

SEANAD ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 23 Aibreán 2009.
Thursday, 23 April 2009.

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach i gceannas ar 10.30 a.m.

Paidir.
Prayer.

Business of Seanad.

An Cathaoirleach: I have received notice from Senator Fitzgerald that she proposes to raise the following matter on the adjournment:

The need for the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs to outline the implications of the recent cutbacks in the community support for older people scheme and the plans for the future of this scheme.

I regard the matter raised by the Senator as suitable for discussion on the Adjournment and it will be taken at the conclusion of business.

Order of Business.

Senator Donie Cassidy: The Order of Business is No. 1, the time limit for the Order of Business, to be taken without debate at the conclusion of Order of Business; and No. 2, statements on the framework for the development of a diabetic retinopathy screening programme for Ireland, to be taken at the conclusion of No.1. On No. 2, spokespersons may speak for 12 minutes, all other Senators may speak for seven minutes and Senators may share time by agreement of the House.

Senator Frances Fitzgerald: I wish to move an amendment to the Order of Business to debate No. 37. It is important that we discuss this issue. Yesterday, we saw further evidence from the Taoiseach of botched political reform with his apparent failure to follow through on the reforms announced in the budget. It is now unclear what he intends to do in regard to ministerial pensions and long service increments. Fine Gael has published a Private Members' Bill which would give a statutory basis to a reduction in the number of Ministers of State to 12. The Taoiseach did not do this yesterday when he announced his new appointments. We should debate Fine Gael's motion today because people are concerned about the economy and the Government's proposals on banking. This topic should be a priority given that people are losing their jobs on a daily basis. Every Senator has encountered people who are in despair after becoming unemployed. It is clear that businesses are not moving in the right direction and we need to ensure we address the banking crisis and are given the details of the Government's intentions.

I refer to the editorial in *The Irish Times* today regarding the slow implementation of A Vision for Change, which outlines how our mental health services ought to progress. An inde-

[Senator Frances Fitzgerald.]

pendent report which was commissioned by the Government and published last week highlighted the disgraceful situation in regard to the implementation of A Vision for Change. I know Senators on all sides of the House are concerned about our mental health services, but this independent report says no drive or leadership is being shown in implementing this document. There is appalling neglect of mental health throughout the country despite the Government's claim that it is implementing A Vision for Change. There is a pressing need to publish a detailed plan with targets, a timeframe and resource commitments if there is to be any progress. I ask the Leader to arrange a debate as soon as possible on that independent report as well as on its implementation.

While we welcome the reorganisation of the HSE, we also need a debate on the impact on frontline services given some of the details that have been published, including the 1,000 jobs that are being cut.

Senator Joe O'Toole: I absolutely agree that we need a debate on the Fine Gael Private Members' motion. It is unfortunate that for obvious reasons we were unable to take it yesterday. I urge the Leader to take it either today or to take two Private Members' motions next week. I think we have time to deal with it today, however, and Members have things to say on that matter. We have been away for the last couple of weeks so I certainly support the view that we should debate it. There are many issues to discuss, even in light of yesterday's UK budget. There are positive things the Government side can take out of this. The UK budget deficit looks like it is higher than the Irish one. The Government side can make its case but we need engagement and should discuss this issue. We also need to hear the Government's considered response to the IMF figures that came out yesterday.

Before the Easter recess, I asked the Leader for a debate on energy. I would specifically like a debate on what is going on in north Mayo. I am no apologist for Shell and I have major reservations about the deal we have done concerning offshore exploration. However, we will be 95% dependent on imported foreign energy from next year, as soon as the Kinsale gasfield finishes, which it almost has. Shell does not own the infrastructure and it cannot distribute gas through Ireland without our say so. We own the infrastructure through An Bord Gáis and we need to get that gas ashore. I do not speak for Shell but we have established democratic structures. We have gone through the process and Shell has met all the demands required of it at this stage. That gas should be brought ashore for the Irish people, not for Shell.

The Leader might not be too happy when I say there is a lack of political leadership on this issue. People are afraid to take on protestors. I come from a left perspective on this issue. I do not agree with any kind of fascist action which undermines democracy and I will fight against it. I am also looking at two Government Ministers — the two Eamons — Deputy Eamon Ryan and Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív, who are engaged in some kind of popularity contest in the west. They are competing against each other as to who can be the most amenable to everybody around them. There are issues at stake for the Irish people and the future of Irish energy independence, so we need stronger political leadership on the question of getting the gas onshore in Mayo. I am seeking a debate on that.

Senator Alex White: The kind of political reform we need goes a lot deeper than the suggestions that have been made. In the last few days, the Government's handling of the fiasco over long-service increments — I know some Members will have sensitivities about it — has exposed politicians and the political system yet again to the charge that we are living in a parallel universe. We are living in a different place compared to most people in this country at the moment. I met somebody yesterday who told me his entire family, including his sons, daughters

and sons-in-law, have lost their jobs. There was not a single person in his extended family who currently has a job.

The issue is whether we are part of the solution or part of the problem. We are seen by increasing numbers of our fellow citizens as part of the problem, not the solution. I do not say this in any sense from a lack of respect for this House or the Lower House, but until we wake up to that fact we will be losing public respect because we are simply not relevant. Unfortunately, these Houses are proving themselves to be largely irrelevant to people's daily concerns. We have an economic system that is in crisis but we also have a political system in crisis because it is not responding. Professor Ray Kinsella made that point again this morning and he is absolutely right — the political system is broken. It is not enough for us to talk about longer sitting hours or all the various laudable suggestions that have been made on how we might reform our business, it goes much deeper than that. I agree with Professor Kinsella's point that the divisions between political parties are increasingly obsolete in terms of stepping up to the plate and presenting options to the public for solving our problems. One often hears the argument that political parties need to come together and there is a case for that on some issues. I heard Senator Boyle calling for that on the banking issue, but we also have a duty to present alternatives to the Irish people — genuinely different positions that we can argue about in these Houses. It is not a question of one side standing up and the other disagreeing for the sake of it, but of genuinely teasing out these issues. I regret to say, however, that is not happening in this Parliament. We should have a debate on the wider issue of political reform, so I ask the Leader to arrange that.

There was one chink of light in the budget concerning child care.

Senator Mary M. White: Hear, hear.

Senator Alex White: I would certainly give a cautious welcome for that. I say "cautious" because I am not clear on how precisely it will be funded or whether the places will be there.

Senator Mary M. White: Yes.

Senator Alex White: I would like the Minister of State with responsibility for children, Deputy Barry Andrews, to attend the House for a debate on how we will replace the crazy system we had for funding child care with a serious, comprehensive system of one year's free child care for all children. It appears that the Labour Party's position in the last general election will now be adopted by the Government. I genuinely welcome that if it occurs, but I want to see how it will be implemented and funded.

An Cathaoirleach: I call Senator Leyden.

Senator Terry Leyden: Not just yet. I am waiting for something.

Senator David Norris: He is gathering his thoughts.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: He is considering his pension.

Senator Paul Coghlan: I wish to second Senator Fitzgerald's proposed amendment to the Order of Business. It is the most important issue facing the country because without stability in the banking system our economic recovery will fail and we will not achieve the lift-off we all desire. The sooner this item at the top of the agenda is tackled the better. Although we do not have any details, there is talk that we will not have the necessary legislation before the autumn. Perhaps the Leader can clarify this. If that is so, it is wrong because it will do frightful damage to the economy. We cannot afford that delay, as damage is being done daily. Whatever

[Senator Paul Coghlan.]

else, the concept is agreed on this issue and I think there is scope for the Minister for Finance along with Deputy Richard Bruton and other party representatives to sit down together. This matter should be agreed in the national interest, but let us take the Fine Gael motion. We believe we can put forward an improved model. I ask the Leader to respond in detail.

I wish to raise another issue regarding legislation. We have had a hubbub in the past from the redoubtable father of the House and one or two others concerning the unregulated free-for-all in the auctioneering profession. If it were not for the two institutes there would not be a compensation fund to protect customers. Now, of course, some of these estate agencies are collapsing given the state of the market and nobody gives a fig about the situation. The National Property Services Regulatory Authority exists in shadow form and has glorious offices in Navan. It also has staff and a website.

An Cathaoirleach: Is the Senator seeking a debate on the matter?

Senator Paul Coghlan: I am asking specifically about the relevant legislation, an issue I have raised previously with the Leader. The body is in place and has everything except authority. It is not able to function because legislation is not in place. Where is the long-promised legislation? The Leader must tell the House. Although this is an urgent matter, it is not as urgent as the matter on which an amendment to the Order of Business has been proposed.

Senator Mary M. White: Since 2005, I have been lobbying, as a Fianna Fáil Senator, for free early childhood education for every three year old. It is a pleasure to note, therefore, that from next January onwards every child will be entitled to a free preschool place in a private or community crèche or Montessori school. The owners of such facilities, whether private or public, will receive €64.50 per week for every child who attends.

All available international evidence shows that after the first four years of life, it is no longer possible to achieve the same pace of emotional and intellectual development in children. The returns of early childhood education on human and personal development cannot be measured while the returns to the economy are gargantuan.

I have spoken previously in the House about the importance of early childhood education to each individual child. From an economic point of view, Ireland will not be able to compete if we do not educate our children from birth onwards. Education for children from the age of birth until three years will have to be addressed in future. We will not compete if our children's brains, emotions and physical development are not cherished from birth.

We frequently discuss competitiveness, research and development. Early childhood development is good for the economy, although I approach this issue primarily from the perspective of the potential development of each human being and that to which every child born in this country is entitled.

Senator David Norris: I join Senator Fitzgerald and others in calling for the debate on the establishment of a national assets management agency, which was scheduled for last night, to be taken today. I do so with some force because at the beginning of this parliamentary term, just after Christmas, I made an initial suggestion to establish what I described then, and the record will show this, as a national property management agency. I returned to the issue on three further occasions. My proposal was derided in the House and not reported elsewhere. I believe this is where the idea originated — I certainly referred to it in the House and gave some details. While the Government has started to act, it has done so backwards and incorrectly. I believe its approach could backfire. The House could add to the debate on the issue. Perhaps the Government would listen with greater attention to what is said and get the details right.

I also ask that Mr. Peter Bacon be called to the House to answer Senators' questions about the establishment of a new assets management agency. While I have great respect for Mr. Bacon, I was horrified last week to hear him on RTE radio say that as a result of his proposal, the responsibility would land back where it belonged, namely, with the shareholders of the banks. In what sense were the shareholders responsible or guilty? They acted perfectly legally in investing their hard-earned savings in a national institution. I see no criminality or blame in that respect and feel a great deal of compassion for hard-working people, young business people and elderly people who placed their savings in banks. They should not be held up to contempt and scorned by someone like Mr. Bacon.

I am interested in the commentary of the American analyst, Mr. Krugman, who has derided the Irish economy. We need people out battling for us because Mr. Krugman, for all his Nobel prize in economics and so forth, is playing a domestic economic game and using Ireland as a weapon in an argument taking place in the United States. We should resist that.

I ask for a debate on No. 27, motion 7 on the Order Paper which was tabled by Independent Senators and deals with water supply contamination. One area in which we seem to be better than Britain is in producing e.coli contamination, which is 30 times higher in our water supply than in that of the United Kingdom. In the past year, 120,000 people were told to boil their water from their domestic supply. According to an Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, report published this morning, one third of water supply sources in this country are contaminated. It is time we woke up and smelt the water, if not the coffee. We need to do something on this issue, which is coming back home to roost in this House. Only a few Senators supported An Taisce when it pointed out that this would happen as a result of the unregulated development of one-off housing in the countryside. Practically all Senators, and certainly all those on the Government side, ridiculed, derided and lambasted An Taisce. Thank God for that organisation because at least it is awake.

Senator Camillus Glynn: Last Tuesday, I and a number of my colleagues from the Oireachtas Joint Committee on the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, including Senator Paul Coghlan, visited the docklands development. We hear a great deal about how the money arising from the Celtic tiger era has been squandered. This is one project on which every cent was well spent. I have never been more impressed by a project. The extent of it is awesome, to say the least, and one of its most positive features is the involvement of local people in leadership roles. Our visit was one of the most energising experiences I have had since entering public life. Will the Leader arrange a debate on the development of the docklands because the issue merits such a debate?

