



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

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

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SEANAD ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 31 Márta 2015

Tuesday, 31 March 2015

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach i gceannas ar 2.30 p.m.

Machnamh agus Paidir.
Reflection and Prayer.

Business of Seanad

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I have received notice from Senator Kathryn Reilly that, on the motion for the Commencement of the House today, she proposes to raise the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport to discuss funding for local improvement schemes, how funding is allocated for these schemes, if supplementary funding for the local improvement scheme is made available outside the allocated funding for road maintenance and the need to make a separate allocation of funding for this purpose.

I have also received notice from Senator Sean D. Barrett of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport to defend the independence of Aer Lingus from the proposed takeover by British Airways and IAG in view of the failures of the takeover airline to serve adequately the regions of the United Kingdom and the need for Ireland, as an outer offshore island, to develop independent competitive air services.

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

The need for the Minister for Health and the HSE to increase the number of places available on the clinical adaption course which is being provided to upskill nurses who have trained abroad but who now wish to work in Ireland.

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

The need for the Minister for Health to discuss the current HSE drug counselling services and programmes for those under the age of 18 years in Dundalk and the need for the reinstatement of the under-18 drugs counselling service in Dundalk.

I have also received notice from Senator Fidelma Healy Eames of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government to

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designate the municipal district of Connemara, County Galway, as a separate stand-alone lot under the social inclusion programme and to award social inclusion funding accordingly.

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

The need for the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government to clarify if funding will be made available for the health and disability groups which were excluded from the 2014 support scheme for national organisations administered by Pobal on behalf of his Department and which were given bridging funding which will expire in June.

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

The need for the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to comment on the reason students who qualified from Mounbellew Agricultural College with a level 7 BSc in Agriculture and Environmental Management are not now qualified to become GLAS planners and to identify options to facilitate these graduates to achieve the required standard of qualification.

I regard the matters raised by the Senators as suitable for discussion. I have selected the matters raised by Senators Kathryn Reilly, Sean D. Barrett, Colm Burke and Mary Moran and they will be taken now. Senators Fidelma Healy Eames, Marie Moloney and Martin Conway may give notice on another day of the matters they wish to raise.

Commencement Matters

Local Improvement Scheme Funding

Senator Kathryn Reilly: I thank the Minister for being in the Chamber to take this matter. I appreciate his attendance and taking the time from his busy schedule.

The issue in hand is the local improvement scheme which has been raised with me not only by people who live in the area I come from but also by local councillors. The scheme is the method by which people living in rural areas have roads replaced where they are not serviced by council roads. The purpose of the scheme is to provide funding for roads and laneways that councils have not taken in charge, in other words, private roads. It is welcome that the scheme was reopened in the past few years and that people living along private roads and lanes have some recourse to funding assistance, but there are issues with the funding of the scheme. Demand outweighs supply and the pressure on the public roads funding allocated to local authorities means that some councils cannot use their funding for the purpose of distributing funding to local improvement schemes. It is important that we try to find some way to deal with the endless number of people waiting for the primary provision of roads to their dwelling houses. Are there creative ideas in the Department, whereby councils can receive additional funding for these purposes?

The scheme was reopened in the past few years, but that does not mean additional funding has been provided. There is leeway for a council to use a percentage of its budget for work on non-public roads, but having the leeway to do so and it being practical within current budgetary constraints and demands on the public roads budget are two different things. Obviously, public

roads should take priority and a number of roads in my county were in dire need of funding, not least for reasons of public safety. However, that means there was no flexibility to provide the funding people living along these roads and lanes needed or deserved under the local improvement scheme. They are not seeking funding for cosmetic reasons and to make roads look better but for genuine reasons in order that they can have access to their homes or small family farms. I know of one man and the lane along which he is living is in such bad condition that, if there is any rainfall, he is blocked in by flooding. He is elderly and cannot meet the cost of repairs himself. Councillors are seeking ring-fenced funding in order that they will not be dependent on having to allocate a certain percentage of funding already needed elsewhere.

As I stated, many councillors find they cannot justify taking funding from the existing provision because this money is needed for public roads. They believe members of the community are being pitted against each other. While I agree with a previous statement by the Minister that local authorities, with their community base and local knowledge, are best placed to judge the priority of works on private roads, those that wish to use the local improvement scheme should not be placed in a position of having to use resources that would be otherwise deployed for investment in regional and local public roads. Specific and additional funding should be ring-fenced for works on private roads. If funding was provided by way of an increase in standard roads funding, councillors would prefer to decide in council chambers whether to allocate moneys to the local improvement scheme.

Members of Cavan County Council and Sinn Féin have called on the Government to provide the money needed to fund local improvement schemes. I understand councillors sought a meeting with the Minister to discuss the issue, which was the source of great contention at a recent meeting of the county council.

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I thank the Senator for raising this matter. As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for overall policy and funding for the national roads programme. The planning, design and implementation of individual road projects is a matter for the National Roads Authority, NRA, under the Roads Acts 1993 to 2007, in conjunction with the local authorities concerned. The improvement and maintenance of regional and local roads is the statutory responsibility of each local authority in accordance with the provisions of section 13 of the Roads Act 1993. Works on these roads are funded from local authorities' own resources supplemented by State road grants. The initial selection and prioritisation of works to be funded is also a matter for the local authority.

As a result of the national financial position, Exchequer funding for Ireland's roads has fallen radically. Funding in 2008 was €2.3 billion, while funding this year for national, regional and local roads stands at €728 million. The reality is that available funds do not match the amount of work required. For this reason, the main focus must be on the maintenance and repair of public roads. This will continue to be the position for some years to come.

The local improvement scheme to which the Senator referred provides funding for non-public roads and laneways that have not been taken in charge by a council. However, the maintenance and improvement of these roads is a matter for the relevant landowner. Given the financial position, there is no separate allocation for the local improvement scheme. Instead, local authorities may use up to 15% of their initial discretionary grant towards local improvement schemes should they wish to do so. The local contribution for these schemes is 20% of the total cost of the project.

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It is open to local authorities to supplement the percentage of the discretionary grant they can use for the local improvement schemes with their own resources. As I indicated, the purpose of Exchequer grants is to supplement the resources of local authorities. It is also a matter for a local authority to agree and prioritise its work programme for the year.

My Department is gathering statistics from local authorities on the local improvement scheme. Of the 19 local authorities that have responded thus far, only four decided to avail of the local improvement scheme in 2014. I note that Cavan County Council availed of the scheme and completed four local improvement projects in 2014. It is my understanding the majority of local authorities opt to focus funding on public roads. Local authorities are best placed to judge the priority of works on private roads. In this way, they may decide whether they want to operate the local improvement scheme in their area or would prefer to put their resources into regional and local public roads.

If a separate fund were to be set aside for the local improvement scheme, it would involve making a *pro rata* reduction to the other road grants headings and imposing the scheme on local authorities that would prefer to prioritise public roads. I do not favour such an approach.

Sale of Aer Lingus

Senator Sean D. Barrett: I welcome our good friend, the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport. He and I discussed issues of aviation economics many times when he was my student in Trinity College Dublin. My concern in this instance is repeated announcements that the Government is edging closer to accepting the proposed takeover of Aer Lingus. I was pleased to note the Minister's statement during his visit to County Kerry at the weekend that he welcomed Mr. Donald Trump's contribution to the debate on the proposal. The takeover would be in the interests of British Airways and IAG and we know the Aer Lingus board wants it to proceed. This does not mean it would be in the interest of wider society.

I am particularly concerned that British Airways has not developed any routes on the north Atlantic from Scotland, a country with a population of 5.3 million people, the north of England, a region with a population of approximately 15 million, and Birmingham, which is located in the UK midlands with a population of approximately ten million between the east and west Midlands. British Airways could be called "Air Heathrow" given that it continuously channels traffic through Heathrow Airport. In contrast, Aer Lingus has developed nine north Atlantic routes. I am not convinced British Airways will pursue different policies in Ireland from those it pursues in Britain if it takes over Aer Lingus.

A major part of the disquiet in Scotland is that, to use the words of a Member of the Scottish Parliament, Angus McNeil of the Scottish Nationalist Party, "there has been a historic imbalance in UK aviation policy that has held back Scottish airports and the development of direct international links". This is a factor in the forthcoming election in the United Kingdom. CAPA Consulting, an Australian economic consultancy, examined aviation in Manchester and made the following conclusion under the heading, "Lack of a home-based carrier restricts route opportunities":

British Airways is clearly not going to help, at least under the present management. Over the course of the last two decades, what was a fit-for-purpose BA Regional operation at both Manchester and Birmingham airports was whittled down...

If we give up a valued national airline headquartered in Dublin to become a subsidiary of British Airways, can we expect the company to treat us better than it has treated regions in the United Kingdom?

As the Minister is aware, in an open European market, airline companies are free to enter any route in Ireland. I would welcome a decision by British Airways to enter the Irish market but not if the price is the acquisition of Aer Lingus. The only destination to which British Airways operates from Dublin Airport, with its 175 routes, is London. The company does not operate any routes from Cork, Shannon, Knock or Kerry airports, which operate 41, 30, 12 and six routes, respectively, and flies to only one of the 190 destinations served by airports in Northern Ireland. This track record does not reflect the undertakings the company has given us.

The Industrial Development Agency put the matter most succinctly in its evidence to the Joint Committee on Transport and Communications when it stated: "Ireland needs frequent, direct and competitively priced flights to multiple destinations in the United Kingdom, the United States and Europe". This is not what is on offer from IAG. We need access for the tourism, high-tech and financial services industries. Scotland, Manchester and Birmingham do not have such access and there is no reason IAG will provide it at an Irish airport.

On the issue of the Heathrow Airport slots, the IAG website states that on 30 March 2012, the company divested 12 slots on taking over British Midland. Having knowingly given away 12 slots as part of the acquisition of British Midland in 2012, the company now states it will protect Aer Lingus's Heathrow slots for five or seven years. It knows it must give up slots because doing so is part of the standard EU procedure for dealing with anti-competitive mergers.

I welcome the finding of an opinion poll on the proposed takeover published in a newspaper yesterday. It showed that we have made the case against the proposed takeover in the face of overwhelming odds and public relations work by the airlines. I note that 54% of respondents did not want the proposal to proceed, while the first opinion poll on the issue found 58% of people opposed the proposal. Among supporters of the Minister's party, 33% were found to be in favour of the takeover, while 50% opposed it. The majority against is even larger among supporters of the Labour Party, Sinn Féin, Independents and the Fianna Fáil Party. This merger is not wanted and Mr. Walsh and company should be told to pack their bags and go. We want this independent airline.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I thank the Senator for raising this matter in the way he has today and in recent weeks. I am constrained in my ability to respond to a number of the points put to me by him. He is now used to this refrain, but because a takeover period has been declared, I am restrained in responding to some of the more detailed points made. I wish, however, to frame what is happening in the context of the development of aviation and aviation policy. These are matters in which the Senator is a genuine expert. As I have outlined from the very start of the process, connectivity and the future of Aer Lingus are important issues in which there is a great deal of public interest which has been heightened since the first proposed offer for Aer Lingus from IAG three months ago. I last addressed the Seanad on this matter on 28 February, but, as I have said, I am constrained in what I can say.

The Senator has spent a good part of his successful career as an economist championing the merits of market forces over Government intervention, particularly in the aviation sector. His work has highlighted the benefits of applying the so-called invisible hand of the market to previously State-dominated sectors such as aviation and his research has provided ample evidence

during the years of the failures of State intervention in the market in Ireland and abroad. On the other hand, his work has also highlighted the benefits market liberalisation has brought as a whole. The aviation sector was a good case study for the Senator to have chosen. It is one of the best examples of the benefits that accrue when a monopolistic, State-dominated industry is gradually opened to competition. An important part of that process has been the reduction of State ownership in the sector. Most European states have now divested themselves of airline shareholdings and, in some cases, the state-owned airline no longer exists. However, there are still some significant state shareholdings such as our own in Aer Lingus.

The first significant deregulation of aviation took place in the United States. Since 1992 the European aviation market has been fully open for all EU airlines. It has been a genuine win-win for all concerned. Consumers, airlines and the wider economy have all reaped benefits in increased routes and connectivity and the significant lowering of prices for consumers. The Senator pointed to the issue of regional connectivity in the United Kingdom. The whole point of the open market is that any such gaps should be quickly filled by competitors. I suggest to the Senator that Aer Lingus's strategy of bringing traffic from UK regions through Ireland on transatlantic routes is a good example of this approach.

In terms of the structure of the airline industry, the opening up of the market has led to two trends. First, new operators such as Ryanair have expanded to become truly European airlines. Second, among legacy carriers, a process of cross-border consolidation has led to the emergence of three main multi-airline groups in Europe - IAG, Lufthansa and Air France-KLM. When Aer Lingus was State-owned, as the Senator is aware, it had to be heavily supported by the taxpayer on a number of occasions. That option is no longer available, which is partly why the State chose to sell its majority shareholding in 2006 in order that it could have access to capital to fund its growth. The company has had many ups and downs, but in recent years it has returned to profitability. That is the reason I wish to reiterate to the Senator that the Government's underlying position on its shareholding is that it will not be sold unless the terms of the sale are satisfactory to the Government and an acceptable price is secured.

Legitimate concerns have been voiced by many people, including the Senator, about IAG's proposed offer and the Government has outlined the details and clarification it needs from IAG in that regard. The interdepartmental group has continued discussions with IAG. I have made it clear that I wish to see this matter brought to a conclusion within a number of weeks. The ongoing engagement with IAG is taking place in that context and my representatives and I are fully focused on that objective. The outcome of this work will be examined very carefully by the Government against a set of public interest criteria before making any decision. Connectivity, including connectivity to the regions, and employment are exceptionally high among these criteria, as I have outlined on many occasions. I welcome the opportunity to respond to the Senator on this point and look forward to continuing to do so.

Senator Sean D. Barrett: I thank the Minister, as always, for engaging in dialogue. The Seanad has a huge role to play in this matter. Part of my disquiet is that the media leaks seem to be bypassing Parliament as if it did not matter. Some of the utterances have been dismissive of the Deputies and Senators from north Dublin, Cork and, of course, County Clare. It should be remembered that there was deregulation because there was a parliamentary revolt in 1984 by seven Deputies, four from Fine Gael and three from Fianna Fáil - one of whom was half out of Fianna Fáil.

In the preface to a book I wrote on this matter Alfred Khan said I was the expert on the

Ryanair model and the revolutionary impact on aviation in Europe. He also documented in this volume the almost equally dramatic successful adaptation of Aer Lingus from a traditional European national carrier to operating in the new deregulated market, in contrast with other former national airlines in Europe which had either left the market or been absorbed by larger carriers. Being absorbed by larger carriers has not been in the interests of services to UK regions, including Wales, Scotland, the north of England and the midlands. I do not want that fate to befall us. The former Taoiseach, Mr. John Bruton, asked me to go on the tourist board, a place where I kept praying for airline deregulation. The Aer Lingus product was so good and still is that for many North Americans their holiday began when they boarded the aircraft. Someone once said that it began even before this in the Aer Lingus lounge. It is an iconic product. British Airways does not have this status and we would be wrong to sell the company to it. It is not worth doing so for the €300 million suggested to the Department of Finance, half of which would go to the troika.

I think of the vision of Seán Lemass who had aeroplanes ready to go in 1948, but the then Government cancelled them. That happened during the month of April and I hope we will not sell the airline this April, as it has such a role to play. Let us have a vision for the country. Aer Lingus is part of that vision; British Airways-IAG is not. In another jurisdiction services have been closed down at Barcelona to be transferred to Madrid. The hub and spoke model will not suit us. I want Dublin Airport competing with Heathrow Airport and Aer Lingus competing with British Airways. I do not want it to be part of it and do not want it to be subsumed by it. If the Aer Lingus board does not want to be independent, it should go. We need people with vision to develop the airline, not to sell it to British Airways.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I again thank the Senator for his points. He articulates the need for a vision for the development of aviation. There is a vision and the fruits of its delivery are clear in the extraordinary access the country has managed to deliver in recent years. This did not happen by chance. It happened because the Government, in particular, prioritised access. This prioritisation has underpinned decisions such as on the reduction of the airport travel tax to zero.

