



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

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

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SEANAD ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 29 Meán Fómhair 2015

Tuesday, 29 September 2015

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach i gceannas ar 2.30 p.m.

Machnamh agus Paidir.
Reflection and Prayer.

Business of Seanad

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

The need for the Minister for Health to provide capital funding for the construction of a new 90-bed facility at St. Patrick's Hospital, Carrick-on-Shannon, County Leitrim.

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

The need for the Minister for Health to clarify when BreastCheck will be fully rolled out to 65 to 69 year olds.

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

The need for the Minister for Education and Skills to provide an update on her Department's review of post-primary school places required from 2017 onwards, specifically concerning Newbridge and south Kildare, and when it is expected that this review will be completed.

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

The need for the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources to come to an agreement with wind farm developers so the community benefit fund is calculated on the basis of a certain number of euro per megawatt of power produced, as is done in Britain.

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

The need for the Minister for Education and Skills to outline the present position regarding the project to provide permanent accommodation for the Holy Family School, Cootehill, County Cavan, and if funding will be made available to construct the school.

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

The need for the Minister for Finance to respond to the concerns expressed by credit unions throughout the country in relation to the commencement of the remaining sections of the Credit Union and Co-operation with Overseas Regulators Act 2012.

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

The need for the Minister for Health, in respect of Waterford city and county, to provide a breakdown of waiting times for assessments, including diagnostic assessments, for children with mild to profound physical and intellectual disabilities; to state the number of speech, language and occupational therapy posts, as well as child psychologist posts; to outline how many child psychologist and therapy posts in the public system are vacant; and to set out the steps he will take to reduce assessment waiting times.

I regard the matters raised by the Senators as suitable for discussion. I have selected the matters raised by Senators Mooney, White, Noone and Kelly and they will be taken now. Senators Reilly, Bradford and Cullinane may give notice on another day of the matter they wish to raise.

Commencement Matters

Hospitals Capital Programme

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister, Deputy Varadkar, to the House.

Senator Paschal Mooney: I thank the Minister for coming to the House. On a side issue, I compliment him on his appearance on “The Late Late Show”. It looked like a very enjoyable one for him.

As the Minister will be aware, the background to this debate is the withdrawal by HIQA of the registration of St. Patrick’s hospital in Carrick-on-Shannon. This decision, which was made amid great controversy, received a negative reaction from the staff and supporters of St. Patrick’s hospital, particularly regarding the manner in which it happened. However, my understanding now is that steps are afoot to improve the situation at the hospital to comply with HIQA regulations. I also understand that the imminent opening of a new 20-bed primary care centre in Ballinamore, County Leitrim, which will result in the transfer of 20 patients from St. Patrick’s hospital to Ballinamore, will go a long way towards compliance. The view of the HSE north west is that St. Patrick’s hospital will be re-registered in a short space of time. That is the background and context to this debate.

The HSE has made an application for funding for the construction of a new 90-bed state-of-the-art unit on lands adjacent to St. Patrick’s Hospital that have been acquired. My understanding is that plans and proposals are at a very advanced stage and that a commitment from the Minister and the Department to fund the new facility is all that is required now. I am sure the Minister will confirm that or clarify the situation.

I might put it on the record that St. Patrick's hospital was originally a Famine workhouse. As it has been there since 1841, plainly it is not fit for purpose. While I appreciate that there are similar establishments across the country with a similar history, I would like to think that the St. Patrick's hospital facility is rather unique in this regard. It is a great tribute to the doctors, nurses and general staff of the hospital that they have maintained it to the highest possible standard.

Despite the conclusions of the HIQA report, the general view of the public and particularly of family relatives of those who are cared for at St. Patrick's hospital is that it is a facility of the highest standard and that the commitment of the nursing staff and doctors is unrivalled. It is for that reason that the HIQA decision caused a great deal of local anger and was seen as an unfair portrayal of an institution that has struggled to maintain those high standards in the face of serious difficulties for a long period of time.

As I said at the outset, it looks like this particular situation is going to be resolved in the short term. I hope that will happen. The main purpose of my contribution is to plead with the Minister to provide the necessary funding so that the new state-of-the-art facility in the capital town of County Leitrim can go ahead forthwith. It is vitally important that such a facility be located in the county and I would hate to think anything would endanger the future of such a facility and that it would be due to lack of funding, given that all the t's have been crossed and the i's dotted in that regard.

Minister for Health (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I thank Senator Mooney for reporting this important issue. I am taking the debate on behalf of my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Kathleen Lynch, who is at another event. The Government's policy is to support older people to live in dignity and independence in their own homes and communities for as long as possible. If it becomes necessary for an older person to move to a nursing home, appropriate accommodation must be available that meets his or her care needs and matches his or her wishes. The HSE is responsible for the delivery of health and personal social services, including those at St. Patrick's Community Hospital, Carrick-on-Shannon, County Leitrim. The hospital was built in 1841 and has been used as a care facility since 1928. The centre has an occupancy of 85 beds, comprising 63 continuing care beds and 22 short-term care beds used for rehabilitation, convalescence, respite or palliative care.

Since 2009, all nursing homes - public, private and voluntary - have been registered and inspected by the Health Information and Quality Authority, HIQA. The most recent HIQA report on the hospital was published last July. Although the report acknowledged that progress had been made and improvements were evident since previous inspections, some concerns were reported, including the physical infrastructure of the facility. I have been informed by the HSE that a substantial action plan has been submitted to HIQA. This sets out what has already been achieved since the inspection and provides identified dates for the actions required by HIQA to be completed. Part of the HSE longer-term plan for County Leitrim includes the opening of a newly-built, 20-bed community nursing unit in Ballinamore. The HSE has applied to HIQA to register this facility and is in the process of recruiting staff. It is expected that the unit will open before the end of this year. This will allow patients from the area who are currently resident in St. Patrick's to transfer to Ballinamore. As a result, there will be some reduction in bed numbers at St. Patrick's, allowing more space, privacy and dignity for the remaining residents, so addressing HIQA's concerns about lack of privacy for some residents in St. Patrick's. The opening of Ballinamore will ensure overall bed numbers are maintained in the south Leitrim area. The new unit will be operated and run by the HSE.

A number of community nursing units, CNUs, similar to St. Patrick's hospital are very old and it can be very difficult or costly to adapt them to modern standards. Discussions are ongoing between HIQA and the HSE about the conditions that will apply to public facilities across the country. Later today, I will announce the total funding that will be available for capital investments in the health sector over the coming years. This will allow the HSE to frame a capital plan that balances priorities across the health service with the available funding. The overriding objective will be to ensure, in so far as possible, that when older people need care in public and residential facilities, it is available for them. Although many public facilities are not in line with how modern residential units are designed and configured, the standard of care provided to residents is generally of a very high standard. Residents and their families frequently express their appreciation of the care they receive and continue to choose such facilities even when alternatives are available. My Department will work with the HSE to allocate whatever funds are available in the most effective way possible, with the safety and welfare of residents being our top priority.

The Senator is probably aware that the capital plan for 2016 to 2021 was published in the last hour or so. It allocated an additional €300 million to the Department of Health for community nursing units and disability facilities over the next six years, and this is in addition to what was already in the budget. Although I cannot say at this stage how it will break down and which projects will be funded when, the Minister of State, Deputy Kathleen Lynch, is working with the HSE on it with a view to making an announcement on a national basis during the next couple of weeks.

Senator Paschal Mooney: I am very grateful to the Minister. It begs the obvious question, which he has partially answered, as to whether, as a result of the increased allocation in the community service sector, which is welcome, the new unit in St. Patrick's Community Hospital in Carrick-on-Shannon will go ahead. I understand it is not necessarily directly in the Minister's brief and that the Minister of State will make the allocations. When the Minister said it would be a matter of weeks, will it be before or after the budget?

Deputy Leo Varadkar: Only today did we know for sure what was available in our capital envelope for the next six years. The Minister of State, Deputy Kathleen Lynch, with my oversight, will meet the HSE, go through it and devise a six-year capital plan for community nursing units and disability residential centres. It will certainly be in there, I just cannot tell the Senator today exactly when it will start and finish and so on. Obviously some of these will require planning permission. All that now has to be worked out. It is a bit like the schools programme which will be ready for publication in a few weeks. There will be a similar programme for community nursing units and disability homes.

Cancer Screening Programmes

Senator Mary M. White: I thank the Cathaoirleach for giving me the opportunity to raise this critical issue. I welcome the Minister, Deputy Varadkar, and am pleased to be able to raise the critical issue of the rolling out of the free BreastCheck screening for women between the ages of 65 and 69. Since the introduction and publication of my first policy paper, *A New Approach to Ageing and Ageism*, in 2006 I have been passionately campaigning for the abolition of the 64 year age limit on BreastCheck as one in ten of all breast cancers occur in women between the ages of 65 and 69.

On 15 October 2014, the Minister announced that free BreastCheck screening would be rolled out to women between the ages of 65 and 69. I spoke to the Minister that day and was absolutely thrilled because I had been campaigning for that for a long time. Everyone at the announcement on 15 October was beaming with delight. The Irish Cancer Society welcomed the decision to make the necessary investment to ensure BreastCheck is extended to women aged 65 to 69, saying it was the right decision, which would save a minimum of 87 women's lives per year.

Some time later, in response to a parliamentary question submitted by Fianna Fáil spokesman on health, Deputy Billy Kelleher, I learned that the free BreastCheck for women aged 65-69 will not commence until the fourth quarter of 2015. I could not believe it. The Minister announced it on 15 October and I was sure something was going to happen quickly. I also learned that the screening of women in the 65-69 age group will only be fully implemented by 2021. In the meantime, 609 Irish women will lose their lives before any real progress is made by the Government's 2021 target. The day the Minister launched it, on 15 October last year, I was genuinely thrilled and so impressed with him. We then found out a couple of months later that it would not be rolled out until the fourth quarter of this year.

I am very disappointed. I felt I was led astray when the public announcement was made outside the gate of Leinster House. It was said it would commence in the fourth quarter of this year, 2015. I do not want to hear about any administrative difficulties or lack of radiographers. We were not told anything about that on the day of the launch. I am a very straight person and this is business, not personal. Given that the Minister launched it that day, I felt I was deceived to hear that this would take so long and that we would have to wait until the first quarter of 2015 for this free BreastCheck screening to be rolled out.

It is ageism that women are not getting a free BreastCheck. It is Irish ageism. There is more ageism in Ireland than in any other country in the world, from my experience. I do not notice it myself - I am very lucky - but it is endemic in society. This is typical. Women in this age group are more prone to breast cancer.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: I thank Senator White for raising this issue again in the Seanad. BreastCheck is now in its 16th year and currently offers a free mammogram every two years to women aged 50 to 64. Under BreastCheck, more than 1.3 million mammograms have been provided to more than 478,000 women, and more than 8,300 cancers have been detected. Last November, I announced the extension of BreastCheck to the 65 to 69 age group, in keeping with EU guidelines. The age extension will be complete by 2021. The additional eligible population is approximately 100,000 and, when the programme is fully implemented, 540,000 women will be included in the BreastCheck programme. Due to the number of people who will be added to the breast screening service and the fact that women are screened on a two-year cycle, the task of extending the age cohort is a major logistical and operational undertaking. This is why the age extension will be implemented on an incremental basis in line with the capacity of the service to manage the additional screening and follow-up workload.

The National Screening Service will need to recruit and train additional radiographers, medical consultants and administrative support to accommodate the increased demand for the BreastCheck programme. Funding for this and for additional mobile units and medical equipment will be made available across the implementation period. A provision of €100,000 was made to commence implementation in the final quarter of 2015.

