



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

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

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SEANAD ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 29 Meán Fómhair 2016

Thursday, 29 September 2016

Chuaigh an Leas-Chathaoirleach i gceannas ar 10.30 a.m.

*Machnamh agus Paidir.
Reflection and Prayer.*

Business of Seanad

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I have received notice from Senator Brian Ó Domhnaill that, on the motion for the Commencement of the House today, he proposes to raise the following matter:

The need for the Minister of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government to revamp and publicise the home choice loan scheme.

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

The need for the Minister for Social Protection to recognise the need to increase the annual grant allocation for approximately 400 community services programmes throughout the country to meet the cost of paying the welcome increase in the national minimum wage to €9.15 per hour.

I have also received notice from Senator John O'Mahony of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Health to restore the motorised transport grant.

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

The need for the Minister for Health to reconsider the recent independent clinical review of the provision of a second catheterisation laboratory at University Hospital Waterford, with a specific focus on the base data used to compile the report, in the interests of providing equal access to quality cardiology care in the public health service for the citizens of the south east.

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

The need for the Minister for Health to outline to the House the informal and formal efforts being made to relocate the European Medicines Agency from London to Ireland following the decision of the British people to vote to leave the European Union.

I regard the matters raised by the Senators as suitable for discussion. I have selected the matters raised by Senators Brian Ó Domhnaill, Máire Devine, John O'Mahony and Paudie Cof-

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fey and they will be taken now. Senator Neale Richmond may give notice on another day of the matter he wishes to raise.

Commencement Matters

House Purchase Schemes

Senator Brian Ó Domhnaill: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit. This issue relates to the home choice loan scheme which was established in late 2008 or 2009 and funded by the Exchequer to the tune of €500 million initially. However, less than €4 million worth of loans have been approved by the home choice loan programme since its inception. As I understand it, only 21 loan approvals have been granted.

There has been much commentary in recent times on the difficulties people are experiencing in obtaining loans to build or purchase homes. Obviously, the curtailment of the Central Bank mortgage lending rules has also had an impact. The home choice loan scheme is administered through the local authority system, however, and not subject to the Central Bank lending rules. Under the scheme, the borrower is only required to have 8% in savings up to a maximum threshold of borrowing €285,000. The borrower must have 8% in savings for an application to be deemed eligible. There are other criteria, including having been refused by two other mortgage lending agencies prior to applying for the home choice loan scheme.

The scheme was set up to support people who wanted to purchase and live in their own homes. The State should do everything possible to afford people the opportunity to progress to a phase in their lives when they can actually do that. The scheme is essentially defunct - it is not working. A spokesman for Irish mortgage brokers, Mr. Karl Deeter, commented on the scheme at the end of August. He stated not only was the scheme defunct but also that mortgage brokers did not even know how to get in contact with the home choice loan provider. We need to put our hands up and say the scheme has been a complete and utter failure. However, that does not mean it should not be resurrected. It should be resurrected in the light of the need to provide housing and the demand among individuals, especially those in rural areas who may wish to build their own homes on their own land. They should be allowed to do so. Often, the only show in town for them is a mortgage through the lending agencies, but they are not available, despite what may be said to the contrary by those in the lending agencies.

The lending rate of 3.25% is competitive within the market, but why is no one applying? The reason is that the scheme is not being promoted, marketed or structured properly. I am keen to hear what the Minister of State has to say. If we are not going to revamp and revitalise the scheme and make it available to everyone, we would be as well to close the door and say we have failed. Where has the money initially allocated to the scheme gone?

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government (Deputy Damien English): It is good to be back in the Seanad again.

I thank the Senator for raising this issue. It is important to bring clarity. Like many schemes, people do not always know about them until they go looking for them. In our offices people

have asked about them in the past and we pointed them in the right direction. Generally, if someone wants a loan through this mechanism, they will find out about it. However, I understand what the Senator is saying about promoting the scheme also.

The home choice loan is a Government-backed mortgage for first-time buyers introduced in 2009. It was introduced as a temporary loan offering from local authorities. It was designed to facilitate those in creditworthy households wishing to purchase or build new homes or purchase second-hand homes who had been affected by the credit conditions in the mortgage market. As the Senator said, it can also be used to build a home on land owned by individuals. It is available nationwide through mortgage brokers who are included in a designated panel compiled by the Housing Agency. The loans are made available and administered by four lead local authorities on behalf of all local authorities - Dublin City Council, Cork City Council, Kilkenny County Council and Galway County Council. A dedicated website, www.homechoiceloan.ie, gives full details of the scheme.

To support local authorities in operating home choice loans in a consistent and efficient manner, the Housing Agency provides a central service for them. This shared central service processes loan applications, carries out credit checks and issues a recommendation to the local authority on each loan application in accordance with the credit policy. The final decision on loan approval is a matter for the relevant local authority and its credit committee on a case by case basis.

The loan is available to first-time buyers who can prove that they have been refused a loan by two financial institutions. It provides up to 92% of the market value of a property purchased to a maximum loan amount of €285,000. The loan is a normal capital and interest bearing mortgage. It is offered at a single, competitive variable interest rate, currently set at 3.25%. Since the home choice loan scheme commenced in 2009, 21 home choice loans have been issued with a total value of more than €3.9 million.

Local authorities can offer another type of product to first-time buyers. In accordance with the Housing (Local Authority Loans) Regulations 2012, local authorities can offer eligible first-time buyers a local authority standard variable rate annuity mortgage loan directly, which offers a rate of 2.55%. Like the home choice loan, this loan type is only available to individuals who have been refused a mortgage loan by two other lenders. The annuity mortgage scheme has a lower loan limit, lower income thresholds and lower interest rates but a higher loan-to-value, LTV, ratio of 97% compared with the home choice loan ratio of 92%. In addition, the standard annuity mortgage is available and administered directly by local authorities. Almost 1,100 of these loans have been provided by local authorities since 2009 when the current product was introduced, totalling €87 million.

When the home choice loan and standard mortgage loans were introduced, careful attention was given to the terms and conditions that should be applied. It was set against the background of the experience of previous mortgage lending by local authorities, under which the current level of arrears is running at approximately three times that of the private mortgage sector, presenting challenges for the home owners and lending local authorities concerned, and liberal mortgage lending by the private banking sector in the years running up to the economic collapse in 2008. Therefore, the regulations underpinning the home choice loan and the standard annuity product provided for the first time for the development of a statutory credit policy that would govern any lending under the scheme. Decisions on all loan applications must be made in accordance with this statutory credit policy to ensure lending prudence and to assist authori-

ties across the sector to engage consistently in responsible mortgage lending in the best interests of borrowers and local authorities as lenders.

My ministerial colleague, Deputy Simon Coveney, and I will continue to keep the home choice loan scheme under review and would welcome whatever suggestions Senators might have as to how the product might be better publicised. To some extent, however, what we are seeing in terms of the home choice loan is a mirror image of what is happening in the private housing market in which there is a misalignment between house prices and the capacity of first-time borrowers to raise sufficient cash deposits to meet prudent financial rules that are intended to safeguard the borrower into the future. In this context, the Senator will know that the Government has made its intentions clear in increasing the supply of affordable houses for first-time buyers into the market. The Minister and I are committed to ensuring the ambition of Rebuilding Ireland - an Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness is achieved. The full intention is to work with all stakeholders to make houses more affordable. Announcements in the budget in two weeks' time will help to address this issue. It is a question of supply and demand and having a product people can afford.

I do not have information on the number of applications, but it looks like people are, for whatever reason, not choosing this product. However, there have been more than 1,400 council loans. People are aware of the former, but they are choosing the latter route. It could have to do with the LTV ratio.

Senator Brian Ó Domhnaill: I thank the Minister of State. The figures which are shocking were given in a parliamentary reply. I agree with much of what the Minister of State said, but his reply obviously comes from the departmental officials and is not imaginative. The scheme is worth €500 million, but less than 0.8% of that money has been given out in mortgage loans at a time when people are looking for them. The reply referred to the limit, the misalignment and the fact that people must have savings before they could get a mortgage, but the Central Bank's rules have set a higher bar at 10% or 20% than the home choice rules at 8%. Therefore, one would imagine that if people had a difficulty in saving a deposit, their first port of call would be the home choice loan scheme.

The Minister of State put his finger on the issue when he suggested the scheme had not been advertised or promoted. I call on him to leave his footprint in the Department by revamping the scheme or getting rid of it altogether. There should not be a false impression that these loans are available. A radical revamp of the home choice loan structure and a marketing programme are required. In 12 months' time, I would like to see several hundred applications having been approved under the scheme.

Deputy Damien English: To be clear, imagination works both ways. We will take on board any idea the Senator has, but I will not force anyone to take out a loan. The loan is available, but people are choosing not to avail of it. They are choosing local authority products instead. It is not that people do not know. The 1,100 people who chose the other mortgage would have been aware of both options. It is not our job to force them to choose this one. I agree that it is our job to advertise and promote the scheme but brokers also encourage people to take out what are the best products for them. Under the scheme, if one fails to get credit through the normal lending institutions, this is another option. People who look to borrow money are aware of all the options. I would have no problem with putting more effort into promoting the scheme but please do not tell me that it is our job to make them choose it. It is not.

Senator Brian Ó Domhnaill: I did not say that.

Deputy Damien English: No, the Senator said-----

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: There is a large measure of agreement between the Senator and the Minister of State.

Deputy Damien English: The money and the product are available for people who meet the criteria. I am open to ideas. As for imagination, the Senator should not blame the officials if he has no ideas either.

Senator Brian Ó Domhnaill: I will provide the Minister of State with plenty of ideas.

Deputy Damien English: I did not hear them.

Senator Brian Ó Domhnaill: I offered a few today. One concerned the marketing of the product. That was No. 1.

Deputy Damien English: I agree with that one.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: The two Members can have a good chat afterwards. I thank both of them.

Community Services Programme

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister of State.

Senator Máire Devine: I thank the Minister of State for attending to address this issue. I also thank and acknowledge a couple of staff from St. Andrew's community centre in Rialto who are present for highlighting to me during the summer the problems facing the community service programme, CSP. The other staff are busy hosting a local economic event in the area today.

Community service projects are the bedrock of communities throughout Ireland. They are the link in the chain that serves to empower individuals to create a better society. They fill gaps in the provision of services that the Government does not provide. They educate, advocate, listen, guide and enable people to become leaders in their communities. As public representatives, we are merely the voice given to us by those who undertake these projects daily, weekly and monthly. There are more than 400 community service projects throughout the country providing child care, drug rehabilitation, youth projects, community development, training, education, etc. Without them, society would have been broken even further during the most recent recession.

Since January the minimum wage increased from €8.65 to €9.15. Sinn Féin welcomed this but is committed to providing for a living wage. Community service projects also welcomed the increase in the minimum wage and view it as a means to allow their staff to live, not just to survive. The problem arises from the fact that Pobal's annual contribution towards employing a full-time staff member remained at €19,033, inclusive of employer's PRSI. This served to pay the employee the minimum wage of €8.65, with the balance covering the PRSI contribution exactly. It was communicated to projects through Pobal that its annual contribution would not increase to provide the extra money required for them to pay the increased minimum wage

lawfully.

Community service projects are nothing without their employees. The employees are the recognisable, hard-working faces that ensure communities advance. Therefore, projects want to be able to pay them a fair wage and fulfil their responsibilities as good employers. That is easily solved. Whether there was an anomaly, oversight or distinct decision made at the time not to increase the contribution, it now needs to be rectified. The upcoming budget provides a space to do this and increase the annual contribution to community service projects in order that they can pay their staff adequately.

I thank the staff and volunteers in St. Andrew's community centre, Rialto and the hundreds of other community service projects throughout the country that do amazing work for society day in, day out. I hope for a positive response.

Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection (Deputy Finian McGrath): I thank the Senator for raising the issue of the community services programme, CSP. I welcome her friends and neighbours from St. Andrew's community centre. I acknowledge the massive contribution made by many such organisations in their communities, of which I know from first-hand experience.

On the broader issue, the provision of local, social, economic and environmental services is the core aim of the CSP, under which a total of 404 service providers are supported to provide such services through the application of a social enterprise model of delivery. For the purposes of the CSP, a social enterprise has been defined as "an enterprise that trades for a social/societal purpose, where at least part of its income is earned from its trading activity, is separate from government, and where the surplus is primarily reinvested in the social objective". The funding provided for the service providers under the CSP is expressed as a fixed annual co-funding contribution towards the cost of employing a manager or specified number of full-time equivalent staff. The CSP service providers are required to generate traded income from a variety of sources. To assist with sustainability, all CSP service providers should strive to be in circumstances in which at least 30% of annual turnover is from traded income and in which the CSP grant is not more than 50% of annual turnover.

The CSP grant contribution is provided on a co-funding basis and employers are expected to provide additional funds from their own resources to meet the full costs of employment. Support for an eligible person with a 39-hour working week is €19,033 per annum. The employer is expected to pay the local labour market rate for the position and to finance this from non-public grant revenue generated. An additional contribution of €32,000 per annum can also be made towards the engagement of a manager. We should focus on that figure also. The setting of wage rates is entirely a matter for the employer organisation in contract under the CSP.

Owing to the changes to the national minimum wage from January 2016, the issue of sustainability of some CSP service providers has come into focus. I accept that is the reason for this debate. In response, the Department has established - this is important also - a CSP support fund for a fixed period, between 2016 and 2018, to assist service providers in enhancing their sustainability as social enterprises. Therefore, a CSP support fund has been established for the next two years. The support fund is allocating additional financial supports to existing providers under the CSP to enhance their sustainability as social enterprises. Allocations under the support fund are supplementary to the CSP contribution that service providers currently receive. Appraisals of CSP service providers are ongoing to establish the extra funding required

and it is expected to be finalised in conjunction with the current 2016 recontracting process.

Senator Máire Devine: The response is positive, but I would obviously need to take it in more. “Appraisal” can be a scary word when one is considering services, including community services. I hope it is not an appraisal to cut further or make the community service projects unsustainable. The Minister of State referred to an appraisal and report at the end of this quarter. Does he know exactly when the decision will be issued prior to Christmas? Will the arrangement apply retrospectively from January 2016 to provide specifically that employers can give the minimum wage to their employees?

Deputy Finian McGrath: I share the Senator’s concerns when I see some of the phrases used, but the bottom line is that I personally will be supporting what she is saying. I will go back to the senior Minister about the issue. I am filling in this morning for the senior Minister because I feel very strongly that many of the organisations do a fantastic job. I believe the decision will be issued before Christmas 2016, but I will have to confirm this for the Senator.

People need to know - the Senator probably knows this - that in the region of 3,000 people are in supported employment under the programme in approximately 400 not-for-profit companies and co-operatives. Funding of €45 million has been provided for the programme in 2016. This will maintain the current level of activity. It is important to know that Pobal is contracted by the Department to take financial and contract management from the CSP.

On the minimum wage, employees should be paid a fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work. I strongly support that principle. In the long term we need to move towards a living wage. Within organisations and companies, this needs to be addressed and a balance needs to be struck.

I will raise with the senior Minister the issues raised by the Senator. I will then revert to her with a more detailed response, particularly on dates and timelines.

Senator Máire Devine: That would be great.

Motorised Transport Grant

Senator John O’Mahony: I thank the Cathaoirleach for choosing this matter and the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, for being present to hear it. Since I entered politics in the other House, the Minister of State has been a strong advocate for the disability sector. Therefore, I know I will get a good hearing. I appreciate that very much. I congratulate the Minister of State on his advocacy for the disabled for many years.

Let me outline the background to the motorised transport grant for those who might not understand. The payment was suspended in 2013. It was for people with disabilities who needed to buy a car to retain employment or, in exceptional circumstances, people over 17 years with severe disabilities who lived in isolated locations and could not use public transport. I wish to concentrate on the latter.

I can best illustrate the point I wish to make by referring to extracts from a letter I received from one of my constituents, a woman who cares for her husband. I will refer to the important points and leave out names; therefore, no one will be identified. The woman states her husband contracted viral inflammation of the brain in 1995 and has considerable brain damage, epileptic and non-epileptic seizures, depression, word-finding problems and problems with comprehen-

sion and memory. She states he had a heart attack in 1999 and has had 16 stents put in his heart. She has been caring for him 24/7 and he has many seizures during the night. I am very much aware of the circumstances. The woman states her husband must be driven to attend appointments in Galway and Dublin. She has to get him out of the house every day for tea and take him to Sunday lunch as part of his therapy, as ordered by his consultants. She contends that she desperately needs to have a sturdy car because her husband is 19 stone, over six feet in height and has had seizures in the car requiring him to be stretchered out on numerous occasions. She has a 2009 car that really needs to be updated to a 2012 car. The Disabled Drivers Association of Ireland advised her she should change car every two years, but it is four years since she has changed hers. She called to the Castlebar clinic 18 months ago to ask for forms to apply for the motorised transport grant and was told it had been stopped and was to be replaced.

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She says she has been telephoning every few months but still there is no replacement scheme. The car is now beginning to give trouble and she is extremely worried that it is going to break down when she is out with her husband and that this could trigger a seizure. His seizures are caused by stress, worry and anxiety. She says she gets the VRT and VAT back on the car but even with the motorised transport grant, she still has to go to the credit union for a loan to pay for the shortfall on the car. The older her current car gets, the more it depreciates. This means that she will have to get a bigger loan from the credit union. She desperately needs the motorised transport grant to be reinstated because if it is not, she does not know how she will manage. I know this case on which I have been working with the family for a number of years. It really is a lifeline and I would like to get a response from the Minister of State.

Deputy Finian McGrath: I thank the Senator for his contribution, as well as for his earlier congratulations on my new portfolio. I give a commitment to push strongly on many of the issues on which I have been advocating. The letter the Senator read from the carer is emotional and heartbreaking. I hope that in some of the responses this morning, we can progress the issue.

I thank the Senator for raising this matter and welcome the opportunity to outline the current position. As he will already be aware, conscious of the reports of the Ombudsman on the legal status of both the mobility allowance and the motorised transport grant in the context of the Equal Status Acts, the Government decided to close both schemes. As a result, the motorised transport grant referred to by the Senator has not been in place for over three years. There are no plans for its restoration on the basis on which it was previously operated. That is the first important part. The next part is, however, more important. The Government is aware of the continuing needs of people with a disability who rely on individual payments that support choice and independence. In that regard, monthly payments of up to €208.50 have continued to be made by the Health Service Executive to 4,700 people who were in receipt of the mobility allowance. The Government has decided that the detailed preparatory work required for a new transport support scheme and associated statutory provisions should be progressed by the Department of Health. I confirm that work is at an advanced stage on policy proposals for the drafting of primary legislation for the new scheme and anticipate that it will be brought to Government shortly. In that regard, a health (transport support) Bill is included in the Government's legislative programme.

A Programme for a Partnership Government acknowledges the ongoing drafting of primary legislation for a new transport support scheme and that both the Minister for Health, Deputy Simon Harris, and I are committed to its progression as soon as possible. We are on

the issue of a transport support scheme. The proposals will seek to ensure that there is a firm statutory basis to the scheme's operation, that there is transparency and equity in the eligibility criteria attaching to the scheme, that resources are targeted at those with the greatest needs and that the scheme is capable of being costed and is affordable when introduced and on an ongoing basis. The Department of Health is seeking a solution which will best meet the aim of supporting people with severe disabilities who require additional income to contribute towards the costs of their mobility needs while keeping within the available budget and satisfying all legal and equality concerns. The challenge is to develop a new scheme on a statutory basis within a limited budget, targeted towards those with the greatest need.

The matter will be brought to the Government for consideration and decision as soon as possible. I look forward to what I am sure will be a valuable and constructive debate when the Bill is brought before the House in due course.