Senator Dominic Hannigan: I join Senator O'Toole in calling for a debate on energy supply, including nuclear energy. As the Senator noted, it is anticipated that 95% of Ireland's energy will come from abroad. A debate on this issue would be timely given that last week the British Government announced its plans for a new generation of nuclear power plants. We cannot avoid the elephant in the room in this regard. For this reason, we must consider the possibility of using nuclear power. Ireland has the disbenefit of being fewer than 100 miles from Sellafield, which *The Observer* newspaper describes as the most dangerous place in Europe. While it is necessary to debate the potentially negative impact of nuclear energy, we also need to be clear that we will potentially take energy from this source from the United Kingdom. We must examine, therefore, whether we are willing to build nuclear reactors here.

Senator Terry Leyden: Will the Leader arrange an early debate on the role of the Garda Síochána, developments in the force and the challenges it faces? It would be worthwhile to

[Senator Terry Leyden.]

have the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform, Deputy Dermot Ahern, outline his legislative proposals in this regard and discuss related issues.

Last Monday, the *Irish Independent* published an article by Michael Brennan, a political correspondent, on a scare story about the proposed closure of 236 rural Garda stations. This is an erroneous, inaccurate report without foundation in fact. On Tuesday night, I met the Commissioner of the Garda Síochána, Mr. Fachtna Murphy, and Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform, Deputy Ahern, in Dublin to discuss this issue. I was given a categorical assurance by both the Commissioner and Minister that there is no truth in the story, no such report exists and no proposals have been made to close Garda stations.

I cannot understand the reason a national newspaper should use scare tactics to worry and concern people. People have great time for rural gardaí and value their Garda stations, of which we have a fine network. The Commissioner assured me and encouraged me to make clear the position in this regard because the newspaper report has worried people in rural areas who are under attack. The Cathaoirleach will be familiar with this problem from his own constituency where a murder recently occurred in Dainegan. I assure people in rural areas, including County Roscommon, that the report is inaccurate and has been refuted by the Commissioner and Minister.

11 o'clock

I commend the Garda on its excellent work. As Senators will be aware, a hoard of gold was recently found as a result of an investigation into the robbery of a safe from Sheehan's pharmacy in Strokestown. I compliment the sergeant and gardaí who found the hoard in Dublin. It was a wonderful achievement.

I commend and congratulate our colleague Senator Ross on an excellent article in last week's *Sunday Independent* on our esteemed colleague, Mick Phelan, a senior usher of the Houses. It was a great tribute to a fine servant of the people of this House and was a very revealing article. I congratulate all our colleagues here for their recent excellent win.

Senator Eugene Regan: I refer to the IMF report which indicated that the cost of the bail out of the Irish banks would be €24 billion or approximately 14% of GDP. The Government has suggested, in effect, that the bail out of the Irish banks is cost free. The Taoiseach has rubbished the IMF report, in terms of its calculations. It exposes the lie of the Government on the cost of the bail out of the banks.

The editorial in the *Financial Times* today on the IMF estimates of the costs of bail outs of banks in the financial sector says the International Monetary Fund this week released its updated estimate of losses to the world's financial sector and for more than a year, the IMF's loss estimate has swollen with each update. The estimate for Ireland is conservative. The editorial goes on to say some governments may object to the IMF forecasts but at least the estimates leave no room for wishful thinking and force us to realise there is more pain to come.

I do not understand why the Government cannot be upfront and honest about the costs. The spin on the Irish economy and the public finances just does not work any more. The Government has been found out by the European Commission, with its addendum in January to the stability programme where its estimates for Government debt have already been changed. The Standard & Poor's downgrade of sovereign debt of Ireland and our banks was criticised by the Government and now every economist who ventures to suggest the Government may be going in the wrong direction in the form of the bail out, such as David McWilliams, are immediately taken on by the Minister for Finance, Deputy Lenihan.

David McWilliams indicated that NAMA was set up to aid developers. There is anecdotal evidence already that the banks are easing up on their demands of developers and other debtors

because of the proposed establishment of NAMA. This is where the taxpayer, rather than the developer, will bear the brunt. I call on the Leader to ask the Minister for Finance, Deputy Brian Lenihan, to clarify his genuine and latest estimate of the cost of the bail out of the Irish banks to this House. The Department of Finance have refuted the estimates. When have the Department's estimates of the public finances or growth rates in the Irish economy or otherwise last been accurate? I ask the Leader to address that question.

Senator John Hanafin: I ask the Leader to arrange a debate on communications. I am very conscious of the import Eircom has for the Irish economy. It is suggested that what can only be described as a vulture fund would take over Eircom, a strategic national asset, strip it of its assets, reduce the number of employees and prevent the necessary development that is ongoing and essential to our economy to benefit from the coming upswing in the world economy.

I contrast this with how much has been done in many areas. It is very easy to have a knee-jerk reaction and say everything was wrong for the last ten years. We have had some wonderful developments in our housing stock, motorways and infrastructure in general. Notwithstanding that, there are areas which still need to be developed, including communications, and there is much good and necessary work being done, which will create gainful employment for people which will benefit this economy and our competitiveness in the future.

It does not benefit anybody for the Opposition to talk down the economy. It seems that whatever is the choice of the day in the newspapers is the view we get on this economy, and it is always the worst possible. The reality is that world economies are expected to pick up and then, and only then, will we see how well prepared this economy and country is for the future.

Senator Feargal Quinn: When we travel abroad and go into an hotel we always find a candle beside the bed because they are so used to running out of electricity. We have not appreciated that for many years we have been used to the fact that every time we turn a switch the light comes on. Senators O'Toole and Hannigan have drawn our attention to the fact that we are in serious danger of running short of energy in the next few years. It is important we debate this. We should not just debate the issue of nuclear energy, which I want. I have looked for a debate on nuclear energy. I am not saying it is the answer but, as Senator Hannigan said today, the British are planning to build more nuclear sites and the Chinese announced last week that they will build five nuclear sites because of their dependence on fossil fuel, which they want to change.

It is for that reason we should have the debate Senator O'Toole is looking for and have a debate on oil and Shell's efforts to bring gas to the people of Ireland, which is being restricted and restrained in a manner which I do not understand by what is apparently a small body of people. It is worthy of debate, and we should have it and include a debate on the environment as well.

Today, 23 April, is an interesting day as it is the day Brent geese leave in very large numbers for their home north of Canada. It is a very long flight. They leave on 23 April every year and come back on 23 October. If anybody wants to see them, they can go out and say goodbye to them in north county Dublin. It is part of the reason we should be debating the environment, not just for the reason Senator Norris spoke about.

I was shocked to discover the poor quality of water in Ireland, as published in the Environmental Protection Agency's report. We only learned this today. In France, every time one receives a water bill it is stated on it the most recent survey on the quality of the water. There is no reason why we could not have such information published every month in Ireland. We should not have to wait for the EPA to state what the water quality now is, how bad it is and the e.coli contamination. If we had a system such as that in France we could publish the

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information every month in the local newspaper and we would know exactly the quality of our water.

I would like a debate on energy which would include the north Mayo gas situation, nuclear energy, and the environment. The Green Party in Britain has changed its attitude to nuclear energy and has said it wishes to include nuclear energy as one method which is acceptable, whereas it opposed it in the past.

Senator Larry Butler: I agree with Senator Quinn that we should have a debate on our energy approach and how we will position ourselves in terms of the European grid. It is vitally important. A group of engineers and architects approached me recently about a study they have done regarding wind and water energy. They have done a detailed survey and found that wind energy is very good when the wind is blowing, but they designed a system whereby they would introduce a water system with the wind system which would create 24-7 support for wind energy. This would also involve the farming community, which would be welcome in terms of income from their point of view. It would create a situation where a lake form water system would be developed which would support the fishing industry. I am very enthused about that.

A study done has shown we have natural energy with a potential value of €68 billion per year — equivalent to that of Saudi Arabia — if we were to develop it and feed it into the EU grid. We could be net exporters of energy. This is the way we have to go. Ireland is far too small for nuclear energy. However, I agree we should have a debate on it. We should discuss how we can exploit our natural resources at sea. We are being hampered in this regard by a few people in County Mayo, which is disgraceful. Last night they broke into a compound and caused much damage, which is bad for our reputation worldwide. A multinational company comes here and creates 700 or 800 jobs in the construction of its facility, yet people are taking the law into their own hands. It sends out the wrong message.

Perhaps the Leader could arrange for a debate on this as soon as possible because it is an important issue. I want to bring in the group I mentioned and have an all-party meeting in this regard as soon as possible. The prospects are exciting and we should advance the development of such projects.

Senator Maurice Cummins: Many people who have lost their jobs and fallen behind in their mortgage repayments are being hounded by the banks. They are receiving letters saying their houses will be repossessed. In some cases these letters are being sent to people who are as little as €6,000 in arrears. Would it not be better for the banks to tackle their cronies, the large developers, who owe tens of millions of euro and continue to have a lavish lifestyle?

Senator Nicky McFadden: Hear, hear.

Senator Maurice Cummins: It would be better to tackle these than people who have fallen on hard times through becoming unemployed.

We on this side of the House asked for a moratorium on mortgage repayments for people who had become unemployed, and we were told it would be part of the recapitalisation negotiations with the banks. This does not seem to have happened. We need the Minister to come to the House as a matter of urgency to let us know what is being done to help people who are unemployed and cannot at the moment meet their mortgage repayments. It needs to be spelt out. We were given assurances it would happen with the recapitalisation of the banks, but it is not happening. Increasing numbers of people are receiving letters from banks threatening repossession, while people who owe tens of millions are not being tackled at all. There is a

need for clarification in this regard. The Minister should come to the House and reassure the thousands of people who find themselves in difficulties in these times.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I join Senator Fitzgerald in asking the Leader for a debate, as a matter of urgency, on A Vision for Change and on our mental health system, which is in crisis. This is because there is no drive or leadership from the Government and increasing numbers of people are faoi bhrú, or under pressure. The cry of human despair from ordinary people is not being heeded by Government. I am asking the Leader for a debate on the independent report published last week, which Senator Fitzgerald rightly highlighted, and on A Vision for Change. People are looking for help in greater numbers every day. Just yesterday I spoke to a woman who was a carer and also the only person in a household of five who was working. That is demoralising. There is no leadership from Government in this regard. The report has long been due to be implemented, but it has now been scattered to the four winds.

Political reform was botched again in the budget. Deputy John McGuinness was right — the two Brians have made a bags of it — and he got no reward for it. When will the political class in Government realise that the number of their officials, advisers and so on is unacceptable? I will give one example on which I ask the Leader to comment in his reply. The Progressive Democrats Party, as far as I know, has gone out of existence, yet it has a press officer being paid a salary of more than €100,000. The Minister for Health and Children has a press adviser who is also being paid more than €100,000, a programme manager being paid €177,000, and a special adviser being paid €150,000. That is a total of four people working for the Minister. Why has the press officer of a party that has gone out of existence now been assigned to the Minister for Health and Children, who has a press officer already?

Does the Leader think it correct that the Government has three separate press officers? It has one for Fianna Fáil — and it needs one, God help us — one for the Progressive Democrats Party, which is now gone, and one for the Green Party, which this week has a problem with language.

Senator Maurice Cummins: Phraseology.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: It has a problem with phraseology. Can somebody on the Government side answer my specific question?

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

Senator Jerry Buttimer: It is relevant to the Order of Business. It is high time we exposed the fact that the Government——

An Cathaoirleach: Does the Senator want a debate on it?

Senator Jerry Buttimer: No, I want answers. I do not want a debate.

An Cathaoirleach: That is a matter for the Leader.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I want those on the Government side to tell me how they can condone or justify the excesses of Government and the peddling of spin when it is costing more than €500,000 per annum for just three people. That is before all the other people involved in this area are taken into account. I would like a debate on how Government operates and the apparatus around it. It is high time we had this debate.