Breast cancer survival in Ireland has improved significantly in recent years, with the five-year survival rate now estimated at 81% for women diagnosed between 2006 and 2011. This is an increase from 72% for women diagnosed between 1994 and 1999. The increase is due to a combined approach of screening, symptomatic detection and improved treatment.

The national cancer control programme has focused on improving the quality of cancer services through reorganisation and expansion and by applying best practice in areas such as prevention, early detection, diagnosis and treatment. Surgery has been reorganised into the eight designated cancer centres, and full breast cancer services are also provided at Letterkenny General Hospital as a satellite of University Hospital Galway. Referral guidelines for GPs have also been developed to achieve a more effective and integrated service. In June 2015, I launched the national clinical guidelines on the diagnosis, staging and treatment of patients with breast cancer. Clinical effectiveness is fundamental to our health service, and implementing good-quality clinical guidelines and audit can improve health outcomes for patients, reduce variations in practice and improve the quality of clinical decisions.

In conclusion, I am committed to extending BreastCheck to those aged 65 to 69 on a phased basis between now and 2021. It is necessary to do this on an incremental basis in line with the capacity of the service to manage the additional screening of approximately 100,000 women and then to follow them up properly. If BreastCheck managers believe the process can be done more quickly, they will have my support, but I will not rush them. If the process is rushed, the standards may fall. I regret that the Senator felt led astray or deceived in any way but I was very clear in my budget statement that week as to what was happening. It was also made very clear in the service plan published in November. I certainly would encourage the Senator to inform herself fully by reading those speeches and the service plan before coming to conclusions. It may be the case that she was not led astray or deceived but rather that she was not fully informed.

Senator Mary M. White: To be honest, I took at face value what the Minister said on the day I met him. I believed that he would roll it out quickly. I will ask one question before pointing out another issue relating to BreastCheck. How many women in the final quarter will be able to avail of the free BreastCheck exam?

A serious matter was drawn to my attention by a woman at the weekend. She is not able to avail of the service because it has not yet been rolled out for her age group. She was also under the impression that the service would be rolled out.

An Cathaoirleach: Does the Senator have a question?

Senator Mary M. White: This is critical.

An Cathaoirleach: All of the issues are critical, Senator.

Senator Mary M. White: This woman said she would pay for a breast exam but she wanted to have it done in the facility where she had free exams up to the age of 64. She was told she could not do that. It is unbelievable how this country can be run in silos. She was willing to pay money to BreastCheck, and the medical personnel could have examined all of her screenings to date. She would have liked to have been able to do this. I suggest the Minister does this. One of the advantages of the free BreastCheck service is that a letter is sent to every woman, but those aged over 64 stop getting letters to remind them to avail of the free BreastCheck. Many issues surrounding BreastCheck need to be dealt with efficiently. I thank the Minister and I

wish him good luck.

Deputy Leo Varadkar: On the first question, I do not have the figure available but I will certainly ask BreastCheck to forward it to the Senator. On the second question, it is not possible for anyone to pay for BreastCheck or for any of the national screening services. They are not run that way. They are run in such a way that they are population based screening programmes and people cannot buy their way in. Everyone is treated regardless of income or ability to pay. If people do want to pay, I imagine they can be referred privately through their doctor if that is what they wish to do, not to BreastCheck but to a different-----

Senator Mary M. White: I find that an appalling response-----

An Cathaoirleach: There is no provision Senator.

Senator Mary M. White: -----that a woman who has availed of free BreastCheck for two years cannot follow up when she is over the age of 64 to continue in the same institution.

An Cathaoirleach: Senator White, please.

Senator Mary M. White: It is typically Irish.

School Accommodation

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister, Deputy Alex White, to the House.

Senator Catherine Noone: I call on the Minister for Education and Skills to provide an update on the Department's review of the post-primary school places that will be required from 2017 onwards, specifically concerning Newbridge and south Kildare. When is it expected that the review will be completed? A colleague of mine asked me to raise this issue. Today, we will announce the Government's capital spending plans for the remainder of the decade and our spending plans for education are vital. It is important that we continue to invest in education, expand choice and end the era of Fianna Fáil flat-pack prefab schools. It is also important that we get the future development of the sector right and ensure such mistakes are not made again. Will the Minister provide an update on the review of the post-primary school places that will be required from 2017 onwards? A specific concern has been brought to my attention with regard to Newbridge and south Kildare. I would like a specific timeline for the completion of the review.

Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Deputy Alex White): I thank the Senator for raising this matter and I will respond on behalf of my colleague, the Minister for Education and Skills. I welcome the opportunity to set out the position on the Minister's behalf with regard to the Department's review of the post-primary school places that will be required from 2017 onwards.

Due to unprecedented demographic growth, 27 new primary schools and 26 new post-primary schools will be established, or will be in the process of being established, between the years 2011 and 2016. The purpose of each of these schools is to meet a specific demographic need within a defined geographic area, that is, to ensure that every child and young person living in a particular area can have access to a physical school place within that area.

The Department uses a geographical information system, GIS, to identify where the pressure for school places will arise. The GIS uses data from the Central Statistics Office, Ordnance Survey Ireland and the Department of Social Protection in addition to the Department's own databases. It also uses data from the local authorities. With this information the Department carries out nationwide demographic exercises at primary and post-primary level to determine where additional school accommodation is needed.

The Department is in the process of concluding a report on the outcome of an exercise to determine where additional post-primary school accommodation will be needed from 2017 onwards. The demographic exercise encompassed all areas of the country, including Newbridge and Kildare. The Minister will shortly announce the details of the new post-primary schools to be provided nationwide arising from this exercise. Arrangements will also be made to provide additional post-primary accommodation to existing schools where the demographic demand warrants this.

Where new schools are to be established, the Department runs an open patronage determination process to decide who will operate the schools. It is open to all patrons and prospective patrons to apply under this process.

More than €2.2 billion in funding is being invested by my Department under its five year school capital investment plan 2012-2016. In excess of €1.5 billion of this is being allocated for the funding of major school building projects. The balance is being used for the additional accommodation scheme, the prefab replacement initiative, the emergency works scheme and the acquisition of sites. Full details of all projects both planned and ongoing are published on the Department's website.

Earlier this year the Minister announced that seven new primary schools will be established in the next two years to meet demographic needs in different areas of the country. Nine new post-primary schools will open over the same period. This includes a new 1,000 pupil post-primary school, Celbridge community school, which opened in interim accommodation this September 2015. A new 1,000 pupil post-primary school, Maynooth community college, opened in 2014. Both of these projects are on the five-year plan, as is a replacement school building for the existing Maynooth post-primary school. Planning is also under way on the next five-year school capital investment plan.

Senator Catherine Noone: I thank the Minister for that comprehensive response. My only question, which I doubt the Minister will be able to answer, is how he defines the word "shortly" when it comes to the report being compiled? Is it today, this month or this decade? That word is vague in terms of an answer, but I appreciate the comprehensive nature of the rest of the information in the reply.

Deputy Alex White: I appreciate what the Senator says about "shortly". It is a sort of term of art in Government, but I understand from the Minister that this work is ongoing, as I stated in the response, and that she intends expediting this as soon as possible. There is no question of it amounting to a period of years. I would hope it will be in the coming period. Obviously, the announcements to be made today in the context of the capital programme are relevant also in terms of the funding that will be available for this critically important agenda.

I thank the Senator for raising the issue. If I can assist her in any way, in contact with my colleague, the Minister, Deputy O'Sullivan, I will certainly do that.

Alternative Energy Projects

Senator John Kelly: I thank the Minister for taking this debate personally, as it does not happen too often in this House. As he is aware, I am not a fan of wind energy, which I believe is a folly. When we do a cost-benefit analysis subsequently we will discover that. However, that is not the essence of the matter I raise, which is to discuss the community fund these wind farm developers put in place. When communities fight against these developments and lose, and these unsightly turbines are imposed upon them, there should be certainty as to how much the community will benefit from the wind farm developments. They need to be set by the Minister and not the way it is being done currently, which is that the more one objects, the more one will get and if one does not object to a wind farm development, one will get nothing.

I will give the Minister an example. In Sliabh Bán, in County Roscommon, there are 20 wind turbines which stand 130 m high into the sky. They will destroy the landscape of Sliabh Bán. On initial consultation the wind farm developers were offering €57,000 a year to the local community. Following further consultation and discussion they increased that to €87,000 per year. The first problem with that is that in the United Kingdom, and we always say we follow the UK model because that is the way they do their business, they decide how much the community gets based on a certain amount of money per megawatt produced. That is £5,000 per annum per megawatt being produced. If that were to apply to Sliabh Bán, in County Roscommon, the community would be getting €420,000 per annum. It appears that, through negotiation, the Sliabh Bán group has managed to get €1,500 per megawatt produced, while in the UK the amount would be €7,500 per megawatt produced. A fair fee needs to be set by the Minister. What is not fair is the negotiated amount in place. Second, the wind farm developers need to deal with a local community group to decide where the money is spent. What is happening in this particular case is that the developers are handing the money over to the Leader programme. The Leader programme will accept applications from football clubs and so on but many local people will not benefit. Farmers who are adjacent to these developments, perhaps 500 m away, have their land devalued as a result and get nothing. Many of the local people will end up with nothing. Basically, we are buying off community groups with a set of jerseys every year. It is not fair on most of the people who lose out as a result of these developments.

Deputy Alex White: I thank the Senator for raising this issue.

One of the central themes in the Green Paper on energy policy, published in May 2014, is citizen engagement. Following its publication, the Department undertook a public consultation process which included analysis of more than 1,200 written submissions and 13 stakeholder seminars, held in Dublin, Westmeath, Sligo, Cork and Wexford, on the various priority areas highlighted in the Green Paper.

A recurring message coming from the written submissions and the seminars was the role that community energy could play in our future energy systems. The views submitted are being considered in the formation and finalisation of the energy White Paper, which will be published before the end of the year, and which will, *inter alia*, address community energy projects and how best to facilitate communities in playing their part in the energy transition.

My Department is also preparing to publish a draft renewable electricity policy and development framework. The framework, which addresses the matters of early consultation, community engagement, and building community gain considerations into energy infrastructure planning and budgeting, will be published for public consultation in the coming weeks. I look

forward to receiving submissions, which will be considered in the context of the strategic environmental assessment, the appropriate assessment under the habitats directive and the subsequent finalisation of the framework.

I should also highlight the various community-level initiatives administered on behalf of the Department by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland. These include the development of community energy projects through the Better Energy Communities programme, which allows community- and locally based organisations to apply for funding on a competitive basis to support sustainable energy upgrades to existing buildings and facilities. It also promotes the creation and development of locally based entities that can engage and mobilise community resources to lower energy bills and boost employment.

On the specific issue the Senator has raised, the notion that community engagement and citizen engagement could be reduced to - as he rightly put it - the idea of a set of jerseys for the local team is completely unacceptable and inadequate in terms of constituting any kind of community engagement policy. Despite the impression conveyed by the Senator's question, the community benefit fund was established by the developers. It is not something they do in agreement with me. As matters currently stand, I do not have any legal or other means to intercede or to involve myself in the community benefit fund. However, what we have done as a Government, and what my predecessors have done, is to set a policy directive in relation to community engagement. That community engagement has to be real and robust and in many cases it has been neither. Certainly, that has to be greatly improved, and I think the White Paper will help us to do that. I should also clarify for the Senator and the House that the Minister of the day does not have an involvement with wind farm developers in that way; in other words, it is not a question of me as Minister, or my predecessors or successors, entering into agreements or contracts with wind farm operators. That is not the way the system works. We have a price support system through REFIT. When project promoters are successful in terms of gaining access to REFIT funds, that is administered by the regulator. There is not this kind of close nexus, that may be suggested, between the Minister, whoever the Minister is, and particular wind farm developers.

