



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE  
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

**SEANAD ÉIREANN**

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

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## SEANAD ÉIREANN

*Dé Céadaoin, 21 Márta 2018*

*Wednesday, 21 March 2018*

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

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*Machnamh agus Paidir.  
Reflection and Prayer.*

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### **Business of Seanad**

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

The need for the Minister for Health to outline the steps being taken to train and upskill people who wish to become home care providers for the elderly.

I have also received notice from Senator Keith Swanick of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Health to provide an update on the current situation in Merlin Park Hospital, County Galway, where two operating theatres remain closed since last September, and if he will address the situation of chronic overcrowding in the accident and emergency unit in University Hospital Galway where patients are at an increased risk of contracting the deadly superbug CPE.

I have also received notice from Senator Rose Conway-Walsh of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs to provide a family resource centre in Erris, County Mayo.

I have also received notice from Senator Victor Boyhan of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to consider the possibility of extending, by a further four weeks, the deadline of 31 March 2018 for the nutrient management plan GLAS 3 requirements to allow farmers adequate time to obtain accurate soil samples given the severity of weather and ground conditions across the farmland.

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

The need for the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government to consider putting in place a redress scheme to provide financial support to home purchasers who now find that their property was not properly constructed and is non-compliant with building and

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fire regulations.

I have also received notice from Senator Jerry Buttimer of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Health to outline the reasons a person, details supplied, has been waiting six years for autism services.

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

The need for the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government to consider honouring the contribution of the Irish navy to Britain and Ireland by the issuing of a new postage stamp.

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

The need for the Minister for Education and Skills to provide an update on the building of a permanent structure at Gaelscoil Chionn tSáile, Kinsale, County Cork.

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

The need for the Minister for Justice and Equality to outline the reason behind the decision not to ratify the optional protocol to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities at this time, and to outline when it is intended to do so.

Of the matters raised by the Senators suitable for discussion, I have selected those of Senators Burke, Swanick, Conway-Walsh and Boyhan and they will be taken now. I regret I had to rule out of order the matter submitted by Senator John Dolan on the ground that it is anticipatory of the statements on Ireland's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities which will take place in the Seanad later today on Wednesday, 21 March 2018. The other Senators may give notice on another day of the matters they wish to raise.

## **Commencement Matters**

### **Care of the Elderly**

**Senator Colm Burke:** I welcome the Minister of State. I very much appreciate him dealing with this matter, which relates to the increase in demand there will be for home care now that we have an increasing number of older people in the country. That number will continue to increase at a dramatic pace in the next ten to 12 years. The figures, as I understand them, indicate that 637,000 citizens are over 65. Within 12 years, that will be 1 million. While there has been an increase in the number of people who are being provided with home care, we also need to plan for the long term. In particular, we need to plan to upskill people who will be able and available to provide home care.

The other challenge we face relates to the fact that because of the increase in employment, people will not be attracted into providing home care because there are more permanent jobs

available. We will have to look, therefore, at what kind of mechanism we should put in place to ensure that people have job security. That is becoming more of a challenge for those who want to provide home care. It is in that context that I am raising this issue. I would like to know what action the Government and the Department of Health are taking to deal with this issue.

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jim Daly):** In common with other developed countries, Ireland is experiencing the ageing of its population. As the Senator rightly pointed out, this is giving rise to some significant challenges for us. The proportion of the population aged 85 and over increased by more than 20,000 between 2006 and 2016 and is projected to increase by a further 36,000 by 2026. This effectively means that this age group is expected to more than double over a 20-year period. Based on current CSO population projections, it is expected that population ageing will continue in the forthcoming decades. This, of course, has direct implications for health and social care services because demand is highest among those in these age groups.

The HSE, working within its available resources, has sought to maintain and, where possible, expand the range and volume of services available. These services include supporting people to remain in their own homes and preventing early admission to long-term residential care, as well as supporting people to return home following an acute hospital admission. Home support services were a particular area of focus in budget 2018, with an additional €18.25 million allocated. The additional resources made available in 2018 bring the total budget for the direct provision of home support services to €408 million. The HSE's national service plan provides for a target of just over 17 million home support hours to be provided to 50,500 people.

Turning now to the steps that have been taken, I can advise that at the end of last year the Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, launched the national strategic framework for health and social care workforce planning. The framework aims to support the recruitment and retention of the right mix of workers across the health and social care system to meet planned and projected service needs. The framework proposes a consistent approach to strategic workforce planning together with the establishment of structures and governance arrangements that support and enable the application of this approach in the health sector and cross-sectorally where appropriate.