Senator Frances Fitzgerald: What measures are they taking?

Senator Shane Ross: I support the calls from Fine Gael for a debate on the national assets management agency, NAMA, and not necessarily just on that. I note Senator Regan's comment that a Government representative should come to the House and tell Members the cost of recapitalising the banks. I was shocked, as I am sure were most other Members of the House, to hear last week, which was a quiet week, that AIB had come forward to say it wanted another €1.5 billion, just like that. It had just got €3.5 billion.

Senator Paul Coughlan: It has not got it yet.

Senator Shane Ross: It will get it on 13 May.

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Ross without interruption.

Senator Shane Ross: The chief executive, Mr. Eugene Sheehy, said last year he would rather die than accept equity. He has now taken €3.5 billion in equity and faces the prospect of selling the Polish subsidiary or even the American shareholding.

Senator Paul Coughlan: Or both.

Senator Shane Ross: He will not be able to sell them and he will be back to the taxpayer looking for €1.5 billion shortly. This is a matter of great urgency, and it indicates — I say this with no pleasure as I have an account with this bank — that AIB is under a great deal of pressure. This is very serious and the House is entitled to debate it.

We are living in a fool's paradise here. Those who resent the comments from abroad, particularly from the IMF, are wrong. What we are hearing from the IMF is the unpalatable truth, which is that our banks are in trouble, perhaps incurable trouble, and they will have to be nationalised. That is justification, if there ever was any, for a debate in the House. We should not run away from it. We have plenty of time today. The NAMA issue is not a simple one. It is complicated. Someone will lose and it is time the Government came clean and told us who. Will it be the bank shareholders, the banks, or the taxpayer? It will be one or the other, and the price of the loans will make all the difference.

We should also ask the Government to consider the position of the board and the chief executive of AIB. They are all still *in situ* while they come to the Government, cap in hand, looking for €5 billion. This is a serious matter that should be debated in the House, and we should do so today.

Senator Paschal Donohoe: One of the most frightening things in the discussions about the current economic difficulties has been the elevation of economists to the role of high priests. They are playing a prominent role in the discussion of what is happening to our economy and what needs to be done about it. That has led us to miss an important point, namely, that there must be a political as well as an economic response to the current crisis. I am struck by how the events of this week are undermining the ability of the Government to deliver the type of political response that is required. Yesterday, some 2,000 people queued a short distance from this Chamber to apply for 150 jobs. This is happening in the same week that demoted Ministers of State are given a payment of €50,000. It is happening at the same time that the issue of increments to politicians and pensions to Ministers has been handled in a way that will do terrible damage not only to the Government, which I care less and less about, but to the entire political system. People look to us to provide leadership. However, the actions being taken by the Government on a daily basis are chipping away at public confidence in our ability to do so.

There are three specific actions the Government must take. First, I agree with Senator Alex White that when there are genuine differences between political parties, they should be dis-

cussed. This is why Senator Fitzgerald's amendment is so important. My party has a different view on how the banking system should be handled. Let us thrash out these issues in the Chamber. We must examine the core issue of nationalisation of the banks. I cannot see how the national assets management agency can work without at least the partial nationalisation of the two largest banks. Twenty of the leading economists in the State are of the same view. Why can we not debate this issue in the House?

Second, where there are offers of co-operation across the political divide, let us accept those offers. My party has indicated its willingness to support an all-party Oireachtas committee on banking regulation. There is no better time to undertake that work. Third, we must have more aggression and pride in defending our country when it is under attack. Last week, an article in *Newsweek* described the Nobel prize-winning economist, Mr. Paul Krugman, as one of the prominent figures in American economic and political life. Last Monday, Mr. Krugman launched a very strong criticism of our economy. Where is the response to this? Why have the Government, the ambassador and the Minister for Finance not defended our State and put forth the facts about the current situation?

I conclude on a positive note by congratulating our colleague, Senator Norris, on the award he received last night from the Lord Mayor of Dublin. As a former member of Dublin City Council, I was fortunate enough to be involved in some of those events and decisions in the past. To be recognised in this way is a rare honour and a great achievement. It is wonderful that the council took the opportunity to recognise Senator Norris for the great contribution he has made to our city.

Senators: Hear, hear.

An Cathaoirleach: So say all of us.

Senator Ivana Bacik: I join Senator Donohoe in congratulating my colleague, Senator Norris. I support Senator Norris in his call for a debate on the quality of our water supply. The Senator has exhorted us to wake up and smell the water. This may be all we should do as it is apparently unsafe for drinking given the levels of e.coli and so on. It is important we debate this issue. I also support Senator Fitzgerald's call for a debate on the proposed national assets management agency. That debate is already taking place throughout the State and it should take place in this House today.

I ask the Leader for an early debate on crime, an issue of enormous concern to people in the wake of recent events, particularly the appalling murder of Roy Collins in Limerick. Not only was this a brutal and heinous crime against an individual, it was also a blow against the entire justice system. From what we have been told, it appears to represent a significant attempt to undermine the fundamental nature of the criminal justice system. That system relies on witnesses to come forward and to provide evidence in order to secure convictions. It is impossible for the Garda to do so without reliable evidence. Where witnesses are intimidated, there cannot be an operating justice system. That is why there has been such enormous concern in the wake of the sad death of Roy Collins.

In this context, I very much welcome the forthcoming Criminal Justice (Surveillance) Bill 2009 and look forward to debating it in this House. It will provide an important additional resource for the Garda in terms of gathering evidence and will mean the force is not entirely reliant on the testimony of witnesses. However, I urge caution in regard to calls for non-jury trials and the increased use of the Special Criminal Court. There is no question that we must deal with the serious problem of witness intimidation. In this context, there have been legislative changes to allow witness statements to be relied on even where the witness has recanted. However, we have not had the same argument about juror intimidation. There are other ways

[Senator Ivana Bacik.]

of dealing with this. The principle of jury trial is an important one which we as democrats should defend in this House and elsewhere. I hope we will have a robust debate on crime without a descent into cheap attacks on basic tenets of the criminal justice system. That would be a disaster for us all.

Senator Nicky McFadden: I support colleagues in calling for a debate on water quality. It is extraordinary, in the wake of the Celtic tiger, that our water supply infrastructure is so deplorable. The Environmental Protection Agency has recommended that the only way to solve the problem is to install better treatment facilities and so on.

What the Government has done, however, is to abolish the fallen animal grant. The €28 million previously allocated for this purpose is a relatively small sum when one considers the damage that will be done to the water table when unfortunate farmers who have been so badly stricken by the current economic crisis have no option but to bury dead animals. There is a danger that some irresponsible people may even deposit carcasses in streams and rivers. The cost of bringing a fallen animal to a knackery is now €190, representing an extraordinary increase of 528%. The subsidy has been abolished since last April with the result that there are no incentives for farmers to deal with this extraordinary situation.

Under the water framework directive, we must comply by 2015 with defined water quality standards. How will we achieve this objective when no incentive is given to farmers to assist them in the disposal of fallen animals? I read with disdain that the Irish Farmers Association has asked that farmers be permitted to bury their animals. This is not the way forward. I call for an urgent debate on this issue in view of the difficult situation in which farmers find themselves. Measures must be put in place to replace the former successful scheme.

Senator Pearse Doherty: I add my voice to the calls for a debate on the national assets management agency. The need for such a debate is one of the reasons for my annoyance at yesterday's Adjournment of the House after 20 minutes. While I acknowledge that it is proper to pay respects on the death of a Member, the extent of the economic crisis is such that we should nevertheless have had a discussion on a proposal which could potentially—

An Cathaoirleach: Nobody opposed the Adjournment of the House on yesterday's Order of Business. It is standard practice when a current Member dies that the House will adjourn. There was a large attendance for yesterday's Order of Business but there was no objection to the Adjournment.

Senator Pearse Doherty: I am aware of that. My point is that I was dissatisfied at the Adjournment of the House in the midst of the current economic crisis when we should have been debating a policy that could potentially bankrupt the State.

Senator Eugene Regan: Senator Doherty was not in the Chamber yesterday.

Senator Pearse Doherty: I add my voice to the calls for that debate to take place today.

Will the Leader allow a debate on third level fees? I understand the Minister will make an announcement on this issue shortly. There are differing views on this matter from the various political parties. Sinn Féin and the Labour Party share the view that third level education should be provided from direct taxation. Fianna Fáil is apparently preparing to reintroduce third level fees. Fine Gael's proposal for a graduate tax is completely unfair and unjust. For example, a graduate dentist earning a net income of €2,777 would have to pay €1,333 in additional tax every month for the next four years.

Senator Maurice Cummins: That is not correct.

Senator Pearse Doherty: The Minister indicated the changes will apply to students sitting the leaving certificate this coming June. The various proposals should be put to the House so Members can thrash them out and inform the Minister's decision. Perhaps the Leader would arrange such a debate.

There must be a discussion on the issue of Ministers of State and the golden handshake they have received. It is incredible the Government has learned no lesson from its mishandling of the economy and the anger of the public. While pensioners and social welfare clients have been denied a Christmas bonus, Ministers of State, some of whom have served less than two years, will receive a severance package of more than €500 for every week they held their positions while still in employment and earning a full Deputy's salary and expenses. It is no wonder there is such outrage. We should not have to have this debate because the issue should never have arisen, but something must be done. We need to discuss the important issues, such as the banking crisis and the national assets management agency, NAMA.

I am glad to hear other political parties coming to the view, which we have argued in this House and in the Dáil for many years, for a nationalised bank. I am not speaking of Anglo Irish Bank, which is the developers' bank, but a proper bank such as Bank of Ireland or AIB. This would meet the needs of customers and businesses. I am glad to hear that view emerging from some of the other political parties.

Senator Mark Daly: Several Members referred to economists as the new high priests. I am reminded of the observation that if all the economists in the world were laid end to end they would not reach a conclusion. Senator Ross referred to the €7.5 billion which we gave to the banks as a loan. We must remind the public that the banks are paying €500 million a year for the use of the money and that amount comes back to the taxpayer every year. Furthermore, if the Government subsequently sells a property for less than it paid a bank for it, the bank will be required to repay the difference. The taxpayer will not be at a loss. That is the aim of the budget. It is not correct to claim that the Government has bailed out the banks to the tune of €7.5 billion. The Government loaned the money to the banks and is getting €500 million a year for it.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: That is Kerry mathematics.

An Cathaoirleach: The Senator was not interrupted when he spoke. Senator Daly, please.

Senator Mark Daly: What I said is a fact. High food and clothing prices in the Republic of Ireland are an important issue. The answer to the problem came yesterday in Tesco's annual report. Tesco accounts for 27.5% of the Irish market. This year the company's profit increased by 5.2% and its worldwide profit was £3.1 billion. Nevertheless, Irish suppliers of goods and services to Tesco are going out of business every day and do not seem to reflect the Tesco success. More than 2,000 jobs have been shed by Tesco suppliers in recent months. What is going on here? Tesco is employing playground bullying tactics.

Senator Mary M. White: That is a very serious allegation.

Senator Mark Daly: It is our job to police the playground. Irish brands and jobs are being destroyed by Tesco. While we welcomed the company to Ireland, we did so on the understanding that Irish customers would get better service and cheaper food. That has not happened. Dublin Meath Growers have been put out of business by the action of multiple retailers. Irish

[Senator Mark Daly.]

workers are being threatened because supermarket chains do not wish to source their goods in Ireland.

Senator Mary M. White: The Senator should be careful what he is saying. He is making very serious allegations.

Senator Mark Daly: These are facts.

Senator Eugene Regan: VAT.

An Cathaoirleach: No interruptions, please. Questions to the Leader.

Senator Mark Daly: When 2,000 jobs are lost because of the action of Tesco and other multiple retailers we have a duty to speak about it in this House.

Senator Mary M. White: Is the Senator sure of his facts?

An Cathaoirleach: No interruptions, please. Senator Daly is speaking and he should ask a question of the Leader.

