of the AMAI in respect of this matter.

I wish to inform Senator Bacik that it is hoped to take the civil partnership Bill early in the next session.

An Cathaoirleach: Senator O'Toole has proposed an amendment to the Order of Business: "That statements on the budgetary implications for education and agriculture be taken today." Is the amendment being pressed?

Senator Joe O'Toole: I thank the Leader for giving a commitment to hold a debate on education in the near future. However, he placed his remarks in the context of what was added to capital and current spending in the budget and did not refer to the cutbacks that will occur. That is the denial to which I object and it is for this reason we must have a debate.

Senator Donie Cassidy: I thought I had covered that matter.

Senator Joe O'Toole: Unfortunately, I must press the amendment.

Amendment put.

The Seanad divided: Tá, 18; Níl, 25.

Tá

Bacik, Ivana.
Bradford, Paul.
Burke, Paddy.
Buttimer, Jerry.
Coghlan, Paul.
Cummins, Maurice.
Donohoe, Paschal.
Fitzgerald, Frances.
Hannigan, Dominic.

Healy Eames, Fidelma.
McFadden, Nicky.
Norris, David.
O'Toole, Joe.
Phelan, John Paul.
Prendergast, Phil.
Regan, Eugene.
Ross, Shane.
Twomey, Liam.

Níl

Boyle, Dan.
Brady, Martin.
Butler, Larry.
Callely, Ivor.
Carty, John.
Cassidy, Donie.
Daly, Mark.
de Búrca, Déirdre.
Ellis, John.
Glynn, Camillus.
Hanafin, John.
Keaveney, Cecilia.
Leyden, Terry.

MacSharry, Marc.
McDonald, Lisa.
Ó Domhnaill, Brian.
Ó Murchú, Labhrás.
O'Brien, Francis.
O'Donovan, Denis.
O'Malley, Fiona.
O'Sullivan, Ned.
Ormonde, Ann.
Walsh, Jim.
White, Mary M.
Wilson, Diarmuid.

Tellers: Tá, Senators David Norris and Joe O'Toole; Níl, Senators Déirdre de Búrca and Diarmuid Wilson.

Amendment declared lost.

Order of Business agreed to.

Health Promotion Priorities: Statements.

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy Mary Wallace): I apologise to Senators for the delay in providing copies of the script. They were outside but they appear to have gone back to the other House. They will be here in a few moments.

I welcome the opportunity to speak in Seanad Éireann on the subject of health promotion priorities. It is widely accepted that the general increase in life expectancy, particularly in the developed world, reflects both the lifestyle changes that have taken place as well as the changes and advances in medical practices. Yet, the primary focus of health care systems is on treatment rather than prevention. We all know that people are living longer. It is important for each individual, and for society in general, to ensure that this longevity is matched with good health. Health and longevity are influenced by lifestyle, and by living and working conditions. Almost 60% of the disease burden in Europe is accounted for by seven leading risk factors, which we can influence. Those are, high blood pressure, tobacco, alcohol, high blood cholesterol, overweight, low fruit and vegetable intake, and physical inactivity. People's lifestyle and behaviours can be positively influenced in regard to those risk factors. Poor lifestyle habits and practices are reversible and the benefits of such changes are great.

Individuals are responsible for lifestyle choices, which determine health in later years. However, individuals face different incentive structures with respect to those lifestyle choices. The physical environment, social and fiscal policy, housing, education, the work environment and nutrition are all directly relevant to future health. Responsibility for achieving and maintaining good health is, therefore, multi-layered, involving the individual, the health sector, other sectors and broader society. Investment in health and in addressing the so-called "determinants of health" will have positive economic and social consequences for the country. In other words, promoting and encouraging people to make better and more informed lifestyle choices is good for Ireland.

I wish to refer to two surveys, one relating to adults and the other to children. The adult survey is the national health and lifestyle survey, Slán. In order for us to make informed decisions at Government level we are assisted by research data on which to base policy. The Slán 2007 survey was the third in a series, which was commissioned by the Department of Health and Children and carried out by the Centre for Health Promotion Studies, National University of Galway. It involved face-to-face interviews with more than 10,000 adults, in addition to a sub-study on body size of 967 younger adults, 18-44 years old, and a more detailed examination of approximately 1,250 adults over the age of 45.

The Slán study provides us with invaluable data for policy development and programme planning on a range of lifestyle related health behaviours in the Irish population such as smoking, alcohol consumption, diet and physical activity. More importantly, the Slán survey allows us to identify trends and monitor changes in population behaviours, thus better informing our priority setting decisions at national and regional levels. It is only through more and better information that we can better understand the health behaviours of the population and provide the necessary services and support.

The second survey I would like to mention is the health behaviour in school-aged children, HBSC, survey. This collaborative European study measured a number of health and lifestyle factors among children in all parts of Europe between the ages of ten and 18. Information from the survey is used to inform the development and implementation of health promotion policies. A number of positive findings were contained in the 2006 HBSC survey. It found that smoking levels among young people are continuing to decrease. It also reported an increase in the number of children who have never had an alcoholic drink. However, it outlined some worrying findings regarding the use of alcohol

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among people between the ages of 15 and 17. The HBSC study informed us that half of all children in that age category are current drinkers. Just over a third of them reported that they had been “really drunk” in the previous 30 days. Such information is needed if we are to identify areas in which a particular focus is needed in the interests of tackling these lifestyle behaviours. I propose to speak about the three issues of alcohol, smoking and overweight and obesity separately.

The Department of Health and Children believes that the level of alcohol consumption in a population is an important determinant of health and disease levels. Therefore, alcohol policy must take into account the total drinking population when defining the scope of public health action and targeting high-risk groups and individual high-risk drinkers. Policies aimed at reducing the harmful use of alcohol reach far beyond the realm of health. They relate to matters such as fiscal policy, trade, agriculture, education and employment. Numerous governmental agencies and organisations are responsible for implementing policy in such areas. The Strategic Task Force on Alcohol, which was established in January 2002, published two reports which set out approximately 100 recommendations across a wide range of sectors. The recommendations are consistent with the measures identified by the World Health Organisation as being effective in reducing alcohol consumption in a population.

I wish to mention four statistics relating to alcohol consumption in Ireland. Irish people aged 15 and over consume an average of 13.5 litres of pure alcohol per person each year, which is 50% above the EU average. A report published by the Health Research Board, which examined the health-related consequences of problematic alcohol use, found that alcohol consumption among the Irish population has increased by 17% in the past 11 years. There was a 147% increase in alcohol-related liver disease between 1995 and 2004, resulting in 1,775 deaths. The number of people in hospital with alcohol-related problems or injuries increased by almost 90% in the same period. Such statistics demonstrate the importance of addressing the problems associated with the role of alcohol in Irish society.

The Intoxicating Liquor Act 2008 was conceived and passed by the Seanad and the Dáil within six months earlier this year. It is a demonstration of the commitment of the Government and the Oireachtas to dealing with alcohol misuse, particularly from a public order perspective. The Act reduces the hours in which off-sales of alcohol can take place and puts in place tougher public order provisions allowing the Garda to seize alcohol from minors. It provides for a court procedure whereby a wine-only off-licence can be secured and specifies new grounds for objecting to the granting of an off-licence. It attaches new conditions to the granting of a special exemption and outlines the arrangements for the structural separation of alcohol in mixed trading outlets.

The introduction on 1 July last of new codes on the advertising and marketing of alcohol was an important development. In co-operation with representatives of the Irish drinks and advertising industries, the Department of Health and Children developed the strengthened codes on advertising and sponsorship. The new codes, which came into effect on 1 July, place an upper limit of 25% on the volume of all alcohol advertising. For the first time, alcohol advertising will be limited to no more than 25% of available space or time in all Irish media — television, radio, cinema, outdoor advertising and the print media. The new controls will also deal with alcohol advertising or sponsorship during the broadcasting of sports programmes. The Government has agreed to establish a working group to examine the extent of existing sports sponsorship by alcohol companies and the terms and lengths of such contracts. The working group will seek to direct how concerns around the extent of sports sponsorship by alcohol companies might be further addressed. The group will be established by the Department of Health and Children, following consultation with other relevant Departments.

In July 2005, a working group on alcohol was established under the terms of Sustaining Progress. The group used the social partnership structure to encourage stakeholders to achieve a targeted and measurable reduction in alcohol misuse. It operated in the context of the special initiative on alcohol and drug misuse under Sustaining Progress. The group included representatives of the social partners, relevant Departments, the Garda, the national drugs strategy team and the Health Service Executive. It examined the three issues of under age drinking, drink driving and high-risk drinking. The group's report, which was published in June 2006, included recommendations on issues like community mobilisation, workplace alcohol policies, advertising, labelling and education and awareness. An implementation group was established in November 2006 to monitor and report on the progress being made with the implementation of the recommendations. The report of the implementation group is expected to be published in the next few weeks.

Almost 7,000 people die each year in Ireland as a result of tobacco use. That number of deaths is far greater than the combined death toll from car accidents, fires, drug abuse and murder. Ireland has led the way in Europe and beyond in implementing legislation to address the tobacco epidemic. There is widespread agreement that the smoke-free at work legislation that was introduced in Ireland over four and a half years ago has been hugely successful. The primary purpose of that measure was to protect the health of workers and the public from exposure to toxic environmental tobacco smoke. Compliance levels of 95%, arising from almost 29,000 inspections last year, indicate that this critical public health initiative is receiving a high level of co-operation from employers and employees. Senators will agree that the real sign of the success of the legislation is the overwhelming support it has received from the public. This positive and progressive health and safety measure has brought immediate and long-term positive benefits to workers and the general public. Its successful introduction is a reflection of the widespread public support and goodwill that exists for a clean smoke-free environment in the workplace.

Price has been identified as an effective tobacco control measure, particularly in preventing young people's initiation and subsequent addiction to tobacco. The sale of cigarettes in packs of less than 20 and the sale of confectioneries that resemble cigarettes was banned in May 2007. The minimum price below which cigarettes cannot be sold was increased to €7.14 with effect from 1 September 2008. The recent budget day increase of 50c in the price of a packet of cigarettes has brought the price of the most popular brands to more than €8, making cigarette prices in Ireland the highest in the 27 EU member states and the second highest in Europe. The further provisions of the Public Health (Tobacco) Acts 2002 and 2004 will be commenced from 1 July 2009. I understand that some Senators have been contacted by representatives of retail premises about this issue. It is important to remind them that the Acts contain important provisions limiting the display and advertising of tobacco products in shops. For example, the Acts provide for a ban on all in-store and point-of-sale advertising of tobacco products, a ban on the display of tobacco products in retail premises, the introduction of a closed container or dispenser provision, tighter controls on the location and operation of tobacco vending machines and the introduction of a retail register. The aim of these provisions is to further denormalise tobacco and protect children and adults alike from the dangers of tobacco consumption.

The final main topic I propose to address is overweight and obesity. This issue can be linked to recent developments in tackling cardiovascular illnesses. Of all chronic diseases, obesity is the most preventable, however it is a complex condition. The prevalence of overweight and obesity has been described by the World Health Organisation as an epidemic. Ireland is no different from other countries in terms of obesity trends. Obesity is becoming one of the fastest growing health problems in Ireland. It is a complex condition that affects and threatens to overwhelm virtually all age and socioeconomic groups. The statistics are frightening. One in

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eight Irish people are obese and every second person is overweight. As a result, half of the population is at an increased risk of developing a chronic health condition. Overweight and obesity contribute to a significant number of illnesses including high blood pressure, type two diabetes, excess cholesterol and, of course, cardiovascular disease, including stroke. It is estimated that obesity is responsible for around 2,000 premature deaths in Ireland each year. The indirect cost of obesity in Ireland is estimated at €0.4billion per annum.