The Senator used the language of giving up on Aer Lingus. I have to emphasise a point to the House. We are aware of it, but sometimes it is not given the prominence it deserves. We no longer own all of Aer Lingus. We own just over one quarter of the company. It is not a State-owned national airline. We have a minority stake in it. On the arguments the Senator made about the merits of national ownership, we need to take on board the point that just under 75% of the company was sold.

On the further points the Senator made about leaks and indications as to where the Government is going, I assure him that we are weighing up very carefully how we intend
3 o'clock to handle this matter. No decision has been made on that matter and I am not in the business of briefing others about my thinking on it in advance of briefing the Cabinet, let alone the Houses of the Oireachtas. When we make the decision on that matter, I will have to take it to my Cabinet colleagues and there will be debate on it in the Dáil and the Seanad.

I will conclude on a particular matter. The Senator made a very important point about the maintenance of our regional airports and regional access. I am the Minister who made the decision to retain public service obligation, PSO, funding for Donegal and Kerry airports. I did that for policy-based reasons. This is the Government that has found ways to develop access into

Shannon Airport and continues to invest a huge amount of time and energy in how we support Cork and Shannon Airports. I recognise these airports have particular needs. I realise also that the access they have built up is an incredibly important contributor to the development not only of tourism across the island but also in creating an environment in which we can attract international investment to the country and where Irish companies can sell their goods and services abroad. That need has been evident in decisions I made with regard to other airports since I came into office and it will continue to be paramount in the way I review this proposed bid.

Nursing Staff Recruitment

Senator Colm Burke: I thank the Minister for coming into the House to deal with this matter. The issue I raise concerns the training courses available for nurses who have trained abroad but who now wish to return. I am led to believe the number of courses available in recent years has been cut back and that the number available is inadequate. Irish nursing homes have over 500 vacancies for nurses and they are finding it difficult to recruit nurses to fill those vacancies. Some nurses who want to return are finding it difficult to go on the adaption courses and unless they do this, they cannot become registered. There is also an issue in regard to delays in registering with An Bord Altranais, but that is a different issue.

Acting Chairman (Senator Hildegard Naughton): I am sorry, but the Senator can only discuss what is on the Commencement matters list.

Senator Colm Burke: I am aware of that. The issue that must be dealt with is increasing the number of places on the adaption courses for nurses who have trained abroad but who wish to work here to allow them go through the training process and then become available to work in Irish hospitals and nursing homes.

The other issue facing nursing homes is that many of the nurses working in them are taking on jobs in the Health Service Executive, HSE. The HSE can now recruit for the first time in a number of years and some of the people who have been working in nursing homes for a number of years are returning to work in HSE hospitals or community hospitals. The nursing homes are facing that problem from both sides. On the one side they are losing nurses and on the other side they do not have an adequate number of training places for those who want to come and work in this country.

Minister for Health (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I thank the Senator for raising this matter. The background to this issue is that nurses who trained in a country outside of Ireland and wish to work in Ireland are required to apply to register as a nurse with the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland, NMBI. The NMBI, following assessment of qualifications by an applicant, may require an applicant to undertake a six-week period of adaptation and assessment. A period of adaptation is designed to make up for differences in education and ensure competence for working in the Irish health service. If this adaptation is required it must be successfully completed as a prerequisite to registration.

In 2014, the HSE facilitated 151 nurses to complete a period of adaptation for the private nursing home sector. In 2015, as part of a pilot project, the HSE has scheduled additional clinical adaptation programmes. These will take place in April, June and August for the private nursing home sector. A maximum of 197 places will be offered on these programmes for which there are currently 60 nurses identified. The pilot project is due to finish in October 2015. In

addition, separate initiatives to meet the demand for adaptation programmes for the public health sector have recently been commenced, and these are being co-ordinated and managed by the hospitals concerned.

I am advised there is an anticipated need for 272 clinical adaptation placements based on projected workforce needs outside the planned 2015 provision for the private nursing home sector. There is no capacity for additional placements onto the nationally co-ordinated clinical adaptation programme developed for private nursing homes. There are 42 health service locations approved by the NMBI for the provision of clinical adaptation programmes. Current difficulties do not relate to the number of sites but rather to the pressure on front-line services to facilitate clinical adaptation such as the availability of clinical facilitators to co-ordinate and manage clinical placements and oversee and monitor the assessment process.

I understand alternative approaches for the provision of clinical adaptation are being explored. However, any options that may arise from this initiative will not bring any benefit in the short term. Therefore, there still remains a requirement to provide adaptation programmes. Discussions on the issue among Nursing Homes Ireland, the HSE office for nursing and mid-wifery services and the Chief Nursing Officer's office are scheduled to discuss this matter in the coming weeks.

Senator Colm Burke: I thank the Minister for the reply. I note that there is an acceptance that there is a need for additional training positions. It is a major problem within nursing homes. It is also a major problem within hospitals. Some Irish nurses contacted me recently who trained in the United Kingdom and who returned to Ireland. They applied in early December to register but ten weeks later they were still not registered with An Bord Altranais. That is an issue that needs to be resolved also. On the one hand, we have the shortage and, on the other, we are not responding fast enough to that shortage. The Minister's reply is open and honest in terms of dealing with the issues, but it is a problem that must be given priority to make sure we do not fall into a situation where beds in nursing homes cannot be filled because we do not have the nursing staff. As a result, there is a backlog in the hospital system.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: As I understand it, Irish trained nurses do not have to do an adaptation course but they do have to re-register with the NMBI if they allow their registration to lapse. There have been some delays in processing applications for all sorts of reasons, not entirely administrative delays, but I am certainly aware of the issue. It is the case that we are in quite a different position than where we were a year ago and thought we would be at this point in time. The HSE will increase the total number of general nurses working for it by 500 this year and at the same time the nursing home sector is growing also. Therefore, there is a greater demand for nurses than was the case this time last year, more so than had been expected. That is causing difficulties but it also means that in some cases the HSE is hiring nurses off the nursing homes. The nursing homes are trying to take nurses off the HSE and the agencies are involved in the whole show also. It is something I am aware of, as is the Minister of State, Deputy Kathleen Lynch. We are meeting with Nursing Homes Ireland on Thursday to try to discuss solutions. We are aware of it, but like many of these issues, the solutions may not be as straightforward as they may appear. However, we will find them.

Senator Colm Burke: I appreciate the Minister's response.

Drug Treatment Programmes Availability

Senator Mary Moran: I, too, welcome the Minister and thank him for coming to discuss a very serious issue concerning the HSE drugs counselling services and programmes for those under 18 years in Dundalk. I have been in contact with local people who are acutely aware of the situation since the closure in December last of the drugs counselling services for those under 18 years and I am led to believe the Dundalk area has no HSE drugs counselling service for the under 18s category.

I was speaking to local gardaí as recently as today about this matter and they are very concerned at the lack of services for young people. It is testament to the efforts of gardaí and juvenile liaison officers, JLOs, in the area that they are working above and beyond the call of duty. Gardaí want to work tirelessly to help young people stay out of the criminal justice system, but it becomes more difficult when the first port of call, the drugs counselling service, is not available. Drug use and addiction continue to be major local issues; therefore, we should provide the supports and services necessary to assist young people in their recovery from addiction.

I am led to believe the biggest local problem is the use of benzodiazepines, benzos. People are buying them on the Internet on which they are openly on sale. Because of the amounts people are taking, they are causing serious health problems. Compared to when ecstasy tabs were popular, benzos are causing a completely different reaction where users actually appear to be unaware of what is happening to them. This is making it more difficult for people like the juvenile liaison officers to help them. I am aware of one case in which a 17 year old refuses to admit that he has a problem and has, unfortunately, been removed from the family home. As the juvenile liaison officer said to me, normally the first port of call would be the drugs counselling service before seeking further help. When drugs counselling is not available, the juvenile liaison officer's hands are tied.

We all know from our early teen years that they are the most vulnerable. It is recognised that second year in school is the most important in determining which way a student will go. If we do not have the drug counselling services needed in place for young people, we are adding to what is a growing problem. It is imperative that we have appropriate services available which are easily accessible. Private counselling services may be available, but many parents in this predicament with their under-18s do not have private health insurance, nor can they afford to access it.

I ask the Minister to outline why the service was discontinued in the Dundalk area at the end of last year. I also ask him to outline the future plans for drug counselling services for the under-18 age group and specifically the future of the service in Dundalk. The service being sought locally would not be full time; people are not looking for a service from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. five days a week, rather they are looking for a service, perhaps one day a week, with a two-hour slot at which young people could be directed by those trying to help them when they could receive the appropriate help they so badly need.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: I thank the Senator for raising this important matter in the House. The overall strategic aim of the national drugs strategy is to tackle the harm caused to individuals and society by the misuse of drugs, through a concerted focus on the five pillars of supply reduction, prevention, treatment, rehabilitation and research. Within this framework, the HSE is committed to achieving improved outcomes for people affected by addiction issues. Regarding the specific issue raised by the Senator, I am advised by the HSE that the under-18 counselling service in Dundalk is still in place. HSE-funded services such as the ISPCC teen focus programme, Turas counselling service and the Meath Jigsaw initiative provide support

for young people presenting with substance misuse issues in Dundalk and the wider catchment area. The HSE addiction services in counties Louth and Meath refer appropriate cases for residential treatment and link with the HSE specialist adolescent services in Dublin. Staff work with parents and guardians on young peoples' substance misuse and liaise with and provide support for services working directly with the young people concerned.

The HSE commissioned a review of the Dundalk addiction services last year to determine whether the model of care was adequate to address service user needs and examine the adequacy of clinical governance arrangements underpinning service delivery. This included a review of the model of service organisation in the Louth-Meath area. The review team comprised an external consultant psychiatrist, a GP co-ordinator from HSE addiction services and a general manager from the office of the integrated service area manager, Louth-Meath primary care services. The review was completed earlier this year.

The report concluded that the existing model of service delivery in Louth-Meath needed to be strengthened in the light of the changing profile of substance misuse in the north east, to which the Senator referred. It recommended a number of structural changes to bring service provision in Louth-Meath into line with national addiction services. The changes recommended include the augmentation of the HSE team with specialist senior clinical personnel, restructuring management roles to allow for an appropriate demarcation between operational and clinical management and a review of roles and responsibilities of HSE staff. The report recommended the development of formal shared care working arrangements for service users in line with the national drugs rehabilitation framework and full implementation and monitoring of the needle exchange programme. It highlighted the need for a model of care to respond to the needs of young people dependent on drugs other than heroin.

The HSE is committed to implementing the recommendations made in the report and, as a first step in this process, has shared the report with the relevant staff to obtain their views and feedback on the issues raised. An implementation plan will then be put in place to address the issues raised in the report. The Government takes the issue of drug misuse extremely seriously and is committed to tackling the problem through all available mechanisms. My Department is beginning work on the development of a new national drugs strategy for the period from 2016 onwards. I intend to play an active role in the development of the new strategy and look forward to engaging with all interested parties in this work.

Senator Mary Moran: I thank the Minister for his reply. Unfortunately, I can tell him categorically that the HSE service on Market Street, Dundalk which dealt specifically with under-18s ceased before Christmas. I ask that he look into this matter. Telling somebody who is living at the far end of County Louth, has a drug problem and does not have support at home to attend the Meath Jigsaw programme is causing a huge problem, even in terms of the provision of transport. Gardaí and juvenile liaison officers would not come to show their concern if they did not think it was huge problem. I, therefore, ask the Minister to look at this issue again and get a straight answer to the question. Other providers are involving private counselling services, but many of the people caught up in this issue cannot afford to do so. Gardaí are seriously worried about the matter.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: I will certainly ask my officials to check specifically on the service on Market Street. It is always a possibility that the information I have been given is incorrect. Given the scale and breadth of the health portfolio, it is just not possible for me to be *au fait* with every individual service in every town and county at relatively short notice. I will ask my

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officials to look into the matter and I come back to the Senator later in the week with a full reply by way of correspondence.

Acting Chairman (Senator Hildegarde Naughton): I thank the Minister and the Senator.

Sitting suspended at 3.20 p.m. and resumed at 3.30 p.m.

Order of Business

Senator Maurice Cummins: The Order of Business is Nos. 1 and 2, motions of referral of Freedom of Information Act 2014 Orders to the Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, to be taken without debate at the conclusion of the Order of Business; and No. 3, Thirty-fifth Amendment of the Constitution (Age of Eligibility for Election to the Office of President) Bill 2015 - Second Stage, to be taken at 4.45 p.m., with the contributions of group spokespersons not to exceed ten minutes and those of all other Senators not to exceed six minutes.

Senator Darragh O'Brien: Last week a number of Senators from the Government side and I raised the issue of mortgage variable interest rates. There seems to be broad agreement among colleagues across the House that mortgage holders are being ripped off. I have raised this issue time and again in the House. According to the comparison made by my colleague, Deputy Michael McGrath in the Dáil, the variable rates are as follows: Bank of Ireland, 4.5%; Danske Bank, 4.95%, EBS, 4.33%; Permanent TSB, 4.5%; Ulster Bank, 4.3%; and AIB, which is practically a State-owned bank, 4.15% - one of the lower ones. These are merely the standard rates and do not take into account loan-to-value ratios. The banks are borrowing at wholesale rates of between 1% and 1.5%, taking into account their own costs and the ECB base rate is the lowest ever. There is no justification whatsoever for banks to continue to charge these rates. There will be an increase in the ECB rate in the next 12 to 18 months and the banks will then further increase their variable mortgage rate. We all know that will happen. Senator Michael Mullins and others raised the matter last week also and decried the fact that the banks were charging these rates, but I want to know what is being done about it. According to my party's research, the Economic Management Council of the Government, made up of the four main Ministers or sub-Cabinet, has not met the banks since 2012. I want to know what, if anything, the Minister for Finance, Deputy Michael Noonan, the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Joan Burton, are doing about even putting forward the view of Government. In Britain there is a treating customers fairly charter, which we could take, transpose and place on a legal footing in Ireland, particularly in banks in which we still have a stake such as AIB, Bank of Ireland and permanent tsb. Although there are public interest directors on the boards of these banks, the Government is totally silent as 300,000 variable mortgage rate customers are being overcharged and ripped off by Irish banks and foreign banks in this country which are charging extortionate rates. This is without even getting into the sub-prime sector.

This matter must be cleared up and while I agreed with colleagues on the other side of the House who raised this matter last week and the week before, nothing further has happened. Fianna Fáil has tabled a Private Members' motion in the Dáil on this very matter that asks what the Government is doing. Members can provide an opportunity today by bringing to the House either the Minister for Finance or the Minister of State at the Department of Finance, Deputy Simon Harris, both of whom are decent attendees in this Chamber. I formally propose an amendment to the Order of Business that the Minister for Finance come to the House to explain what

is the Government's position on the variable mortgage rates being charged to Irish customers.

I ask the Leader that on the return of Members after the Easter break, time be set aside for the issues of Government procurement and tendering. I have published a Bill that I intend to introduce also, but I make this request in the context of what I understand today regarding the 10% of bus routes in Dublin that Dublin Bus intends to put out for privatisation. Even if one leaves aside whatever is one's view of that proposal, is the Leader aware that only companies with a turnover of €30 million can pitch for these routes? This kicks every Irish company out the gap, as they will not even be able to tender for this business. That is what is being done wholesale across all sectors and all Government tendering.

Senator Terry Leyden: That is right.

Senator Darragh O'Brien: The issue must be addressed. I ask the Leader to set aside time when Members return after the Easter break to discuss the matter.

Senator Ivana Bacik: First, I welcome the passage through this House late last night of the Children and Family Relationships Bill after a long debate. It is welcome to see this major and most progressive law reform go through. As all Members are aware, it will change the law in a number of important respects but in a child-centred manner, while recognising the reality of the diversity of family life in Ireland today. The Bill will make important changes to the law on adoption, guardianship, parentage and other matters and I greatly welcome it.

