



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

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

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SEANAD ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 6 Feabhra 2018

Tuesday, 6 February 2018

Chuaigh an i gceannas ar 2.30 p.m.

Machnamh agus Paidir. *Reflection and Prayer.*

Business of Seanad

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

The need for the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport to outline his plans for the transfer of Dún Laoghaire Harbour from the State to Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council as provided for by the Harbours Act 2015.

I have also received notice from Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Education and Skills to direct that third level institutions charge only a nominal student contribution and registration fee when students undertake an internship year as part of their course of study.

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

The need for the Minister of Education and Skills to give an update on the future plans for the Canal Way Educate Together School in Dublin 8.

I have also received notice from Senator Frank Feighan of the following matter:

The need for the Minister of State with responsibility for the diaspora to provide an update on the funding and plans for assisting organisations and lobby groups supporting the Irish diaspora and foreign aid programmes.

I have also received notice from Senator Aidan Davitt of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Education and Skills to give an update on the accommodation plans for St. Patrick's National School, Edmonton, Killucan, County Westmeath.

I have also received notice from Senator Ged Nash of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Health to give an update on the data breach involving confidential patient information from Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, Drogheda, County Louth.

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

The need for the Minister of Health to ensure that appropriate initiatives are put in place by the HSE to reduce the number of patients who do not attend their outpatient appointments.

I have also received notice from Senator Tim Lombard of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government to provide an update on the Belgooly-Riverstick water scheme in County Cork

Of the matters raised by the Senators suitable for discussion, I have selected Senators Boyhan, Clifford-Lee, Devine and Feighan and they will be taken now.

Commencement Matters

Harbour Authorities

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: The first matter will be taken by the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Ross. You are very faithful to the House, Minister, and you are welcome once again. Your favourite Senator is waiting.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I thank the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Ross, for coming to the House. I have put down a Commencement matter calling on the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport to indicate his intentions to authorise the transfer of Dún Laoghaire Harbour Company from the State to Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council, as provided for under the Harbours Act 2015.

I realise the Minister is aware and knowledgeable about what is going on in Dún Laoghaire Harbour but I will set out some key points. There is considerable uncertainty about the future governance and management of Dún Laoghaire Harbour given the possible transfer of Dún Laoghaire Harbour Company from the State to Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council. The suggestion that ports of local or regional significance would transfer to local authorities has been flagged for approximately two years, since 2015. We have seen some cases of where that has happened.

I wish to flag several issues. I wish to declare that I was a director of the company for two terms so I understand the intricacies of company law and especially issues around the governance of Dún Laoghaire Harbour Company. I live in Dún Laoghaire and I am a former local elected representative for the area. I know and understand the workings of the company and of Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council.

I have several concerns. Outstanding issues remain in respect of a due diligence report commissioned for the harbour. There are protracted legal issues. There are human resources issues

and disputes. There is a depleted workforce at the company. There are suggestions of a major deficit in the pension fund for the company. There are issues relating to corporate governance and funding sources.

I understand this State company has never issued a dividend to the State. I call on the Minister to check this out at some future date. It would raise serious concern if a State company did not give a dividend to the shareholder. In this case, the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport and the Minister for Finance are shareholders on behalf of the State. Every company has to wash its face. A State company, like this one, needs to be able to issue some dividend, if not to the shareholders, then ultimately for spending on the company and the assets of the company.

I have looked at the company's registration and directorships. I understand two of the directors are to cease being in office within months. That will leave only two other directors. This is something I am keen for the Minister to look at. Given the transitional period under discussion, perhaps the Minister can use his powers and office – which is his entitlement in this case – to appoint one or two directors for another transitional period of one year or two. Ultimately, that is a matter for the Minister but it is important to note that there are four directors in place in the company today and two are due to go in a matter of months.

A person who retired from the company some years ago is now acting harbour master. There is a legal obligation to have a harbour master in any harbour. That is an important issue.

What am I asking of the Minister today? I am asking for a decision to be made on the transfer at some point soon rather than for us to be left in limbo. The physical structure of the harbour is in a bad way in parts. There is no coherent masterplan or vision for the harbour. We need a new governance and management structure. We need a new vision and direction for Dún Laoghaire. This is an amazing port. It is an asset to the country, the local economy and the community of Dún Laoghaire.

We need certainty about the Minister's intentions in the short to medium term. We need certainty on how this is progressing. It is important for the community, the sailing fraternity, businesses in the town and the county council and its chief executive. If they have to take over, they need to understand the ramifications and whether there is a shortfall and a need for investment. I have touched on a range of issues. At this stage people are crying out for some direction and certainty about a future transfer of this company.

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I thank the Senator for bringing up this issue, which is one which has been going on for far longer than would be preferable. The issue of transfer is thorny and has now become a political football. It is a matter of conflict between various parties. I will not and do not have to duck out of anything, but the real problem, as the Senator is aware, is that there are two court cases which constrain me enormously in terms of what I can say about some of the issues he has raised. They are very delicate issues and I do not want to say anything which would prejudice the cases.

The Senator will find my reply useful, but before I refer to it I will answer some of the questions he asked. He is right on the issue of directors. It might be helpful to appoint a couple of new directors. If I felt they would hasten the process it would be a very good idea. There is room for that. I note from a table I have here that one director will retire on 1 July this year and another on 23 September. I would not leave the board inquorate, but the case for appointing new directors is probably compelling. This long saga needs a direction which stops the stale-

mate that appears to have been reached and which is frustrating Government policy and leaving the future of the harbour in a great deal of doubt.

The only real role that the Minister has to play directly in the matter to which the Senator referred is if there is a dispute about the model of transfer which is adopted when the harbour is taken in by the local authority. That can be done by a direct share transfer or integrating the assets into the local authority. That has not been decided. A risk assessment is currently taking place which is postponing any decision. If there is a dispute, I will be in a position to make a decision but I have not got to that stage yet.

On the issue of the dividend, it is sometimes very frustrating for a Minister to see profitable companies not paying dividends to the State because obviously we feel we could make good use of them. I am not sure whether dividends have never been paid, but I will take the Senator's word on that. They have not been paid recently. The Senator made a case for dividends. Some State companies maintain that there are other reasons they do not want to pay dividends. They include boosting their reserves for specific reasons. The Irish Aviation Authority is one of the most profitable companies in my portfolio and does not pay a dividend. We asked it about that. I agree with the Senator that it certainly should pay one. There are sometimes good reasons dividends are not paid or are not as big as they might be. Public companies which make profits sometimes do not pay dividends for the same reasons.

I wish to advise that the transfer of Dún Laoghaire Harbour Company to Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council is progressing. The national ports policy, published in March 2013, provides that the five designated ports of regional significance, that is, Drogheda, Dún Laoghaire, Galway, New Ross and Wicklow, will be transferred to more appropriate local authority-led governance structures. The five ports retain important roles as facilitators of their regional economies and, in some instances, as centres of marine-related amenities and tourism activities. However, the scale and nature of these activities are not such as to warrant continued central government involvement. Dún Laoghaire Harbour Company is designated for transfer to Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council.

The Harbours Act 2015 provides the necessary legislative framework to allow for the transfer of ports of regional significance to local authority control. The relevant legislation was enacted in 2015. The Act is not prescriptive in regard to the model for transfer for each port. Rather, it is designed to provide the maximum legislative flexibility by providing for the two possible models of transfer to which I have referred, namely, the retention of the existing company structure and transfer of ministerial shareholding in the company to the local authority or dissolution of the existing company structure and transfer of all assets, liabilities and employees into local authority structures. The intention is that in the case of each port, the local authority and port will agree the most appropriate model of transfer. The optimum model will be the one which finds broad consensus and agreement between parties. If there is disagreement between the port company and the local authority on the model of transfer, then the final decision will be taken by the Minister.

The process of transferring governance of the Dún Laoghaire Harbour Company to the council is well advanced and, as I have said, the future governance and operational structures of the port are primarily matters for agreement between the council and the port company. In the case of each port transfer to a local authority, the decision on the model of transfer is informed by due diligence carried out by the local authority with funding support from my Department.

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Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council has procured consultants to conduct due diligence, and the council chief executive presented the due diligence report to councillors at the council meeting held on 9 January 2017. As the report raised a number of issues for further clarification, the chief executive decided to engage a risk and finance consultant to carry out a risk assessment. This assessment will enable the council to fully understand the implications of each model of transfer and the responsibility that will transfer, in financial and other terms. Officials from my Department met with the risk assessor on 31 January 2017 to give the shareholder's perspective on national ports policy and to explain different models of transfer.

Since then, I understand that both the council and the port have engaged in a process. In April 2017, clarification was sought from my officials on whether it was necessary to sign a non-disclosure agreement regarding commercially sensitive information held by the port. My officials met with the Dún Laoghaire Harbour Company's chief executive officer and company secretary on 11 April 2017 to progress matters, and a way forward was agreed in order to enable the exchange of information required, and to clarify any outstanding issues so that the risk assessment could be completed.

I understand the port company has engaged with the risk assessor, who is now in the process of preparing the final report for presentation to the council at a meeting scheduled to take place on 26 February. I expect matters to then progress towards the agreement of a model and a transfer date. Finally, I can confirm that Wicklow Port Company transferred to Wicklow County Council in August 2016 by a ministerial order made under the Harbours Act 2015. Drogheda Port Company transferred to Louth County Council in October 2017. The transfer of the other ports of regional significance to local authority control is progressing.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I thank the Minister for that comprehensive response. It is clear that it is intended to transfer the Dún Laoghaire Harbour Company and the governance of the harbour to Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council. I appreciate that the Minister has outlined that he has a role only in the event of a dispute. Would the Minister consider appointing one or two people to the board early on to help push things along? He has identified that as a possibility. I also appeal to the Minister to consider some engagement with Ms Philomena Poole, the chief executive of Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council, in regard to those appointments. Clearly, if this company is going to transfer to Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council, there is a strong case to be made for dialogue and consultation between the Minister and the chief executive beforehand. Suitable people to fill the skills shortage that may affect the company may come forward. I would appreciate it if the Minister would consider that.

Deputy Shane Ross: This is a constructive and sensible discussion. I will respond by saying unless something occurs to me in the next couple of days, I will seriously consider appointing two directors. I will do that through the Public Appointments Service, PAS, process. I would not have any direct involvement in it. It will take place through the process set up by my Department. This will mean that the appointees are independently nominated and are not political cronies or anything of that sort. With that reservation, I accept the Senator's point.

Third Level Fees

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee: I thank the Minister of State for attending the House today to respond to the issue I have raised on third level fees, specifically those charged to students undertaking a year's internship as part of their course of study. The issue was highlighted

to me by a student in north County Dublin who is in her third year in Maynooth. She is on work placement for the full year. She also has a friend who is in DCU who is on a full-year's work placement. They both have to pay their full fees to their particular universities amounting to more than €3,000 each. They do not have any access to the library and they are not undertaking tutorials, lectures or examinations. Their only interaction is submitting a report at the end of their internship in June.

The Citizens' Information service says that student contribution fees cover student services and examinations in college. That is disproportionate to the level of service these girls and many thousands like them are getting when they undertake their internship year. Perhaps the Minister of State will consider directing that the colleges reduce their fees significantly for students who undertake a full academic year out of the college setting, who do not access the services and have limited interaction with college staff.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor): I thank Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee for raising this matter. Internships are an increasingly important element of higher education programmes and are a means of strengthening the link between higher education and the workplace. They afford students the opportunity to apply their learning to a work environment, thereby enriching both the student and the workplace. In particular, academic programmes that include an internship module provide students with an opportunity to put theory into practice, to acquire new skills and knowledge - personal and work related - and to enhance their employment potential on graduation.

The importance of work based learning in higher education is reflected in the new systems performance framework that was published in December 2017. The new framework that provides the strategic objectives for the higher education sector up to 2020 includes a high level target that all students will have the opportunity to undertake a work placement or a work-based project as part of their course by 2025. The Higher Education Authority will work with the higher education institutions to ensure that this target is achieved.

It is important to acknowledge that there is a cost to individual higher education institutions arising from the establishment of internship programmes, for example, students undertaking the internship element of their programme continue to have access to all institutional facilities. Institutions are also expected to support their students during the internship element of their programme through formative and summative evaluation. There are also costs associated with developing and sustaining links with employers.

It is also important to recognise that higher education institutions are autonomous bodies and my Department has a limited role in the day-to-day running of the operational affairs of the institutions. In particular, it is an issue for higher education institutions in the first instance to determine the level of fee applicable to particular programmes or to particular elements of academic programmes. The student contribution, which currently stands at €3,000, applies to all students who benefit from the Department's free fees initiative. The student contribution is paid by the Exchequer in respect of students who qualify under the Department's third level grant schemes. Tax relief is also available for second and subsequent siblings to alleviate the cost for families for approved courses at approved colleges of higher education.

The Senator will be aware that we are reinvesting in higher education for the first time in a decade. Ensuring a sustainable funding model for higher education is a key priority for me. To this end, I secured funding of €36.5 million in budget 2017. This was complemented by addi-

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tional funding of €60 million for higher education in budget 2018. This additional funding will allow for targeted initiatives in higher education, including in respect of skills programmes, performance and innovation funding, technological university development, and apprenticeship costs in the sector. It will also allow for places to be provided for 2,100 and additional students in 2018. This means we are investing approximately €100 million more in higher education in 2018 by comparison with 2016.

To complement this work, I recently published an independent expert review of the current allocation model for funding higher education. It provides a roadmap for transitioning towards a reformed funding model that is more transparent, that is consistent across higher education institutions, that incentivises actions in key strategic areas, such as research and STEM provision, and that supports improved accountability while also respecting international autonomy. I will continue to work to provide a more sustainable funding model for the higher education sector in the years ahead while also recognising and respecting the autonomy of higher education institutions over key operational decisions. Again, I thank the Senator for affording me the opportunity to respond on this matter.

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee: The Minister said internships are becoming increasingly important. They are also becoming increasingly more common. When I was in third level, it was very rare for an internship year to be part of the normal course of study. It is far more prevalent in today's society.

The Minister mentioned that students have access to the facilities in the third level institution, such as the library, during their internship year. While this is true, most of the students work for approximately 40 hours per week and will not be going back into the university to use the library. They are very busy during their working week. In reality, therefore, they do not access the services of the third level institution. While I accept that the Minister has limited scope in regard to the fees charged by third level institutions, perhaps there is scope for her to encourage them to reflect on the fees they charge to the increasing number of students who are taking the internship option as part of their courses and perhaps reduce the fees nominally to reflect the fact that the students are not using the college facilities.

Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor: I thank the Senator for her remarks. Internship is becoming increasingly important. We will be seeing more of it and we will be encouraging it. I would like the students to be able to use the library. Certainly, I am not someone who would say that if one does not pay fees, one may not use the library. Given the very nature of third level education, library facilities must be available to students. Whether they use them is an issue for themselves.

Higher education institutions are autonomous. I will reflect on what the Senator said, however. At present, I am making sure there is increased funding for higher education institutions so each student will have a better experience right through the continuum of higher education.

School Accommodation Provision

Senator Máire Devine: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire go dtí an Teach. I believe it is his first time addressing a Commencement matter for me in this Chamber. I want him to be generous and to act boldly with regard to the matter I raise.

Like the majority of parents, I wanted a more progressive education for my children. Accordingly, I was part of the parents group which established the successful Educate Together school at Griffith Barracks on South Circular Road, Dublin 8. Obtaining the premises for the school was quite a battle. That is why I am particularly passionate about the Canal Way Educate Together project. I hope the Department will be more proactive than it was 18 years ago.

When I was segregated across the road at the Mater Dei national school, now St. James's primary school, my brothers attended CBS James Street, which is now where the Canal Way Educate Together school is located. I welcome the students, parents and the teachers from Canal Way school to the Visitors Gallery. When I visited the school last week, I noted the atmosphere was about creativity, spontaneity, respect, co-operation and fun, which was evident in every classroom. It is the opposite to what my brothers put up with in the CBS. However, this creativity and modern schooling is confined and constricted by the lack of space for expansion, the dire conditions of the building with poor heating, toilet facilities and opaque windows which the kids cannot see through and the lease. The school was the first to be divested from Catholic patronage of religious orders under a previous Minister. However, it was given a paltry ten-year lease in 2014. The school's board of management was not consulted and had no input regarding its terms and conditions. It is at the mercy of the Edmund Rice Schools Trust to do any building works, upgrading or expansion. This is untenable.

There are six years remaining on the lease. How can the children, teachers, principal, parents and community function securely with such a short-term miserable lease? This is causing chaos and anxiety for parents. There is nowhere else to enrol their children. Why should they have to go anywhere else? My neighbour, for example, put her son's name on the school's waiting list four years ago when he was one month old. However, he cannot be accommodated at the school this September. I have been stopped on the streets and in shops and have received emails and phone calls on the subject. It is a massive issue for Dublin 8, but one that is repeated across the country.

The school is unique, offering a modern education system to nurture our children and our communities. Will the Minister get the lease and security of tenure for this school? In turn, this will allow growth and expansion of the school, which is in such high demand. Will the Minister please just do it?

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Richard Bruton): I thank Senator Devine for raising this issue which has already been raised with me by Deputies Catherine Byrne, Ó Snodaigh and Senator Bacik. I know this is a valuable school, treasured within its community. Canal Way Educate Together school is a co-educational school which opened in September 2013 in Harcourt Terrace. Subsequently, in 2014, the school moved to a former primary school building in Basin Lane that was secured as part of Government policy on school divesting. The school had 240 pupils enrolled at September 2017 and staffing of a principal, nine mainstream teachers and three resource posts. The existing accommodation at Basin Lane consists of ten mainstream classrooms, which are sufficient to meet the school's current enrolment numbers. To facilitate its development, the school has submitted an application to my Department for additional accommodation.

The Basin Lane building is subject to a ten-year and nine-month lease between the Edmund Rice Schools Trust and the Minister for Education and Skills, which, in turn, has been subleased by the Department to Educate Together, which is the patron body. Any building works require consent of the Edmund Rice Schools Trust under the lease. In that connection, my Department

has been liaising with the Edmund Rice Schools Trust to secure its consent to the placement of temporary accommodation on the school site. I am pleased to confirm that the Edmund Rice Schools Trust has agreed a licence agreement that will allow for the provision of an additional six mainstream classrooms and three resource rooms to the school. An approval letter devolving authority for the delivery of the classrooms concerned has been issued by my Department to the school. My Department will be in ongoing contact with the school to provide relevant assistance with this project. I thank the Senator for raising the matter. I can assure her that my Department will continue to liaise with the school regarding its accommodation needs.

Acting Chairman (Senator John O'Mahony): Does the Senator want a brief supplementary?