With a co-ordinated multi-sectoral approach to tackling obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease, as identified by the task force on obesity, prevention is not only possible but essential. The task force report, entitled *Obesity — the Policy Challenges*, was launched in May 2005. Its recommendations relate to action across six broad sectors: high-level Government; education; social and community; health; food, including commodities, production and supply; and the physical environment. It highlights the need for cross-collaboration between all key stakeholders and real practical engagement by both the private and public sectors.

A key recommendation of the task force was the development of a national nutrition policy. My Department is finalising this policy, which will provide strategic direction on nutrition for the next ten years. While addressing the nutritional needs of the whole population, it will have a particular focus on young people and on food poverty. My Department has already produced a number of guidelines aimed at specific groups, including preschools and primary schools. Post-primary school guidelines and food and nutritional care in hospitals guidelines will be launched shortly.

Another key recommendation of the task force is that Departments, together with the private sector and consumer groups, should take multi-sectoral action on the marketing and advertising of products that contribute to weight gain, particularly those aimed at children. For this reason I very much welcome the new Broadcasting Bill going through the Oireachtas. It provides that the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland prepare codes governing the standards and practices to be observed by broadcasters. This will allow for revised codes on advertising and is a first step in a multi-sectoral approach towards addressing the problem of obesity.

We have made great inroads on the detection and treatment of cardiovascular disease in recent years. The Government has committed over €60 million since 2000 towards the implementation of the cardiovascular health strategy, building healthier hearts. This funding has supported a wide range of new services and initiatives. These have had a positive impact on the diagnosis and treatment of patients with heart disease.

An audit of progress on the implementation of the building healthier hearts strategy was published by the HSE in September 2007. The report, *Ireland: Take Heart*, showed a continuing decline in cardiovascular disease. However, a rise in obesity and low levels of physical activity have prevented Ireland from doing even better. Smoking is still an important issue, especially among younger women. The report also identifies where services fall short of what was recommended in building healthier hearts.

A cardiovascular health policy group was established in September 2007 to develop a new policy framework for the prevention, detection and treatment of cardiovascular disease, including stroke. The work of the group is nearing completion and it is expected to make recommendations shortly.

An integrated chronic disease policy framework was published earlier in the year. This policy focuses on the population measures to prevent chronic disease including diabetes and how inter-sectoral action can be taken to address the wider determinants of health. These actions will be taken through the Cabinet Committee on Social Inclusion with the support of the senior officials group on social inclusion. The integrated chronic disease policy framework also focuses

on disease management programmes. This part of the policy focuses on how chronic disease should be managed. It includes the strengthening of primary care and the development of self-care programmes to empower people with chronic disease to take greater control in the management of their conditions.

The prevention of chronic diseases will benefit everyone, not just the individuals concerned, but society in general. We must ensure that the increases in longevity witnessed in the last few decades are matched with improvements in health. This will not happen unless there is real commitment to addressing the lifestyle factors which contribute to poor health. There is no doubt that the pace of life has increased and it is often difficult for people to live healthy lives. It is important that we help improve general awareness of lifestyle factors affecting health and also that we try to put in place the structures to make it easier for people to lead healthy lives. I will conclude with some wise words from the famous comedian George Burns, who lived to the ripe old age of 100: "If I had known I would live this long, I would have taken better care of myself".

Senator Mary M. White: Very good.

Senator Frances Fitzgerald: I thank the Minister of State for joining us here to discuss this area of health promotion priorities. This is the first debate in this session on this issue and it is very important. The Minister of State has covered a wide range of areas and we should return to particular areas, such as alcohol, smoking and obesity, in the Seanad because there are many reports covering different areas. We might discuss each area in detail for a session in the Seanad and examine how the recommendations are being implemented in the various areas. That would be very worthwhile.

Health discussions in this country almost always focus on the crisis situation. Prevention is better than cure, however, unfortunately, the promotion of healthy lifestyles does not get the kind of attention it needs to reduce mortality and morbidity. The absence of the required focus is a serious problem for the country. Much can be done to prevent people from having to go to hospital or developing many of these so-called lifestyle diseases.

When we saw the removal of the medical card from the over-70s this week I was very struck by the numbers of doctors, physicians and consultants who said the one effect of the universal medical card was that it helped people to stay at home by providing access to all the other services. A relatively small input of service to an elderly person can ensure he or she stays at home. A home help or a nurse calling, for example to do some bandaging at home, can make a difference and keep a person at home. This week the Government took a decision that is not in the interest of health promotion and prevention rather than cure. Withdrawing the medical card has put many people at risk and made it less likely that community care will happen for a person rather than his or her having to go into a hospital or nursing home.

We know there is no comparison between the cost of a nursing home and remaining in the community. I would make that political point about the decision making in this year's budget from a health promotion perspective. It was very short sighted and I was struck by the doctors who have spoken on this during the week and the studies that show the difference those small interventions can make to an elderly person.

The Minister of State has covered a wide range of areas and I will not be able to address them all. I am very keen to see the report of the group examining the implementation of the recommendations of the strategic task force on alcohol. I hope we can discuss that here. One would wonder about young people who are so at risk from binges. With the affluence we have had in this country in the last ten years there is no doubt alcohol consumption is very high and the Minister has quoted some startling and frightening figures. The implications are serious

[Senator Frances Fitzgerald.]

and it must be a key area for us to address, particularly regarding young people. Getting education and information about the effects of alcohol to young people is an uphill struggle, given the kind of society we have. If one looks at the health implications for them, it is a matter of life and death.

One example is driving and accidents. We should seriously consider introducing a zero level for alcohol for provisional drivers. There have been improvements. Young people are now often nominating a driver when they go out. However, when one looks at the levels being consumed it is a very serious issue. We may need to take more specific action regarding young people. There is a problem across all ages with alcohol, it is a cultural issue and it is well known that we have ambivalent attitudes. We need more action on the implications of this, and probably need to take more action on the advertising side.

I welcome the changes brought in by the Government in recent months. I hope they will protect communities because many of them are very concerned about groups of young people out of control. These young people can be assaulted and murdered. It is a critical issue. As a society, we need to shift from merely addressing and dealing with health problems as they arise to encouraging and fostering an environment whereby the public is educated about health matters. We need to shift the focus.

The promotion of health, and healthy life, living and eating, needs a champion. This is seen worldwide when one looks at what is happening with health promotion. Someone in Government is needed to drive an agenda promoting healthy lifestyles and good choices. The office held by the Minister of State provides the scope to become this champion. The energy within Government is what is needed.

I turn now to the areas of obesity, drugs and smoking and cancer screening. Cancer screening is not within the area of responsibility of the Minister of State but I am interested in the links her Department can make to this, and I want to make suggestions about some of the screening we need to do which would be important to prevent illness. These arguments could be applied to any range of health issues we face and we need the Government to play a leadership role in promotion and education.

We need to focus on the ticking time bomb of obesity. In 2001, 57% of Irish people were overweight or obese. This year, only seven years on, that figure has risen to 64%. The problem is growing. More and more Irish people are becoming obese and this is leading to serious health difficulties. We need to address this. It leads to diabetes, cancer and — the most recent research shows — dementia. It has life-long implications. We need to do a lot about it.

In 2005 the Government established the National Taskforce on Obesity. There were 93 recommendations. I am concerned. Ten of these recommendations have been farmed out to industry, and some action has been taken on them. The Minister of State said some Departments are working on this. The problem is there are approximately 80 recommendations across a range of Departments, and I do not think we have seen action on these. We need a detailed update on these recommendations and a timeframe for implementation.

I am concerned that there is currently no implementation group in place. The Minister of State might confirm this in her reply. Getting implementation of this report is problematic if there is no implementation group. I may be wrong — perhaps the interdepartmental action may be the implementation group — but is an interdepartmental group charged with acting on these recommendations and has it met? I would like a reply to that. I am not sure that there is one, and the Minister of State might outline whether the implementation group will be departmental or broader in scope. I understand the first recommendation in the obesity report involved stakeholders.

There are groups like the Nutrition and Health Foundation, with which the Minister of State is meeting, who have done much work in this area and produced some terrific publications which deserve to be seen by a wider audience. We must have the interdepartmental group, with a timeframe and an implementation plan for this to move ahead. We need co-ordination and the Minister of State is the person who can do this. This addresses the areas of healthy eating, exercise, nutrition and how we get the message to people about the risks they are taking if they do not begin to act. Getting the message to younger people in schools is critical.

I raised the issue of vending machines earlier in the year, and there has been some progress. There are still issues arising on the range of healthy eating options available to young people in our schools and hospitals. It is extraordinary to go into hospitals and frequently see that one cannot buy fruit. Often, the vending machine is the only thing available to young people. We have work to do in this area and Government action can be taken to look at healthy eating in schools. The schools have a lot to do, and parents are under increasing pressure to prepare healthy lunches, but there is a role for the Government in taking action that can impact on the way young people get food in school or patients, and their family and friends, access food in hospital.

The Minister of State did not mention screening issues, and this may be because it is dealt with by a different part of the Department of Health and Children. Screening is a very important tool for prevention. A meeting of the Joint Committee on Health and Children this week had a superb briefing from the National Cancer Screening Service. It produced some very worrying statistics on the levels of breast cancer, colorectal cancer and cervical cancer. We have had much discussion on breast cancer screening. We want to see it provided across the country. It is depressing that it has taken eight years and we still do not have universal coverage. We should reduce the age at which people have screening and extend it at the upper end. Other countries have brought it up to 75 and we ought to be doing the same.

The numbers of people who are dying of colorectal cancer this per year is extraordinary and very disturbing. There are 1,900 new cases every year, and 900 people are dying. Irish men have the fourth highest mortality rate among men in the world for colorectal cancer. We need this screening to be brought in. Women are tuned into prevention and they are good at undertaking screening, but Irish men are not. As can be seen from the statistics, colorectal cancer screening must come in very soon. It should not take ten years to come in, as breast cancer screening did. We must find a faster way to proceed because lives are being saved. As it is a good preventative tool and resource it can alleviate pressure on the hospital system.

The Minister of State highlighted very effectively the challenge we still face regarding smoking. There was cross-party agreement to put €2 on the price of cigarettes. That would not be popular with smokers. Many voters will say that it is a time of recession, people who smoke want to smoke, and they do not want cigarettes to become more expensive, but it is the most effective means of addressing the issue. We had cross-party support for a €2 increase. Can the Minister of State tell us why this was not done? The Fianna Fáil Chair of the Joint Committee on Health and Children supported it. It is the most effective way to proceed if we are serious about health promotion and preventing disease and illness. The recommendation was put forward by ASH. There have been some very good initiatives regarding smoking.

I welcome this debate, which I requested. We must start focussing on health promotion and the prevention of serious illness in Ireland. Culturally, we are not doing enough. We need a champion and it is a great opportunity for the Minister of State to take on that role and to try to promote greater debate. I would like to see the Seanad playing a stronger role in this area.

Senator Mary M. White: I had the pleasure of meeting Dr. Muireann Cullin of the Nutrition and Health Foundation this morning and Mrs. Catherine Bent, a representative from the

[Senator Mary M. White.]

Nutrition and Health Foundation stakeholders. They pointed out that the national taskforce on obesity, chaired by the eminent Mr. John Treacy, made 93 recommendations but these are not being taken seriously or implemented. I ask the Minister of State to give an update on the position in that regard in her response to the House. It was frightening to hear that in 2001, 57% of adults in Ireland were overweight but by 2007 the figure had risen to 64%.