Senator John O'Mahony: I thank the Minister of State for the latter part of the reply in which he set out the position on the promised legislation. I know the history of this issue. I note the point the Minister of State made to the effect that the scheme will be targeted at those in greatest need. In reality, if it is not restored quickly, the costs to the State in respect of the person about whom I am talking - there are many others - will end up being a great deal more. The letter I read was from someone who has won a national award as carer of the year. The person is a saint on this earth. We can talk about equality all we like, but if the scheme that is implemented fails to meet her needs, it will cost the State multiples of what it would otherwise have to pay. Without divulging anything about the person, some people who were in similar circumstances sued in respect of similar hospital treatment, but the family to which I refer refused to do so on condition that they would be supported to care for their father and husband at home. It is vital that this case be pursued to a positive conclusion at the earliest opportunity.

Deputy Finian McGrath: I thank the Senator. Of course, I share his concerns about the particular individual. It is an emotional and heartbreaking letter and there are many in the same position. I can give a commitment on two things. The first is more support for carers in society because I acknowledge the fantastic unpaid work they do. The Senator mentioned that the particular woman could have taken a legal case but did not. There are a lot of good, civic-minded people in broader society who act like that and need our support. I accept the Senator's argument. Second, I will be saying to the Minister, Deputy Simon Harris, that the legislation to help the 4,700 individuals in question who make a massive contribution by looking after the disabled and sick people must address their needs. It will reduce the cost to the State in the long term, which is a reality I accept. I will bring these key messages back to the Minister.

It is important that carers in Irish society not only be acknowledged and commended for their work but also supported. The Senator has mentioned that the woman in question won a carer of the year award. There are many like her and there are times when society and the State do not provide them with enough support. My job in the next two or three years is to do my best to increase the support they get, increase investment in services, implement the carer's strategy as set out in the programme for Government and, in this particular case, do something about transport support schemes for people with disabilities.

Hospital Services

Senator Paudie Coffey: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Marcella Corcoran Ken-

nedy. The Minister for Health, Deputy Simon Harris, is only too well aware of the significant issue I wish to raise.

Access to cardiac intervention is a critical need where a citizen has a heart attack. Unfortunately, in the Ireland of 2016, we do not have equality of access to health care in the event of an emergency. That is particularly the case in the south east. The essential target response time to achieve the best cardiac intervention outcomes in the event of a heart attack is 60 to 90 minutes. The south-east region, however, has only one catheter lab which operates at University Hospital Waterford between the hours of 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. five days a week. The south east is, therefore, the only region in the country which does not have access to 24/7 interventional cardiac care within the critical period to which I referred. No intervention is available after hours, which means that lives are being put at risk. This issue has been highlighted consistently by me and others in recent years. It is important that we examine the context and background to this issue. In 2012, Professor John Higgins was appointed by the Government to take an objective, independent view and make recommendations to it on the reform of the hospital systems in the south and the country as a whole. His findings are otherwise known as the Higgins report.

In 2013 there was reform of the acute hospital network and the establishment of hospital groups. It resulted in the break-up of the old South Eastern Hospital Group that transformed what was then the Waterford Regional Hospital into the University Hospital Waterford. At the time clear commitments were given to the public, politicians and clinicians by the former Minister for Health, Senator James Reilly, and the former Secretary General for the Department of Health, Dr. Ambrose McLoughlin. The commitments included an enhancement of interventional cardiology at University Hospital Waterford. The records are available for anybody to see in the Department of Health and I urge the Minister of State to make herself aware of them. Three years later, the hospital boards have still not been appointed and commitments have not been met. This is a serious breach of trust in the reform programme in terms of the public, politicians and health professionals.

In terms of the recent Herity report, three areas require specific focus and attention. First, the base population and throughput data used in the report are fundamentally flawed because it took into account the current patient throughput of a part-time service. It also did not take into account the potential patient referrals in a region of 500,000 people if a 24 hours, seven days a week service was available.

Second, Dr. Herity has stated it is possible to travel from Waterford to University Hospital Cork within a 90 minutes' timeframe. That is incorrect in terms of many of the outlying areas of Waterford, including south Wexford, south Tipperary, east Waterford and south Kilkenny. His timeframe does not take into account the transfer times for patients from outlying areas who are in urgent need of intervention, travelling to Waterford in the first instance. Dr. Herity has acknowledged in his report that there is no stated alternative to get patients outside the 90 minute zone to cardiac care. The only way to do so - logical people would agree with me - is through the provision of an air ambulance service, a measure that is not possible in the current climate. Therefore, lives in the south east are at risk in the event of an emergency.

Third, I am seriously concerned about the fact that the Department of Health gave a note to Dr. Herity prior to him compiling his report. That gives the impression, whether it is right or wrong, that Dr. Herity was guided by the Department officials and, thus, his report was pre-determined. The situation raises questions about the independence of his report and is a matter that needs further analysis and examination. The basic flaws in his report undermine its find-

ings and recommendations. Alternative findings have been proposed to the Minister which we ask him to consider. It is essential that the three aspects of the report that I have identified be reviewed before decisions are made about the future of the cardiology services in the south-east region.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy):

I thank the Senator for raising this important matter that I know has been close to his heart for a long time. I am taking it on behalf of my colleague, the Minister for Health, who is unable to be here owing to a pre-arranged meeting with the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health. He has asked me to convey his sincere apologies.

As the Senator will know, the Minister received the report on the independent clinical review of the need for provision of a second cath lab at University Hospital Waterford on foot of the programme for Government commitment. The report was completed by Dr. Niall Herity, a consultant cardiologist and clinical director of cardiology at Belfast Health and Social Care Trust. He is a well known and highly respected cardiologist in Belfast. It is a comprehensive report that reflects the fact that Dr. Herity consulted widely and met all of the key stakeholders, including the management and staff of both University Hospital Waterford and Cork University Hospital.

Dr. Herity's calculation of the catchment population for the University Hospital Waterford's cath lab has been challenged since publication of the review. In his report Dr. Herity quite rightly points out that it would be a mistake to assume that the catchment area of University Hospital Waterford is represented by every resident in Waterford and its surrounding counties. Dr. Herity, therefore, determined the effective catchment population by looking at regional patient flow data and combining this with 2016 census data for the population of Waterford and surrounding counties.

Dr. Herity has provided robust evidence that a second cardiac cath lab at University Hospital Waterford is not justified. However, he recommends increasing the number of weekly sessions currently provided, with the requisite additional staffing for the increase in sessions, in order to address waiting times and provide improved access. He also recommends that new specialist equipment be provided to improve contingency for radiological equipment failure during a procedure. The Minister is happy to provide the additional resources necessary to implement these recommendations and, as such, significantly improve services for patients at University Hospital Waterford. This investment will be reflected in the HSE's national service plan for 2017. During this period of investment and enhancement of services, the situation will be closely monitored. A further independent clinical review will be carried out in early 2017 to assess the impact that these improvements have had on the volume of patients attending the cath lab in University Hospital Waterford.

Dr. Herity has recommended that University Hospital Waterford's cath lab operate as an elective lab that provides all specialised cardiac services except interventional treatment for patients who are having heart attacks. Dr. Herity has also recommended that the current nine-to-five provision of these services cease to allow the hospital to focus on the much larger volume of planned cath lab work.

Senators will understand the Minister must be certain that any change to how a service is delivered will result in improved services for the patients using the service. Therefore, he has asked the Department to address the implications of this recommendation by undertaking a

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national review of all primary percutaneous coronary intervention, PCI, services with the aim of ensuring as many patients as possible have access, on a 24/7 basis, to safe and sustainable emergency interventions following a heart attack. It is expected that this review will be completed by the end of July 2017.

The Minister intends to visit University Hospital Waterford in the coming weeks. He will take the opportunity to speak with staff and management on a broad range of issues.

Senator Paudie Coffey: I acknowledge the recommendation to enhance services at the existing cath lab. The recommendation should be implemented without delay.

I take issue with the fact that Dr. Herity has claimed he engaged with important stakeholders in the south east. He did not visit Wexford General Hospital, St. Luke's General Hospital in Kilkenny or South Tipperary General Hospital, even though they are all hospitals in the region and catchment area of University Hospital Waterford. If he had done so, he would have heard the views of the consulted cardiologists in all of these hospitals and the GPs in the region who are critical stakeholders.

I repeat my three issues of concern. First, the base population and throughput data that Dr. Herity used in his report are fundamentally flawed. Second, he states it is possible to travel from Waterford to Cork in 90 minutes. That is the best estimate, but it does not allow for outlying areas. That is critical in the event of a heart attack and accessing interventional care. Third, I am deeply disturbed and suspicious about the fact that Department of Health officials gave a note to Dr. Herity prior to him completing his report. That scenario raises questions about the independence of his report.

I mean no disrespect to the Minister of State present or the Minister for Health, but I am concerned, given the context and history of this issue, the recommendations of Professor John Higgins who was appointed by the Government in 2012 and the commitments entered into at the highest levels in Government and also at the highest levels in the Department of Health. The 2013 commitments are on the record in the Department of Health and state:

The establishment of Hospital Groups will enhance cardiology cover in WRH. At present this is provided from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. The increased flexibility of staff across the group will help enable us achieve our goal of providing cardiology cover at Waterford Regional Hospital 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

What has changed since? I deeply suspect that it is not the Minister for Health who is at issue. I believe the Department of Health officials have an agenda. They are against the people who live in the south-east region and University Hospital Waterford owing to being interested in providing efficiency in health services. That efficiency excludes people who have an equal right to access care when they have a heart attack in the region. People are being deprived of that right. As a Government Senator and a former Minister of State, I am deeply disturbed by what has happened with the hospital groups, the non-committal to the commitments given and also the non-establishment of hospital boards in three years.

The Dublin press and media have painted this as a local parish pump issue, but that is not the case. This is a regional issue that potentially affects approximately 500,000 people and many of those have families who cannot access the service in an appropriate timescale. This is a matter of life and death and I do not say that lightly. I appeal to the Minister of State to take an alternative view and listen to the consultants who have made the alternative case. We often

hear that doctors differ. This is one doctor who has given an opinion; there are many others giving a different opinion. If the Minister does not believe the people of Waterford, he should travel to Cork and listen to Professor John Higgins whom the Government appointed in 2013 and who will state the case.

Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy: The Senator can rest assured that I will bring his points to the Minister and also raise the question of the hospital board appointments which many of us are anxious to see established. The Senator asked questions that I cannot answer, but I will certainly ensure a response is issued directly to him after I leave the Seanad this morning. He raises some very valid points which require elaboration which I aim to get for him.

Sitting suspended at 11.20 a.m. and resumed at 11.30 a.m.

Order of Business

Senator Jerry Buttimer: The Order of Business is No. 1, motion of referral to the Joint Committee on Justice and Equality of European regulation on matrimonial matters, matters of parental responsibility and international child abduction, to be taken without debate at the conclusion of the Order of Business; No. 2, motion of referral to the Joint Committee on Justice and Equality re appointment of members to the new Legal Services Regulatory Authority, to be taken without debate at the conclusion of No. 1; No. 3, motion re change of names of select committees, to be taken without debate at the conclusion of No. 2; and No. 4, statement by the Taoiseach, to be taken at 2 p.m. and conclude not later than 4 p.m., with the time allocated to group spokespersons not to exceed eight minutes each and to all other Senators not to exceed six minutes each and the Taoiseach to be given five minutes in which to reply to the debate. Senators may share time.

Senator David Norris: Does that mean that we are having no discussion whatever this morning before the Taoiseach comes into the House?

An Cathaoirleach: That is correct.

Senator David Norris: I see.

An Cathaoirleach: That is a matter for the House to decide.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: On the Order of Business, yes.

Senator Catherine Ardagh: On the issue of support for victims of crime and their families, a man whose son had been murdered in Spain in a case of mistaken identity came to my office recently. He was in great shock. He had had no interaction with the Irish authorities on any investigation into his son's murder. He did not know where to turn. Will the Leader ask the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality if her Department plans to do anything to set up a proper office to liaise with victims of crime and their families? Many charitable organisations have stepped into this breach to support victims of crime and their families.

In view of the upcoming and unprecedented work stoppages by An Garda Síochána in November, I have massive sympathy for gardaí because they are on the front line. Their job is very difficult. Every day they run the risk that they will not go home. The Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality needs to engage more with the Garda Representative Association to try to avoid this desperate measure which will have a serious effect on the country.

Senator Michael McDowell: Will the Leader ask the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality to come to the House to explain the appointment or non-appointment of new judges? When Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil made the confidence and supply agreement which was published, it was provided that all agreements with Independent Deputies and other political parties would be published in full. We have read in the newspapers in the past couple of days, however, that the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Shane Ross, believes he has an agreement with the Government that no new judges will be appointed until a Bill which has not yet even received pre-legislative scrutiny and the terms of which will be highly controversial, if published in the form adumbrated, and raise serious constitutional issues is passed. That Bill must be passed before further judges can be appointed by reason of an agreement which one Minister seems to have extorted from the rest of the Cabinet. That is constitutionally wrong. The Constitution provides that it is the Executive's function to advise the President to appoint judges. This is not an academic issue. It is an issue of significant importance because a few days ago the President of the High Court suspended reforms he had brought forward for want of judicial resources to implement them. This means that the ordinary business of the courts is being affected by this blackmail deal that seems to have been made privately with the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport to the effect that no new judges can be appointed until the Houses of the Oireachtas consider a new Bill. It ignores completely the fact that this is a minority Government which does not have the capacity to push through its Bill. Deputy Jim O'Callaghan has his own proposals on the matter in the form of a Bill which he has published. It is profoundly wrong that one member of Government should hijack the appointment of judges in this way.

Senator David Norris: Hear, hear.

Senator Michael McDowell: I want the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality to come to the House to explain to us how it is that serious damage has been done to the constitutional process by reason of an agreement which is unpublished and secret and which should not be in place, given the deal on confidence and supply that was entered into between the Government and the Fianna Fáil Party. There should not be a secret deal. It should be published. As legislators, we are entitled to know if it is the case that judges may not be appointed at the whim of one Minister in government. On that basis, I am asking that the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality come to the House as a matter of urgency to explain what deal there is and who entered into it-----

Senator Gerald Nash: Today.

Senator Michael McDowell: -----and to indicate clearly that the Constitution overrides deals of this kind and that the Government retains its right to appoint judges and will appoint judges when it is necessary to do so.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: I want to raise an issue that may be futile to some, but it is important to us in County Mayo. It is important to the elderly and those with disabilities. We will be coming to Dublin on Saturday to take away the Sam Maguire Cup, we hope, and-----

Senator David Norris: What about the curse?

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: That only applies in September. Does the Senator not know that Saturday next is 1 October? There are many who want to travel by train and extra trains are being put on from Mayo to Dublin to bring supporters up for the match. However, the elderly and those with disabilities will not be allowed to use their passes on those trains. They

are the same trains and tracks that are publicly funded, yet such supporters are being excluded. It is an important issue that needs to be addressed by the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport in order that it will not happen again to the supporters of other counties because this discrimination cannot be allowed to happen.

I note the launch this morning of the rural action plan by the Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. There is a focus on what can be done to attract more employment to rural areas and encourage people to remain living in them, yet at the same time we learn that an area near Ballina has been without a broadband service since Monday last. On an ongoing basis, we are left without mobile phone coverage and broadband coverage. I have been contacted recently by a business in Roscommon that cannot open, even though it has the potential to create quite a number of jobs because the proprietor cannot get the required connectivity. At the briefing this morning we were told that the broadband services were within the remit of the national broadband plan. The bottom line is there needs to be more co-ordination between the respective Departments of the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Denis Naughten, and the Minister Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, Deputy Heather Humphreys, as one is dependent on the other. It is ridiculous that whole areas of County Mayo and the west continue to be blue spots, that is, areas without broadband coverage. There is no point in having plans to bring employment and investment to areas when we do not have these basic facilities.

Senator Grace O’Sullivan: I delivered the keynote speech yesterday at a diversity conference in Waterford where a young lady, Ms Nowar Dlikan, a Syrian refugee, gave an account of her story and the atrocities she and all citizens were experiencing in Syria. I have heard more disturbing news this morning from the Syrian city of Aleppo where Syrian Government forces, with the help of their Russian allies, have endangered what remains of the existing peace process with their use of bunker-busting bombs against civilians and hospitals. We are seeing horrific imagery coming out of Aleppo and it is really concerning. I would like to hear from the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade what position the Government will take at EU and UN levels to push for an end to the terrible suffering of the people of Aleppo. I would also like to ask the position of the Government on the EU refugee allocation programme in the light of the assertion by the Slovakian Prime Minister, Dr. Robert Fico, that the programme is now dead in the water.

Senator Kevin Humphreys: I very much support the efforts of the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, Deputy Simon Coveney, to speed up the supply and the announcement of the rapid-build housing. The Minister is talking about supplying 1,600 such units.

It was reported in *The Sunday Times* at the weekend that the Minister for Finance, Deputy Michael Noonan, was to shut the door on tax reliefs for Airbnb. Airbnb-type businesses are having an enormous effect on the supply of housing, especially in urban areas. It is estimated that we have lost between 1,500 and 2,000 units that were in the ordinary rental market to Airbnb-type accommodation. I suggest to the Leader of the House that he bring it to the attention of both Ministers that to shut the door on the tax relief for rental of rooms, while important for the student market, will not have the effect that we want in shutting the door on the transfer of units that are let long term. Two or three months ago five apartments in my area on the South Circular Road that were rented to ordinary people on rent allowance working in the Civil Service and other areas were transferred to Airbnb. These are five units people had to leave. During the rounds of discussions with various lobby groups on what changes they wanted to see

included in the budget, one person pointed out to me that five apartments in the Smithfield area that had been let long term by tenants working in the city had been transferred to short-term lets. Both Ministers need to look at what is happening throughout the world in that regard. In Berlin regulations are being brought forward to control the number of units being transferred to Airbnb accommodation. Only 50% of a flat in Berlin can be part of a short-term lease. Dublin, Cork, Galway and Limerick are not alone in dealing with this problem. It is affecting Berlin, London and Seattle, to name but a few cities which are bringing forward regulations and legislation to control it. We are in a period of constrained supply. While I welcome the Minister's proposal to build 1,500 rapid-build units, if we lose 1,500 at the other end, it will not serve any purpose. I urge the Minister for Finance, Deputy Michael Noonan, to look at this. He stated he would announce in the budget efforts to shut the door on tax relief on short-term lets, given the impact they were having on the provision of student accommodation. We also need to look at efforts to shut the door to ensure we will not see a transfer to short-term leases of units being let in the market because that will make the housing problem far worse.

Senator Paudie Coffey: The budget negotiations are under way and there is engagement with the various parties and stakeholders. As policymakers and politicians, we must recognise that in recent years there have been considerable reductions in the pay, salaries and conditions of many. Having said all that, today we see many of the public sector unions lining up and coming forward with their pay claims and pay restoration claims. It is important to state that while it is popular for politicians to support all of these increases, at the same time we, as politicians, are looking for enhanced resources for public service provision. We, therefore, need to be careful. It is a fact that 70% to 80% of public expenditure is on pay and pensions, which leaves just over 20% for public services. It is my belief - this is where we need the debate - that in the budget we should prioritise the provision and restoration of services for three vulnerable sectors, namely, the disabled, the elderly and the sick who require access to health services. We must also assist those in middle Ireland, the working young parents who are paying for child care and mortgages. They have carried the can for several years and need to be rewarded in some way in the budget. Will the Leader have a debate on the sustainability of public services? While recognising its contribution and its employees, we cannot have it every way. We need to have a considered and genuine debate on this issue.