Senator Máire Devine: I thank the Minister for liaising with the Edmund Rice Schools Trust but I guess the word that stands out for me is temporary. It is not going to solve the problem. Will the Minister visit the school? I know he cannot visit every school in the country and I understand his workload, but this is the first one to be divested and I think it would send out a great message and follow on from Government policy to divest schools to communities and let communities run and have ownership of them. I would like the Minister to visit the school and I invite him, as do the principal, parents and children. Will he negotiate with the Edmund Rice Schools Trust to buy this school? Is he in that negotiation space or are we just still talking about temporary accommodation? I appreciate the nuances in divestment but the Minister needs to be bold. We need to grab this and ensure that our children have the modern schooling they deserve so this country and the culture changes. Again, it is all well and good but please omit the word "temporary". It needs to be permanent security.

Deputy Richard Bruton: The matter of purchasing a property is something that would have to be considered by the Department in a wider context. We try to avoid purchasing sites in many cases where we can secure leases on good terms. Most of the properties we have are owned by patrons rather than the Department. The Department builds or provides facilities with a lien to ensure those properties are put to educational use. From an Exchequer point of view, that has been a satisfactory way to interact with patrons. What the Senator is suggesting would require some reflection by the Department as to whether it ought to move from such arrangements to a different arrangement. I do not have a fixed view on this. I would say that in the short term, the Department is fully committed in terms of capital to meet what is now an estimated 20,000 additional places we must provide every year. That does mean that we must be fairly careful with the use of capital. Site acquisition is pretty much confined to areas where we must acquire a site for a new school where we have those commitments. Site acquisition is adopted when it is necessary, not as a routine approach. I am not closing my mind to that but what is important is that under the existing arrangement, we have permission to allow the school develop. My Department will obviously be working with the school to ensure that its longer-term plans can be delivered in this way. I cannot commit today to visiting any particular school but I will bear in mind the kind invitation issued by the principal. When I get an opportunity to go out and about, as I try to do, I will certainly consider a visit to this school.

Diaspora Issues

Senator Frank Feighan: I welcome the Minister of State with responsibility for the diaspora. I am seeking an update on funding and plans for assisting organisations and lobby groups

which support the Irish diaspora, along with a similar update about foreign aid programmes. It is great to see the Minister of State back in the House. I acknowledge his work and the work of the Government in this area and his deep personal interest in and commitment to the global Irish. Brexit is posing many challenges for Ireland but I also believe it will present many opportunities for Ireland. Until recently, as I have stated many times, an average of 26 daily meetings took place between Irish and UK officials in Europe. This provided politicians and officials with a platform to nurture and develop friendships and trust. We need to do more to ensure that this trust and these friendships can be protected and enhanced. It is evident that the Government is committed to growing our global footprint for overseas staff. I was very pleased to hear the Taoiseach's commitment at the end of last year to double Ireland's representation around the world, through its network of embassies and agencies, focusing on investment, tourism, culture and food. As the Minister of State knows, Ireland has always punched well above its weight and Irish people have made huge contributions wherever they have travelled. I believe that, as a country, we do not have a colonial or imperialist past. Ireland is in a great place now, as an independent nation, to step up and take its place among the nations of the world and do what is good and lead by example. I look forward to hearing what exactly the plans are for our diaspora, for our foreign NGOs, etc.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Ciarán Cannon): In 2018, the Government has committed €11.595 million to the emigrant support programme. Through this important programme, the Government supports culturally sensitive front-line welfare services, targeted at the most vulnerable members of our overseas communities. It also supports cultural, heritage, business and capital investment projects which benefit Irish communities abroad. The current round of that particular emigrant support programme grant scheme is open for online applications until 16 February 2018. We are also continuing our work to reduce the barriers faced by citizens returning to Ireland from abroad. I commissioned an economic report on difficulties experienced by Irish people returning home which will soon be finalised and published. This will be considered by the interdepartmental committee on the Irish abroad, which works to facilitate a whole-of-Government response to issues affecting Irish people abroad. In addition, my Department has established an innovative new project to assist returning emigrant entrepreneurs, the back for business pilot programme, which is also successfully under way.

The Government is demonstrating its continued commitment to achieving a solution for our undocumented citizens in the US by proactively engaging with the Irish immigration centres and continuing our political engagement through high-level visits which will continue up to and including the St. Patrick's Day visits and onwards after that. The Coalition of Irish Immigration Centers, with the support of legal advice funded by the Department's emigrant support programme, has produced straightforward and accessible interpretation and guidance about the executive orders which has been made available through its own website and those of the embassy and consulates. Our priority continues to be to support the most vulnerable members of our community abroad, with 70% of that emigrant support programme funding going to organisations which provide front-line welfare services. Based on key themes discussed at the global Irish civic forum in May 2017, we are also seeking to encourage greater collaboration within Irish communities overseas. We are committed to supporting diversity in the diaspora to best represent the range of Irish groups and organisations that exist at home and abroad, including those that have been under-represented historically. The focus of this year's funding round is on collaborative projects which support intergenerational links and which reflect diversity and support new emigrants.

The Government is strongly committed to Ireland's overseas development co-operation programme and its place at the heart of our foreign policy. A Programme for a Partnership Government clearly articulates our commitment to the UN target of providing 0.7% of gross national income in official development assistance as economic conditions allow. The manifestation of that commitment has been the steady increase over each of the last three budgets in the funds allocated to official development assistance with just over €770 million allocated in budget 2018. Around 70% of official development assistance is channelled through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade as Irish Aid with the remainder channelled through other Government Departments. Our citizens can take pride in the achievement of Irish Aid which is helping to transform lives. Ireland's response to humanitarian crises allows those in refugee circumstances to meet basic needs such as food and education. Working with such organisations as Concern and Trócaire, the EU, the UN and key partner countries in Africa, Ireland is helping to build resilient communities and societies and also helping to ensure other potential humanitarian crises are avoided. Irish civil servants, drawing on the knowledge, contacts and expertise generated by the Irish Aid programme, were instrumental in brokering agreement of the sustainable development goals at the UN, a set of targets which are intended to improve the lives of everyone on our planet by 2030.

In building and maintaining an effective development co-operation programme, my Department has developed a series of transparent criteria for funding. There are two main civil society funding streams currently operating. The first is a civil society programme grant, which is a performance-based multi-annual grant for organisations of a certain size. It allows for flexibility and predictability in addressing the needs of poorer and marginalised people. The second such funding stream is the annual civil society project fund, which allows Irish and selected international NGOs to apply for funding for projects up to three years in duration. The 2018 funding round, which saw an increase in the potential size of grants awarded closed last month and applications are being assessed.

Looking forward, the improving economic circumstances open the prospect of increases in Irish official development assistance in future budgets. To prepare for this, the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Coveney, has indicated that Ireland's development co-operation policy should be revisited to take account of the current global context and to ensure Ireland's policies are ready for the development challenges of the decade ahead. Development of this new policy will include a public consultation phase. It will also reflect the work undertaken by the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade and Defence which is currently reviewing the Irish Aid programme. The new official development assistance policy should inform very ambitious but sustainable progress towards meeting that UN target for official development assistance.

Senator Frank Feighan: I am delighted the Minister of State is working to reduce the barriers faced by citizens seeking to return to Ireland from abroad. I look forward to seeing the report when it is finalised. They are people who never forgot our country and sometimes went in difficult times. Everything should be put in place to provide the best possible assistance for returned emigrant entrepreneurs such as a back to business pilot programme. Much funding has been spent. We have gone up to 0.7% of gross national income in official development assistance. We could work more closely with a lot of other organisations in a lot of other areas. We have applied for observer status at the group of francophone nations. They also work closely with countries in Africa. Through the francophone group and the EU, we can make our money go further. I know the Minister of State is looking at various opportunities and I appreciate

the work being done. I appreciate that sometimes Irish Aid can be forgotten about. I want to highlight the great work the Minister of State, the Department and all the other Departments involved in Irish Aid are doing but the Irish overseas should be helped as well. We need to take our place among the nations of the world. We are an independent nation without any baggage and we can now be independent arbiters around the world. We should not be afraid to take those steps.

Deputy Ciarán Cannon: I thank the Senator for his consistent interest in this area. The report from Indecon, which was the entity commissioned to prepare the report on the barriers that exist for returning emigrants, will be published very shortly. It has forensically assessed each of those barriers and the reasons they occur and has suggested some very innovative solutions which we hope to implement. The Senator is correct in saying that Ireland, quite rightly, is proud of its long and historic track record in supporting vulnerable communities and countries across the world. The Senator mentioned francophone Africa. I just returned from Senegal last week where Ireland as a long-committed member of the Global Partnership for Education - indeed one of the founders of the Global Partnership for Education in 2002 - was able to commit to doubling its funding for that particular endeavour over the next three years in partnership with a number of other countries with a similar interest in ensuring that the incredible societal transformation that occurred in this country over the past 50 years through education can also occur in other countries where young people are equally entitled to share in that success.

Message from Dáil

Acting Chairman (Senator John O'Mahony): Dáil Éireann has passed the Planning and Development (Amendment) Bill 2016 on the 31st day of January 2018, to which the agreement of Seanad Éireann is desired.

Sitting suspended at 3.21 p.m. and resumed at 3.34 p.m.

Order of Business

Senator Jerry Buttimer: The Order of Business is No. 1, motion of referral of Sectoral Employment Order (Mechanical Engineering Building Services Contracting Sector) 2018 to the Joint Committee on Business, Enterprise and Innovation, to be taken without debate at the conclusion of the Order of Business; and No. 2, statements on foreign affairs, to be taken at 4.45 p.m. and adjourned not later than 6 p.m., if not previously concluded, with the contributions of group spokespersons not to exceed eight minutes each and those of all other Senators not to exceed five minutes each; and No. 3, Private Members' business, Education (Welfare) (Amendment) Bill 2017 - Second Stage, to be taken at 6 p.m., with the time allocated for the debate not to exceed two hours. As the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Simon Coveney, will be unavoidably absent this evening, the Minister of State, Deputy Ciarán Cannon, will take the statements on foreign affairs. The Tánaiste has been unavoidably detained and apologises to the House, as I do.

Senator Catherine Ardagh: This is Safer Internet Day, an EU-wide initiative to promote safer use of the Internet for all, especially young people. The theme of Safer Internet Day 2018 is "Create, connect and share respect: a better Internet starts with you". Not only do Internet

platforms have a role in cultivating a safer space for users, but as individuals, politicians, teachers and parents, we have a role to play in raising awareness of the need for safety when using the Internet. It is a great campaign and encourages all of us to highlight the motto in an effort to create awareness and safety online, especially for our young people. It will not be a panacea but, in conjunction with other prongs, like the immediate appointment of a digital safety commissioner, confirmation of a digital age of consent and possible legislation on age limits for the use of smartphones, I believe we can continue to ensure that our young people use the Internet smartly and safely.

Moving on to the more sinister side of the Internet, I congratulate An Garda Síochána on its diligent work on Operation Ketch. To date, 31 homes have been raided as part of an operation to crack down on child pornography and the raids have been carried out across 12 counties. I hope that with the correct resources the Garda will be able to successfully prosecute many of these awful crimes and, in turn, these successful prosecutions will act as a serious deterrent for other perpetrators. These, as we know, are not victimless crimes.

The third item I would like to raise is the community employment service for people aged 62 and over. A review scheme was promised to be delivered this autumn on the support stream for participants aged 62 and over but the findings have yet to be published. The scheme enables 7% of participants aged 62 years and over on each scheme to remain on the CE schemes up to the qualifying age for the State pension, provided the eligibility conditions were met and the numbers on the scheme have not been exceeded. I call on the relevant Minister to let us know when the review will be completed and when its findings will be published.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I thank the Senator and call Senator McDowell.

Senator Michael McDowell: I dtús báire, ba mhaith liom cúpla focal a rá i dtaobh ár gcomhghleacaí, an Seanadóir Trevor Ó Clochartaigh. Tá sé sa nuachtáin go bhfuil sé ar intinn aige éirí as oifig mar Sheanadóir. Go pearsanta, ba mhaith liom a rá gur duine gealgháireach, macánta agus cairdiúil é agus guím dea-ghuí air ina phost nua i TG4. Tá aiféala orm go bhfuil sé chun éirí as oifig sa Teach seo.

The second point I want to make is as follows. We read in the newspapers last week that the Prime Minister of Israel, Mr. Benjamin Netanyahu, had summoned the Irish ambassador to protest to her about the legislation which this House was debating at that stage, and which is still under debate in this House. I just thought it was appropriate that this House should make it very clear that we decide in this House what we debate and how we vote. We do not succumb to lobbying from outside as to what we say, do or think, or do with our votes or with our mandates in this House.

Senator David Norris: Do they not?

Senator Michael McDowell: There are places in the world where particular interest groups, and particular national interest groups, have immense clout and where people are afraid to speak their minds on issues. In this House I would consider it not merely our right but our duty to consider legislation, and to give it a fair debate, without interference by the representative of any sovereign power. I say that without any malice or ill will whatsoever towards Israel whose existence I support, and I support a two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli issue. I also support Resolution 242 of the UN in terms of the extent of Israel and the extent of the occupied territories.

I want to put on the record my strongest possible objection that the leader of any country of any kind, be it democratic or undemocratic, would consider it his right to summon the Irish ambassador to rebuke, through the Irish ambassador and through the Irish Government, this House for what it is doing, and to suggest that we should alter course at his insistence. We are a free, sovereign, neutral, non-aligned State. It is wrong in principle for the leader of any other sovereign state to seek to influence our debate by curtailing it or protesting about it. We in this House are intelligent women and men who have our own judgments on these matters. Whether we are in favour of or opposed to the Bill in question - and I personally support its progress to Second Stage - I deeply deprecate the idea that the leader of a foreign state should try to influence our proceedings.

The last thing I will say is that some Members might be interested in a particular provision in law.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Members are always interested in law.

Senator Michael McDowell: Section 58 of the Seanad Electoral (Panel Members) Act 1947 provides that where two or more vacancies occur and the Minister is notified of them, two entirely separate elections must take place to fill the vacancies.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I thank the Senator for that enlightenment but I do not believe there are two vacancies just yet.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Not yet.

Senator John Dolan: The issue I want to raise today is the progression and implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The Taoiseach was in this House last week. I was delighted that he mentioned that the convention would be ratified by March and that there would be resolutions in both Houses in that regard. I thank the Taoiseach for that. The Taoiseach - the leader of our country - must ensure that the implementation of this convention is driven. It is a matter for every Department, but it needs a ward boss. It needs the leader of the State to make sure that its implementation is co-ordinated, efficient and effective and that we do not have the age-old problem of one part of Government not knowing what another part is doing. That is the key to really clocking on with this.

The Taoiseach made a statement on the future of Europe in the European Parliament a week or two before his visit to this House. He underlined the historic and hopeful context of its creation after the Second World War. He set out the issues and grave challenges of today as well as the importance of the EU to Ireland and of Ireland's commitment to the EU. These are very significant statements. He referred to the Balkans and central and eastern Europe. He mentioned the role of the EU in supporting these areas and the importance of the Structural Funds specifically. He also mentioned the great African continent and the support which it needs in this century.

As we ratify, let us not forget to have solidarity with and to support these states and other eastern states such as Moldova that are on the edge of Russia. We should not forget what I will describe as the concerns that Russia has about the states which border it and their interest in being part of the European democratic movement. Let us keep what I will describe as our missionary instinct in our international concern. Perhaps "missionary" is an awkward word these days. As we plough on with the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, let us be awake to the people with disabilities in these states and their families.

We are committed to the implementation of the sustainable development goals in respect of economic, environmental and social issues across the world. That feeds into this agenda as well. Ireland can get out and in front in respect of implementation of the convention for more than 600,000 people here and it can also be a shining light for people with disabilities and their families who are in much more unfortunate situations than we are. I am often regarded as someone who is always giving out that not enough is done here, but I will put the following on the record. I have been to other places and know what people experience daily. I know that we have good ground from which to work and on which to continue in that vein.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: I raise an issue about the schedule for this week. Last week when he came to the House, the Taoiseach boasted about how efficient the Government was in publishing legislation. He said we should have sight of a Bill at least two weeks before it was debated and that we should not accept a lower standard. The Data Protection Bill will be debated on Thursday less than one week after it was published. As per the high standards set by the Taoiseach, I ask that more time be given to consider the Bill, the consequences of which are deep and will be felt far and wide. As a consequence, we need more time to examine it. Will the Leader consider giving us more time to examine it in a meaningful way?

Thousands of patients in chronic pain found have out in recent months that the Versatis patch is no longer available to them under the medical card or the drug refund scheme. The decision by the HSE to withdraw the pain-killing patch is having a huge effect on chronic pain sufferers. It means that a person who has money does not suffer pain, whereas the person who does not have it must use morphine patches, consider taking a drug that is not effective or remain in pain. Patient-centred health care must include empathy and respect. One man who is only off the patch for one week has seen a significant reduction in his quality of life. Many users of the patch have been through serious illnesses and medical procedures. Will those who no longer have access to the patch have to go back to pain management clinics? Last week I referred to the confusion surrounding waiting list times at the pain management clinic in University Hospital Galway. This is an example of the HSE attempting to save money, but it may end up clogging up services that are already under pressure. I know of another patient in her early 30s who cannot move and is absolutely dependent on the patch. She has been waiting since July 2016 for an appointment to attend the pain management clinic in Galway, but has been told that she will have to wait at least another 15 months. On behalf of those patients who are receiving other similar long-term products from the HSE, I ask that they not be treated in such a disgraceful manner. We need to have a full debate in the House on the patch and its impact on those in chronic pain. The Leader might say the HSE is responsible, but the Minister for Health needs to intervene on humanitarian grounds. There are thousands of such patients throughout the country who are in chronic pain caused by arthritis and other conditions.

Senator Ivana Bacik: I congratulate our colleague, Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh, on his new position with TG4. As he will be with us for another month, it is a little premature to pay tribute to him. It has been a pleasure to work with him in recent months, in particular, as a member of the Technical Group. On my own behalf and that of my Labour Party colleagues, I thank him for working with us and look forward to continuing to work with him in the next few weeks.

I agree with Senator Michael McDowell on the report on the Israeli Prime Minister which I, too, was concerned to see. I thought it was an important debate last week and was delighted to take part in it. I commend Senators Frances Black and David Norris and their colleagues for proposing the Bill and the way in which the debate was conducted. It was sensible to withdraw

the Bill in order to engage in further consultation on it.