Finland, as Members know, has a reputation for heavy drinking and ill health. The Finnish Government led a ten year campaign to improve the health of the Finnish people and was very successful in this regard. Our own Government was successful in introducing innovative legislation banning smoking in the workplace and public places. This has led to a cultural change in attitudes to smoking. I took up smoking when I was 18 years old and I must say I enjoyed every cigarette I ever had but the national awareness campaign of the 1980s encouraged me to give up. Unfortunately, I put on four stone when I gave up smoking. However, having spoken to the representatives from the Nutrition and Health Foundation today, perhaps the penny will drop and I will become more physically active.

As the Minister of State has said, it is frightening to think that every second person one meets in Ireland is overweight. Dr. Cullen pointed out that nutrition is not on the curriculum for trainee doctors, which is alarming. When patients visit their doctors, they should be given nutritional advice. As we all know, unhealthy eating habits start early in life, with young people eating too much.

I urge the Minister of State to champion the cause of a healthier and fitter Ireland. However, it is important that we do not separate physical and mental health because they go hand in hand. More emphasis is placed on physical health than mental health at present because of the stigma attached to mental illness. In that context, Dr. Cullen also pointed out that trainee general practitioners do not study mental health as part of their course at university.

I spent from September 2007 to July of this year studying suicide. During that time, I spent three months writing a paper on suicide in Ireland. There are more suicides in Ireland every year than deaths by road accident. Approximately 500 people die by suicide every year. Four times more Irish men die by suicide than Irish women. Our national average on suicide in comparison to other EU countries is relatively good — we are in seventh place — but we have the second highest youth suicide rate in the EU. While I know there is a Minister of State with special responsibility for mental health, the Minister of State with responsibility for health promotion should focus on the promotion of mental and physical health.

Figures from the National Suicide Research Foundation in Cork indicate that approximately 60,000 Irish people self-harm every year. There are 11,500 self-harm presentations to accident and emergency departments, representing 8,500 individuals, as many are repeat presentations. Self-harming is a predictor of future suicide which shows that our heads are in the sand regarding the extent of the problem. We are afraid to face up to the fact that we have a serious suicidal problem in Ireland. That problem cannot be solved by simply placing advertisements in the media about mental health. We must educate young people at school about mental health.

A survey carried out by the EU in 39 secondary schools in Cork and Kerry found that 9.1% of teenagers said they had a constant history of self-harming, which is frightening. Such teenagers are in a lonely position. They are not talking about self-harm but are doing it privately. They are in purgatory because they cannot face up to their mental health problems. Discussions about the importance of physical health are broadcast widely but mental health is not seriously on the radar.

When people turn up at accident and emergency departments in other countries having self-harmed, they must go through a formal process of evaluation. They are asked about their own

history, their family history and their current life situation. They are also given a formal follow-up, in terms of psychiatric help, once discharged. The system in Ireland is very *ad-hoc*. Every accident and emergency department should have a uniform procedure for recording self-harm presentations and for ensuring that patients receive appropriate psychiatric treatment.

Approximately 60,000 people self-harm every year but only 8,500 present at accident and emergency departments. That means more than 50,000 people are not making contact with our health services and are suffering in silence because of the stigma attached to depression, mental illness and suicide. In 30 years' time we will look back and remark at how savage and barbaric we were, that we stuck our heads in the sand and ignored this problem.

People are afraid to say they suffer from depression because they feel they will be diminished in other people's eyes. The well-known author J.K. Rowling announced last year that she had felt suicidal because of personal circumstances. That announcement was very important and positive. It was pointed out to me by a Dáil Deputy that when politicians are canvassing they are often asked by constituents about the possibility of getting treatment for family members who have cancer or other physical illness. However, they are not asked about treatment for family members with mental illnesses. Mental illness is not becoming a political issue because people are ashamed to talk about it to politicians.

We must drive forward this issue. I make a total of 31 recommendations in my paper on suicide. These can be boiled down to three actions to effectively reduce the level of suicide. These are a reduction in alcohol consumption, training GPs to identify depression and restricting access to lethal means. People have told me their children died from suicide and their GPs had told them to pull themselves together. Not only do GPs not get training on nutrition, they do not get adequate training on identifying and treating mental illness.

I accept that we have a serious obesity problem. However, as a young female politician the Minister of State can influence the attitude to addressing suicide in schools and issues such as bullying. International research shows that 20% of those who die by suicide have been bullied. Bullying happens in schools, workplaces and in Leinster House. I was bullied by somebody yesterday. I told my colleagues in my office what was said to me and they asked whether there was somewhere I could go to report it. People have no right to intimidate or try to diminish other people. How dare they.

Irish people, society, schools and business need to know what are human rights and not only hear the words. Human rights involves not interfering with or intimidating people or diminishing others. I am not addressing fully this serious issue of young people being bullied in schools. I am discussing the physical and mental health of young people. We must begin by discussing nutrition with young people in schools. We all know it is too late afterwards. I have been a friend of the Minister of State since 1993 and wish her the best of luck in her role. She has a tremendous opportunity to place the issue of physical and mental health on the political radar.

Senator Ivana Bacik: I welcome the Minister of State to the House and I also welcome the opportunity to speak on the important issue of health promotion priorities. I listened with great interest to what previous speakers stated. Clearly, this topic covers an enormous spectrum of health issues. Senator Mary White correctly spoke about the need to incorporate physical and mental health. Enormous work must be done on seeking to prevent suicide and decrease suicide rates. She was also correct to focus on bullying which is a major issue. A bullying research centre in Trinity College has done a great deal of work on how to prevent bullying and deal with it when it occurs, whether in schools or in the workplace.

[Senator Ivana Bacik.]

I want to focus on two issues, one of which the Minister of State focused on in her speech and another which has not been raised. Alcohol is an important topic in the examination of health promotion. It feeds into bullying and difficulties with mental and physical health. The Minister of State cited figures which are of great concern. An increase of 147% occurred in alcohol related liver disease between 1995 and 2004. The number of people in hospital with alcohol related problems or injuries increased by 90% in the same period, which is an enormous increase.

I agree with the Minister of State that the issue of abuse of alcohol is of serious concern. However, I do not agree that the Intoxicating Liquor Act does enough to deal with it or to address the problems we have in our culture with alcohol abuse. We debated it at length in this House and at the time I raised some of the difficulties I had with the provisions of the legislation. Some measures concerning education in the Act are positive. Public health education is a vital part of any campaign to address the problems associated with alcohol abuse.

The part of the Act with more teeth contains provisions on the sale of alcohol, particularly relating to closing times. These represent a missed attempt to change our culture around alcohol. The highly restrictive licensing system we have in place at present does not work to prevent excessive consumption of alcohol. According to the figures given by the Minister of State, in Ireland our consumption of alcohol is well above the EU average. However, we have a long tradition of controlling the number of licences granted and the hours at which alcohol may be consumed in licensed premises and bought in off-licences.

This is in contrast with other European countries, particularly on the continent where more relaxed and liberal licensing laws are in place with regard to the sale of alcohol, where people are more responsible about their personal drinking. We seem to have a culture in which the State has restricted the hours of drinking to a much greater extent and yet people are less responsible in terms of their consumption. This is a conundrum and all of us can grapple with how best to tackle it.

It would have been worth trying an approach which liberalised who could open licensed premises. I would love to have seen nightclub licences to address the issue that people like to dance as well as drink. It would have given people a place to go and would have dealt with public order issues that occur when pubs close. I would like to have seen a programme which introduced licences where food and drink would be sold together and which would have attempted to create a culture more like the European drinking culture where people consume food and drink together and are less likely to abuse alcohol or drink excessively. The problem is that for so long we have been treated like children in terms of drinking laws that people behave like children. It is time to move away from the paternalistic approach. This is one aspect of the issue of excessive alcohol consumption which covers a range of issues.

Another aspect I want to mention is alcohol and sports sponsorship, to which the Minister of State referred. As part of any campaign to address excessive drinking, it is important to examine the advertising and marketing of alcohol and the Minister of State and the legislation have done so. I am glad to see controls on the volume of alcohol advertising. I am also glad to see the Government has agreed to establish a working group to examine this issue.

Last March, I raised this matter in this House and held up a football jersey for a well-known English Premier League football club. It was sold in a shop in Dublin in a size to fit nine and ten year olds. However, it carries prominently the logo of a well-known beer company. The matter was brought to my attention by somebody who was greatly concerned about it. He wanted to buy a football kit for his young son but found they all advertised alcohol.

In January, the UK adopted a code which prohibits the sale to children of jerseys which bear alcohol logos. Alcohol companies which are permitted to sponsor football clubs are not allowed to display their logos on children's kits. When I raised this matter in the Seanad, I also wrote to the Minister for Health and Children, Deputy Mary Harney, requesting that a similar code be introduced here. I stated that if the industry is not willing to do so legislation should be introduced. The Minister responded that no legislative remedies were available to restrict or stop the sale or import of these jerseys. Irish clubs do not do this. It is a matter particular to English Premier League clubs. I would like an update on this issue. Will it be tackled by the working group mentioned by the Minister of State or is it being addressed?

Another aspect of health promotion which has not been touched on in this debate but was raised by Senator Prendergast on the Order of Business — I know she will address it with much more expertise than I — is the issue of health promotion in maternity and reproductive health services. Health promotion strategies and public education can play a major role in promoting public health generally.

The law on reproductive health has had a long and tortuous history. The current law on reproductive health is not best focused at meeting the needs of women and men. Due to constitutional restraints, the needs of the many thousands of women who travel to Britain and abroad for abortions every year are not being met. There are also difficulties in health promotion for crisis pregnancies. I commend the Crisis Pregnancy Agency in its positive work in promoting reproductive health and preventing crisis pregnancies. On Monday, it launched the Think Contraception campaign which will have immense public benefit in educating people about avoiding crisis pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections and diseases. It is most unfortunate that last week's budget announced the agency would be subsumed into the Health Service Executive.

Senator Fidelma Healy Eames: Shame.

Senator Ivana Bacik: I hope that will not put a stop to the work it is doing in health promotion.

The Crisis Pregnancy Agency has not been able to stop rogue or bullying pregnancy counselling agencies because there is no legislation in place. These operate around the country to essentially bully and intimidate young women who present to them with crisis pregnancies, giving them misinformation. Some form of Government action or legislation is required in this area.

There are problems with the Regulation of Information (Services Outside the State For Termination of Pregnancies) Act 1995 which prohibits doctors and counsellors from referring women to termination providers in Britain. Even if a woman wishes to go to Britain, she can only be given information but not be referred. From a health promotion perspective, this is not adequate in dealing with the issues women in crisis pregnancy face.

The Association for Improvements in the Maternity Services, AIMS, established in 2007, has met with the Minister for Health and Children to press for changes and improvement in the delivery of maternity services. AIMS has requested adequate data collection from hospitals on the provision of maternity services. For example, there is a concern that adequate figures on maternal health are not available but come piecemeal from individual maternity hospitals. Data on maternal morbidity rates seem to be lacking.

AIMS has also lobbied the Minister for the setting in place of national guidelines for good practice on the delivery of maternity services. This was highlighted in Ms Justice Maureen Harding Clark's report on the provision of maternity services at Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, Drogheda. Her recommendations need to be put in place and national guidelines for good

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practice adopted. AIMS has demanded adequate action where there are deviations in services as was highlighted in the Lourdes hospital, Drogheda, with the appalling consequences for so many women.