It is not possible under current arrangements to do the sort of thing that the Senator has advocated. I agree with his basic point that we do not currently have in place a sufficiently robust regime of community engagement. We must do an awful lot to improve it and the White Paper will help us to do so.

Senator John Kelly: Indeed, community and citizen engagement has proven to be a joke in the past but I hope the situation will improve. I read in my local newspaper this week that the ESB has launched a scheme called community fund 2015 for another development in County Roscommon. At least it has advertised that it is willing to sit down with communities to talk to people and agree a set figure.

I shall return to the point I made earlier. In Sliabh Bán people were originally offered €1,000 per MW produced but that offer was increased to €1,500 after negotiations. A Minister in the UK, and that is why I suggest that the Minister here should analyse how the calculation came about, introduced a rate that is five times greater than what wind farm developers get away with here. The final rate is purely down to the Minister here. I would appreciate if he would examine what mechanisms were brought into place in the UK that have given greater security to communities there. People know what they are going to get when they learn what size of wind farm development is going ahead.

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Deputy Alex White: What the Senator has said is not unreasonable. I will carefully consider what he has said. I have looked at the models adopted in other countries. It is not just in the UK but in northern Europe where a regime has been developed whereby communities, local groups, sometimes co-operatives have equity in wind farms comprised of one or two turbines and, in some cases, larger enterprises. The Senator has made a very helpful and useful point which I shall carefully consider.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank the Minister.

Sitting suspended at 3.13 p.m. and resumed at 3.30 p.m.

Order of Business

Senator Maurice Cummins: The Order of Business is No. 1, statements on the Ireland 2016 Schools Programme to be taken at 5 p.m. and to conclude not later than 7 p.m., with the contributions from group spokespersons not to exceed eight minutes, those of all other Senators not to exceed five minutes, and the Minister to be called on to reply at 6.50 p.m.

Senator Marc MacSharry: I welcome the publication of the figure of €27 billion over the next number of years and eagerly await all the pre-election promises. One hopes that the litany of broken promises does not follow if the Government is returned to power. One of the details that has emerged is that there will be approximately €18 million for the refurbishment of Garda stations. It has not been missed by the public that the closure by the Government of 139 Garda stations throughout the country has saved just €500,000. I am sure the Leader would agree that the value of rural Ireland far outweighs the price or cost of €500,000 and I wonder if the capital plan will adequately address the contempt with which the Government has pursued the facilitation of rural decline over the past four years. I very much hope it does because the €30 million announced at the National Ploughing Championships last week was nothing short of an insult to the people of rural and regional Ireland.

I would like to propose an amendment to the Order of Business that the Minister for Health, Deputy Varadkar, comes to the House and explains to Members and to the people of Ireland who is driving the bus in the Department of Health. It seems that, reminiscent of the Fennelly report, he intends to threaten the sacking of individuals if improvements are not made in the numbers on trolleys throughout the country. Indeed, August, traditionally a quiet month, saw the largest number of patients on trolleys throughout the country. One wonders how many there will be in January unless the Government takes the reins, stops being a commentator on the Department of Health and realises that it is the Minister who is supposed to be driving that bus. There has been a 400% increase in those waiting for more than a year and a 65% increase in my county of Sligo. The Minister, instead of threatening to fire people who are on his staff, should consider his own position and perhaps resign because the buck stops with him. I wished him well on the day he took over here because I felt he had the ability and the direct speaking style to get to the bottom of the problem. Sadly, as a commentator this man is much more of a pundit than a player.

Senator Paul Coughlan: Which one is the Senator?

Senator Marc MacSharry: He is on the pitch. He needs to perform. He should not be threatening staff that they will be fired. Then again, this is what the Taoiseach has done with regard to-----

An Cathaoirleach: Do you have a question for the Leader?

Senator Marc MacSharry: I ask that the Minister be brought to the House today. That is an amendment to the Order of Business. The Minister should address his failure to acknowledge his position as the person in command of the health service. I would like him to outline for us what will be done to mitigate the disaster which has seen record numbers on waiting lists and trolleys in recent months.

Senator Ivana Bacik: I welcome strongly today's announcement of a six-year capital investment plan that will extend from 2016 to 2021. I do not think there is any way to portray this as anything other than good news, no matter how the Opposition may try. A significant investment of €27 billion will be made over a six-year period. We are seeing really positive plans under a whole range of headings. In the transport area, the metro north project, which includes a link to the airport, and the cross-city Luas project will be developed. The importance of cross-Border co-operation is evident in the allocation of €31 million for heritage and cultural investment. We are seeing significant provision being made for demographic increases in the education sector, with 19,000 additional primary school places to be provided by 2018. Major investments are to be made in justice, housing and health as well. I do not think there is any way to portray this as anything other than good news. It is extremely welcome. I do not doubt that over the coming weeks, we will be in a position to tease out some of the detail of the capital investment plan and debate it further. This morning's announcement was accompanied by further good news on unemployment. It was announced today that the unemployment figure has decreased to 9.4%. As colleagues of mine have pointed out, there are 30,000 more people at work this year than there were this time last year. It is a very significant reduction. Of course we hope that trend will continue.

I would like to speak about commemoration, which is a theme to which we will return this afternoon when we debate the 1916 centenary commemorations. I commend Trinity College on the moving ceremony it held on Saturday - it was also attended by my colleague, Senator Barrett - at which a memorial stone commemorating the Trinity staff, students and alumni who died in the First World War was unveiled. The stone in question, which honours the memories of nearly 500 men and - I understand - one woman, is in the Front Square of Trinity, which means anyone can go to see it. While their names are etched on a hall of honour in the 1937 reading room, as it is known, for a long time many people did not know it was there as it was not advertised by the college and it was perhaps neglected in the way that we neglected so much of the history of the many thousands of Irish men and women who died in the First World War. It was very moving to hear pen profiles of some of the deceased being read by the presidents of the graduate students union and the students union at this really important event.

I ask the Leader for a debate when we get time, but in advance of the general election, on the issue of the eighth amendment. I was delighted to participate last Saturday in a demonstration organised by the Abortion Rights Campaign and the Coalition to Repeal the 8th Amendment. I was one of many thousands of people who took to the streets to call for the repeal of the eighth amendment. I think there is a growing momentum of people, individually and in groups, who have come out recently in favour of repealing the eighth amendment.

Senator Paschal Mooney: The Senator would say that, would she not?

Senator Ivana Bacik: I would like to see us debate in an honest, objective and rational fashion the reality of crisis pregnancy for so many people in Ireland and the need to repeal the eighth amendment.

Senator David Norris: I would like to give a general welcome to the Government's capital proposals. As I was listening to RTE on the wireless this morning, I thought it was quite unusual that there was a degree of accord between financial commentators and political pundits in welcoming the plan and finding very little indeed they could cavil about. I particularly welcome the introduction of metro north in a modified form. I hope this will go through. Many years ago, Senator Quinn and I introduced measures here to facilitate the development of a metro. After considerable consideration and discussion, the then Government agreed to introduce a metro, but it became a casualty of the financial difficulties in which the country found itself. However, it became a casualty of the financial difficulties in which the country found itself. I very much welcome the fact that it may go ahead in some limited form. The person who briefed Senator Quinn and me most extensively on this matter was Mr. Cormac Rabbitte, a very brilliant transport engineer, and he has not given up. In the past few days, I received an update on metro Dublin development, and they are making a pre-application to An Bord Pleanála under the Railways Act. I very much hope the Government will examine it, given that it seems to fit in very well with the partial plan the Government already has and would provide Dublin with an extensive and comprehensive metro service, which would be very welcome.

We are the only European capital that has no underground, and it would be the answer to so many of our transport problems. Dublin is messing around with cycle lanes and banning cars. I had to go all the way around the world to get here today because College Green is closed except to buses. It is lunatic. Shortly, I will be imprisoned in my house in North Great George's Street unable to get out with the car. An underground which would bring me here would be a great personal benefit to me but also to the city and the country.

I was somewhat amused to read about the Minister of State, Deputy Dara Murphy and his taxi. It is the greatest load of rubbish I have ever heard in my life. A Minister of State was driving in a car to the airport to make a political appointment in Brussels, or wherever it was. The car broke down, and he talked to a taxi driver. There is some kind of confusion about it, and the fare was very large - €350, which I would not be mad about paying. Gardaí were contacted about the failure of the car and they offered to drive him to the airport. Perfectly right. They are servants of the State, and if there was no demand for their services in the local area it was appropriate for them to ensure the Minister of State got to his appointment on time. I salute the gardaí for their correct action and I deplore the tittle tattle in the media about it. It was a perfectly appropriate use of State resources.

Senator Marc MacSharry: Hear, hear.

Senator Cáit Keane: I welcome the capital plan for 2016 to 2021 that was announced today. It is advance planning over five years. Some €46 million was allocated for Garda vehicles and €205 million for Garda technology. In this country, we still display paper tax, insurance and NCT discs on our cars. That was all right when we did not have the major technology or the facility to photocopy and make fraudulent tax and insurance discs to display. The torches gardaí flash on a car to verify that tax and insurance discs are in order are gone out. The UK and many countries have moved on towards the modern system of automatic numberplate recogni-

tion and I ask the Minister to consider it, and not only for financial and cost-saving reasons. A conservative estimate of the cost of procuring, posting and administering of discs is €10 million per year. It is also estimated that fraud adds a minimum of €40 to the cost of the average insurance policy.

There are 136 Garda traffic corps vehicles on the road, of which 80% are already equipped with automatic number plate recognition, which means we are 80% of the way there. Could we go the whole hog and enable gardaí to use smartphones to check tax and NCT compliance? The general trend in every country is that way. Mr. Conor Faughnan of the Automobile Association, AA, has already called for this. Will the Minister equip each garda with a hand-held device? It would be not only for number plate recognition. Another Senator spoke about Garda stations and rural post offices closing down. One can have an office in one's car with a hand-held phone. Every garda should have in their possession automatic number plate recognition plus modern technology to do their reports online. I welcome the announcement by the Minister, Deputy Fitzgerald. It was the biggest announcement in the history of the State for-----

An Cathaoirleach: Is the Senator looking for a debate on this issue?

Senator Cáit Keane: I am looking for a debate, but I am looking for more than a debate as well. I am looking for this to go to the Committee on Transport-----

An Cathaoirleach: We will not have time to deal with it on the Order of Business.

Senator Cáit Keane: Okay. I welcome that today and note-----

An Cathaoirleach: I call Senator Mooney.

Senator Paschal Mooney: I am particularly pleased that Senator Bacik referred to the memorial unveiled in Trinity College because there is a very interesting article in today's "Irishman's Diary" about the lack of memorials in Catholic churches in Ireland. This was not about the political situation, as such. It was primarily because there was no tradition in Catholic churches of such tablets being put up, whereas they were quite abundant in Protestant churches. In both the Church of Ireland and the Methodist churches in my home town of Drumshanbo, there are several tablets commemorating local soldiers who died in the First World War. While I do not know the name of the lady in Trinity College, the reference in the article to Catholic churches having commemorative tablets is a specific reference to St. Mary's on Haddington Road, which has a memorial to 92 Irish men who died in the First World War and one woman, Iza Mahony, who was a volunteer nurse. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a hanam agus na hanamacha eile.

My main reason in rising, apart from that slight diversion, is to ask the Leader whether we could have some debate on homelessness, which has now come centre stage. It looks like the Government is kicking to touch on it. I agree with Fr. McVerry's proposal that a national emergency be declared. Everybody who is involved in helping the homeless has been pointing out increasingly that this crisis is unprecedented. While I appreciate that the Minister, Deputy Kelly, is going to fly the flag and fight the good fight, there is an obvious need to pull together the various State agencies involved and that the public, rather than the political family, sees that something practical is being done that will work.