Senator Terry Leyden: It is of great concern that gardaí are considering taking industrial action on 4, 11, 18 and 25 November. The Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Frances Fitzgerald, should come to the House next week to discuss the issues involved. Gardaí have been extremely patient and involved in negotiations for months. The issue was raised in the Dáil in June by Deputy Micheál Martin, leader of Fianna Fáil. We met the Garda representative organisations last December and they have genuine grievances in that regard. Both the Association of Garda Sergeants and Inspectors, AGSI, and the Garda Representative Association, GRA, are reasonable and constructive representatives of the force. The executives of these organisations have to respond to their members who feel very much under attack from public service restrictions and the fact that new Garda recruits are on a very low salary. In fact, it is now impossible for a young garda to live in Dublin as rent assistance has been withdrawn. The issue should be resolved in a practical manner. I am sure the former justice Minister, Senator Michael McDowell, would make a major contribution to a debate with the Minister for Justice and Equality. All of the issues involved could be discussed here in a practical way. When he was Minister, Senator Michael McDowell brought forward major reforms and improvements. He was an effective Minister in introducing joint policing committees which have played an important role in local areas. No other public servant has to go to work with a stab vest on.

We have to bear in mind the danger in which gardaí put themselves every day on the country's streets. It is a dangerous business, particularly given the growth of the Kinahan and other gangs. We cannot afford for gardaí to take the industrial action they are proposing, but they are being forced into taking it to get a result. Will the Leader invite the Minister for Justice and Equality to come to the House next week to outline the situation as she sees it? We can then put questions to her from the point of view of the people we represent, namely, gardaí at GRA and AGSI levels. I declare an interest as I am a nominee of both organisations on the Labour Panel. However, I make no apologies for doing so. Senator Michael McDowell will recall that we represented our views to him on many occasions when he was Minister.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I support my colleague, Senator Michael McDowell. We cannot have the courts held up. People are waiting years to bring cases before the courts. Now we are told we will have to wait for legislation which may take one year to get through this House. If there is some agreement in place, it should be published. In the meantime, we need an interim agreement which would allow for the appointment of judges.

I support my colleague, Senator Terry Leyden, on his comments on gardaí. We cannot have them on strike.

This year we started off in a spirit of co-operation and working together in this House. At least that is what I thought until I read the *Irish Independent* this morning. It contained a report that Fine Gael Senators had met the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, Deputy Simon Coveney, last night in secret to discuss the remuneration terms and conditions which would apply to city and county councillors. The Seanad had a committee in place to discuss this matter. It had only one meeting and has not met since. I understand an announcement is to be made at a forthcoming Local Authorities Members Association, LAMA, conference. What does that say about the level of co-operation and Members working together to do the job we are here to do? It is bloody despicable if a meeting was held last night. At the very least, this House deserves an explanation from the Leader if it did happen. I would be happier to hear it did not happen.

Senator Kevin Humphreys: The Senator knows that is about the Fine Gael leadership.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: Of course, it is about the leadership of Fine Gael. When the two boys are finished playing it out, I hope the Tánaiste, Deputy Frances Fitzgerald, will enjoy her new role as Taoiseach.

(Interruptions).

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Senator Gerard P. Craughwell is welcome back to Fine Gael.

An Cathaoirleach: May I have order in the Chamber?

Senator James Reilly: I raise a serious issue which has been escalating for several months at the Oberstown facility for young offenders. It is an excellent new-build which cost more than €50 million and which is very much focused on the rehabilitation and re-education of young offenders to give them a second chance, to which all Members will agree they are fully entitled and which we would like them to have. There has been, however, an ever-increasing number of serious incidents at the facility, with staff injuries. Local residents have become extremely

concerned about these incidents. There are many old people in the vicinity living on their own, as well as many parents of young children. They are becoming increasingly concerned owing to several absconsions and a fire on the roof which caused considerable damage to the wonderful facility. There was an incident in which a staff member was locked in a room and held to ransom. Gardaí eventually had to go to the facility to release the staff member. The newspapers report that this day last week over €1 million worth of damage was caused to the facility. For several months it has been clear that whatever protocols are in place at the facility are not working. Staff feel threatened. I know many of them as I worked there as a general practitioner. Many of the staff have worked there for years but do not want to go back. Having been the Minister involved with the facility's development, I know that it was difficult to get staff to work there. Accordingly, it makes it all the more important that they be retained and feel protected at work.

The facility's board has apologised for certain failures in texting alerts, etc., when there have been break-outs and will seek to rectify them, as well as ordering a review of existing protocols. However, this needs to be done urgently as local people are concerned. I have written to the Minister responsible about the issue to seek a meeting with local residents to reassure them but all I have received so far is an acknowledgement. People in the area support the facility and have shown good will towards it, but they are deeply worried about the escalating incidents in the past two months. Given this and the money invested in the facility, will the Leader invite the Minister to attend the House to explain what has gone wrong at the facility and why there have been a significant number of incidents there? I believe the protocols in place do not allow staff to deal with young offenders. These are young men, aged 16 and 17 years, some of whom are aggressive and as large as many of us, if not larger. The staff need to be able to deal with these problems when they pass a certain point without having to resort to the Garda which has a significant amount of other work to do and can well do without being called to the facility continually. If the protocols were somewhat different, as they have been in the past, these situations would not get to the point they have.

An Cathaoirleach: The Senator's point has been well made.

Senator Paul Gavan: I want to raise the issue of apartheid. While we have a wide range of political views in this Chamber, I am confident that nobody here would defend an ideology of apartheid or racism. This summer, however, I visited an apartheid state, the state of Israel where I saw at first hand the people of Palestine under occupation and subjugation. Some 4.5 million Palestinians live under Israeli military rule on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, while Israeli citizens live in over 200 illegal settlements. The two populations are separate and unequal. Palestinians on the West Bank face more than 500 checkpoints, while Israeli settlers come and go as they please. Thousands of Palestinians have their houses routinely demolished each year as new Israeli settlements continue to expand. Israelis enjoy full citizenship and civilian courts, while Palestinians enjoy military courts, temporary citizenship and severe restrictions of their right to travel within their own country, even to see their own families. Up to 2,000 children have been murdered by Israeli forces since 2000.

12 o'clock

I could go on, but time is limited. I wish to highlight this evening's protest outside Tallaght Stadium before the Dundalk game, congratulate its organisers and call on anyone going to the game to join in the red card protest against the apartheid state of Israel. Will the Leader invite the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade to come to the House? Israel has announced that a

further 2,500 illegal houses will be built on Palestinian land this year; therefore, I would like to hear from the Minister what the Government is doing to oppose the Israeli plans.

Senator David Norris: Inspired by Senator Michael McDowell, I propose an amendment to the Order of Business that, instead of No. 4 being taken at 12:30 p.m., we have statements on the appointment of judges. I hope the Tánaiste would be present, but even if she was not, we could have statements at 12:30 p.m. at the conclusion of the Order of Business.

Regarding the situation in Syria, a matter raised by my Green Party colleague, Senator Grace O'Sullivan, the Russians are committing war crimes daily and have been doing so for some time, but the American position is weak because it supported the state of Israel when it was doing exactly the same on the Gaza Strip. That is a problem. It remains to me most extraordinary that international politicians at a senior level would seek to move forward abstract policy and the interests of their own countries at the expense of the misery of thousands upon thousands of people.

I support the Sinn Féin Senator's comments on the situation of Palestinians'. I was in a part that is rarely visited, the Jordan valley, the day after demolitions. They are referred to as houses, but they are not houses. They are pathetic, flimsy, corrugated iron structures or tents. They are the lowest of the low. They have nothing. What is appalling is that the land that is in contention is in the hands of the Christian churches which - I speak as a Christian - do absolutely nothing to safeguard the rights of Palestinians. I support the call for a debate on this highly contentious issue.

Senator Aidan Davitt: I have serious concerns about orthodontic services which are underfunded. A constituent of mine who is 16 years of age has been waiting for an operation on her teeth since she was 13. She is a young, maturing lady and her mother has serious concerns for her because this is affecting her self-confidence. It is a problem for the girl and her whole family. She has had four appointments and three operations cancelled. The service is inadequate. I call on the Minister for Health to address the House on this travesty which affects everyone who is awaiting an orthodontic appointment.

Senator Gerald Nash: I second Senator Michael McDowell's proposal to have the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality appear before the House to discuss the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Shane Ross's reported proposed interventions in what is an important matter.

An Cathaoirleach: I would prefer to get the record straight. An amendment to the Order of Business was proposed by Senator David Norris, not Senator Michael McDowell. If Senator Gerald Nash wishes to second the amendment, he may do so.

Senator Gerald Nash: I second the amendment. I also propose an amendment to the Order of Business that No. 11, Protection of Employment (Uncertain Hours) Bill 2016, be taken before No. 1.

Senator Kevin Humphreys: I second the amendment.

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Gerald Nash will have to get someone else to second the amendment, as Senator Kevin Humphreys has already spoken.

Senator Fintan Warfield: I second Senator Gerald Nash's proposed amendment.

Senator Gerald Nash: Go raibh maith agat.

Senator Fintan Warfield: This week I joined IMPACT library staff in the Lexicon library in Dún Laoghaire who were expressing their opposition to a council management decision to proceed with the policy of having unstaffed libraries. I accept that HR matters are ones for council management, but at a time when the public library service is being eroded, libraries are being closed and a policy of staffless libraries is being pursued and a national tender for library stock is being considered, we should start a national conversation about the value of library services. Their space is democratic, cultural, economic, education and social. Few other spaces can boast such a diversity of service focal points. What value do we place on this combination of classes, workshops, programming and supports for combating digital exclusion? For Sinn Féin, this represents accessibility and inclusivity, none of which would be possible in staffless and underfunded or closed libraries. In this light, I request the presence of the Minister for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, Deputy Heather Humphreys, or the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, Deputy Simon Coveney, to progress this conversation on the downgrading of library services.

Senator Gerald Nash: On a point of order, my understanding is that, when I proposed that the Bill be taken, I was obliged to reference the date on which it would be taken. Is that correct?

An Cathaoirleach: Not yet. We will come to that matter.

Senator Gerald Nash: That is fine.

An Cathaoirleach: We will do it at the end of the Order of Business.

Senator Tim Lombard: I refer to Norwegian Air International, NAI, and the long-running debacle that has been the attempt to get transatlantic flights into Cork Airport. It is very important for the second city that we have a transatlantic airport and direct flights from Cork to the United States. During the week NAI announced that it had booked slots from March onwards and was proposing to put in place a price structure as low as €100, which is very competitive. The main issue for us is licensing. I welcome the Taoiseach's statement during the week that he was putting pressure on the US authorities to have the issue sorted out. It is important that this open air licensing agreement be enforced. Owing to political issues in the United States, we will probably not have an agreement until after the election, but it is important that we keep the matter on the agenda as one of the key drivers for tourism, particularly in the southern region. It would provide us with great connectivity which I hope would help the tourism industry in the south to develop. I would like to think that, after the election, we will have an opportunity to discuss with the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade how we can work with him and the pressure this Chamber can apply to deliver these important transatlantic flights into Cork.

Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh: Ba mhaith liom i dtosach báire tagairt a dhéanamh don chlár a rinne "Prime Time" an oíche faoi dheireadh faoin phictiúrlann nua atá á thógáil i nGailimh. A few nights ago "Prime Time" highlighted the development of the arthouse cinema in Galway. It chronicled a host of serious issues with the way the project had progressed and which we should investigate. Although it is a local matter, it points to a broader issue within the Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs as to why there had not been proper oversight. We have been told that €6 million in State funding was invested in the arthouse cinema project and that a further €1 million will be needed and that there are questions about the fund-raising methods used to supplement State funding and so on, but it appears

from the report that at no point was there proper oversight of whether moneys were available, a proper business plan was in place, etc. A number of substantial capital projects have been earmarked for Galway in the context of it being awarded the designation of European Capital of Culture 2020. I am sure capital projects are being undertaken in other parts of the State. In this light, it is important that the Minister attend the House to discuss how her Department is overseeing such projects.

I also seek a debate on regional economic development with the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Ring. I would like to find out the Government's vision, particularly for the west. We are far behind in the development of infrastructure and there are serious issues with broadband, water and sewerage. In addition, there has been a haemorrhaging of citizens as a result of emigration. Schools have also closed. It is important, therefore, to see how the Minister of State's regional economic development brief will address these matters. How will it create jobs in the west and what is the Minister of State's vision in that regard?

Ba bhreá liom dá bhféadfaimid an díospóireacht sin a bheith againn go luath.

Senator Paul Coghlan: I think we are all agreed that there is not just a need for a judicial council but also that it is the right thing to put it in place, on which both the Executive and the Judiciary are agreed. I am delighted that the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality made a recent statement on the matter. It is included in the legislative programme and there will be a Bill in this session. We currently have a Judicial Appointments Advisory Board which submits names. However, we have to be somewhat cautious. While we can have statements - I am sure the Leader will allow them - I am not too sure we can have them today. Senators Michael McDowell and Victor Boyhan have tabled an item on the agenda that we discuss the matter of having a judicial council. I, therefore, ask the Leader to allow statements, but I cannot see how we can have them immediately. We should be slightly cautious by arranging for such statements to be made in early course but leaving it to the Leader's discretion to arrange for the Minister to attend the House, if possible.

Senator Brian Ó Domhnaill: I wish to add to the comments made on the Garda Representative Association's decision to instigate four days of strike action in November owing to the fact that their pay demands have not been met. This is a serious development, one that goes to the core of every community in the country which requires a Garda presence. As such, the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality must intervene.

Senator Gerald Nash: What about bus drivers?

Senator Brian Ó Domhnaill: It is absolutely different. No comparison can be made between emergency response teams, whether they are firefighters, ambulance personnel or gardaí, and other public sector workers and it is unfair to do so because they are the first line of protection, when required. I ask the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality to intervene. There is no trade union to represent gardaí, although they have their representative bodies. Low-paid firefighters were dealt with heretofore, but the demands of gardaí have not been met or dealt with. We cannot have a trade-off or a stand-off heading into November, before Christmas, when the dark nights of winter are approaching and elderly people are frightened in their homes owing to this situation. It is imperative that the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality deal with the issue. Will the Leader to facilitate a debate on it in the House with the Tánaiste next week or the week after, if possible?

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Senator Paul Gavan: A big change from last night.

Senator Brian Ó Domhnaill: The Senator was not listening.

An Cathaoirleach: Before calling the Leader to respond, I welcome a public representative, Councillor Crowe, to the Visitors Gallery. I wish him a successful stay. I thought he might be up for the match, but he is not a Mayo man.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I also welcome Councillor Crowe to the Visitors Gallery. I am sure he will be swamped afterwards by his electorate.

I thank Senators for their contributions on the Order of Business. A total of 18 Members spoke and raised matters of importance.

Senator Catherine Ardagh referred to victims of crime. There is a Victims of Crime Office and the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality has published the heads of the Criminal Justice (Victims of Crime) Bill which is included in the programme for Government. They were published in July 2015. In addition, we have seen a 21% rise in the budget to fund services for victims of crime. Senator Catherine Ardagh has raised an important matter and I look forward to having the Bill before the House.

Senators Michael McDowell, David Norris, Paul Coghlan and Gerard P. Craughwell raised the issue of judicial appointments. I cannot accept the amendment proposed by Senator David Norris for one practical reason - the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Frances Fitzgerald, is not available today as she is taking the Order of Business in the Lower House. Second, she will also be tied up during voting time in the Dáil this afternoon. However, the matter of judicial appointments is important. I agree fully with Senator Michael McDowell that it is one which should be the preserve of the Executive. Such appointments should be fully independent of any part of the Oireachtas. As Senator Paul Coghlan said, there is the Judicial Appointments Advisory Board. As Members of the Upper House, it is important that we allow the discussion at the Cabinet table to continue, but I am not afraid of having a debate on the issue because I share Senator Michael McDowell's view. I also agree with Senator David Norris' proposal that we have that discussion at the earliest opportunity. However, I share the view of both Senators that it would be premature to have that debate now because we do not have the full facts and there has been no Cabinet memorandum or decision taken yet. It is important, therefore, that we allow the Executive the power to appoint. According to the note on the Cabinet's discussion this week, it was agreed that the Government could reserve the right to appoint members to whatever positions came up. However, I agree fully that we cannot be at a standstill in the making of appointments to the Judiciary. The debate should take place, but I appeal to Senators' better nature to wait and agree not to have it today. I will arrange such a debate at the earliest opportunity, but it would be a little premature to have it today.

Senator David Norris: On a point of order, I remind the Leader that I specifically said the debate should take place even in the absence of the Minister, Deputy Frances Fitzgerald.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: To be fair, I am trying to be collaborative.

An Cathaoirleach: As the Leader has made his point, we will let the Order of Business unfold.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: In having the debate it is important to have the full facts and not

to have them at half-time.

Senator Michael McDowell: Will the Leader indicate the timeframe he is contemplating? I agree that it would be preferable for the Tánaiste to be here, but it is not essential. Will the Leader indicate whether we are talking about one week or one month?

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I am hoping it will take place in the next couple of weeks. I am not a member of the Cabinet, but it is my understanding there will be another discussion next week. I might be wrong, but let me see what happens after the Cabinet meeting next week. I will come back to Senators Michael McDowell and David Norris on the matter.

Senator Michael McDowell: I am agreeable to that proposal.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: It is also important that we do not use the debate for political purposes to badger people on the issue of judicial appointments. We should allow for a certain degree of independence.

Senator Grace O'Sullivan raised the important issue of the Syrian conflict. In that regard, she mentioned the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Charles Flanagan. At the United Nations in New York last week he reaffirmed Ireland's support to help to bring the Syrian conflict to an end. I share Senator David Norris' views on Russia's role and behaviour. The Senator will accept that in his fine address to the United Nations the Minister spoke about the catastrophic consequences of Russia's actions.

Senator David Norris: Absolutely.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: It behoves us to encourage all involved to engage in talks and become more proactive to bring about a resolution.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh said holders of the free travel pass were not entitled to free travel on the weekend of the All-Ireland football final. That is wrong and I appeal to Iarnród Éireann to change the policy. Given the cost of match and train tickets, we should be encouraging people to travel, especially those who need special assistance. They should not be deprived of an opportunity to attend the match. I agree fully with the Senator and will take up the matter with Iarnród Éireann on her behalf.

I will be happy to arrange for the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Ring, to attend the House for a debate on the rural action plan.

Senator Kevin Humphreys mentioned the importance of housing. The Minister, Deputy Simon Coveney, has brought his action plan before the House.

The Senator also referred to Airbnb, which is a double-edged sword. At one level, it gives people an opportunity to earn income, but it can also deprive students of an opportunity to stay in rooms which were available previously for rent during the academic year. In Cork some rooms are no longer available to students because they are being used for Airbnb. The Revenue Commissioners have been working on the tax incentive issue which the Minister for Finance has said will be dealt with in the budget. We have had a pre-budget discussion with him, but we will try to have him back again to discuss the issue, although it may not be possible to do so before the budget. The points made by the Senator about Airbnb should be considered in the context of the overall holistic approach to the issue of housing. It is important, however, to increase the stock of housing and availability of rooms.