Maternal and infant health is a matter for health promotion. AIMS has raised this not only with the Minister for Health and Children but also with the Minister for Education and Science. Some education about normal birth and breast-feeding should be included in the curriculum as part of the social, personal and health education syllabus. Irish breast-feeding rates and normal birth outcomes are among the lowest in Europe. AIMS has published figures on the rate of caesarean deliveries which is pushing 30% in some hospitals. The national breast-feeding rate has been far lower than the European average, a mere 14% in the first six weeks after birth, a critical time in the development of infant health, compared with the European average of 80% to 90%. We should be looking to promote normal birth and breast-feeding at an earlier level. Will the Minister of State embrace that as part of the health promotion strategy?

Senator Ann Ormonde: I welcome the Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children, Deputy Mary Wallace, to the House and wish her well in her brief. It is a challenging brief with which we all, as public representatives, can identify because we recognise what is happening in society. I have no doubt the Minister of State will be comfortable with these challenges.

What are the priorities in health promotion to deliver good health for the people, both adults and children? Lifestyles have changed over the past 15 years as Ireland has become a more wealthy society. Parents and young children have had much money to spend and this should have been matched with good health. Consumer spending, however, has brought along bad health with high blood pressure, binge-drinking, obesity in children, cardiovascular disease, nervousness and asthma becoming more prevalent. These are illnesses I never heard of when I was growing up. Health profiles of young people highlight problems with self-esteem, bullying and suicide. If I were to talk on every one of these issues, I would be here for a long time. I will concentrate on the one issue that I know most about from my dealing with the public — binge-drinking.

The Intoxicating Liquor Act 2008 alone will not tackle the problem of young people binge-drinking. It is a societal issue which must involve parents, communities and schools in tackling binge-drinking and its knock-on effect, anti-social behaviour. Why is binge-drinking prevalent? It is because of low self-esteem and too much money among our young people. Many of them had part-time work and were able to spend what they earned on drink. This may change with the downturn of the economy. In one way, the downturn might be good in that people will have to pull their lifestyles in a bit. Many young people believe they are a success story by proving how much they can drink. At 3 o'clock in the morning, they all spill on to the streets with resulting anti-social behaviour. Public transport could be used to prevent people congregating. The Minister of State should involve the Department of Transport.

The Garda cannot tackle this alone. Parents have a role too. There has to be a change in attitudes which can only come from the schools. Our social and personal education is not sufficient to deal with this problem. While teachers will do it well between 9 a.m. and 4 p.m, when young people leave the school environment, it changes. Schools, the Garda, the law cannot tackle this issue alone. All stakeholders must combine to change our lifestyles to bring about an attitude of good living, health, behaviour and a sense of being responsible. Good manners and how to behave in society were prevalent when we were growing up but now they are gone. We were taught these by our parents, not in the schools. The question must be asked whether they are being taught manners today. The schools

1 o'clock

will do their best but there must be continuity in the outside world to deal with that. As well as getting at the schools, therefore, the Minister of State, Deputy Wallace, must get at society.

Residents' associations will have a role. Perhaps we should invite people in to discuss the area of anti-social behaviour and how society can help out. It is like the national economy in that we all have a stake in this. We all want to have a good standard of living, to protect our way of life and to have the money in our pockets, but we must sacrifice somewhere.

In the light of this binge-drinking, we must change the attitude and the culture. I enjoy a drink. Anybody would enjoy alcohol in moderation, but this is about how to behave. It comes from our low self-esteem. I ask myself why there is such low self-esteem. Why do young people feel they must drink and judge the success of their night out by how much alcohol they can consume? What worries me about society is that the pattern of life is failing and I wonder how the young people will cope with life when they grow up to be adults.

Another area I wish to raise relates to overweight and obese children. That is also a societal issue. We must ask the teachers of social, personal and health education and the nutritionists. The parents at preschool must understand before their children come to school.

The Minister of State, Deputy Mary Wallace, has a great time ahead of her. There are considerable challenges. I will continue to speak to her on this outside the Chamber. She will make it work because it is a societal issue and that is what she is good at.

Senator Phil Prendergast: I welcome the Minister of State to the Chamber. I will touch on a few points which have not been covered and on ones to which Senator Bacik referred earlier.

I raised on the Order of Business this morning my concern about the severe shortage of midwives in all the major maternity hospitals in light of the current staffing restrictions. The leads me, on the issue of health promotion, to parent craft classes which are usually in place so that mothers to be can be educated on the benefits of breast feeding and those who choose not to — we are pro-choice in this regard — can know the correct way to make up bottles and be shown the skills they may need in having a new baby, if it is their first and, indeed, to refresh them if it is not, even though demand for antenatal classes continues among some no matter how many babies they might have.

I would be very concerned at present. Having worked as a midwife for more than 20 years, I am aware that in a crisis in a maternity unit, one always must go to where there is the greatest activity. In terms of priorities, there will always be a need, whether the action is in the labour ward or in the theatre because of Caesarean sections, our rate of which is considerable. The service which goes off the radar, so to speak, is parent craft and health education. As a health care professional, if I have a choice between whether I have staff where they will be needed in the delivery of the baby as opposed to the delivery of education, my priorities will lie always with the woman who is having the baby because that is the greatest need. We all aim to send home a well baby with a well mother who is able to look after it as best she can.

In terms of the amount of time available, we in Clonmel are lucky. I am not just promoting Clonmel. As there are 1,200 deliveries a year in the hospital, the staff are able to have time to speak to the mothers to help them with breast feeding, to encourage them to do what feels right for them, to give them the confidence to know their skills and instinct are not flawed, and to let them know there are skills to be learnt. It is not quite as beautiful as the baby sucking gently at the breast and looking up at the mother. Sometimes there is a little harassment thrown in and, indeed, I was a great testament to that in my day. In any event, there is a significant issue in that regard.

As a person who has a great interest in young people, I was invited by schools to be a guest speaker during my time as mayor of Clonmel. Many of the young people in schools would

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speaking about different options they might like to take up in the future and I was brought in as somebody who might be able to talk to them about midwifery, for which I have the highest regard, and nursing in general. I understand the problems due to scarce resources and what it is like when one is faced with the choice either to teach a woman about parent craft or to go to the labour ward to help out. The choice must be to go where one needs to be. That is a pragmatic decision and response with which we must deal.

There is a great interest in health promotion but there is also a great disconnect at times between it and the physiological process. That leads me to my next point, which is pertinent and relevant. I regularly visit schools in Clonmel and the surrounding areas, including Dungarvan, to talk about the sexual health programme. The content of my programme is informed by questions I take in advance. I collate the questions because as every student can ask up to three questions, naturally there is duplication and when I collate them, there probably is 40 overall. There is a significant amount of misinformation and much reference to teen magazines. I do not know whether the Minister of State has looked at the content of teen magazines recently, but it would make your hair fall out. In my case, I will not say “stand up” on account of——

Senator Cecilia Keaveney: The hair-do.

Senator Phil Prendergast: ——the fact it would frighten the Minister of State. There is significant interest in the area of sexual health. I visit classes from second year to the leaving certificate. There is great interaction because I get many texts afterwards. Naturally, there is great interest. Some will not ask the questions in class but will follow up on something I said.

I do not put a tooth in it, as it were, in the case of sexual health and sexually transmitted infections. I do not give them statistics, the reason being simply that I would fall asleep myself at the mention of them. Instead, I talk about how many in a class of 40 might have the most common sexually transmitted infection — genital warts — or I talk about the dangers of chlamydia and how it can affect their future sexual health in being able to conceive, when that time comes. I also talk about crisis pregnancy and the morning-after pill. It is very relevant and those classes are very pertinent and important. There is a considerable focus, from my perspective, on young people getting the correct information in a non-judgmental way and being able to talk about the difficult questions. The students should be able to talk in their own language about what it is that affects them and the challenges they face.

I do not confine it all to matters sexual. We talk about issues of self-esteem, body image and how one might feel better in oneself. We also talk about issues of same-sex attractions. We talk about all that because the issues arise in the questions I receive in advance of classes.

Obviously, one is constrained by the length of time one has with these students and one cannot deal at length with suicide, which has been covered by Senator Mary White. As a member of the sub-committee, I have a great interest in that area and a great deal of empathy with people who deal with that daily. As the Minister of State can imagine, given the horrific numbers of people who take their own lives every year, we encounter much of that and many who are affected. There is a fear as well that talking about it in school will prompt somebody to do it.

I am well aware that if one can interrupt the sequence of events, it is possible to make a difference. Recently, I attended a conference in Scotland, the 12th European Symposium on Suicide and Suicidal Behaviour. There were 750 delegates from 53 countries at the conference. In addition to plenary sessions there were many parallel sessions in 20 minute slots throughout the day. I attended a particularly interesting one. It was about four people who were unsuccessful

ful in completing their suicidal acts. There were four different events and the one that occurred in America made me think hard. It involved a very famous bridge where the outcome of attempted suicide was always a success. The person jumped and in that moment clarity and sanity returned. The person was able to take the necessary action to get into the correct position so as not to die. The rest of the four were similar; they took evasive action at the last minute when sanity and clarity returned.

I do not know if there are easy answers. I was a midwife for many years and I know from conducting those programmes in schools that there is a huge role to be played in educating people properly and perhaps doing it on an informal basis, which is what I do. There is always a great deal of relaxation because the students know I am not a teacher, and we use some different words that perhaps teachers will not use. That is the real world, and I am delighted to be part of that world.

I am delighted to have participated in this debate. I thank the Minister of State for her interest. I hope I have contributed in a positive way to formulating a policy that might best shape the future for our young people and make a difference.

Senator Déirdre de Búrca: I welcome the Minister and the opportunity to discuss health promotion priorities. Health promotion is a central interest of the Minister's portfolio. What is most important in setting priorities in this area is the basic model of health care that underpins our health care system. Obviously, health promotion is about prevention and early intervention. It is about trying to promote health so people can avoid contracting disease or illness, and the expensive high technology interventions that are necessary at that stage to cure or rehabilitate them.

The Green Party's health policy has always put great emphasis on self management and self care, with the onus on the individual to manage his or her health in a responsible and effective way. To do that, the individual must have as much information and awareness as possible, particularly in today's society where lifestyle-related diseases occur more frequently. These are conditions such as obesity, diabetes and diet-related illnesses and ill health. There are also diseases that can arise due to lack of exercise, over-indulgence in drugs or alcohol and, as Senator Prendergast mentioned, sexual behaviour. These lifestyle-related issues can have a profound impact on an individual's health over the long term. Problems tend to present themselves when the individual is middle-aged or older. The cumulative effect of a lifetime of bad diet and poor lifestyle can culminate in serious health problems which then present in our acute hospitals and so forth and require all kinds of expensive interventions.

One of the priorities for health promotion is the development and implementation nationwide of an effective primary health care system that is accessible and affordable, something the Government has commenced and to which it is committed. This model involves the establishment of primary health care centres that are staffed by multi-disciplinary teams. They would include professionals such as dietitians, occupational therapists, physiotherapists and so forth to deal with the wide range of lifestyle related health issues with which people can present. If our primary health care system is to be successful, it must be about early intervention on these matters and trying to prevent people reaching the point where their conditions become so chronic they must present to the acute care sector of the health care system.