Senator Mark Daly: We can speak in this House but suppliers cannot. They have appeared before a joint committee but they cannot speak out. They say they have been asked for promotion payments, or what used to be known as “hello money”. To speak out against a company which takes 25% of one’s production would be commercial suicide.

Senator Paul Coghlan: That is correct.

Senator Mark Daly: It is our duty to continue to investigate why multiple retailers are treating Ireland as a suburb of Manchester rather than a separate country.

Senator David Norris: Hear, hear.

Senator Mark Daly: They are now trying to source UK international brands rather than Irish international brands and putting our workers out of business.

Senator Mary M. White: That is not correct, a Chathaoirleach. The Senator is making a very serious allegation about our economy and about a company which has done so much for this country. He is smearing a company. He should make those allegations outside the House.

An Cathaoirleach: We are dealing with questions to the Leader.

Senator Mark Daly: I ask the Leader to discuss this issue with the Minister and investigate it further. The Joint Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment tried to do so and had to meet *in camera* to get to the bottom of the matter.

Senator David Norris: Exactly.

Senator Paul Coghlan: That is true.

Senator Mark Daly: If further investigation is required it should be carried out. I know the Minister has been investigating this matter and I urge her to continue to do so.

Senator Mary M. White: I suggest that Senator Daly make these allegations outside the House. What he said is very serious.

An Cathaoirleach: It is a matter for Members what they say in the House. It is their own responsibility.

Senator Donie Cassidy: Senators O'Toole, Alex White, Coghlan, Norris, Cummins, Buttimer, Ross, Donohoe, Bacik, Doherty and Daly all called for No. 27, motion 7 to be debated today. Owing to the untimely death of our colleague, Senator Tony Kett, this item was not debated during Fine Gael Private Members' time yesterday evening. I have already arranged with Senator Frances Fitzgerald, leader of the Fine Gael group in the House, that it will be debated during Fine Gael Private Members' time next Wednesday evening. If it is felt necessary to give three hours to this topic I am prepared to propose that on the Order of Business next Wednesday. Private Members' time can be extended to three hours to allow all Members to make their views known on this very important and urgent issue.

We will review weekly the difficulties being experienced in banking. No one in the world has an answer to these difficulties. Everyone is doing their level best to rejuvenate the world's economies. Yesterday, we saw the British Chancellor of the Exchequer bring in his budget and we have seen the huge efforts being made by the new President of the United States, Barack Obama, to rejuvenate the US economy. Because Ireland is a small open economy, we were hardest hit by the downturn. I hope we will be one of the first to recover when the upturn arrives. Within months of the American economy recovering we will return to economic growth.

Senator Fitzgerald called for a debate on A Vision for Change, the report of the expert group on mental health, and wider issues pertaining to the Health Service Executive, HSE. I have no difficulty in allocating time for this and I hope the Minister for Health and Children, Deputy Mary Harney, will attend the House for that debate.

Senators O'Toole, Hannigan, Quinn and Butler called for a debate on energy, which is timely. I can accede to this request, especially as Senators have pointed out the importance of this topic. I listened attentively to Senator Larry Butler and other Senators speaking about the proposed Mulcahy report on wave power and the challenges facing Ireland in this area. These challenges could be turned into an opportunity and give Ireland an income for many years.

Senators Alex White and Mary White congratulated the Minister for Finance on the child care initiative announced in the budget. I join them in their congratulations.

Senator Alex White: Steady on.

Senator Donie Cassidy: I look forward to the new measure being put into effect on 1 January next. I especially congratulate Senator Alex White on showing leadership on the Opposition side. When something positive happens in Government he is intelligent and big enough to congratulate the Minister concerned.

Senator Alex White: We had to look forward.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: The most positive news is the departure of the Brent geese over the Atlantic.

An Cathaoirleach: The Leader, without interruption, please.

Senator Donie Cassidy: I believe the new councillor in the Senator's area will deal in due time with him.

[Senator Donie Cassidy.]

Senator Coghlan asked about the auctioneering Bill. The auctioneering Bill will be before the House this year. I agree with the Senator that it is urgent. I hope to be in a position to inform the House next Tuesday when that Bill will become before the House.

Senator Paul Coghlan: When will the legislation be published?

Senator Donie Cassidy: It is hoped — I stress “hoped” — it will be published this session. Members will recall that six unexpected Bills were published during the last session owing to the banking challenges. One cannot foresee what future difficulties might arise in this area. As pointed out by Senator Leyden, the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform is also facing many challenges. I will return to that issue shortly. In terms of dealing with these issues, unexpected drafting of new Bills and Bills which seek to amend existing legislation, both of which must be brought before both Houses for approval, takes time and requires us to take account of the availability of draft persons. Members will be aware that expertise in these areas is of the utmost importance. Members of the House whose qualification is in the legal profession will know how tedious and lengthy a process is the drafting of legislation which must be brought before each House for scrutiny. While it is my intention that the auctioneering Bill will be dealt with in this House during this session, that may not happen until the next session should it be necessary to bring before this House the two or three Bills published yesterday. I will update the House on this next Tuesday.

Senators Norris, McFadden and Bacik called for a debate on water quality. I have no difficulty in allowing time for such a debate. As one who lives in the lake district of Ireland, a beautiful part of hidden Ireland in the midlands, I would welcome a debate on this important and topical issue.

Senator Glynn called for a debate on further developments in the docklands and on what has been achieved in terms of transformation of the area. I often take friends there to show them the achievements and advancements of our country during the past ten or 12 years. It has been mind boggling to witness the developments taking place there. It shows what can happen with progressive ideas. I have no difficulty in providing time for a debate on this issue.

I join with Senator Leyden in congratulating the Garda Síochána on the great work it is doing. The Senator also called for a debate on the role of the Garda Síochána, the challenges facing the force into the future and the proposals put forward in this regard. We are all aware of the ever-changing challenges facing the Garda. The force is to be congratulated on its work in the drugs area. I support the comments made by Senator Leyden in regard to the article on the closure of local Garda stations, which is unfounded and untrue. I am pleased to hear he has been reassured by the Minister and the Commissioner on this matter.

Senator Eugene Regan: We will hold the Government to that.

Senator Donie Cassidy: I join with Members in congratulating the Ushers on their good fortune and send good wishes to Mr. Michael Phelan, whom I understand will retire shortly.

Senator Regan made known his views on the IMF report and the difficulties and challenges facing Government in terms of the economy and all pertaining to it. The Senator will have an opportunity to raise the issue by way of Private Members’ business. As I stated, we will be reviewing week-on-week this matter during the current session.

Senator Hanafin called for a debate on communications and expressed serious concerns in regard to the future of Eircom and the important role it can play in the development of our

economy. I have no difficulty in providing time for such a debate and will endeavour to ensure it takes place during the coming weeks.

Senator Quinn expressed his support for the proposals outlined earlier and informed the House of the departure today of the Brent geese. As I understand it, they leave on 23 April and return on 23 October. One learns a little every day. I have learned a little today having heard Senator Quinn's contribution on the topic.

I join Senator Donohue in congratulating Senator Norris on the recognition given to him last evening by the Lord Mayor of Dublin. It was well deserved and we all congratulate him. An issue on which Senator Norris and I agree is the move of the Abbey Theatre to the GPO building for the 2016 commemoration celebrations. I look forward to debating that issue in the House a little later this session.

Senator David Norris: Hear, hear.

Senator Donie Cassidy: It would be a huge vote of confidence in O'Connell Street, the GPO and those who gave their lives for our country. I take this opportunity to inform the House that I intend to provide time for a debate on this topic in the near future.

Senator Bacik called for a debate on crime. I take this opportunity to inform the House that a number of urgent Bills will come before the House this session. The Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform will be in this House quite often. I support the Minister, the Commissioner, the Garda Síochána and the Government on their attempt to ensure fear of the law. It appears a small number of citizens no longer fear the law. It is our duty to ensure fear of the law. We must support the Minister of the day and Commissioner in terms of passing legislation required to meet the challenges in this area.

Senator Doherty called for a debate on education. He also proposed that third level fees should be taken from direct taxation. I have no difficulty providing time for a debate on that proposal and will endeavour to do arrange time for a debate on education. Senator Daly outlined the difficulties being experienced by the north Dublin growers in terms of products sold by Tesco, a food-chain that has 27.5% of the market in Ireland. I chaired the committee set up to debate the grocery order. Senators Coghlan and Leyden were also members of that committee. We are now seeing the fruits of what was said at that time. As Senator Daly stated, we must back Irish growers in terms of saving jobs. I will provide time for an open ended debate on the challenges facing Irish branded products and what we, as members of this House, can do to ensure the undertaking given by Tesco to the Joint Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment in respect of the grocery order, in terms of its requirement to retain a high percentage of Irish products for sale in its stores, is adhered to. Tesco provides 13,000 full time and 4,000 part time jobs in Ireland, which is gainful employment. It also provides terrific opportunities for Irish growers.

There exists a list, I believe, of 14 or 15 items not being manufactured in the EU. Perhaps our institutes of technology or young entrepreneurs seeking new ideas could by way of attending the Joint Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment ascertain the items being sold in our multiples but not manufactured anywhere in the EU. We must keep an eye on this and ensure the multiples continue to sell a particular percentage of Irish products.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: On a point of order, either skilfully or inadvertently, the Leader did not respond to the specific questions I raised.

An Cathaoirleach: I have no control over that.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I am looking for interpretation from the Chair.

An Cathaoirleach: I have no control over——

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I have raised a specific matter with the Leader on the Order of Business——

An Cathaoirleach: I have no control over——

Senator Jerry Buttimer: ——regarding Government special advisers and press officers which he ignored.

An Cathaoirleach: It is not a point of order.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: He ignored——

An Cathaoirleach: Senator——

Senator Jerry Buttimer: On a point of order——

An Cathaoirleach: That is not a point of order. The Senator asked the Leader a question.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I asked a specific question but he did not answer it.

An Cathaoirleach: I have no control over the Leader.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: He ignored——

An Cathaoirleach: It is not the Chair's job to reply.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: He ignored my specific request.

An Cathaoirleach: He may refer back to the Senator.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: My question to the Cathaoirleach is——

Senator Donie Cassidy: On a point of clarification and to be helpful to the Senator, I included his name in the response. I thank the Cathaoirleach for allowing me to speak.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: The Leader did but he did not refer to the remarks I made. I spoke on two issues on the Order of Business.

Senator Donie Cassidy: I have left all those urgent matters to Private Members' business.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: This is urgent.

Senator Donie Cassidy: I have given an extra hour to elaborate.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I did not refer to Private Members' business. I spoke about A Vision for Change and Government advisers and press officers and I asked the Leader——

An Cathaoirleach: There is an amendment to the Order of Business.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: This is a matter of extreme urgency.

An Cathaoirleach: The Leader——

Senator Jerry Buttimer: With respect to the Chair, this is a matter of extreme urgency. I do not want to be disrespectful to the Chair but I asked a specific question.

An Cathaoirleach: The Senator is being disrespectful to the Chair. I will adjourn the House if the Senator persists.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I want the Leader to reply to my specific question.

An Cathaoirleach: I have no control whatever over the Leader

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I want the Leader to reply to my specific question regarding paid advisers to Ministers and the Government. I want it answered.

An Cathaoirleach: I ask the Senator to resume his seat.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Can the Leader reply to me?

Senator Donie Cassidy: If a response is necessary, it actually——

Senator Jerry Buttimer: The Leader knows a response is necessary.

Senator Donie Cassidy: All I can say from experience is that it happened between 1983 and 1987. It was the Senator's party that started it.

An Cathaoirleach: The Leader has replied.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: The Progressive Democrats Party has expired. The party no longer exists. A member is being paid——

An Cathaoirleach: I ask Senator Buttimer——

Senator Jerry Buttimer: The Leader has not answered my question.

An Cathaoirleach: I have no control over the Leader.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: This is part of the lack of leadership from Government.

An Cathaoirleach: I have no control whatever over the Leader's replies.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Who does?

An Cathaoirleach: There is an amendment——

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Who has control?