I seek a debate on school admissions policies in the light of the proposed school admissions Bill which I understand is being brought before the Cabinet today. As colleagues are aware, a number of cases have arisen in recent months regarding school enrolment and admissions policies. The new Bill will be welcome in seeking at last to reform this area from a statutory point of view. In the light of the Bill, Members might have a general debate, even in advance of its introduction, because it is such a pressing issue for so many parents. In particular, there is the issue of diversity of patronage in the school system. I acknowledge Members have debated this matter in this House previously, but they are due to have another debate on the subject, given that so many people have raised the difficulty of getting into a school, in particular where schools are religious-run and where a child does not have the particular religion of the local school. This is a real issue for many parents across Ireland. While the former Minister, Deputy Ruairí Quinn, set up the diversity of patronage initiative, very few schools have transformed patronage under that initiative and consequently, Members should have that debate.

I welcome the announcement today that the Government is buying, as a national monument, the buildings at 14 to 17 Moore Street at which a commemorative centre will be established. All Members are aware that the last council of war with James Connolly and Pádraig Pearse was held at 16 Moore Street and that the poor condition of the buildings on Moore Street has been a matter of controversy for some years. In advance of the centenary of the 1916 Rising, it is welcome that the Government has made this decision and that the site will be developed as a commemorative centre, adjacent of course to the GPO, as another commemorative centre and national monument.

Senator Feargal Quinn: Approximately 18 months ago, a referendum was held on this House, that is, the reform of the Seanad. However, nothing happened afterwards and then, some time around the end of last year, the Taoiseach decided he would appoint a committee that should report by the end of March. As today marks the end of March, things are taking a

long time. However, the group established is highly distinguished, mainly comprising former Senators. While its members are highly competent and capable regarding whatever it is they are coming up with for a reformed Seanad, leaving it until April Fool's Day to report does not seem to augur well, assuming the aforementioned report will be made available tomorrow. I hope this will happen and ask the Leader to check, if he can, to establish what has happened with that report because the committee started with great hope.

If I may, I will follow through on what Senator Darragh O'Brien spoke about in respect of the variable mortgage interest rates. What has really got me about this is that for those banks that have introduced lower rates, it is only for new customers. It is the most outrageously unfriendly thing to do, that is, to tell one's regular customers that one does not regard them to be as important as strangers who are coming in the door for the first time. A debate is needed on this issue and I look forward to having such a debate soon.

Tomorrow marks the start of a huge campaign around the country, in which individuals will be asked to make sure we have a cleaner Ireland, an Ireland with less litter and which does not scatter rubbish all around the place. Ireland is the sixth biggest generator of household rubbish - I am unsure in which area, but it is not just the European Union but the entire OECD area. Ireland has a bad record in this regard, but we can do something about it. This something is not going to be done by the State or councils but by us individually if, as a nation, we can say we are not going to put up with this but are going to do something about it. The ideal way of making sure we are not obliged to clean up is to not put out the litter in the first instance. I believe the campaign that starts tomorrow needs the support of everybody and if it gets that support the whole attitude to a dirty Ireland could be changed to one of having a clean Ireland.

Senator Catherine Noone: I was shocked to read a report from the United Kingdom today showing that one in five students aged between 14 and 17 years had bought or tried to buy e-cigarettes. The report also revealed that one in 20 of these teenagers had never smoked conventional cigarettes before, which suggests vaping may have become a new activity with which to experiment among teenagers, rather than a device to help to quit conventional cigarettes, which is the purpose for which they were intended. Moreover, this extensive study, which was conducted in Liverpool, monitored 16,000 teenagers in the north west of England and was published in the journal *BMC Public Health*, found a strong link between cigarettes and alcohol use. The study revealed that under-age drinkers were more likely to have obtained e-cigarettes than were non-drinkers, while among the non-smokers, binge drinkers were four times more likely to have bought or tried e-cigarettes. This report is all the more concerning, given that here in this country, we tend to mirror trends in the United Kingdom. Although the Government has acknowledged that e-cigarettes contain a highly addictive substance and has approved the drafting of legislation prohibiting the sale of such products to those who are under 18 years of age, as matters stand, there are no specific regulations governing electronic cigarettes in Ireland. While e-cigarettes are considered to be less potentially harmful than regular cigarettes, the long-term health consequences of vaping are not yet well known. Concern already has been expressed in the United States about the safety of the liquid inside e-cigarettes, which, if ingested on its own, can be harmful. Such a speedy infiltration into teenage culture of what in essence is a new drug is alarming. It has been shown that exposure to nicotine in adolescence may lead to lifelong risk of addiction and keeping the rates low in youths should be the top priority for all Members. In Scotland, Ministers are consulting the public on a crackdown on e-cigarettes, including a ban on their sale to persons under 18 years, advertising restrictions and other such measures. As such, I call for the fast-tracking of legislation to prohibit the promotion and sale

of e-cigarettes to teens.

Senator Thomas Byrne: I was both astonished and disgusted today by the proposal from Fine Gael and the Labour Party that they will rewrite the 1916 Proclamation. I have never heard its like before. Would one rewrite a document for which people died?

Senator John Gilroy: No one is proposing to rewrite it.

Senator Thomas Byrne: That is exactly what is proposed.

Senator John Gilroy: The Senator should check his facts.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Senator Thomas Byrne to continue, without interruption, please.

Senator Thomas Byrne: Fine Gael and the Labour Party have no authority. They have no ownership of 1916, which belongs to everybody in this country and it is about time they realise that. There appears to be some sort of shame, particularly within the Fine Gael Party, as well as large sections of the Labour Party, about the 1916 Rising. That was clearly evident-----

Senator Catherine Noone: What is the Senator talking about?

Senator Thomas Byrne: It was clearly evident from the promotional video the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Deputy Heather Humphreys, released last year. The 1916 Rising was hardly mentioned. There were pictures of the British royal family, but none of the signatories or people who had died.

Senator David Norris: There was not much in the document about the alliance with the Kaiser.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Does Senator Thomas Byrne have a question for Leader?

Senator Thomas Byrne: We should have a full debate on the 1916 Proclamation, how we are implementing it and realising the vision of those who gave their lives and those who subsequently created this democracy.

Senator John Gilroy: Let us have that debate.

Senator Thomas Byrne: How are we realising that vision? For the Fine Gael Party, the latest show of shame and embarrassment follows the iar-Thaoiseach, Mr. Bruton, calling for the firing squads to be remembered. It is ludicrous and ridiculous. It is about time Fine Gael took its hand off the Proclamation and gave it back to the people, with whom it belongs.

Senator Darragh O'Brien: It is disgraceful.

Senator Lorraine Higgins: I call for a debate on the Tús and rural social schemes. There are moves afoot to amalgamate the schemes which, I respectfully suggest, are incompatible. The rural social scheme is for small farmers and helps to supplement the incomes of a few thousand, whereas the Tús scheme is a job activation measure. To corroborate my assertion, I have been advised that at least one community development company is advertising posts of rural social schemes and Tús supervisors, although they are separate schemes. Given the precedent set and that matters are predetermined, the rural social scheme has played an important role in supporting low-income farmers in the past decade. It offers unlimited social benefits to those participating in the scheme in that it assists in alleviating isolation in rural Ireland, promoting

positive mental health and does untold work in supporting a broad range of social care services, community and voluntary groups. We should do nothing that might place it in jeopardy. I have been a long-time believer that we need a separate strategy for rural Ireland when it comes to Government policy. It could be akin to the islands strategies pursued during the years. I do not want to see another case of east versus west because the numbers participating in rural social schemes are proportionately smaller in the eastern part of Ireland than in the ten counties along the western seaboard.

Senator Darragh O'Brien: What is the Minister of State, Deputy Ann Phelan, doing about it?

Senator Lorraine Higgins: Some 2,096 people, 81%, including 156 farmers, are in the constituency in which I live, Galway East; we must, therefore, be particularly cautious in implementing policies designed for implementation in the east but which do not fit in the west. On that basis, I call for a debate on the issue at the earliest convenience.

Senator David Norris: Last night we passed the Children and Family Relationships Bill which should put an end to the idea canvassed by the “No” side that the referendum deals with children. That business has been taken care of and is done and dusted.

Senator Fidelma Healy Eames: No more questions.

Senator David Norris: There can be plenty of questions.

Senator Fidelma Healy Eames: I thank the Senator.

Senator David Norris: No one ever stopped the Senator, but the referendum is about one thing only. The issues of children and adoption have been dealt with. As it is utterly dishonest to suggest children will in any way be affected by it, the Senator should stop doing it. I am concerned by the misinformation. Some nasty material is being circulated, about which I will speak on another occasion. It is coming from the “No” side and I have come across nothing like it from the “Yes” side. I very much welcome the fact that DCU has changed the time of its examinations to facilitate students who wish to vote in the referendum. I appeal to the provost of Trinity College Dublin and the heads of the other universities and technical colleges to do the same because this mostly concerns young people who should be facilitated in every way to vote. I wonder if the Cathaoirleach will consider writing to the heads of the universities to ask them if they will consider changing the dates of examinations to facilitate voting in this important referendum. I am very concerned that, owing to apathy and misinformation, the referendum could easily be lost. That is what I am hearing on the ground, not the 74% figure in *The Irish Times* survey, which is very soft.

Senator Tom Sheahan: I ask the Leader to invite the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Brendan Howlin, to the House for a debate on recruitment in the public service. As many sectors in the public service are suffering, I do not have to name them. People know the sectors about which I am talking, but I want to make a case for one, in particular. Report after report and projections-----

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: There are three debates ongoing and I might rule later that those who interfere with the progress of the Order of Business will not be allowed to speak. Members can have it one way or the other. Senator Tom Sheahan has been standing for over one minute and no one has had the courtesy to listen to the point he is trying to make or the question he

wants to put to the Leader. I will allow him another minute.

Senator Tom Sheahan: The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform should release funds for recruitment in the public sector. I will bring it down to the health service and make it parochial. We are always talking about how we can enhance our tourism product and, in fairness to the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, he has brought forward many initiatives. The trajectory in the tourism scheme is upwards, but I want to bring to mind staffing levels in Muckross House and Gardens in Killarney. Today there are 350 bus tours awaiting allotments to take a tour of the house because the number of guides is down from 22 to 11. It is a no-brainer because 350 buses, with 40 tourists each, equate to 12,000 people, which at €10 per head comes to €120,000. It would be cost neutral. The other point is that the national park is becoming dilapidated and unkempt because staff are not available to maintain it.

Senator Fidelma Healy Eames: Where is Senator Paul Coghlan?

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: The Senator is trying my patience. Since she came into the Chamber, she has interrupted proceedings four times and also had a chat with Senator David Norris.

Senator David Norris: I was not responsible for it.

Senator Tom Sheahan: The Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Deputy Heather Humphreys, has been trying to obtain funding, but we must direct this request to the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform to make funding available to recruit staff. The Muckross House Visitor Centre has been closed for the past three years. If we are trying to build and grow our tourism product, that is not the way to go about it.

Senator Terry Leyden: I second the amendment to the Order of Business proposed by Senator Darragh O'Brien.

What is the status of the Intoxicating Liquor (Amendment) Bill 2014 which Senator Imelda Henry tabled? The name of the Leader is also on the Bill which is No. 26 on the Order Paper. With Good Friday coming up, it would be timely to have a discussion on the issue. The Fianna Fáil Party has not made a formal decision on its policy on opening on Good Friday, but last year I had strong reservations. Yesterday I listened to Mr. Joe Finnegan on the radio station Shannonside interview a publican from Newtownbutler who was attracting customers from all over counties Cavan and Monaghan. My colleague Senator Diarmuid Wilson says Belcoo will be wide open, 100 m from Blacklion, where three or four pubs cannot open on Good Friday. It is not a level playing pitch and we should have an open-minded discussion on the issue. The Bill could be passed by Friday if people wanted it to happen, but it will not. I spoke to Mr. Padraig Cribben of the VFI who said there were 52,000 people working in the industry, an enormous number. Now they are competing with railway stations and hotels. If there are 7,300 licences - 700 in Dublin, some people have reservations about the matter. One time there was no opening on St. Patrick's Day. I have reservations about opening on Good Friday from a religious point of view, but our society has changed dramatically and we must cater for all tastes.

We have to bear in mind that this is a tourist destination. The late Brian Lenihan Snr., a brilliant politician who was a great friend and mentor, spoke about the futility of consistency in the 1980s. This was the wise warning of a thinker who understood the danger of being tethered too tightly to a single position in an environment of ever shifting sands. We are on shifting sands

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and should have an open discussion, at least a Second Stage debate, which would allow the Government to express its point of view. I was fundamentally opposed to this last year. In case I am accused of having a vested interest, I have a certain vested interest in the light of changed circumstances. We have great colleagues in the Presbyterian Church in Northern Ireland who hold very extreme views-----

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I will call time on the Senator.

Senator Terry Leyden: I did not realise that the public houses in Northern Ireland would open on Good Friday, whereas the Roman Catholics cannot open, perhaps we should look at this issue again.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: The Senator is over time and out of time.

Senator Lorraine Higgins: Confucius agrees.

Senator Terry Leyden: Confucius would have a view on that matter.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Please respect the Chair.

Senator Maurice Cummins: He was a learned scholar.

Senator Catherine Noone: Like Senator Terry Leyden.

Senator John Gilroy: The Fianna Fáil Party's view of Irish history, as outlined by Senator Thomas Byrne, is rather charming in its simplicity. We would all love to live in the simple black and white world that it portrays Irish history to be.

Senator Darragh O'Brien: That is a stupid thing to say. What is the Senator talking about?

Senator John Gilroy: It fails to acknowledge the complexity of the positions, the motivation and the actions that lead to the formation of the State. Lest there be anyone in any doubt about how Fianna Fáil rewrites history in a self serving type of way, we note that the only thing Fianna Fáil can say about the Rising today is to focus on a negative thing on the day the Government announced the purchase of Moore Street National Monument.

Senator Darragh O'Brien: That is a load of nonsense. The Senator is missing the point.

Senator John Gilroy: The day that something really good and positive happens, the Fianna Fáil Party focuses on the negative.

Senator Darragh O'Brien: The Senator is missing the point

Senator John Gilroy: Let us recall this is the party of men who stood in the General Post Office in 1916

Senator Darragh O'Brien: I hope that is not the reason the Senator stood up.

Senator John Gilroy: The men who stood in the General Post Office in 1916, de Valera and Lemass, were the founders of the party that brought this country to ruin 100 years after they had made a stand in the GPO.

Senator Thomas Byrne: Lemass and de Valera

Senator Diarmuid Wilson: The Senator just got out in time.

Senator John Gilroy: What would they be thinking today?

Senator Thomas Byrne: Lemass and de Valera set up democracy in this country

Senator John Gilroy: I support the Senator's view that there should be an early debate to tease out different positions.

Senator Darragh O'Brien: I hope that is not the only reason the Senator stood up.

Senator David Cullinane: Unfortunately, Dunnes Stores workers will be on strike on Thursday. I do not believe they want to be on strike. The last place they want to be is on a picket line, but they have been left with no choice because of the actions of the company. Dunnes Stores is a very profitable company and has treated many of its workers very shabbily down the years. Many of them are on contracts that guarantee very low working hours. They do not know from week to week how many hours they will have. The Mandate trade union conducted a survey which shows that 86% of workers said the use of contracts by Dunnes Stores was a way to control and manipulate the workers. Many have their 15 hours spread over five days, which means that they do not have access to any social welfare payment and they do not know from week to week or from day to day what hours they will have. They have no income security. That creates many problems. The Dunnes Stores workers are a section of workers in that sector, where there is a problem with low pay, precarious work and under-employment. There are unscrupulous employers who do not recognise trade unions, will not engage with them and do not treat their workers fairly but yet are making huge profits. It is not good enough. I am calling for a debate on the issue of precarious work and under-employment and the issue of contract work. There are companies and workers who will use part-time and contract work in a progressive way, because flexibility is important to some workers, but it is also clear that some employers are using it for sinister reasons to control the workforce. That is not good enough. I take the opportunity in the week that workers will be on the picket line, where they do not want to be, to seek a debate on the issue of precarious work; it would do them justice. Let us put in place the solutions because there are solutions and the debate would be the time in which to raise them.