Fr. McVerry made a comparison with the case of foot and mouth disease, where we moved very quickly to address the issue by bringing the various State agencies together. We have also, in this House and the other House, passed emergency legislation from both this Government

and the previous one in respect of the banking system. The Government of the day can do it if it wants. It seems that the will is not there and that there is just public relations going on. As this Government gets closer to the election, it is upping the PR machine. I am asking for a debate on this, even if it means the Minister coming before the House to outline what he is doing or not doing, because he made a comment last night on television that there was no difficulty-----

An Cathaoirleach: I call Senator Kelly.

Senator Paschal Mooney: -----with Dublin City Council refurbishing what he calls void houses-----

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Mooney is way over time.

Senator Paschal Mooney: -----which are the houses that need refurbishment, whereas our spokesperson, Deputy Barry Cowen, has made it clear that Dublin City Council has had a shortfall of €6 million-----

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Mooney is way over time. I call Senator Kelly.

Senator Paschal Mooney: -----so there are some questions that need to be addressed in respect of this. The bottom line, however, is that now is the time to do it; not tomorrow, not next week, but now.

An Cathaoirleach: I call Senator Kelly.

Senator Paschal Mooney: I would also like to second Senator MacSharry's amendment.

Senator John Kelly: I want to raise an issue of concern relating to Bus Éireann. In my county of Roscommon, most of the established bus operators lost their runs this summer following a tender process. These operators had a relationship built up with the special needs students they were bringing to school and now the students are being asked to get to know the new bus operators. They might have great difficulty with this.

The tender process involves the price, the route, and how the bus is cleaned both outside and inside. I am aware of one bus operator who lost his run because he was 1 cent per mile more expensive than the next man. Another bus operator, with whom I am well acquainted, was told he had the best price but he lost the run because he did not score 100% on how he cleans his bus outside and inside or whatever. Last year he gave the exact same explanation of how he cleans his bus inside and outside and he scored 100%. He copied it from last year and they downgraded him to 66% and he lost the run. There seems to be no transparency as to how bus operators are selected. The very notion that a special relationship is built between the operator and the student is not even a consideration. It seems that how a bus is cleaned inside and outside is more important, which is crazy. I would like the Leader to bring this to the attention of the Minister for Education and Skills so that we can see what kind of transparency can be brought to these issues.

Senator Sean D. Barrett: I hope the transport plans announced today will be some advance on Transport 21, which was announced approximately ten years ago by the last Government. I see a headline today, "Revealed: The 19-Minute Journey from Dublin City to the Airport by Metro." Buses, without subsidy, can currently go from the airport to Lucan or Sandymount in 20 minutes, so I do not know what this is supposed to serve. These projects tend to be dominated by engineers who spend all the money. The country was bankrupted before, and we

would want to be pretty careful; the devil will be in the detail. What has been published so far seems to be a reheated version of a plan that was not much good when we saw it the first time approximately ten years ago.

I note the proposal by Ernst & Young in the *Sunday Independent* that it will drop degree requirements for people studying to be auditors and accountants. The rest of us have a rather different view of auditors and accountants. Next year, the Irish Auditing and Accounting Supervisory Authority takes over the supervision of standards in accountancy and auditing from Chartered Accountants Ireland. That transfer will take place in June. It would be ill-advised, given the problems we have had with auditing in the financial and building society sector, as well as in banking, to have any changes to reduce the qualifications of auditors before the transfer to the Irish Auditing and Accounting Supervisory Authority. It is a matter of a regret that it has taken so long since the financial crisis to transfer the supervision of accountants from their own body to an independent statutory body, the Irish Auditing and Accounting Supervisory Authority.

Senator Terry Brennan: Yesterday was national Tidy Towns day, with more than 850 communities taking part in what is now a major national competition. The overall winner was Letterkenny in County Donegal, and I happened to be there yesterday when the announcement was made. The town has participated in the competition for 57 years, culminating in yesterday's marvellous achievement, which arose from a consistent effort from the local community. Clonegal in County Carlow is Ireland's tidiest village, while Listowel in County Kerry is Ireland's tidiest small town. Westport in County Mayo won the category of Ireland's tidiest large town. I congratulate everybody in the many towns and villages that have participated on an annual basis but have not won. I come from Carlingford, which was an overall winner 20 years ago but is still participating. The people are trying to improve the lives of the community and our towns and villages for the many visitors who come to us.

We speak about volunteerism in this Chamber fairly often, and there are not many greater examples of it than this competition. We can think of communities doing their best to improve facilities - for themselves, primarily, but for visitors as well - for more than 50 years, or five generations. These people love their towns and villages. We must also acknowledge what this has done for tourism in the four corners of this country. People like to visit, stand, stare and admire these towns and villages, so I congratulate one and all for participating. The competition started with 50 participants in the first year. Yesterday, the number of participants was in excess of 850 throughout the length and breadth of the country, and all are to be congratulated.

Senator Sean D. Barrett: Hear, hear.

Senator Diarmuid Wilson: I join other colleagues who paid tribute to our former colleague, Jimmy Harte, on his retirement. I wish him and his family the very best for the future. He was a very gentle, quietly-spoken man, but he got his message across on many occasions. He will be truly missed by us all.

Rural Ireland has been in the national media in recent weeks. The attack on rural Ireland not only by the Government but by criminal gangs has been raised in every council chamber in the country and in this Chamber for many years. I am sad to report that not a lot of action has taken place to address these concerns. We learned in today's media of the statement by the Minister of Justice and Equality that the closure of more than 100 rural Garda stations has saved a mere €500,000. This is on top of the closure of many post offices. In my county town of Cavan, the

most modern army barracks in Europe and the only purpose-built army barracks in the State was closed. It is costing more to maintain the building now than it was to run it when it was at full capacity. This is a terrible indictment of the Government.

To my amazement, I find myself in total agreement with Senator Cáit Keane regarding her proposal on number plate identification. I will go one step further: in an effort to combat and crack down on rural crime, if investment were made in smart technology on every rural road in Ireland, the Garda Síochána would be in a position to pick up number plates that were not valid. A signal could be sent to the gardaí in close proximity and they could apprehend such vehicles. This is where investment should be made. Unfortunately, the Garda stations that are now closed will never be opened regardless of who is in government. This is my firm belief. We should invest in this technology. Senator Feargal Quinn has mentioned in the past that such camera technology is in existence in rural parts of countries such as France, as well as on main highways, and it can record the speed at which a car is travelling. Surely it is not beyond the realm of possibility to put this infrastructure in rural Ireland to assist the Garda in identifying the criminal gangs coming down from major cities to rob our vulnerable people.

Senator Michael Mullins: I very much welcome the capital plan for the next five and a half years, which was announced today with a significant investment of €27 billion. Obviously, this will restore, I hope, all of the jobs lost during the recession and address many of the infrastructural deficits we have. To pick up on the arguments made by Senators Diarmuid Wilson and Cáit Keane, the only way we will beat the criminals in today's world, who are very sophisticated, is with technology. I welcome the fact more than €200 million is in the plan for investment in technology. Good technology and Garda vehicles will go a long way towards tackling the problem of rural crime. We must ensure Garda stations have technology and facilities. Recently I visited the Garda station in Ballinasloe and I was horrified to see how primitive the conditions were and the poor facilities for the detention of prisoners. If that is replicated throughout the country, we need significant investment in existing Garda stations.

I welcome the fact that during the lifetime of this capital plan, 45,000 jobs will be created in construction. That will get the construction sector off its knees, so to speak, and give it a badly-needed boost.

The Fine Gael-Labour Party Government is to be applauded on the progress made over the past four and a half years. Having got the country up off its knees, it now has an ambitious programme to drive forward the recovery and ensure that we never again get ourselves into the position we have been in for the past seven or eight years.

I welcome the announcement today of the rural economic development zones and the allocation of funding for same. In County Galway alone, €207,500 was allocated, with €60,000 being allocated to Ballinasloe Area Community Development, which submitted a fantastic application. That €60,000 will help it put together a plan that will drive economic recovery, particularly in the retail sector in towns like Ballinasloe and others towns in east Galway.

Senator Feargal Quinn: It is interesting to hear a debate already starting. Senator Norris referred to the underground railway that was proclaimed at least ten years ago. Senator Barrett asked us to consider the development taking place in terms of privatising transport from the airport. There is little doubt that that has worked very well. It is a debate we should be having, and when I hear Senator Norris expressing concern about what is happening in College Green, it is a debate that needs to take place because we have not had that debate. Those decisions are

being made without understanding that.

Senator David Norris: Hear, hear.

Senator Feargal Quinn: Senator Cáit Keane referred to the Garda using technology to check car tax, insurance and licences. I am not sure it is the job of the Garda to check tax and insurance. Modern technology enables us to do that in a much more efficient way.

I saw a huge traffic jam recently where gardaí had stopped traffic on the north side of the city. It must have gone back 2 km or 3 km while they checked insurance and the tax discs. That can be done readily nowadays, and it is being done, with a smartphone. We should investigate the possibility of doing something like that because there is little doubt that it does not make sense for the Garda to be doing it.

Two figures were published today. First, the number of burglaries has increased by 8.4% this year on last year and, second, incidents of stealing from shops have increased by 11.2%. I do not know if that is related to Garda stations being closed but it is the sort of topic we should be debating in this House. I ask the Leader to find time for a debate on that in the near future.

The ploughing championships last week were a wonderful success. I spoke yesterday to a group of young students in Trinity College about entrepreneurship. The ploughing championships came about from an idea Anna May McHugh had 52 years ago. That lady is not a young entrepreneur, although she may have been at that time. The ploughing championships were a wonderful success. I was delighted to see that the French Government gave her an award last week because of that success, and I would like to congratulate her.

Senator Paul Coghlan: I welcome Senator MacSharry back from his purgatory in the bunker. It is good to see him back on his feet in this Chamber. He was always something of a dancer. He talks about pundits and players but, given his own acting ability, he endeavours to play both roles.

(Interruptions).

Senator Paul Coghlan: He should be careful because sometimes talent can skip a generation, as we were reminded recently.

An Cathaoirleach: Does the Senator have a question on the Order of Business?

Senator Paul Coghlan: Of course. One is allowed a little poetic licence. I too welcome the superb capital plan and genuinely feel that people will pay much more attention to Senator David Norris's welcome of it than they will to Senator Marc MacSharry's false criticism. I do not want to go on about the capital plan; it speaks for itself, and others have referred to it. Today, I would like to mention briefly three items concerning our farming community on which we may be able to have some discussion in due course, when time permits. I believe increased funding must be allocated for agri-environment schemes with full payments to all GLAS and AEOS participants; there must be an extra allocation for areas of cultural constraint to reverse the cuts of previous budgets and support farming in marginal areas; and finally, there should be a modest increase to the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, to pay farmers for restrictions resulting from land designation where such restrictions are not covered by GLAS. Perhaps these matters can be covered in a pre-budget statement or, if not, perhaps the Leader

would allow for a debate on agricultural matters.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: This morning I heard on the news that foreign citizens who are in this country on visas of one sort or another for education or training purposes are queueing around the block waiting for access to the Department of Justice and Equality to renew their visas. I cannot for the life of me understand, particularly in the context of students, the reason the international office in each college cannot be called upon to administer visas. If they collect the relevant information, surely the visas can be administered in a one-stop shop within the universities that the students are attending. Last week a deputation from China, which included the secretary from the department of education in China, visited the Oireachtas. One of their grave concerns was that their citizens who come to Ireland as students have to queue up for hours, and sometimes overnight, in order to get their visas renewed. This is wrong.

I draw attention to the few miserable shillings saved by closing half the Garda stations in the country. In Stepaside, where I live, which is not exactly rural Ireland, we are inundated with burglaries. The loss of that Garda station has been of massive import. I am sure that much more than €500,000 worth of Garda time has been spent on investigating the burglaries that have taken place. I ask the Leader to ask the Minister for Justice and Equality whether there is a case to be made for reviewing the closure of some of the Garda stations with a view to reopening them.