An Cathaoirleach: The Leader replies.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: When he ignores a request from a Member, what recourse does one have?

An Cathaoirleach: I cannot control what the Leader replies to.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I know the Cathaoirleach cannot control that and we appreciate that.

An Cathaoirleach: I am unable to control many Members.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: What recourse do I have?

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Frances Fitzgerald has moved an amendment to the Order of Business: “That No. 27, motion 37, be taken today.” Is the amendment being pressed?

Senator Frances Fitzgerald: Yes.

Amendment put.

The Seanad divided by electronic means.

An Cathaoirleach: The result of the vote is Tá, 20; Níl, 20. There is an equality of votes. Therefore, pursuant to Article 15.11.2° of the Constitution, I have to exercise my casting vote. I will vote against the question in this case, in view of the commitment given by the Leader to debate this matter on Private Members’ time next Wednesday. That is why I am voting “Níl”. The amended result is Tá, 20; Níl, 21. The question is defeated.

Senator Frances Fitzgerald: Could I call for a walk-through vote? The Cathaoirleach’s decision to use his casting vote in support of the Government means we will not have a debate on the economy today. I call for a walk-through, manual vote.

An Cathaoirleach: That is agreed.

Amendment again put.

The Seanad divided: Tá, 20; Níl, 21.

Tá

Bacik, Ivana.
Bradford, Paul.
Burke, Paddy.
Buttimer, Jerry.
Cannon, Ciaran.
Coghlan, Paul.
Cummins, Maurice.
Doherty, Pearse.
Donohoe, Paschal.
Fitzgerald, Frances.

Healy Eames, Fidelma.
McFadden, Nicky.
Norris, David.
O’Toole, Joe.
Quinn, Feargal.
Regan, Eugene.
Ross, Shane.
Ryan, Brendan.
Twomey, Liam.
White, Alex.

Níl

Brady, Martin.
Butler, Larry.
Callely, Ivor.
Carty, John.
Cassidy, Donie.
Corrigan, Maria.
Daly, Mark.
de Búrca, Déirdre.
Ellis, John.
Feeney, Geraldine.
Glynn, Camillus.

Hanafin, John.
Leyden, Terry.
MacSharry, Marc.
Mullen, Rónán.
O’Malley, Fiona.
Ó Domhnaill, Brian.
Phelan, Kieran.
Walsh, Jim.
White, Mary M.
Wilson, Diarmuid.

Tellers: Tá, Senators Jerry Buttimer and Maurice Cummins; Níl, Senators Déirdre de Búrca and Diarmuid Wilson.

Amendment declared lost.

Order of Business agreed to.

Order of Business: Motion.

Senator Donie Cassidy: I move:

That, in each sitting until the adjournment of the Seanad for the Summer recess, the Leader of the House be called to reply to the Order of Business no later than 55 minutes after the proposal of the Order of Business; that the contribution of each Group Leader shall not exceed 3 minutes; the contribution of every other Senator shall not exceed 2 minutes; and the reply of the Leader of the House shall not exceed 15 minutes.

Question put and agreed to.

Diabetic Retinopathy Screening Programme: Statements.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children, Deputy Áine Brady, to the House and wish her the very best of luck in her new portfolio.

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy Áine Brady): I thank the Leas-Chathaoirleach and Members for their welcome and welcome this opportunity on my first day in office as Minister of State to speak to the Seanad on the subject of the framework for the development of a diabetic retinopathy screening programme for Ireland, which was published in November 2008.

Diabetes mellitus is a chronic, progressive metabolic disease. There are two types. Type 1 or insulin dependent diabetes accounts for approximately 10% of cases. It affects mainly children, adolescents and young adults and requires lifelong treatment with insulin. Type 2 or non-insulin dependent diabetes accounts for 90% of all cases diagnosed in Ireland and it affects mainly middle aged and older people. Its prevalence is rising rapidly due to a number of factors, including the aging population and lifestyle factors such as obesity. Diabetes is a common condition. A report, Making Diabetes Count — What Does the Future Hold?, published by the Institute of Public Health, provides the best available estimates of the prevalence of diabetes, both diagnosed and undiagnosed, in the Republic of Ireland. Just over 140,000 adults in the Republic are estimated to have diabetes -type 1 and 2 combined. The report predicts this figure will rise to at least 194,000 or 5.6% of the population by 2015, a 37% increase. It further estimates that this increase will be largely due to an increase in the incidence of type 2 diabetes, owing to the increase in childhood and adolescent obesity.

My Department's policy on diabetes, Diabetes: Prevention and A Model for Patient Care, was published in 2006. This set out a model of care based on shared care between primary care and acute services which would deliver quality diabetes care at the appropriate level. It also identified retinopathy screening for eye disease as well as patient education and empowerment, and the development of podiatry services as key areas for further development.

The Health Service Executive established an expert advisory group under Dr. Colm Costigan to take forward and implement the policy recommendations. The group published its report on 14 November 2008. The report is a blueprint for the development of services for patients with diabetes over the coming years. It is practical and patient focused, with strong emphasis on prevention, service integration and community based management, supported by specialist services. The group emphasises that real savings could be achieved in health care costs by preventing the complications of diabetes such as eye disease, specifically diabetic retinopathy, kidney disease and cardiovascular disease.

Retinopathy was identified as one of the most common serious complications of diabetes. Diabetic retinopathy is a disease of small blood vessels of the retina and is the most common

[Deputy Áine Brady.]

cause of blindness in people aged 60 to 65. Approximately 5% to 10% of people with diabetes have a sight threatening retinopathy which requires ophthalmic follow-up and treatment. Of the estimated 140,000 people with diabetes in Ireland, approximately 14,000 will develop a sight threatening retinopathy. Screening, followed by treatment of retinopathy, is very effective in preventing blindness. International evidence shows that in a population of those screened and treated, 6% are prevented from going blind within a year and that this rate rises to 34% within ten years. Among the group's key recommendations was the introduction of a diabetic retinopathy screening programme to prevent eye disease. The expert advisory group formed a sub-group, the diabetic retinopathy screening sub-committee, to develop a framework for the development, implementation and monitoring of a national diabetic retinopathy screening programme which we are discussing in the House today.

In December 2007, and in advance of its report, the advisory group made interim recommendations to the HSE leadership team for the development of diabetic services. It prioritised the roll-out of the national diabetic retinopathy screening programme. It recommended the following targets: that funding for the development of a national diabetic retinopathy screening programme be prioritised; that funding be made available incrementally over the next four years to implement the programme in each of the four HSE areas, commencing the programme in a new area each year; that the HSE immediately prioritise funding and commence procurement for an eye specific IT system to support a national diabetic retinopathy screening programme; that the HSE set up a formal governance structure for a national diabetic retinopathy screening programme; that 95% of registered people with diabetes be invited for screening by year five of full national implementation, and that 70% of registered people with diabetes attend screening by year five of full national implementation.

In November 2008 the diabetic retinopathy screening sub-committee produced a national framework for diabetic retinopathy screening in Ireland. This framework set out the aims and principles which should underpin the development of a screening programme. The aims of a national diabetic retinopathy screening programme are to detect sight threatening diabetic retinopathy which is treatable, detect any diabetic retinopathy that it is possible to detect with digital retinal photography, provide screening on a call/recall basis according to best practice guidelines and refer patients in a timely way for ophthalmic assessment and treatment as required.

The following principles of the national diabetic retinopathy screening programme have been adopted by the HSE diabetes expert advisory group. It should be a population based call-recall programme, delivered on an annual basis. Eligible patients should include all those with diagnosed diabetes, aged 12 years and over and medically fit to attend. It will be accessible to all eligible patients, by which I mean it will be free, wheelchair accessible, delivered locally, and that provision will be made for the screening of prisoners and persons in nursing and residential homes who are fit to receive treatment. Screening should be carried out using digital retinal photography. Screening should be delivered in four area programmes, based on a population of approximately 1 million and a geographic area corresponding to each HSE area. A register of people with diagnosed diabetes should be established for each area, and collated nationally. A grading service should be developed on the basis of each HSE area population. These centres will grade images taken by all photographers in the programme for that area. The screening model should be mixed, that is, it will feature a combination of fixed and mobile clinics and, possibly, photography by optometrists depending on the geographical distribution of the population, public transport links and economies of scale. HSE areas should propose their preferred service model to the national screening committee or national executive office for approval. Screening should be carried out in cooperation with general practitioners, hospital

diabetes service staff, optometrists, ophthalmic physicians and surgeons. There should be timely referral, assessment and treatment of abnormalities discovered. There should be timely feedback to the screening programme of the result of screening events and of referrals. There should be a robust system of clinical governance and quality assurance.

It was decided to continue the roll-out of the programme across the Health Service Executive, western region, as a population-based screening programme had previously been established in the former North Western Health Board. The funding was, therefore, made available to the HSE western region primary community and continuing care budget. This would allow for screening services to be offered to all people with diabetes — approximately 30,000 people over the age of 12 years — registered with the programme between west Limerick and north Donegal.

Owing to resource constraints, the diabetic retinopathy screening programme did not commence in 2008. At present the HSE is moving into the implementation phase for the roll-out of the screening programme to the rest of the western region based on the national framework document. Funding of €750,000 is available in 2009 for this purpose. One of the key parts of the implementation phase is the development of the governance and committee structures and this process is under way. Job descriptions and recruitment forms for the eight agreed staff are with the relevant local health offices. Currently all recruitment activity and recruitment competitions are placed on immediate hold pending further clarification regarding the filling of posts. Should approval be granted to fill the posts, it will then be possible to proceed to the various stages required for recruitment. The formal procurement process for the information and communications technology requirements of the programme is to commence in the coming months.

A quality assured diabetic retinopathy programme of highest international standard is being rolled out this year in the west. We hope to continue the roll-out of the programme in other areas as resources permit.

Senator Frances Fitzgerald: I congratulate the Minister of State on her appointment and wish her success. I note, however, that in the appointment of Ministers of State, she is the only woman and we have lost two female Ministers of State. I regret the number of women in the Government has taken a backward rather than a forward step, given our very low representation in the Houses generally. That is a backward step, but I wish the Minister of State success.

The key point in the Minister of State's speech was contained in its closing paragraphs, namely, that "Owing to resource constraints, the diabetic retinopathy screening programme did not commence in 2008". Another key sentence in her speech was that, "Currently all recruitment activity and recruitment competitions are placed on immediate hold pending further clarification regarding the filling of posts." Therefore, as the Minister of State said, there is a great uncertainty about the future of this vital service.

The statistics on the incidence of diabetes in Ireland are frightening, as I am sure the Minister of State will agree. Diabetes is no longer a future threat to the health of our people, rather it is a current crisis. An estimated 250,000 people have diabetes. It is estimated that approximately 100,000 people do not yet know that they have the condition. The Minister of State might comment on this figure or report back to the House on it. A significant number of people who have the condition are undiagnosed, they do not present for treatment because they are not aware they have the condition and, therefore, they are not able to take the kind of preventative action that is necessary.

It is also expected that the number of people suffering from diabetes in Ireland will double in the next decade. This is undoubtedly an extraordinarily serious public health policy issue

[Senator Frances Fitzgerald.]

because the implications for people with the condition without treatment are serious. We definitely need a national debate on this illness. To tackle this public health crisis we need greater awareness, more services and more preventative work.

It is regrettable there is not a greater focus on preventative medicine and health promotion. At a time of scarce resources in particular, as well as at other times, it is important that health promotion is given a high priority. The figures for the incidence of obesity among children are startling. The increase in the incidence of obesity is also startling, it being one of the predisposing factors for diabetes. Preventative action and working with parents, teachers in schools, general practitioners and people in any centres where young people gather to try to influence young people's attitudes towards a healthy lifestyle and healthy eating is critical. I again call for the implementation of the expert report on obesity because we must examine the taking of preventative action in this area. That is critical.

Approximately 5% to 10% of all people with diabetes will develop sight-threatening retinopathy. It is a major cause for concern that up to 50% of persons with type 2 diabetes have retinopathy at the time of diagnosis. This highlights the delay in diagnosis of diabetes at an early stage.