I thank the Leader for continuing today the debate on foreign affairs which we had to postpone from last week. I am sorry to hear that the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Simon Coveney, will not be present, but I look forward to participating in the debate. I thank all those who attended the screening of “Syria - The Impossible Revolution” which I was happy to host earlier today. The film which is supported by the Irish Syria Solidarity Movement was made by Ms Anne Daly and Mr. Ronan Tynan. It is a powerful documentary about the origins of the Syrian revolution and the terrible tragedies that have befallen the Syrian people in recent years. For anyone who would like to see it, I will be sending a link.

Finally, I wish to note that today marks an important anniversary. It is the 100th anniversary of the passage of the Representation of the People Act 1918, which gave women the right to vote, albeit a somewhat limited right to vote. For the first time, it allowed women over 30 to vote in Ireland and Britain. It paved the way for the 1918 general election in which Constance Markievicz was elected as the first woman Member of Parliament and Teachta Dála. Today, we remember all of the many women and men who campaigned on women’s suffrage over many years, including women like Isabella Tod, the Haslams, Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington and, of course, Constance Markievicz.

I am delighted to be chairing the Vótáil 100 programme and to be wearing the badge. The Taoiseach is wearing the same badge in the other Chamber today. The badge is a replica of the Irish Women’s Franchise League badge and all Members of the Oireachtas have received one to mark this important centenary. Over 2018 we will have many different events. Our committee is made up of Deputies and Senators on a cross-party basis. Senators Conway-Walsh, Higgins and McFadden are committee members from this House. We will have a series of events in the Seanad Chamber in particular. It is very much a Seanad-led series of events. I thank the Leader for agreeing to have a debate on the centenary in the House on the week of International Women’s Day. There will be a debate in the Dáil this evening at 6 p.m. on the anniversary on the Representation of the People Act. We look forward to welcoming young people into the Chamber from transition year on 17 April for the Díospóireacht na nÓg public speaking competition to mark the centenary. We look forward to many other events over the year as well. I thank colleagues for their support. I wish to mark how much has been done 100 years on but how much still remains to be done too, with women comprising only 22% of the Dáil and only 30% of the Seanad.

Senator Colm Burke: I wish to raise an issue relating to an article in the *Sunday Business Post* over the weekend by Susan Mitchell about the over-prescribing and the major increase in the past ten years in the use of certain drugs. The number of people using one drug, Lyrica, has gone up from 54,981 to 652,013. That is more than a 1,086% increase. Use of another drug, OxyContin, an opiate, has gone up from 47,262 to 122,000. That is a 159% increase. Use of Lexapro has gone up by 232% from 198,000 to 631,000 people.

It seems there has been an extraordinary increase in the prescribing of drugs across the board during the past ten years. This raises serious issues. Is it causing, and will it cause, problems in our health care service? What can we do to work with our general practitioners and medical care professionals in order that people are aware of the consequences of over-use of drugs and medication? That is something we need to have a serious debate on. It is a costly issue.

Tomorrow, the Joint Committee on Health will deal with a report on the availability of or-

phan drugs. As people are aware, orphan drugs are extremely expensive because they are used only by a small group of people. Here, many drugs are being used up at an extraordinary cost to the State. Simultaneously, we cannot afford to buy drugs for people who really need them. I am not saying that people who are using these drugs do not require them, but there must be a question mark over the extent of the usage and of the prescribing. The matter is worthy of a debate on what is the best way forward to deal with this issue from a health care point of view. It would be appropriate for the Minister to come before the House to discuss the matter. I appeal to the Leader to give serious consideration to my request.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: Today I would like to raise the issue of waiting lists for eye care. At the end of last year, 2017, some 40,000 people were on outpatient lists for eye care procedures. That figure was up from 38,823 in 2016. More than 20% of cases on the waiting list relate to cataract surgery appointments. In some cases people are waiting up to four years in different parts of the country to have this addressed. I imagine Senators will agree that this is both cruel and heartless and that something needs to be done about it. I would like to commend and compliment the people in Sligo on the initiative they have undertaken. It is something we could roll out throughout the country. There was a joint approach by the public and private sectors to try to address the issue of waiting lists. It is called the Sligo post-cataract scheme. It is a joint venture between the ophthalmologist in the community and the ophthalmologist in the hospital setting. It has been very successful and has treated up to 20,000 people a year in the north-west region. We can learn from it and it is something we should roll out throughout the country, as I said.

Not only is it a good idea, it also saves the taxpayer money. It is estimated that €32 million a year can be saved, as well as a 50% reduction in the number of people waiting for appointments and the time involved. It has proven to be very successful at getting people off waiting lists. I would be surprised if the Minister for Health is not already aware of this system, but I ask the Leader to bring it to his attention so it can be rolled out throughout the country and people will not have to wait years for cataract operation and will instead be dealt with in a much speedier fashion.

Senator Billy Lawless: I would like to offer my sympathy to a fellow Chicagoan, the great actor John Mahoney, who has passed away. He played the character of Martin Crane in “Frasier”. I knew him pretty well. He was a great lover of Ireland and performed many times in the Galway arts festival over the years. I wish to extend my sympathies to his family. In 2014 he said the two places he loved most in the world were Chicago and Galway. I concur with that. May he rest in peace.

Senator Frank Feighan: I note that a committee will today consider a petition for the removal of a statue of Prince Albert from Leinster House.

Senator David Norris: Never.

Senator Frank Feighan: I have walked by the statue many times and had not realised it was Prince Albert. I do not know much about him, but we have to be very careful about re-writing history. The statue of Prince Albert was put there at a time when we had an all-Ireland parliament. There is a statue of Henry Grattan in Westminster. If we change the *status quo*, we will remove something of a history with which we are not comfortable. People may want to remove history from Westminster with which they are not comfortable. Maybe we should reflect on the fact that we cannot rewrite history. There would be a cost involved and the statue

has done no harm to anybody for the past 70 years.

Senator Victor Boyhan: We could sell it.

Senator David Norris: At a cost to our own traditions. We should respect our own history.

Senator Terry Leyden: Victoria went to Australia.

Senator Frank Feighan: Henry Grattan was a great patriot and his statue is in Westminster. I am very proud of that

Senator Terry Leyden: He should be reunited with Victoria in Australia.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Senator Leyden, you are out of order. You should know better.

Senator David Norris: He should be with all the German nationalists who swore allegiance to the Kaiser in their proclamation of 1916.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Senator Norris, you are not on stage yet.

Senator Frank Feighan: I feel very proud when I see a statue of Henry Grattan when I go to Westminster, as do other Irish politicians. There is a major Irish caucus in Westminster and it is very proud of the statute. He was a patriot and opposed the Act of Union 4 o'clock in 1800. He was of Grattan's Parliament. If one starts removing statues that are a part of our history, which we may not like, it is the wrong way to go.

Senator David Norris: The moving statues are here again.

Senator Máire Devine: I want to congratulate Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh and send our best wishes and love to him on his new adventure. I will miss him.

I wish to amend the Order of Business today to include No. 63, motion 12, on the Order Paper, a motion which is to be taken without debate. I accept that the Minister has tried to address this issue but his suggestions have not gone far enough.

I hope I get the support of my colleagues in the Seanad and perhaps of Fine Gael also. The parents, who are the experts, need to be at the table to steer national policy on children with complex medical needs. I cannot believe they are not there already, or the degree to which they have to fight to get there. They are the experts, as I said. What do they have to do to have their voices heard?

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Does the Senator mean that No. 63, motion 12 be taken without debate?

Senator Máire Devine: Yes.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: Although I understand the reasons, I am disappointed to note that the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Coveney, will not be joining us. I hope the Leader will ensure that we have a debate with the Minister in the near future, as it has been promised for many months.

I welcome the comments on the Control of Economic Activities (Occupied Territories) Bill 2018 that we put forward last week. The urgent need for action was underscored by the fact that just this weekend, a children's school in East Jerusalem funded by Irish Aid was demolished by

the Israel Defence Forces. This demonstrates why we need to move forward and act on this.

I was sorry not to be present for the full debate last Thursday, as I was a part of the Vótáil 100 symposium. However, I was here for the conclusion and I read the proceedings with interest. In that debate, my colleague, Senator Lynn Ruane, spoke about personal and collective responsibility, and how we, as legislators, need to address the reinforcing of inequality by society. The links between low education and imprisonment reported on in today's newspapers underscores that point. Senator Ruane asked the Taoiseach to deliver a republic of equal outcomes with far greater equality of wealth and income, reducing the material, social and cultural inequalities that exist between us in society.

The Taoiseach responded by saying he believed that equality of outcome meant that everyone was the same with no ambition; it meant levelling downwards, the model of the Soviet Union or Cambodia. In fairness to the Taoiseach, he also acknowledged that perhaps he misunderstood. He did indeed fail to understand. That is both disappointing and worrying. Greater equality of incomes and outcomes is not some abstract communist notion. It is what is advocated by best international research, including that of the International Monetary Fund, IMF, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, OECD. It is what we have signed up to deliver under the detailed targets of the sustainable development goals, which Ireland helped to negotiate. For example, goal 10.3 is a commitment to ensure equal opportunity and reduce inequalities of outcome. It will be outcomes that will be the test of Ireland's implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Ireland's public service duty and commitment to equality budgeting, measures I have praised in the past, require the delivery of more equal outcomes. I believe that some members of Government understand that. It is important that the Taoiseach does too. His job is not ribbon-cutting at the starting blocks on some individualised race for success or survival. It is bringing society forward together, and bringing society together in deeper dialogue. That is something we value in the Seanad-----

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: The Senator is nearly a minute into injury time.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I will come to my conclusion, but this is an important point. When Members of all sides raised legitimate concerns about regional development-----

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: It is a matter for debate, rather than for the Order of Business.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: -----they were told not to talk down rural Ireland. We heard a previous Taoiseach telling us not to talk down the economy. Let us be open to dialogue.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: We will not have the debate now.

Senator Michelle Mulherin: I was quite dismayed today to see headlines in at least one newspaper highlighting the National Transport Authority's report on rail, and to see that it was the lead story. This is a report that was published in November 2016, which dumbs down the economic need for vital transport infrastructure, particularly rail, in the west and north-west regions. It is very telling that this report should suddenly resurrect itself and become of interest at a very critical time, when we are putting together a ten-year national capital plan, when we will single out infrastructure projects, such as rail lines and roads, that need investment. It is a red herring. The Department I see benefitting most from this report being publicised, and thereby deflecting attention from the need in the west and north west, is the Department of Transport,

Tourism and Sport. If we were relying on the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, we would not have a train, a bus or an aeroplane entering the west or the north west. The Department does as little as it can for Knock airport.

Senator Terry Leyden: There are trains thanks to Fianna Fáil.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: Thank God for the monsignor.

Senator Michelle Mulherin: When it comes to bus services, it is one crisis after another and now we are being told that the trains could be gone. It was the same with Colm McCarthy. This threat is constantly hanging over us. The reasons regularly given are economies of scale and include in what we need to invest and so on. We do need to have a debate and some facts and figures. Last year passenger numbers on the western rail corridor were the fastest growing; they were up by 34%. An Atlantic economic corridor has been identified. How are we to fulfil the objectives set out without infrastructure?

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: We are not going to have that debate today.

Senator Michelle Mulherin: When Knock airport carried out a survey recently, it showed that there was a population of 1.2 million living within 90 minutes of the airport. They are paying taxes. Let us have a debate about the subsidisation of public transport. My understanding is the DART is the most subsidised mode of transport, not services in the west. Let us have the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport come to the House. I earnestly ask that it be done in order that we can sort the chaff from the wheat.

Senator David Norris: I express my sadness that we are to lose Senator Trevor Ó Clochar-taigh. He has been the most hard-working, decent, committed Member of the Seanad and we will certainly miss him.

I support very much what Senator Michelle Mulherin said. This morning I listened on the wireless to the reports. In the worst case scenario we are presented with the situation where there would only be rail connections between Dublin and Limerick, Dublin and Cork and Dublin and Belfast - three railway lines for the whole of Ireland. That is dreadful. I call for a debate not just on transport services in the west but also on the planning and development ideas the Government has because it looks as if Sligo is to be left out. That means there would be no town included north of the Dublin-Galway axis. Sligo was originally nominated as a gateway town, but there has been no investment in it. It is all very well to nominate a place as a gateway town and then do nothing at all about it. Sligo may only have a population of 20,000, but it has an enormous hinterland which includes counties Roscommon, Leitrim and others. It is extremely important, if we are committed to keeping people in rural Ireland and the provinces and not having just one enormous conurbation on the east coast, that we do something. This House should have a debate to urge the Government to live up to its commitment to the west.

Senator Terry Leyden: I concur with Senators Michelle Mulherin and David Norris on the statements emanating today that the bulk of rural railway lines face closure. To say the least, that is an horrific headline. The railway line is the lifeblood of tourism in towns such as Roscommon, Boyle, Carrick-on-Shannon, Westport, Ballina, Sligo, Longford and Mullingar. There is no doubt that they would love to cut out all of those towns. We must ensure the required investment is made. I remind the House that in 1997 there was a very serious rail accident outside the village of Knockcroghery. The Minister at the time was Mary O'Rourke. The advice from the safety board was that the line to Westport and possibly the one to Galway

be closed, but she resisted and, with the help of her ministerial colleagues, Charlie McCreevy and Bertie Ahern, an investment of €1 billion was made over a three-year period which secured those lines which are the lifeblood of towns such as Roscommon and Westport, to which tourists flock. The standard of the railway lines is now very high and free WiFi is available on trains. It is a luxurious way to travel. It takes only two hours to travel by train from Roscommon to Dublin. I compliment all of the staff, including train drivers, who are making the service work well. History nearly repeats itself. In the period 1997 to 2002, Ms Mary O'Rourke was the Minister. Coming from Athlone, in the heart of the midlands, she had the determination and commitment to ensure sufficient investment. That was the crucial point. Now the service is running very well indeed. The service is excellent, including in towns such as Roscommon. There is a train at 6.30 a.m., 8.30 a.m. and 11.05 a.m. and they return three times during the day. Whatever about national planning frameworks, if a railway system is not maintained there will be no national framework. I ask the Leader to request the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Shane Ross, to visit this House again. He was here quite a long number of-----

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: He was here this morning to deal with a Commencement matter.

Senator Terry Leyden: It would be marvellous to see him here in the House. Was he here this morning?

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: He was.

Senator Terry Leyden: I am delighted.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: A Commencement matter-----

Senator Terry Leyden: I am thrilled he was in.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: He appears very frequently.

Senator Terry Leyden: I am really delighted that he could visit us-----

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: The Senator is well over time.

Senator Terry Leyden: ----- particularly when he vetoed my-----

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I thank the Senator.

Senator Terry Leyden: We wish Albert every success on his visit to Australia.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I join my colleague, Senator Michael McDowell, in his comments with regard to Israel. During my time as president of the TUI, the organisation voted to have an academic boycott of Israel. It brought all hell down on us from both official and unofficial Israel. It does not like being told what to do. How dare it tell us what we can or cannot do.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: It is not the only one.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: About two weeks ago, I had a bit of a scare sitting in my car outside a retail store in south County Dublin. Such was the scare that I felt the need to call an ambulance. The ambulance came, collected me and brought me to the local accident and emergency unit within 25 minutes. Within two hours, I was seen by a cardiac specialist. Within eight hours I was seen by a consultant cardiologist, and within a couple of hours thereafter I had

an angiogram and was back in my bed. While I lay in my bed I was considering trauma centres.

This brings me on to Senator Mulherin's point on the forgotten west. If I were in Belmullet or some other such place and had a similar scare, how long would it be before an ambulance would get to me? How long would it be before I would get to see a consultant? How long would it be before I would have the confidence, on having an angiogram, to know all was well? It certainly would not happen in a short space of time.

That led me to think about two trauma centres, in Dublin and Cork. I do not want a debate on trauma centres because there is nobody here qualified to debate the clinicians' view of trauma centres but I do want a debate on how we will support the trauma centres with helicopters to get patients to them within a specific period. They say an hour is the magic time. Therefore, we need to hear that there will be four regional helicopters to service the needs of people who find themselves in traumatic circumstances. I would like the Minister to come to the House at his leisure to discuss how we will do that. God knows where we will get the money to do it.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: Like previous speakers, I agree on the Versatis patch, which is no longer available under the medical card and drug refund schemes. Some 25,000 people are using the patch. Owing to the cost, it is no longer available under the medical card and drug refund schemes. A lady I know went into a pharmacy to buy a packet of the patches because they were no longer available on the medical card and they cost €390 for a supply for one month. That is unreal, yet if one goes to Spain one can buy the same patches for €120. Therefore, there needs to be accountability.

Senator David Norris: Hear, hear.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: Why are we in Ireland charging so much for these patches when one can go across to Spain-----

Senator David Norris: Because they can get away with it.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: -----and purchase them for €120? We need to examine this. The Minister needs to come into the House to address this.

I want to raise another serious issue. Recently there was an inquest into the death of a young boy. The jury recommended the introduction of regulation and safety considerations for the use of sulky cars on public roads.

I also read of an incident where a pregnant woman was run off a road by five cars protecting a sulky race. If I decided to block off a public road with some of my friends to set up a snooker table to play a few shots, we would find ourselves in a Garda station.

Senator David Norris: In the nuthouse.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: Why is one regulated but the other is not? Unregulated sulky racing is dangerous and has already led to loss of life. It is a traditional sport which should have a traditional home and be banned from our highways and byways. There is no appetite for sulky racing on public roads. Accordingly, it needs to be regulated. I received hundreds of calls over the past several weeks on this issue. When I rang the local authority and the Garda, I was informed it is not regulated. The Minister needs to introduce regulations. We cannot afford to lose another life on the roads because of sulky car racing.

Senator Brian Ó Domhnaill: I support the amendment to the Order of Business put forward by my colleague, Senator Devine, on the care of children with complex medical needs and the approach being adopted by the HSE in not seeking the views of parents.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Is the Senator supporting it or seconding it?