Senator Rónán Mullen: If any of us were asked how much money be saved by the closure of the Garda stations, very few would have guessed that the figure would be as low as €500,000. It is an indictment of Government policy. We have heard in recent days about the plans to revitalise rural Ireland and investment to refurbish our towns and so on. It is important that significant detail is provided and that there is significant investment. In March, a journalist, Richard Curran, hosted an excellent documentary on the battle for rural Ireland. It showed the stark reality of the challenges our small towns and villages are facing.

I am glad we are going to have a debate on the migrant crisis on Thursday. I am not sure the Government is firing on all cylinders on this issue. It is right and proper that the Minister for Justice and Equality take that debate, but there are related issues that need to be dealt with by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, such as whether safe havens will be established in the Middle East for persecuted minorities - not just Christian minorities, but other minorities. The challenges faced by particular groups must be looked at now as well. It cannot be separated from the question of or absorption into the country of very hard pressed people who are fleeing war. They need to be helped and supported. At the same time we must look at what is going to be done to assist persecuted minorities and what our policy is, for example, on Syria and on regime change or otherwise in Syria. I would like to be hearing much more from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade on Ireland's policy on these matters.

I would also like to hear about the recent attendance by the Minister for Justice and Equality at a conference in Paris on the persecuted groups and the challenges facing particular ethnic communities. As far as I am aware there was no media coverage of her participation at the conference. We do not know what she said and we do not know what the Irish Government's policy is. I would like to hear about that matter on Thursday but we need to hear from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade as well.

I note Senator Bacik's attempt to interpret there being some kind of a momentum to secure further legalised abortion in Ireland. This is largely a media swell rather than a groundswell as the rather modest turnout at last weekend's protest showed. It is time that she told us what she

and fellow abortion supporters think about the absolutely grisly realities being pursued.

Senator Ivana Bacik: I wish to make a point of order.

An Cathaoirleach: A point of order.

Senator Ivana Bacik: I am a pro-choice activist and not an abortion supporter. I ask Senator Mullen to get that right. After so many years I think he would have learned by now.

Senator Paschal Mooney: It is semantics. It is the same thing. Why not give the reality of abortion to people-----

Senator Ivana Bacik: I do not hide behind it.

Senator Paschal Mooney: -----instead of hiding it behind phraseology? Why not tell people the reality?

Senator Ivana Bacik: Why is it happening?

An Cathaoirleach: Has Senator Mullen a question for the Leader?

Senator Rónán Mullen: Yes and for the Deputy Leader. I never interrupt.

Senator David Norris: Wrong.

(Interruptions).

An Cathaoirleach: Has Senator Mullen a question for the Leader? The Senator's time is way over.

Senator Rónán Mullen: I am always astonished at Senator Bacik's Pavlovian response-----

An Cathaoirleach: As the Senator has no question for the Leader I call Senator Gilroy.

Senator Rónán Mullen: -----when she and her colleagues are challenged about their support for abortion.

An Cathaoirleach: The Senator is way over time.

Senator Rónán Mullen: In conclusion, she has not yet spoken about the grisly realities-----

An Cathaoirleach: The Senator is way over time and I ask him to resume his seat.

Senator Rónán Mullen: -----we are learning about Planned Parenthood in America which funds-----

An Cathaoirleach: The Senator is way over time.

Senator Rónán Mullen: It is really time that we discussed some of the terrible things that are happening in our world.

Senator John Gilroy: The immediately previous exchange demonstrates why we cannot have a mature debate.

An Cathaoirleach: Has the Senator a question for the Leader?

Senator John Gilroy: Yes but I want to build a background to my question. The exchange demonstrates why we cannot have a mature debate on these very important issues. People start roaring, shouting and throwing personal abuse at people just because they oppose the position that people take.

Senator Diarmuid Wilson: That is unfair on Senator Bacik. She was not shouting.

Senator Ivana Bacik: It was not meant.

An Cathaoirleach: There has been a good debate on this issue, Senator Wilson.

Senator John Gilroy: A torrent of abuse was directed at my colleague because of a position that they do not share. Personal abuse is never appropriate. If that is the level of argument that this House is able to generate then I do not think it is worth engaging at all.

An Cathaoirleach: Has the Senator a question for the Leader on today's Order of Business?

Senator John Gilroy: I welcome the Cabinet's expenditure programme that was outlined today which gives money to the badly-needed upgrade of the Dunkettle interchange in Cork. The measure will remove the last set of traffic lights from Cork to Belfast when completed which is a good thing and can only be welcomed. The location is a real bottleneck and holds up the full development of the city and port of Cork. The measure is very welcome.

Senator Paul Bradford: No. 69 on the clár relates to the report of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health and Children on the cost of medical indemnity insurance. It would be good if we could discuss the report and other health insurance costs which all add to the pressure on the health service and the cost of private health insurance. We have had the announcement, over the past day or so, by VHI of another increase in the cost of providing health insurance. We should not be surprised by it because the price of health care increases almost on a monthly basis.

Now that the great hopes for universal health care and Dutch health models, Australian models and Canadian models have all been consigned to the dustbin of manifestos, we have to recognise that we are left with a tweaking of the current health system. With proper structural change and investment the system certainly can work. It is the cost of the provision of that service, the cost of not just insurance but of consultancy and so much more, which needs to be tackled. On more than an annual basis the insurance providers seek an increase, it is acceded to and the taxpayer and citizen has to foot the bill. We need to look into the reason health insurance is costing so much. No. 69 could form part of that debate. It is clear we are not going to move to any new model of health care provision in the medium or distant future. We are stuck with the model we have and we must try to make it work and affordable. We must also tackle the cost issue. It would be helpful if the Leader could arrange a debate in this regard in respect of which, as I said, No. 69 could be a helpful introduction.

Senator Maurice Cummins: Many Members have raised the issue of the capital plan, the aim of which is to secure recovery and ensure all regions share in the benefits. The €27 billion investment plan for Ireland is essential to the restoration by 2018 of all the jobs lost during the recession and a reduction in the unemployment rate to 6% by 2020. This is affordable, achievable and consistent with the Government's plan to eliminate Government borrowing by 2018.

It was necessary throughout the financial crisis to keep spending under control. To restore our national finances to stability we used every innovative way we could to raise additional capital to invest in Ireland's recovery. The proposed new investment in roads, public transport, education, health care, flood risk, enterprise and policing is designed to alleviate growing pressures in the economy which hold back recovery. The recovery is not yet complete and we must continue to manage the national finances carefully or risk falling back. The Government could not afford to include everything we wanted in this plan but it represents the best of what can be delivered with the available resources. As a Government we have no intention of going back to the bad old days of boom and bust. The days of blank cheques are well gone.

This capital investment plan provides approximately €42 billion of State-backed investment in capital projects. As I mentioned, the Exchequer is providing €27 billion for investment in national projects. Support will also be provided from the ERDF and Europe. Under the plan, more than 45,000 construction-related jobs will be created in projects throughout the country, including new road infrastructure, new schools and a new modern metro system in Dublin, as referred to on the Order of Business by several Members. It also provides more investment in enterprise support services, which were also mentioned on the Order of Business.

Garda technology was also mentioned by several Members, including Senator MacSharry. In addition to the investment already made available in this area over the past year, further investment in Garda vehicles and technology to address the many issues raised today by Members is being provided. Senator MacSharry also proposed an amendment to the Order of Business seeking that the Minister for Health, Deputy Varadkar, come to the House today. I do not propose to accede to the Senator's request as the Minister for Health, Deputy Varadkar, was in the House only half an hour ago to address two items raised by his colleagues. I am sure that if the Senator seeks to address the issue by way of Commencement debate the Minister will be willing to come to the House to respond to it.

Senator Bacik also spoke of the benefits of investment in the capital plan and noted that the unemployment rate is down to 9.4%. Who would have believed when unemployment was up in excess of 15% that it would be down to 9.4% in such a short time? Senator Bacik also complimented Trinity College, Dublin, on its recent remembrance ceremony in respect of over 500 former staff and students who died in the First World War. Senator Bacik also called for a debate on the repeal of the eighth amendment. This obviously will be a subject during the election campaign and I do not wish to have that campaign started in the House any time soon, considering that the election still is a number of months away. Senator Norris welcomed the metro scheme, and I note his comments in that regard, as well as his comments about the Minister of State, Deputy Dara Murphy. Senator Keane welcomed investment in Garda technology and noted the importance of the elimination of the paper trail where insurance and tax discs are concerned and how smart technology could be used to detect defaulters. Senator Mooney called for a debate on the homeless, while noting the comments of the Minister, as well as those of his own party spokesperson, on last evening's television debate. I agree with him on the need for a debate in this House and will try to arrange it with the Minister of State with responsibility for housing. Senator Kelly raised the tendering process for various bus routes and the need for greater transparency in this regard. Senator Barrett questioned the value for money of the metro to the airport, which probably was contrary to what Senator Norris mentioned. Senator Barrett also highlighted the supervision of standards in accountancy and the need to maintain qualifications. I could not agree more with the Senator; there is a need to maintain standards in this area, especially in view of what the country has gone through over the past decade. Senator Brennan

spoke about the national Tidy Towns day and congratulated the overall winner, Letterkenny, as well as all the winners in this great competition, and complimented the voluntary effort of all concerned. I also wish to compliment RTE's "Nationwide" programme on its excellent coverage of the event and to give due recognition to everyone involved in this competition.

Senator Wilson raised the issue of rural Ireland and the marauding gangs that are plundering it, while welcoming the new resources for the Garda and noting the need for smart technology and additional Garda vehicles, which will be addressed in the capital plan. Senator Mullins spoke on the ambitious plan for recovery and welcomed the funding of development moneys for towns such as Ballinasloe. Senator Quinn also spoke on the theme of smart technology for the Garda and noted that burglaries have increased by 8%. He is quite correct in this regard, and that is the reason the Minister will come to the House soon to introduce a new burglary Bill. Members will have an opportunity to discuss this issue with the Minister at that time. Senator Quinn also lauded the organisers of the National Ploughing Championship, which was an absolutely wonderful success and has been for many years. I join with the Senator in complimenting all involved. Senator Paul Coghlan called for greater funding for agricultural investment, particularly in the agri-environment services and for the National Parks and Wildlife Service. I am sure many of these issues will be referred to in the budget.

Senator Craughwell raised the issue of the administration of visas and the delays and the inconvenience that are caused to so many people in Burgh Quay in particular. I agree with him that something radical must be done to address it, because what is happening there at present should not be allowed to continue. I certainly will bring this matter to the attention of the Minister. As for Garda stations, I note that more than 90% of the stations that were closed were one-man operated stations in which gardaí were present for a maximum of one to two hours per day. However, I agree with the Senator that in the case of Stepside, it is a different ball game.

Senator Mullen discussed the challenges for small towns, which I am sure will be addressed in the budget. He also called for a debate on Syria. The Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade attended the House some months ago on that topic, but I agree that he should return. I am sure that he would be willing to have a further debate on Syria, particularly regarding the persecution of minorities and the political situation.

Senator Gilroy welcomed the capital plan and its benefits for Cork and many other areas. In Waterford, the combination of funding contained in this plan and other funding from the European Regional Development Fund, ERDF, and local authorities will help to underpin a €35 million investment plan that includes the regeneration of Tramore and Waterford city and further development of the Deise greenway. The money will be welcome in my county.

Senator Bradford mentioned an item on the Order Paper, the report on the cost of medical indemnity insurance. Rather than noting the report, he has called for a debate. I will try to arrange for one with the Minister in early course.