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Senator Paudie Coffey referred to the budget talks with reference to the public sector unions, while Senators Terry Leyden and Brian Ó Domhnaill raised the issue in the context of An Garda Síochána. It is important that Members acknowledge and understand the frustration of members of the Garda who have been obliged to endure pay cuts and are on the front line every day and night. I commend them for the work they do and understand their frustration. However, I appeal to them and their leadership, in particular, to re-engage in talks. The statement made by the Commissioner last night was measured, one in which she appealed to them to engage in talks. The Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality has also done so. Many Members were delighted to hear last Friday that an agreement had been reached with the Garda Representative Association, GRA, on many of the outstanding pay issues. It is important to recognise that there must be continual talks. It is disappointing to learn of the GRA's rejection of the decision, but it is important to highlight the need for constraint by all on the issue of public sector pay as the Government does not have a pot of money available. Were we to accept the accumulated budgetary proposals made by Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin, we would be back to the bad old days of boom and spend.

Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh: That is nonsense.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: It is not and we cannot go back to them.

Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh: The Leader has not even seen the pre-budget proposals-----

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I have heard Sinn Féin's spokespeople every day on radio and television promising the sun, the moon and the stars.

Senator James Reilly: Absolutely.

Senator Paudie Coffey: All things for everything.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: It cannot be done.

Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh: They have all been costed by the Leader's colleagues in the Department of Finance.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: The Senator should talk to his colleagues-----

Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh: All of the figures are from the Department of Finance.

(Interruptions).

An Cathaoirleach: I ask the Leader-----

Senator Paudie Coffey: They made swingeing cuts in the North.

Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh: We will check the Government's budget when it is announced.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: The Senator should talk to his colleagues in Stormont.

Senator James Reilly: It is not affordable.

Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh: The Senator was a great man for figures when he was in the Department of Health.

Senator Paudie Coffey: Sinn Féin is making swingeing cuts and implementing austerity in the North of Ireland.

Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh: Nonsense.

An Cathaoirleach: The Leader, to continue, without interruption, please.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: All I ask of Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh is that he talk to his colleagues in Stormont who will tell him what government is about because in government one cannot be all things to all people.

Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh: They are very good in government, are they not?

Senator Jerry Buttimer: That is a matter of opinion.

Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh: Yes; they are managing in government very well.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: The important point is that all of us who are committed in public life recognise as public servants the importance of An Garda Síochána. Equally, however, the job of the Government is to govern. The current Administration is committed to protecting the economy and not going back to the old ways. When I hear Senator Brian Ó Domhnaill lecture us, I invite members of his party to cast their minds back to when it was in government and the way in which it wrecked the country. Let us call a spade a spade. Collectively, we must make people's lives better. If that means a reduction in the universal social charge, USC, an increase in public services or a modest pay increase, let us try to do it. However, let it not be a catchall for everybody. We cannot give everybody everything he or she wants and let us not try to do so because people do not believe us anymore.

Senator Paul Gavan: Sinn Féin is not promising tax cuts.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: It is promising everything.

Senator Paul Gavan: Not at all.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: The Senator knows that I am correct.

The other point is that, regardless of whether one is in opposition or a minority Government, if one considers what the Government has available to spend, the fiscal space - I hate using the term - is limited. The ratio is 2:1 in terms of tax cuts and public expenditure. If, as Senator Paudie Coffey sought, one wishes to fund education, disability or housing services for the elderly, one must make choices. While being in government requires the making of choices, in the case of the GRA, I hope it will return to talks because all Members of the House who serve as legislators respect members of An Garda Síochána and value tremendously the work they do. However, one must go into talks and negotiate.

Senator Brian Ó Domhnaill: It has to be invited

Senator Jerry Buttimer: It has been invited.

Senator Brian Ó Domhnaill: It must be invited by the Minister.

An Cathaoirleach: Order, le do thoil.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Senator Gerard P. Craughwell, joined by Senator Gerald Nash, raised the issue of judicial appointments. He also referred to a report in the *Irish Independent*. All I can tell him is that the Minister responsible for housing and local government and all parts in between, Deputy Simon Coveney, had a meeting with Fine Gael Senators yesterday, as other Ministers do. I cannot tell the Senator what decision he has made on anything to do with councillors' pay and remuneration. However, I will ask him to meet the group set up by Members. I, therefore, ask the Senator to take back the remarks he made and the phraseology he used because, as I yesterday, the language used by Members matters.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I totally agree.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Certainly as Leader, I never have acted other than in a co-operative, cross-party way on the issue raised by the Senator. The Minister will attend the conference of the Local Authorities Members Association, LAMA, in Bantry on Friday, as I am sure the Senator will. I am also sure he is canvassing and lobbying for his members, as are we all. The important point, as I have stated from day one, is that we should all try to achieve a result to improve the lot - their terms and conditions and, equally, their lives - of councillors, many of whom have been obliged to forfeit lucrative careers to serve in the public interest. The other objective towards which we should work is giving more power back to local government members because too much power has been given to the executive at local authority level. I hope the Senator will join me in working in a bipartisan way in that regard.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I would be delighted to do so.

Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh: It was Phil Hogan who did that.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Sinn Féin's local government proposal is a little like Aesop's tales. I am very fond of the Senator, but I sometimes wonder what world he is living in. Hilary Clinton used the phrase "living in one's own reality" about Donald Trump. I think the Senator should read Sinn Féin's proposals every week because they change from week to week.

Senator Paudie Coffey: It has no responsibility.

Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh: The Leader is really showing who is afraid of the real people.

Senator Paudie Coffey: All of the money and no responsibility.

An Cathaoirleach: The Leader is inclined to wander a little this morning.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: We did not do the leprechaun economics.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Sinn Féin has come up with voodoo economics.

An Cathaoirleach: Let us conclude the Order of Business.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I apologise.

Senator James Reilly referred to the Oberstown centre. I will be happy to have the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Deputy Katherine Zappone, come into the House to discuss that important issue.

Senator Robbie Gallagher raised the important issue of apartheid in the context of the state of Israel and Palestine-----

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: It was Senator Paul Gavan who raised the issue. Language is important.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: My apologies. The Senator is correct that language is important. Senator Paul Gavan is right; a debate is needed to hear from all sides.

Senator David Norris: A rose by any other name smells the same, according to the bard of Avon.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: The Senator is correct. It is also my opinion that the Palestinian people deserve to have their voice heard and recognised. While I might not receive approval in many quarters for saying that, I share Senator Paul Gavan's views in that regard. This is an issue Members must consider and I will seek to have the Minister come before the House to discuss it.

Senator David Norris referred to the situation in Syria and also referred to Palestine, an issue to which I have just referred.

Senator Aidan Davitt raised the issue of dental care. I will ask the Minister for Health, Deputy Simon Harris, to come to the House to discuss it.

Senator Fintan Warfield raised an important issue regarding libraries without staff that is now entering the public domain. There is a distinction to be made between libraries that are staffed by librarians and the service they provide and staffless libraries, but it is critically important that we recognise the importance of the library service to communities. I will be happy to have the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, Deputy Simon Coveney, come to the House to discuss the issue with Members.

Senator Tim Lombard referred to Norwegian Air. Many of us from Cork have raised this troubling issue which I believe has been referred to arbitration. However, from the perspective of Munster, Cork in particular, it is critical that this transatlantic link be established. I appeal to the US authorities to certify and give a licence to Norwegian Air.

Ní fhaca mé an clár mar gheall ar an bpictiúrlann i nGaillimh, ach tá an ceart ag an Senator Ó Clochartaigh go bhfuil obair forbartha le déanamh ag gach Roinn maidir leis an gcaoi ina úsáidtear airgead an taxpayer. Oversight of the spending of money on taxpayers' behalf is something in which Members should engage, as well as having the Minister come to the House to discuss the issue. I will also be happy to have the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Ring, come to the House.

I will accept Senator Gerald Nash's proposed amendment to the Order of Business. If Senator David Norris withdraws his proposed amendment, I will endeavour to have the Minister for Justice and Equality come to the House within the next couple of weeks.

An Cathaoirleach: How stands Senator David Norris' proposed amendment?

Senator David Norris: As a litigant in a case before the courts for five years, I feel strongly about it. However, I also remember, with the then Senator Shane Ross, dealing with the matter of political appointments, which is probably from where he is coming. In the light of the

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Leader's reasonable approach and the indication given by Senator Michael McDowell who was the instigator of the proposed amendment, it would be ridiculous for me to take a more extreme position. Consequently, I am happy to withdraw my proposed amendment.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank the Senator. I am sure that if the matter is not dealt with, either he or Senator Michael McDowell will raise it next week or the week after that.

Senator Gerald Nash has proposed an amendment to the Order of Business: "That No. 11 be taken before No. 1." The Leader has indicated that he is prepared to accept the amendment. Is it agreed to? Agreed.

Order of Business, as amended, agreed to.

Protection of Employment (Uncertain Hours) Bill 2016: First Stage

Senator Gerald Nash: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to provide greater protection for employees by more effectually regulating zero hours and related employment practices; and to provide for related matters

Senator Kevin Humphreys: I second the proposal.

Question put and agreed to.

An Cathaoirleach: When is it proposed to take Second Stage?

Senator Gerald Nash: I propose that it be taken in the Labour Party's next available Private Members' time slot. To the best of my recollection, that date is 9 November.

An Cathaoirleach: I suggest the Senator propose that it be taken next Tuesday. It can then be taken any time after that.

Senator Gerald Nash: I, therefore, propose that it be taken next Tuesday.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Second Stage ordered for Tuesday, 4 October 2016.

Sitting suspended at 12.30 p.m. and resumed at 2.05 p.m.

2 o'clock

Business of Seanad

An Cathaoirleach: Before we welcome the Taoiseach formally, we must dispose of some housekeeping matters. I apologise as they should have been dealt with this morning after the Order of Business, but we neglected to do so.

EU Regulation on Matrimonial Matters, Matters of Parental Responsibility and Inter-

national Child Abduction: Referral to Joint Committee

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I move:

That the proposal that Seanad Éireann approves the exercise by the State of the option or discretion under Protocol No. 21 on the position of the United Kingdom and Ireland in respect of the area of freedom, security and justice annexed to the Treaty on European Union and to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, to take part in the adoption and application of the following proposed measure:

Proposal for a Council Regulation on jurisdiction, the recognition and enforcement of decisions in matrimonial matters and the matters of parental responsibility, and on international child abduction (recast)

a copy of which was laid before Seanad Éireann on 27th July, 2016, be referred to the Joint Committee on Justice and Equality, in accordance with Standing Order 70A(3)(k), which, not later than 6th October, 2016, shall send a message to the Seanad in the manner prescribed in Standing Order 74, and Standing Order 76(2) shall accordingly apply.

Question put and agreed to.

Appointment of Members to Legal Services Regulatory Authority: Referral to Joint Committee

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I move:

That the proposal that Seanad Éireann, noting that the Government agreed on 27th September, 2016, to propose, for the approval of Seanad Éireann, the appointment of Eileen Barrington SC to be a member of the Legal Services Regulatory Authority, and pursuant to section 9 of the Legal Services Regulation Act 2015, approves the appointment, with effect from the establishment day to be appointed by the Minister for Justice and Equality in accordance with section 7 of that Act, by the Government of Eileen Barrington SC to be a member of the Legal Services Regulatory Authority, six of whom shall hold office for a period not exceeding four years from the date of his or her appointment as the Government shall determine and five of whom shall hold office for a period of three years from the date of their appointment in accordance with section 10(2) of that Act, be referred to the Joint Committee on Justice and Equality, in accordance with Standing Order 70A(3)(k), which, not later than 6th October, 2016, shall send a message to the Seanad in the manner prescribed in Standing Order 74, and Standing Order 76(2) shall accordingly apply.

Question put and agreed to.

Change of Names of Select Committees: Motion

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I move:

That, following Orders made by Government on 5th July, 2016, and 19th July, 2016, respectively, altering the names of Departments and titles of Ministers, the names of the Select

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Committees in column (1) of the Schedule below, which were established by Order of the Seanad of 21st July, 2016, are hereby amended as set out in column (2) of the Schedule and each such Committee shall perform the functions set out in Standing Order 70A in respect of the Government Department or Departments listed in column (3) opposite each Committee.

SCHEDULE

(1) Select Committee established on 21 July 2016	(2) New name of Select Committee	(3) Government Department
1 Communications, Climate Change and Natural Resource	Communications, Climate Action and Environment	Communications, Climate Action and Environment
2 Housing, Planning and Local Government	Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government	Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government
3 Regional Development, Rural Affairs, Arts and the Gaeltacht	Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs	Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural

Question put and agreed to.

Statement by the Taoiseach

An Cathaoirleach: It is an honour to have the Taoiseach present in the House. Without further ado, cuirim fáilte roimhe. I ask him to address the Chamber.

The Taoiseach: Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach as ucht an cuireadh a thabhairt dom an tseachtain seo. Cuirim fáilte roimh na sean-Seanadóirí agus na Seanadóirí nua atá anseo.

As Members are aware, this Government is unlike any other established in Ireland since the foundation of the State. It required a completely new approach based on consultation and building consensus towards a new vision for the people. That vision is that we want a fair society based on a strong economy. We want thriving communities in urban and rural Ireland. We want an Ireland that looks after its people from the time they are born until the time they leave. We want an Ireland where everybody is given the opportunity to succeed and where nobody is left behind. We want people to have the peace of mind that comes from feeling safe and secure in their lives and homes.

A Programme for a Partnership Government sets out a detailed set of actions and commitments to be implemented by the Government during its lifetime. The new political landscape has presented an opportunity to reform radically Irish politics and fundamentally change the relationship between the Government and the Oireachtas and, with it, the relationship between the Irish people and their Parliament. We have embraced a new and collaborative approach, not only with the partners of the Government but also with the partners of the Opposition. This includes reform of how the Dáil conducts its business, the budgetary process and Oireachtas committee structures and developing a communications process between Departments and Deputies. I will return to this later.

The programme for Government sets out an ambitious programme of work. It has one simple objective at its core, namely, to make people's lives better in every part of the country. A fair society must lean on a strong economy. That strong economy will work primarily to create a fair and compassionate society of which people can feel part and proud, a society for everyone.

The country and the people have come through an unprecedented economic crash. Every family in Ireland has been touched in some way or other during this crisis. In the past five years members of the previous Government and I have worked to end that crisis, exit the international bailout and help with the creation of new jobs. Ireland's continued economic success remains central to our work. While the sense of economic crisis may have passed, we still have a great deal of work ahead of us to ensure work and opportunity are present for all families across the country.

The Action Plan for Jobs has won recognition from the OECD as a coherent and effective way of confronting urgent priorities. Its features can equally be applied to other urgent priorities. It also facilitates a way of governing that involves a genuine partnership and maximises the chance of delivering upon objectives. One of the first priority actions of the Government has been to apply this process to tackle the housing crisis by publishing a new action plan on housing.

There are many challenges ahead, including in respect of housing and homelessness, education and health, and broadband and rural development. We are committed to tackling these challenges head on to build a society in which the recovery will be felt by every individual and family around the country. As part of the process, I have met individual Ministers to agree their priorities for the coming year, taking into account the actions and ambitions contained in the programme for Government.

The outcome of the UK referendum on membership of the European Union was not the result for which we had hoped. However, the Government has put a clear plan in place to deal with this and has a contingency framework that maps out the key issues that will be most important to Ireland in the coming months. These priority areas for the Government are Northern Ireland and the peace process, the common travel area, the economy and the European Union.

I am satisfied that, from all my engagements with international leaders, Ireland's priorities are well understood, in particular the importance of protecting the peace process and the European Union's contribution to peace in Ireland. The peace settlement in Northern Ireland is by now well established, but we are still far from a time when we can take it for granted. At the North-South Ministerial Council summit in Dublin Castle in July, the Irish Government and Northern Ireland Executive agreed to work together to ensure the peace process would be safeguarded, that Northern Ireland's interests would be protected and that the importance of North-South co-operation would be fully recognised in new arrangements that emerged from negotiations. The Government believes there is a need for the widest possible conversation on the implications of the referendum result for Ireland, North and South, and for North-South future relations. As I said in the Dáil during the week, I intend to convene an all-island dialogue on the implications of Brexit in the near future because I believe there are many issues of mutual interest and concern that need to be discussed.

I welcome Prime Minister May's assurance that Northern Ireland, with all the devolved administrations, will be centrally involved in developing the United Kingdom's position prior to entering into any negotiations with the European Union. Neither the Irish Government nor the

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British Government wishes to see a return to the borders of the past on the island of Ireland. We will do our utmost to avoid barriers to cross-Border traffic and economic activity. We are also conscious of the past symbolism of the Border and the wider negative psychological impact it had on the Border areas and, more generally, across both parts of the island. We value the common travel area. We will work to keep it in place to the greatest extent possible as part of future arrangements. There is absolutely no desire to limit the freedom of people on both sides of the Irish Sea to live, work and travel freely across these islands.

It remains to be seen precisely what impact Brexit might have on the UK economy but, because of our close economic ties, any negative impact on the UK economy could have adverse implications for us. Ireland's strong recovery has ensured the economy is open, attractive and competitive. I am confident that it is resilient and that appropriate fiscal policies are now in place to help us adjust to the economic effects and impacts of Brexit.

We do not expect the budget for 2017 to be significantly affected, but it will take account of likely impacts to the extent that we know of in the early stages. We are continuing to promote the attractiveness of Ireland as a location of choice for mobile international investment and talented people. We will, of course, seek to take any opportunity that arises for Ireland from Britain's decision to leave the European Union. The economic interests of our countries are most certainly best served by having the United Kingdom in a close trading relationship with the European Union.

We remain fully committed to our membership of the European Union and the eurozone. Engagement with EU partners and the EU institutions remains a high priority. The Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade and I remain actively engaged with our European counterparts, as are other Ministers. Diplomatic contacts are being intensified in European capitals. At an informal meeting of the 27 Heads of State on 16 September in Bratislava, I outlined Ireland's contribution to the vision for the future of the European Union. We will continue to contribute to discussions on the renewal of the Union and will be an integral part of a re-energised European Union subsequent to the conclusion of the discussions and negotiations on Brexit.

We will bring forward our proposals for the budget for 2017 on 11 October. While we, as a country, have many reasons to be positive about the future, we have to remember the lessons that have been learned in the past decade. The gains we have made have been hard-won and the Government is not going to put them at risk. Budget 2017, therefore, will be prudent, reflect our need to underpin Ireland's economic recovery and ready us for the future. This is particularly necessary, given that the international environment remains uncertain, not least in the context of the United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union and the continuing low levels of economic growth in Europe. The Government will, therefore, continue to take a responsible approach to the management of the public finances. The choices we make have to be forward-looking and sustainable and must be focused on those areas where need is greatest. We have made it clear that where we have headroom – the Minister for Finance has made clear that it is constrained and somewhat limited - two thirds will be directed towards public spending and one third towards tax measures. The budget for 2017 will prioritise new measures to help make people's lives better and deliver better services for them, in particular, for hard-pressed working families. The Government will also maintain its strong focus on the issues we have identified as being of greatest urgency, not least ensuring a functioning housing market and investment in the infrastructure Ireland needs for the future. We will also continue to work to ensure the economy is Brexit-ready and that Ireland continues to be an open and attractive place in which to do business. These are the pillars on which we build.

Another key priority for the Government is responding to the housing and homelessness challenge, the subject of so much discussion and coverage in recent years. It is universally acknowledged that, as a country, we are not producing enough new homes to meet our needs. Reflecting the urgency and priority attached to the issue, I appointed a senior Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, Deputy Simon Coveney. As I said, we committed in A Programme for a Partnership Government to the publication of a new action plan within 100 days and it has already been published. We published it in July within that timeframe. The detailed and comprehensive work carried out by the Oireachtas Committee on Housing and Homelessness within a tight timeframe fed into the development of that plan. There are five key pillars in the plan: addressing homelessness; accelerating social housing delivery; building more homes for the wider housing market; improving the rental sector; and making the best use of the housing we have.