Senator Brian Ó Domhnaill: I am seconding the amendment. The HSE seems to be proceeding with a policy approach to this area without listening to the key stakeholders, namely, the parents of the children with complex medical care needs. It is a sensible motion and I hope the Government will accept it. Otherwise, we will end up with bureaucrats in the HSE dictating policy without listening to the key stakeholders. That is wrong. A great lady in Donegal, Ms Gina Grant, heads up the Our Children's Voice organisation which gives a voice to helpless children. They are not being listened to at a national level by the HSE. This has to change, which is the objective of the motion in question. I am glad to second the amendment to the Order of Business to have the motion taken today. I commend Senator Devine on proposing it. Those kids cannot speak but their parents deserve to be heard by the policymakers in the HSE.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Seanadóir Ó Domhnaill as a thacaíocht. Ba mhaith liom tús a chur le mo chuid le comhghairdeas a dhéanamh le muintir Ghradam Ceoil TG4. Bhí an imeacht i mBéal Feirste don chéad uair oíche Dé Domhnaigh agus beidh sé ann don trí bliana atá amach romhainn fosta. Ba imeacht ceolmhar agus spleodrach é a chuir fáilte roimh dhaoine ó gach aon chúlra. Bhí an tUachtarán, Micheál D. Ó hUigín, i láthair fosta don imeacht náisiúnta, suntasach, tábhachtach seo. Cé go dtuigim go bhfuil mo iarchomhghleacaí ceaptha mar stiúrthóir cumarsáide ag TG4, níor mhaith liom an jab sin uilig a dhéanamh ar a shon inniu. Sílim go leiríonn Gradam Ceoil an ghné sin de shaol na hÉireann gur féidir linn bheith thar a bheith bródúil as, gur féidir linn a chéiliúradh agus gur féidir linn a thaispeáint ar ardán náisiúnta agus, tríd na meáin chumarsáide, ar ardán idirnáisiúnta chomh maith.

Tá a fhios agam gur luaigh an Ceannaire an tseachtain seo caite go mbeidh díospóireacht againn ar chúrsaí Gaeilge mar chuid de Bhliain na Gaeilge, agus go mbeidh lá trí mheán na Gaeilge againn sa Seanad. Tréaslaím agus tacaím leis sin. Sílim go léiríonn imeachtaí cosúil le Gradam Ceoil TG4 ní hamháin cé chomh tábhachtach atá cultúr agus traidisiúin na hÉireann, ach cé chomh bríomhar agus beomhar atá siad freisin. Táim cinnte go n-aontóidh an Ceannaire liom. Níl a fhios agam an bhfaca sé an clár oíche Dé Domhnaigh ach bhí sé ina chlár fíormhaith. Seolaim comhghairdeas, dea-ghuí agus beannachtaí an Tí seo chuig TG4 as imeacht den chéad scoth a eagrú.

Senator Victor Boyhan: Will the Leader organise a debate on the national maritime strategy envisaged by the Government? There has not been much debate about it. We have had an awful lot of debate about the national planning framework in terms of equal distribution across the country. I would particularly like to see an emphasis on the national maritime spatial plan, which is being worked on by the Department. I am particularly interested in hearing about an all-island dimension to this particular spatial strategy that would cover the environment, fisheries, tourism, transport, offshore renewable energy and oil and gas. There is much controversy about oil and gas offshore but we need to address these issues in terms of a particular policy so we know where we are going. Climate change and related impacts are really important parts of this strategy. Our marine heritage and our marine biodiversity and environment are other issues.

I am conscious that this document is well advanced within the Department. There has been very little public discussion of it considering we are an island. I am particularly keen that we have an all-island dimension. What I would suggest is that at some time, the appropriate Minister with responsibility for marine affairs would come to the House for a debate on this really important legislation that will come before the Houses.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I welcome the former Minister of State, Deputy Calleary, who is in the Visitors Gallery, to the House. The Deputy is very welcome. It is good to see him here with a group.

Mar a dúirt an Seanadóir McDowell, beidh an Seanadóir Ó Clochartaigh ag éirí as a phost mar Sheanadóir i gceann cúpla seachtain. Tá díomá mór orm go bhfuil sé ag fágáil an Tí mar, mar a dúirt an Seanadóir McDowell freisin, fear uasal agus macánta é. Níl sé marbh; tá sé beo fós. Gabhaim mo fhíorbhuíochas leis as ucht an obair a rinne sé. Bhí sé an-chairdiúil le gach duine agus é i mbun a ghnó. Go n-éirí leis sa phost nua i TG4.

I join all Members of the House who have spoken and all who have not. We will probably pay tribute in time to Senator Ó Clochartaigh on his impending departure from the House. As Senator McDowell rightly said, he was a very courageous man but also a very pleasant and courteous man with whom one could do business. He had a different point of view to many of us in the House on many occasions but at all times, he rose above that. I thank him for his service to the people of Connemara and the people he represented in this House but also for his friendly banter. I wish him well in his new position with TG4. I am sure that in time, we will be able to pay tribute to Senator Ó Clochartaigh but he is not dead. He is very much alive. He has a new career ahead of him and I wish him well.

Senator Ardagh began by raising the issue of Safer Internet Day. I would be happy to have a debate on that in the coming weeks. All of us in the House share the Senator's views regarding the issue of a digital strategy around the age of usage of a mobile phone, the appointment of a digital safety commissioner and the age of consent. It is important that as part of Internet Safety Day, the Minister for Education and Skills today announced the allocation of an investment of €30 million in ICT equipment for schools but, significantly, he also launched a very important programme about being in control, which is a resource for schools and parents. The grant will allow for the integration of digital technology in teaching. International research has shown that it is through qualified professional teachers, in addition to the knowledge of parents, that we influence and help shape minds. As Senator Ardagh rightly said, it is about ensuring our children are safe and are kept safe online. We must all address this issue and keep it to the forefront of everything we do.

I also join Senator Ardagh in congratulating An Garda Síochána for Operation Ketch on Monday morning. It sent a very powerful signal and, hopefully, it will lead to arrests. I had better be careful about what I say because I do not want to put anything in the case but it is certainly an operation we should all support and it is certainly one that I know has international co-operation. I commend An Garda Síochána for that.

Senator Ardagh spoke about the community employment scheme for people over the age of 62. I agree with her that the matter has been raised in the House before. It is important to allow people of an age group to be able to continue to make a contribution and to be involved in this case in community employment in our communities. I would be happy to have that debate.

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Senator McDowell raised the issue of the two impending by-elections. They are independent of each other in my opinion too. I am not a learned expert like Senator McDowell but I have read the article and one is an inside and the other is an outside nomination. I look forward to having the by-elections held whenever the writs are moved and the groups have sent their documentation to the appropriate personnel.

I join Senators McDowell, Higgins, Craughwell and Bacik on the issue of the Israeli Prime Minister calling in our ambassador last week. I am very much of the view that we, as Members of a Parliament, the Houses of the Oireachtas in this case, are quite able to do our own business, to have freedom of mind, opinion, thought and how we exercise our democratic decisions here.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: Ceart.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: An agreement was arrived at between Senator Black and the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade regarding the Bill. We were happy to support the adjournment of the Bill to allow for discussion, commentary, back-channel discussion or research to be done. It is important to recognise at the same time that a sovereign leader of an independent country is entitled to his viewpoint and we should never detract from that but we are a sovereign, independent House. We can even take different decisions from Government. I agree with the Senators.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: The Israeli ambassador might come in and we will have a word with him.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I was taken aback by the newspaper headlines. I think it says more about the Prime Minister of Israel than it does about us. We will determine our policy.

I will make the point, as I said in the House last week when some people took umbrage, that the issue of lobbying is one that we need a collective discussion on. Lobbying happens every day of the week. Lobbying happens with amendments to Bills, including lobbyists writing amendments to Bills, writing Bills for people, coming in and using the audiovisual room under the guise of different categories of making statements on various issues. There were lobbyists with Senator Gavan last week who spoke about the Public Health (Alcohol) Bill, masquerading around the House here as if they knew everything about certain issues. Lobbying is happening. That is why we have registered lobbying.

Senator Michael McDowell: There is nothing wrong with it.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: There is nothing wrong with it but let us understand that there are various different types of lobbying and let us get real about it. It happens every day of the week. The nature of lobbying is to put forward a viewpoint. I do not agree with Prime Minister Netanyahu's decision last week but he was lobbying, at one level. That is what it is called.

Senator David Norris: He was telling us what to do.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: It is the same thing.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: We are not going to have a debate on it now.

Senator David Norris: Mr. Nathan Yahoo.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I assure the Senator that many of us are told what to do everyday.

That is the nature of politics. I agree with the Senator that we have to stand up to the Prime Minister of Israel and say that we can do our own business our way. Let us not be afraid of saying that.

I agree with Senator Dolan regarding the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. I have spoken with the Department of the Taoiseach about the matter. I think it has to be taken and led by Government. The Senator knows my views on that. I have never recoiled from those views here. It is an important challenge, as the Senator said, with regard to the sustainable development goals and I would be happy to have that debate in the House on the different countries the Senator named. I would not be afraid to use the word “missionary” at all, because our missionaries have done much good work around the world.

Senator David Norris: Hear, hear.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: That has changed in terms of its output and outcome. I know where the Senator is coming from. We will have that debate in the coming weeks.

Senator Conway-Walsh raised the issue of the schedule. I thought we might have agreed the schedule at the group meeting on Wednesday. I will not adjourn the Bill this week. I propose that we will not adjourn it on Thursday when it comes in but allow it to roll over to give time to people who feel they need more time to analyse it and study it. It is only Second Stage so I would be happy to do that with the House’s permission.

Senators Murnane O’Connor and Conway-Walsh raised the issue of the chronic pain drug, Versatis. I have not got the information about it but, to be helpful to Members, they may get an answer more quickly if they submit a Commencement matter for the Minister to address. I am not familiar with the issue which has not been raised with me but I would be happy to meet the Senators about the matter.

I commend Senator Bacik for her work on Vótáil 100. I know that she participated in a commemorative event last Sunday, which I think was in Glasnevin Cemetery. I am sorry to have missed her briefing on Syria this morning. It is important that we recognise and remember not only the journey but its beginning in 1918, what it meant, the gargantuan challenge it was then and how it was overcome. We must also remember the women and gentlemen the Senator mentioned, in particular Countess Markievicz, Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington and others who come to mind. It was a huge struggle then. The sacrifice and courage of those women deserves to be remembered today. Vótáil 100 is not about a badge. It is important we remember and commemorate. I look forward to having that debate on International Women’s Day. It is about ensuring the voices of all people are heard as part of democracy around the world and in our country. Looking at the statistics on the role of women in politics - the IPU is meeting this week - the figure is quite low, which poses a question. We are lucky, despite what some people might think, to have very formidable and strong women in this House. We may disagree on ideological grounds but it is important that we contribute to the development of democracy. I salute the work that has been done and commend all Members, in particular Senator Bacik, who is leading Vótáil 100. We will have that debate. It was our intention to have the debate but the Dáil jumped ahead of us. We agreed at the leaders’ meeting to have it as part of International Women’s Day. That is why we are behind the Dáil.

Senator Burke raised the issue of the overprescribing of a number of drugs. The Senator, in his very pertinent contribution, spoke about the issue of the extent of usage and prescribing.

That is what we need the debate to be centred on. It is a very important debate to have.

Senator Gallagher raised the very important issue of the waiting times for cataract operations. We opened a new theatre in the east and the national eye strategy has been unveiled by the Minister. There is an issue around waiting times and I would be happy to have a debate with the Minister on that.

I join Senator Lawless in paying tribute to the late John Mahoney, with whom we all became familiar through “Frasier”. There is a wonderful clip of the father and son in “Frasier”, which I heard this morning, where they were both in a bit of a quandary. It is worth playing back again to show the depth of the character and the role he played in “Frasier”. As Senator Lawless said, he was a person who loved Ireland and was very proud of Ireland. Senator Lawless referred to Chicago and Galway.

Senator Feighan raised the issue of the statue of Prince Albert. The issue is before the Committee on Public Petitions tomorrow. I do not want to pre-empt the committee’s decision but it is fair to say Prince Albert will not be going too far, if anywhere at all.

Senator Devine raised the very important issue of children’s complex needs. The Minister spoke to the Senator in the House last week. I had emailed him on the Senator’s behalf after the Senator raised the issue last week. The Minister has offered to meet the Senator and other Members of the House and I hope the Senator will take him up on that offer. It is important the Senator does not use it as a political football, and I am not saying she is. It is about ensuring the voices of people are heard. I hope the Senator will meet the Minister and accept his invitation.

Senator Devine received a very comprehensive reply from the Department of Health on the matter. I want to make the House aware of a number of points in that letter, if people are not aware of them, before we vote on the Order of Business. The Minister said, “My officials have liaised with the HSE on this issue and have sought to identify an approach that will ensure that parents are afforded the best opportunity to contribute to the work underway by the HSE to enhance the delivery of paediatric homecare in the community.” Second, he says “the Steering Group established by the HSE is a clinical group and addresses issues relating to the business process, which is commercially sensitive”. His letter also refers to the fact that to provide parents with an opportunity to be involved, there would be an establishment of a parental reference group. He said, “This new Group would provide parents with the appropriate forum in which they can identify and discuss ideas of concern or examples of best practice in relation to the provision of paediatric homecare packages.” That is a fairly accommodating decision by the HSE. However, as I said last week, I will not divide the House on the matter and I will accept the motion. It is important that the Minister’s response be provided because it was a comprehensive and full response. The Senator asked for no debate last week on the matter, but to be fair to the Minister, following the Senator’s representations last week I liaised with the Department and the Minister. I know the Senator also did that last week here. The Minister and the HSE have made some movement on the basis of last week’s interjections. I wanted to put that on the record of the House to be clear. I will not divide the House on a very important matter and I will accept the amendment.

Senator Máire Devine: Fair enough.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: However, it is important that we do not allow misinformation to go out here. The Minister and the HSE made progress on foot of representations. It is not all

just about parents being on the committee or the steering group.

Senator Máire Devine: There was no progress at all.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: We will come to that at the end of the Leader's response.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: In response to Senator Higgins, last week we moved the statements on foreign affairs. I have no control over the Minister's diary. When I became aware of it, I deliberately informed the House at the beginning of the Order of Business that the Minister could not be here because I know it is an important issue for Members of the House. I did not have to do so. I give the Senator a commitment that we will in the immediate future have further debates with the Tánaiste on foreign affairs. I know where she is coming from. I give her that commitment.

To be fair, it is an important matter raised by the Senator and other Members of the House. I apologise that the Minister cannot be here, but I do not have control over his diary. I am told there are issues requiring his attendance and that is why he cannot be here. However, the Minister of State, Deputy Cannon, will be a very fine replacement. He is a Minister of State in the Department on his own merit. I will be happy to have the issue the Senator raised on the ongoing debate on foreign affairs dealt with immediately.

I will not go back over the Taoiseach's remarks last week because we could have a political debate on that until the end of time. To be fair, Senator Higgins has her view on the Taoiseach's comments. Those of us who heard what the Taoiseach said have a different view. We will agree to park that. We will invite him back in again and we will have that discussion. In my contribution I said I thought Senator Ruane made a fine contribution on the issue. It is something we need to discuss in generic terms in terms of political response to how we handle issues.

Senators Mulherin, Norris and Leyden all skirted and touched on the issue of Irish Rail, rural sustainability and the national planning framework, if I can use those terms all together. Senator Mulherin is right in this. The headline today was from a 2016 report.

Senator David Norris: The figures in it have been updated.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I will answer that specifically in a second. The headline is about creating sensation. I will have the Minister, Deputy Ross, come to the House because it is about ensuring that we have good-quality public transport, that we have sustainable transport links but that we have transport links for rural areas. I am not afraid to say that we have a dispersed population, but we cannot have all the growth in Dublin. Last week the Taoiseach made the point in this House that parts of Dublin are beyond the M50, which was what Senator Murnane O'Connor's contribution was about. We must go beyond Naas and have that contribution, and go east and west as well. I am not aware of plans to close any railway line. I say to Senator Leyden that the report today has been in the public domain for quite some time. It was not about a freedom of information request. As I said, it was a 2016 report.

Between 2008 and 2016 the taxpayer has made €5 billion available to the three CIÉ companies through its PSO and capital investment programme. Iarnród Éireann received €3.7 billion, which is 75% of that total Exchequer funding. The issue of rail is intrinsically linked to where people live, work and wish to travel. What we must do is to ensure that we create more jobs in rural Ireland. This is at the very core of the Government's national planning framework. I agree with what the Taoiseach said last week. Can we stop talking ourselves down and pro-

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mote positivity instead? Senator Leyden referred to successes in many towns in rural Ireland. Consider the Ludgate Hub in Skibbereen, for example. Let us be positive. If we want to sell Ireland, let us not be negative. The debate is necessary but must be balanced. I ask that Members listen to last Sunday's documentary on RTÉ Radio 1 about Mr. Charlie McCreevy's *Hot Press* interview. It is like Groundhog Day now.

Senator John Dolan: It was entertaining.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: It was. What Mr. McCreevy said is anathema to some in Fianna Fáil and the Sinn Féin Party today. We will not have post offices or Garda stations on every corner.

Senator Michael McDowell: Just one per corner.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: It is on a junction.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: On a sad note, an independent and wonderful bookshop - Liam Ruiséal's - is closing in Cork. People on radio and social media are today lamenting its closure, but when did they last go into the shop? When did we last use the post office, bank or-----

Senator Terry Leyden: Or Stepside.

Senator David Norris: Frequently, we are put out of them. If one goes into a bank, one is told to get the hell out and use the machine. The bank does not want people.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Senator Norris, please.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I have an ongoing row with Bank of Ireland, of which I am a customer, because I refuse-----

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: Talk about-----

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: We cannot go into the details of individual cases.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Senator Norris is right. I refuse to use online banking.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Members are trying to get the issue in again, but under the radar this time.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I agree with Senator Norris. Our banks, which we bailed out, do not want us going into them.

Senator David Norris: Exactly.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: A bank has only one teller's position open when we go in and queue. I was in Bank of Ireland in Douglas yesterday morning. A lady comes around, asks whether we are okay with this or whether we need to use that machine, and the queue suddenly becomes smaller. We should be asking people to go to our post offices and banks and use them,-----

Senator David Norris: Hear, hear.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: -----not driving them away. Bring them in.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: One bookseller has told people to go and buy books on-line.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Please, allow the Leader to conclude.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: We will have a debate on the national planning framework and rural sustainable development.

Senator David Norris: Good.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: It is about ensuring balanced economic development.

I am glad that Senator Craughwell is okay.

(Interruptions).