While the primary health care system is important and the Government must obviously continue its efforts to roll out primary health care centres throughout the country, another part of the health sector has been overlooked and has been almost invisible in terms of the contribution it makes to health promotion. It comprises the community pharmacies and the health food sector. As the community pharmacists emphasised to public representatives during the pharmacists' dispute over the last year or so, the community pharmacists provide an informal

[Senator Déirdre de Búrca.]

service by providing information, advice, guidance and so forth to people on the management of their health. Again, this puts the onus on individuals to take responsibility for their health and to have an awareness of the correct information about their health condition.

The Green Party has always taken a strong interest in the health food sector. I thank the Minister for recently agreeing to meet representatives from the Irish Association of Health Stores who wished to discuss Ireland's position with regard to the transposition of the EU food supplements directive and the setting of maximum permitted limits for certain vitamins and minerals. The Minister's attitude was extremely open and she gave the representatives a fair hearing. Again, they made the point to the Minister that they are an important source of information and advice for people on managing their health. Obviously, they also stressed the role that the careful and responsible use of food supplements can play in managing one's health.

I hope the Department of Health and Children will find a way to include the community pharmacists and the health food sector in the health promotion strategy that will be developed. They currently play an extremely important role and, in co-operation with the Government, could play an even better role. Perhaps certain regulations might have to be introduced or tighter conditions might have to be imposed on the type of services they are currently providing informally and in an unregulated manner, but they provide an important service, which potentially could be even more important, to the public. I hope the Minister will take this into consideration in formulating the health promotion strategy.

Senator Fidelma Healy Eames: I am delighted to speak about health promotion. During the middle to late 1990s and over the turn of the millennium I was on secondments of up to five years working in health promotion and public health in two different health boards and in the education sector in the formulation of the new school subject known as social, personal and health education. I re-examined the statistics for that time in preparation for this debate. The two main causes of early death in Ireland at the time were smoking and fat in one's diet. Interestingly, that is still the case. The problem of fat in the diet or obesity has worsened but smoking still remains a major cause of death. I will focus on that today. Mental health and bullying, which were well discussed by Senator Mary White, are also huge factors in early death.

Health promotion is about the health of the population. I vividly recall that, especially when working with young people, it was about making the healthy choice the easier choice. That was my benchmark. As we get older the issue is adding years to life and life to years. In that regard, one can understand why free entitlement to the medical card for everyone over 70 was a very significant factor in adding years to life and life to years. It has begun to mean so much to them because it is a health-promoting factor in their lives.

I read the speech of the Minister of State although I was not present to hear her delivering it. It is wonderful to note the research she is drawing on, which confirms much of what I am about to say.

Smoking is the main cause of preventable ill health and premature death in Ireland. Some 6,000 people die here every year from smoking-related diseases. As the Minister of State said, 30% of all cancers are caused by smoking and 90% of lung cancers are caused by it. The evidence very strongly supports the view that these are preventable given the correct intervention. The effects of smoking on health include cancer of the lungs, mouth, larynx, throat, oesophagus, cervix, bladder and pancreas, in addition to coronary heart disease and pregnancy and birth complications.

This is a difficult area to work in because one never knows how effective one is. Success cannot be pinned down and, as Senator Ormonde stated, it is no good working solely in schools.

A multi-pronged approach is required that reaches the home, school, community and even sports clubs, or anywhere that serves as a key influence in young people's lives.

Tobacco is the leading cause of cancer deaths in Ireland. In 2005, according to the National Cancer Registry, 1,092 males and 750 females died as a result of tobacco and lung cancer. The Slán survey, a survey of lifestyle attitudes and nutrition, indicates smoking is an issue across all age groups. Some 35% of smokers are between 18 and 29 and 34% are between 30 and 44. Therefore, over 70% of smokers are under 45. Smoking is more prevalent among the poorer social classes. Some 37% of smokers are in social class 5-6. The majority of smokers between 18 and 29, 30 and 34, and over 65 are men. Interestingly, more women are smokers in the 45-64 age category.

I would like to draw the attention of the Government to the importance of addressing smoking early in children's lives. The gateway age for the drug is between nine and 13 years. The Health Behaviour in Schoolchildren study summarised the main points. It states smoking is most prevalent among youths between 15 and 17, particularly girls. These girls are more likely to be middle-class girls, which is not so much the case among adult female smokers. While it was encouraging to note in the Slán survey that smoking on the part of boys and girls had decreased slightly in 2006, the rate among girls was still higher than that among boys.

Why do young people start smoking? They talk to me about the weight issue, as referred to this morning, and to peer pressure, the desire to conform when hanging out, self-esteem issues and the lack of physical involvement.

We need to determine the effective interventions. The approach is to start young and start now because of the cost of smoking in terms of ill health and the burden on the health system. This is a major issue that needs to be addressed in future budgets. We spend €15 billion on health annually. Some 10% of the current budget, €1.5 billion, is spent on treatment for tobacco-related diseases. It is well worth addressing this. One of the main steps that can be taken is increasing the price of cigarettes. It was interesting that Senator Fitzgerald stated there is cross-party support for increasing the price of a packet of cigarettes by €2. It would have been an easy method to acquire the extra revenue needed in the budget by comparison with the method the Government chose.

The United Kingdom has been more successful than Ireland in tackling death due to smoking. It has stronger media campaigns, which have been shown to be quite effective. If we follow the advice of the World Health Organisation to monitor tobacco and prevention policies, protect people from tobacco smoke, which we have done very well in our legislation, offer help to those who want to quit tobacco use, warn about the dangers, enforce the laws on tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship and raise the taxes on tobacco, we will go a long way towards preventing ill health and death by smoking.

Senator Cecilia Keaveney: This is a vast subject and to embrace it in seven minutes is impossible. I wish the Minister of State well in her work. We will see the changes when she is successful.

I was the convenor of the Oireachtas Committee on Health and Children some years ago and we produced a very strong report on the tobacco industry. It is still available for Senators to read. It gave the then Minister for Health and Children, Deputy Martin, the confidence to introduce the smoking ban. I learned a lot about the tobacco industry's ability to promote its interests. A very brave decision — the right decision — was made by the Government and we should continue to monitor the industry.

While I acknowledge that the price of a packet of cigarettes was increased by 50 cent in the budget, I believe it should have been increased further. I do not accept that it is good enough

[Senator Cecilia Keaveney.]

to say revenue would decrease if cigarettes were taxed too much. The price should be a disincentive to smoking, if possible. However, some smokers to whom I spoke said they have stopped having lunch and dinner and instead use the money to buy cigarettes. Such is the difficulty associated with tobacco.

If I were to focus on one subject concerning smoking, I would ask the Minister of State to consider making patches and other equipment to help one stop smoking much more readily available. A nurse told me a number of years ago that she was only allowed to have one packet of such products at any given time and that this presented a difficulty if more than one person approached her with a view to quitting smoking.

We must bite the bullet; taxation on cigarettes should not be a revenue stream. We should try to assist people in quitting consuming what is an addictive drug. A lot of money must be invested to help people overcome any addiction.

Let us consider alcohol abuse, bearing in mind that I enjoy having a glass of most types of alcoholic beverage as much as anyone else. I raised the issue of the labelling of alcoholic beverages on the Adjournment on 28 November last year. Has the Minister of State an update? A number of Members of the Seanad and Dáil have recently lost weight — some of us again — and were facilitated in doing so by many food companies that write on their packaging the calorie content, saturated fat content and salt content of their products, in addition to all the other ingredients.

However, if one purchases an alcoholic beverage in a bar, nothing states what one is really drinking. One might know the percentage of alcohol, the stating of which is obligatory. I should not be mentioning specific alcoholic products but will refer to two to make a comparison. Bud Light is light in alcohol but not necessarily in calories while Bulmers Light is light in calories but not necessarily in alcohol. In this case, the word “light” has two completely different connotations. If I get a diet drink I will know what is in it, and people are not scared to say it. I have challenged the industry to come up with less calorific versions of alcohol.

The European Union regulatory framework, Directive 2000/13/EC, deals with this issue. Last year we presented our way forward on labelling competitiveness, consumer information and better regulation in the EU. The Minister of State might not have it to hand but I would be interested to get an update on that from her.

I saw people on “The Late Late Show” who had lost weight recently and the one point they all made was that they no longer drink alcohol. They no longer drink because there are many calories in alcohol. Everyone wants to lose weight. If people knew the calories in a pint of beer, would they drink ten or 20 pints a night?

Another point I must mention before I conclude is the promotion of mental health. I was late coming to the House for this debate because I had a meeting with the Minister of State, Deputy John Moloney, on the issue of music therapy. Music therapy is a clinical intervention and is linked to art and drama therapies. I have seen that therapy working throughout the country. It can benefit people who have sexual abuse issues they may not have dealt with. The Commission for Victims and Survivors in the North travelled to the South and said it was very important for people who had suffered trauma. It is also important in terms of conditions such as autism and for anybody dealing with mental health issues.

The difficulty in this area is that we do not yet have professional recognition of creative arts therapists. Every other country in the world has such recognition. We must move towards having that process finalised. It has started but prevention is always better than cure and early intervention is the next best thing. Creative arts therapy opens up people’s minds in a clinical way to change their view of themselves and of others, and it can assist in many aspects of the

health sector. I cannot explore the issue today but there is a very good report on the issue, *Defining Music Therapy*, September 2006, on the Oireachtas website under the arts committee heading. If anyone needs information or clues to why creative arts therapy is important, it is embraced in that report.

Senator David Norris: I welcome this debate and I welcome the Minister of State to the House. I must say, as a random observation, it is interesting that the Minister of State and the overwhelming number of speakers in the debate were women. Women have demonstrated that they are the people who care about the basic issues.

The basic issues are clear, and they have been dealt with fairly extensively. They are smoking and drinking alcohol. There is no question or doubt about that. There is a huge distortion in terms of the alcohol figures, and I believe the Minister of State put those on the record. We are 50% above the European norm. This is described as our culture. I find that insulting. It is not our culture the way people drink alcohol in this country, the way they damage themselves and the way they behave in public. This is an increasing phenomenon.

In view of the short time available I direct the Minister of State to the debate held in this House on the alcohol Bill during which many strong points were made. Some were taken up by the Government but it did not go as far as suggested from this side of the House particularly in terms of the control of advertising, among other things.

Politicians are too close to the drinks industry in this country in the same way as we have discovered they were too close to the construction industry. That relationship must be broken. Traditionally, politicians held their clinics in pubs and so on, and we have a representative of the Licensed Vintners Association in the Seanad. They have a very strong lobby and they do not always tell the truth. They do target young people. Sports sponsorship is an obscenity and a contradiction. Alcohol is something that has clearly damaged the health of the country yet we allow it to get in and target young people.

The same applies to smoking. I am very glad this country showed a lead in banning cigarette smoking because this is the second major element in terms of what we need for a health promotion strategy. Traditionally, the tobacco companies have been corrupt. They falsified evidence. They deliberately included additional chemical elements that had an addictive effect. They denied research. They lied in court in America, and they are now targeting the most vulnerable countries in the developed world to off-load their cigarettes.

We need to be aware that the drinks and the tobacco industries are two powerful groups who have no scruples. That is a change. In the old days in Ireland there was Uncle Arthur, John Jameson and the old Midleton distillery but that is gone. Nowadays the players are the big multinational corporations. They do not make their decisions here. They make their decisions looking at a graph in London or New York and it is a question of profit. It is not a question of the social damage that is being done. The mass of ridiculous groups that are established are nothing but a camouflage.

We need to get into the schools early and make sure that drinking is not seen as something heroic. I hear commentators on the radio and people on chat shows promote it subliminally. They refer to being plastered, having a hangover or that they had a few bebies. That is the way it is insidiously eating into what we see as our culture.