Over 80 specific time-bound commitments are contained in the housing action plan. They include commitments to double the annual level of residential construction to 25,000 units; to roll out a €200 million local infrastructure housing activation fund; and to develop a comprehensive strategy for the house rental sector. The Government has set a target of 47,000 new social homes by 2021 supported by an investment of €5.35 billion. We are trebling the rapid build programme to 1,500 homes and have provided €70 million for the Housing Agency to buy vacant properties throughout the country. Implementation of the plan is progressing, overseen by the Cabinet committee on housing. We will publish quarterly progress reports in each of these separate areas.

Members will be aware that the establishment of a citizens' assembly was a commitment in the programme for Government. A resolution approving the establishment of the assembly was passed by both Houses of the Oireachtas in July. The following topics will be for consideration by the assembly and the assembly will make a report to the Houses of the Oireachtas on each item: first, the eighth amendment to the Constitution; second, how we best respond to the challenges and opportunities of an ageing population; third, fixed-term parliaments; fourth, the manner in which referendums are held; and fifth, how the State can become a leader in tackling climate change. The assembly will also be asked to consider such other matters as may be referred to it. The resolution sets a time limit of one year from the date of the first assembly meeting for completion of the assembly's work, but it does not set a time limit for individual items. However, it specifies that the eighth amendment to the Constitution will be the first item on which the assembly will report. The report on the eighth amendment, when completed, will be sent to the Houses of the Oireachtas. On receipt, the Houses will refer the report for consideration to a committee of both Houses which, in turn, will bring its conclusions to the Houses for debate.

On 27 July the Government approved the appointment of Ms Justice Mary Laffoy as chairperson of the Citizens' Assembly. Membership will consist of 100 persons: 99 citizens entitled to vote in a referendum, randomly selected so as to be broadly representative of Irish society by a polling company commissioned for that purpose, plus the chairperson. The recruitment process is nearing completion. As I indicated, the inaugural meeting of the Citizens' Assembly will take place on 15 October. The timing and nature of public consultation and the method by which interested parties will be selected to make presentations to the assembly will be a matter for the chairperson and assembly members. It will, of course, be open to interest groups and members of the public to make written submissions for consideration by the assembly. Plenary sessions of the Citizens' Assembly will be streamed live via the website. The focus of the

broadcast will be on those making presentations.

As I said, the new political landscape presents an opportunity to reform Irish politics and change the relationship between the Government and the Oireachtas. On 10 March 2016, the first sitting day of the Thirty-second Dáil, the House passed an all-party motion to task the sub-committee with identifying a package of reforms to strengthen Parliament for the people, something Members on all sides agreed was necessary. As an initial step, the sub-committee consulted Dáil Members and sought submissions for consideration. It received 28 submissions. The sub-committee has since met 18 times to consider a number of matters raised in the submissions. On 19 May the House adopted a package of reforms proposed by the sub-committee and in the following weeks amended existing and adopted new Standing Orders to give effect to the reforms agreed to.

The following are the main reforms proposed. It was proposed to give more power to Parliament to plan and make arrangements for its own business, with the establishment of a new Business Committee, comprising Government and Opposition Deputies who together plan the business of the House on a weekly, sessional and yearly basis. The legislative priorities of the House are now agreed to by all parties. The Business Committee has been operating successfully since June, with all decisions reached by consensus. The Members of Seanad Éireann have also implemented a system whereby the Leader convenes a meeting with all of the other Seanad group leaders every Wednesday to discuss the following week's business.

Another proposal concerned better scrutiny of the annual budgetary cycle by the new Oireachtas Committee on Budgetary Oversight, supported in its work by a new independent budget office which is being established and will crunch the numbers for the new committee. It was proposed to have an increased role for the Office of the Parliamentary Legal Adviser to allow the office to assist backbench Members in drafting legislation and give advice on all legislation being brought before the House.

It was proposed to change the rules for groups to allow more than one technical group to be formed. This enables Independents and Members in small parties to join forces to get a greater share of parliamentary set pieces, for example, Private Members' time. A rearrangement of the sitting day was proposed in order that sittings of the House, wherever possible, would not clash with committee meetings. People are aware of Members having to leave committee meetings to vote in divisions. This enables Members to give more time to both plenary sittings and committees and not to have to choose between attending one or the other.

Pre-legislative scrutiny will be extended to non-Government Bills which pass Second Stage in the Dáil, which will increase their possibility of being enacted. A new Irish language committee was established. Members now have the facility formally to record their abstention from a vote, which was not previously available, and to put on the record of the House an explanation for their abstention or the way they voted. Improvements were proposed to both the parliamentary questions process and the way in which the Government answered questions on its promised legislation on the Order of Business. A voting time on Thursday afternoons was introduced, which represents a more efficient use of the House's time.

This new way of doing business will be a catalyst for improved communication between Ministers and their Departments and Opposition spokespersons and their teams. A more cohesive Oireachtas will lead to better consensus on legislation. To help facilitate this approach, a parliamentary liaison unit has been established in my Department. The role of the unit is to

facilitate the enhanced relationship between the Government and the Oireachtas. The unit is working alongside the Chief Whip's office to support Ministers and their Departments in the management and implementation of the legislative programme.

Seanad reform is of great interest to the Members here and great concern to everybody. In order to progress the reform process, I established an independent working group on Seanad reform in December 2014. The principal focus of the working group was on possible reforms of the Seanad electoral system within the existing constitutional parameters. The working group also explored ways of reforming Seanad Éireann generally and the manner in which it carried out its business. The group examined these issues also within existing constitutional parameters.

The working group examined submissions and proposals for reform, which have already been made and looked at. They were as follows: the role of a reformed Seanad within the political process; the powers and functions of a reformed Seanad; and any such matter the working group saw as relevant. The working group sought submissions and suggestions from interested parties and took into consideration the 11 official reports since 1937 and the many submissions made during the Seanad referendum process in 2013. The group, chaired by Dr. Maurice Manning, met on seven occasions and published its report on 13 April 2015.

The working group identified the main problems with the existing situation as: an electoral system which was elitist and disfranchised a majority of citizens; a constitutional concept of vocational representation which had little substance in practice; and the absence of clear defining guidelines on the distinctive role of the Seanad in public life. The proposals of the working party meet these issues head on. The report, if implemented, will develop and strengthen the vocational nature of the Seanad. It will make possible the participation of all Irish citizens in Seanad general elections. It will establish a franchise for Irish emigrants who are Irish citizens and allow electoral participation of those normally resident in Northern Ireland. It will also maintain the link between national and local politics through an electoral college of elected representatives and will modernise the registration and electoral process in a way that is secure and using the most appropriate and up-to-date, modern technology.

The key recommendations made in the report are as follows. It recommends the establishment of an interim implementation body to oversee the implementation of the changes. It recommends that the majority of seats be elected by popular vote in a "one person one vote" system. This principle is recommended to be extended to include Irish citizens in Northern Ireland and those living overseas who hold a valid Irish passport. The report recommends provision for online registration of voters and the downloading of ballot papers. It also recommends a greater role for the Seanad in the scrutiny, amendment and initiation of legislation and that there be a review of the panel system. The working group also produced a draft Bill to implement the relevant recommendations contained in its report.

I welcomed the report when it was published and said there needed to be a public and political discussion and consultation on it. On 5 May and 8 July 2015 statements on the report were made in Seanad Éireann, with both the chairperson of the working group and former Senator Joe O'Toole, a member of the group, in attendance. I also met Opposition party leaders to discuss the report's contents in July 2015. Arising from this meeting, I gave a commitment to have a debate in Dáil Éireann on the working group's report at an appropriate time. Although this did not prove possible in the last Dáil, it is my intention that the debate should take place as soon as possible. The Dáil debate should be the first step in the reform process.

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The working group recommended that the interim implementation body be established. A Programme for a Partnership Government makes a commitment to move forward with the reforms proposed by the working group. The implementation group should be established in the Oireachtas and its membership should consist of Members of both Houses of the Oireachtas, from all parties and groups, with access to independent experts. Yesterday I wrote to the leaders of the parties suggesting we move ahead with the establishment of the implementation group and, assuming they agree, intend to make the necessary arrangements as soon as possible in order that the reform agenda can be advanced.

The Seanad Bill 2016, sponsored by Senators Michael McDowell, Frances Black, Victor Boyhan, Gerard P. Craughwell, John Dolan, Joan Freeman, Alice-Mary Higgins, Colette Kelleher, Rónán Mullen, Grace O'Sullivan, Pádraig Ó Céidigh and Lynn Ruane, aims to implement reforms proposed in the report of the working group. The Bill commenced Second Stage in the Seanad on 13 July last and my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Damien English, spoke on that occasion to give a broad outline of the Government's position on the various provisions contained therein. Making the proposals put forward by the working group happen has my full support and I have advised the new Leader of the Seanad, Senator Jerry Buttimer, that it should be a priority of his and the Seanad.

I thank the Leader for inviting me to address the Seanad. Senators have heard me outline the Government's priorities for the new session and the challenges we face as a country. I have also contacted the Opposition party leaders to seek cross-party agreement on an implementation group in order to advance the Seanad reform process. The Dáil and the Seanad need to continue to work closely with each other and complement each other's work in order to maintain Ireland's recovery and successfully overcome any challenge we may face.

I wish Senators well in their endeavours and look forward to working with all of them in the future.

Business of Seanad

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call the next speaker, I am sure Members of the House will wish to join me in welcoming the Right Honourable Mr. Alex Salmond, MP. On my own behalf and that of my colleagues in the Seanad, I extend a very warm welcome to him. I hope he and his good wife, Moira, will enjoy their stay in the country and relish the sunshine. I am sure he will be around for the big match on Saturday night.

Statement by the Taoiseach (Resumed)

Senator Catherine Ardagh: Ba mhaith liom mo chuid ama a roinnt leis an Seanadóir Murnane-O'Connor.

An Cathaoirleach: Beidh ceithre nóiméad ag an mbeirt agaibh.

Senator Catherine Ardagh: Cuirim fáilte mhór roimh an Taoiseach agus, ar son Sheanadóirí Fhianna Fáil, gabhaim mo bhuíochas leis as ucht teacht anseo inniu chun labhairt linn.

I wish to address the Taoiseach on two issues, namely, Seanad reform and Brexit.

After over a dozen reports on Seanad reform, it is now incumbent on the Taoiseach and the Government to meaningfully engage in the Seanad reform process. Fianna Fáil supports the Seanad 2016 Bill which seeks to implement the Manning report on Seanad reform. The Bill is in keeping with our explicit commitments in our manifesto, *An Ireland for All*. Fianna Fáil was the only parliamentary party to oppose the abolition of the Seanad in 2013 and set out detailed reform proposals at the time. While affirming the importance and value of the Upper House, Fianna Fáil recognises the need for expansive reform in the Seanad to revive its popular legitimacy and to restore its important role in the legislative process. This stance has been supported by the recent report of the working group on Seanad reform, which echoes many of the recommendations made by Fianna Fáil in 2014.

One of the key points we made at the time which were raised in the Manning report and which our leader was able to implement was appointing three Independent Senators. We have been able to appreciate the value of the contributions these Senators have made to this Seanad. The Bill draws on the Manning report and reflects much of the previous 2014 Fianna Fáil Bill in the area. After 12 reports on Seanad reform, we now need real action, not more idle talk. The Bill provides a clear route forward to reform the Upper House. It is vital that, following his failed campaign to abolish the Seanad, the Taoiseach engage in the process in a meaningful fashion and ensure the legislation passes through the Dáil on this occasion.

The outcome of the referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union is hugely disappointing. While we respect the views of the voters, we regard the outcome as a bad result for Ireland, the United Kingdom and the European Union. What is now needed is a calm, stable and measured approach. Our focus should be on showing that Ireland plans to remain a committed member of the European Union, making Brexit an absolute priority in the public business, pushing for the unique position of Ireland to be recognised in negotiations and working to reform the European Union in order that it lives up to the principles on which it was founded.

The long-term outcome of the referendum for Ireland will most likely depend on the relationship that Britain establishes with the European Union and the terms of such a relationship. We must ensure Ireland's interests are to the fore in any set of negotiations. Britain is our nearest neighbour and largest trading partner and the implications for trade, travel, tourism and other facets of life will be affected. The uncertainty about borders is a huge concern for the whole island, with massive effects on trade and the agribusiness. It is crucial that the Border be central to the negotiations on the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union. We need political, economic and legal certainty as soon as possible.

What does the Taoiseach hope to achieve with the all-Ireland forum and how does he plan to make it as inclusive as possible, given the Democratic Unionist Party's reluctance to participate? Given that Brexit, when it eventually happens, could take many forms, how is the Taoiseach's Department planning for all of the possible scenarios? What is the Taoiseach doing to convey to other member states that Ireland's position on Brexit is unique and distinct and that there is a need for sensitivity, particularly in respect of Northern Ireland?

We have already seen the impact on the mushroom industry as a consequence of the referendum result - 90% of all mushrooms grown in Ireland are exported to the United Kingdom. What efforts are being made to protect industries that are particularly vulnerable as a result of the Brexit vote? What are our embassies doing to promote Ireland as a destination for business and to lessen our dependence on the EU market?

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In respect of the budget, what are the Taoiseach's plans to ensure it will be weighted in favour of those who have suffered most in recent years, particularly lone parents, the elderly and households with children? Will he commit to restoring the Christmas bonus in the upcoming budget? Why are there no Senators on the Committee on Budgetary Oversight?

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I welcome the Taoiseach. I am my party's spokesperson on housing and there are one or two issues about which I am very concerned. We have had four months of meetings with the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, Deputy Simon Coveney. Arising from these meetings, we have been told there is an 84-point action plan. One of the only two results to emerge from the meetings is that the pre-planning and planning process will be hastened for local authorities that are building over 100 houses. However, that is miles down the road and we are in a crisis. The other result relates to the new housing assistance payment, HAP, scheme, which is not working. It is a rental scheme that all local authorities are introducing. People are given more rent to help with their rent allowance, but many landlords are increasing rents, with the result that there is no balance. Unless these problems are addressed, we will not solve the housing crisis.

In my local authority area, Carlow, there is a cap of €27,500 and anyone who earns more than this figure does not qualify for inclusion in the local authority housing list. Every local authority has set up a new rent scheme and everybody has been reassessed. Many of the people with whom I deal do not qualify for inclusion in the local authority housing list and are becoming homeless. We are not addressing the key issues to help people to find homes.

The new tenant purchase scheme introduced in the past four months allows only 50% of tenants to buy their houses. The other 50% - either because they do not work, because they are in receipt of illness benefit or because they are retired - cannot qualify for the new scheme. Apart from these two initiatives, what else in the 84-point plan has been done to help homeless persons?

The local authorities are preparing their budgets. Carlow is very small. The town council has been abolished and there have been extra costs for the land aggregation scheme for local authorities. In addition, rates and utility payments from the local enterprise boards have been lost. It is a small county council which cannot pass a budget because it does not have the proper funding coming in. I have spoken to the Minister about this. If a plan is not put in place to help the local authorities that require assistance, the ordinary Joe Soap on the road will suffer when the allocations for library services, parks and road maintenance are cut. We need to ensure everybody gets fair play and that the Taoiseach will help the local authorities that come to him asking for help to reach some agreement. I understand it is very hard to give so much capital funding to local authorities, but the Taoiseach needs to make an agreement with them because the working person will suffer the cuts.

Senator Michael McDowell: Tá mé ag roinnt mo chuid ama leis an Seanadóir Lawless.

An Cathaoirleach: Ceart go leor.

Senator Michael McDowell: Cuirim fíor fáilte roimh an Taoiseach, atá anseo linn inniu, agus roimh an méid a bhí le rá aige. Táim dóchasach go bhfuil spiorad nua ag teacht chun cinn sa Teach seo i dtaobh athchóiriú an tSeanaid as seo amach.

In his extensive statement the Taoiseach covered many matters, including very important issues such as Brexit and the future relationships between Ireland and the United Kingdom and

between the North and the South. The one thing I would say in relation to all of them is that there are many domestic squalls surrounding the Government. As the Taoiseach pointed out, it is in an unusual position. I express my hope it will keep a firm hand on the tiller. Both the economic situation and the position on public sector pay need to be kept under control. We should not allow ourselves to be buffeted too much.

I welcome a number of things the Taoiseach said about the reform of this House. I welcome his reiterated support for the implementation of the Manning report and his commitment to making that happen. I was particularly struck by two features of what he had to say. The first relates to the formation of the implementation group. Those who have read the Manning report will be conscious that it sets out ambitious reforms for the future conduct of elections to this House and the future business of this House. Such reforms will require a huge amount of preparation and groundwork to be done. The extension of the franchise to citizens who are normally resident in Northern Ireland or who live elsewhere abroad will be a hugely ambitious task in a short timeframe. In that context, the Taoiseach's comments on getting a consensus in the Dáil were very important too. This Chamber is not the only one concerned with the issue. We must ultimately have a broad consensus based not merely on what Members of Seanad Éireann think about how Senators should be elected in the future but also on what the people of Ireland, through their public representatives in Dáil Éireann, think about the issue.

When the Minister of State, Deputy Damien English, came to respond to the debate on the Seanad reform Bill, he outlined in a robust enough way some of the difficulties implicit in the reforms. Some might have seen his remarks as throwing cold water on the matter, but think they were an expression of the Government's desire to see us address the matter in a realistic way. Given that many Members of this House have been well served by the current system, under which they were elected, it would be naive of us to think they would be universally enthusiastic about the adoption of a different system. I emphasise that barring a miracle, the arrangements for the Manning report to be implemented in full will probably not be put in place in time for the next general election. They may be put in place on the Statute Book, which is my hope. From a practical perspective, a register of people in Northern Ireland will have to be compiled and voting arrangements will have to be extended to cover Irish citizens living in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States. In such circumstances, it is highly unlikely that these arrangements will be fully operational in the near future. I say that to underline the point that those who are reluctant to embrace change should realise that it will take time. It is important to put the new arrangements on the Statute Book now in order that they can be implemented with the backing of an Oireachtas implementation group.

Senator Billy Lawless: I welcome the Taoiseach. Irish people who live abroad are delighted that he appointed a Senator with a specific brief to advocate for their concerns, particularly about the undocumented status of many of them. Two weeks ago I attended the 50th anniversary celebrations of the Harp and Shamrock Society in San Antonio. I stayed directly across from the Alamo, where many Irish people died. Twelve of those who died were born in Ireland, while a further 20 were of Irish descent. Thirty of the 300 people who attended the event a fortnight ago were born in Ireland. This shows how diverse the Irish community is in that region. The same can be said of every state in the United States.

As the Taoiseach knows, the United States is less than 40 days away from a presidential election, the result of which will be as close as any in recent memory. The Irish and immigrant rights community in the United States is watching the race extremely closely, as opinions on immigration expressed by the two candidates could not be further apart in substance or tone.

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I was in New York last week with the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Charles Flanagan, and the Minister of State, Deputy Joe McHugh. We met representatives of Irish community and immigration advocacy groups. I assure the Taoiseach that they are already planning their responses to either a Trump or a Clinton victory in the forthcoming election and preparing their strategies for the first 100 days of the next presidency.

The Irish community leaders I met in Ireland House asked me and the Irish Government to petition the next President of the United States and the US Congress on new visas for the Irish. They made the case that Ireland had lost 18,000 visas a year under the 1965 immigration law, which today results in fewer than 350 green cards being issued to Irish people. I believe there is the political will in Congress and Irish people punch way above their weight. Given that 10,500 visas were secured in a 2013 Senate Bill, I believe an Irish visa Bill could pass if the Irish Government joined forces with legislative allies on Capitol Hill and Irish community groups to make a major push.