Senator Jerry Buttimer: We heard about his scare during his fine interview on radio. He did well. The national trauma centre strategy report - I have lost my written note - has been published. One in four people is transferred out of the centre that they attend. Time is critical. I cannot find my note,-----

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: Yes.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: -----but it is important to tell the Senator. I read an article in *The Irish Times* written by the president of the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, Professor John Hyland. He called for the trauma report to be implemented. Time is critical. Perhaps we are mirroring the UK's 2010 model, although I am not saying that that is a good thing. We need a realistic debate on where to locate services. Perhaps I am in a minority of one on this matter, but-----

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I disagree. The Leader is right.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: No, I have not finished yet.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: Transportation to those centres-----

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Yes, and-----

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Senator Craughwell cannot ask questions at this point.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: -----that is the issue on which we can have a debate. I understand that people in many parts of the country are in the time-critical zone. Two and a half, three or eight hours waiting in a bed was a good record for Senator Craughwell in our health system.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: As a public patient.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I will use that as a template for other Senators. I am glad that the Senator is okay. I say that genuinely.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I do not mind depending on how good the services are.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Senator Murnane O'Connor raised the issue of sulky racing. Deputy Mattie McGrath has introduced a Bill in the Lower House on the matter. If it is passed, we can debate it during Private Members' time. Mar a rinne an Seanadóir Ó Donnghaile, déa-

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naim comhghairdeas le gach duine a ghlac páirt i nGradam Ceoil. Bhí sé ar siúl i mBéal Feirste den chéad uair agus bhí sé le feiceáil ar TG4 oíche Dé Domhnaigh. Ní fhaca mé an clár ach chonaic mé an tUachtarán ar an nuacht ar a 9 p.m. agus é ag bualadh le rannpháirtithe. I join the Senator in congratulating all who took part and it was good to have it in Belfast. It is about celebrating our music, traditions and cultures. Scríobh an Seanadóir Ó Céidigh chuig an gCoiste um Nós Imeachta agus Pribhléidí faoi chúrsaí Gaeilge agus beimid á bplé sna seachtainí amach romhainn.

Senator Boyhan raised the matter of maritime spatial planning and he is correct because we are an island nation with a maritime tradition. We must ensure we examine the issues surrounding the industry, tourism and sport. This concerns the economy, our carbon footprint, climate change and renewable energy. There are a variety of issues and I would be happy for the Minister to come to the House in the coming weeks to discuss them. I am happy to accept Senator Devine's amendment to the Order of Business.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Senator Máire Devine has proposed an amendment to the Order of Business, "That No. 63, motion 12, be taken today without debate." Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Máire Devine: I have a brief comment.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I cannot allow the Senator speak.

Senator Máire Devine: I just wanted to be nice to the Leader and thank him.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: The Senator can be nice to him outside the Chamber.

Senator Máire Devine: I fundamentally disagree with the letter from the Department of Health, as do the parents. I will clap him-----

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Please, Senator. The amendment has been agreed. When will the motion be taken?

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Now.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Order of Business, as amended, agreed to.

Primary Care Steering Group: Motion

Senator Máire Devine: I move:

That Seanad Éireann:

recognises:

- that the parents of children with complex medical needs are best placed to understand their children's needs and deliver the care required;

- that parents are the voice for their children;

welcomes:

Seanad Éireann

- the increase of services offered by the Department of Health for home care cases for children with complex medical needs;

- the formation of the HSE Primary Care steering group that is developing national policy for these children;

and calls upon the HSE to include a non-HSE parent representative on this Primary Care Steering Group.

The Leas-Chathaoirleach cut me off.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: We must do it in sequence.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: I second the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Sectoral Employment Order (Mechanical Engineering Building Services Contracting Sector) 2018: Referral to Joint Committee

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I move:

That Seanad Éireann approves the following Order in draft:

Sectoral Employment Order (Mechanical Engineering Building Services Contracting Sector) 2018,

copies of which have been laid in draft form before Seanad Éireann on 25th January, 2018, be referred to the Joint Committee on Business, Enterprise and Innovation in accordance with Standing Order 71(3)(k), which, not later than 20th February, 2018, shall send a message to the Seanad in the manner prescribed in Standing Order 75, and Standing Order 77(2) shall accordingly apply.

Question put and agreed to.

Foreign Affairs: Statements

Acting Chairman (Senator Gerard P. Craughwell): The Minister of State is welcome.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Ciarán Cannon): I thank the Seanad for the invitation to speak on foreign affairs and I welcome the opportunity to discuss in this House Ireland's approach to international affairs, which is guided by A Programme for a Partnership Government and the vision expressed in the foreign policy review statement, The Global Island. This framework provides the goals and the priority area of focus for the Government's global engagement to safeguard a secure and prosperous future for the Irish people and make a distinctive and principled contribution to the collective international effort to build a better world.

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My understanding is this House would like an update on broader foreign policy matters and not just work under way regarding Brexit. Suffice it to say that today Brexit remains front and centre of the efforts of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and all of the Government. This work will continue and intensify into 2018. There was a huge collective effort to achieve our goals in phase 1 of the negotiations, for which we received unflinching support from our fellow EU member states and the institutions. Work has begun on ensuring these achievements will be translated into the withdrawal Bill that is to be negotiated by October.

Attention is shifting to the shape of the future EU-UK relationship. We have been clear that we wish to see the closest possible trading relationship, one which will sustain the €65 billion worth of trade across the Irish Sea each year and the 200,000 jobs in Ireland that depend on same.

It would be one thing if the frequency and pace of international events moderated in response to Brexit, but, unfortunately, as Senators know, we enjoy no such luxury. This means that we cannot afford, even for one day, to take our eyes off fast-moving developments. This, in turn, requires continuing and renewed investment in global governance, with a strong United Nations as the bedrock of the international rules based order. This investment is all the more important in the face of the multiple challenges that confront the multilateral system. Our engagement in the development of the common foreign and security policy of the European Union is a key vehicle in pursuing this core objective.

The European Union's support for a global order, based on international law, which ensures human rights and sustainable development has been reaffirmed in its 2016 global strategy which commits it to promoting peace, prosperity, democracy and the rule of law. The aim is to improve the quality of life and security of peoples threatened or afflicted by conflict. In turn, this will help to prevent or mitigate the negative effects for our own citizens of insecurity and conflict elsewhere. Ireland co-operates closely with its EU partners in protecting citizens through the justice and home affairs framework. As well as dealing with, as we must, the immediate symptoms and manifestations of conflict through necessary security measures, a medium to longer term strategy to address the root causes is required and being formulated. Action through the common foreign and security policy plays a complementary role in addressing the underlying drivers of threats such as terrorism which have their source in instability in the European Union's neighbouring regions. A range of factors are in play, among which are conflict and societal fragility, as well as poverty and underdevelopment. Continuing engagement in supporting peace and state building, security sector reform and the promotion of the rule of law are key to addressing the causes of conflict and building stable and resilient societies.

With our partners, we are developing an integrated approach to marshal more coherently the full range of instruments available to the European Union, including diplomatic contacts, economic development, trade, capacity building and peace support measures. This entails a mix of actions in the civilian and military spheres. The significant majority of operations under the common security and defence policy have been civilian in character and tasked with support for the rule of law, improving governance and guiding security sector reform. Strengthening the European Union's ability to provide these supports is a major ongoing priority. Sadly, there are circumstances where it is necessary to have the military capacity to manage crises, create space for negotiated political solutions and protect civilians. The EU treaties confer on the European Union a mission to preserve peace, prevent conflicts and strengthen international security, in accordance with the United Nations charter. The tasks that may be undertaken in pursuit of these objectives cover the full spectrum of conflict cycle, including conflict prevention and

peacekeeping; crisis management and peacemaking; post-conflict stabilisation; joint disarmament operations; humanitarian and rescue; and military advice and assistance.

The European Union has no defence capabilities of its own. It relies on member states to provide the civilian and military assets to undertake these tasks. Considerable difficulties have been experienced in sourcing the necessary range of capabilities for EU peace support operations. It is recognised that there is a need for greater co-operation between member states in generating the requisite assets. The Permanent Structured Cooperation arrangement, PESCO, is a mechanism aimed at addressing this need. It enables countries to come together voluntarily on a project by project basis to jointly develop military crisis management capabilities in support of EU common security and defence policy operations. PESCO will enhance the European Union's capacity to engage in peacekeeping and crisis management operations.

As the House will be aware, Ireland has actively engaged in the shaping of the common security and defence policy from its inception to equip the European Union to act effectively as an international peace provider in support of the multilateral order and the United Nations. Consistent with this, we have been one of the main contributors to common security and defence policy, CSDP, missions both civilian and military. Our Defence Forces are currently serving in three of the EU's six military CSDP operations in Mali, Bosnia-Herzegovina and in the Mediterranean. My Department supports the deployment of some 14 experts to nine civilian CSDP missions in eight countries which promote respect for the rule of law, human rights compliance and gender sensitivity. Additionally, An Garda Síochána contributes a further five personnel to the EU mission in Kosovo.

Permanent structured co-operation, PESCO, is provided for in the Treaty on European Union which was approved by the Irish people by referendum in October 2009. Some 25 EU member states, including Ireland, are participating. Austria, Cyprus, Finland and Sweden which, like Ireland, are not members of any military alliance are also participating in PESCO. Ireland's participation in PESCO will enhance the Defence Forces' capabilities for a wide range of United Nations-mandated missions where they must be able to work with contingents from other countries. It allows the men and women of our Defence Forces to gain access to the latest equipment and training, which enhances their ability to participate safely and effectively in challenging peacekeeping missions. Accordingly, I believe Ireland's participation in PESCO is in our interests and consistent with our foreign policy and values. It will also enable us to continue to influence development of the CSDP.

Participation in PESCO in no way diminishes or undermines Ireland's policy of military neutrality. PESCO is a vehicle for developing capabilities required for peace support. However, deployment of Irish contingents on peacekeeping missions will continue to be governed by the triple lock mechanism. Our military neutrality has helped us to develop a distinctive and independent voice on the maintenance of international peace and security. I assure the House that this Government upholds and will continue to uphold this longstanding and publicly valued policy.

The deployments of forces by the EU have all been UN-mandated or supported. The UN increasingly relies on regional security providers such as the EU to run peacekeeping and other peace stabilisation operations. This is why PESCO has been warmly welcomed by the UN Under-Secretary General for Peacekeeping as potentially offering additional capabilities for UN-mandated missions. Support for and engagement with the UN of course remains a cornerstone of Ireland's foreign policy. Ireland has a distinguished peacekeeping record with not a

year having passed since 1958 without Irish men or women having been engaged in UN peace support operations.

It is, therefore, right that, at appropriate intervals, Ireland seeks to be part of the body that shapes the policy and practices that our troops carry out - the UN Security Council. We have a responsibility to participate fully in the UN's work and to champion its role, particularly at this time of global instability and challenge to the rules based international order. These considerations inform Ireland's candidature for election to the Security Council in June 2020. A seat on the council would strengthen our voice and influence on the global stage. It is a platform to amplify our values and key foreign policy priorities, including those on sustainable development, human rights, disarmament, rule of law and the peaceful resolution of disputes. Ireland can be, as it has been before, an independent but authoritative voice on the major political and security issues impacting our world.

Ireland continues to play a leadership role on nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation, issues which are of high priority for my Department and, I know, for many members of this House. Last autumn the Tánaiste signed, on behalf of Ireland, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which was adopted by 122 states following negotiations mandated by a UN General Assembly resolution put forward by Ireland and five other countries. This treaty, when it enters into force, will implement the disarmament provisions of the non-proliferation treaty. We also continue our work on conventional weapons, remaining fully engaged in implementation of the landmine and cluster munitions conventions and working with partners to promote universal ratification of the Arms Trade Treaty.

On human rights, we have pioneered an initiative to protect the space for freedom of expression for civil society which is coming under increasing pressure in many parts of the world. We continue to support human rights defenders and we will further strengthen our engagement on gender equality and women's empowerment when we chair the bureau of the Commission on the Status of Women in 2018 and 2019. Last November, the Tánaiste launched Ireland's national plan to implement the UN guiding principles on business and human rights.

Our additional foreign policy priorities include the EU and Ireland's relations with Africa and the Middle East peace process.

On the latter, I understand the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade had a very good discussion last week with Members who will be aware of his particular interest in the region which he has visited twice since last summer. We will continue to press for a stronger role for Ireland and the European Union in achieving a just and lasting resolution based on the two-state solution.

Ireland continues to be deeply engaged in Africa. In addition to our development co-operation programme, Irish Aid, we provide peacekeeping support via the participation of the Defence Forces in the UN training mission in Mali and the deployment of three civilian experts to EU Common Security and Defence Policy missions in the west African region. We are undertaking a review of the Irish Aid programme and developing a pathway towards reaching our long-standing target of 0.7% of gross national income in ODA by 2030. The Tánaiste will bring proposals in that respect to the Government very soon.

Our trading relationship with Africa is also growing. However, a key priority is developing the political relationship between the European Union and Africa which must be strengthened

and deepened if we are to address effectively shared challenges in areas such as migration, climate change and economic development. Ireland can and should use its connections and its experience to play a leadership role in that regard. There will I hope be an early opportunity to do so at the start of the post-Cotonou process which will open up space for discussions with African leaders and political dialogue with the European Union on what the best structure might be in the future.

I express my appreciation to the House for giving me the opportunity to outline how Ireland will continue to work for a secure, just, fair and sustainable world, prioritising the values and interests of the people. I look forward to hearing the views of Senators on the issues we are facing on the foreign policy landscape.

Senator Mark Daly: I thank the Minister of State for coming into the House. I know that he is busy working on the events that coincide with St. Patrick's Day which will present a great opportunity for Ireland to engage on foreign policy issue and also with the global Irish network.

Given that the Minister is attending to important business in the North, there are issues about which we have concerns, including the impact of Brexit on the island and the Good Friday Agreement. This year marks the 20th anniversary of the signing of the agreement. We have to point out again that, in spite of numerous requests from the Joint Committee on the Good Friday Agreement, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has refused to provide us with a detailed analysis of what has been implemented, line by line, issue by issue, under the agreement and what has yet to be implemented. We know that it is possible for it to do so because both it and the secretariat in Northern Ireland produce a detailed analysis every six months. As the Minister is aware, the Government will be asked to reflect on the Good Friday Agreement, discuss its strengths and weaknesses and whether it is fit for purpose for the next 20 years. Obviously, the question that will come up is how much has been implemented and what is left to be implemented. The committee has been asked this question by a House of Commons select committee, members of which came before us in private session. As the Acting Chairman knows, the answer is that the Government is not entirely sure. As a member of the committee, I know that sounds a little odd, but time and again all we have received from the Department is nothing short of a compilation of press releases on issues such as civil rights, the language Act and others about which we can read in any newspaper, including victims and cases which have not been resolved. In many cases, they have not been investigated. With other members of the committee, I have asked for it to be included in the work programme that we receive a detailed analysis from the Department of the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. On the day I joined the committee in 2016 I asked if anyone could tell me what had yet to be implemented under it. With that knowledge, one can benchmark the achievement of the committee, but to this day all we have received are five or six pages, which is not good enough. It is not good enough for the committee to be treated in that way, but it is also not good enough that the Department, unless it has a document hidden away in some filing cabinet, does not make an analysis every six months, as it does in the case of the Fresh Start agreement. However, it has not done so in the case of the overarching Good Friday Agreement. We will continue to ask for such an analysis and some bright breezy day it might appear. It should appear this year because it is nothing short of embarrassing that the Department is not able to answer the question. It should be able to hand out a document stating what has been achieved, what has not been achieved and what has yet to be implemented.

The Taoiseach was asked in the Dáil a few moments ago about the prospect of there being a united Ireland. It was the stock answer from any Department. I think it was Senator Michael

McDowell who alluded to the three standard replies given - it was too early to intervene; the issue was too sensitive to intervene; and it was too late to intervene. In the middle of the reply it was stated there were issues ongoing in Northern Ireland. Issues arise in Northern Ireland all of the time. For the Taoiseach not to address the issues of concern is a problem for the unionist community because they are concerned about the future. This was outlined in a report I compiled which was endorsed by the Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement on unionist concerns about the holding of a referendum on a united Ireland. Three issues were raised in an analysis carried out for the committee by a former member of the Ulster Defence Regiment. The first was the issue of land ownership. It was asked if we would seek the return of the lands granted during the plantations. The second was the issue of retribution for former members of the security forces who had been involved in collusion or murders during the Troubles. The third was the issue of identity, how the British identity would be respected in a united Ireland. None of these issues is being addressed.

The Taoiseach stated it was too sensitive to intervene because the immediate issue was re-establishing the Stormont Assembly. Of course, that is important, but the long-term issues in Northern Ireland are of equal importance because, as Mr. John Bradley pointed out and as was quoted in the report, “policy neglect seldom goes unpunished”. I am sure the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is looking for the policy papers it has available on the achievement of Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution because it is being asked by the High Court to produce them. It is to supply preliminary documents by 14 February. Has it got them? Some would classify them as foreign affairs issues but others would not. They see them in the context of the State’s objective and engagement with Britain. They concern the achievement of the main aim of the State or, as the then Attorney General Rory Brady described it, a constitutional obligation on the Government of the day to put forward the case and address the concerns of all sides. The High Court is looking for the policy papers because a unionist, Mr. Raymond McCord, is taking the State to court to find out what it is doing to achieve its own aims. It is nothing short of something out of “Yes, Minister”. His son, Raymond Jnr., was murdered by the UVF on the instructions of a paid informant of the RUC. This shows the dysfunctional nature of the Northern Ireland state in the deployment by the state of South American-type murder gangs.

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. There has been engagement with unionists in Northern Ireland on the economic issues associated with Brexit. That is where the issue of keeping the Border open comes in. It is very important to the people living on both sides of the community to ensure there will be a continuation of the economic benefits peace has brought. Unfortunately, the dividends of peace are mostly in the South. The UN human development index shows that in health, education and income, the Republic is ranked eighth in the world. The UK is ranked 16th. If Northern Ireland is isolated and treated as an independent economic area, according to the Oireachtas Library and Research Service, it is ranked 44th in the world in terms of health, education and income.

Acting Chairman (Senator Gerard P. Craughwell): The Senator is well over time.

Senator Mark Daly: I would like a commitment from the Minister of State. Will he make sure the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade supplies the Oireachtas Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement with a line-by-line, issue-by-issue breakdown of what is yet to be implemented in the Good Friday Agreement?

Acting Chairman (Senator Gerard P. Craughwell): Senator Joe O’Reilly has eight minutes.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: I thank Senator Lawless for accommodating me. In eight minutes it is only possible to touch in a small way on a number of items which on their own would merit debate and discussion. I will try to address some important issues as quickly as I can.

I acknowledge the tremendous work done on Brexit. It is important to my region so I am happy about it. I am very concerned that in phase 2 of the negotiations, the commitments made by the UK will be honoured and that we will hold onto the system of alliances we have built up in Europe so successfully. I would prefer not to have a post-Brexit Europe but if we are to have one, it will be important to build up allies. The UK was a very important ally in the EU. Eastern European states will become supporters of Ireland and it will be important in a post-Brexit EU that we hold on to our tax policies. It should be clearly understood that in net terms, our tax regime is no more beneficial to multinationals or inward investment by companies than the French taxation system, for example. It is important that in a post-Brexit situation we harness the goodwill we have built up.