There is also the question of accident and emergency services. Part of the promotion of health should be to penalise people. We only have to look at the distortion in the way accident and emergency situations are dealt with because of the influx of people under the influence of drink and drugs at the weekends. We should look, too, at the collateral nuisance caused, the

[Senator David Norris.]

proliferation of off-licences and the way in which licences are being given out throughout the city.

I am on the Dublin central policing committee. I raised this issue and a report was commissioned. When it came back it was all done in terms of competition policy. There was no element of health or the social good involved. I insisted that the report be withdrawn and rewritten, as it was, but that was the priority. Competition is a little god. It appears to be more important than people's health and welfare. We can give disincentives to people by making it unattractive to smoke or drink alcohol, and the Government could do a good job on that.

I want to raise another element — spitting in the street. That went out when I was a child because every bus had advertisements saying “Don't spit in public”. One could be fined for doing it. It was a serious offence but now the pavements are a mess with spit. We need to promote awareness in this area. It is partly our own fault and it is partly due to people who have come from other cultures where spitting is part of the daily routine but it is a dangerous way of spreading disease. To return to the question of alcohol, in the inner city where I live people use the pavements as public lavatories.

A number of other issues arise such as AIDS. When was the last time we had an AIDS prevention programme directed at young people? I can tell the Minister of State that in terms of sexual hygiene that message has got lost. AIDS is no longer seen as a death sentence. It is seen as something one can live with. It is not treated as seriously as it should be. We need a programme in place.

The issues of bullying and suicide were raised, and the figures outlined regarding young males in particular. Under that there is also a concealed figure for those people who are gay, and that must be tackled head on. A total of 80% of the bullying in schools has a homophobic element but in 80% of cases nothing is done because, among other things, the teachers are afraid. That is why it is wonderful that we have schools like Educate Together.

I was invited to Griffith Barracks Educate Together national school. When I was half way there I phoned my secretary to ask if it was a secondary school. She said it was a primary school. I was there to talk about the gay issue as a human rights issue. I was concerned but it was marvellous because of the context in which they put it. If that had been there when I was a child it would have been so positive and hopeful. Under the suicide figures there are many young men who are depressed and confused about their sexual identity.

With regard to the suicide figures, we used to regard ourselves as the best of the lot and compared ourselves favourably with Scandinavian countries in that they were either godless or Protestants. We were a good Catholic country. Suicide did not exist. Now we have information on the rates but it reveals only part of the picture. In the United Kingdom, for example, the authorities factor in undetermined deaths when computing the annual figures. We do not do that, even though a significant proportion of undetermined deaths are actually by suicide. I ask the Minister of State to give consideration to this matter.

I compliment the Minister of State upon her interest in this area. There is no doubt that further health promotion initiatives are required. Nutrition should be part of the school curriculum. People become fat because they eat too much junk food.

Acting Chairman (Senator Ann Ormonde): The Senator should conclude.

Senator David Norris: This is one of the practical matters which should be dealt with in the context of the educational curriculum.

Senator Liam Twomey: I am sorry Senator Norris was cut short because he was making a fine contribution to the debate. It is a pity a few more people are not here to listen to what is being said.

Health promotion is linked to disease prevention. We have not exactly covered ourselves in glory with regard to implementing many of the health promotion initiatives referred to in this debate. The smoking ban has probably been the most effective of these initiatives but huge numbers of people continue to smoke and this has major implications for their general health.

We allowed the problem of alcohol consumption to spiral out of control, particularly in the context of legislation introduced by the Government and the relaxation of certain rules. People's alcohol consumption has been reined in to some degree but it is clear that health promotion was not an aspect of the Government's policy in this area in recent years.

The position in respect of obesity is strange. I do not believe the Government supports the report of the national task force on obesity. We are not doing enough in this area. Reports are being issued and small initiatives taken. When one considers, however, that this is a health crisis, it is clear that we are not at the races in terms of tackling it.

The Minister of State referred to the cardiovascular health policy group. In recent years there have been fantastic developments in cardiovascular health care — in other words, dealing with heart disease — in the context of outcomes for patients. This was achieved through health promotion, health prevention and health care. People were made aware of the dangers through health promotion, health prevention came in the form of the Heartwatch programme run by general practices and primary care facilities and the health care aspect was dealt with by means of upgrading bypass and heart surgery clinics throughout the country. The latter made a fantastic difference in the context of health care. If we did the same in respect of cancer care, there would be fantastic changes in the next couple of years.

A point missed by many Ministers is the fact that what I have stated was reflected in what occurred in recent days in respect of the budget. The Minister for Health and Children, Deputy Harney, has a pathological obsession with GPs and primary care in general. That is what caused the debacle involving medical cards for those over 70 in recent days.

The Minister received plenty of warnings regarding the nature of the issue relating to the over 70s. During the past seven years there has been a major disruption of primary and general practice care as a result of this matter. Due to the fact that the Minister set out to pay GPs capitation fees three to four times greater than they would normally receive in respect of people aged over 70, general practices in wealthier areas were able to utilise the additional resources that were becoming available. It was not just a case of there being a capitation issue in respect of those over 70 years of age, grants were also made available to general practices in respect of practice nurses, secretaries and managers. The money did not go into GPs' pockets. In order to obtain the funding, they were obliged to take on practice nurses and managers. This allowed general practices to do a great many things in the context of primary care provision.

I employ a practice nurse who is able to administer the flu vaccine to elderly people during the winter months and who also runs clinics for diabetics. The Minister of State referred to the increase in the incidence of diabetes. My practice is now in a position to screen patients for diabetes, high cholesterol and blood pressure problems. If the proper practice supports are not in place, there will be no possibility of our having practice nurses.

By dismantling, in an extremely simplistic way, the scheme that was in place, the Government has done more than just insult elderly people by removing their entitlements. Its action will result in the creation of a problem in primary care in the coming years. It is almost stupid for the Minister to refer to shifting services from the hospital sector to primary care when it is clear that she is going to withdraw supports for primary care. I will await with interest the

[Senator Liam Twomey.]

results of the review being carried out on the Government's behalf by a senior civil servant, particularly in the context of whether he recommends that the practice supports to which I refer will be withdrawn.

The one good development in recent days is that the inequality which allowed general practices in wealthier areas to avail of these supports while those in less affluent areas could not will be a thing of the past. If one examines the position regarding health promotion and disease prevention, one will discover that it is in the poorer and more deprived areas of our cities that problems relating to alcohol abuse, people smoking too much and obesity arise. However, Government policy to date has been structured towards better-off areas. We will wait and see whether the review to which I refer tackles the inequalities to which I refer. I will monitor developments closely.

Disadvantages were built into the system for political reasons. I am surprised the Government walked into this mess last week, particularly as it would have received numerous representations from the very GPs who were in receipt of capitation payments warning that discrimination was occurring. There is no point in blaming Deputy O'Reilly for being a far better negotiator than Ministers. Perhaps the Government should avail of his services because it will be obliged to engage in negotiations with many different interest groups in the coming months.

Senator Cecilia Keaveney: Will Deputy O'Reilly offer his services?

Senator Liam Twomey: Recent events show how badly the Government negotiated on behalf of the people. Deputy O'Reilly's job at the time when the capitation fees were agreed was to negotiate on behalf of——

Senator Cecilia Keaveney: Deputy O'Reilly was——

Senator Liam Twomey: If Ministers are useless at their jobs, they are useless at their jobs. It is as simple as that.

Senator Cecilia Keaveney: So the Senator is saying——

Acting Chairman: Senator Twomey, without interruption. There can be only one speaker.

Senator Liam Twomey: Senator Keaveney should not be so crass and stupid.

Acting Chairman: Senator Twomey's time is exhausted.

Senator Liam Twomey: When Ministers renegotiate the deal, they should try not to make fools of themselves a second time. They should try to ensure that points being made by many people, including me, that——

Senator Cecilia Keaveney: I am not——

Acting Chairman: There should be no interruptions.

Senator Liam Twomey: ——a proper primary health care service is delivered to the people.

Senator Keaveney and I served in the Lower House. She may remember that I raised this issue with the Minister for Health and Children, Deputy Harney, who, like the Senator, was smug and smart about it.

Senator Cecilia Keaveney: Is the Senator saying that I am smug and smart?

Senator Mary M. White: Senator Keaveney may be smart but she is not smug.

Senator Liam Twomey: That is why Senator Keaveney ended up in the Seanad.

Senator Cecilia Keaveney: Anybody that is——

Acting Chairman: I call on the Minister of State to reply.

Senator Mary M. White: Senator Keaveney is smart but she is not smug.

Senator Cecilia Keaveney: Senator Twomey thinks I am stupid, which is a very dangerous assumption to make.

Senator Mary M. White: Senator Keaveney is far from it.

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy Mary Wallace): I thank the Senators who contributed to this important debate relating to the drawing up of priorities in respect of health promotion. Many speakers focused on the specific issues of tobacco, alcohol and obesity.

Senator Fitzgerald and others highlighted the fact that prevention is better than cure. The Senator stated that this aspect is not afforded the same focus as others. However, this debate gave us the opportunity to focus on health promotion. The Senator referred, in particular, to the need to focus on young people. Whether it is tobacco, alcohol or issues relating to obesity such as overeating and a lack of physical activity, it is important to ensure that we get matters right in the context of the school curriculum. Every Senator referred to the need to ensure that we deal with this matter correctly from the point of view of education.

Senator Fitzgerald also welcomed the changes the Government has introduced in respect of alcohol and indicated her hope that these will continue to make a difference in our communities. Other Senators expressed concern in respect of legislation dealing with alcohol and stressed that there is a need to go further. Senators Bacik, Ormonde and Norris recalled the passage of the relevant legislation through this House. I reassure Senators in that regard. The Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform is bringing forward a new consolidated intoxicating liquor Bill next year which will bring all of the licensing laws together. That may address some of the wider issues referred to by Senators that were not addressed in the Intoxicating Liquor Act. I thank Senators for their warm support for the legislation that was passed before the summer. Reference was made to the difference it is making in communities.

Obesity was referred to as a ticking time-bomb. Without a doubt it is an important issue we must address. Vending machines and healthy eating in schools were referred to by several speakers. Senators Mary White and Ann Ormonde were particularly concerned about that issue. I wish to reassure them on a number of points.

One of the first things I did as a new Minister in this area was to initiate a system to examine the task force reports. Like them I was concerned about how we would know whether we were making progress and how to set clear benchmarking targets. We began by initiating bilateral discussions across Departments. We could have set up an interdepartmental group but my concern was it might take a long time for Departments to talk to one another. There is a need for wider discussions but initially to speed things up, we commenced a process of bilateral discussions between the Department of Health and Children and the Department of Education and Science on school guidelines, vending machines, greater exercise and other such issues. Another area of bilateral discussion has been with the Department of Transport on sustainable transport policies, cycling and other matters relating to how we change the built environment.

[Deputy Mary Wallace.]

In the next few months the Department of Health and Children is due to publish the national nutrition policy, which is important. A number of things are happening in regard to that policy, school guidelines and the built environment. We will continue to have clear progress.

Senator Fitzgerald asked why we did not increase further the tax on cigarettes. Senator Keaveney supported that position from the point of view of health promotion. I agree that price is a big factor in cigarette smoking. From a public health perspective we welcome any increase in the cost of a packet of cigarettes. In fairness to the Minister for Finance, he also has to balance that in terms of the consumer price index and inflation. Many of the popular cigarette brands cost more than €8 and that is a way to address smoking from a health perspective. Future budgets will continue to address the issue.