Senator Michael Mullins: I support my colleague, Senator Lorraine Higgins, in her call for the debate on the future of the community employment and Tús schemes. These schemes have operated very effectively in County Galway and the west and we want to ensure they are safeguarded. It is important to hear what are the plans for them.

I agree with everything Senator Darragh O'Brien said about the variable interest rates. He rightly said I had raised this matter last week. I know that the Leader will not be in a position to accede to the amendment to the Order of Business today, but I would like an urgent debate on this issue. There is no justification whatsoever for the interest rates being charged by the main banks, given the low ECB rate. It is true that more than 300,000 people are being ripped off and this matter needs to be addressed. I call on the Government to respond to the various cries for help being made by so many people.

It is welcome that €12 million was pledged yesterday by the Minister of State, Deputy Sean Sherlock, on behalf of the Government at a major humanitarian conference for Syria which was held in Kuwait. The conference is designed to raise €7.7 billion to help almost 18 million people in Syria and in the region. The conflict in Syria has cost more than 200,000 lives to date

and more than 12 million people are in need of ongoing humanitarian aid. Ireland's contribution will help fund some lifesaving humanitarian aid and some short-term relief, but what is deeply troubling is that there is little progress in bringing the conflict to an end. The international community appears indifferent to the innocent people that are being barred or banned. Humanitarian aid is being prevented from reaching vulnerable people and the Assad regime appears to be acting with impunity. This conflict has continued for four years and appears to be worsening. I would like to have a further debate or discussion on Syria with the Minister of State, Deputy Sean Sherlock, or the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Charles Flanagan. International attention needs to continue to be focused on the worst humanitarian crisis of our time. There appears to be little or nothing happening to resolve this appalling conflict, in which so many innocent women and children, as well as men, are losing their lives on a daily basis. Millions of people are being displaced. The issue of whether Ireland should take additional refugees also needs to be addressed.

Senator Fidelma Healy Eames: I support Senator Michael Mullins' contribution on Syria. Children in Syria are displaced. They are not receiving any education. I am part of a programme called "UpForSchool" which is aimed at getting the 58 million children worldwide who are not at school into school. This September there will be a UN summit at which all world leaders will be asked to sign a commitment to sustainable development goals to get children who are currently not at school into school. Syria is a particularly apt case and we should put our weight behind it. If world leaders do not do something about it, the rest of us will not get too far.

I thank the Minister for Education and Skills for listening to the case of children with Down's syndrome and for providing the resources for them. I tabled a motion on this issue and think the debate made some small difference. Many parents have contacted me and asked that I thank the Minister on their behalf.

I also note my thanks to the Minister for Education and Skills for holding back on changes on special needs until adequate consultation has taken place in schools. The Minister is listening and making a difference. There are children with emotional difficulties, particularly because of bullying, an issue on which we should focus.

I beg the indulgence of the Chair to raise a question with the Leader. On 13 June we will mark the 150th anniversary of W. B. Yeats's birth. His ancestral home is in Thoor Ballylee, County Galway. It was closed because of flooding in 2009 and we are doing our absolute best to have it reopened in time to mark the anniversary of his birthday. I am asking for one hour to be set aside for public statements when we can remember Senator W. B. Yeats, as well as the poet and literary man, who has such a reach worldwide. It is time this House also did something about that issue. I ask the Leader if we could invite particular guests to the Visitors Gallery on that day.

Senator Darragh O'Brien: That is an excellent suggestion.

Senator Fidelma Healy Eames: I appreciate the Leas-Cathaoirleach's support.

Senator Denis Landy: I welcome the announcement last week by the Minister, Deputy Paschal Donohoe, of a ten-year tourism policy.

Senator Martin Conway: Yes.

Senator Denis Landy: The Minister hopes to increase tourism revenue by €5 billion and

tourist visitors to the country by 100 million during that period. In the context of Senator Tom Sheahan's earlier comments, it is important that we have a debate on this subject.

Senator Martin Conway: It is.

Senator Denis Landy: The Minister outlined broadly how he hopes this will happen but the specifics of the policy have not been put together. He has invited input from the general public and he might also welcome input from Members of this House. For example, the Wild Atlantic Way has been an outstanding success, as has the greater Dublin area tourism product, but the south east and the midlands-----

Senator Lorraine Higgins: And the west.

Senator Denis Landy: To some extent, the west is covered in the Wild Atlantic Way, but the south east and the midlands have not yet been included in the tourism product. This policy presents an opportunity for building on what we have already have in certain parts of the country, about which Senator Sheahan spoke, and for improving tourism. The Minister should be invited to come into the House before he launches his three-year plan, which, according to his press statement, he intends to do shortly, to facilitate the input of Members of this House. We have many ideas about growing tourism in our parts of the country such as developing the GAA Way, a suggestion I have articulated here on many occasions. It would be welcome if the Leader arranged for the Minister to come into the House after Easter to hear our views on this matter.

Senator Sean D. Barrett: I welcome the announcement today that Ulster Bank and An Post are to link up to provide some banking services in post offices. It is good news for towns where banks are closing branches and good news for small post office which are under pressure. There has been concern about the closure of post offices in rural areas.

I echo the concern of Senator Darragh O'Brien about the prospect of a €30 million tender to operate bus services. It seems that would mean that 150 buses would have to be put off the road.

Senator Darragh O'Brien: It is ridiculous.

Senator Sean D. Barrett: For what is the €30 million needed? In transport there are no economies of scale; small is beautiful. Transport policy should not be focused on size in terms of scale. People can build up a reputation, but the requirement to start with €30 million worth of buses parked outside seems to be wrong. We had that when a man by the name of Patton was operating a service from Dalkey to Dublin Airport but we gave his licence to a UK multi-national instead. It seemed he was quite happily providing his neighbours with a bus service to the airport, but the Patton Flyer was taken off the road by the Department. The Department must be realistic about the way the real economy operates.

Senator Hildegard Naughton: It is welcome that Galway is one of 11 counties that has increased its grant allocations to third level students. In the 2013-14 academic year, almost 5,400 students received third level funding. Since the introduction of the centralised system there has been a general reduction in grants given to people living in rural areas and an increase in the number given to people living in urban areas. Although there does not appear to be any statistics on this, we were told that is due to a uniform policy now being adapted by Student Universal Support Ireland. I am a little concerned that some of the reasons given are anecdotal and no studies seem to have been carried out on this issue. I ask the Leader to invite the Min-

ister to come to the House to discuss the matter at her convenience.

Senator Diarmuid Wilson: I join Senator Terry Leyden in calling on the Leader to have a debate on the licensed trade opening hours, particularly on Good Friday. I do not see anything wrong with publicans having two days a year off. They generally look forward to this. It is nothing to do with religion. Initially, it started out that way but publicans are entitled to have a break, as well as the rest of us. It is an issue, as Senator Terry Leyden said, in the towns and villages surrounding the Border. Some people from the Republic travel to Northern Ireland to have a few drinks, while it is not allowed in the Republic. That does not happen as much now as it did in the past, but it still happens to a certain extent. I would welcome a debate on the issue in the context of a wider debate on the issue of alcohol.

Last week eircom published a draft plan which offers no alternative to having overhead power lines in the north east. This issue has been raised by many people, including Senator Thomas Byrne on this side of the House, Senator John Whelan on the opposite side and my colleague, Deputy Brendan Smith in the Lower House. If undergrounding can be considered for Grid Link and Grid West, it should also be an option for the North-South interconnector. It is a fact that there are many advantages to putting power lines underground, including lower transmission losses, lower maintenance costs and less risk of weather damage, but, in particular, it is an issue of fairness. This issue has been raised at Cavan, Monaghan and Meath county councils particularly by Councillors Seamus Kyne and Clifford Kelly and it is an issue of ensuring fairness for the people of the north east. We were told that this inquiry included assessment of the feasibility of putting cables underground in other parts of the country and while we are told it is possible to do it in other parts of the country, for some reason only known to EirGrid, it is not possible to put the cables underground in our part of the country. All we are asking for is fair play and fairness. I ask the Leader to arrange for the Minister to come into House in order that we can have a discussion with him on the matter.

With regard to the 1916 Rising commemorations and the part our respective parties played in them, even though we only became parties after it, we should have a very balanced approach. Nobody has a monopoly of knowledge or the part their people played in it. While we are discussing history, is Senator John Gilroy now writing himself out of the history of the Fianna Fáil Party, of which he was a member for many years?

Senator John Gilroy: That is the worst insult the Senator could give me-----

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I call Senator Martin Conway.

Senator John Gilroy: -----that I was a member of Fianna Fáil.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Will Senator Martin Conway, please, proceed?

Senator Darragh O'Brien: Senator John Gilroy is doing okay. The Labour Party is welcome to him. We do not want him back.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I call Senator Martin Conway for the third time.

Senator Martin Conway: I did not want to interrupt our esteemed colleague.

Senator Diarmuid Wilson: Go Ahead.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Time is running out. Senator Martin Conway might not have

time to interrupt anybody.

Senator Martin Conway: I echo what my colleague Senator Denis Landy said about the importance of tourism. Senator Terry Brennan spoke about this issue last week or the week prior to that. We should debate that subject more in this House. The one thing that we as a country should have learned from the crash and crisis we have been through in recent years is that we should play to our strengths. The strategy behind tourism in the past four or five years has been smart, innovative, creative and successful. We had The Gathering which was the first attempt at a corporate branding where we pulled together all the strengths, appealed to the diaspora and, in turn, we got the results. The Wild Atlantic Way is a similar example of success, which pulls together the strengths and beauty of the various counties into something that rivals the Camino or any of the great walks of the world. It has been a great success. Despite a very limited budget the Wild Atlantic Way has repaid its investment 20-fold and other parts of the country need the same type of corporate approach. Until five years ago Kerry was competing against Clare, Clare was competing against Galway and we were all competing against each other. At the Irish festival in Milwaukee, every county had their own stand and instead of combining all our resources and promoting Ireland we were promoting each county. We had a situation in which there was an airport in every county, which was not smart, given the size of the island. I call for a debate after Easter on Ireland as a world class tourism destination. I ask the Leader to organise statements on the subject and invite the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Paschal Donohoe, who was in Doolin last Friday, even though I was here carrying out my Seanad duties. He opened the Doolin rescue centre.

Senator Paschal Mooney: How did the Minister manage without the Senator?

Senator Martin Conway: There has also been an investment of €5.7 million on the pier. A lot of good work has been done and the GAA Walk, in particular, is a super idea.

Senator John Crown: I call on the Leader to ask the Minister for Health, the Taoiseach and the Minister for Justice and Equality to consider some radical approaches to dealing with the tobacco industry in the light of the disclosure that Japan Tobacco International intends mounting a serious, and I believe ultimately futile, legal challenge. It is worth looking into the context of this to consider what remedies are available to the State. Throughout the entirety of the Northern Irish tragedy there were 3,000 deaths, an average of 100 per year. That is 100 per year too many and 3,000 too many in total, but every year on the island of Ireland approximately 6,000 people die from lung cancer, or 60 times as many people as died violent deaths in the pointless Northern Irish conflict. In response to that conflict the State was prepared to take quite radical legal measures in defence of citizens, gardaí, prison officers, one of our Senators and others who were murdered. This involved proscribing certain organisations as illegal. If Japan Tobacco International persists in its course of trying to undermine the democratic rights of our Republic to protect its citizens from the effects of its product, would the Minister consider proscribing Japan Tobacco International and invoking the same draconian powers which were used during the Troubles to limit their rights and make it illegal to be a representative member or employee of the organisation in Ireland? This is what we did for other groups who were responsible for far fewer deaths. Would the Government consider the possibility of having a referendum to make the following amendment to the Constitution: “No provision of this Constitution protects the right to sell tobacco products.”? It is a nice, simple constitutional amendment and we would be the first country in the world to do it. It would not ban tobacco but would mean that our legally elected legislature would be entitled to enact whatever laws it saw fit to protect citizens from this incredibly evil industry. The tobacco industry would then operate at the pleasure of

the representatives of our State and could not hide behind any arcane constitutional arguments. We do not respect a constitutional right to murder or manslaughter; therefore, why should we respect a constitutional right to sell cancer-causing addictive substances, especially to youngsters in this country?

Senator John Whelan: It has just been announced by the Minister for Justice and Equality that the independent review into the murder of Fr. Niall Molloy has been published. I am sorry to tell the House that there will be no justice for Fr. Molloy or his family because the report, carried out by the serious crime review team and Mr. Dominic McGinn, SC, concludes that while there are many unanswered questions, no different outcome would arise from and no further purpose would be served by a further inquiry into the matter. This is on two grounds: first, two key witnesses have died since the murder in July 1985 and second, there is a reluctance on the part of others to give evidence and information regarding what may have happened on that date. Even at this late juncture I make a final appeal to anyone who has meaningful information on this matter and who is aware of what actually happened in Clara, County Offaly, in July 1985 leading to the death of Fr. Molloy to clear his or her conscience and ensure justice by bringing this matter to closure. I am grateful to the Minister for requesting this independent review, but, unfortunately, and despite the best efforts of the Government, it has not led to any positive outcome for the family.

Senator Paschal Mooney: I am glad that the topic of tourism is regularly raised in this House and I am sure the Leader will respond accordingly. I congratulate the owners of Lissadell House in County Sligo, Edward Walsh and Constance Cassidy, who earlier this week announced that they were opening their entire demesne. The impressive restoration of Lissadell House is a joy to behold and I encourage anybody visiting the north west to visit it. They are throwing it open to the public for walking and cycling and are going to provide extra activities along the beach, which is a beautiful part of the north west. In the background of this decision are years of litigation between Sligo County Council and the Walsh-Cassidy family, but despite that, the family still has the appetite and enthusiasm to put their patriotic duty before their personal preferences. They bought the estate from the Gore-Booths at a time when the State would not buy it. The price was very substantial and they spent all their own money restoring the building to its former glory. Lissadell House looms large in the poetic activities of Senator W. B. Yeats whose wonderful poem pays tribute to the two Gore-Booth sisters, one of whom - I think it was Constance who later became Constance Markiewicz - he referred to as a gazelle. In that context, it is relevant to have a debate on tourism on a regular basis because of its importance to the economy and I commend the calls of other speakers to the Leader in this regard. The fact that Lissadell House is going to be opened to the public will give a huge boost to tourism in the north west.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Three other Senators have indicated. I will try to let them in, even though time is up.

Senator Terry Brennan: I listened to comments about the success of the Wild Atlantic Way and there is a further proposal to link the Viking city of Waterford with my own mediaeval town of Carlingford via the medieval city of Kilkenny, the Boyne Valley and Newgrange and Ferdia and Ardee, I hope ending up in the nicest mediaeval town in the country. There should also be an east coast wild way in the future.

I read recently that my old alma mater, the ESB, was to recruit 300 apprentices in the next few years. It is the way forward and is part of its development programme for the next five

to ten years, which will provide young men and women with great opportunities. They heard today that the Office of Public Works intends to employ apprentices as stonemasons to continue the good work it is doing to our national monuments throughout the country.

I support the call made by Senator Feargal Quinn on the question of litter and dumping rubbish. As a nation we must take the responsibility to take home the litter we create and bin it. If we did not have to empty all the bins in the capital city, towns and villages or clean our streets one can only imagine the money we would save. The responsibility lies with us all.