An Cathaoirleach: Senator MacSharry has proposed an amendment to the Order of Business, "That a debate with the Minister for Health on his role in addressing the increase in waiting lists in accident and emergency services and in the health service in general be taken today." Is the amendment being pressed?

Senator Marc MacSharry: I reserve my right to raise it on another day.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Order of Business agreed to.

Sitting suspended at 4.35 p.m. and resumed at 5 p.m.

Ireland 2016 Schools Programme: Statements

Acting Chairman (Senator Hildegarde Naughton): I invite the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Deputy Heather Humphreys, to address the House.

Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I am very pleased to have the opportunity to update Seanad Éireann on the Ireland 2016 Schools Programme. The programme was launched by the Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan, and me at CBS Westland Row, Dublin, last week. It was an ideal setting for the launch of the programme, as both Pádraig and Willie Pearse went to school in Westland Row. It is well known that the Pearse brothers, and Pádraig in particular, valued education, so I hope they would have approved of the diverse range of initiatives and projects that form part of the education programme.

The Ireland 2016 centenary programme is an invitation to everyone on the island of Ireland and the global Irish community to look back on the events of 100 years ago that shaped this nation, to consider the amazing things we have achieved over the last century and to look ahead to the next 100 years. We want children and young people to be at the heart of this programme because they, after all, are the guardians of the next 100 years. The Ireland 2016 project teams in my Department and the Department of Education and Skills have developed a diverse programme of activities for children and young people to help them reflect on the events of 1916 while also looking towards the future.

Earlier this month the Taoiseach launched the Flags for Schools initiative, under which the Defence Forces will deliver our national flag and a copy of the Proclamation to every national school in Ireland. It is very important that children and young people learn about the peaceful message behind our national flag. Members of the Defence Forces will visit more than 3,300 primary schools and talk to the children about the flag and the contents of the Proclamation. I saw how excited the children were in Mayo at that first event with the Taoiseach. They were so thoroughly engaged with their history and listened to every word the Army officer said as he explained the significance of the green, white and orange in our flag. The Thomas F. Meagher Foundation is also going to deliver the flag to secondary schools around the country. Through these flag initiatives we are bringing the commemoration programme right into the classroom, and I hope we will leave children with a positive memory of the events of 2016.

Another element of the programme in which I am particularly interested is the Proclamation for a New Generation project, whereby students across the country will write a new proclamation for their own schools to reflect the values, hopes and aspirations of the 2016 generation. This will start with an analysis of the ideals and principles contained in the 1916 Proclamation, and students will then be encouraged to reflect on their own aspirations. Who better to look to the future and to set out their vision for the next century than the children of 2016? This project entwines the historical and forward-looking elements of the programme. The children will look back on what happened in 1916 and on what informed the aspirations and ideals of the

signatories; then they will consider their own experience today and what they would include in a proclamation for their own generation. We can then look forward to Proclamation Day, which will be a very special day held in all educational institutions on 15 March 2016. The day will start off with the raising of the national flag, followed by a reading of the Proclamation. It will be an opportunity for schools around the country to invite families and the wider community to come to the school as they showcase the work of their students, such as the results of the Proclamation for a New Generation.

As part of the 1916 ancestry project, children and young people will explore what life was like back in 1916 and what happened to their families during the Rising, and will perhaps even discover whether family members had any involvement in those tumultuous events. The ancestry project will give students and their teachers an opportunity to explore the wide range of material being made available online as part of Ireland 2016, including, for example, the parish records published by the National Library of Ireland, which provide a wealth of genealogical information. These records feature the baptism certificates of some very well known figures from 1916, including Pádraig Pearse and Thomas MacDonagh. It is my hope that as the children start exploring this information, it will also spark the interest of their parents and other family members.

A number of all-Ireland competitions focusing on the events of 1916 have been developed by the Department of Education and Skills in partnership with the Department of Education in Northern Ireland, including history, drama and arts competitions, which are open to students from both sides of the Border. A number of other competitions will also be run, including a special exhibition featuring work by students on the theme of Ireland 2016, which will be hosted by the National Gallery of Ireland in September 2016. Students will also be invited to write a short drama based around any aspect of the events of 1916, film the performance and submit the short video to RTE. A public vote will be launched to select the best plays, with the winning schools invited to perform on the stage of the Abbey Theatre in spring 2016.

Our national cultural institutions, including the National Gallery and the National Museum, have been developing exciting programmes to engage directly with children. We have also been working with other organisations to run programmes and publications which will complement the main elements of the schools programme. On Wednesday, 23 September 2015, *The Irish Times* published a fantastic supplement called “Children and the Revolution,” which was supported by my Department. This supplement was delivered to every school in the country and included a wealth of information on the Easter Rising. We are also working with the *Irish Independent* on an exciting series of supplements, which I will launch in the coming weeks. The Ireland 2016 project office has been working with *The Irish Times* on a debating competition, which I will launch in the GPO next week. This high-profile competition for third-level students will focus on 1916 and will culminate in a final in February 2016.

As with all commemorations during the decade of centenaries, the Government is committed to an inclusive approach in marking the centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising. The Government’s expert advisory group on centenary commemorations summed up this approach well when it stated that the aim of the commemorations should be “to broaden sympathies, without having to abandon loyalties.” The Ireland 2016 programme is intended to give people scope to think about the events of 1916 and their legacy in a way that is personal and meaningful to each individual. There are many different perspectives and views on how the events of the 1916 Rising, and all those whose lives were affected by those events, should be appropriately remembered.

In addition to this comprehensive schools programme, communities are developing plans at local level for a whole range of events across the country, and I hope that children and young people will also get involved in their local communities and take part in the various events. We all remember inspirational teachers from our own childhoods. I thank teachers and principals around the country; their enthusiasm and interest in this programme will help the children to really understand the events of the past and unlock their potential for imagining the future. I acknowledge the role of our education centre network and teacher bodies, and the great support and resources that they make available to teachers. I thank my colleague, the Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan, and the many officials in her Department who have been so important in developing the schools programme. I extend my appreciation to Dr. Maurice Manning, chair of the expert advisory committee, and to the committee for its assistance with the development of the programme. The knowledge and experience of such a committee is invaluable to the Ireland 2016 programme. I am also very grateful for the commitment and input of the members of the Oireachtas all-party consultation group, some of whom are present this evening. My Department has also been working with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs to support the engagement of children and young people outside the formal education sector. Eight regional consultations are taking place with children aged between eight and 12 and with young people aged between 13 and 17 on the theme of "Imagining our future." The outcome of these consultations will be compiled in a report to be presented by children and young people to Ministers and decision makers at a major young people's event on 2 April 2016.

There really is something for all interests in the programme and I look forward to seeing the outcomes throughout 2016. Further details on all of the events taking place under the Youth and Imagination strand of the Ireland 2016 centenary programme can be found on the website www.ireland.ie. I thank Members for the opportunity to outline the Ireland 2016 Schools Programme.

Senator Labhrás Ó Murchú: I welcome the Minister this evening to outline what is a very comprehensive and imaginative schools programme as part of the 1916 centenary celebrations. I compliment the Department and its Northern counterparts on the most edifying national Famine commemoration in Newry on Saturday, 26 September 2015. It was most impressive. I was struck by how peaceful and inclusive that event was. It is not to overstate the case to say that it could not have happened 15 or 20 years ago.

I compliment the Government on the State funeral afforded to Commandant Thomas Kent. It was a most edifying and inclusive event. I have spoken about this in the Seanad over the past 15 years in the hope that it would happen. I do not think it could have been done better than it was done in Castlelyons on 18 September 2015.

With regard to the programme itself, something the Minister said near the end of her speech is quite true - there is something for everybody. All interests will be catered for and encapsulated in the programme. The Minister is right about the excitement when the flag arrived. I have heard the same story from parents and teachers. It shows that, given the opportunity, that is precisely the interaction that a school wants with the outside world. It will be a memory for life for those young people. We invest confidence in young people when we ask them to demonstrate what type of Ireland they would like, for example, by asking them to write their own Proclamation. That is important. As one gets a little bit older, one forgets how creative young people are, and young people are creative at a very young age. In this case, the focus is 1916, and if they are given an opportunity in a formal setting, there is no doubt that we will be

agreeably surprised by what will come back. Over the years I have seen young people writing dramas. One might expect them to be incomplete, but it is amazing what they are able to do when given guidance and parameters in a school. For that reason, I believe that Proclamation Day, on 15 March 2016, will be exceptionally special. The reading of the Proclamation will be the primary event on that day, but one will find that schools will put their best foot forward and will endeavour to do something very special. If one looks back on one's own school days, when there was a special day in school, one will remember all the preparation that went into that and the sense of achievement when it went well, particularly when there were parents and other people present. I feel that that day will go down as one of the most important days in the childhood of those young people.

What is important about the programme is that much of it is community-based. I have always felt that that is the way it should be. We talk about the commemoration belonging to everyone, and that is particularly evident in a community context. If one looks back over the years, one can see that communities have become very cohesive. We all look back at a time when there were perceived divisions in communities. That is gone, certainly in this part of the country, and hopefully it is happening in Northern Ireland as well. If there is an event that emanates from the community and the community is part of it by hosting and energising it, it will belong to all the people. There will be people there of different political and religious persuasions; they will have no problem once they realise that this is about our history, in the same way that the World War was commemorated. History is history; it is not something that is used to be provocative or otherwise. Moreover, this type of programme will start where it should, namely, with young people. Obviously, other events will be held outside of schools and many young people in school also will be part of them. While they will be coming out into the adult world, they also will influence the adult world as a result of their own experience within the school programme. I also believe this commemoration is being started in the right way because it is being done on the basis that everyone occupies this island for the better and for the good of all people. No Member who enters this Chamber is without an edifying experience of his or her own. Each Member present has experienced the new Ireland, its potential and opportunities and one should not allow oneself to be influenced excessively by some peripheral opinion. As I have stated previously in the Chamber, it was an education for me when the Fleadh Cheoil went to Derry and I remember visiting the Waterside and meeting the loyalist leaders of the bands that time. There was no difficulty in this regard and while they had a perception of me and of what we did and we had a perception of them, it was all laid aside. Thereafter, I received an invitation to go back up and meet these loyalist representatives in the Orange lodge just outside Derry before Christmas. At the lodge, I met husbands, wives and children with the aprons, buns, tea and so on and, genuinely, nobody thought of politics or partisanship. All one really thought of was generous humanity because these were people who wished to engage and I wished to reciprocate and engage with them. If nothing else emerges from the entire commemoration of 1916 next year than the fact of us all going forward with renewed confidence, respect and co-operation, as well as a constructive approach to one another, the commemoration will have been a great success.

Senator Eamonn Coghlan: The Minister is welcome to the House. I was delighted to learn that the launch of the initiative took place in Westland Row last week because my father, who lived a mere two blocks from Leinster House, went to school there and, as a young boy, I remember listening to many stories of Pádraig Pearse. I also recall the events of 49 years ago on the 50th anniversary and all the wonderful ceremonies that took place, as well as the pageantry in Croke Park. My father provided the sound system for those particular ceremonies and all the

wonderful events that took place and now, 50 years later, we are ready to celebrate the centenary of the 1916 Rising. I also was delighted by the initiative taken with the flags in schools, which was launched by the Taoiseach a week or two ago, because ever since I was nominated to the Seanad four years ago, I have been visiting schools to promote physical education and at times in such schools, I have been asked to raise the green flag for the environment. I also have been asked to raise the active schools flag, which is awarded when schools participate in physical education to a high standard. Now that the tricolour is to be presented to all the schools in Ireland, it will be a great occasion in which to instil pride in the young children of Ireland as to the meaning of the tricolour. As a sportsman, I was fortunate to have the talent and health to be able to win a gold medal for Ireland, to be handed a tricolour, to carry it around the stadium in Helsinki in 1983 and to hear the national anthem being played. An opportunity of success like that enables one to understand what the anthem and flag are all about.