As the Minister of State will be aware, when money was allocated to extend the mobile screening service in the north west, it could not be delivered at that time because of the recruitment ban. She might update the House in that respect. That may be the matter to which she was referring towards the end of her contribution.

I note that in the programme for Government neither Government parties considered that a national diabetes strategy merited a mention. This issue needs to go higher up the priority ladder in terms of our public health policy. There has been some apathy and a lack of urgency in addressing this serious public health issue. I welcome that the Leader placed this matter on the Order Paper for debate today. I hope we can create greater awareness about this illness.

We have the expert group report on this illness. I understand it is working on an ongoing basis. The Minister of State might clarify that. I thank its members for their work. The role of such expert groups is important in pointing the way. What is happening in terms of the implementation of the report's recommendations? The Minister of State might give Members more detail on their actual implementation. We know what the recommendations of the report from the diabetes expert group published last November indicate. They state that real savings can be achieved in health care costs by preventing the complications of diabetes, that patient education is very important — a point I have repeated — patient education and community empowerment are critical, linked to GP care and specialist care, and that a regional model of care is recommended for children and adolescents with diabetes. It also recommends a framework for a national diabetic retinopathy screening programme for Ireland which is clearly essential. It is sad to think of people who have lost their sight who, with proper treatment, early diagnosis and intervention, would not have done so.

Will the Minister of State, when replying, outline the plans for the full roll-out of the diabetes screening programme, as recommended by the expert advisory group? If the necessary public funds for the programme are not available, which is what the Minister of State appears to be saying, are there any other plans or is she considering other methods of delivery such as public private partnerships to deliver the screening programme? The shortage of ophthalmologists is an issue in rolling out this programme. Are there plans to train and upgrade the training of this group of people to ensure the incidence of retinopathy can be identified? What is the future role of the expert group?

The issue of screening makes complete sense. It will save the State and the health system money and it will also save people's sight. I saw in some research material on diabetes that the cost of the illness to the State is €350 million. I also saw figures for the cost to the State of people who are being treated for conditions such as foot ulcers as a result of diabetes. The cost in this instance is high. It can cost up to €40,000 per person for people who need inpatient treatment. This illness can have extraordinary implications. A recent "Prime Time" programme covered the case of a very young woman who lost the sight of one eye because of a lack of treatment and screening. What is the plan for the implementation of the expert group's report? A renewed sense of urgency and priority needs to be attached to the issue of diabetes and its screening. Prevention and early diagnosis needs to be emphasised if we are to minimise the serious effects of this illness and maximise the chances of successful treatment and containment.

Senator Geraldine Feeney: I wish to share my time with Senator Walsh, by agreement.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Geraldine Feeney: I welcome our new Minister of State, Deputy Brady, and congratulate her on her appointment. Senators on this side of the House are delighted that she was recognised and promoted because she is ideally suited for her brief. As a young, modern woman with a healthy family, her eyes will be firmly fixed on health promotion.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak about diabetes. The last occasion on which the Seanad debated this issue was in 2005. Judging from the Minister of State's contribution, it appears we have achieved 100% of the goals we set in that debate. Diabetes is a chronic progressive disease. Type 1 diabetes is insulin dependent and affects children, adolescents and adults. People who have type 1 diabetes know about it because their survival depends on regular injections of insulin. However, I am told that people can have type 2 diabetes without being aware of the condition. During our 2005 debate, the late Senator Kate Walsh, who had diabetes, asked how one could have diabetes without knowing about it. She advised anyone who noticed the signs of diabetes to seek medical advice because it is manageable if diagnosed on time.

Lifestyle and diet play a significant role in the onset of diabetes, which appears to affect older men especially. Even something as simple as feeling thirsty can be a sign its onset. As we are living longer, the current combined figure of 140,000 for types 1 and 2 sufferers will increase by as much as 37%.

In 2006, the Department of Health and Children issued a report on diabetes prevention and patient care. An expert group set up by the Health Service Executive, HSE, under the guidance of Dr. Colm Costigan subsequently issued its own report. These reports offer an opportunity for significant progress on dealing with the disease.

A "Prime Time" episode broadcast last year made for horrific viewing in its description of a secondary school student in Donegal who suffered from type 1 diabetes. This young girl's plight was raised on the Order of Business in the Seanad. Senator Fitzgerald stated that the girl went blind in one eye but my recollection of the matter is that both of her eyes were affected. It was devastating for her to be struck down at such a young age. No amount of money should be spared in setting up a screening programme to prevent such cruel afflictions because prevention is better than cure. It is also important that people are educated about the signs of diabetes.

As people tend to say the same things in debates such as this one, I will simply welcome all that the Minister of State has said rather than address her proposals in detail. Senators who were involved in our previous debate on diabetes will agree this screening programme represents an improvement on our approach to the issue. I am glad the programme has been

[Senator Geraldine Feeney.]

rolled out in the west in light of that region's high incidence of diabetes. However, it is crucial the programme is adequately funded. We are all aware of the ban on recruitment and that money is short supply but I cannot emphasise enough the importance of this programme. Over a five-year period, screening will be rolled out to the entire country.

I was heartened to hear that the UK model of clinical governance and quality assurance will also apply here. During the previous Seanad, the Joint Committee on Health and Children heard from an expert group which discussed the this model. I am confident the Minister of State has the enthusiasm to keep on top of her brief. She can change the lives of many people for the better by ensuring the effective roll-out of the screening programme. I urge her not to allow the ban on recruitment to become an obstacle to spending the money available to her as efficiently as possible to help those who are struck down by this disease.

Senator Jim Walsh: I thank Senator Feeney for sharing her time with me and join her in congratulating the Minister of State on her promotion, which is a distinct honour. I have known the Minister of State for many years and am sure she will excel in her new position because she has the commitment necessary to meet her new responsibilities. She will have the goodwill of everyone in this House in that regard.

I welcome much of what she has said in her contribution. Senator Fitzgerald correctly pointed out that lifestyle is a significant factor in the onset of this pervasive disease. Our emphasis should be on education, therefore. Health promotion should include avoidance of areas that lead to diabetes, particularly obesity and the consumption of many sugar-based foods and carbohydrates. I was not conscious of the effect carbohydrates have in transferring to glucose within the digestive system, as a consequence of which they can lead to high blood sugar levels. I am sure Senator Twomey will be able to correct me if I am wrong, but if I sound knowledgeable about this it is because 18 months ago I had a dry mouth, a condition to which Senator Feeney referred. I went to have it checked and the GP subsequently rang me to say my sugar levels were borderline and near the danger zone for diabetes. I said it was not too bad if it was borderline, but asked what the limit was. The doctor's reply stuck with me because he said having diabetes was a bit like being pregnant, that one cannot be a little bit pregnant — one either has it or not. He sent me to a dietician and in the meantime I checked in a DIY book I have at home, which is a medical encyclopaedia, to compare diabetes types 1 and 2. I was surprised that there are no life expectancy issues with type 1 diabetes, providing a person takes insulin. However, with type 2 diabetes there is a life expectancy issue because of the progressive nature of the disease, so that motivated me and having gone to the dietician I decided to apply the advice. I lost two stone and went back to the GP about six months later to get a baseline, which should have been done much earlier. He rang me subsequently to say there was good news: I was not suffering from diabetes and my sugar levels were half what they were before. It means however that I could well be a candidate for diabetes but hopefully by catching it in time and dealing with it, one can avoid it.

That brings me to the point because the Minister of State laid heavy emphasis in her speech on the measures that are being taken for diabetic retinopathy screening. That is absolutely essential because loss of eyesight is a terrible affliction and disability. People who suffer from diabetes are in the high risk category so we should place the emphasis on investing in such a screening programme.

As Senator Fitzgerald said, there are many people with undiagnosed diabetes and others who may well develop it within the next few years due to their diet and lifestyle. While the emphasis on screening is for registered diabetics, there should be an educational programme aimed at those with undiagnosed diabetes and others at risk. Perhaps the screening could be

extended to such people so they can be checked in time. In many ways, investment in this type of diagnostic area can save a lot of money in the health service later on. Apart from loss of vision, the Minister of State mentioned other factors including kidney, liver and cardiovascular disease which is common. The cost of treating those diseases, if diabetes develops, is extremely high and therefore I advocate educating people so they are aware of the problem. In addition, screening should be provided for early detection and hopefully people will be motivated to make the necessary lifestyle changes to avoid the potential effects of diabetes. My comments are based on my experience and the limited knowledge I accumulated from it. One of the changes I made was to use the stairs rather than the lift, as my office is on the third floor. A former Minister for Health, Deputy Rory O'Hanlon, told me that when he moved into the Department he stopped using the lift and has never used it since, although he is now on the fifth floor. Once we become aware of the dangers and risks involved, small changes like that can make a difference. I am sure Senator Twomey's contribution will be much more expert than mine, given my limited medical knowledge.

I encourage the Minister of State to broaden the scope of the screening programme to reduce the future incidence of diabetes. In addition, we can add to the value of people's lives who may thus avoid the disease. I compliment and congratulate her, and wish her well in her new portfolio. I have no doubt she will discharge her responsibilities effectively. She has all our good wishes in that regard.

Senator Feargal Quinn: I welcome the Minister of State and we are honoured that she is attending the House on her first day in her new portfolio. She comes here with a huge amount of enthusiasm and commitment. I hope she will place diabetes, and diabetic retinopathy in particular, high on her list of priorities. While I do not have medical expertise, it seems one of the things that can be done is to remind people they can do something about their lifestyles even before being screened. It was interesting to hear Senator Walsh talk about using the stairs instead of the lift. In the 1940s, when I was about six years of age, I remember my father saying he heard a doctor on the radio stating that people were not getting enough exercise. The doctor suggested that people should always run up stairs instead of walking up them. I got into the habit of doing that and my father also did so for many years. The Minister of State can remind people that they can do something about their health through a change of lifestyle.

Both here and abroad, a large amount of research is taking place into diseases that affect the eyes. We must continue to invest in such research which will pay for itself in many ways. An interesting article was published recently on macular degeneration which reported on a successful outcome as a result of stem cell research. Within two years they believe they will be able to solve that problem, although I am not sure of the method involved or whether it will be acceptable to everybody. Nonetheless, it appears it is possible to do something in this regard.

Senator Feeney mentioned how horrific it is to lose one's eyesight. I know of one young woman who was on one of the supermarket customer panels. She had lost her eyesight, but gave great example to others by saying she was not going to let it beat her, that she was going to beat it. She was able to prove that the ability to conquer adversity is within ourselves.

Diabetes affects approximately one in 25 patients in the developed world, and the incidence of diabetes in Ireland is increasing. As the Minister of State told us, it is expected that up to 5.6% of the population will be affected by 2015. In Ireland, diabetic retinopathy accounts for 12% of all new cases of blindness each year. It is the leading cause of blindness in patients between the ages of 20 and 65. After 65, macular degeneration probably affects eyesight more.

Diabetes can affect the eye in various ways, but the most serious effects are through problems in the retina. This is called diabetic retinopathy. Having diabetes does not mean that a person

[Senator Feargal Quinn.]

will necessarily have eye problems. However, it is important that regular eye examinations are carried out to ensure potential problems are diagnosed early. That is really the point — it does not cost money, it just involves reminding people to have such checks. Sight loss from diabetes can usually be prevented if diabetic retinopathy is diagnosed and treated early.

I was also interested in another statistic according to which diabetes affects one in every 100 adult Europeans. It can affect blood vessels in the eye causing damage to the retina, but the condition needs to be treated early. Diabetes experts have warned that Ireland has fallen far behind other European countries in the prevention of blindness from diabetes retina eye diseases. Eye complications of diabetes are the most common cause of blindness in this country.

Senator Feeney referred to a debate held on this issue around three years ago. Four years ago, Ireland was a signatory to a European agreement which set specific targets for retinopathy screening. Since then, the Department of Health and Children and Health Service Executive have not made significant progress in expanding diabetes eye screening programmes, the national diabetes screening programme which was recommended by the Department in 2006 and the pilot programme for the west approved in 2007. The Minister of State has given us hope that progress will be made in this regard.