Senator Labhrás Ó Murchú: For over ten years and on a regular basis in this House I have raised the issue of Volunteer Thomas Ceannt who is buried in Cork gaol. As we all know, Thomas Ceannt played a very significant role in pursuit of Irish freedom and on the eve of the centenary commemoration of 1916 it would be helpful if the appropriate Minister updated us on the current position. My understanding is that some of the initial obstacles have now been overcome. If we look back on the repatriation of the bodies of the ten volunteers buried in Mountjoy Prison, we all remember with a great sense of affection and pride the manner in which the Irish public responded to that act on that occasion. It is well past the time when Volunteer Thomas Ceannt received a Christian burial and had his body repatriated to a more appropriate location, possibly the family plot in Fermoy. I will be personally very disappointed if months pass by and it is not evident that that will be done, perhaps next year, which would be the proper occasion to do what is right. Volunteer Thomas Ceannt is now the only patriot from that period resting in prison grounds and if there are no difficulties with family or otherwise, it should not be beyond the bounds of possibility that in the coming months we should be able to announce that the right thing will be done, even at this belated stage. I ask the Leader if he would make an inquiry for us in that regard and provide a statement for the House.

Senator Jim Walsh: I begin by supporting Senator Labhrás Ó Murchú in that regard. Given the week that is in it, it is appropriate that that issue is raised and we do not have to wait until the centenary to commemorate those who sacrificed their own lives in order that we might have independence and freedom. It is hoped that some day their aspirations will be achieved when, together, the island will move forward as a unit.

I support fully what Senator Darragh O'Brien said about the variable interest rate being charged by the banks. I recall talking to some of my colleagues who were in the Cabinet at the time of the crisis in 2008 and they all claim that because of the seriousness of the financial situation they could not allow the banks to collapse at that stage because the economic, fiscal and social fallout would have been of such magnitude that the country would not have recovered, probably for decades. Rescuing the banks has cost the taxpayer and created tremendous problems for individuals but, equally, my colleagues told me that it was their intention that once we got past that emergency they would ensure the citizens of this country, customers and taxpayers, were protected, and there is a real need to do this. The insolvency legislation has not succeeded, which many of us predicted at the time, and as Senator Darragh O'Brien rightly said, with the money markets here cheaper than they have ever been, it should not be the case that people are paying interest rates of 4.5% or 5%. It is not sustainable and it is not good enough, particularly when many of them are in negative equity.

Senator Ivana Bacik called for a debate on school admission policies. I would like to have a debate on that issue because I have consulted people in the education field who tell me that in my own county and across the rest of provincial Ireland there is no problem about enrolment but a perceived problem is being generated to promote a particular ideology, about which we have

talked a good deal in the past week. There is a need, perhaps in Dublin, for some refinement where people might have difficulties. Generally, however, people of all denominations and none are accepted into denominational schools, but the effort behind all of this is to try to make all schools non-denominational. That is a mistake because we have seen in other countries that tried to move in that direction that parents and the pupils gravitate to Catholic schools because that is where they get the best education, which is ultimately what parents are interested in.

Senator Maurice Cummins: That was a bit of a marathon. Senators Darragh O'Brien and Feargal Quinn, as well as the last speaker, Senator Jim Walsh, raised the issue of mortgage holders paying at over the top variable rates. There is no question that that is the case. The Statement of Government Priorities 2014 to 2016 recognised that promoting and encouraging competition and new entrants into the banking sector was required to exert downward pressure on interest rates for both new and existing variable rate mortgage holders. The mortgage interest rates independent financial institutions operating in Ireland charge to customers are determined as a result of commercial decisions by the institutions concerned. The Minister for Finance and the Central Bank have no statutory role in the setting of the mortgage rates charged. As the Taoiseach announced last month, the Economic and Monetary Council will meet the main banks in the near future to discuss the issue of mortgage distress and the cost of variable rate mortgages. The improvements in the overall economy include a reduction in the cost of funds, an increasing demand for greater competition between lenders which has led to a reduction in the standard variable rates offered by the majority of banks to new customers and, in the case of AIB, all standard variable rate customers. As part of the Central Bank's work on the issue of mortgage arrears, lenders were asked to consider all avenues to help customers in arrears, including interest rate reductions.

The regulation of interest rates remains a policy issue which is under active review by the Government and has been the subject of correspondence between the Department of Finance and the Central Bank. The Consumer Protection (Regulation of Credit Servicing Firms) Bill will ensure all mortgage holders in the State will have the protection of the code of conduct on mortgage arrears and access to the Office of the Financial Services Ombudsman. The actions already taken by the Government to promote competition in the banking sector, including the establishment of the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland, the credit guarantee scheme and the amendment to section 149 of the Consumer Credit Act to encourage new entrants to the financial sector, are all helping the system, but I will ask the Minister for Finance, as I have done previously, to come to the House for a debate on the banking sector. I hope he will accede to that request.

Senators Ivana Bacik and Jim Walsh referred to the school admissions Bill, which is pending. We had a debate on the issue of patronage previously, but we will have ample time when the school admissions Bill is brought forward to have a further debate.

Senator Ivana Bacik welcomed the fact that the State was buying the buildings at 14 to 17 Moore Street for a commemorative centre for members of the 1916 Rising. The issue was raised on several occasions by Senator Labhrás Ó Murchú who said the State should intervene and buy the properties. I am glad that the State has acted.

Senator Feargal Quinn mentioned the Seanad reform group. I believe it is due to report in April. When the report is published, I hope to invite the chairman of the Seanad reform group to come to the House to debate it with him.

Senators Feargal Quinn and Terry Brennan referred to the dumping of litter, an issue that was raised yesterday also. It presents a major problem. Senator Terry Brennan is right - it is up to each and every person to look after his or her own litter and not to litter the roadsides and streets of our cities and towns.

Senator Catherine Noone referred to e-cigarettes, a study in the United Kingdom and the need for regulation here. As she stated, e-cigarettes are not sufficiently long in existence to ascertain their maleffects, if any. I am sure the Minister for Health and the Department are monitoring the position.

Senator Thomas Byrne asked how we were implementing the 1916 Proclamation. I do not know what he is speaking about. I do not know what his rant was, especially on the day of purchase of the buildings at 14 to 17 Moore Street as a national monument.

Senators Lorraine Higgins and Michael Mullins referred to the community employment and Tús schemes and called for a debate with the Minister of State with responsibility for rural issues, Deputy Ann Phelan, on a strategy for rural Ireland. Given the many interesting announcements made in this regard in recent months, I am sure she would be willing to come to the House again to discuss the matter.

Senator David Norris referred to the forthcoming referendums and stated university examinations were clashing with the polling date. I am sure the Ministers for Education and Skills and the Environment, Community and Local Government will take up the matter with the universities. It is important that we have a good turnout for the referendums as the turnout has been disappointing for previous referendums. Young people who are eager to vote in the forthcoming referendums should be given the opportunity to do so.

Senator Tom Sheahan raised the matter of public service recruitment, in particular at Muckross National Park where the number of guides has decreased from 22 to 11. There is a need from the point of view of tourism to increase their number. I am sure the Senator will take up the matter with the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport.

Senator Terry Leyden referred to the intoxicating liquor Bill and raised the issue of opening on Good Friday. That is a matter which will be incorporated in a Bill which will be brought before the House by the end of the year but certainly not before Good Friday. I am glad that the Senator is coming around to the idea and has done a complete U-turn on it-----

Senator Terry Leyden: I am adjusting.

Senator Maurice Cummins: -----having been totally opposed to it. Now he is in favour of it, which we welcome.

Senator Terry Leyden: It is called pragmatism.

Senator Maurice Cummins: On the futility of consistency, I thought that was the motto of the Fianna Fáil Party.

Senator Ivana Bacik: It might as well be.

Senator Maurice Cummins: Senator John Gilroy raised the issue of commemorations.

Senator Terry Leyden: He is a terrible man.

Senator Maurice Cummins: Ireland 2016 is the Government's initiative to commemorate the 1916 Easter Rising while reflecting on our achievements in the past 100 years and what we want to achieve in the next 100. It is based on five themes: celebrating our achievements, remembering our past, reconciling and respecting all traditions, presenting Ireland to the world and imagining our future. A great deal of work is under way led by the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Deputy Heather Humphreys, who has established the Ireland 2016 project office within her Department, which is leading the engagement and planning elements of the programme. The Government has provided €22 million in 2015 for seven major flagship commemoration projects which will be completed by Easter 2016. They include the development of the permanent exhibition space and interpretative centre at the GPO; the renovation of Kilmainham courthouse to enhance the visitor experience at Kilmainham Gaol; the provision of a permanent visitor facility at Cathal Brugha Barracks for the military service pensions archive; the development of visitor facilities at Teach an Phiarsaigh at Rosmuc; the renovation works at Richmond Barracks; the development of a tenement museum in Dublin; and the restoration of the Kevin Barry Room in the National Concert Hall. These are all projects that will provide a permanent and lasting tribute to those who were involved in the 1916 Rising. People should remember what has been and what is being done on the issue of commemorations.

Senator Darragh O'Brien: Tell John Bruton.

Senator Maurice Cummins: Those who suggest nothing is being done should be aware of these capital projects which are only a small part of the commemorations.

Senator David Cullinane referred to the dispute at Dunnes Stores. I hope Dunnes Stores will engage with its workers and use the labour relations mechanisms of the State to solve its problems.

Senator Michael Mullins referred to the pledge made by Ireland to provide €12 million in humanitarian relief in Syria. As he rightly pointed out, there is a need for the international community to redouble its efforts to resolve this appalling issue, the effects of which we witness on our screens on a nightly basis.

Senator Fidelma Healy Eames supported the comments made by Senator Michael Mullins and also welcomed the extra support provided for children with Down's syndrome.

In regard to Yeats 2015, marking the 150th anniversary of the birth of William Butler Yeats, I am not sure what we can do, but we can organise a debate to mark the occasion. William Butler Yeats should be commemorated in this House, of which he was a Member. I do not know what we can do, but we will try to arrange something.

Senator Denis Landy referred to and called for a debate on the three-year plan for tourism. The need for such a debate has been highlighted by a number of Members. I am sure the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Paschal Donohoe, a former Member of the House, who has come here on many occasions will be willing to do so again to discuss this important sector.

Senator Sean D. Barrett welcomed the fact that Ulster Bank and An Post were coming together to provide banking services at An Post. This has to be a good development for An Post. I remind Members that, as requested, we will be having a debate on social protection which will be taken by the Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection, Deputy Kevin Humphreys, in the context of letters issued by the Department asking people for their bank details. I

think the Minister of State will have a positive response for Members on Thursday.

My voice is gone. I knew that the debate had gone on for too long. I ask the Leas-Cathaoirleach to excuse me. I will respond tomorrow to other matters raised.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I was going to suggest the Senator was being a little long-winded. I am not sure if it is appropriate for the Chair to say that, but it is said in good faith.

Senator Darragh O'Brien has proposed an amendment to the Order of Business, "That a debate with the Minister for Finance on the variable mortgage rates being charged to Irish citizens be taken today." Is the amendment being pressed?

Senator Darragh O'Brien: Yes.

Amendment put:

The Seanad divided: Tá, 17; Níl, 25.	
Tá	Níl
Barrett, Sean D.	Bacik, Ivana.
Byrne, Thomas.	Brennan, Terry.
Craughwell, Gerard P.	Coghlan, Eamonn.
Crown, John.	Conway, Martin.
Daly, Mark.	Cummins, Maurice.
Healy Eames, Fidelma.	D'Arcy, Jim.
Leyden, Terry.	D'Arcy, Michael.
Mooney, Paschal.	Gilroy, John.
Mullen, Rónán.	Hayden, Aideen.
Norris, David.	Henry, Imelda.
Ó Murchú, Labhrás.	Higgins, Lorraine.
O'Brien, Darragh.	Keane, Cáit.
Power, Averil.	Landy, Denis.
Quinn, Feargal.	Moloney, Marie.
Walsh, Jim.	Moran, Mary.
White, Mary M.	Mulcahy, Tony.
Wilson, Diarmuid.	Mullins, Michael.
	Naughton, Hildegard.
	Noone, Catherine.
	O'Donnell, Marie-Louise.
	O'Neill, Pat.
	Sheahan, Tom.
	van Turnhout, Jillian.
	Whelan, John.
	Zappone, Katherine.

Tellers: Tá, Senators Paschal Mooney and Diarmuid Wilson; Níl, Senators Aideen Hayden and Michael Mullins.

31 March 2015

Amendment declared lost.

Question put: "That the Order of Business be agreed to."

The Seanad divided: Tá, 24; Níl, 17.	
Tá	Níl
Bacik, Ivana.	Barrett, Sean D.
Brennan, Terry.	Byrne, Thomas.
Coghlan, Eamonn.	Craughwell, Gerard P.
Conway, Martin.	Crown, John.
Cummins, Maurice.	Daly, Mark.
D'Arcy, Jim.	Healy Eames, Fidelma.
Gilroy, John.	Leyden, Terry.
Hayden, Aideen.	Mooney, Paschal.
Henry, Imelda.	Mullen, Rónán.
Higgins, Lorraine.	Norris, David.
Keane, Cáit.	Ó Murchú, Labhrás.
Landy, Denis.	O'Brien, Darragh.
Moloney, Marie.	Power, Averil.
Moran, Mary.	Quinn, Feargal.
Mulcahy, Tony.	Walsh, Jim.
Mullins, Michael.	White, Mary M.
Naughton, Hildegard.	Wilson, Diarmuid.
Noone, Catherine.	
O'Donnell, Marie-Louise.	
O'Neill, Pat.	
Sheahan, Tom.	
van Turnhout, Jillian.	
Whelan, John.	
Zappone, Katherine.	

Tellers: Tá, Senators Aideen Hayden and Michael Mullins; Níl, Senators Paschal Mooney and Diarmuid Wilson.

Question declared carried.

Freedom of Information Act 2014 Orders: Referral to Joint Committee

Senator Maurice Cummins: I move:

That the proposal that Seanad Éireann approves the following Order in draft:

Freedom of Information Act 2014 (Effective Date for Certain Bodies) Order 2015,
copies of which Order in draft were laid before Seanad Éireann on 10th March 2015, be referred to the Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, in accordance

with Standing Order 70A(3)(j), which, not later than 2nd April 2015, shall send a message to the Seanad in the manner prescribed in Standing Order 73, and Standing Order 75(2) shall accordingly apply.

Question put and agreed to.

Senator Maurice Cummins: I move:

That the proposal that Seanad Éireann approves the following Order in draft:

Freedom of Information Act 2014 (Exempted Public Bodies) Order 2015,

copies of which Order in draft were laid before Seanad Éireann on 12th March 2015, be referred to the Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, in accordance with Standing Order 70A(3)(j), which, not later than 2nd April 2015, shall send a message to the Seanad in the manner prescribed in Standing Order 73, and Standing Order 75(2) shall accordingly apply.

Question put and agreed to.

An Bille um an gCúigiú Leasú is Tríocha ar an mBunreacht (Aois Intofachta chun Oifig an Uachtaráin) 2015: An Dara Céim

Thirty-fifth Amendment of the Constitution (Age of Eligibility for Election to the Office of President) Bill 2015: Second Stage

Acting Chairman (Senator Tom Sheahan): We will now take Second Stage of the Thirty-fifth Amendment of the Constitution (Age of Eligibility for Election to the Office of President) Bill 2015. No. 4, a motion pursuant to section 23 of the Referendum Act 1994 on the proposal to amend the Constitution contained in the Thirty-fifth Amendment of the Constitution (Age of Eligibility for Election to the Office of President) Bill 2015, will be debated in conjunction with Second Stage but will not be moved until Fifth Stage has been concluded.

Tairgeadh an cheist: “Go léifear an Bille an Dara hUair anois.”

Question proposed: “That the Bill be now read a Second Time.”

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Paudie Coffey): The Thirty-fifth Amendment of the Constitution (Age of Eligibility for Election to the Office of President) Bill 2015 provides for the amendment of Article 12 of the Constitution. It provides for the age at which a citizen becomes eligible for election to the Office of President to be reduced from 35 years to 21. It is a short but important Bill in the context of the Office of President, as provided for in the Constitution.