Senator Mary White stated physical and mental health go hand in hand and referred to the importance of raising awareness among children in schools at a young age about health and nutrition. Senator Keaveney referred to the calorie content of alcohol and drinks such as Bud Light and Bulmers Light. She was especially concerned about labelling. Alcohol labelling will be addressed in the new EU labelling policy. Senator Bacik expressed concern also about the excessive consumption of alcohol and stated that the new legislation alone will not be enough. Senator Ormonde was also concerned about that matter. I reassure Senators that further legislation is due. The codes came through on 1 July this year. We are happy to continue to discuss the issues with Senators who are interested in the area. All suggestions from them are welcome.

Senator Prendergast focused on programmes in schools from her perspective of 20 years' experience in midwifery. She referred to sexual health programmes in schools, sexually transmitted infections, the benefits of breast feeding, parent craft education and the pressure on staff in maternity units. Across all of the topics she underlined the importance of early intervention and talking to children in schools.

Senator Bacik made an interesting point about jerseys. I am not familiar with the UK code to which she referred and I would welcome information from her on that area, which we intend to research. The working group we are setting up to examine the code on sponsorship will deal with that issue. Senator Norris expressed concern also about the obscenity of sports sponsorship and the contradictions involved. I assure both Senators and others concerned about the issue that the working group has been asked to examine this area.

Senator Norris referred to the big issues of smoking and drinking. He called also for a young people's programme for the prevention of AIDS. He suggested more health promotion is required. He also stated that nutrition should be part of the school curriculum. Many Senators referred to nutrition and schools. We intend to publish shortly guidelines for preschool, primary and post-primary schools. On a bilateral level we intend to focus on those issues with the Minister for Education and Science because, as many of us know, if we can get it right from the perspective of physical activity and nutrition in schools, we will get things right all round.

I agree with Senator Keaveney that prevention is always better than cure and early intervention is the next best thing. Senator Healy Eames mentioned an interesting statistic. She reminded all of us with concerns about smoking that the gateway age for children is nine to 13. She referred to peer pressure, self esteem and weight issues in connection with children taking up smoking. We need to watch the next step in terms of the removal of advertisements in the retail sector following the announcement on 1 July this year that it will come into effect on 1 July 2009. The protection of children is at stake. I am delighted to see so much cross-party support for that measure.

Senator de Búrca concentrated on lifestyle, diet and exercise, the role of the community pharmacist and the health food sector. We had an interesting meeting with her group in that regard. She also referred to health promotion and early intervention.

Senator Twomey referred to the effectiveness of the smoking ban but like all of us, he is concerned that people continue to smoke. We got much satisfaction for a while from the success of the smoking ban but Senators were of the view that more needs to be done. The ban on the sale of packets of ten cigarettes in May 2007 was aimed at reducing the sale of cigarettes to children. I welcome the support of Senators for the ban on the in-store point of sale and the display of tobacco products. We are delighted so many support the proposals that will come into effect on 1 July 2009.

Senator Twomey mentioned the fantastic improvements in the cardiovascular area. I agree with him. One has only to visit hospitals to see the major changes that have taken place in the past 20 years, the wonderful things the medical profession is achieving in the cardiovascular area and the difference it is making to the lives of so many. The new interventions are very good.

Senator Twomey's point that we are not doing enough about obesity is shared by all of us. If we are to take anything from today's debate, it is that obesity, especially among children, is one of the areas on which we need to focus. I agree with Senators that tackling this problem should be prioritised. When one considers that half of our population is overweight, it is clear we need to get it right. As Senators said, we need to make the easy choice the right choice. Schools and parents have a responsibility to transmit that message to our children. Similar action needs to be taken in respect of alcohol and smoking. If we can get it right for the children and teenagers of today, we will have got it right for future generations.

I thank Senators for contributing to the debate on this issue. Many of the views that have been expressed today will be taken on board. We will continue to examine this issue. If Members have further ideas, we would like to hear from them.

Acting Chairman: When is it proposed to sit again?

Senator Cecilia Keaveney: It is proposed to sit again at 2.30 p.m. on Wednesday, 29 October 2008.

Adjournment Matters.

Schools Building Projects.

Senator Frances Fitzgerald: I thank the Chair for giving me an opportunity to raise this matter. Our schools are facing many problems at present. Schools in the Lucan area have been badly affected by the initiatives announced in the recent budget. I am concerned that many children in the Lucan and Clondalkin area are being educated in prefabricated buildings. Some of the schools in question were hoping to get further provision as a result of the budget, but they have not received it to date. Schools are also worried that the cuts in substitution will impact on their staffing levels. The specific school I am speaking about this afternoon, Gaelscoil Eiscir Riada in Lucan, County Dublin, is the fastest growing gaelscoil in the country. It has almost 180 pupils. I would like the Minister of State, Deputy Mary Wallace, to outline whether the school will be helped in its efforts to acquire a site from County Dublin vocational education committee for a new school building. I am glad she is here to respond to my queries.

[Senator Frances Fitzgerald.]

When Gaelscoil Eiscir Riada opened its doors in 2005, it had 26 pupils, a principal and a single teacher. Its pupil numbers have grown rapidly since then, as I have indicated. There is huge demand for places in the school. As a result of the failure to provide a site for the new building, it looks like many of the siblings of the children who are attending the gaelscoil will not be able to join them there. The school has recently been offered an adjoining site, currently owned by the local VEC, on which to develop new permanent buildings. In return for the permanent site, the VEC is apparently asking for some works to be done on other sites. The VEC is willing to provide the site in question for this growing school. I understand the VEC has not heard from the Department about the acquisition of the site. I ask the Minister of State to get the Department of Education and Science to contact the VEC to see whether it is possible to make some arrangement, as a matter of urgency, to ensure the school will be able to take in new pupils, including the siblings of existing pupils, next year. Action needs to be taken to meet the growing demand in the area for this form of education. Many parents in Lucan want to send their children to a gaelscoil.

I would like to ask the Minister of State a few questions. Can she update me on the status of the negotiations on the site I have mentioned? Can she give me some detail on the Department's general view on the request that has been made by the VEC? Can she arrange for the negotiations to be concluded swiftly so that a site can be provided? Gaelscoil Eiscir Riada has proved to be a major asset to the Lucan area. The school authorities want the school to develop further so it can meet the need in the area. As a disappointed parent has said:

We feel that the Department are victimising us and our children because we chose to send them to a Gaelscoil. It is clear that the Department do not support Gaelscoileanna and that they have no interest in nurturing the language of our country. We have been more than patient as we watched other schools being built around us during the last two years while our children were left in prefabs. We are worried that our children are being discriminated against because we chose to send them to a Gaelscoil. What other reason can there be for them being left in prefabs, with no Departmental will to do anything for them?

It is clear that the parents of Gaelscoil Eiscir Riada are very concerned. They are keen for a permanent school building to be put in place soon. The site that has been offered to the school authorities is beside the existing school. It looks like it is possible to conclude the negotiations with the VEC. I ask the Department of Education and Science to make progress with the negotiations, thereby offering hope and encouragement to the parents who are doing a great deal of fund-raising. They want to continue to send their children to the gaelscoil and to be able to send their siblings there as well.

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy Mary Wallace): I thank Senator Fitzgerald for raising this matter and giving me an opportunity to outline to the House the Government's strategy for capital investment in education projects and, in particular, the current position in respect of the purchase of a new site for Gaelscoil Eiscir Riada in Lucan, County Dublin. The Minister for Education and Science, Deputy Batt O'Keeffe, has asked me to clarify that the modernisation of facilities in our existing building stock is a significant challenge. Similarly, we need to respond to emerging needs in areas of rapid population growth. The Minister intends to prioritise such challenges during his term in office.

The Government has dramatically increased investment in the schools building programme to almost €600 million this year. Almost €4.5 billion will be invested in schools during the lifetime of the national development plan. This unprecedented level of capital investment reflects the Government's commitment to continuing its programme of sustained investment

in primary and post-primary schools. The Government is emphasising the delivery of additional school places in rapidly developing areas while furthering its commitment to improving the quality of existing primary and post-primary accommodation throughout the country. Its investment will enable the purchase of sites to facilitate the smooth delivery of the school building programme, with a focus on site requirements in rapidly developing areas.

Gaelscoil Eiscir Riada is operating in temporary accommodation on a site that is owned by County Dublin VEC. The Department of Education and Science is consulting the VEC on the possibility of using the site, together with additional VEC lands, to meet the school's long-term accommodation needs. A study that was conducted to determine the feasibility of this proposal is being considered in the Department. The acquisition of the site will be considered in the context of the capital budget that is available to the Department for school buildings. As there are many competing demands on the Department's capital budget, it is not possible at this time to give an indicative timeframe for the acquisition of the school site.

Projects are selected for inclusion in the school building and modernisation programme on the basis of priority of need. The band rating that is assigned to a project indicates the urgency, type and extent of work required at a school. Under the band rating system, all applications for capital funding are assessed in the Department's planning and building unit. The assessment process determines the extent and type of each school's need, based on such matters as the demographics of the area, proposed housing developments in the area, the condition of existing school buildings and the capacity of the proposed site. The process ultimately leads to a decision on an appropriate accommodation solution. As part of this process, each project is assigned a band rating under published prioritisation criteria for large-scale building projects. The criteria were devised following consultation with the education partners. This project has a band rating of 1.1. I thank Senator Fitzgerald for giving me an opportunity to outline to the House the current position in respect of the purchase of a new site for Gaelscoil Eiscir Riada in Lucan, County Dublin.

Senator Frances Fitzgerald: Can the Minister of State give me any idea what the phrase "this project has a band rating of 1.1" actually means in terms of the timescale for the conclusion of the negotiations?

Deputy Mary Wallace: My knowledge of such matters is based on my experience of dealing with schools in my local area. I am sure the Senator has similar experience. As both of us represent constituencies in commuter land, we have to deal with many schools building projects. I understand that when a school is told that its project has a low band rating, it is bad news for the school. If a project is one of the upper bands, such as band 1, it is good news because the project has priority status.

While I do not have in-depth knowledge of the detail of the case mentioned by Senator Fitzgerald, it appears we are talking about a site that is owned by the VEC. A study has taken place. It appears from the sentence that reads "the Department of Education and Science is consulting the VEC on the possibility of using the site" that the Department considers the use of the site in question to represent the best way forward. However, an additional portion of VEC lands is also needed to meet the school's long-term needs. The study that was carried out is being reviewed in the Department. The outcome of that study will tell a lot.

Senator Frances Fitzgerald: Perhaps the Minister of State will ask the Department to contact the VEC.

Senator John Paul Phelan: I thank the Minister and the Cathaoirleach for giving me the opportunity to raise this issue. Like most of the Adjournment matters I have raised, this is a

[Senator John Paul Phelan.]

schools issue. Without casting aspersions on the Minister, Deputy Wallace, I want to raise my objection that we do not have a Minister from the Department of Education and Science present for the debate. Two of the three Adjournment matters this afternoon relate to education and there are enough Ministers in that Department to have one here to answer them. While the Minister, Deputy Wallace, will ably deputise for her colleagues in the Department of Education and Science, one of them should be here as a matter of principle.

My issue concerns Marymount national school in The Rower, a rural school in a neighbouring parish. The school caters for approximately 134 pupils. It has six teachers including five class teachers and a learning support teacher with a half-day of a resource teacher every week. The problem concerns the dilapidation of the school building. In the past few months the parish community has purchased additional lands adjacent to the existing school premises and has received a number of commitments, principally before the last general election and even before the previous one, that the school would be completed as a matter of urgency. The board of management and the parents' council have done Trojan fundraising work. They have been told they have passed all stages and are awaiting clearance from the Department to commence construction. That was expected to happen last October. The contractor who had been more or less pinpointed to do the job was expecting an announcement to be made last October but it has not been made.