Irish companies now employ more Americans in the United States than American companies employ in Ireland. As the Taoiseach is aware, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Mr. Paul Ryan, is very proud of his Irish roots and a major advocate of immigration reform. Will the Taoiseach, through his Ministers and the ambassador, make contact with the next President, whoever he or she may be, to ensure a visa Bill for the Irish will be initiated? I suggest any visa Bill also provide for a path for the undocumented Irish who would not be averse to coming back to Ireland to secure such a visa at the US Embassy here if it were guaranteed that they could return to the United States.

I thank the Taoiseach for his commitment to the diaspora and the issue of voting rights for immigrants abroad. As the Minister of State, Deputy Joe McHugh, alongside Ambassador Anderson, noted in New York, we have a constitutional obligation to the Irish diaspora under the Good Friday Agreement. This statement was wholeheartedly appreciated by the community leaders we met in America. They also wondered about the Government's stance on the voting rights issue. Can we expect a referendum on the matter to be held and the result implemented in time for the 2018 Irish presidential election? The subject of immigration reform and the plight of the undocumented Irish are of relevance to the process of Seanad reform that is under discussion.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: I would like to share time with Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: I welcome the Taoiseach. It is always nice to see a Mayo man in the Seanad as there are far too many Dubs here. We will all be united on Saturday. That is, of course, if we can get a ticket. We will have a chat afterwards.

The Taoiseach: We will be united in victory, of course.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: Alex is not here. I hope he will be more successful than I have been, but there are a couple of days left.

I welcome the Taoiseach to the Seanad. I am glad that he raised the issue of Brexit because I am interested in the Government's plans to protect the best interests of the entire island of Ireland. We are about to enter an extremely difficult period, for which there is no precedent. It is

now the calm after the storm and before the next one, when Article 50 will be triggered. There is no timeline and, regrettably, not much hard evidence of planning on the Government's part. We need to see the entire island being proactive, rather than waiting on the Tory Government to make the next move. It created this crisis for its own selfish ends. The Taoiseach should certainly not allow it to dictate how we respond or the pace. It is now obvious that the Brexiteers had absolutely no plan and we still do not know what they want. We need the Taoiseach to work closely with the Northern Executive, with or without the support of the British Government. The Taoiseach should, when necessary, stand up for Ireland and confront the British Government, in the same way as the First Minister of Scotland, Ms Nicola Sturgeon, is doing. I welcome Ms Sturgeon's moves. Also, she has explicitly said that if the negotiations on Brexit are not to her satisfaction and that of the Scottish National Party, she will consider another referendum on Scottish independence.

Mr. David Davis, MP, has been appointed as Brexit Minister in Britain. Has the Taoiseach plans for a Minister and Department here to deal with the fallout from Brexit and to plan across all Departments, including the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine which will be crucial in dealing with the Brexit issue? Not a day goes by without a new forecast or concern raised about the possible impact of the decision by English voters to leave the European Union. I say "English voters" because the people in the North of Ireland voted to remain in the European Union. We need dedicated individual and support staff to formulate responses and come up with solutions in what looks to be a challenging few years ahead. It is vital that the Taoiseach take personal responsibility to impress on the British Government that their wishes should be respected. I get the sense that the Government is dealing with all of this as a done deal and we in Sinn Féin will continue to press for the rights of those who consciously voted to remain part of the European Union.

I also want to find out whether the Taoiseach, since he was returned in April last, has been listening to the concerns of people. We had thousands on the streets again last week on the issue of water charges. They are clearly saying they should go forever. This means the charges being eliminated. It is time to give up the ghost on the water charges issue. People will not be fooled into paying their hard-earned money to keep Irish Water in the lifestyle to which it has become accustomed. All the while, we see the purchase of Siteserv and the non-implementation of the Moriarty tribunal findings become centre-stage in American politics in the US presidential election. It reflects badly on us, as a country.

I will turn briefly to the Apple issue. There is considerable public concern about the Government's refusal of the €13 billion. My party and I think we are missing a real opportunity for the Taoiseach, as leader of the country, to hold his hands up and come clean. This is a real opportunity for him to admit that we have for several decades knowingly facilitated tax evasion and tax avoidance on a significant scale, but this is not the only country to have done it. Billions of euro have been lost to people all over the world, but we are leading the charge. The Taoiseach's Government and particularly the previous Fianna Fáil-led Government have formulated policy to deprive Irish citizens of billions of euro due to the State from multinational companies. The Taoiseach, with Fianna Fáil, has given away our natural resources, oil and gas, as well as the fishing industry. The seaweed industry is even about to be given away.

Nobody is saying we should not do everything we can to encourage inward investment and job creation by multinationals which are welcome to be here. Our 12.5% corporation tax rate is highly competitive. Our educated English-speaking workforce and many other factors make this an attractive place in which to do business. Do we not owe it to the hundreds of thousands

who have been forced to emigrate, those children who are not allowed on the school bus, those children and families who are homeless, those elderly and sick patients lying on hospital trolleys, those children with special needs, those with disabilities, those parents crippled by the cost of child care, those on low wages and zero-hour contracts and those farm and fishing families whose incomes have been eroded to have a fair fiscal policy that will drive a fairer distribution of wealth in the country?

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: An uair dheireanach a bhí an Taoiseach agus mé féin os comhair a chéile, bhíomar i bparlús an ardmhéara i mBéal Feirste. Seo muid anois in Seanad Éireann agus tá sé deas an Taoiseach a fheiceáil. Ciorcal mór an tsaoil a chuirtear ar sin i gCoiláiste Feirste, seanscoil seo agamsa.

I welcome the Taoiseach's commitment this week to convene the national dialogue on the Brexit issue. Of course, that dialogue should be national in the truest sense of the word. It should include achan chearn den tír seo. I look forward, regardless of the disgruntled remarks of others, to seeing as wide a representation as possible at that conversation to seek to assist the Taoiseach and the Government in ploughing a way through the choppy waters that have been forced on us against our will. The Taoiseach, I need not remind him, has a clear obligation to stand up for the best interests of Ireland in her entirety. He has a mandate from the people in the North that is clear about the people's ambition and aspiration to stay and keep Ireland in her entirety in the European Union.

Mura miste leis an Taoiseach, labhróidh mé fosta faoi chearta vótála i dtoghcháin uachtaránachta. It has been rightly referred to by Senator Bily Lawless, in the context of the remarks of the Minister of State, Deputy Joe McHugh, earlier this year, that a referendum would be sought to be held early next year to extend the franchise in presidential elections to the diaspora. That is the proper thing to do. It would be in line with best practice in other states and countries around the world. I want to know if, as outlined clearly by the Constitutional Convention and a broad range of civic and political opinion in the North, the same enfranchisement and democratic right will be afforded to me and the hundreds of thousands of people like me in the North who are Irish citizens and wish to vote for their President who, of course, is not the President of a land mass but the President of the Irish people in their entirety. Perhaps the Taoiseach might confirm for me, without pre-empting the outcome of a referendum, although I would be reasonably confident heading into one, that when that referendum is held, it will not only seek to extend the democratic right to vote in presidential elections to the diaspora but also include Irish citizens living north of the Border.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Taoiseach go Seanad Éireann. I am happy to have the Taoiseach in Seanad Éireann.

The Taoiseach spoke about a Government unlike any other. We are also looking at a Seanad Éireann unlike any other because this Seanad, the Twenty-fifth Seanad, is the first which was saved from abolition by a popular vote of the people. I am sure the Taoiseach will agree with and support me in recognising that, the people being sovereign, as he himself recognised, those who voted to retain the Seanad in 2013 were voting for reform. When we spoke about a new relationship between the people and their Parliament, they were voting explicitly for the right to have a relationship, both in how this Chamber was elected and in the work that it conducted. I strongly support the advance in the area of Seanad Éireann reform and very much welcome the commitments the Taoiseach has given today in recognising the Manning report, the valuable work done in that regard, the importance of the proposals made and the transformative and

positive nature of many of them. I look forward to the actions of the implementation group. I hope those of us who are heads of technical groups rather than parties will also be invited to the discussions and look forward to that happening in my capacity as leader of my group.

I raise one small point. The Taoiseach speaks about the Dáil debate as being the first step in the reform process. It is important to note that steps have already been taken in the reform process, be it the vote of the people, the work of the Manning group or the Bill we have put forward which has reached Second Stage in this House. If we wish to drive forward meaningful Seanad reform and deliver it for the people before the next time we will have an election, we need to ensure we will not take any backward step and that we will continue to move forward with the Bill while discussing implementation. I would like the Taoiseach's assurances in that regard.

The Taoiseach also spoke about budgetary scrutiny and the new process in that regard. I have a question for him on a specific commitment given. Something I strongly welcome is the commitment in A Programme for a Partnership Government on equality and gender-proofing. This is something, with many others, certainly during my time with the National Women's Council, on which I was happy to campaign and press for. I am delighted to see it as part of the Taoiseach's commitment. I would like him to outline how he sees the equality and gender-proofing aspects of the budget being delivered, both in budget 2017 and in the future. Will there be an equality statement to accompany the budget, as is the practice in Scotland? It is important that tax measures, including tax reliefs, also be included within the equality budgeting process. This is something on which it would be useful to hear assurance also.

3 o'clock

I reiterate the point made by others that we need to be realistic when we talk about tax in Ireland. We need to be real on the figures. When we talk about corporate tax practices, we have to be real. When we talk about tax concessions, the language we use is important. In that regard, we need a reality check. I urge the Taoiseach to give leadership in the discussion on what the squeezed middle actually is. The fact is that median earned income in Ireland is €28,500. Half of all workers in Ireland are earning that amount or less and they cannot be invisible. We need to ensure this entire 50% of workers is not invisible in the discussion on the budget. What they need is real investment in quality wages and quality work and real increases in pay and public services. Investing in public services is the way to give back to and benefit the full population. Ireland has a role also in making the case at European level for public investment in public services.

I make a special appeal on care services. Care provision is the lifeblood of our society and should be recognised in all economic processes, including the summer economic statement and economic dialogues. That would be transformative not only in relation to child care but also in terms of home care and the question of statutory entitlements. We have heard Ministers say they do not want the budget to appear regressive. It must not be regressive and that must be tested. Further to the question of equality proofing, guidelines were issued by the Department of the Taoiseach to all Departments on their new three-year statements of strategy. It is unfortunate that the guidelines have not drawn attention to the public sector duty in terms of equality and human rights. It is important for the Taoiseach to provide leadership for Departments to ensure they are aware of their duties in that regard. I would like to have statements in the House on how the guidelines might be amended to include a clear reference to that public duty.

The Taoiseach represented the State at the highest level in signing the Paris climate change

commitments and the sustainable development goals. In the past, we have also signed up to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It would be appropriate to remind Departments of these key commitments on which the Taoiseach has led and which apply across government and to ensure they are reflected in departmental strategies for the next three years. Ireland played a key role in the negotiations on the sustainable development goals, which should be commended strongly.

Ireland also played a key role in the recent summit on refugees. At UN level, Ireland is playing a key role in moving the discussions forward. However, we must also show leadership within Europe where the EU-Turkey deal is not acceptable and the human rights of refugees are in the balance. Leadership must also be shown within Ireland where, sadly, our already inadequate commitment to take 4,000 refugees has seen us receive only 400. I know that the figures are moving, but this is an area in which we can lead. The outcome of the summit was a call to all countries to do what they could. I believe we can and should do much more. We must also look at our direct provision system and the right to work. We must examine the way refugees are treated within Ireland. We must also send these positive signals because of the danger of the xenophobic language which drove so much of the Brexit debate. That is why we must send positive signals and messages of inclusion.

On Brexit, I welcome the all-Ireland conversation. Other Members have spoken about the important issues, but, crucially, we must not engage in any race to the bottom on conditions. We must look to opportunities such as investment in higher education. On the future of Europe, we can be strong European citizens while also being critical. We must be strong in areas such as trade and the CETA which the Government seems intent, unfortunately, on signing this very month. At a time of uncertainty and when we are talking about responsibility, it would be reckless for it to agree to the provisional application of this trade agreement with its immense implications.

I do not have a chance to make my other points, but I look forward to the overall debate. I say to the Taoiseach that while the Citizens' Assembly is welcome as a discussion, it is not a sufficient response to the demands from international bodies or the street. People want a chance to vote through the ballot box. We need a referendum to repeal, not replace, the eighth amendment. I hope a date for the referendum can be set within the lifetime of the Government.

Senator Ivana Bacik: I wish to share time with Senator Kevin Humphreys.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Ivana Bacik: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Taoiseach. I welcome him back to the Seanad. I am glad to hear of his commitment to Seanad reform now that the question of abolition is firmly off the table. As others have said, we have a blueprint for reform in the shape of the Manning report, for which I note that the Taoiseach has expressed his support. However, we need to see action and a timeframe for implementation of the recommendations.

As the Labour Party's spokesperson on foreign affairs, I have a number of issues to raise with the Taoiseach, the first of which is Brexit. We have already spoken a great deal about it and the Taoiseach has addressed it. I welcome the stated Government priorities and the announcement of an all-island dialogue. We passed a motion in the Seanad in July mandating us to have a comprehensive dialogue and debate in this Chamber calling in, among others, MEPs and Northern Ireland's First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. I hope we will contribute to the

debate. We must look at creative ways of moving forward. I had an interesting meeting with Alex Salmond, MP, earlier today when we spoke about the possibility of separate legal status for Northern Ireland and Scotland in the wake of the Brexit negotiations based, for example, on the Lichtenstein model. We must look at all options as we move forward in the process.

On our relations with the European Union more generally, I noted with interest the Taoiseach's speech in Bratislava. While it is important to commend him for his emphasis on our neutrality, I note the need to hold the line on that issue, particularly in the light of Jean-Claude Juncker's speech calling for a centralised common defence policy in Europe. We need to ensure we take a strong stance in defence of our neutrality.

On the question of refugees which others have mentioned, I welcomed very much the commitment of the previous Government to welcome 4,000 refugees from Syria through the European hot spots in Greece and Italy. However, I am very concerned by the slow pace of progress which has been noted by the Tánaiste in recent weeks. Can we expedite the process to ensure more refugees will be brought in and can we see implementation of the recommendations made in the Mahon report on the reform of the direct provision system which was a priority of the former Minister of State, Senator Aodhán Ó Ríordáin? I received an e-mail update today from Médecins Sans Frontières in which it described the appalling situation in Aleppo and referred to the very large number of civilians who faced siege in rebel held areas which were under bombardment from the Syrian Government and Russia. The 250,000 people in question have access to only approximately 30 doctors. The USA has announced today that it will take a much stronger stance against Russia. I would like to think Ireland would take a role within the European Union to press for a similar stance, given the apparent abandonment by Russia of the peace process.

On an issue closer to home, with other Members, I ask that the momentum for repeal of the eighth amendment be recognised within the political system. I am glad that the Taoiseach spoke of the plan for a citizens' assembly which I hope will recommend a referendum in favour of repeal. When will it be held? Can we have a very clear timeframe for the process of referral of recommendations to the Oireachtas committee and then to the Dáil and the Seanad? The momentum is clear. We need to see the repeal of the eighth amendment.

Senator Kevin Humphreys: The Taoiseach is very welcome. It is welcome that he should come to the Seanad today, albeit he should do so on a more regular basis. I would like to see him attend the Seanad at the beginning and end of each term in order that we would see him back before Christmas. The level of the debate so far has been very good and informative, which I very much welcome.

I do not think politicians, like the media, have short memories. The reason I ran the campaign to have the Taoiseach attend today was that the terms "new politics" and "reform" were dripping from everyone's tongue. However, nobody knew or understood exactly what was meant by them. I was hoping the Taoiseach would put some meat on the bones, but, unfortunately, I have seen very little of it. What I see constantly are the major decisions of the day being kicked to either committees or for review or mediation. One of the ones which drove me absolutely demented was when there was an undermining of the concept of collective Cabinet responsibility. I very much support the campaign to repeal the eighth amendment, but Deputy Mick Wallace's Bill was clearly unconstitutional. How it was wrangled to allow people to vote against it was that the Attorney General's advice was not sought by the Cabinet, but I do not find that right. One of the Minister's who did not seek the Attorney General's advice was very

glad of her advice when he was rushing back from Rio de Janeiro where he found himself in severe trouble.

We had an interesting discussion this morning when Senators Michael McDowell and David Norris referred to delays in the appointment of judges and asked where the real responsibility lay. We read in various newspapers that a particular Minister will veto the appointment of judges, which raises questions about the concept of collective Cabinet responsibility. Whether it is true, it was said he had gone to the newspapers and announced that he was going to veto it. I find that very difficult to accept.

I wish to raise two issues that are close to my heart. I raised one of them yesterday, namely, the co-location of Holles Street hospital at St. Vincent's University Hospital. One of the issues was kicked to a mediator in the hope of finding a result. When the Minister attended this House he said: "I have no plan B." If St. Vincent's University Hospital, Elm Park, does not agree to it, it is scuppered and, therefore, 10,000 babies will be born in Holles Street hospital in overcrowded conditions and ten delivery wards when there should be over 20. An article in *The Irish Times* this morning reports that the State is still owed over €240 million by religious institutions. I suggest that if we cannot get agreement on the co-location of Holles Street hospital at St. Vincent's University Hospital, Elm Park, as part of the compensation to taxpayers and the State, the religious order involved should hand the hospital back to the HSE to manage it. Let us build a good quality hospital that the women and children of the State deserve. That would be a fitting legacy.

I constantly hear that the Rural Alliance and different Independents hold the strings of power over the Government. It is driving a wedge between rural and urban Ireland. However, parts of Dublin, Cork and Limerick have suffered equally from the recession. Such areas have also lost Garda stations and post offices. There are huge areas of disadvantage across Dublin that urgently require investment. All disadvantaged areas, whether rural or urban, deserve to share in the recovery. The sum of €20 million for reinvigorating rural towns is badly needed, but urban areas have suffered equally. They include Dublin's inner city, an issue which was kicked to a task force to consider. We need decisions and leadership. Even though it is a minority Government, we cannot let small groups derail the recovery. I am not only talking about economic recovery but also about the social recovery of communities, schools, hospitals and infrastructure. I ask the Taoiseach not to be misdirected by small vocal groups that are only looking after their parishes. The interests of the country need to be looked after.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I am sharing time with Senator Kieran O'Donnell.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Cuirim fíor-fháilte roimh an Taoiseach. Gabhaim mo bhuíochas leis agus tugaim mo thacaíocht dó as ucht an chomhrá agus an méid oibre atá le déanamh ar son an ghnáthdhuine ar fud na tíre.

In welcoming the Taoiseach to the Chamber I hope his presence will be a continuing one. In his address he highlighted many key issues. Listening to some of the comments, I am reminded that the more things change, the more they stay the same. I will not go into the parish pump issues that have been addressed either directly or indirectly.

The themes addressed by the Taoiseach highlight the fragility faced by the world and Ireland within the European Union, whether it concerns Brexit or our own existence in Seanad Éireann,

including how we are elected. Other issues include the budget and the country's economic outlook within the European Union, the eighth amendment, the pressing issue of housing and the Government's approach to how it governs. That requires leadership and an holistic approach by Members of the Oireachtas. I am confident that under the Taoiseach's leadership, the programme for Government which is committed to a just society based on a resilient economy will be achieved. Those who navel gaze should look at how far the country has come in the five short years Deputy Enda Kenny has been Taoiseach. Unemployment has fallen; the economy is growing and the public finances are secure. We have seen profound change in the social lives of many and some of us are now more equal than we were.