Our relationship with the UK post-Brexit will be of crucial importance. We have €1.2 billion worth of trade with the UK on a weekly basis and 200,000 jobs in each country depend on it. I have the privilege of leading the Irish delegation to the Council of Europe, of which Senator Alice-Mary Higgins is one of our most excellent former members. Through the good offices of Ambassador Keith McBean we had a very successful bilateral meeting with the UK delegation at the last Council of Europe plenary session. That is very important. The Council of Europe will become a very important forum for our relationship with the UK when it is no longer in the EU. It will be important that we work very closely there with the UK. We must maintain good relations and we must maintain and enhance our trading relationship. We have tremendous bonds of kinship and neighbourliness and mutual economic interests. It is an important relationship.

The cause of returning emigrants, which is under the remit of the Minister of State, is a very important one. I discovered this all over Cavan-Monaghan. We had 27,000 people return to Ireland between 2016 and 2017. They are encountering great difficulty. I find this right across Cavan-Monaghan. I met a young man recently who cannot open a bank account, get his car insured or his driving licence renewed. Full account is not taken of his driving experience abroad. They will not accept his banking record abroad for mortgage purposes and he is having problems with his health insurance and other issues. It is a real problem. The concerns and needs of emigrants who come home is a very big issue which the Government must address. We should be happy they are home.

My good friend Senator Lawless will do a wonderful job speaking about the undocumented Irish. I do not have his level of expertise on the issue but I want to record my great concern about the undocumented Irish. Many young people from Cavan-Monaghan and elsewhere in Ireland are living in an undocumented way in America. They live in fear and cannot come home to family funerals or weddings. They are almost fugitives in their new land. They are very constructive members of society making a huge contribution to society in their newly-adopted land. We have to get them regularised and accepted. Enormous diplomatic efforts must continue in that regard.

The Palestinian issue is huge. We had a discussion recently, for which the Minister of State was present in the House, on a very good Bill introduced by Senator Black. She very sensibly allowed the Tánaiste to do some work on it over time. The two-state solution is Irish policy. We are against increasing the settlements. We are against the settlements in Palestinian lands and

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the abuse of the Palestinian people. The Irish Government has a very strong position on this. I would like the Minister of State to assure us there will be no flinching from it and that we will encourage the reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas so the Palestinian Authority can take control of governance. We should encourage dealing with the settlements and get a two-state solution. The unilateral American position on Jerusalem as the capital is regrettable. I urge the Minister of State to introduce an initiative in the EU, led by Ireland, for a peace settlement in the Middle East. Ireland has the moral authority to lead that and should do so.

I was delighted to hear the Minister of State say our neutrality is not compromised by PESCO. That is very important. There were very legitimate concerns about that expressed in the House. The Minister of State has made it very clear it is not an issue. He has made it clear that we proudly remain part of the peacekeeping effort and that is a very important thing. He also made it clear we will continue our aid for developing countries and for countries in Africa.

I skirted over a number of issues. We do not regard our dealings with Northern Ireland as foreign affairs because they are within the island and are very important. It is a huge concern in my area and every area in the country that we would make every diplomatic effort to ensure a new devolved Administration is established in Northern Ireland. The Tánaiste, Deputy Co-veney, is doing extraordinarily good work there as he has been doing on the Brexit issue. I am very confident he will be a success in that regard.

I have just skirted a number of issues. Do I have much time left?

Acting Chairman (Senator Gerard P. Craughwell): The Senator has 30 seconds left.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: I have skirted around a number of issues because that is all my time allows. I would like individual responses from the Minister of State. I would welcome other engagements with him in the House so that we can take the issues I have raised one-by-one. The issues of the undocumented Irish and returning emigrants merit serious discussions in their own right. I thank the Acting Chairman for the opportunity to contribute.

Acting Chairman (Senator Gerard P. Craughwell): Senator Billy Lawless, who is Senator for the diaspora, has eight minutes.

Senator Billy Lawless: I thank the Minister of State for coming to speak to us in the Chamber today. I commend him for his commitment to addressing the issues faced by Ireland's diaspora. As we near St. Patrick's Day, with many members of Cabinet and the Minister of State travelling to the United States, I ask the Minister of State that as well as promoting inward investment to the State, he ensures that whether a Minister is in Silicon Valley or Savannah, the plight of the undocumented remains firm on his or her agenda. As the Minister of State is aware, it is not just about persuading the President, which is a tall task in itself, or persuading sympathetic US Senators or Congressmen on Capitol Hill, it is about building a coalition of goodwill so businesses that invest in this country act as our messengers for a bespoke solution to the continued hurdles the undocumented abroad face. There are many in the Irish emigrant community, who are either undocumented themselves or have loved ones who fall into that category, who remain despondent at the prospect of meaningful reform being realised under this US Administration. I would temper that despondency in this way. Historically, Ireland has managed to do many great things with both Republican and Democrat Presidents and when either party leads the House of Representatives or the Senate. It is an often forgotten fact that the McBride principles, named after Seán McBride, Nobel Peace Prize winner, were enshrined

in US law during a deeply divided Administration and Government in the United States. The McBride principles were a form of positive discrimination, or as was referred to in the US then, affirmative action, where US companies, if they were to invest in Northern Ireland, were forced to hire equal numbers of Catholic and Protestant workers.

I give this example simply to say that we cannot give up the fight for the undocumented. Despondency and waiting for the next Administration to come along are not the answer. We must work on every side to build a permanent coalition that understands and accepts the unique plight of the undocumented Irish. I hope this message will be conveyed loud and clear by all our Ministers representing us abroad in the coming months.

I also call on the Government to stand ready to secure a reciprocal agreement with the United States, which will ensure future flow of emigration from Ireland to the US while, at the same time, regularising the status of the undocumented. I can think of no better way of enlarging our diplomatic army in the cause of our undocumented neighbours and cousins to build a coalition of support than extending the electoral franchise to emigrant voters. As I have said many times in this Chamber, how we treat the undocumented at home must be the foundation of how we advocate for them abroad. In that same vein, the referendum in June 2019 will be about linking those who for years have campaigned in the US with their local US politicians to the Irish State, which has advocated on their behalf and whose President represents the entire Irish nation. I pressed on the Taoiseach when he was here last week - I will do the same to the Minister of State - not to allow a vacuum to develop in advance of the referendum that I am sure for the Government seems far away. The sooner we have clarity and know precisely who the Government intends to allow to vote in presidential elections and how it will operate in practice, the better we can start having real arguments and allay legitimate fears some of our citizens may have.

I am grateful for the Minister of State's continued support. Will he convey to the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade my thanks for the negotiations he is having on Brexit on behalf of the people?

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit go dtí an Seanad.

Last week, the Seanad debated a Bill on banning goods from illegal colonial settlements entering Ireland. Then I laid out my deep concerns about Israel's continued illegal occupation of Palestine, including in the settlements and the apartheid system it enforces there. I also raised the case of Ahd Tamimi who remains imprisoned in an Israeli military jail. Last week, the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade neglected to call for her immediate release. Will the Minister of State do so on behalf of the Government now?

It was reported last week that in January, a 14-year-old epileptic Palestinian girl was arrested by Israeli authorities and sent to the Gaza Strip for two weeks, even though her home is with her parents south of Ramallah in the West Bank. The girl was arrested as an illegal alien on 13 January in East Jerusalem because she did not have the right Israeli issued permit to be in Jerusalem. She was released on bail and taken by the Israeli authorities to the Gaza Strip because it was listed in records as her father's place of residence, even though she had never been there in her life. The traumatised child was stuck in Gaza for two weeks before she could return home. This is another example in a litany of brutal daily realities which exist for Palestinians and what they face under Israel's occupation and enforced apartheid regime.

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On Sunday, Israeli authorities tore down two EU-funded classrooms which were part of a school for children in the occupied West Bank because they said they were built illegally. This is the fifth time they have done this since 2016. How does the Government plan on holding Israel to account for destroying schools built with Irish and EU taxpayers' money? Will the Government demand compensation and the rebuilding of the schools? It is time for the Government to respect the democratic wishes of the Seanad and the Dáil, as well as of the Irish people, and officially recognise the state of Palestine with East Jerusalem as its capital.

I am concerned by the current political situation in Catalonia. On 21 December an election was held after the Spanish Government revoked Catalonia's home rule. The Catalan people once again gave political parties which support Catalan independence a parliamentary majority. However, the leader of the largest party is in exile in Belgium and the leader of the second largest party remains imprisoned by the Spanish authorities. The leaders of the two main grassroots, pro-independence civil society groups also remain in prison. The Catalan Parliament is still trying to elect its President because the Spanish Government is threatening to arrest more Catalan MPs if they go ahead with the vote to re-elect pro-independence President, Carles Puigdemont.

Like many others, I am truly appalled at the approach and provocative actions of the Spanish Government. Picking a new President should not mean criminal consequences or negative legal effects for MPs. The continued prosecution of Catalan Ministers, MPs, civil society activists and the Speaker of the Catalan Parliament is completely unacceptable and undemocratic. The Spanish Government must turn away from its clearly confrontational approach and, instead, enter into meaningful negotiations with the Catalan Government to find an acceptable path forward through inclusive dialogue. We must bear in mind that we will all gather this year and next year to commemorate elections and the sitting of a then so-called "illegal Parliament".

I have deep concerns about what is happening in Colombia. While it is welcome that FARC and the Colombian Government have agreed a historic peace deal, the Colombian Government is failing to protect vulnerable community leaders and human rights defenders from right-wing paramilitaries. Last year at least 170 community leaders were killed in Colombia; 21 were killed last month alone. Colombia's ombudsman said last week community leaders in Colombia face extermination. He called on the Colombian Government to prioritise the protection of community leaders and said its failure to do so was "assisting in their extermination". Will the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade raise with his counterpart in Colombia the completely unacceptable assassination of these social and political leaders? Hopefully, the Minister of State could pledge on behalf of the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Ireland's support to these human rights defenders who are under threat.

I condemn Turkey's ground offensive and invasion of Syria and its attacks on Afrin in north-west Syria. Turkey's military attacks have caused significant civilian casualties. They are wrong and must be condemned by all. We have already seen the human rights violations that the Turkish army has committed against Kurds in south-east Turkey. It is clear its brutal tactics will be replicated against Kurds in Afrin. The Kurdish People's Protection Units, the YPG, has been successfully fighting Daesh in this region. Turkey's attacks will hamper the fight against Daesh, which is not completely surprising given the many questions surrounding Turkey's covert support for radical jihadist groups in this region. I urge the Minister of State to condemn Turkey's attacks on Afrin and that it is raised with his counterparts in the Turkish Government.

I want to speak out against the brutal attacks and blockade of Yemen by Saudi Arabia and

the United Arab Emirates which have plunged the country into the worst humanitarian crisis in the world. UNICEF's latest report, *Born Into War*, details how children in Yemen have been scarred by years of violence, displacement, disease, poverty, undernutrition and a lack of access to basic services, including water, health care and education, because of the war and the Saudi blockade. More than 11 million children, nearly every child in Yemen, now need humanitarian assistance and famine is a real prospect. I urge the Minister of State to support an arms embargo on Saudi Arabia and other necessary measures to create a peaceful political solution to this conflict. I call on the Department to respond generously to UNICEF's appeal for \$312 million in 2018 to continue responding to the urgent needs of children in Yemen.

I respectfully disagree with the Minister of State on the State's participation in PESCO. I have already made my views known to the Minister of State, Deputy Kehoe, on this. We have much to be proud of in the record of the Defence Forces' participation in humanitarian search and rescue missions in the Mediterranean. Not only will PESCO hamper and erode Ireland's neutrality, it will also have a real possibility of changing the whole nature of the humanitarian efforts which we have undertaken in the Mediterranean to save many refugees.

Regarding the issues of Brexit and the North, as other colleagues have said, I resent contributing to statements on foreign affairs having to talk about the North and Brexit when both of them are home affairs and should be treated as such.

Senator Mark Daly: Hear, hear.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: Irish language groups in the North in the context of the talks in which the Minister, Deputy Coveney, is taking part have made an appeal in recent days to the party leaders, the British Secretary of State, Karen Bradley, and the Minister, Deputy Coveney, to meet the groups and organisations in the Irish language sector who live their lives, work and contribute to society day in and day out, to hear the experience of that community, and to cut through some of the mistruths, ignorance and, in many cases, bigotry expressed towards that community. The people who sent that letter to the Minister on behalf of the Irish-speaking community have yet to receive an acknowledgement. I respectfully urge the officials to take that on board, that they would seek to engage with that sector and, most importantly, that they would meet and hear from them and understand, not the media narrative that exists around the Irish-speaking population, but the reality.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: Although I am very happy to welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Cannon, to the House, I note we have been promised a debate, and we will need to have one, with the Minister, Deputy Coveney, on some of these issues in the future because I understand many of them fall within his remit. Nonetheless, I look forward to the engagement with Minister of State, Deputy Cannon.

I was happy he spoke about the sustainable development goals. Ireland can be very proud of the role it played in brokering one of the most important ambitious global agreements we have had in global development. I understand a national implementation plan is with the Cabinet and is due to be published. Will the Minister of State be returning to the House to present this plan and to allow opportunities for statements and a discussion on it?

I note Ireland will be reporting to the high-level political forum in July, presenting a voluntary national review. As this matter also falls under the remit of the Minister of State's Department, I would like him to comment on what plans he has to incorporate input and review

from civil society, both domestic and overseas, around that report, allowing for meaningful engagement. When we receive the national implementation plan, we will need some immediate targets, because if we wish to achieve these goals by 2030, we need to start now and we need to have progress now. It is important to note, and I noted this in an earlier discussion today, that commitment to equal opportunity and reduced inequalities of outcome is at the core of the sustainable development goals. It is also important to make sure that our policies are consistent with supporting other countries in their capacity to deliver the sustainable development goals because they are universal goals and a universal responsibility. It is important in other areas of our policy that we do not undermine the capacity of developing states particularly to reach these shared goals and targets.

I welcome the Minister of State's reference to the post-Cotonou process in respect of Africa. Ireland's relationship with Africa has been a very positive and strong one. I would note in particular the role that has been played by the organisation of Irish parliamentarians for Africa in the Oireachtas for many years.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: Hear, hear.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I understand that while the European branch of that entity may be in difficulty, it is important that we recognise the role of that entity within the Oireachtas and make sure it is continued to ensure people have a space for more parties to engage in issues that affect Ireland, Europe and Africa.

In respect of Irish Aid, we have had a long-standing commitment to the 0.7% of gross national income, GNI, target. It dipped severely in recent years to 0.33%, which is not even half of the target. I recognise that the Taoiseach has now pledged to increase it. I especially welcome last week's announcement around increased support for the global partnership for education. I also note the review of the Irish Aid programme which the Minister of State signalled. That is one which we may be able to discuss in more detail in this House, but I note with some concern that an increasing portion of Irish Aid is routed through European aid which operates sometimes on quite different principles. An important aspect of Irish Aid is the principle that it is not tied. As we look to increase our spending in this area, we need to ensure that we maintain that principle and that we maintain it within our funding.

We also need to examine the area of policy coherence. Under the sustainable development goals, policy coherence is one of our commitments. From our areas of aid to trade to our taxation policies, we have to make sure that we address contradictions which undermine the often positive and exceptional work of Irish Aid and programmes and workers. In that context, others have spoken about the issue of occupied territories. Globally, there are many occupied territories to be considered, including Western Sahara and West Papua, but focusing specifically on the question of the occupied Palestinian territories, it is concerning that at the weekend we were told by the Irish representation that the Israeli army has demolished a children's school in East Jerusalem, a school which Irish Aid funding helped to build. It underscores the need for intensified strong diplomatic action to ensure we are not losing ground on this issue and we do not enter a new era in which actions can be taken with perceived impunity.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: Hear, hear.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: With respect to Brexit, I will not speak in detail on it as I imagine we will have a chance to debate it further, but I want to highlight two issues. First, it

is welcome that the Tánaiste met the joint committee on human rights. The principle of human rights equivalence is a vital, if somewhat neglected, pillar of the Good Friday Agreement. That question of human rights equivalence is crucial and a first stage Brexit issue. It would have been good to see it moved forward more in the first phase of the negotiations.

The second issue I wish to highlight is that Ireland has a very strong national action plan on women, peace and security, as the Minister of State will be aware. It is important we remind ourselves of that plan in our approach to the Brexit negotiations and our engagement in them. When we talk about women, peace and security, we need to talk also about communities, women's groups and civil society groups, the role they have played in the Good Friday Agreement and the role they need to play in the conversations as we look to the Brexit negotiations. It is a reminder for us to follow through on those principles.

The next stage of the Brexit negotiations is effectively a trade negotiation. That involves key questions. What will be the model of the trade agreement? Will it include an arbitration method such as an investment court system? There would be a concern if that is the method and the chosen form of arbitration because the investor court system is currently being challenged within the European Court of Justice. That raises the question of whether it is an appropriate model to be considered. Will the precautionary principle, and this is very important for Ireland, in terms of environmental employment and medical and health standards be at the centre or will we go for the situation which prevails in a number of trade agreements where the onus is on a person to prove harm rather than the precautionary principle standing? Will we go for the quite radical and still experimental proposal of a negative list system where everything is included unless something is taken off the table, or a positive list system where we know what is being negotiated? These are the questions that hang over every trade negotiation, but we need to address them urgently in terms of Brexit.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: The Senator is spot on, yes.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: The issue on which I wanted to focus is PESCO. I will need to speak to the Minister, Deputy Coveney, because this deeply affects his work on disarmament. I have to correct the record in the context of the Minister of State's speech. He said PESCO is provided for in the Treaty on European Union which was approved by Irish people. Let us be very clear, the opportunity to opt in or out of PESCO is what is provided for in the treaty and that is what was voted for. It is important that we do not give some retrospective legitimacy to suggest people have approved that. I beg the Cathaoirleach's indulgence on this. I will be following up on the question of PESCO and we will have a debate on it, but let us be clear that it is not business as usual. One of the key areas is that of military procurement. What we now see is that there is going to be joint military procurement. The Minister of State refused to answer previously whether the triple lock would be used. We now know the triple lock will not be used, so there is a core question, which is how the Minister of State, Deputy Cannon, assures the public that the military equipment we purchase will be used by other countries with different mandates and whether it will be used outside a UN mandate? Germany has NATO troops and is part of missions in Afghanistan and Austria has brought tanks to the border with Italy to use against migrants. Some European countries have a history of testing and using their military equipment against other countries outside UN mandate. There is a real question here.

An Cathaoirleach: I must ask the Senator to finish. There are three other speakers and they will not all get in.