In drawing up its first report the Constitutional Convention gave consideration to the current age requirement of 35 years, which applies to citizens who wish to be elected to the Office of President. The convention recommended that the age of candidacy be reduced, but it did not suggest a specific age to which it should be reduced. The Government accepted the recommendation and agreed that a referendum should be held in 2015 on reducing the age from 35 years

to 21, the same as the minimum age for Dáil and European election candidates. As the Bill has emerged from a recommendation of the convention, I take the opportunity to acknowledge the work done by the convention in bringing forward proposals for constitutional change. The impact of its work is clear. The two referendums to be held in May are based on recommendations made by the convention.

In addition, the convention recommended in its fourth report that an electoral commission be established. The Government accepted this recommendation and the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Alan Kelly, recently took the first steps towards establishing an independent electoral commission when, on 27 January, he published a consultation paper. The paper was discussed in the Seanad on 4 March and on 10 March the Minister met the Joint Committee on the Environment, Culture and the Gaeltacht to discuss it as part of the pre-legislative process. The joint committee will engage in a consultation process and report to the Minister with recommendations.

On the Bill before us and the specific proposal to lower the age at which a citizen becomes eligible for election to the Office of President, I note that the issue was considered previously in Constitution reviews undertaken in the 1990s. The members of the 1996 Constitution review group were divided on the issue. Some members considered there was not sufficient reason to differentiate between eligibility for Dáil membership and the Presidency. They were prepared to rely on the judgment of the electorate to make a proper choice between candidates. However, other members considered that the presidency called for special qualities which were more likely to accrue and mature over a longer span of years than 21. The majority of members ultimately favoured no change or only a minor reduction in the age limit.

The all-party committee on the Constitution took a different view in its 1998 report on the President, in which it recommended that any citizen who had reached the age of 18 years should be regarded as eligible for election to the Office of President. The committee found that there was no logical reason for setting the age at which one became eligible to be President at a greater age than that at which a citizen might exercise the right to vote in elections. In making this recommendation it concluded that young people should be encouraged to engage in politics. It took the view that any young candidate who succeeded in being nominated would be an exceptional and worthy candidate. These recommendations were not taken up at the time and lay dormant until the Constitutional Convention considered the question again 14 years later in 2012. A narrow majority of the members of the convention - 50% versus 47% - found in favour of lowering the age at which a citizen could become eligible for election to the Office of President. While the convention's report did not advance any argument for or against lowering the age threshold, the proposal has since generated debate among political commentators and in the media. I propose to share with Senators some of the points that have been aired.

Those in favour of lowering the age threshold from 35 years point out that doing so could generate a greater diversity of potential candidates, thereby providing a greater choice for the electorate. The view is advanced that the electorate can be trusted to judge the suitability of candidates, irrespective of their age. It is also argued that capacity to undertake the job need not be age related and, more generally, that it could encourage younger people to engage in politics. On the other hand, those against lowering the age threshold suggest there is no public demand for change. It is argued that lowering the age threshold could weaken the Office of President as considerable experience is considered desirable in making decisions on such matters as the referral of a Bill to the Supreme Court or the dissolution of the Dáil. There is also the view that the older age brings a certain gravitas to the office that may be absent among young persons.

The wide divergence of positions taken on this matter in other countries does not offer us any guidance. The age of eligibility for holding presidential office ranges from 18 years in Croatia, Finland and France, for example, to 50 years in Italy. In the case of France, the President has wider executive powers than our President. Most countries have a minimum age requirement of 35 or 40 years for eligibility for the office of President. The age of Presidents in Ireland has ranged from 46 to 78 years. The Government, in accepting the convention's recommendation to lower the age threshold, agreed that a minimum age of 21 years would be appropriate as it matched the minimum age for election to the Dáil and the European Parliament. It will only be possible to gauge the impact of the change over time if the Bill is passed and subsequently approved in the forthcoming referendum in May. In the event that it is approved and a person younger than 35 years is a candidate at a future election, people will ultimately decide on the suitability of that person for election to the Office of President.

On referendums generally, I have noted the commentary in the media on other recommendations of the Constitutional Convention and, specifically, when referendums on these might be progressed. As Senators are aware, the Government has run six referendums since taking office and a further two will be held in May, both of which arise from recommendations of the convention.

Earlier this year the Taoiseach indicated in the Dáil that, while he did not envisage any further referendum being held in 2015, this was a matter for the Government to consider at a later stage. It is the clear Government position that the best approach is for only two referendums to be held in May. This is a reasonable position. While the Government agreed to hold a referendum on lowering the voting age to 16 years in 2015, it would be premature to proceed with the vote in May. This matter was discussed and the Government's position outlined in the Dáil in February and March when Private Members' Bills on lowering the voting age and voting by citizens resident outside the State were debated.

I have also noted commentary in the media and elsewhere that the referendum proposal in the Bill is, in some way, not as significant as some of the other proposals for constitutional reform that have emerged from the Constitutional Convention. I do not accept that view. Article 12 of the Constitution provides that the President shall "take precedence over all the other persons in the State" and "shall exercise and perform the powers and functions conferred on the President by this Constitution and by law". Given this position in the Constitution, the proposal to reduce the age at which a citizen is eligible for election to the Office of President is significant. Moreover, proposals to change the Constitution are always significant milestones in the ongoing development of the State.

The debate on the proposed amendments to the Constitution in the referendums in May has begun. Following publication of the constitutional amendment Bills, the Minister established, on 27 January, the Referendum Commissions for both referendum proposals. It is the task of the commissions to explain the subject matter of the referendums to the electorate, promote public awareness of the referendums and encourage the electorate to vote. The commissions' preparatory work is under way.

I will now outline the details of the Bill. Section 1 provides for the amendment of Article 12 of the Constitution, as set out in the Schedule to the Bill. Section 2 provides for the standard citation of Constitution amendment Bills. The Schedule, Part 1, provides for the substitution of the Irish text of Article 12.4.1^o of the Constitution. The new text provides that every citizen who has reached the age of 21 years is eligible for election to the Office of President.

The Schedule, Part 2, provides for the substitution of the English text of Article 12.4.1° of the Constitution. The new text provides that every citizen who has reached the age of 21 years is eligible for election to the Office of President.

The opportunity is being taken to correct a possible conflict between the Irish and English texts of Article 12.4.1°, as they stand. While the Irish text requires a candidate to have completed 35 years of age, the English text requires a candidate to have reached the 35th year, which would happen on his or her 34th birthday. In the amendment to the Constitution now proposed, the Irish and English texts of the Bill are aligned. Attention was drawn to this possible conflict between the Irish and English texts in the Constitution review reports undertaken in the 1990s that I mentioned. The all-party Oireachtas committee noted that the issue had been raised by the eminent constitutional lawyer John Kelly, a former Member of both Houses of the Oireachtas, in his book *The Irish Constitution*.

Senator David Norris: On which side did he come down?

Deputy Paudie Coffey: In concluding, I repeat that this is a short but important Bill. Our democratic processes and our full participation in them are important for all of us. I take the opportunity to encourage people to vote in order to have their say in the outcome of the referendums. I commend the Bill to the House.

Senator Labhrás Ó Murchú: Tá fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit. I thank the Minister of State for outlining the Government's position on the referendum. Fianna Fáil is not opposing this and supports the idea of a referendum being held. It is also clear from the presentation that we are endeavouring to balance how to recognise youth and enable it to take up positions that require responsibility and experience. The position of President is the most important office anyone can hold and we have been very well served by Presidents in the past. They have done us proud at home and abroad and are very often the face of Ireland. We are well aware of the manner in which they avoid unnecessary controversy and fulfil the obligations the office places on them.

The Constitutional Convention was a good idea and even if it had not been part of the programme for Government, the changes in society and attitudes and our position internationally mean it was important to examine the Constitution and see how it might be improved. We should compliment all those who participated in the convention because they had to give a lot of their time and attention and much of it was during a vacation period.

Some of the recommendations from the convention were decisively passed, but in this case it was a 50:50 division. There is nothing particularly wrong with that or with people expressing their views democratically in such a forum. It will also spill over into the voters' area because the same will apply. Mol an óige agus tiocfaidh sí. No person interested in enhancing democracy would suggest that young people should not be given the opportunity to play the fullest role in public life. No one suggests a young person of 28 years would be less idealistic than someone of 35 years or any other accepted age. I see that forming part of the debate during the referendum campaign and it is understandable in a way because, generally speaking, one must look at the experience, expertise, track record and understanding of any office. All of this is exceptionally important and particularly with the office of the Presidency. I am sure it is the same with other offices where people are subject to constant appeals for representation from lobby groups. We have seen that with legislation passed in the Oireachtas and the manner in which the President is brought into focus immediately. While the Council of State is available, it is not brought together on a regular basis, except when there is some issue the President is

not particularly happy or clear on. In the main, the President must make the decision and must draw on a huge body of experience gained before taking up the office. Looking at the holders of the office, that is what happened. It gives people a sense of confidence in the Presidency, the political system and whatever decisions the President might make. It is a particular confidence when representing Ireland abroad. We look at presidential visits to other countries and we watch carefully the protocol, decorum and presentation and we are seldom disappointed. Often, the pictures are going worldwide and are the pictures of Ireland at that point. We can see the need for a wise head and I am not suggesting a 21 year old does not have a wise head. A wise head is needed on that occasion and people feel that we cannot put an old head on young shoulders. I do not mean the term old in a derogatory sense but what is intended is to embrace age with experience and expertise.

Having said that, the Minister has pointed out clearly that this is a matter for the people and the people decide on a number of fronts, whether we recognise youth in the context of being eligible to go forward for the office. We can point to Italy, where the age is 50 years, and many others where the age is 30 or 35 years, which is what the minimum age was. In Croatia and France, the minimum age is 18 years, but they seem to be the exception in many ways. That is precisely what people will consider and, in fairness, once the Constitutional Convention gave so much time to issues of this kind, it is important that there is an opportunity for people to consider the issues. The media and other people say there are major constitutional issues discussed and were clearly passed, some of which are acknowledged and are being progressed. However, others seem particularly important and raise the question of why this particular one was raised at this particular time. I speak in the same tone as the Minister of State. There is a degree of caution and the measurement of the vote at Constitutional Convention. That is the case with the referendum where the ball is being kicked to touch. It is being given back to the people and my main hope is that it will not be seen as lowering the status of the Presidency or raising question marks about the Presidency. We must avoid misunderstanding when the referendum is being put to the people because the Presidency has served us well. We are lucky to have such an institution and there is no doubt that, where Ireland is concerned, we still need that image and status for the Presidency. I hope the debate does not go off track and remains on the main issue asked in the referendum. I wish the Minister of State well in what he is doing and the same for the Government.

Deputy Paudie Coffey: I thank the Senator.

Senator Labhrás Ó Murchú: I do not think this is the type of issue on which we should have a political division, given where we are at this time.

Senator Cáit Keane: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit inniu. It is appropriate after the death of the Minister of State's mother to sympathise with him now and I have not met him since. They say behind every good man there is a good woman, but the Minister of State has a good wife also. Having lost his mother this week, I extend my condolences to him.

I welcome the Minister of State to debate the proposal to amend the Constitution to reduce the age of eligibility for the election to presidential office from 35 years down to 21. As he has said, there will be two referendums on 28 May or whatever the date is. Two referendums on the same day are enough because there has been confusion, in referendums, when too many questions are put on the table at the same time. Two referendums will be held on the same day. Again, the proposal came not from this House or Houses but from the members of the Constitutional Convention that was established by both Houses in July to consider a list of matters.

Obviously this is only one of the matters it has considered and there are others to be actioned later. To action all together would be confusing.

The Minister of State has mentioned that 17 years ago the Oireachtas committee discussed age limits. It recommended at the time that the age to qualify for election to the Office of President be reduced to 18 years. Things have moved on and one can see how youth is viewed now versus 17 years ago. There was a recommendation 17 years ago to reduce the age of eligibility for election to the Presidency to 18 years so a proposal for 21 years seems worthy of recommendation, which is why I support it here today. Years ago it was said youth were to be seen and not heard. I believe what the youth of today have to say must be listened to. I support both findings, the one put forward years ago by an Oireachtas commission but particularly the more recent one by the Constitutional Convention.

The political scientist, Professor Melanie Scully, has found that most European countries have a relatively high age threshold for the presidency role. At the same time, she has pointed out that a high age requirement does seem and might seem increasingly anachronistic in the context of lowering the age. Capacity and ability to deal with the issue should be most important, rather than a focus on ageism in terms of youth or the elderly. While it is the norm, in the European Parliament, where 19 democracies have higher age limits some European states have a much lower age. France, in particular, reduced its age limit of 23 years to 18 in 2011; it had a much lower age threshold than we had. When one compares the powers of the president in France with the powers of the President here one discovers they are much more onerous. A French president has much more power, yet the age of eligibility in France has been set at 18 years. We do not have anything to fear by agreeing with the Constitutional Convention that the age of eligibility to be elected President here should be reduced from 35 years down to 21.

On the nomination process, let us first look at the presidential candidates heretofore. The Minister of State mentioned that the oldest candidate we have ever had was 78 years and he was Dr. Dubhghlas de hÍde. As his name is still remembered, that proves age is valuable also. The youngest Presidents we have ever had in this country were two women. What does that say about us? Does it mean that women are better than men because they can get elected President when younger? The two women were 46 years old when they were inaugurated but most of the men were older. President Michael D. Higgins was 70 years old when he was inaugurated in 2011. The youngest candidate in the last presidential election was Seán Gallagher who was 46 years old. On that occasion the electorate had the choice of a younger or older President. The electorate chose the best candidate and did not opt for age, which is the right way to do things. I think it will be the same in future, people's ability will get across to people.

Arguments have been advanced in favour of a lower age threshold which will generate a greater diversity of political candidates. Diversity is important. There is a diversity of minds when one opens the presidential election up to a further age group. The measure would provide a greater choice. The electorate can be trusted to judge the suitability of the candidates, regardless of their age. The ability to do the job should not and need not be age-related. I agree that young people now are better educated and informed.

As the Minister of State said, lowering the age threshold might encourage more young people to participate in the political process. Somebody said to me that if one opens the Presidency to people who are 21 years then somebody from One Direction or whoever could be elected on popularity grounds. That opinion has been expressed before. Irish people are well informed enough to be judgmental and to select the best candidate rather than a popular one. Given the

intense focus on candidates during election times, particularly for presidential election campaigns where there are television debates, radio and social media, it is unlikely that a candidate who does not possess the experience and qualities needed to undertake the duties of presidential office - earlier the Minister of State outlined the duties of the presidential office - would be selected in the first instance or elected if they were selected by the people.

The political scientist, Professor Robert Elgie, has noted that while there may have been un-presidential candidates or unsuitable candidates in America, with a lower age threshold, none of the ones deemed unsuitable would be elected. He was not referring to Ireland or the European states. Analysis of the 2011 presidential election in Ireland shows that candidates were persistently criticised for being ill-informed about specific responsibilities and powers of the role. There is good critical analysis and critical critique of the suitability of the candidate for the role which has shone through in each presidential election.

One interesting feature of the Constitution as it stands, and the Minister of State referred to it, was that the Irish and English versions differ. A person reaches his or her 35th year at his or her 34th birthday and the Irish version would have a person elected a year earlier than the older version, “[g]ach saoránach ag a bhfuil cúig bliana tríochad slán”. The Irish version means people would have to be older and have completed their 35th year. The Minister of State stated earlier that the terminology will be corrected by the translation service.

The legislation is based on the recommendation of the Constitutional Convention which is comprised of 66 ordinary citizens. There were also 30 politicians, but they were not in the majority and there was an independent representative from Northern Ireland. There was a broad range of people involved. We are always talking about inclusive and participative democracy and the convention is an example of that at work. Citizens of the country recommended that something should be done, the Government has acted on it and it is now up to the wider cohort of the population to vote on this proposal and take a deliberative decision on same.

We should have no fear at all that reducing the age will lead to unqualified candidates. The selection process for selecting the candidate to go forward for President is quite restrictive and onerous. A candidate needs the nomination of four county councils or 20 Oireachtas Members. The selection process is on the agenda also.

Senator David Norris: The Government ruled it out.