It is known that many people with diabetes in Ireland are suffering unnecessarily from vision loss and blindness as a result of the lack of an effective screening programme to detect eye disease at an early stage. Such a programme would allow for effective treatment interventions. Experts state that between 3% and 5% of those with diabetes develop sight threatening retinopathy each year and many will continue to go without necessary early treatment in the absence of an organised screening programme. It is urgent, therefore, that progress is made on a nationwide screening programme.

Last month, I read a story in the *Irish Examiner* about a diabetic, Mr. Chris Murphy, who suffers from blindness in one eye and claims the health service was to blame for his condition. According to the article, Mr. Murphy, a former construction worker, “is now terrified when he wakes up every morning, in case he finds he has lost the use of the other eye” and “even now cannot get a full eye check every six months, as he has been advised to do”. The article continues:

In August 2000, when he attended the hospital’s eye clinic, he was told his appointment had been cancelled and the receptionist apologised for not contacting him. Several weeks earlier, he had moved to London to work but wanted to return to Dublin simply to attend the clinic because of growing concerns for his eyes. He woke up one morning in October the same year to find he was blind in the left eye.

“If that clinic had not been cancelled the blood vessels which had burst would have been seen and lasered, preventing the blindness. That is what the wonderful staff at London’s Moorfield Eye Hospital told me,” he said. Staff at the London hospital set about treating his right eye and, a year later, through intricate surgery managed to return over 50% vision to his left eye.

I refer to Mr. Murphy’s case because it demonstrates that it is possible to address the problem. Professor John Nolan, the consultant diabetes specialist in St. James’s Hospital in Dublin, states that the Department and HSE have known for many years that providing diabetes eye screening throughout the country is straightforward and simple, would provide for early diagnosis and treatment of eye conditions and would not cost much to establish. He also noted that eye screening programmes are currently only available on a piecemeal basis in some areas. It has

reached the point where screenings are being organised independently, for example, in the north east, north west and Galway, as the Minister of State informed us.

More than 80 people with diabetic retinopathy were referred to the National Council for the Blind of Ireland's services in 2008 alone. How many more people will lose their sight over the next two years before a screening programme is up and running? This is a challenge for the Minister.

The cost of screening and the subsequent treatment of eye disease is often lower than the cost of dealing with diabetic eye disease that has not been detected at an early stage through screening. The failure to detect cases of diabetic eye disease causes terrible human suffering and has a substantial economic impact. We must do our utmost to introduce a screening system to help prevent this avoidable suffering.

The reason I raise this issue is that, on occasion, we hear from people who are seeking more money. A screening programme in this area would appear to offer good value for money because by preventing disease it would save money. I urge the Minister to give it a high priority.

Senator Maria Corrigan: I am pleased to have an opportunity to contribute to the debate and discuss the causes and effects of diabetes and, more important, the framework for the development of a retinopathy screening programme. I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Áine Brady, and congratulate her on the new and important role conferred on her. I wish her well and have no doubt the competence she will bring to her areas of responsibility will be beneficial.

Diabetes affects people from all walks of life, from the very young to the very old, and is considered by the World Health Organisation to affect 246 million people worldwide. The WHO anticipates that the condition will affect 380 million people by 2025 if nothing is done to slow down the epidemic. In 2007, the International Diabetes Federation noted that the disease had caused 3.8 million deaths worldwide, accounting for approximately 6% of total global mortality. This stark figure places the issue in context as it shows the disease has caused roughly the same number of deaths as HIV-AIDS.

Diabetes can be prevented and its consequences minimised through good management. Early detection is, therefore, crucial. The establishment of programmes such as the national retinopathy detection programme will assist in this regard. It is estimated that approximately 200,000 people in Ireland suffer from diabetes, many of whom are unaware that they have the condition. As other speakers noted, the majority of diabetes sufferers will only be diagnosed when symptoms arise during an acute medical event arising from complications such as long-term, untreated hyperglycaemia. A further 200,000 people have impaired glucose intolerance or pre-diabetes and of this group, 40% will develop diabetes in the next five years if lifestyle changes are not made. In this respect, I was struck by comments made by Senators Walsh and Quinn on the impact lifestyle changes can have.

It is clear that detection and proper treatment are at the core of confronting the challenge diabetes presents in this country. A number of factors make people susceptible to type 2 diabetes. Obesity is one such factor. More than 80% of people with type 2 diabetes are overweight. This makes all the more relevant those programmes we have highlighted, notably in the past 18 months, on the importance of maintaining a healthy body weight and creating awareness of what constitutes obesity and fat levels in our body mass.

Age is another factor which increases susceptibility to type 2 diabetes. Between 90% and 95% of those with diabetes are aged over 40 years. Additional factors are a family history of diabetes and physical inactivity. The condition can also occur during pregnancy.

[Senator Maria Corrigan.]

Given my background, the role emotional stress and anxiety can play in the onset of diabetes and in exacerbating the problem is of particular interest to me. People are living highly stressed lives leading to irregular and chaotic lifestyles. This is often evident in eating and physical exercise patterns. Furthermore, grief, worry, anxiety or the death of a close loved one can contribute to the alteration of blood sugar levels and result in the onset of the disease. In the present challenging economic times many Irish people are suffering from stress and anxiety as a result of the economic downturn, thus heightening the risk factors associated with the onset of diabetes.

In congratulating the Government on its continued commitment to mental health I urge that in these times of limited resources we carefully and specifically target expenditure to ensure it is spent most effectively on meeting the most prioritised needs.

I was struck by a further comment made by Senator Quinn concerning the importance of reminding people of what we can do. When people feel a loss of control and start to develop a sense of helplessness about their lives it can make a significant contribution to anxiety and stress. Identifying areas over which we have control is key to addressing this issue. For this reason, I endorse Senator Quinn's comments on the importance of having a programme of education to raise awareness of factors over which people can have control. It can assist in giving back a sense of control to people and give them the opportunity to identify areas of their lives for which they can take responsibility and manage. Practical information for people is very empowering.

Studies undertaken in the United Kingdom by the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Disease and the diabetes trial unit at Oxford University have shown conclusively that effective control of blood glucose in an effort to keep the level as normal as possible is favourable in preventing and delaying the progression of complications of diabetes. The study further showed that there was a consequent 76% reduction in the risk of developing eye disease.

The Institute of Public Health published a report, *Making Diabetes Count: What Does the Future Hold?*, which provides the best possible estimate for the number of people both diagnosed and undiagnosed in Ireland today. It predicts there will be a 37% increase in diabetes in the Republic of Ireland over a ten year period. Dr. Kevin Balanda, the associate director of the IPH, predicted that the prevalence of diabetes in adults in 2015 will be 5.6% of the population or approximately 200,000 people. The vast majority of the increases in cases of diabetes is for type 2 and many of these will occur due to adolescent obesity and a lack of exercise, which are undoubtedly two of the most common causes of the epidemic of this disease.

I am conscious of stating the obvious, but adolescent obesity and a lack of exercise are factors within our control. When we consider the cost of diabetes, personally and economically, it makes sense to emphasise immediately the need to take back control of the factors over which we have control. Given the cost of diabetes on a personal level, the impact it has on a person's health and their quality of life — losing one's eyesight is very significant — and the economic cost to the State in meeting the needs of people who suffer those consequences, undoubtedly the retinopathy programme is money well spent. It is an investment in our people's health and our health service.

I welcome the adoption of the principles and continued roll out of the framework in the west. I ask the Minister of State to ensure a comprehensive system is put in place to evaluate the programme, that we then learn from that evaluation, make whatever adjustments are necessary and then roll out the programme in the rest of the country as soon as possible. This is

something which will ultimately add to people's lives and will save the taxpayer and the Exchequer money in the long term.

Senator Liam Twomey: I congratulate the Minister of State, Deputy Brady on her appointment. She has a difficult task ahead but that is the job of Ministers.

If we look at the Government's response to diabetes and the issue of the diabetes crisis in our health care system during the good times in this country, I have very little confidence we can really deal with this crisis when money is in short supply for the HSE. Too much of what was said here today concerned what the HSE is doing. It is quickly becoming a discredited organisation in giving direction to deal with this sort of crisis. For us to have statements in the Seanad on the framework for the development of a diabetic retinopathy screening programme shows we are somewhat out of touch with what is happening on the ground. We have enough framework documents to keep us going for another decade. We are, to some degree, putting the cart before the horse.

It is amazing that we have only two primary screening programmes in this country, those for cervical and breast cancer. If one considers all the diseases and illnesses in the health care system which can be effectively screened, it is amazing we do not have primary screening for any other disease on a nationwide, and not a partial. It concerns not just diabetes, but cholesterol, blood pressure and bowel and prostate cancer. All of these can potentially be screened for before they become a problem.

The Government is letting people go blind by setting up another committee and looking into another framework document because this disease affects the poor disproportionately. Believe it or not, a person is not covered by the medical card system, which an ordinary person uses if they cannot afford primary care, to get their cholesterol or glucose checks as a screening for diabetes. In other words, the medical card system does not cover patients to get adequately screened for common diseases. What confidence can one have that a Government which cannot manage to cover a basic screening programme on a medical card will implement a more complex programme such as a retinopathy screening programme for diabetes?

It is fine to talk about personal experiences regarding diabetes, but I deal with this on a more practical level, in the sense that I still look after patients in general practice. I cannot get access to a dietician. I have to push for ophthalmology, even though we know it is incredibly important, not for screening but to make sure patients do not go blind before they show signs of it. It is very difficult to get them screened.

We were recently approached by the hospital where I see patients and were told it can see new patients but will have to cut back on seeing existing patients, as it cannot do both. In other words, we are now playing King Solomon with patients. Do we get new patients with diabetes seen or adequately look after the patients who have diabetes through the current hospital system? There is no engagement between the HSE and primary care, the GPs, on how we could effectively move programmes from the hospital into the general practice setting. We might talk about it, have nice documents about it and have policies on it but it does not exist.

It reminds me of when Hitler was moving tank divisions around the eastern front, when such divisions never existed. It is fine to talk about these things but we are not doing them. We are not even touching on them in terms of the practicality of how we run our health services.

If we are serious about this, let us have a proper screening programme which looks generally at how we can screen patients effectively and cheaply across the country. We are not screening for very simple things. The number of patients who are getting strokes and heart attacks because of high blood pressure is ridiculous. The number who are getting diabetes, and the complications of it, is ridiculous when one considers that a simple blood test would diagnose

[Senator Liam Twomey.]

the 140,000 people who are walking around with undiagnosed diabetes. One simple blood test, carried out by a doctor or nurse, would sort out that problem, yet it is not happening.

We seem to have a habit in this country of wanting to screen for diseases after we know they exist. We are talking about screening for diabetic retinopathy when we already know the patient has diabetes. The only other such screening programme in the Irish health care system is the heart watch programme, which screens patients for heart attacks after they have had a heart attack. We try to prevent heart attacks in patients, but they must first have a heart attack to become part of that screening programme. That is how daft the running of our screening programmes in our health service is currently.

When one is talking about prevention, there is another major issue coming down the line in this country, that of metabolic syndrome. I remember mentioning this to the Minister for Health and Children, Deputy Mary Harney, and she gave me some waffle about a framework document and the setting up of a policy group. Metabolic syndrome is becoming far more important than diabetes because it covers the issues of obesity, diabetes, high cholesterol and high blood pressure within the patient population. It is causing strokes, heart attacks, diabetic ulcers, kidney disease, liver disease and blood vessel disease and yet nothing is happening. We are spending billions of euro every year on these diseases.