The Ireland 2016 Schools Programme is part of the youth and imagination strand of Ireland 2016. The programme is a year of activities to commemorate the events of the 1916 Rising, and the 2016 schools programme is a wonderful way to involve children by educating them in a fun and interactive way. The focus on children and young adults in the centenary programme via the schools programme is hugely important. I cannot emphasise that enough. It will enhance their understanding of the events that took place and will enrich their sense of Irish identity in the future. The programme involves a huge array of activities, research projects and competitions and awards are being rolled out in primary and post-primary schools throughout the country commencing this month. The schools programme has been developed by the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht in partnership with the Department of Education and Skills, which is wonderful. Both Departments have worked to develop an interactive programme of activities that place children and youths at the heart of the commemoration and assist them to examine what happened in the past while also enhancing their hopes and dreams for the future.

It is fantastic that the national cultural institutions such as, for example, the National Library and the National Museum are also involved in the schools programme with tours planned to help boost the understanding of young people of the events that took place 100 years ago. A special exhibition featuring work by students on the theme of Ireland 2116 will be hosted by the National Gallery of Ireland in September 2016. In addition, there will be an all-Ireland song competition through a partnership with the National Concert Hall. Primary and secondary students will be invited to write a song inspired by the modern, multicultural Ireland of the present and the finalists will perform at the National Concert Hall in May 2016, where two overall winners will be selected, with one from a primary school and the other from a secondary school. In addition, there will be a transition year module facilitated by the Military Archives and NUI Maynooth based on material from 1916.

Some other examples of the Ireland 2016 Schools Programme include the Proclamation for a New Generation project, which will see students being asked to write a new proclamation for their own school to reflect the values and hopes of the 2016 generation, starting with an analysis of the ideals, principles and aspirations of the 1916 Proclamation. A special so-called Proclamation Day will take place in all educational institutions next March. This is the moment when each school in the country will showcase the results of its Proclamation for a New Generation and all other creative projects relating to 1916 that its student body has developed.

In addition, the 1916 ancestry project will invite all primary and post-primary pupils to trace their family or another family tree back to 1916. Students will be encouraged to find out what was happening in their local community in 1916 and embark on a trail of discovery using the

resources of the national cultural institutions. A range of arts awards and competitions, based on themes relating to 1916 or Ireland in 2116, has been developed by the Department of Education and Skills in partnership with the Department of Education in Northern Ireland, which will be open to all primary and post-primary schools on the island of Ireland.

All the national cultural institutions are creating exciting and diverse programmes of events and activities specifically to engage young people and children both with the events of 1916 and to explore and express their vision as young artists for the Ireland they want in the future. There will be a great deal going on for teachers and students to explore the events of 1916. Students will be invited to write a short drama, for example, based on any aspect of the events of 1916, to film the performance and submit the short video to RTE. A public vote will be launched to select the best plays and the winning schools will be invited to perform them on the stage of the Abbey Theatre in the spring of next year. The topic for the libraries and post-primary schools' special 1916 poetry competition is "Your Ireland". The Poetry Aloud all-island poetry speaking competition is encouraging poems on 1916 themes.

From my point of view, the best advantage to the 2016 schools programme is there are many families and people, even of my generation, who may not participate in the centenary commemorations. However, by having so many activities and educational programmes delivered through the school system, one is guaranteed the children will become involved in a fun and interactive way and they can encourage their parents, families, extended families and communities also to get involved in this wonderful celebration of Ireland 2016.

Senator Mark Daly: I welcome the Minister to the House and thank her for outlining the wide ranging programme. I served on the Decade of Centenaries committee for the last four years. It has been a long journey and there were lots of concerns, but from this side of the house we are delighted with the Government programme. I think it is very comprehensive. The schools programme outlined by the Minister is only one part of it but all the other aspects of it are equally comprehensive and it will make for a very good year and appropriate celebration of the 100th anniversary of the 1916 Rising. I wish to pay particular tribute to the Minister and while I understand that we should not name officials in the House I will name them anyway: praise is due to John Concannon and to Sinead Copeland and to all the officials who put in so much effort. They are not just doing the 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., they are going to the events in the evenings and at weekends. They are putting in an enormous amount of hours.

The question has been asked, "What are we celebrating?" I have debated this theme with the chairman of the Thomas Francis Meagher Foundation, the Reverend Michael Cavanagh. He is not just a Church of Ireland reverend; he is also a lecturer in Trinity College on ethics in engineering. He was in charge of the Jubilee Line underground extension in London and he is also an adviser to NASA on safety critical systems. We discussed 2016 and what it is we are celebrating, about the promotion of pride and respect for the Irish flag and its meaning for peace. He pointed out that we must focus on what it was we were trying to achieve, not who it was we were trying to achieve it against. What we were trying to achieve is contained in the Proclamation about equal rights, equal opportunities, and civil and religious liberties.

In some senses, what we will be looking at next year is celebrating how far we have come. The UN Human Development Index puts Ireland 11th in the world out of 196 nations, above our nearest neighbour who is 14th. We must also reflect upon how far we have yet to go to achieve all those aims and objectives contained in the Proclamation. The reflection on how far we have come in attaining those aims we sought to achieve 100 years ago is a rightful part of

the celebrations.

The flag and the description of its colour, as described in Article 7 of the Constitution, is central to this. In the education process, in the Department of Education and in primary and secondary schools, the national flag is described as green, white and orange. Not green, white and yellow, not green white and gold – it is green, white and orange. It is orange for a reason, the significance of which was outlined by Thomas Francis Meagher when he talked of the colours and their symbolism for peace between Irish Catholics and Irish Protestants. Those aims and words are as relevant today as they were 100 years ago or 160 years ago when Thomas Francis Meagher spoke of them. When he spoke those words I do not think he would have believed that they would still be quoted all these years later and that when he flew the flag for the first time on 7 March 1848, that the second time it would fly would be on Easter Monday, 1916. Now, thanks to the Minister and the officials, all national schools and second level schools in the State will be presented with the flag by Proclamation day. In the case of the secondary schools those flags will have flown from the building where the first tricolour was flown. I wish to pay tribute to the Minister and the officials for working with the Thomas Francis Meagher Foundation. The foundation has an impressive line-up of supporters including Irish athletes Henry Shefflin, John Treacy, Cora Staunton and Niamh Briggs, Brian Schweitzer the former Governor of Montana, Congressman Thomas Rooney and Congressman Joe Kennedy, the grand-nephew of John F. Kennedy and the grandson of Robert Kennedy. Another honorary board member is Packie Bonner who gave us back our flag, in a sense, when he saved the penalty in Italia '90. That occasion allowed everybody to fly the flag with pride. This pride will happen again in 2016, but it will also allow us to celebrate appropriately the 100th anniversary of the 1916 Rising and I look forward to working with the Minister and the Government on ensuring that the year is one where the whole nation can celebrate together.

Senator Susan O’Keeffe: I welcome the Minister to the House. The year 2016 will be a great year to be a schoolchild due to the extraordinary range and depth of programmes that the Minister and her officials and committees have conjured up. Of course it has been more than conjuring and it is the result of much hard work, but there is imagination at work also in trying to reach out. The programme offers certain big pieces and events, but it also reaches out to the imagination of our young people and our small children. One of the events that appeals to me is where first and second class children, and perhaps even younger, will examine what it was like to be a four year old in 1916. It is from the stories which people tell about their experiences that children learn.

Senator Coghlan recalled his own great moment of glory, holding the flag and listening to the anthem. These are the moments that people remember and imagine and in talking of their experience they inspire children to think “Well I want to run for Ireland,” or “I want to play football for Ireland”. For the little ones at school, examining what four year olds did in 1916 will engage them in a way that perhaps history books cannot or will not. That is what is good about the range and depth of these programmes. As the Minister has said, there is something in this programme for everyone.

In looking at the plan for County Sligo which will have 55 events, not all about the schools, the key intersecting themes of remembrance, shared history and reconciliation, refection and re-imagining will be the cornerstones of all the events we will enjoy and celebrate next year. I believe it genuinely is a year to celebrate. While it is important to commemorate, I am a believer in looking to the future. What have we learned? By looking back we can be inspired by the people who fought and died in 1916, we can take that learning and it becomes about what

we can do in the next century and beyond. Rather than it be a sad moment it becomes an inspiring one. There is plenty to be inspired by in the events to take place, many of which have been outlined today.

The bilingual education piece for next year is particularly important and I welcome it. Níl mórán Gaeilge agam féin ach cuirim fáilte roimh na rudaí atá ann ina thaobh. It is important that we have an emphasis on the Irish language next year on an all-island basis. The Irish language will play an important part next year and I am delighted to see this.

The Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology will invite primary schools to submit short films based on any aspect of 1916. It is lovely to see opportunities for third level students to interact with younger students and the skilled people who work hard at the institute looking after that project. It is one project that I will certainly be looking out for. The Abbey Theatre production of “Me, Mollser” for fifth and sixth classes, will be taken on a nationwide tour. This is a lovely opportunity for theatre to be taken out from the confinement of the actual theatre and for people to understand that the Abbey Theatre has been around for over 100 years and has played its part in who we are as a nation.

I want to salute the idea of sharing our flag and of reinventing our connection with the flag and what it stands for. In remembering the message that the flag belongs to all of us as citizens of this country it becomes not a political emblem, it becomes ours and it belongs to everybody. I am delighted to see that children will be engaged in this message through the Army, which is a lovely way of organising it, so they will then understand when they see the flag flying that it belongs to all of us.

Is there an opportunity for the harp to be included in our celebrations next year? We are the only country in the world with a musical instrument among our emblems. It was on the Irish flag for centuries. We retain it on the beautiful leather seats in the Seanad and on the President’s flag as one of our official emblems.

Some younger schoolchildren will be examining the family life and cultural life of 1916. Social media overwhelms most of our young people’s lives and they are good with it. Examining the role of film, theatre, literature and print at the turn of the last century would be good for them. They may be surprised to discover that a great deal was happening. The telephone had been invented by that time. They may discover that some of the things they are used to doing on social media had their roots further back than they believed.

Local stories will be important. Through schoolchildren, each county will celebrate its stories and people. As with Senator Eamonn Coghlan’s experience with the flag, it is the stories of those who lived in 1916 - neighbours, grandparents or great-grandparents - that will awaken for children a better understanding of what happened. Reaching out through those family connections will be important.

It would be remiss of me not to mention William Butler Yeats in this context. We have had a successful year of celebrating his birthday. In his poem “The Leaders of the Crowd”, he wrote: “Truth flourishes where the student’s lamp has shone”. This is a nice line to take from Yeats, though not one with which people might be too familiar. As part of the joined-up thinking to which the Minister referred, this afternoon we celebrated with the Minister for Education and Skills and the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht the book produced by more than 100,000 national schoolchildren from throughout the country in celebration of Yeats’s birthday.

Each child examined two poems, painted pictures and wrote a poem of his or her own. At each education centre, we selected four or five, which we produced in a book, *The Magic Within*. It was a perfect opportunity for the two Departments to join hands and work together, which they continue to do through the cultural charter. The Creative Yeats national secondary school competition encouraged young people to use social media to engage with Yeats. An essay competition was also run by Callan Tansey Solicitors. It is good that our young people are looking back and finding ways for their futures to be inspired by what happened many years ago.

We will have a busy year. I would love to be a schoolchild next year. I am sure that all of us as public representatives will play our part in helping to celebrate this moment in our history. It will be a beacon for the next 100 years. I thank the Minister for her and her Department's hard work.