Senator Cáit Keane: Not today.

Senator David Norris: The Government ruled it out-----

Acting Chairman (Senator Tom Sheahan): Senator Cáit Keane to continue, without interruption.

Senator Cáit Keane: A candidate needs the nomination of four county councils or 20 Oireachtas Members. There are two issues up for decision on this occasion. Two issues at a time is enough to deal with because it would be confusing and virtually impossible to decide five or six issues at one time. Seven or more issues were put forward previously. It would be virtually impossible for people to get through that number without the requisite skills. I firmly believe the people of Ireland, when given the choice of a younger candidate on the ballot paper, will be able to decide for themselves whether that candidate has the required level of skill. Dr. Eoin O'Malley, in a 2011 article, said that the presidential election in Ireland shows that can-

didates were persistently criticised if they did not have the requisite specific responsibilities or qualifications for the role and those criticisms helped people decide whether or not to vote for a particular candidate. The evidence suggests that in Irish presidential election campaigns voters take a candidate's experience and qualifications seriously and focus on a candidate's suitability for the post.

Honesty and the question of who is the best candidate to represent Ireland abroad were key criteria and young people have represented us ably abroad on many occasions. They would not let us down as President, but it will be up to the people to decide. The Constitutional Convention will be discussed at a later date, but I will support the Bill and hope it is supported throughout the House.

Senator Jillian van Turnhout: I welcome the Minister of State. I support of the Thirty-fifth Amendment of the Constitution (Age of Eligibility for Election to the Office of President) Bill 2015. I, too, was a member of the Constitutional Convention; therefore, part of me is disappointed because it made two recommendations, namely, that the voting age be lowered to 16 years and that the presidential term be not reduced to five years or aligned with local European elections. As part of that weekend's consideration the reduction in voting age was a supplemental issue, as were the proposal that citizens be given a say in the presidential nomination process and the issue we are discussing.

I tabled an amendment after the Constitutional Convention on the subject of reducing the voting age to 16 years in European and local elections because such a change would not require a constitutional amendment. We could put it into legislation and trial it for local and European elections to see whether we would wish to do it on a permanent basis. The Government needs to give it greater consideration, as they have done in other countries. We had some important inputs from the convention on the issue.

Today's issue is to reduce the age for presidential candidates. I am disappointed with some of the commentary in the media which dismisses this as a joke. Anything that changes the Constitution is extremely serious and we need to take each issue on its merits. I believe the Irish people could handle several referendums on one day if we had a permanent electoral commission looking at elections and referendums to ensure they are carried out appropriately and fairly. We saw in the referendums on judges' pay and Oireachtas inquiries how the people can decide which way they want to vote on each issue.

A greater issue is the question on the ballot paper because sometimes that is not always clear which question a voter is answering. I also have a difficulty with how we provide information. All too often the option is a binary "Yes" or "No" but without any reasoning or other information. It is as though we have to have panels that require "Yes" or "No" and I wonder about how this will work on the question of presidential age. Some people will turn it into a joke so that they can get onto the "Yes" or "No" side of the debate.

I have looked at other European countries. In France the age limit was 23 years until 2011 and it is now 18. The age limit is 50 years in Italy, 40 in Latvia, 18 in Slovenia and 35 in Austria. There is no happy medium and it is quite an arbitrary issue depending on the country. Other countries are looking at the issue at the moment. Across the water, Queen Elizabeth became Queen at 25 years, although that was not in an election and I do not necessarily want to draw the comparison. If we look at history we would see people whom we would currently preclude from being President. For example, two signatories to the Proclamation of Indepen-

dence, Joseph Plunkett and Seán McDermott, who were leading figures in the Rising, were below the age required to serve as Uachtarán na hÉireann. Michael Collins, who was taken at the young age of 35 years, never could have been President of Ireland. In these cases the Irish people would never have had the choice and that is the point. Hannah Sheehy-Skeffington, a suffragette, was 34 years old when she founded the Irish Women Workers Union. Rosie Hackett was 19 years old when she co-founded the union. Charles Stewart Parnell was 34 years old when he became leader of the Home Rule League. I do not want to point to people around at the moment because I do not want to be seen putting forward candidates but maybe others have some great suggestions.

In the world of business, people of a very young age lead multi-billion dollar, pound or euro businesses. I do not say they would necessarily be great Presidents but young people are in leadership positions across the world and this referendum is about widening the choice for the people. Surely age has become much more arbitrary now. A person's suitability depends on their life experience and what the Irish people believe they need in a President at a given time. At different times the people have chosen different leaders to suit the time. They have made excellent choices so I stand in support of opening up choice and waiting to see what candidates come forward. Why should the age be 35 or 36 years, depending on what language one reads the Constitution in? Why not reduce the age and allow candidates to come forward? There are issues around the nomination process, on which I have no doubt Senator David Norris will elaborate. We should open the process out in order that the people of Ireland have the choice of whom they wish to be President of Ireland. I support this amendment and will be encouraging a "Yes" vote.

Senator Denis Landy: I welcome the Minister and reiterate the comments of Senator Cáit Keane on his recent bereavement. In every organisation and every walk of life there are rules. The Minister of State will know as a lover of hurling that there are rules for the ages of teams, such as an under-21 rule where Waterford have a good crop at the moment. Players under 21 years can play senior hurling but players over 21 cannot play under-21 hurling.

In this situation the rule according to the Constitution is that a person has to be over 35 years to stand for the Presidency. The age at which one may stand for the Seanad or the Dáil or in the European elections is 21 years and for local elections it is 18. I know of one or two who have been elected at that age but there are not too many.

The decision of the Government to bring forward this amendment has been well explained by the Minister of State and other speakers as arising from the Constitutional Convention. Many things were discussed at that convention and this is but one of them, but this is the one that presents before us for a referendum in May. No one of us is, so to speak, more equal or less equal than any other citizen in a vote in a referendum and that is the great thing about the Constitution. Each one of us has a vote in the ballot box. Were one to judge by the decision of the Constitutional Convention, I understand there was a majority of 3% in favour of recommending this proposal. I am aware, from discussions I have had with people on this issue across various spheres of society, there is division regarding this issue also. It has been well noted by other speakers that the youngest ever President was 46 years old, while the oldest was 78. I read the transcript of the contributions in the Lower House on this issue of which there were very few, that is, four excluding those of the Ministers. I hope interest in the referendum among the public will be greater than that and I believe it will. I believe there is good interest in this issue. I have come up through youth organisations and was involved in representing young people in various organisations in my younger years. However, I also respect views expressed by other

speakers on this issue to the effect that when people get greater experience, they perceive matters differently. Gravitas was the word used and people have life experience to enable them to handle issues differently. I also believe there is a vibrancy, vitality and energy in young people that perhaps one loses as one gets older.

What is the correct mix to represent this country as President? For me, the jury is out on that although obviously, I will make a decision and will vote on the proposal when the time comes. In Ireland, however, we always seem to look to other countries for guidance. Much has been made here today about the various age limits such as those in France and Italy of 18 and 50 years, respectively, and so on. That is the beauty of the Constitution and of the sovereignty of the people of Ireland. We will decide ourselves what is best for us. This issue will be decided on 22 May, along with the marriage equality referendum. I will respect whatever the people decide. To be honest, at present I am in favour of retention of the 35 year age limit. However, I am open to being convinced as the debate progresses. It is an apt selection by the Government from the various issues that were brought up at the Constitutional Convention. I believe there will be a good debate on this issue in the coming weeks and that a decision will be made by which people can stand.

We have seen great Presidents and all our Presidents have been great in the era they represented. While I will not single out any President, the Presidents of the current era may not have been suitable for the times at the beginning of the State and *vice versa*. However, each of them served this country well in his or her own way. As Senator Labhrás Ó Murchú noted, when they travel across the world to represent Ireland, they do us proud and all of them have done that. I do not remember any issue in respect of any President where I suggest the country was poorly or badly represented or that something happened with which one could not agree. I am proud of every President of this country to date and will go along with and support whatever decision the people come up with on this referendum. I will view the decision as the voice of the people of this sovereign State.

Senator David Norris: I also welcome the Minister of State back to this House and remember the days when he sat before me in the Chamber. I also extend my sympathy to him on his recent bereavement.

I am pretty indifferent to this legislation and the referendum. I do not believe it has great wide appeal and do not believe people are that interested in it. I consider it to be ludicrous and unnecessary. Reference has been made to how France lowered the age to 18 years and how the French had the limit at 23 for many years before that. However, they never have elected a President under the age of 35 years. Even if it is changed, I rely on the judgment of the people. I think they will make a wise decision and it would be highly unlikely that they would produce somebody who is 18 or 21 years or whatever the age is. Moreover, I detect a notable lack of enthusiasm in the Minister of State's speech for this proposal. He is saying things like "on the one hand and then on the other hand" and it is very like the McKenna judgment-----

Senator Cáit Keane: The Senator is a mind reader.

Senator David Norris: ----- with 50% here and 50% there. Senator Denis Landy's contribution was interesting because he stated the jury was out and then indicated that he was thinking about voting against the proposal.

Senator Denis Landy: The jury is out until 23 May.

Senator David Norris: Exactly. The jury is still out.

Senator Denis Landy: It is not my decision; it is the people's decision.

Senator David Norris: That is an important consideration.

The Minister derives all this from the Constitutional Convention and refers to the importance of the convention, the wonderful work it did in bringing forward proposals and so on. However, the Government is highly *à la carte* about the proposals which it took up from the convention. If one examines the figures pertaining to this particular debate, it was the most narrow of all the debates. It did not even secure a majority but got a plurality of votes, as a majority would have been 51%. Instead, it got a plurality and even that plurality was within the margin of error statistically for an election. That is a rather interesting point. The Minister also made reference to commentary in the media about other recommendations of the convention, to which I will return in a moment. He spoke of people having stated it was not a highly significant amendment and his answer to that was the fairly bland response that all constitutional referendums are important. There is a certain lack of logic.

Then there is the issue of the difference between the Irish language and English language versions. Instead of including the proposed clause in Irish, “Is intofa chun oifig an Uachtaráin gach saoránach ag a bhfuil bliain agus fiche slán”, it strikes me it would have been a far more sensible amendment for the Government to have changed it from “bliain agus fiche” to “chúigiú bliain is tríocha”. This would make the two versions of the Constitution coincide. I understand that the Irish version takes precedence anyway so presumably, one could run at the age of 34 years, if one so wished. The Minister of State also mentioned that the late Professor John Kelly referred to this issue in his book, *The Irish Constitution*, but did not state on which side, if any, Professor Kelly came down.

I mentioned the Government's *à la carte* approach to this issue and it certainly was. It neatly tailored and micromanaged the convention to make it do what the Government wanted it to do. I was present and saw all this happening before my eyes. Moreover, the staff openly took sides with the Government in this matter. As for the figure of 47% to 50%, the Minister of State should know I managed to get a motion before the convention. Despite
6 o'clock the management of the platform party, I managed to have an amendment recommendation discussed to the effect that the process of nomination to the Presidency should be opened to the citizens of Ireland generally. The nomination process was too difficult and too demanding and it is for this reason that we have never once in the history of this State had an independent President, that is, a President who had a track record that was completely independent of the political parties. They all have been dependent on the political parties and that is because of this difficulty that exists in respect of the process of getting a nomination. However, the proposal before Members received the lowest vote for a proposal that was passed. On my amendment, which proposed opening up the presidential nomination process, we got the highest vote when 96% of the convention voted “Yes”. That is 46% more than the 50% who voted for the proposal before Members. It is astonishing that something that was so narrow and so fuzzy has been put forward. Even the language in which it was discussed was fuzzy. No specific age was suggested and no arguments were advanced in its favour.

However, arguments were certainly advanced with regard to the opening up of the presidency to the citizens of Ireland. I remind the Minister of State that an all-party constitutional review committee issued a report in 1998 in which it recommended this change, namely, that

nominations for the Office of the President be opened up to the citizenry. The Minister of State's party produced detailed legislation in respect of this matter, as did Fianna Fáil. When I raised the issue during Private Members' time, the Government sent the former Minister of State, Deputy Fergus O'Dowd, to the House to indicate that no action was going to be taken on it because such action was not necessary. Deputy Fergus O'Dowd signed the original legislation brought forward in 1998. It was brought forward in his name; therefore, it was quite a *volte face* on his part.

It would be much more significant if we were to take measures to open up the Presidency and allow nominations by citizens. That would be much more democratic than this arbitrary and unnecessary reduction in the age of eligibility, particularly when we all know that no one under the age of 35 years is going to be elected President. It would be far more significant were the Government to consider the possibility of opening up the nominating process. It will not do so, however, because since 1998 successive Governments have tumbled on the fact that this is one of the offices over which they have control. Governments are not likely to surrender that power. It is my strong belief there would not have been a presidential election on the most recent occasion had it not been for my intervention. The parties were canoodling with each other to come up with an agreed candidate. Negotiations took place and it was obvious that a fix was being put in place. When I threw my hat into the ring, however, the campaign opened up.

What I have suggested underpins my belief that the nominating process is faulty. There is universal agreement on this matter and the Government is simply reluctant to move on it. Despite the faulty mechanism of nomination, we have had a succession of outstanding Presidents. There was not a dud among them. We should be very proud of all of those who have held the office, from Douglas Hyde through to the current incumbent, President Michael D. Higgins. We have been very well served by our Presidents. That said, the situation would be further improved if the Government opened up the nominating process to the citizens of this country rather than fiddling around with the age of eligibility of candidates.

Senator Paschal Mooney: I welcome the Minister of State. On behalf of the Fianna Fáil group of Senators, I express our sincere sympathy on his very sad loss. I have experienced a similar loss - as, I am sure, have other Senators - and know that it is not a pleasant time. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam.

While I support the legislation and have no difficulty with someone over the age of 21 years being nominated to contest a presidential election - ultimately, it is the people who will decide whether such an individual is fit to serve - the subject with which we are dealing does not even register on the radar when it comes to the wider context of the economic cycle and the issues which citizens have indicated that the Government should treat as priorities. We suggest what is proposed is somewhat patronising to young people who were promised a much broader slate of political reforms, including a reduction in the voting age to 17 years. We must also remember the many people, a large proportion of whom were young, who left the country during the past six years in the aftermath of the economic crash. The young people who left were denied a franchise.

I hope the Government will make some positive moves towards introducing votes for members of the diaspora. It would be relatively easy to extend the franchise to allow Irish citizens not resident in the country to vote in presidential elections. I see no difficulty in this regard. It would be very easy to draw up a list of the criteria that would obtain were we to take this route. For example, a time limit could be put in place to allow only those who left the country

in the past five to ten years to vote and the franchise could be extended to those who hold Irish passports. Those to whom I refer would also be required to register in their country of residence before they could vote. All of these are measures which have been implemented in other countries. I see no threat whatsoever to the Irish political system as a result of an extension of the franchise. However, there would be enormous positives from an international perspective. As a former emigrant, those who have left the country would welcome an extension of the franchise as an acknowledgement of their position. In the main, those who emigrated did so for economic reasons. I fully accept, however, that a considerable cohort of young people leave the country to gain further experience abroad. In any event, a large number of those who have settled abroad still have a very keen interest in Irish affairs. I ask the Minister of State to take note of the fact that there is a significant level of support for extending the franchise to members of the diaspora to allow them to vote in presidential elections.

I do not agree with my colleague, Senator David Norris, and others who propose that the current system of nomination should be dismantled. I came to this view after some reflection. My initial knee-jerk reaction was to ask why the nominating process should not be open to the wider public. I then examined the results of various elections at local level in both this country and on the neighbouring island where the nominating process had been opened up. Senator Denis Landy captured it perfectly when he referred to the Presidency and the fact that it was very special. Following a slow start, it now holds an extremely special place in the affections of the people. The mere thought that it might be abolished - a matter which was a political football for some time a few decades ago - is anathema to citizens in the light of the superb work done by a succession of Presidents, particularly in the modern era. In saying this I intend no reflection on those who went before. If the nominating process were opened up, it is inevitable that frivolous candidates would be put forward, but the presidency should not be about frivolity.