When I hear people talking about Apple, I ask them to visit Cork city or other areas where thousands are directly employed by multinationals or in ancillary services. The country is viewed around the world as one in which the economy is growing and people are employed at home. We are welcoming home our returning emigrants. Earlier today, together with Senator Billy Lawless, I met the Governor of Michigan. We had discussions about attracting people to invest here, which will have a positive outcome. Challenges remain, including Brexit, public service pay and other demands. However, we can see how a growing economy benefits many people, with the fruits being invested in the country.

The budget in October will probably be the most important we have ever faced as a nation. We should deal with it prudently and based on how we can improve people's lives in a tangible and meaningful way. It is important to improve people's lives but in so doing there is a duty on all of us to recognise that the Government does not have a pot of gold to float every boat and make everyone happy.

The changed political landscape presents us with a challenge because no party has a majority. I thank all Members of the House for their co-operation and willingness to work together in a spirit that has seen us do business better and differently, for which I commend all Senators. I refer, in particular, to Senator Billy Lawless as a member of the diaspora and a citizen of the country. Having visited America during the summer, I know that his work is having an impact. I wish him well in his continuing endeavours. Some criticised and questioned his appointment, but I know from talking to members of the Irish diaspora in the United States that they see his appointment as an important one that values their work. This concerns not only the undocumented Irish but also the efforts to bring people home to work here, as well as bringing investment to the country.

The Taoiseach spoke about leaving nobody behind. This is a partnership Government and it is important that that partnership reach beyond the Cabinet room or Dáil Chamber and also be extended to this House. Seanad reform was agreed to in the programme for Government. As Leader of the House, I welcome the opportunity to work with the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, Deputy Simon Coveney; the Minister of State, Deputy Damien English, other Ministers and all sides of the House to bring about reform. As a former Chairman of a committee, I recognise the importance of bringing Oireachtas reform to the people. The committee system is the most pivotal part of what we do in this House, yet it gets lost in the cauldron of debate in both Chambers. Nonetheless, the committee system has demonstrated that it can work quite well on behalf of the people.

As Leader of the House, I am committed to bringing forward a second Private Members' motion which we discussed briefly yesterday at the Committee on Procedure and Privileges. The Seanad consultation committee has been re-established. It is important to reach beyond the

gates of Leinster House to the communities we serve and those whom we represent. It is said Senators do not have a constituency, but we are here to work on behalf of the people. As *Seanáadóirí*, we must go beyond the gates to reach out to the public. I hope the Seanad consultation committee can do so again. Thanks to the initiative of Senator Kieran O'Donnell, we will have a continuing Brexit debate. I look forward to working with the Taoiseach on the implementation body to bring Seanad reform, whatever it brings, to the Upper House. It is important that we continue, collectively, to bring reform of the Seanad to fruition.

I will speak about the Citizens' Assembly. As somebody who served on the Constitutional Convention and chaired the health committee which dealt with the protection of life during pregnancy legislation, I very much welcome the establishment of the Citizens' Assembly. I spoke in the House yesterday about the benefits of it and the need to be temperate in our language when we approach what is a very sensitive topic. Equally, we must empower the Citizens' Assembly in order that it can do its work and bring forward its report. We should give it our support as Members of this House.

The ten-year health strategy is important and we all hope it will be successful and we can sign up to it. It is disappointing that no Members of this House have yet been appointed to the group discussing the strategy. In this House we have experts in the health area who are willing to engage and be part of that process.

As the Taoiseach stated, we cannot go back to the old days. We are ambitious for ourselves and the people. The Taoiseach and the Government are the same. I commend the Taoiseach for his work and wish him well in the endeavours he will continue. I hope the people will continue to see increased employment and consequent benefits to all our lives.

Senator Kieran O'Donnell: I welcome the Taoiseach and wish him well. I will touch on two key elements dealt with by him in his address. The first is Brexit, an issue on which, as the Leader mentioned, we will hold our own debate. I very much welcome the Taoiseach's call for an all-Ireland dialogue. The Good Friday Agreement has passed its 18th birthday - the age of consent - and I hope people will see that it has evolved over time, with the natural progression now being an all-Ireland dialogue on Brexit because it has implications both North and South, particularly in the economic sphere. We could have a common approach in viewing Brexit.

The second issue is our interaction with the European Union. There is much talk that Ireland, as such, has no direct role in the Brexit negotiations *vis-à-vis* the United Kingdom and the European Union. Ireland very much has a role in the navigation, as it wants to ensure our trade links with Britain are maintained. The United Kingdom is our largest trading partner and we have many common bonds. There is a specific role for the Taoiseach, acting on behalf of the Republic, to assist in a way that will ensure we can have safe passage through choppy waters.

If there was ever a manifestation of a reason somebody should be appointed to the Seanad, it is the example of Senator Billy Lawless's contribution on emigrants. He raised new themes and issues today related to the diaspora. I would like to see the measures fast-tracked, as the diaspora is a major issue. We all have family members living in America and Senator Billy Lawless spoke specifically about the United States. Something practical could be done. I ask the Taoiseach to engage with the new US President, whoever it may be, as quickly as possible in that regard.

An Cathaoirleach: At this stage I will allow Senator David Norris, the father of the House,

to say a few words. I will try to confine the other speakers to three minutes and get as many as possible into the time allowed. I am trying to be fair to everyone.

Senator David Norris: I thank the Cathaoirleach. It is greatly appreciated.

I welcome the Taoiseach. I also welcome his remarks on Seanad reform, for which I have been campaigning for 40 years. I hammered out some of the well known phrases about the Seanad in those 40 years. I contributed to every report published during the 30 years I have spent in Seanad Éireann. The Seanad Bill introduced by Senator Michael McDowell was cobbled together by lawyers hired by former Senator Feargal Quinn. I recommend that the Taoiseach look at the detailed forensic critique to which I subjected it in this House. One of the issues - a parochial matter, I suppose - is the defence of the Trinity constituency. I point out to the Taoiseach that it is the longest surviving parliamentary constituency on the island, dating back to the beginning of the 17th century, and it must be respected.

As father of the House, I ask the Taoiseach to grant me the privilege of a ten-minute interview. I have suggestions to make about Seanad reform. They are not pick-and-mix or about referring issues to committees. It is a really radical and visionary approach that would get the Taoiseach an additional footnote in history. The partisan element of the process bedevils the Seanad. It should be removed, but it will require vision. Very few politicians are prepared to relax their control or their power but the Seanad should essentially be an adviser and accomplice to the Government, lending support based on a fully professional approach.

The Taoiseach should forget about all of the committees, etc. Why not grasp the nettle and really go for a referendum? We are having a referendum on something to do with the presidency, votes in America and so on; why not, therefore, grasp the nettle and have a referendum focused entirely on removing the party political element of the Seanad? It would also entail removing the Taoiseach's option of nominating 11 Members. In a non-confrontational and advisory Seanad composed entirely of professional people - the greatest brains of social reformers and people involved with the community - there would be no need for the controversy involved in wanting to defeat the Government or introduce party-oriented reforms. I ask for an opportunity to speak to the Taoiseach and give him details of this proposal. There were suggestions of tinkering earlier. There was a suggestion of opening the university seats to 1 million potential voters, leaving 1,000 voters to decide the other 43 panel seats and one vote - that of the Taoiseach - for 11 Members. That is just absurd and does not really amount to reform. Could I have the opportunity at some stage in the Taoiseach's very busy schedule to discuss these matters? I can provide a blueprint in advance of any such meeting.

Senator Mark Daly: I welcome the Taoiseach. He stated that as a result of Brexit, the European Union must prepare for a united Ireland. There is a severe issue between the North and the South because of Brexit and it will be detrimental on both sides of the Border if there is not a good result for the United Kingdom that could lead to a positive result for Ireland. In many instances, people do not realise there are more Border crossings between the North and the South than there are between the European Union and all of the countries to the east of it, a border ten times the size of the one between the North and the South. There are 30,000 people per day commuting between the North and the South. There are 1 million litres of milk coming across the Border to be processed in both jurisdictions. The knock-on effect of a hard border or restrictions on trade or people would be detrimental, North and South. What is the Taoiseach's Department doing to ensure that not only will the European Union be prepared for the eventuality of a united Ireland but that we will be also?

The other issue raised which was related to Seanad reform is votes for Irish citizens living in the North and overseas. The most fundamental right of any citizen in any state is the right to vote. Nevertheless, 100 years after the Proclamation we still deny that right to so many on the island, as well as people born on the island who live in other countries. Imagine it is almost 190 years since Catholic emancipation and 98 years since women were given the right to vote, yet we still deny a vote to one in three citizens born on the island. As part of the reform process we must extend the right to vote to citizens wherever they live who claim they are part of the Irish nation.

On the Irish overseas and the diaspora, I welcome the nomination of Senator Billy Lawless as the diaspora Senator. The Taoiseach has made some great appointments but of them all, that nomination is important because Senator Billy Lawless will be able to speak for the Irish overseas in the United States and throughout the world. Fianna Fáil produced the first policy paper by any political party on the Irish overseas and the diaspora. When one considers how many years the State has been in existence, the fact it took nearly 80 years for any political party to produce a policy paper specifically for the Irish overseas and the diaspora does not bode well for our treatment of them. However, I do not merely refer to the undocumented in the United States, but one key concern must be the forgotten Irish in England who left this country in hard economic times, worked hard and sent back money to their families, friends and relations and who have now fallen on hard times. They are people we must look after and I ask the Taoiseach to so do.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: The Taoiseach is welcome. It is a great pleasure to address him and I thank him for his attendance.

I fjoin my colleagues in welcoming the nomination of Senator Billy Lawless. I was one of the first people who was sceptical about it, even though I knew the Senator was a good Galway man. It took a brave Mayo man to bring in a Galway man. The Mayo men came down the Curragh Line with their shoes under their arms - saving them for the big town - but we will forgive them for that. The nomination of Senator Bily Lawless was a great and brave one by the Taoiseach, for which I congratulate him.

The Government is facing an unprecedented industrial relations crisis and a new approach is necessary to overcome these issues. The Government must realise or understand it cannot continue to expect workers to live in income poverty and not encounter industrial unrest. There must be an admission that the recovery message which was oversold, to all intents and purposes, created unrealistic expectations, given the economic uncertainty still facing the country. Unions cannot be expected to support the recovery unless there is honest discourse which I would describe as full transparency with respect to the finances of the State. Different figures are being bandied about all the time, which creates a level of expectation Members are aware cannot be fulfilled. I ask the Taoiseach and the Minister for Finance to state they got it wrong on the amount or level of recovery. We are in recovery, for which the Taoiseach is to be congratulated, but the level of recovery does not support the expectations in the country. Once this admission is made, we can then move on to an understanding of realistic margins within which the budget must be operated for the security of workers.

The Government must also admit the current hard-nosed approach to the talks on the Lansdowne Road agreement is not working. As a country, we are at risk of repeating the worst mistakes made in the recent past in which we agreed national pay deals and then agreed a series of side deals and special measures on top of them, which made a farce of the entire approach. The

current industrial unrest can no longer be kept at bay and this will require a strong overarching solution. We need a social partnership again that will embrace all and bring everybody on board. It is not enough to ignore some of the unions that have a difficulty with the Lansdowne Road agreement, while others are mindful of the state of the nation's purse. The Government must reconvene the Lansdowne Road talks and give all unions, whether part of the current deal, the opportunity to avail of a renewed chance to put their case on the table. The Government must come to this process in an open and honest fashion; admitting it exaggerated the amount of money it had available and with transparent figures for what might be possible. Out of this, a new and overarching deal must be established to bring an end to the current unrest. We are at risk of ten years of industrial unrest unless we do something. I believe the Taoiseach's previous Government gave leadership and that the trade unions will respond to him positively. I, therefore, ask him to revisit the Lansdowne Road agreement. Let us go back to it and let us get all of the unions under the umbrella at the same time. I ask the Taoiseach to take this on board and again thank him for listening to me.

An Cathaoirleach: Tá trí nóiméad ag an Seanadóir Ó Clochartaigh.

Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh: Ba mhaith liom mo chuid ama a roinnt. Tógfaidh mé dhá nóiméad agus tógfaidh an Seanadóir Devine nóiméad amháin. Cuirim míle fáilte roimh an Taoiseach. Caithfidh mé a admháil go raibh díomá orm nach raibh tagairt dá laghad, i ndáiríre, do chúrsaí Gaeilge agus Gaeltachta san óráid a thug sé. An fáth a bhfuil díomá orm, ar bhealach, ná gurb é an Taoiseach atá i gceannas ar straitéis an Rialtais ó thaobh na Gaeilge de. Is é an Taoiseach an cathaoirleach ar an gcomhchoiste idir-rannach maidir leis an nGaeilge agus an Ghaeltacht agus is é sin an coiste atá in ainm is a bheith ag cur Straitéis 20 Bliain don Ghaeilge i bhfeidhm. Is dóigh liom nach bhfuil an Taoiseach ag tabhairt dea-shampla sa mhéid sin os rud é nár dúirt sé focal ar bith faoin straitéis sin ná faoi diongbháilteacht an Rialtais maidir leis.

Tá daoine amuigh ar an talamh ag rá gurb iad na Rialtais a bhí faoi chúram an Taoisigh na Rialtais ba mheasa a bhí ann ariamh ó thaobh na Gaeilge agus na Gaeltachta de. Chonaic muid lagú ar Acht Údarás na Gaeltachta ar an mbord a bhí ann agus ar an maoiniú atá ar fáil dó. Táimid ag feiceáil straitéise in ndáiríre nach bhfuil á chur i bhfeidhm mar is ceart. Ní léir go bhfuil aon tacaíocht ag go leor de na Ranna Rialtais don straitéis céanna. Bhí an Rialtas ag iarraidh Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla a chur os ár gcomhair a bhí lag agus ag lagú cearta lucht na Gaeilge. Ba mhaith liom dá ndíreodh an Taoiseach ar sin sa tréimhse atá aige mar Thaoiseach leis an méid sin a chur ina cheart.

As a man from the west, there were many expectations that with the Taoiseach things would improve in the west. However, I am afraid that in Galway, being the fourth largest city, people are disappointed at the difficulties they face and that more has not been done under the Taoiseach's watch for the people of Galway. There is a massive crisis in the the emergency department service. The Taoiseach visited in 2015 and stated the emergency department in University Hospital Galway was not fit for purpose, but 33 patients are still on trolleys in the unit today. I have asked the Minister for Health to consider the possibility of building a new hospital in Galway. While he is completely non-committal, I ask the Taoiseach to at least commit to giving consideration to that proposal now that senior clinicians in Galway are calling for it.

As for the traffic issue in Galway, where the former Minister for Health who is now a Member of this House once got stuck and was obliged to walk to meetings in the city, it is in absolute chaos and nothing really has been done to address the issue. Moreover, the homelessness crisis in Galway is absolutely diabolical, with 56 families and 133 children left homeless this year.

Galway and the west need a much stronger focus from the Taoiseach to bring us back to where we need to be.

Tabharfaidh mé an t-am eile don Seanadóir Devine.

Senator Máire Devine: I thank the Taoiseach for his attendance. In the few seconds available to me, my guess is I will not get the Taoiseach to agree to solve the multiple emergencies throughout the fractured health system. Consequently, I have decided to go easy on him and ask him to solve one issue about which I was banging on yesterday and on different occasions, namely, the position of nurses, my colleagues. The Taoiseach should be aware there were hundreds of nurses outside Leinster House when the Dáil reconvened to welcome him back after the recess. The issue is about increments and the injustice of increments not being paid to intern students from 2011 to 2015. While this was agreed to by the Government, the Department of Health and the Health Service Executive, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Paschal Donohoe, has reneged on it. As he does not really wish to listen and is not responding, consequently, I appeal to the Taoiseach. It would be an easy-peasy thing to do and I am not asking for the sun, the moon and the stars. That is the subject of another debate for another time, but I really would like the Taoiseach to attend to the issue.

An Cathaoirleach: I will try to facilitate as many speakers as I can.

Senator John Dolan: I dedicate the couple of minutes allocated to me to the memory of Michael Corbett, a strong disability advocate from County Mayo. He was my colleague and friend and a great champion of people with disabilities throughout Ireland. I thank the Taoiseach for his attendance and attention. Disability comes to every door and has a couple of hallmarks. It drives people into poverty and causes exclusion and these twin imposters conspire in a potent way to ensure people's hope and possibilities for the future are diminished. Ireland can and must work against these twin evils. In budget 2017 the Taoiseach has modest but significant resources to make a strong start in dealing with this matter.

Disability wreaks havoc in every community and group: urban and rural, among children, young people, adults and older people, as well as among poor people, those at risk of poverty, the squeezed middle and those who are well off. It does not spare any such category. The Taoiseach has committed to ratifying the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities by the end of this year and to commence strong implementation. I ask him and his Government - he has the choice to do this - to develop a good, robust social infrastructure that will underpin the economy and serve all the people when they have needs. Something like 50,000 or 60,000 people who are not disabled today will be disabled by this day next year. It is something that comes to every one of us. We know this in our own lives.

A good start in 2017 is vital after the years of difficulty that we have had. The Taoiseach should harness the resources of his Government and the Cabinet and get to grips with this terrible dilemma, this running sore. Health and community services, income supports, the cost of disability payment, employment and housing are the issues that will have to be tackled in faith when we sign. The Taoiseach will ratify with his signature the UN convention within the next couple of months. To do that with confidence and strength, he should make a good start in the budget. If he marshals €300 million of the almost €700 million available to him in this area, he will distribute and triage much-needed support for people and families all over the country. Restoration needs to happen across the public service and this would be a potent way to do it. Michael Corbett was laid to rest today. It is our job not to rest until people with disabilities can

take their full place, in terms of its values and participation, in this republic of ours.

Senator Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: I welcome the Taoiseach. In fairness to the Leader, Senator Jerry Buttimer, it is incumbent on us in this House to work together to try to solve problems, a few of which I want to raise with the Taoiseach in my short contribution.

Senator Lynn Ruane and I work in the drugs area and want to have good engagement with the Minister of State, Deputy Catherine Byrne. Senators Colette Kelleher and Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and I who work on the Traveller ethnicity issue hope to receive good co-operation from the Minister of State, Deputy David Stanton. However, I must ask the Taoiseach about the issue of direct provision and my contribution will be solely on that issue.

In this House, when I was Minister of State, there was uniformity of opinion on the issue of direct provision. I see Senator Martin Conway who is one of the most vocal on it in front of me. We came to speak with one voice and the need for action on it. A report was commissioned. At the time the Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Frances Fitzgerald, and I worked very hard to commission that report and worked to implement it. It was said on national radio last week that of the 2,000 people in direct provision accommodation over five years, as a direct result of that report, 1,500 are no longer in it, which is a good day's work.

However, the draft programme for Government that was released contained a commitment to implement the McMahon report, which took nine months to put together. It was compiled by NGOs and departmental officials and when it was signed off on, the assumption was that it would be implemented. To my horror and that of others, that sentence regarding the implementation of the McMahon report was dropped from the actual programme for Government. I, therefore, ask the Taoiseach, because of the nature of the vulnerability of the families and children living in direct provision accommodation, that we implement the report. We are not asking for a new report. We are not asking for action to be taken which has not been already cited. We are asking that the Taoiseach give a commitment to implement the report which was commissioned by the Department with officials from many Departments and NGOs in good faith and which has been published and was being implemented. The Minister of State was here and was not in a position to give at commitment that it would be implemented. The Minister for Justice and Equality is not in a position to say she will implement it. I would love if the Taoiseach could stand in this House and make such a commitment to the Members who collectively, in a cross-party manner - this is not a divisive issue in this House - are all committed to implementation of the report. The Taoiseach stood as a proud Irishman in the Dáil and spoke in a tearful way on the issue of the Magdalen women and was commended for doing so. I commended him - we all did - because it was an emotional day for everybody in the Oireachtas. However, I am fully convinced there will be a Taoiseach in 20 or 30 years' time who will have to make a similar apology on the issue of direct provision. It is within the Taoiseach's gift today to stand in front of us as a collective and say: "I, as Taoiseach, will oversee or ensure that the McMahon report will be implemented."