Senator Sean D. Barrett: I welcome the Minister. I thank her for her address in Newry last Saturday. If it was a foretaste of the events of the coming year, it was an auspicious start. The Minister, her Department and Newry, Mourne and Down District Council organised a commemoration of the Famine. As part of the inclusiveness that Senator O'Keeffe mentioned, historian Dr. Eamon Phoenix described in new ways the impact of the Famine on the Ulster Unionist and Protestant communities. That was an aspect that was not known previously. It was an innovation. I attended in the presence of the Minister, Mr. Danny Kennedy, MLA, and Senator Ó Murchú. We must get that group together again as it was most informative and useful. I commend the Minister on the inclusiveness she has shown in the organisation of events.

The Trinity College Dublin commemoration of the 1914 to 1918 period earlier in the day has been mentioned. The chaplains kept it going, but it has been reinterpreted. Idealistic people of 16, 17 and 18 years of age volunteered in large numbers because they believed in the cause. Almost 500 never came back.

Inclusiveness is important. When the Taoiseach honoured Thomas Kent at his funeral, I welcomed his reference to the RIC man who was shot on the same day. As I stated when the Minister attended the Seanad previously, "including everyone" also means the many ordinary policemen who did not have a political stance but were caught up in this and killed, had to leave or were forgotten. The Minister's inclusiveness was impressive.

National schools will gain from soldiers bringing the flag to them and explaining it. I saw it on television being done at a school in Mayo. The schoolchildren were most impressed by the gesture. It was magical for them.

Much happened during the decade in question. The teens were a period of great vibrancy in music, theatre and politics. The 1920s to 1950s were dull in comparison. The Minister is celebrating the most exciting decade. The celebrations have got off to a good start.

The inclusiveness was appreciated in Newry last Saturday. Mr. Seán Kelly, MEP, brought rugby to Croke Park. Many Unionists support that sport and an all-Ireland team is to be commended. The invitation that the Minister issued to every ambassador, chargé d'affaires and honorary consul probably brought together a range of people in Newry who had never been all together before. That was commendable.

We are celebrating the rise of trade unionism, which was an ingredient in what happened in 1916 and workers' rights, the suffragettes and the franchise. There are many interesting elements to celebrate. What I saw in Newry last Saturday was a good start. I commend initiatives

like Joe Duffy's researching of the 40 children who were killed in 1916.

I have always felt that school programmes have immense possibility. They are mostly exploited, if that is the word, when a team wins the Sam Maguire cup or the Liam McCarthy cup and it is brought to schools. That day is one that all the children remember. It is exciting. The Minister for Education and Skills could use ambassadors to explain to schoolchildren how culture, business and sport operate, as one never knows what might excite the spark in young people. They remember the day when someone famous came to their school.

The programme deserves the support of every Senator. I wish the Minister well. It should be a time of great celebration. We are constantly seeing 1916 and that decade in a new light. Instead of looking back in anger, there should be positivity in terms of what that period means for Ireland's future. A maelstrom of ideas came together at the time. For capturing that excitement, the House and the country are in the Minister's debt. I commend what she has done.

Senator Maurice Cummins: The Minister is always welcome in the House. The Ireland 2016 Schools Programme is an event that will be very much welcomed by school children and indeed everyone involved in education in the country.

In 2011 a group of Waterford people set up a voluntary committee to commemorate the first flying of the tricolour in Ireland at No. 33, The Mall, by Thomas Francis Meagher. The Thomas Francis Meagher festival has grown from strength to strength in recent years. I compliment James Doherty and his committee on their excellent work in promoting this festival in recent years. It was this committee that first thought of the idea of presenting a ceremonial Irish flag to primary schools. Last year, representatives from more than 130 schools throughout the country attended a function in Waterford, which was also attended by President Higgins. It is the intention of the committee to continue this event in Waterford in the coming years.

I know that Senator Daly has set up a company called the Thomas Francis Meagher Foundation, which is registered as a charity. I presume it is registered with the Charities Regulatory Authority, as is required by law. I welcome his enthusiasm in this regard. I do not know whether there have been any meetings of the foundation since it was set up, but I compliment him on his work in this regard. Anyway, I hope he will not forget the fact that the Thomas Francis Meagher committee is a Waterford committee, set up to promote Waterford and the building where the tricolour was first flown. This is a historical fact, despite people's claims otherwise. There are some rumours to the effect that the foundation is trying to hijack the flag event next year and bring it elsewhere. I hope this is only a rumour. I know that Senator Daly mentioned a number of dignified people in his remarks and I imagine they certainly would not advocate or welcome any hijacking of that event from Waterford.

The year 1916 is to be commemorated by all, as has been mentioned, and I welcome the schools programme and the details that the Minister has outlined in the House today. It is a very inclusive programme. We have many innovative events, incorporating arts and cultural, dramatic and musical events. As Senator O'Keeffe mentioned, our flag belongs to everyone.

Senator Paul Coughlan: Hear, hear.

Senator Maurice Cummins: I hate to see it abused at some events, as we have seen in recent years.

Senator Terry Brennan: Hear, hear.

Senator Maurice Cummins: Our flag is to be respected at all times.

I am keen to make reference to the comments of Senator Labhrás Ó Murchú in respect of the Thomas Kent State funeral. It is something Senator Ó Murchú has raised in this House on numerous occasions in the past ten years. I agree with his view that because of the approach of the Government and the family, this was a very respectful and dignified event, as it should have been.

I compliment the Minister on her efforts in the schools programme as well as the whole commemoration of 1916, which will no doubt be inclusive, as it should be. I hope everything will go well for all of us in 2016.

Senator Terry Brennan: Ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur roimh an Aire. Tá brón orm nach raibh mé in ann bheith in Iúr Cinn Trá Dé Sathairn seo caite. Bhí orm mo bhean chéile a thógáil go dtí an t-ospidéal i mBaile Átha Cliath.

Yesterday, An Taoiseach, the Minister for the Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht and the Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan, launched the Flags for Schools initiative. As part of the Ireland 2016 centenary programme, Óglaigh na hÉireann, the Defence Forces, will present the national flag and a copy of the Proclamation to every primary school throughout the country. The first ceremony was held yesterday in Islandeady, Castlebar, County Mayo. This was the first in a series of ceremonies that will take place in more than 3,300 national schools throughout the country, including special schools. It is a major element of the State programme to mark the centenary of the 1916 Rising.

Speaking at yesterday's event, An Taoiseach stated:

We are here for a very special occasion. We are here today for the very first of over three thousand events like this, as Óglaigh na hÉireann, our Defence Forces, begin to present the Irish Tricolour and the 1916 Proclamation to every primary and special school in the land. In being here, we are helping to remember the great sacrifice of the people who fought in 1916 and after so that this flag could be flown by its people, and that this nation could take its place among the world's free nations.

This initiative is a great way to get young children engaged with the 1916 commemorations. Through the delivery of the national flag to every primary school in the country, children will gain a greater understanding of the work of the Defence Forces and the importance of our national flag, which symbolises the aspirations for peace between the different traditions on this island.

I too hope that thousands of ceremonies that will take place throughout the country in the coming months will leave our schoolchildren with a positive and lasting memory from the commemorations. I thank all those teachers and pupils from primary and post-primary schools for getting involved. Next year's programme of activities to enable people to engage with the events and themes around 1916 is truly exciting and innovative. The Minister is calling on all schools to get involved, particularly in time for Proclamation Day on 15 March next year, when we will ask all schools and further and higher institutes to open the doors to their communities and present the various projects relating to 1916 developed by our young people.

I congratulate the Minister, her departmental officials, the Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy O'Sullivan, and her staff, as well as the cross-party committee established some three

and a half or four years ago, on their efforts on this outstanding initiative to commemorate and celebrate 100 years of our island's history.

Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I thank all Senators for their contributions. In particular, I thank Senator Ó Murchú for his kind comments and I thank the other Senators for their kind comments on the national famine commemorations. I was delighted to be able to work with Newry, Mourne and Down District Council in order that we could hold the famine commemorations for the first time in Northern Ireland. The last time they were held in Ulster, the location was Clones, my local town. As an Ulster woman and the chair of the committee, I was pleased that it has come back to Northern Ireland and Ulster. It is very much a community event and an inclusive event. It was very respectful. I went to Newry on Saturday and I returned to Warrenpoint on Sunday for another unveiling of a plaque. While many of the people who travelled on the boats went to Newry, they had to continue the journey to Warrenpoint, where many of them got the boat to America, Australia, Canada or wherever they went. I will go to Canada at the end of October for the international famine commemorations there. There is a strong link between Ulster and Canada through the ships that travelled from Warrenpoint. I am looking forward to visiting Canada.

As I have indicated previously, I very much want the 2016 commemorations to be inclusive and community-driven. I acknowledge the important role Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann will play in the commemorations and I have no doubt the harp will feature prominently. Plans are afoot in County Cavan to bring together musicians from different traditions to perform in 2016. I have always made clear that I want the commemorations to be inclusive, respectful and appropriate. I am conscious, as the person heading the State commemorations, that they belong to all the people of Ireland rather than any particular group or political party. The purpose of the commemorations is bring everyone together to reflect upon the past 100 years and look forward to a bright future.

I am encouraged by the level of interest shown in the programme. I also want to ensure the commemorations move out beyond Dublin as the large number of events taking place in Dublin could have resulted in the programme becoming Dublin-centric. I am pleased with the engagement shown by local communities through the local authorities. Some 80 local consultation meetings were held nationwide and it is encouraging to note each county is producing a plan of commemoration, all of which will feed into the national plan. We are also briefing the local authorities in Northern Ireland and have received a positive response to date. That engagement will continue. I am also pleased that we are working with the GAA and that the organisation is taking part in the State commemorations.

The school programme will be one of the many ways in which we will reach into every community. I want to get people thinking and talking. I hope the schools programme will spark discussions among families about how they or their relatives were affected by events. It is important to hear stories that bring life to history and history to life. I hope children will go home and discuss what they are doing at school and what they have discovered. As I nation, I hope we will come together to commemorate the events that led to the foundation of the State.

To respond to a point raised by Senator Cummins, children will be taught the protocol that applies to the flag and the way it should be treated and respected. In particular, the flag should not touch or be dragged along the ground as one sometimes sees unfortunately. Children will be made conscious of this protocol and the meaning of the flag will also be outlined to them.

The country has come a long way in the past 100 years. We have the maturity to examine the events of the past without being triumphalist. As Senator O’Keeffe stated, we need to reflect on the past 100 years and we should be proud of and celebrate our many achievements. The peacekeeping role of the Defence Forces, for example, is widely respected across the world.

A number of academic conferences are also planned for third level institutions next year. I have no doubt these will facilitate discussion of the events of 1916, including what may have occurred if history had taken a different course and the meaning of these events in 21st century Ireland. Through the 2016 programme, I hope we can encourage children to look back on the events of 1916, consider what life was like for children at that time and think about how different their experiences are today. It is important that they learn about our history in an informed and inclusive manner.

Senator Barrett will be pleased to note that I am launching Joe Duffy’s book on the children of 1916. I acknowledge that Joe Duffy was highlighting what happened to children in 1916 long before the commemorations programme was put together.

The full details of the Irish language programme will be published in the coming weeks. It is important that the Irish language is prominent throughout the commemoration programme. The harp is a prominent symbol on all the printed material and we will ensure this symbolism is respected.

I am excited about the year of commemorations that lies ahead. Events will also take place to mark the role of women, which is very important given the significant role women played in the Rising before fading into the background. As I stated, we have passed legislation to encourage more women to become involved in politics. This will be an interesting study and it is very worthwhile and important that we do it.

We are working with many different organisations, including community organisations and the Thomas F. Meagher Foundation to which a number of Senators alluded. We are very pleased with the level of engagement with the programme. The greater the number of people involved, the better and richer will be the programme of commemorations. I thank the House for the opportunity to speak.

The Seanad adjourned at 6.05 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 30 September 2015.