Under the current system, someone must engage with local councillors in order to seek a nomination. It must be remembered that the people elect councillors to represent them and that the actions they take are taken in the name of the people. If the people do not like the decisions their councillors take, they can turf them out of office at the following election. The position is similar in respect of both the Dáil and the Seanad because the Members of both also represent the people. The way the system has been designed means that there is no elitist closed shop. Senator David Norris was absolutely correct to highlight his own experience and the fact that he had managed to overcome what might have been seen as obstacles to people seeking a nomination to stand in a presidential election. Dana Rosemary Scallon also overcame them. Friends of mine in the Seanad bucked the system and, despite their parties not wanting them to run for election, they managed to encourage other Senators to have their names included in nomination forms. That has happened across all parties. The system, as it now works, can be challenged. This is despite the fact that there are what are perceived to be major obstacles in the way. As stated, Senator David Norris, Dana Rosemary Scallon and a number of other Members of this House are perfect examples of how the system can be challenged.

While I support the view that people from the age of 21 years and upwards should be allowed to be nominated for election to the Office of President, as previous speakers pointed out, it does not necessarily follow that someone aged 21 years is going to be nominated. It is most unlikely that such an individual would be nominated. What is proposed in the Bill will, however, open up an interesting vista for those under the age of 35 years. Senator Jillian van Turnhout highlighted a number of historical figures who would not have been able to stand for election to the Office of President if the existing rules on the age of eligibility had been in place. From

that point of view, the legislation is important. In addition and as Senator Denis Landy pointed out, a person can be elected to serve on his or her local council at 18 years of age. I recall a time before the relevant law was changed when a former colleague of ours in this House was elected to fill his father's seat but could not do so because he was between the ages of 18 and 21 years. His uncle was obliged to take the seat until he turned 21 years, which was ludicrous.

Overall, what is proposed in the Bill is positive. However, an interesting question arises as to how the McKenna judgment will be applied. We must consider who is completely opposed to what is being done. I refer to the media, particularly the electronic media. Perhaps this will be clarified by the Minister. My understanding is that the McKenna judgment applies only to RTE. For example, it does not apply to the newspapers but they still operate it. They always go searching for the other side.

In this instance, it will be a major problem to find somebody who will state he or she is totally opposed to this in order to provide balance. It again points up the all-embracing nature of that judgment. There was no flexibility built into it. It was either "Yes" or "No". One had to ensure there was balance. It is ludicrous. The motivation behind it was fine, but I question the practice. There is a need for the Government or somebody to look at the McKenna judgment again and go back to the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court will not reverse its own judgment. It does reverse its judgments, but it can only do so if somebody brings the issue before it. In the overall context of this debate, the McKenna judgment will be shown to be ludicrous in this respect.

As everybody here has stated, this is an issue that animates, excites and enthuses the Irish electorate. According to the most recent opinion poll, they would be much more interested in proposals that would put more money in their pockets and more jobs in the economy rather than this sop to the young people of Ireland. In that wider context it is irrelevant.

Senator Kathryn Reilly: I welcome the Minister of State. My party and I will be supporting this legislation.

I, too, express my disappointment that we will not be having a referendum to reducing the voting age to 16 years, but I acknowledge that in the other House the Government accepted legislation that my party put forward on the Friday sitting.

The lowering of the age for presidential candidates would serve to empower young people. It would also serve to kick-start the promotion and awareness of and participation in politics among young people in terms of the issues affecting them. The earlier we engage young people in democracy and politics, the greater the chance that we will promote and sustain a lifelong interest in and commitment to voting and participating in the democratic process.

Unlike previous generations, modern young people are much more informed, for example, by civic, social and political education courses in schools. Today, young people have a wide range of access to media and social media networks, for example, Twitter and Facebook, and many other media that I myself do not fully understand even though I am quite young. Young people are able to get this information, engage and debate on political issues in their own way through these fora.

At this point, I highlight an article that was in *The Irish Times* last week, entitled "Zayn Malik's move points us in one direction on presidential age referendum". There are not many journalists who could tie in the exit of a member of one of the most popular boy bands cur-

rently with politics but, alas, it was done. While Zayn did leave One Direction, this article went completely down the wrong direction. When, for example, on the same day a certain television presenter was sacked from his job for misconduct in attacking his producer, are we able to tie that into some other referendum on how perhaps we should vote? The article stated:

In short, the proper place for a 21-year-old is not in *Áras an Uachtaráin*. It's not even in the *Dáil*, *Seanad* or Cabinet.

No, the proper place for a 21-year-old is in a nightclub; or a night-train to Mongolia with nothing much to do in the morning; or a job in which mistakes can be made without major incident; or a college library; or in a band; or even a boy band. Vote No.

This piece is not only highly offensive but condescending and degrading towards all young people in Ireland who are working hard to make a difference. Personally, I find it insulting.

Most Senators and Deputies, including the Minister of State, the Cathaoirleach and me, probably entered politics young. Most of us became interested at a young age, probably in our mid-to-late teens. I have been working in the Houses of the Oireachtas since I was 20 years old. I was elected to this House at the age of 22 years. If I have electoral ambitions to be President, after having gone through college and acquiring experience in these Houses, why should my age preclude me? Why should I have to be older if the electorate itself feels I can do a good job? Should it not be the electorate who judges each candidate on his or her merit rather than having a restricted choice only based on age available to it on polling day? Why should I, or any other young person in Ireland, be discriminated against by ageist policies? We would not discriminate against people because of skin colour, religion or sex, and why should we accept discrimination because of age?

The Constitution permits a 21 year old to serve as a Minister and, essentially, exercise more political power on a daily basis than the President. Why should we discriminate against someone below the age of 35 years exercising the functions of a President? If a 21 year old can theoretically deliver the budget, I am prepared to trust such a person in the *Áras* for a number of years.

To go beyond my political party, the current Minister of State at the Department of Finance with special responsibility for the Office of Public Works, public procurement and international banking, Deputy Simon Harris is 28 years old and he has been a Member of the Oireachtas since 2011. As we all will be aware, he has been in this House for the passage of a number of important Bills and while I would not agree with him on the content of some of that legislation, no one could deny that he is able and articulate and one of the most intelligent Members in the Houses. Prior to his election to the *Dáil*, he was elected to Wicklow County Council in 2009 with the highest percentage vote of any county councillor in Ireland. It sounds like a party political broadcast for Deputy Harris, but would anyone question his ability because of his age? Should he have been in nightclubs or out Interrailing instead of putting himself forward for election and getting elected by so many of his peers? Would it be better if the Minister of State was in the out-and-about sections of the newspapers falling out of nightclubs with the glitterati or in these Houses using his experiences, wisdom and knowledge to influence legislation?

I heard a lot of Deputies in the *Dáil*, and one or two Senators here, state that while they are supportive of the Bill, they would be unlikely to vote for someone under 35 years of age and that is fine. I accept that. However, allowing someone younger than that to stand is important

and the involvement of more young people in politics would introduce innovative and fresh ideas. My party will be supporting this legislation wholeheartedly.

Senator Jim Walsh: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Paudie Coffey, and offer my condolences to him. I have not had the opportunity privately to do so. As he will be aware, I served with his father for many years on the then General Council of County Councils and we were good friends. I sympathise with him on his bereavement.

All parties are supporting this amendment of the Constitution. A little like the other amendment, it is almost as if political parties are afraid to say “No” anymore. I can see some reasons, for example, that it was proposed by the Constitutional Convention. It raises some questions. Why is it a good idea to have somebody in his or her 20s? When he or she is probably at university or in other education, and perhaps should be out enjoying life, why would it be appropriate for us to lock him or her up in *Áras an Uachtaráin*? I can think of a whole lot of things I would rather be doing in my 20s than being in *Áras an Uachtaráin* and making the occasional statement with all the inhibitions which are on it, but perhaps there are persons who would like to do that. The other point I would make, which has been said by some of my colleagues, is that democracy means positions should be open and maybe there should be no impediment to those in their 20s to put themselves forward if they are interested in attaining these positions.

There is a high regard, as my colleague, Senator Paschal Mooney, stated, among the Irish people for the position of *Uachtarán na hÉireann*. There is a long tradition where that position is seen to be above politics and is well respected. It is interesting that in the current climate, when politicians, regardless of their hue or political party, are to put it mildly not looked up to and are not the flavour of the month, the Presidency rises above this. There is a great deal of respect for the current incumbent, as there was for his predecessors. I knew the past number of Presidents. I probably would have known the late President Hillery best. He was a very fine gentleman who impressed all those who met him. He did not project himself or seek the lime-light, but he was highly impressive in the role of President. He did a lot to resurrect respect for the Presidency following the disasters of the 1970s where the position was ridiculed by a senior Minister and an incumbent had to resign. All those who have held the office have distinguished themselves and provided leadership.

A common thread that can be identified in regard to all the occupants is that they had significant life experience which they were able to bring to bear on their position as President, on the areas they prioritised and in their statements and public pronouncements. Oratory can be used to provide leadership and it certainly provides an outlet for people, particularly in difficult times. Our current President has been exemplary in that regard, making several very good speeches with which many members of the public have empathised. A young person might be able to do the same but his or her perspective would probably be a little different.

Will the Minister of State indicate why this proposal from the Constitutional Convention was selected to accompany the referendum on the redefinition of marriage, which will take place on the same day? Moving forward with another of the convention’s proposals relating to the Presidency, namely, the proposal to extend the franchise to all people resident on this island, North and South, and to all members of the diaspora who hold Irish citizenship, would, in my view, have represented a progressive step towards inclusiveness as we approach the centenary next year of the Easter Rising. It would have sent an important signal to people.

We have had debates in this House on many occasions about the plight of those people who

are endeavouring to buy their own houses and those who are in negative equity and paying exorbitant rates simply because the banks have not been tackled on their decisions to increase the margin they apply over the cost of funds. People who are struggling to make ends meet are suffering because of this and some are struggling to avoid repossessions. Against that background, the decision to hold a referendum on the proposal we are discussing today is perhaps indicative of a Government whose priorities are somewhat skewed. It would be far better to direct our energies towards dealing with the fallout from the economic collapse and striving to assist people.

It comes down to a question of choices. I had a discussion with a gay man at the weekend about the referendum to redefine marriage. This man noted that it will cost €21 million to run the two referenda. In his opinion, this money could be so much better spent. If, he said, the money were used to provide HIV testing to people who are homosexual, among whom there is an increase in the numbers affected by HIV, it would be a far better expenditure of the money.

Senator Denis Landy: Can we stay on the subject we are discussing? We have had three days of this already.

Senator Jillian van Turnhout: There are many people with HIV, including people who are not gay.

Acting Chairman (Senator Terry Leyden): Senator Jim Walsh has exceeded his time.

Senator Jim Walsh: I am raising this issue in the context of Government priorities. I accept there is support for what is being proposed in these referenda and there may be good reasons for holding them, but the decision to proceed with them at this time is indicative of a Government that has lost its way when it comes to recognising what are the priorities for the Irish people. I realise there is an ideology behind the decision. I know that a sop must often be given to a smaller party to keep it happy in government. Ultimately, however, if we do not start prioritising the issues that have a real impact on the public, the disconnect between people and their politicians will continue.

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Paudie Coffey): I thank all Senators for their contributions to the debate. Divergent views have been put forward but it is the people who will decide the outcome of the referendum, which is one of the great strengths of our democracy.

Senator David Norris referred to the nomination process for the Presidency. He is correct that there was a strong vote at the Constitutional Convention in favour of a recommendation to give citizens a greater say in the presidential nomination process. The Government has agreed that this recommendation be referred to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Environment, Culture and the Gaeltacht for consideration. The issue is not being ignored and we await with interest the recommendations of the committee.

Senator Paschal Mooney has often voiced his strong views on the diaspora and I take on board what he said in this regard today. The Constitutional Convention recommended that citizens resident outside the State should have the right to vote in presidential elections. The Government's diaspora policy was announced earlier this month, on which occasion we made clear that it will be necessary to analyse the full range of practical and policy issues that would arise from any significant extension of the franchise outside the State. This would have to be done before any decision could be made on holding a referendum to extend the franchise as proposed. The Minister, Deputy Alan Kelly, will be undertaking that analysis in co-operation

with the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Minister of State with responsibility for the diaspora.

Senator Paschal Mooney: I ask the Minister of State to press for a timeline in this regard.

Deputy Paudie Coffey: We will talk about that issue another day.

There are different views on the proposal before the House to lower the age at which citizens are eligible for election to the Office of the President. Some are of the view that we should leave well enough alone by retaining the age requirement of 35 years, while others have suggested we should be even more ambitious by lowering the age requirement to 18. The Government is proposing in this Bill to lower the age requirement to 21 years, matching the age requirement for standing for election to the Dáil, the Seanad and the European Parliament. It will only be possible to gauge the impact of the change over time, if the Bill is passed and subsequently approved by referendum. It is to be welcomed that we are taking steps to deal with the proposal to lower the age requirement in order to be eligible for the Office of President. We are all too familiar with the many fine reports on constitutional issues on which no actions were taken. I referred earlier to the work of the Constitution Review Group and the all-party Oireachtas committee on the issue of lowering the age requirement. Their recommendations lay dormant until the issue was aired again by the Constitutional Convention some 14 years later. We are finally giving the people an opportunity to have their say and the referendum will settle the matter for the foreseeable future.

If the Bill is passed and approved by the people by way of referendum, it will have a significant impact on the number of citizens who will become eligible for the Office of President. Based on the population figures from the last census, some 2.27 million people, or nearly 50% of the population, were aged 35 years and over. Some 3.27 million, or 71%, were aged 21 years or over. On the basis of these figures, some 1 million additional people in the State, or more than 21% of the population, will become eligible for election to the Office of President if this proposal is accepted by the people. That is a significant increase in the number of eligible citizens and reflects the fact that this is an important proposal that is being put to the people for decision in May.

There has been some unwelcome commentary to the effect that the referendum proposal is not substantial. It has been suggested that rather than progressing the referendum on the candidacy age of the President, the Government should be addressing some of the other recommendations made by the Constitutional Convention. We should bear in mind that under the Constitution, the President takes precedence over all other persons in the State. A President is required to make significant decisions, as referred to by many Senators, on issues such as the referral of a Bill to the Supreme Court and the dissolution of the Dáil. Taking these facts into consideration the proposal to reduce the age at which a citizen becomes eligible for election to the Office of President must be seen as significant. I am not trying to diminish the importance of the other recommendations that have emerged from the convention. We should acknowledge that all the other issues on which recommendations have been made are serious issues with implementation implications that need to be weighed up and analysed carefully. Neither am I saying the Government has not progressed these other recommendations. The impression is sometimes conveyed that the Government is not responding or is ignoring these. That is not the case. If the Bill is passed and approved by the people in a referendum, it will make a significant change to eligibility for election to the Office of President as originally envisaged by the architects of the Constitution. The lowering of the age requirement from 35 to 21 years will

mean that a wider range of citizens will be eligible for election to this high office. It will also mean alignment of age requirements to stand for President, the Houses of the Oireachtas and the European Parliament. The Government has committed to holding two referendums in May, one on the proposal in the Thirty-fourth Amendment of the Constitution (Marriage Equality) Bill 2015, which was passed in this House last Friday, and the other which is the subject of the present Bill. I understand that if either or both of these proposals are accepted by the people, Ireland's Convention on the Constitution will be the first ever citizen assembly of its type to produce bona fide constitutional change.

I thank Senators for their contributions.

Cuireadh agus aontaíodh an cheist.

Question put and agreed to.

Acting Chairman (Senator Terry Leyden): When is it proposed to take Committee Stage?

Senator Cáit Keane: Tomorrow.

Committee Stage ordered for Wednesday, 1 April 2015.

Acting Chairman (Senator Terry Leyden): When is it proposed to sit again?

Senator Cáit Keane: Amárach ar 10.30 a.m.

The Seanad adjourned at 6.35 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 1 April 2015.