The Minister of State is talking about a retinopathy screening programme which she cannot guarantee will have the proper person taking the photographs. It was stated an optometrist will take the photograph if possible. Who will take the photograph if the optometrist does not? I certainly would not like anybody to take a picture of the back of my eye, unless they were trained to do so. It is ridiculous that this is the best that has been come up with, on the theoretical basis of a screening programme. We should go back to basics, to the simple things we can do to prevent such diseases. Simple blood tests can prevent many of the diseases we are talking about. Screening programmes can be carried out in the context of primary care. If we consider what is happening in terms of diabetic care in hospitals, we will see what a mess it is in. If we sort out these issues, we can then start looking at top-notch medicine. Some of the things I hear from Government put me in mind of buying a car with an anti-lock braking system, ABS, and the best CD player but forgetting about the doors. Let us get practical in terms of what we can achieve in our health services.

Senator Paddy Burke: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Áine Brady, and wish her the best of luck in her new portfolio. I have no doubt she will do an excellent job.

I welcome the opportunity to say a few words on the issue of diabetes from which a considerable number of my friends suffer. The word is that one never knows one is going to get diabetes until one has it, and then it is too late to prevent it. Will all this screening prevent people from getting diabetes? I have always been of the opinion that 250,000 to 260,000 people in this country have diabetes but do not realise it. The Minister of State said the figures were somewhat less and, if so, I am delighted to know this. It is because we are getting on top of things and people are more informed about diet and health. Obesity is increasing, yet we have never had as many fitness centres, as many people walking or cycling, or as many involved in sports. One would wonder where it is all leading. Diet must be the main problem.

Diabetes affects nearly all the organs of one's body. If it can be prevented, everything possible should be done to do so. Senator Twomey mentioned that a simple blood test administered by a doctor or nurse could be useful. I presume it would only reveal whether one had diabetes and not whether it was coming down the track.

I have some questions about the roll-out of the screening programme in the west. The Minister of State said it would be rolled out in the four Health Service Executive, HSE, areas. Will the western region be the last one?

Deputy Áine Brady: It will be the first.

Senator Paddy Burke: When is it hoped the programme will be rolled out to all other regions? Will the programme be situated in a designated place in the western region, such as University College Hospital Galway, or will it be in several hospitals in the region? As the Minister of State understands, the western region is very large geographically. I hope the programme will be rolled out in a number of areas in the region.

An Cathaoirleach: Does the Minister of State wish to reply?

Deputy Áine Brady: Yes.

An Cathaoirleach: I congratulate the Minister of State and wish her well, as I was not here when she first spoke.

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy Áine Brady): I thank the Cathaoirleach and all Senators for their good wishes. As Senators know, I am only in office for one day, but I will give as much information as I can, although the Cathaoirleach did give me the option of not responding. I appreciate the trouble Senators have gone to in making their statements and I have listened seriously to what they have said.

To answer the question asked by Senator Burke, the programme is being rolled out first in the HSE western region, and funding of €750,000 is available in 2009 for that roll-out, which will consist of a mixture of mobile and fixed units. There is an issue with recruitment because recruitment generally is on hold, but because diabetic retinopathy is a priority for us, we are considering the position and discussing it with the Minister for Finance. The funding is in place for the positions. That recruitment has been put on hold generally is a worry, but we hope the programme will go ahead in the west in 2009 because the funding is in place. In the years after that, resources permitting, we will introduce the programme in the other three HSE areas. A key recommendation of the diabetes expert advisory group was the development of a shared care model and in this regard joint general practitioner-specialist clinical guidelines have been developed.

Many Senators spoke about preventative measures, including Senator Fitzgerald, who opened on that point. Prevention is important. As Minister of State with responsibility for health promotion I am committed to the development and implementation of various initiatives aimed at addressing lifestyle conditions which can lead to the development of certain chronic diseases such as type 2 diabetes, which accounts for 90% of cases of diabetes in Ireland. It is considered that one of the factors leading to the increased prevalence of type 2 diabetes is the rise in excess weight and obesity in our population.

As Senators are aware, my predecessor, Deputy Mary Wallace, recently established an inter-sectoral group comprising representatives of all stakeholders, including experts from Government Departments, agencies, the food industry and relevant non-governmental organisations, to oversee the implementation of the recommendations of the task force on obesity and to address general lifestyle issues related to chronic diseases. The first progress report from this group was published last Friday and I will continue with the process and give priority to tackling obesity in particular. I listened carefully to what Senator Twomey said about developing wider screening programmes. This will be considered in the context of the new GP contract and primary care strategy.

[Deputy Áine Brady.]

If there are any other issues I have not been able to answer today, I will return to Senators with the answers.

An Cathaoirleach: When is it proposed to sit again?

Senator Maria Corrigan: At 2.30 p.m. on Tuesday, 28 April 2009.

Adjournment Matters.

Care of the Elderly.

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Curran, to the House and wish him well.

Senator Frances Fitzgerald: I welcome the Minister of State to the House. I am grateful for the opportunity to raise the need for the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs to outline the implications of the recent cutbacks in the community support for older people scheme and his plans for the future of the scheme. I understand there has been a meeting with a number of the national organisations who have been concerned about this issue in recent days. Perhaps the Minister could update Members on the outcome of that meeting and whether he has changed the decision to suspend the scheme. This is an urgent matter which affects the elderly.

We have seen recently harsh cutbacks and reductions in public services and the impact of this on front-line services. In the medical card debacle, the psychological security of the elderly was taken away when the automatic right to a medical card for those over 70 was removed. This psychological aspect has had a damaging effect. The suspension of the community support scheme for older people represents another cutback for this age group.

I have seen a letter dated 7 April from a principal officer in the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht which states:

As a result, the funding available for a range of activities supported by this Department has had to be curtailed to meet the Government's objectives in regard to finance. These actions affect the community scheme for older people and result in the suspension of the scheme from today.

This suggests the scheme is no longer in operation. There are many people who want to access this service. Hospital social workers are trying to obtain security pendants for elderly people so that they can leave their long-stay beds and return home. People who have suffered a stroke, especially those who live alone, need the security of this alarm system to return home. In Clondalkin, in the Minister of State's constituency, from where some aspects of the Dublin scheme are run, people are on waiting lists to access these services.

The scheme was introduced in 2002 to provide funds to local community and voluntary organisations to install personal monitored alarms and other items of home security such as door and window locks to enable older people to live independently. It was a relatively small initiative but very important in terms of the security of those who benefited from it. It is difficult for many older people to access the funding for this type of security from their own resources. Some 10,000 people have availed of the scheme since its inception. This year alone, more than 1,850 have benefited from the scheme. I pay tribute to the many community and voluntary groups which facilitate older people in accessing the scheme, administer funding and ensure people feel safe in their own homes while preserving their independence.

I acknowledge we are in a time of financial difficulty. However, will the Minister of State outline the logic behind the decision to suspend this scheme? Has he considered the adverse impact on individuals who will no longer be able to live in security in their own homes? How much will be saved by the suspension of the scheme? Must it be suspended in full? If savings must be made under the scheme, if access is to be limited or if the Government has any concerns about its management, will the Minister of State clarify those issues? The suspension of the scheme represents another attack on the elderly. Surely any savings will be cancelled out if people are obliged to avail of long-term residential care because they are unable to return home?

I look forward to the Minister of State's explanation why this decision was taken and his plans for the future in regard to the scheme. Is it the intention to reopen the scheme? What are people expected to do in the meantime?

Minister of State at the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (Deputy John Curran): I thank Senator Fitzgerald for raising this matter on the Adjournment. I am pleased to have the opportunity to address this issue and will attempt to respond to the points raised as directly as possible. My Department has operated the scheme of community support for older people since it was established in mid-2002. It was originally devised in 1996, based on the simple concept of helping people active in their communities to maintain contact with older people in their neighbourhood. Grants are not paid to individuals but to community organisations working with older people. This approach has helped over the years to ensure broader community support for older people and has allowed volunteers and staff of community organisations to maintain contact with older people.

Since my Department took over the scheme, in excess of €22 million has been awarded to community and voluntary organisations. Our estimates suggest that 60,000 older people have been direct beneficiaries through the provision of a monitored alarm — sometimes referred to as a pendant alarm or panic button — or one of the other covered security items for their homes. My Department reviewed the scheme in 2004 and made several innovations in response to concerns raised at that time. The scheme was developed to allow for the installation of window locks, door locks and chains and to cover the cost of providing sensor exterior lighting. Further innovations have been introduced since then, including a grant in respect of smoke alarms. Funding is now provided for carbon monoxide detectors where they are supplied as part of other smoke detection devices.

One of the key recommendations of the 2004 review was that a standard individual grant should be paid. This grant is now fixed at €300 per installation for the monitored alarm and lower amounts for the other equipment available. This approach has helped to ensure community groups obtain good value for money and that commercial suppliers are obliged to provide quality equipment at a reasonable price given these products vary little in their design or service.

I am satisfied the current level of grant ensures recipients of the alarm are not required to make any contribution to the cost of the supply or installation of the equipment. The only costs falling to the older person or their family members are the annual monitoring costs. I understand these costs vary from as low as €50 to a high of more than €100. This is an area in which I would like to see greater competition. People must be encouraged to shop around for the best value.

The changes introduced in 2004 have meant that the demand for grants has grown to unsustainable levels. From 2002 to 2006, the average annual expenditure on the scheme was some €2.4 million. The average expenditure for 2007 and 2008 reached more than €4 million, an increase of two thirds. I am sure Members will agree that this could not be sustained, even in better times. Moreover, I am concerned that the changes introduced to the scheme in recent years mean it is no longer targeting genuine need among older people.

[Deputy John Curran.]

As a result, the scheme was suspended in early April. This was done with a view to affording my Department the opportunity to review its operation in the coming months and relaunch it later in the year with tighter terms and conditions. Earlier this week, the Minister, Deputy Ó Cuív and I met representatives of Age Action Ireland, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Muintir na Tíre, Irish Rural Link and the Senior Citizens Parliament to discuss the suspension of the scheme and their concerns about how it currently operates. Arising from those discussions, we have agreed a process that will set the broad parameters for a review of the scheme and for the necessary consultation to be undertaken as part of it. I hope the review process will begin in May and be completed by mid-September. These bodies have also agreed to participate in the review process and to work with my officials in addressing their concerns regarding the operation of the scheme.

I assure Senator Fitzgerald that all applications received up to the suspension of the scheme will be processed and approved, as appropriate, in line with the current eligibility criteria. Funding will be made available to eligible groups in the coming weeks. When it was first established, the scheme had a once-a-year application system, but this was reviewed some years ago. The original complaint was that a person who missed the application deadline was obliged to wait 12 months before applying. The scheme is now open for application on a continuous basis. I acknowledge that we are not accepting applications in the coming period but I emphasise that towards the end of 2008, we cleared virtually all applications on hand. That is why the expenditure for last year was some €4.3 million. We will not accept new applications during the period of the review but it would be disingenuous and unfair to suggest there is a substantial backlog of applications. The applications received prior to the suspension will be dealt with in full. In addition, it is important to note the suspension of the scheme in no way affects those who have already received a monitored alarm device.

I reiterate my commitment to this scheme and the security it has offered to the many older people using the alarms. I hope to relaunch it in September once the review is completed.

Senator Frances Fitzgerald: The Minister of State indicated there was a concern that the scheme was no longer targeting genuine need among older people. Will he elaborate on this? I take his point that the backlog of applications has been cleared. However, what is the case for those who apply between now and September? Are there contingency plans to deal with them?

I welcome Minister of State's assurance that the scheme will be re-launched in September. Can he assure people who already have monitored alarms that monitoring will continue, even under the revised scheme?

Deputy John Curran: Continuous monitoring has nothing to do with the Department. It is a matter between the individual customer and the commercial companies which supply the monitoring. The customer pays a monitoring fee of between €50 and €100 per annum, and that will continue.

I have a concern about real and genuine need. Throughout the years we dealt with about 6,000 applicants per annum. Last year we dealt with approximately 11,000. It is important that limited resources are targeted where there is real and genuine need. Applicants for the scheme are not means tested and it came to the attention of myself and others that some sort of means test might be required and that the necessary structure should be put in place.

Applications will not be accepted between now and the completion of the review. While the review is in place the applications which have been received to date will be processed but no new applications will be accepted.

The Seanad adjourned at 1.45 p.m. until 2.30 p.m. on Tuesday, 28 April 2009.