As I said, the school is in poor condition. The rooms are smaller than standard size, there are significant problems with sewerage and electrical equipment. For the past eight years they have been renting two prefabs in the school yard for additional space at a cost of €10,000 each annually. This story is repeated in other parts of the country but unique to The Rower is the number of commitments given by the Government in the past number of years that work would be carried out, and nothing has happened.

It has already cost approximately €200,000 in fees for architects and engineers for the plans that have been drawn up for the new school in The Rower. It has not reached the final stage of the Department granting the go-ahead to the developer to commence work. The principal and other staff members had numerous meetings with the previous Minister for Education and Science, Deputy Hanafin, and were told they would be included in the last three or four announcements on school construction, but it has not happened. There is a high level of frustration in the area that this has not happened. In post-Celtic tiger Ireland there is concern that this announcement might never be made.

I was interested to hear Senator Fitzgerald's question at the end of her remarks on the banding system. As far as I was aware until very recently the bands included only one, two, three and four; the decimal places seem to be a recent development. I do not know if I am correct and maybe the Minister could correct me. There is a significant problem in The Rower national school. The building is more than 40 years old and is in an unacceptable condition for a national school in 2008. Commitments have been given by Government representatives over a number of years and no work has been done. I hope the Minister will have positive news for construction to begin in the near future when she responds.

Deputy Mary Wallace: I thank the Senator for raising this matter as it provides me with the opportunity to outline to the House the position on the proposed building project for Marymount national school, The Rower, County Kilkenny. Marymount national school is a fully vertical, co-educational facility. This means it caters for boys and girls from junior infants to sixth class inclusive. The enrolment as at 30 September 2007 was 128 pupils. The school has a principal, four mainstream assistants and one learning support teacher. The school has applied to the Department for large scale capital funding for an extension and refurbishment project. In

common with all applications for large scale capital funding, the application for Marymount was assessed in accordance with the Department's published prioritisation criteria for large scale building projects. It has been assigned a band 2.4 rating under this process.

A band rating reflects the type and extent of work needed and the urgency attaching to it. In this case, the band 2.4 rating reflects the fact that a refurbishment of the school building is needed and that the school has a deficit of mainstream accommodation but this deficit is not as significant as that of higher band rated projects. Overall, the Department intends to provide the school with suitable accommodation for a five teacher school. The project was on the Department's capital programme for 2007 to advance to tender and construction. Tenders were submitted late last year.

As the Minister, Deputy Batt O'Keeffe has said in this House many times before, not all school accommodation needs can be met together. They can be met only incrementally over time in a structured orderly manner. A realism has to attach to the fact that there was a significant under-investment in school buildings over decades. Taken together with the current extra demands on the Department's capital budget from newly emerging communities with little or no school infrastructure and the growing need to provide for special needs pupils, to name but a few, it is clear the Department must stand on an orderly process in terms of how it allocates its capital funding to ensure the most critical needs are met first.

The Minister, Deputy Batt O'Keeffe, appreciates that boards of management and wider school communities are anxious to see their individual building projects proceeding as quickly as possible. The Minister has no desire to see schools in less than suitable accommodation but he, too, must be realistic about what needs to be done on a nationwide basis and to ensure that the resources of the Department are targeted at the most urgent needs first. This is ensured by the implementation of the prioritisation criteria which the Minister has outlined.

This Government has dramatically increased investment in the schools building programme to almost €600 million this year. This will allow it to continue to significantly invest in primary and post primary school buildings throughout the country, to provide additional school places and to continue the Department's programme of modernising existing schools. Annual capital resources of this magnitude have allowed the Department to deliver more than 7,800 building projects under the last national development plan alone. The Minister, Deputy Batt O'Keeffe, looks forward to building on this unprecedented level of work.

I again thank the Senator for raising this matter and assure him that the project for Marymount national school will be considered for advancement in accordance with the procedures I have outlined.

Senator John Paul Phelan: While I am not happy with the response I thank the Minister of State. If we had a Minister from the Department of Education and Science here I might be able to find out more information. I am very disappointed with the band rating of 2.4, which is a kick in the teeth for those concerned with the Marymount national school in the The Rower. It is lower than I would have expected. I note with interest the Minister's reference to realism. So many commitments on this school have been given by Government representatives in Kilkenny in the past few years and a sense of expectation has been built up.

Acting Chairman (Senator Terry Leyden): Senator Phelan must ask a question.

Senator John Paul Phelan: I ask the Department of Education and Children to be more realistic in that sense. A number of years ago the school authorities were told not to seek any additional funding under the summer works scheme because they were to be in for a major redevelopment of the school. As a result of that the circumstances and conditions have deterio-

[Senator John Paul Phelan.]

rated. I regret that people in the Department told the board of management not to apply for summer works in the expectation that they would get a completely new school. I am not happy with the response, although I understand the Minister of State has to give it.

Acting Chairman: Senator Phelan has gone beyond the normal time without asking a question.

Deputy Mary Wallace: While I understand the band is in category two rather than one, it is not a kick in the teeth. A band of 2.4 clearly reflects the fact that a refurbishment of the school building is needed. I am familiar with projects that have a band of four, and they are stacked well behind the project that has a rating of 2.4.

Senator John Paul Phelan: They were misled, unfortunately.

Deputy Mary Wallace: It is an acknowledgement that the school has a deficit of mainstream accommodation but that this deficit is not as significant as those in the higher band ratings. That is how the band system works.

Garda Stations.

Senator Cecilia Keaveney: I thank the Minister of State for taking the time to answer my Adjournment matter today. I may be seen as a greedy person, because I will begin by congratulating the Office of Public Works, the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform and all those concerned in the major development taking place at Buncrana Garda station. I am not being greedy when I come to raise the issue of Carndonagh Garda station.

Had the Minister of State come to visit Carndonagh, he would have seen the awful conditions under which gardaí there operate. In terms of size, the Visitors Gallery in this House would probably be bigger than the Garda station in Carndonagh. When I raised the issue with the OPW, departmental staff and the Garda a number of years ago, people were surprised by what I said, other than those who had been in Carndonagh. They accepted what I said was not an exaggeration, and I was given credit for the fact that I probably did not exaggerate it when I could have.

Inishowen's population is approximately 33,000. It has a population that is 5,000 larger than Leitrim. It is the size of Louth and is a sizeable geographic entity. It is a peninsula and is close to the large population centre of Derry and is also close to Letterkenny, which is a major urban centre in Donegal.

Owing to a number of Garda stations being closed or only open during certain hours on certain days, an agreement was reached that there would be a complementary 24-hour service provided for north Inishowen. South Inishowen is being accommodated by the gardaí in Buncrana, and there is a 24-hour presence there. There were serious concerns, which I brought to the attention of various Ministers over the years, and as a result, an agreement was reached that north Inishowen would have a 24-hour facility. That was not just a Garda station, but also the ability for female gardaí to have their own space, the provision of cells, an area for people to be questioned and held, and also a holding yard for impounded vehicles. A full complex was to be put in place.

A number of years have gone by, and although I always had the impression that there was a favoured site and it was moving forward, the site was changed. I had a sense over recent months that there was a favoured site. I raised this issue on 13 February and the response I received stated:

Carndonagh is one of the priority locations on the Garda Síochána's building programme and it is intended to build a new Garda station there. A site has been identified and the Office of Public Works, which has responsibility for the construction and maintenance of Garda accommodation, is in the process of acquiring it. Once this is done, the OPW and the Garda authorities will bring forward the necessary detailed planning for the new station.

I raised the issue again on 13 May and hoped that things had moved on, but I received the same information as I did previously.

I respect that the Minister of State is new to the portfolio, and I know he will have an interest in promoting such an urgent and important piece of basic infrastructure for the Garda. If we had a plethora of stations opening all day, all week, I would not need to be here. We have a policy decision to have a major resource located in Carndonagh to serve the entire north Inishowen community. There has been no debate on the urgency or prioritisation of the need. I have watched this process closely. When the OPW, the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform and the Garda are all involved in trying to drive a project, sometimes the wheels come off the bus, as it were. I can see how it can happen.

Swift progress is being made on Buncrana Garda station. We have the right Minister of State at the helm should he be made aware of the current situation. I hope he has good news for me today.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Martin Mansergh): I thank Senator Keaveney. I share her affection for the peninsula of Inishowen. An ancestor of mine, Eleanor O'Doherty, was the sister of Sir Cahir O'Doherty. I have positive family connections. I wish what I had to say on this matter brought her more comfort.

Demographic changes in the Carndonagh area of County Donegal and an increasingly busy operational environment for the Garda Síochána have placed a considerable level of demand on the local Garda service. It has become evident over time that the existing station facility at Carndonagh, which was built in the 1960s, has become inadequate to accommodate Garda operational requirements to modern standards and, indeed, into the future. Accordingly, in 2006, the Garda Síochána requested the Office of Public Works to procure a development site in Carndonagh on which a new, larger station facility could be located. In recent months, after a public procurement process, the OPW successfully identified a site in Carndonagh suitable to Garda management. While no contract to purchase this site has been signed as yet, negotiations are at an advanced stage.

As the Senator will appreciate, because of the commercial sensitivity of this process, I am not able to give more details of the terms of the purchase at this time. Concluding this purchase will also depend on the availability of resources and the priority accorded to the project by the Garda Síochána and the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform. The policy choices are made by the Garda Síochána and the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform. We simply execute their wishes.

Financial provision for projects proceeding to construction is provided from the annual provision of the Garda building programme. Prioritisation of projects in that programme is a matter for the Department of Justice, Equality, and Law Reform and the Garda Síochána in the first instance. The prioritisation of the acquisition of this site and the commitment of funds to conclude the purchase is a matter for decision by them. Once a development site has been acquired at Carndonagh, the next step in progressing the project to construction would be for Garda management to provide a brief of requirements to the OPW which would clarify the scale and operational profile of a new Garda facility for the Carndonagh area.

[Deputy Martin Mansergh.]

There is no dispute about the need for a new Garda station. A fair amount of work has been advanced not only to identify a site but to negotiate terms of purchase, although that has not yet been finalised. It is a question of priority. There are similar requirements and situations, not only in Senator Keaveney's constituency but also in my own and every one throughout the country.

Senator Cecilia Keaveney: I appreciate the answer. I refer to the answer on 13 May, which stated:

[T]he Garda budget stands at over €1.6 billion. This level of resources is an unprecedented investment in policing, representing an 11% increase on the Garda budget for 2007. Under the NDP a sum of €260 million is assigned for Garda stations and other accommodation.

I would like the Minister of State to help me push this matter over the line, so to speak. Local knowledge has it that a long time has been spent looking at this site. The difficulty is that if the authorities do not seem to be coming to a conclusion, the site may be sold for something else, and there may not be another appropriate site in the future. I appreciate that we are in a situation of competing demands but the area in question has a population larger than that of Leitrim and is the same area as Louth. In that context, I ask the Minister of State to consult the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform in an effort to ensure this matter is prioritised.

Deputy Martin Mansergh: I take note of the final points made by Senator Keaveney. She referred to moneys for Garda buildings but we are in an even tighter situation now than we were six months ago. However, from here on I will take a personal interest in progress on the matter.

The Seanad adjourned at 2.30 p.m. until 2.30 p.m. on Wednesday, 29 October 2008.