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Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: Okay, I will adjourn but only on the-----

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Higgins should listen to me for a moment. She had eight minutes and she is now at almost ten minutes and that is an abuse of the privilege she was given.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I had to redirect my speech because we did not have the debate that we had been promised and I did try to address the Minister of State's brief, out of respect to him.

An Cathaoirleach: I know, but I have to be fair to everybody.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: However, I note that we will be returning to PESCO and we will need clear assurances as to how the Minister addresses the use of those weapons and military equipment which Ireland jointly purchases. It is a very clear question. There is no mechanism to deal with it.

An Cathaoirleach: I call Senator Feighan.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: Will the implementation on PESCO-----

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Higgins should please respect the Chair. I call Senator Feighan.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: It is a concrete question. Will the implementation plan on PESCO be published-----

An Cathaoirleach: I call Senator Feighan.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: -----and will it be brought to these Houses and voted upon? That is my final question.

An Cathaoirleach: I always say that when people have eight minutes, they should not leave the important point until last. Senator Buttimer, the Leader of the House will probably not get to speak now because we wasted three minutes. Senator Feighan has five minutes.

Senator Frank Feighan: I thought I had eight minutes.

An Cathaoirleach: The leader of each group has eight minutes. Senator Feighan has five and Senator Bacik has eight because she is the leader of the Technical Group.

Senator Frank Feighan: I will pare down my speech.

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Buttimer would have five but I cannot see him getting in. the Minister has to respond as well.

Senator Frank Feighan: These are very challenging times due to Brexit and as we all know too well the nature of the relationship between the EU and the UK post Brexit remains unclear. It will be subject to potentially complex and protracted negotiations. I commend the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Coveney, and the Minister of State, Deputy Cannon, who is present, and the foreign affairs team on the continued work they are doing on the Brexit front.

Ireland has secured concrete commitments on the maintenance of the common travel area and on the protection of the Good Friday Agreement in all its parts and the gains of the peace process. I have attended many conferences and meetings through my involvement with the

British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly and many other fora and I have told UK politicians that under no circumstances will there be a border on the island of Ireland. We cannot say that enough. In some respect there is a selective memory but under no circumstances can we allow a border on the island of Ireland. I think we have made our position extremely clear. We want to be very helpful to the United Kingdom and we will be helpful to it but this is a red line issue on which we have made ourselves very clear. I was in the UK last week and people said we could get around that. One cannot get around a border on the island of Ireland. The Border will be the Achilles heel of Brexit. It was an Achilles heel two years ago and the same was true a year ago. That is why I believe Brexit cannot work because there cannot be a border on the island of Ireland for many reasons other than the symbolic, political and financial.

I welcome the fact that the Minister has taken a review of the Irish Aid programme and developed a pathway towards reaching our long-standing target for overseas development aid of 0.7% of gross national income, GNI, by 2030. That is very important. As a country we must take our place among the nations of the world and lead by example. We have no baggage such as having had an empire and we are seen as independent arbiters. We need to step up to the plate. I do not say we need to take risks but we must be seen as independent arbiters. Sometimes when there are issues before the House, that does not mean we should not debate them, but people are watching Ireland in terms of our position and we will do an awful lot of good in the world in future years.

I note with interest that we have applied to become an observer at the francophone group of nations. I welcome that. It is a very strategic move. It will ensure we get into places such as east Africa or other parts of Africa and it will help our relationship with the EU and Africa and help us to do good. Previously, I suggested we should consider our relationship with the Commonwealth of Nations, formerly the British Commonwealth. I say that from the point of view of aid, trade, the diaspora and sport. We should also look at the CPLP which is the Community of Portuguese Language Speaking Countries. All of those groups and agencies are not hugely political but they do great work around the world. If we are going to spend 0.7% on aid, which Norway, Sweden and many other countries do, it is about time that we could pool our resources and ideas. A group from the Commonwealth of Nations does work around the world, as does the francophone group, the EU and the United Nations, and that all makes a considerable difference.

Canada and Cyprus are in the group of francophone countries. They are also in the Commonwealth of Nations. We should not be afraid of joining and helping out in those various communities because that can only do good. India is the second largest country in the world with a population of 1.3 billion. It is the fastest growing economy at 6.7%. Why would we not look at being part of an organisation that would give us access to such a country? If it makes sense for us to join a francophone group of nations, why should we not look at a group of which we were a member up to 1949 when a Fine Gael Taoiseach left in a huff? Why should we not consider the Commonwealth of Nations and all the positive aspects of being a member of it? Let us get over the fact that it is British. It is the Commonwealth of Nations and it would make great sense for us to consider joining such a group.

Senator Ivana Bacik: The Minister of State, Deputy Cannon, is very welcome to the House. If I may, I will touch for a moment on an issue that is not related to foreign affairs. As a fellow member of the all-party Oireachtas cycling group, I commend him on his work on cycle safety. I wish him the very best with the minimum passing distance law which I hope will be introduced without any further delay. I know the Dublin Cycling Campaign and others are

working with him on it.

As a member of the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade I am delighted to engage with the Minister of State and the Minister, Deputy Coveney, on a range of issues. We look forward to having the Minister before us at the committee on 1 March and I will certainly raise issues with him then. I am conscious that colleagues have raised issues around the undocumented Irish. Senator Lawless has done much work on votes for the diaspora, the Government commitment on which I very much welcome, having been involved with the Constitutional Convention which recommended that we would have votes for the diaspora in presidential elections. Others have spoken also on PESCO.

On the day that is in it, the centenary of the Representation of the People Act, when we commemorate the centenary of women's suffrage, I very much welcome the Minister of State's commitment to ensure gender equality is at the forefront of our international work, in particular as he said when Ireland becomes the chair of the Commission on the Status of Women later this year.

In the brief time available to me, and so as to allow time for Senator Buttimer to speak, I wish to touch on Irish Aid. As the Minister of State is aware, the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade has been conducting a review in conjunction with the Department, and we hope to launch our report on Irish Aid at the end of February. We heard from many stakeholders in the area and a number of issues were addressed. Members of the committee travelled to Malawi, a key partner country for Ireland. We are keen to ensure the Government takes forward the implementation of the sustainable development goals in the Irish Aid programme, with a specific focus on gender, education, climate change and agriculture. We have also called for a whole-of-Government approach to overseas development. We very much recognise the very positive feedback we get from partner countries and from those working in development in terms of Irish Aid's programme and the significant benefit it has brought about.

One thing we are keen to emphasise is that we would seek to reach our commitment on the spending of 0.7% of GNI on overseas development aid. I very much welcome the comment in the Minister of State's speech that he will be developing a pathway towards reaching that goal. He also said the Tánaiste will bring proposals in that respect to Government very soon. I very much hope we will see it. The committee will certainly be working to support it because, in its report, it will be setting out in detail a proposal for how we can achieve our target on a phased basis. We are conscious that Ireland is still some way off achieving it. We were only at a figure of 0.33% in 2016. That is a key issue that will certainly be raised in the report.

On ongoing humanitarian crises, colleagues have referred to the Rohingya people and the need for an independent investigation in that regard. I raised the matter with the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Simon Coveney, some months ago and was glad to see in his response to me that the Government would be pushing for an impartial, independent investigation into events, particularly in Rakhine State. I very much support the Minister's work in that regard.

Colleagues have referred to the conflict in Syria. With regard to the conflicts in Syria and Yemen, as a neutral state within the European Union, Ireland should be referring to the powers behind them - the powers that are really causing the humanitarian crises. I refer to Russia's backing of the brutal Assad regime in Syria, on which we have had quite a number of hearings at meetings of the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs. This morning I was glad to screen a

film by Ronan Tynan and Anne Daly of Esperanza Productions, “Syria: The Impossible Revolution”. It sets out the context and background to the horrific conflict which has claimed so many lives. There is still enormous displacement of people across Syria, with civilians being targeted and sieges in East Ghouta and other places. I am happy to work with the Irish Syria Solidarity Movement in trying to highlight the plight of the Syrian people and the backing of the Assad regime by other powers such as Russia and Iran which has resulted in the regime being propped up. The same applies to the forgotten crisis in Yemen which others have mentioned and in which there have been terrible civilian casualties. Saudi Arabia has been complicit in the brutality. Ireland should be taking a strong stand against the backing of brutal regimes by other powers.

On the conflict in Palestine and the Middle East, I am glad that we had the debate last week on Senator Francis Black’s Bill on the occupied territories. I am also glad that the Minister adopted a co-operative approach to it. I hope he, Senator Frances Black and her colleagues will liaise on the matter to ensure progress is made on the Bill which is an important one. It is important that we take action, particularly on the settlements which are illegal under international law. The Labour Party has a strong track record on Palestinian rights.

Although I know that it is not strictly a matter for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade - it is a matter for the Department of Justice and Equality - we need to recognise our role in Ireland in taking in more refugees and ensuring generosity in granting a right to work to those living in direct provision centres. I hope we will see speedy action being taken by the Government in that regard. My colleague, Senator Aodhán Ó Ríordáin, has taken a strong stance on the issue and been right.

Recently I was pleased to attend the Holocaust memorial event. The resonance between the position on the plight of refugees fleeing from conflict across the Mediterranean and Ireland’s lack of generosity in taking in Jewish refugees during the Second World War was actually noted by the Taoiseach when he spoke at the event.

On Brexit, I do not agree with Senator Frank Feighan. I do not believe many agree with his position on the Commonwealth. However, I agree with him on how disastrous Brexit will be for Ireland. A number of members of the committee met the House of Commons Exiting the European Union Committee just a week and a half ago. We presented a cross-party consensus to its chairman, Mr. Hilary Benn, and his colleagues on just how seriously detrimental Brexit would be to Ireland. We left them very clear on the effect it would have. It is crucial that we have ongoing parliamentary engagement with Members of Parliament in Britain and Members of the House of Lords. I am glad that, as part of Vótáil 100, a group of us will be travelling to the House of Commons on 28 February to present a portrait of Constance Markievicz. It will be the first time the British will recognise officially her position as the first woman Member of Parliament who was elected in 1918.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Ciarán Cannon, and commend him for his work in the Department. There will be an adjournment of the debate to allow further discussions with the Tánaiste, Deputy Simon Coveney, who is but one of the Ministers in the Department. The Minister of State is here in his own right and has his own specific brief and duties. He is not here as a surrogate.

It is important on this day to have ongoing parliamentary dialogue, negotiation and conversation, as Senator Ivana Bacik pointed out. This is a very important day in the country’s history

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and the history of women. It is also important in the context of the ongoing peace process in the North. I hope that, in the context of this debate, there will be a resolution of the issue that has bedevilled the parties in the North for 12 months. It is hard to believe it was this time last year that some of us, including Senator Brian Ó Domhnaill, were canvassing in the elections in the North. I had the pleasure to be there and certainly found the issues to be pertinent, including to what was happening here. The one thing people want is devolved government. They do not want administrators, civil servants or direct rule from London; they want the parties that were elected to take up their responsibilities. I wish everybody well in the ongoing talks.

I am a member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE which meets on a number of occasions during the course of the year. We are due to meet next week in Vienna. One of the pertinent points in its initial founding document, under the Helsinki Final Act, was a call to participating states to develop co-operation in the fields of trade, industry, science and technology, the environment and other areas of economic activity that contributed to the reinforcement of peace and security in Europe and the world as a whole. It is the very principle of reinforcing peace and security that is at stake. What the opening mission statement does not refer to is the ongoing issue of human rights.

As a member of the LGBTI community, I had the need - I will not say the honour or pleasure - to meet the Russian ambassador to discuss human rights in Russia and the issue of Chechnya. From talking to some of my friends, including Senator Billy Lawless, who represents the diaspora via Galway and Chicago, I note that there is a fear within the LGBT community in America that there has been regression in the representation of rights by some, particularly under the current US Administration. It is feared that across the world human rights issues for LGBT people are not profiled enough. I very much welcome the participation of Mr. Rory O'Neill, through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, as an ambassador for us across the world. He is an extraordinary person, with whom I have had the pleasure of working and campaigning. I have been on panels with him. He brings his own unique style and also a keen intellect to many issues, including the issue of HIV-AIDS in this case. Those who questioned his participation should consider what he has actually done and to where he travels. Whether it is in Mozambique, South Africa or other parts of the world, he is challenging but also advocating.

There is a wealth of information, knowledge and experience within the parliamentary system that can also be used. I use my opportunity, as a member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE, to advocate continually for human rights. To borrow the famous phrase used in connection with Mr. Bertie Ahern, it sometimes feels like playing handball against a haystack, but we must continue to advocate. That is why Senator Ivana Bacik is correct regarding migrants and our humanitarian outlook. We must continue to challenge ourselves as a nation, challenging not only the State and civic leaders but also an gnáth duine - the ordinary person - on how we can make Ireland a more welcoming place for people fleeing conflict.

I commend the work done by Deputy Simon Coveney when he was Minister for Defence. He is now Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade. I commend him for his genuine approach to the humanitarian crisis in the Mediterranean. I also commend the men and women of the Naval Service and the Defence Forces for the work they do.

It is a matter of international co-operation and adopting a comprehensive approach to security. While we want to see our neutrality maintained and do not want to see it diluted, the world is evolving. The way in which the world looks at itself is changing. Bearing in mind the 1975

document of the OSCE, there have been changes in the world, but the challenges remain. I heard the Minister's comments on the United Nations. What does it stand for anymore? Whom does it represent? Where does the power lie? Who makes the decisions? These are questions we must all ask and consider. That august body is seen as bearing the gold star in upholding human rights and challenging those who deny them, but who is in control? Senator Alice-Mary Higgins referred to this issue.

6 o'clock

It is a question to which I will come back when the debate is resumed. Certainly, it is one we cannot and should not ignore.

I thank the Minister of State for coming into the House. I know that he came at the eleventh hour. He has a considerable budget and brief which I did not get a chance to discuss, but I know from talking to people he has met as part of his work that he is doing a good job.

On the Order of Business Senator John Dolan struck an important chord when talking about missionary work and sustainable development, including sustainable development aid, throughout the world. That is an issue to which we must come back. I propose that we adjourn the discussion until a later date.

An Cathaoirleach: The discussion is adjourned until another occasion, as agreed to on the Order of Business. I thank the Minister of State.

Education (Welfare) (Amendment) Bill 2017: Second Stage

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister for Children and Family Affairs, Deputy Katherine Zappone, back to her alma mater. I am sure she has fond memories of the Chamber.

This is a Private Members' Bill and I have already outlined what it is about.

Senator Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I intend to share time with Senator Kevin Humphreys.

I welcome the Minister and thank her for her indication of support for the Bill. It is much appreciated.

I wish to read some words written by Tom Johnson almost 100 years ago. Today we are recognising the 100th anniversary of the granting of the vote to some women for the first time in 1918. Since we are going through a period of reflection on from where we have come and where we are, it is important for us to reflect on the revolutionary ethos that underpinned those times. I speak of Tom Johnson because he was the first leader of the Labour Party in the Oireachtas. He was asked to pen the first democratic programme of the First Dáil. As the Labour Party had not sought election in 1918, the honour was given to him to write it. He wrote:

It shall be the first duty of the Government of the Republic to make provision for the physical, mental and spiritual well-being of the children, to secure that no child shall suffer hunger or cold from lack of food, clothing, or shelter, but that all shall be provided with the means and facilities requisite for their proper education and training as Citizens of a Free and Gaelic Ireland.

It was the children to whom Tom Johnson turned first. As you know, a Chathaoirligh, our

legislation requires children to be in school between the ages of six and 16 years. Unfortunately, there are problems with the attendance records of many children aged four or five years in the school system. Obviously, these problems are not of their making and it is within the power of their parents or guardians to deal with them. They will have a major impact on their ability to reach their potential in later years.

I have read through the international research on the abilities of children at early ages. I often quote from the 1995 Hart and Risley report which concluded that the average three year old from a welfare dependent family had, on average, one third of the oral language capacity of a three year old from a rich or advantaged family. A poor child aged three years has 400 words, while a rich child - if a child can be rich at the age of three years - has 1,200. Even at the earliest stage, a disadvantaged child has a major gap to close.

I view literacy and educational disadvantage in the way tuberculosis was viewed in the 1940s and 1950s when it was said no one should get sick because he or she was poor. It is similar with illiteracy. People will always have difficulty in reading, but they should never have difficulty in reading because they are poor.

Effectively, we are trying to deal with four and five year olds with chronic attendance difficulties. Often they can be sick, for which there are reasons. Any medical professional will back up the family and deal with Tusla in that regard. However, if a parent is poor and in despair and in a family that is struggling to function because of any number of stresses and strains, including addiction and poverty, bringing a child to school can be the last thing on his or her list of priorities. We want to ensure that if a child is four or five years of age and vulnerable and at the beginning of the educational journey, that journey will be defended by the State, Tusla, the political system and legislation. Unfortunately, families often do not understand the power of education and the importance of being in school every day. As a former school principal in an area of acute disadvantage, I know that Mondays and Fridays often fell by the wayside. On half days, people often took full days off. Christmas and summer can be difficult. It is not because parents or guardians do not love their children but it is because education has failed too many parents and too many people. When they look at school or education, they are looking at something very negative. In some instances they would rather be friends with their children than parents. That is completely understandable.

The Minister rolled out and robustly defended the ABC programme which we started in the last Government. These are programmes across acutely disadvantaged areas. They empower parents to understand the power of oral language, literacy, school attendance and diet, which can prepare a child for life. The scheme in Darndale is called Preparing for Life.

In our Bill, we want four and five year olds to be prepared for life. If children are not regular attenders at school, it should be within the capacity of Tusla to intervene with the family but not in a negative or an aggressive way, or in a way that would undermine the parents, but in a compassionate and empowering way which ensures parents and guardians can ensure that attendance patterns are improved. The Minister will appreciate that if a four or five year old is missing from school for 60 to 90 days a year, we can be sure those attendance patterns will be as bad if not worse if we fast forward ten years.

We should be striving for the total eradication of illiteracy. I met an educational psychologist in West Dunbartonshire, Scotland, called Tommy MacKay who speaks in those terms. Unfortunately, the ambition for our language has not been strong enough. We have spoken about

breaking the cycle and delivering equality of opportunity in schools. However, striving for the total eradication of illiteracy has to be our goal. Attendance at school for four and five year old boys and girls across this State is something we need to strive for.

As the Minister said, under 50% of four year olds are enrolled in schools but the vast majority of five year olds are. If a child has chronic attendance issues, the teacher or principal of the school is effectively powerless because of the legislative issue of only requiring children to be in school between six and 16 years of age. With the best will in the world, a teacher or a principal can only go so far.