Senator Joe O'Reilly: I join in the welcome to the Taoiseach and the recognition of the exemplary leadership he has given the country in getting people back to work, restoring the public finances and now setting about rebuilding a normal society.

I want to address the Brexit issue which I will address on a micro level first. In the context of the budget and governmental policies in the short term, there are a number of businesses and industries, notably in the agriculture sector - the mushroom industry being highlighted - that

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are suffering hugely because of the fluctuation in the value of sterling. Jobs will be dislocated in these sectors if we do not do something to help such sectors. Ultimately, that would involve a social welfare bill and a loss of dignity for people, which is not a correct policy. I, therefore, ask the Taoiseach, in the context of the budget and flexibility within the taxation system, that an effort be made to address the difficulty of sectors hit by the fluctuation in sterling in the budget and in the future.

On a broader level, regarding Brexit, it is welcome that the Taoiseach wants to have an all-Ireland dialogue. It is so important and was mentioned that there not only be a recognition that the people of Northern Ireland voted to stay in the European Union but also that there be a national approach because we do not want to see a return to a hard border. We want free movement of people, services and goods across the island and a normal society to continue here. The Taoiseach's attempt to achieve consensus nationally in that regard is great.

Regarding the arrangement with the United Kingdom, we need the United Kingdom to have a kind of Norwegian model. I know that the Taoiseach cannot personally or directly influence this, but perhaps he might create conditions or assist to create conditions that would lead to it. We need the United Kingdom to maintain as many links and much business and movement of goods, people and services as possible, with a certain adaptation, as in the case of Norway, which would suit its particular needs. We need as much normality as possible to continue after the result.

In a budgetary context, the 9% VAT rate which was revolutionary and one of the great planks in restoring the economy has now become very important. The prognosis is that sterling will continue to fluctuate downward. As sterling weakens, UK visitors will have less spending power. To attract tourists, hotels and businesses need the 9% VAT rate. In that context, I would be the first to support the view that has become common, anecdotally and otherwise, that hotels must measure up in the prices they are charging. This is a Dublin issue specifically, but in the areas where I live it is very important just to keep the tourism sector alive.

The fluctuation in the value of sterling is a real issue along the Border and across the agriculture sector, particularly in intensive agriculture. We could lose jobs and a lot of progress. I appeal to the Taoiseach to see how this could be headed off in the budget. It should be borne in mind that the ultimate cost of allowing a collapse in these sectors which I know he does not want to see happen would be enormous in terms of social welfare, health and societal problems.

An Cathaoirleach: A number of Members are offering to speak, but I cannot fit in all of them. Therefore, rather than start the rounds again, I ask the Taoiseach to respond. We must finish at 4 p.m. There are only nine minutes left.

The Taoiseach: I have enjoyed this experience and thank Senators for the contributions they have made. Some of them have been very valuable and constructive.

My agenda for the future is immediately to deal with the budget and the public finances, Brexit, the common travel area, Northern Ireland, our relationship with Britain, the protection of our own national interests and housing and homelessness. Regarding the latter, we have produced an action plan in 100 days, with €5 billion on the table, which is being implemented. There are challenges in the health sector. The budget is €14 billion and we have waiting lists and issues with emergency departments. Our strategy is to have a ten-year focus on health.

I was asked when the Citizens' Assembly would report on the eighth amendment. It is the

first issue with which Ms Justice Laffoy and the 99 citizens will deal. Obviously, I expect the recommendations or whatever report is produced to be available to the Oireachtas probably fairly early in 2017. I cannot put a date on it because I am not in a position to direct that the assembly have it back by a particular date. It is important that ordinary citizens be entitled to have their say at a public forum on an issue which has divided Irish society for well over 30 years. I look forward to the engagement and participation of people from throughout the country and various groups will have their say. It will eventually come back to the Oireachtas. I cannot give a date as to when the assembly will report, but it is the first item with which it will deal.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell referred to public pay. This is a serious issue. Having gone through budgets since 2011, I know just how desperate the situation has been and still is in many cases. I take on board Senator Michael McDowell's words. We are not going to blow the economy off the rails on which the people have put it in recent years through their hard sacrifices and difficult political choices. There is a finite pot of approximately €1 billion as has been set out by both Ministers. It will be two to one in favour of public services as against taxation matters. We must make choices based on fairness, equality and priority to try to improve the lives of people where we can.

In many cases, when I sit at the European Council table people look at Ireland in a very different way now and see the growth rate and the deficit falling - to be eliminated by 2018. They see employment at over 2 million for the first time since 2009 and they see the improvements. However, there are challenges. The Senator raised a very particular point on the follow through from the Haddington Road agreement and the Lansdowne Road agreement, which is to end in 2017. I am a realist, as everybody must be in this business. The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform is acutely aware that there must be an arrangement to follow on from the Lansdowne Road agreement in due course. I will say no more about it now, except that the Minister is acutely aware of the importance of the public services in which people engage and the services they provide. I hope that in the current situation people will involve themselves in the mechanisms of the Workplace Relations Commission and the Labour Court and that we continue to keep the country moving in the direction it is now heading, towards a rising economy with the capacity to spread its fruits throughout the land where they are needed, where there is inequality and where people have been left behind.

The north inner city is an issue on which I intend to prove the Government actually takes an interest. It is an area that was neglected, left behind and in which there was not equality of opportunity. I have been there on many occasions. There are very strong, resilient and persistent people living in it who are committed to their families, streets and homes. They do not want their area to be blackened by a small percentage of criminal gangs that involve themselves in power, money and territory with a ruthlessness that is savage in how it imposes itself on communities. That is why the Garda has been given the resources and the opportunity to deal with them. It is also why Mr. Kieran Mulvey is speaking to all of the groups involved. We will receive his report in November and I hope we can deal with the issue and demonstrate that where community leaders and people want to get on with their lives, we will be there to help them. When I say "we", I mean everybody involved. This is a cross-party issue, not a party-political one.

The question of education interests me. We do not have the money to invest where we know we could. We must look to the Cassells report. We have shorter term issues. We have the issues of paternity leave and the second free preschool year. We must also deal with the question of child care costs.

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I am concerned about the fragility of the European Union. Thirty-five or 40 years ago, a number of very strong leaders were recognised in Europe but now we have a single, serious economic power. For all of those years it was a case of countries applying to join the European Union and now a country has decided to leave it. I want Senators to understand the European Commission has always been the body which has dealt with applications to join because it has had the experience and expertise available to it. This is the first time a country is leaving and the Commission will still deal with the negotiations and discussions. It will be the European Council which will make the ultimate decisions because its members are the elected leaders and Heads of Government of the countries involved. There is fragility about the structure of Europe that needs to be focused on, with clear political thinking and a picture of where we want to be in five, ten, 15 and 20 years' time.

There are concerns about trade deals, but there is also the prize of being able to set down the standards for world trade for the next 50 years. People should not be afraid of globalisation. Socrates said he was not a citizen of Athens or of Greece but a citizen of the world. It is more important now to understand the interdependence of people and the international aspect of who we are in Ireland and the impact Irish people make worldwide every day, of which I am very proud. We have the challenge of continuing to keep the country as a place that is attractive for foreign direct investment and recognised as being open for business. We are first in the world for skilled labour and, according to some of the world reports, seventh in terms of competitiveness. We have moved up the line, which is where we need to be.

The forthcoming budget on 11 October will provide for Brexit-proofing on issues that we know are important. People have mentioned the industries under pressure - some have already gone under. Currency fluctuations, mentioned by Senator Joe O'Reilly, are an issue. Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland are examining it and the Minister is very cognisant of what it means. It also means that there is an issue with price increases in the case of some manufacturing exports to England. These matters will impact on British consumers in due course, which will be an issue. It is right and proper that the Prime Minister should have the opportunity to reflect on the issues on which the United Kingdom has to focus before Article 50 is triggered. Otherwise we will be into a complete mass of confusion. We cannot have a fix at on what the proposition is, as it is the legal right of the Prime Minister to move it. When it is moved, the European Union must respond on where it wants to be. Believe me, the complications will be absolutely complex and we have had some initial reaction to them.

People have asked whether we have a plan. Long before the vote, we established a unit in the Department of the Taoiseach to examine the contingencies that might have to be dealt with. There is a dedicated Cabinet committee. I was asked about appointing a Minister. This is bigger than one ministry and we need everybody involved. That is why I chair the Cabinet committee and bring in Ministers as necessary. I have asked all Ministers to look in detail at what is involved in their Departments in so far as their counterparts in Northern Ireland are concerned. The next meeting of the North-South Ministerial Council will be held in November and this will be an issue. I hope we will have held the first of a series of all-island discussions before then because it is important that the economic voice of Northern Ireland also be heard on cross-Border activities. It is very important that we hear all voices. The North-South Ministerial Council is well able to deal with the politics and political discussion, but there are other voices that also need to be heard.

On homelessness and housing, we have a €5 billion programme that is unprecedented in its scale. Some people remarked that not much was happening. The plan was produced within the

first 100 days. The main aim in dealing with homeless families which was set out in the action plan is to ensure that by mid-2017 - it is an ambitious target - commercial hotels will only be used in exceptionally limited circumstances to accommodate homeless families.

4 o'clock

For instance, the €200 million infrastructural fund being put in place is to open up sites that are held in public ownership but are not accessible. There is an intense interest in this already and I believe it will bring about an increased access to about 11,000 to 15,000 houses when they are built.

We also need new ways of thinking like the private sector building after Dublin City Council voted in respect of the site at O'Devaney Gardens, which is a massive operation. Bigger companies, where they are publicly quoted, have a capacity to have very low interest rates in the repayment of loans that they borrow to build houses and can come on stream. We will accelerate the rapid building programme. By the end of 2018, there will be at least 1,500 provided. Look at these sites - much of the material comes in already manufactured elsewhere and grows exponentially in very quick time. A total of 550 HAP homeless tenancies are to be delivered in 2016 and 1,200 in 2017. So far, 450 have been delivered this year. Two hundred extra emergency beds for rough sleepers are to be put in place before the end of the year, at a cost of €4 million. The Housing Agency will purchase 1,600 vacant properties, a number of which will be used to provide permanent homes for homeless persons. The agency has acquired 171 properties on behalf of the local authorities. In addition, in excess of 730 homes have been offered to the agency for sale. So far, bids have been made on 96 of them. Of these, 49 have been accepted and work is ongoing. The supply of social housing will increase to 47,000 by the end of 2021. It is an ambitious target, but it is one I believe will be achieved. Under Rebuilding Ireland, housing first teams in Dublin will increase from 100 tenancies to 300. The point made by those dealing with homeless persons is that the capacity of the Housing First Team is very good. Get the houses first and then provide the wraparound services for those who will live in and occupy them. It seems to be a very successful initiative which is now being expanded here and we hope it will be a big success.

I have mentioned the eighth amendment.

I am very happy to recognise Senator Billy Lawless. I know him for many years, but the reason - to be clear on this - for his appointment was I had seen him in action in the United States, on Capitol Hill in particular, talking to Republican and Democratic Senators and Congressmen. He is better known than many of those who serve on Capitol Hill in the White House. His connections on behalf of all of the Irish will be most fortunate for whoever is elected President in November and the new structure that will apply on Capitol Hill. I wish him well in his endeavours for the diaspora in general but also for the undocumented Irish and elderly Irish who find themselves stranded in condominiums far from their friends and relations, unable to move out. Our agencies and those who look after the needs of the Irish can be led by the Senator. They are in very good hands in that regard.

I thank the father of House for his inspiring words. I will be most happy to grant him an hour of my life to discuss his proposals on Seanad reform.

(Interruptions).

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The Taoiseach: Afternoon tea, coffee or whatever is the Senator's liking. We will choose an appropriate location, visible, of course, and-----

(Interruptions).

Senator David Norris: I thank the Taoiseach. He is most gracious.

The Taoiseach: Senator Aodhán Ó Ríordáin raised a particular matter.

If I may, I would like to come back to the Seanad before the end of the year.

Senator David Norris: Splendid. *Bravo.*

The Taoiseach: We might refer to a number of the issues raised, including the McMahon report which we commissioned. The learned judge produced a fine report.

The Minister of State, Deputy David Stanton, is dealing directly with refugees. We have had problems in that regard, not just in Ireland. We have been ready and committed to take 4,000 refugees, between relocation and resettlement, but it has been very slow in starting off. The process has been streamlined somewhat, particularly in Italy where there were problems. Obviously, there have been problems in other locations also. I think the Minister of State might be quite happy to come and give the Seanad an update. I know that he was answering questions in the Dáil yesterday on the issue. Much better progress is being made. Actually, he has been to visit quite a number of the locations where refugees or asylum seekers have been. By and large, where they have moved from direct provision accommodation into housing in Ireland, they find the country most welcoming and strive very hard to make a contribution to Ireland. I will be happy to follow up on the issue to see what we can do.

A Senator mentioned disability services. I would like to think we could sign the convention as soon as possible. When we set out the roadmap, there were a number of pieces of legislation that had to go through and they were stacked up. In Ireland, we prefer to pass the legislation before we sign. Others have signed and not dealt with the legislation. Perhaps we might discuss that issue also.

Bhí an Seanadóir ag caint faoi chathair na Gaillimhe. The traffic jams are horrendous in Galway.

Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh: Exactly.

The Taoiseach: The people in question are not driving around for nothing. They are working.

(Interruptions).

Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh: That will be of great comfort to the people of Briarhill.

The Taoiseach: The largest cluster of medical device centres in Europe is in the Galway area and I have been caught in the traffic jams myself. NUIG has expanded beyond all recognition. It is a university that has actually climbed up the rankings, despite many criticisms, but I

take the Senator's point. Obviously, we put €900 million into the capital programme to provide a relief road in Galway. It is difficult to get agreement on these things, including the environmental and social aspects, as well as on the impact on people and so on, but it is a location that is going to be the city of culture in 2020. That is going to mean so much for the west and it will be an opportunity for Galway to show its capacity to be recognised as a European city.

On *Stráiteis na Gaeilge*, we have the new *coiste*. The draft recommendations will be before it shortly and Senators will be entitled to participate and help us in that regard.

I have mentioned the Lansdowne Road agreement.

As for the forgotten Irish in England, we have seen the "Men of Arlington" and the programmes produced during the years. I have to say there is a great connection with the Irish agencies in London, Birmingham, Liverpool and so on that look after those who left, particularly in the 1950s, some of whom fell on hard times in the more difficult years.

I mentioned Senator David Norris and his invitation.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: Voting rights.

The Taoiseach: Yes.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: Ná déan dearmad orainn.

The Taoiseach: On the all-island conversation mentioned by the Senator, obviously it is part of where we are and we are going to follow through on it.

Let us see whether we can make real headway on the Manning report and I hope all of the parties will agree to participate. Rather than have it vested in just one Department, it will be the responsibility of the implementation committee. The former Senator Maurice Manning and his people have said they will be available to work with the implementation group on any technicality or issue that might arise and on which it wants further background information.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh mentioned Article 50. When it is to be triggered is the right of the Prime Minister. Obviously, I have met the Secretary of State, Mr. Davis, and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Mr. Brokenshire. Most Ministers have met their counterparts and we are obviously looking at the contingency issues that are going to have to be dealt with, but remember this - of all the countries to be affected by Brexit, for Ireland it is the most critical. It will not affect other countries in south-eastern Europe to the same extent. Given our connections with Britain during the years - social, economic, political and so on - we need to maintain our working relationships. The common travel area arrangement affected both countries to their benefit before we joined the European Union and has done so since, but it has not been tested with one in and one out. Clearly, we do not want to return to having a hard border and it is my intention not to do so. It is also the intention of the British Prime Minister, but there may be different views elsewhere in Europe. If one has a land border between Dundalk and Derry, obviously we will need to be able to look after our national interests. Our national interests were voted on in 1998 when the Good Friday Agreement was voted on and the people, North and South, voted for the right and the opportunity to be able to travel on the island freely. We do not want to see a situation where people in Northern Ireland who are entitled to Irish passports will be required to have visas to visit a part of the island that is a member state of the European Union when the United Kingdom eventually pulls out of it. There are issues that need to be ex-

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amined. I have spoken to a number of people about imaginative ways of ensuring we can retain the best of what we have and move on. From a European perspective, we need to face the future in a way that will allow the European Union to move forward with its almost 500 million people and all of the opportunities that presents. It has evolved during the years from the slaughter in two world wars. Peace in Europe has been, possibly, taken for granted. In the context of the human catastrophic events happening in Syria and Aleppo, that peace should never be taken for granted. For this reason, it is important that the politics of Europe be focused on what we can do to deal with immigration and the prosperity and development of members countries.

Senator Michael McDowell made an important point. We are not going to play around with the public finances. All of the people of the country have made sacrifices and we have moved to a point where we are in a better position than we were, but we are not yet where we would like to be. Careful management of and continued growth in the economy allows for expenditure to deal with those who have been left behind, those who have been neglected and those who have been treated unfairly. We need to get people out of poverty and onto higher incomes in order that they can contribute fully to their communities and areas.

Senator Kevin Humphreys: The point I have made is that the Cabinet has collective responsibility in that regard.

The Taoiseach: I assure the Senator that the collective responsibility of the Cabinet remains as it always has been. There has been no change. There has been collective responsibility since the foundation of the State and I do not intend to change it. When the Government and the Cabinet make decisions by collective responsibility, that principle stands, which is important. As I indicated in the Dáil to the former Leader of Senator Kevin Humphrey's party in recent days, I do not intend to change it.

I hope I have dealt with most of the issues raised.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: Perhaps the Taoiseach might address the issue of voting rights for people in the North in presidential elections.

The Taoiseach: Following on from the appointment of the first Minister of State with responsibility for the diaspora, former Deputy Jimmy Deenihan, a new Minister of State has been appointed to that role. I will shortly meet the officials who deal with this area. I want the issues of voting rights for people in the North in presidential elections and the voting rights of emigrants to be addressed. There are complications and challenges.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: I am not an emigrant.

An Cathaoirleach: Please allow the Taoiseach to respond.

The Taoiseach: I did not say the Senator was an emigrant. I said I wanted to deal with the issue of voting rights for people in the North in presidential elections and the voting rights of people who live in countries outside the island of Ireland. I hope I have made myself clear.

I will be happy to return to the House again before Christmas to deal with some of the other issues raised, if that is the wish of the Seanad.

Senator Catherine Ardagh: The Taoiseach might address the issue of the Christmas bonus.

Senator Mark Daly: I hope he will come back with good news.

The Taoiseach: That issue has been raised in the Dáil and elsewhere. These are matters for the budget to be announced on 11 October, in the context of which discussions are ongoing between the Ministers for Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform and the other members of the Cabinet. As I said, we have a finite pot. All of these matters will be subject to the budgetary announcements to be made on 11 October.

An Cathaoirleach: We are well over time. I thank the Taoiseach for his visit and what has been a very interesting debate. We will hold him to his promise to return to the House before Christmas.

The Taoiseach: I will be happy to do so.

An Cathaoirleach: The Taoiseach can discuss the the issue of the Christmas bonus at that point.

When is it proposed to sit again?

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Next Tuesday at 2.30 p.m.

The Seanad adjourned at 4.15 p.m. until 2.30 p.m. on Tuesday, 4 October 2016.