With our amendment, any child enrolled in school aged four or five will come under the auspices of the Educational Welfare Act. That will be a positive move. I appreciate the Government is supporting and will facilitate the Bill. I appreciate there is broad agreement in this House that this Bill is a good piece of work.

As we recall our past and look to our future, we should note that throughout the history of our State it is our children who have been let down time and again. Education is the great liberator and the one thing that will drag a child out of poverty. It is said the most revolutionary action a girl can take is to pick up a book. That is why Boko Haram is kidnapping schoolgirls in Nigeria and that is why Malala Yousafzai's life was threatened with a gunshot as she was on her way to school. A ten year old girl with a book is probably the most dangerous thing in the world.

What we need to encourage in Ireland is the ambition that four and five year old children with books can change the world. However, if they are not in school everyday, if their families are not in a position to send them to school everyday or if they feel that education is down the list of priorities, then there has to be an agency that can empower those parents and guardians to bring those children back to school. Tusla is that agency but I appreciate that it will say it is under-resourced in terms of educational welfare officers. We can have a discussion about the number of educational welfare officers.

Let us defend the rights of four and five olds to their education, if they are enrolled in a school they want to attend. As the Minister knows, primary schools across Ireland are the most wonderful places in the country, regardless of quibbles and complaints about resources and various different things that will always be needed. A person cannot walk into any primary school in the country and not be uplifted. I refer to professionalism, love, care and just the buzz of what children bring to a place. That is what we are trying to achieve. Thankfully, we are achieving that together. We appreciate the Minister's support for this Bill which will become law and four and five year olds will have their educational rights protected.

Senator Kevin Humphreys: I formally second the Bill. I congratulate, on behalf of the Labour Party, Senator Ó Riordáin on the work he has done and on the fact that the Minister is accepting the Bill. I grew up in the inner city. Part of the south docks is a mirror image of the north docks. It is an area that has not recovered since containerisation. We have seen much unemployment in the core of the inner city. Drug addiction and crime have followed on from that with young people seeing no future and being locked out of education. They have seen the new Dublin grow up around them. They have seen the Irish Financial Services Centre, the docklands authority and the silicon docks rise out of the ashes.

They feel locked out. They do not feel any of those doors are open to them. They do not

see the benefit of education. In many instances, there is not the habit of going through the educational system. I refer to anything that would close that gap, where a child can fall through that crevice and not get an opportunity to have the same advantages as everyone else of a good education. Senator Ó Riordáin mentioned the ABC programme and the early intervention which Professor Josephine Bleach, who I know works closely with the Minister, has pioneered in the inner city. The ladies who go around the flat complexes in the north and the south inner city are known as the book ladies. They are the people who bring books into the flats and who teach the parent how to play with the child, how to teach the ABCs, and how to hold a pencil, a simple little thing. Child arrive into a classroom in the first year of study and have not have developed the dexterity to hold a pencil.

At four or five years of age, when the children enter the formal education system, they are already two or three years behind in their development. This Bill is a small measure to close off one of the gaps. I refer to the habit of going to school everyday, which is so important. The Bill does not set out punish parents but to support parents and children to make sure they have equality of opportunity. In many places, from Tallaght to Ringsend and from the North Wall to Ballymun, many of our children are denied that equality of opportunity from the very beginning. Sometimes it is due to circumstances outside of the child's control. It may be a problem the parents have with addiction, whether to drugs or alcohol, or it may even be that their parents did not regard education as empowering or as a way to future prosperity.

I visit schools in my area when the leaving certificate results come out. I will not mention the schools but if one visits a school in an affluent area in my constituency and asks students where they are going and what is next, one will be told they are going to Trinity, that they have applied to UCD or that they are taking a gap year and that they are going to Oxford next year. They have their educational roadmap laid out in front of them. If one visits the north or south inner city and asks the same question, one may be hit with the answer that they are going to sign on. How do we stop children giving up by the age 17 or 18? We have to make sure the supports are put in at a very early stage. That is why the ABC programme and the early intervention have worked so well.

I supported the work of Professor Josephine Bleach and the Minister has continued to support that fantastic programme. It has empowered children and got them to the starting line at the same level as everyone else. We have to do what Senator Ó Riordáin said, namely, not break off support once they enter the education system. We have to support parents and children to develop the good habit of going to school every day. They should not miss school because holidays are being booked close to summer holidays or because there is an event in the family. We need to emphasise the importance of going to school every day and make sure that habit is entrenched at a very early stage in a child's educational life. We also need to make sure that the support of Tusla is in place to assist parents and children. All Departments can be underfunded, but let us deal with that and make sure our legislation reflects our ambition for our young people.

I welcome the Minister's support for the Bill. Everybody in the House wants the best for all of our children. Unfortunately in this State some children start school at a disadvantage because of the areas in which they are born. We have a responsibility, given the economic recovery, to target that economic recovery at our children to make sure they have equality of opportunity. A child in Pearse Street should have the same opportunities as a child born in Terenure. If we work together and focus the spending of the recovery in the proper areas, the next generation of children will be the best generation we can possibly produce. I again thank the Minister for

her support for the Bill.

Senator Maria Byrne: I welcome the Minister. I commend her and my Labour Party colleagues on bringing forward the proposal. The fact that the Bill is receiving more or less unanimous support shows that people are putting children at the centre of this. It demonstrates the importance of lifelong learning. The Bill covers those aged from six years to 16 years of age, but it is very important that four year olds and five year olds are included.

I note the commitment from the Government to two years of free preschool, which is very important. The Bill is complementary to that, along with introducing youth into education earlier. A survey showed that when children are happy in education and learning from a young age, they are happier in themselves as they grow older. It gives them confidence. This is a very beneficial Bill.

It was frightening to read that close to 6,000 referrals were made in respect of children who did not attend school last year, which is quite a high figure. The Bill will help that deficit. The school completion programme and the home school liaison service are very complementary to the Bill. The Departments of Children and Youth Affairs and Education and Skills working together will achieve what is of benefit to children, in particular younger children.

Senators Ó Ríordáin and Humphreys referred to the fact that some children do not attend school due to disadvantage. It is very important that the Minister's Department and Tulsa work with the parents and guardians of the children concerned. The help and support coming from them would be of advantage to the parents and children. Close co-operation and communication is very important and the doors of communication should be kept open at all times.

I compliment the Minister on her foresight in accepting the Bill. I compliment all involved in supporting the Bill. At the end of the day, we all want a high standard of education for those who are young and not so young. Lifelong learning, no matter what age one is, is very important to all of us. I commend the Bill.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: I welcome the Minister to the Chamber and compliment my Labour Party colleague on bringing forward this sensible and worthwhile Bill which we in Fianna Fáil, along with others, are very happy to support. I welcome the fact that Department of Children and Youth Affairs would have the power to intervene at a much earlier age, something which is vitally important. The saying "A stitch in time saves nine" comes to mind in respect of the Bill. If there is an issue with a particular child in school it can be identified early and steps can be taken to talk to the parents and determine the difficulties. That can be done not in a heavy-handed way but, as outlined by Senator Ó Ríordáin, in a compassionate and thoughtful way with a view to finding a resolution to the difficulties in order that the children concerned get the best possible chance to get an education that, it is to be hoped, will be their passport to a better life.

The most recent statistics available are for 2015 and 2016. I note there was a slight increase on previous years, which is quite worrying. It is timely that Senator Ó Ríordáin is bringing the Bill to the House at this particular point in time. All Senators have outlined the reasons for that in their contributions and I will not be repetitive. We in Fianna Fáil are delighted to be associated with the Bill, and look forward to its speedy passage and to it becoming law.

I am quite surprised that such legislation has not been introduced before now. The Bill is so obvious that one would wonder how it has not been in place up to this point. I again com-

pliment Senator Ó Ríordáin on his foresight. His experience of being a school principal in the area in which he worked has given him an added dimension in terms of the sensitivities of this particular issue. We are delighted to support the Bill and we look forward to its speedy passage through both Houses.

Senator Paul Gavan: On behalf of Sinn Féin I welcome the Bill to the House and again compliment our colleague, Senator Ó Ríordáin. It is a good Bill. I agree with Senator Gallagher. I was surprised to find this was not already covered by legislation. The Bill addresses an important gap which needs to be bridged. It addresses an issue which is of serious concern, as Senator Byrne alluded to, in respect of our schools and attendance.

The facts are that, whether it is a good thing, we know that of the 67,000 children who begin primary school each year, the vast majority are aged under six years and we need to ensure that they are protected by the law. We know from academic research that long-term absences and poor attendance records can cause instability as well as literacy and numeracy skills development issues in young children. These issues were addressed in the original Education and Welfare Act by introducing mandatory attendance at primary school for those aged over six years. We agree with this for the reasons outlined, but also because we believe that children have the right to an education and no parent should be allowed to deny his or her child that right. It is for those reasons that we agree that if a child aged four or five years is enrolled in a primary school by his or her parents, the parent should also be mandated to achieve an attendance record to the same standard as any other child in primary school.

I wish to raise some other issues related to this topic. I am sure the Minister will be aware that Ireland already differs from most European countries in that most children in the EU do not start school until the age of six or older. In countries such as Finland and Sweden, both of which rank highly for academic achievement and child well-being, children do not begin school until the age of seven years. We need to look at why that is the case. The issue of children starting school early in Ireland has been highlighted by Early Childhood Ireland and the Irish Primary Principals Network. Both groups said that many children aged four or five are not ready for primary school for a number of reasons.

We know schools in Ireland refuse to take children as students whose fourth birthday falls in June, July or August to protect the children from being left behind in class. If a four year old child falls behind, he or she may never catch up. The mixing of ages in a classroom can be difficult. For instance, because a child is entitled to begin primary education any time between his or her fourth and sixth birthday, a two-year gap means there can be significant differences in development, motor and social skills and the child's all-round maturity.

We also know from statistics published in the Growing Up in Ireland longitudinal study that children from lower socio-economic groups begin school earlier. Statistically, over half of children born to low-income families in 2008 started school in 2012 aged four years whereas less than one quarter of children from the highest income group began at the same age. That there is a class divide is worrying.

Fortunately, we know from evidence published in 2017 that more families are deciding to delay their children's entry into primary school, as they are availing of the preschool years provided by the State. This is evident in the statistic that the proportion of four year olds attending primary school fell from 47% in 2000 to 27% in 2017, which suggests that many parents do not feel that their children are ready for primary school at four years of age and would benefit from

the preschool years. Therefore, we reiterate our welcome for the introduction of the second year of preschool. It is an invaluable year and will assist in the development of children who take up the opportunity.

We understand that, of the 500,000 children attending primary school, one in ten misses more than 20 days each year. The majority of these children are already protected by the Education Welfare Act but are still missing school. Perhaps we need to look beyond simply punishing parents for their child's poor attendance and consider the reasons that child is missing from school. Is it because the family is living in emergency accommodation and has no means of transporting the child to school on time? Is it because the school transport system is underfunded and the route is not accommodated? Is the child's home environment difficult and supports are not there for the parents? These are questions that must be answered before a child or a parent is held accountable.

Age, even at an early stage, is only one determining factor of a child's readiness for education. Some children will be much more mature at the ages of four and five, their linguistic abilities will be more advanced than that of others their age, and their family environments may also assist in settling them into school. If a parent wishes to enrol a child into a primary school at the age of four or five, that child should be protected under the Education Welfare Act. Therefore, we support and welcome this Bill.

Several of us have just come from the education committee, at which a number of powerful presentations on educational disadvantage were given. An Cosán was in attendance and Ms Elizabeth Waters made a particularly strong contribution. If the Minister has time, she should consider the brave and radical comments made by Dr. John Bissett of the Canal Communities Local Drugs Task Force. In particular, he challenged the ideology of equality of opportunity. It does not work for working class and disadvantaged people. We need to move to equality of outcomes. The Minister's colleague, Ms Waters, echoed those sentiments. What Dr. Bissett had to say - I listened to the last of it on television while I was preparing for this debate - was powerful testimony.

I welcome Senator Ó Ríordáin's reference to the democratic programme for governance. A powerful document, it was 100 years ahead of its time. Here we are 100 years later and we are still waiting. The programme spoke of equality and public control of key sectors of our economy. It spoke of putting public interests ahead of the rights of private ownership. When Sinn Féin celebrated the document ten years ago in the Mansion House, Deputy Adams asked whether it was any wonder that it had not been mentioned. It set out a radical vision that has been forgotten about for far too long in the State. If we are ever to achieve the goals that Mr. Tom Johnson and radical republicans and trade unionists set out at the time, we must listen to the challenging words of people like Dr. Bissett and Ms Waters regarding what we must do in education.

A colleague from Fianna Fáil cited a startling statistic this evening. If I am wrong, please accept my apologies. She mentioned that there were 89 school inspectors in the Twenty-six Counties. In other words, each one had 45 schools to cover. The figure in the Six Counties is 130 inspectors. The significant lack of resources facing the Minister in this regard presents a major challenge.

I wanted to raise these points because there is a common theme about how we challenge disadvantage and move towards real equality in this Republic. I welcome the Bill, which has

Sinn Féin's full support.

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): As an Independent Minister, a campaigner and fighter for social justice, I welcome and support this Bill. I wish to inform Senators that I have also secured the agreement of Cabinet colleagues to support it. Senator Ó Ríordáin's work on this important issue as a teacher, campaigner and public representative is welcome and it is right that it should be acknowledged.

We are in the process of ensuring that our children have the best possible start in life. There is important work going on to improve preschool and primary school. Colleagues will be aware of our efforts to change one of the most expensive child care services in the world into the best. With unprecedented levels of investment and a great deal of political support from the Houses, we have made a good start. That work is continuing.

However, we must also ensure that those parents who opt to place their four or five year old children in primary school are supported. Currently, 40% of four year olds and virtually all five year olds attend primary school, yet our laws exclude them from supports that are only available to children of the legal school-going age, that being, six to 16 years. As Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, I share the opinion that this needs to be corrected. I view the Bill in that context.

By acting now, we can ensure that, when necessary, parents are offered support - the Senator's Labour Party colleagues used the word "empowerment" - to give their children the very best start in school through regular attendance. The measures that we are discussing will allow appropriate interventions by Tusla's educational welfare services, EWS, with the families of four and five year olds. I welcome to the Public Gallery Mr. Noel Kelly, the director of the EWS, and the support given by him and Tusla for this Bill. Educational welfare officers will work with families and schools to improve the attendance, participation and engagement of our youngest pupils.

Parents are the main educators of their children and, therefore, have a key role. While the classroom, playground and formation of new friendships lead to learning, excitement and joy, it also requires commitment. It can be hard work, as Senator Ó Ríordáin and other colleagues indicated, and puts some families under pressure. For some, the new routine, time commitment and cost can be a struggle. The Bill will ensure those parents have extra support. Most fundamentally, we know that prevention and early intervention are much more effective than "cure". Appropriate early intervention, allied with high-quality early years services, is the best way to ensure that every child has a real and meaningful opportunity to realise his or her full potential.

We are making progress in providing options for children, parents and families. Senator Ó Ríordáin's Bill ensures extra support in primary school, but child care changes already in train also offer other options for parents of very young children. My mission is to ensure that every child is offered accessible, affordable and quality child care. Since the introduction of free preschool, which is provided under the early childhood care and education programme, in 2010, the number of children attending preschool has exceeded 95%. In line with the programme for Government commitment to introduce a second preschool year which will help prepare young children further for starting school, raising the school starting age to five years, the programme is being extended to two full years from this September.

The changes that we are making at preschool and primary school levels are positive. I sup-

port the Bill and welcome the support of my colleague, the Minister for Education and Skills. I promise that our Departments will work closely together, along with the EWS, on any potential policy or resource implications. I commend the Senator's initiative in introducing the Bill, given the positive impact that it will have on children and families and how it strengthens the legislative framework within which the EWS undertakes its work.

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Ó Ríordáin has a couple of minutes to wrap up if he wishes to take them. There has been a positive outcome for him.

Senator Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: Yes. I thank the Cathaoirleach. I also thank the Government for accepting the Bill and the Minister for her positive speech and her engagement, which has been a delight. I appreciate the comments of those Senators from Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin who have contributed on the debate. I want to put on the record of the House my appreciation to Tony McGillicuddy who penned the Bill. Approximately five years ago I tried to introduce it as a back bench Labour Party Deputy but it went into a raffle that I did not win. I then became a Minister of State and was unable to pursue it further. In any event, I thank the Minister for taking it on.

It is an important issue and I appreciate the comments made by other Senators. Regardless of the cut and thrust of these Houses, there are vulnerable children who need our support for whom small measures can last a lifetime. If, as a result of the Bill, one family engages in a positive way with Tusla and corrects the attendance issues of a child in school, we will have done good work today. It will affect more than just one family, however.

I also recognise the attendance of Noel Kelly. In a previous incarnation, he was very involved in the Preparing for Life scheme in Darndale that I referenced earlier. The scheme has changed countless numbers of lives in Dublin 17.

This Bill is part of a wider suite of measures that we need to discuss. Senator Ruane had an engaging conversation at the Joint Committee on Education and Skills on access at all levels of education. Campaigns were mentioned about trying to keep libraries open and have people think differently about education. Why is it that some people in our Republic, when asked to sign their charge sheet, will sign it with an X? It is because that is the only way they know to sign it. This happened early on in the person's life and was not changed in time so that this person would not have to sign the charge sheet with an X. That is the reality for too many people in our Republic.

Education is about empowerment and offering choice and different roads for people to take. Those roads should not be closed off at four or five years of age. As a former primary school principal, I know that it is not too late but it can be very difficult to change things at the age of four. Many teachers will say that they know by the child's demeanour that one four year old will have fewer challenges than another who might be sitting right beside him or her. It is upsetting to say that it is possibly too late for a four year old, and of course it is not too late for a four year old, but the damage that can be done to a child at that age can be difficult to reverse.

With the Bill we are trying to set positive patterns of attendance at the earliest age of a child's school life. There will be conversations about whether a child belongs in a formal school setting at four years of age and the Minister referred to that in her contribution. I appreciate her observations in that regard. Given the positive mindset she has brought to her Department and to the Bill, however, I think that this can be one of a suite of measures that we, on a cross-party

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basis, can introduce to try to improve the educational outcomes of the most vulnerable children in our Republic.

I appreciate the Minister's attendance in the House and her acceptance of the Bill as well as all the comments made across the Chamber. I look forward to progressing the Bill and seeing it enacted in the not too distant future.

Question put and agreed to.

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

Senator Maria Byrne: Next week.

Committee Stage ordered for Tuesday, 13 February 2018.

An Cathaoirleach: When is it proposed to sit again?

Senator Maria Byrne: Tomorrow at 10.30 a.m.

The Seanad adjourned at 6.45 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 7 February 2018.