One of the early actions identified as necessary to implement the framework is the development of a more formal and structured arrangement for engagement between our health and education systems to ensure the development and retention of the appropriate competencies and skills in the system. As with all health and social care workers we must ensure that the competencies and behaviours being developed by those who wish to become home care providers take account of developments in health and social care delivery. It is essential that educational and training courses are provided to these individuals with the core competencies which are required for their future profession. Ensuring closer engagement between health and education and training systems is vital to achieving this goal. The development of a protocol for engagement between the two sectors is a high-level objective of the framework's implementation plan. I am fully aware that home care providers play a vital role in improving the health and well-being of our older population by supporting and looking after them at home, which is usually their preferred environment. In terms of the provision of training, the HSE provides training to its home support workers. The current programme in health service skills leads to an award at level 5 recognised in the national framework of qualifications or equivalent. This skills programme is available to staff working in the HSE and section 38 agencies. This ensures that they have the necessary competencies required for their role meeting all the quality standards

required for effective patient and client care.

**An Leas-Chathaoirleach:** Does the Senator have a supplementary question?

**Senator Colm Burke:** I thank the Minister of State. He has acknowledged that there will be a substantial increase in the demand for home care. In the context of the national strategy framework for health and social workforce planning, do we have a five-year or ten-year plan to develop this service or are we merely going from year to year? My concern is that it is the latter.

**Deputy Jim Daly:** I can appreciate the Senator's concerns because the demographic trends are frightening to say the least. It is staggering to think we will have 1.2 million people over the age of 65 years living in this country in the next 20 years or so. There is a huge challenge and that is why, early in my tenure in this role, the Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, and I launched a consultation on a new statutory home care scheme that would mirror the fair deal scheme. It would be underpinned by statute, would be guaranteed funding and would be a demand-led scheme. Part of that is looking at our workforce planning and the issues surrounding ensuring that we have availability. It is a challenge in many different regions and it contributes to the *ad hoc* nature of delivery today. The upskilling and recruitment, as well as the maintaining and keeping in the system of home care workers, is part of that statutory scheme and is part of the planning process that is being undertaken at the moment. I assure the Senator that we are aware of that challenge and that is to the fore in our development of the new statutory scheme, which we hope to have up and running within the next two to three years.

### Hospital Services

**Senator Keith Swanick:** I thank the Minister of State for coming to the House to take this matter. Two operating theatres in Merlin Park University Hospital, Galway were shut on health and safety grounds last September when significant leaks in the roof were discovered. Repair works were completed on 1 November and yet, more than three months later, the theatres are still not open. An independent clinical assessment has been undertaken to assess the feasibility of returning these theatres to use and I understand that correspondence was issued yesterday to the effect that one of those theatres may be in a position to open today. Can the Minister of State confirm this? More importantly, can he also confirm that it would be adequately resourced, keeping in mind that it is more than six weeks since the Taoiseach stated in the Dáil the Government's commitment to ensuring the restoration of a full elective orthopaedic service to Merlin Park University Hospital, Galway? For such a service to be restored, the promised modular theatres on the Merlin Park site need to be put in place immediately. I have been in contact with the chair of the HSE forum, Councillor Mary Hoade. She has echoed the concerns of all the forum members from all parties, all the staff members from University Hospital Galway and Merlin Park and, more importantly, the concerns of the public in general. Over six weeks ago, the Taoiseach said that the tender process for these modular units was in the final stages and it was expected that a contract would be awarded in the coming weeks. Can the Minister of State confirm whether this contract has been awarded and provide a timeline as to when work is due to begin?

With respect to Galway University Hospital emergency department, Eilish O'Regan reported last week that patients were falling victim to outbreaks of deadly superbugs in dangerously crowded hospitals. We know that the emergency department of University Hospital Galway is dangerously overcrowded. It has consistently been at the top of the trolley watch indicators,

which is a shameful accolade. A 2017 report found that conditions at the emergency department were chaotic and nothing short of scandalous. The eyewitness report commissioned by the Saolta group stated that patients are crammed together, within touching distance of each other for the most part and with little or no privacy. Is it any wonder that patients in close quarters are contracting and passing on superbugs, which are becoming increasingly resistant to antibiotics? The CPE bug is particularly nasty and has multiplied and evolved since my days of working in accident and emergency. It is dreaded because it is almost untreatable. It is immune to some of the last resort group of antibiotics that are used when all other drugs fail. It usually leads either to a pneumonia-type infection in the chest or an E. coli infection in the bladder or digestive system. It kills around half of patients whose bloodstream it enters. Some 17 new cases were detected between 19 February and 12 March in Ireland, including in University Hospital Galway. I ask the Minister of State to update the House on the current stage of works at the new emergency department block. I urge him to acknowledge that there is a real need to put all shoulders to the wheel in this regard.

**Deputy Jim Daly:** I welcome the opportunity to address the House on these matters on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Harris. The leaks in the roof of the building that houses Merlin Park University Hospital's orthopaedic theatres occurred in September 2017, necessitating the closure of both theatres in the interest of patient safety. A full repair to the membrane of the roof was required to secure the integrity of the building and these works have been completed. I am pleased to have the opportunity to inform the House that following completion of remedial works identified as part of a further external assessment, one of the theatres has become operational today.

It has been evaluated that the best way of restoring effective capacity at Merlin Park is the construction of two modular theatres on the Merlin Park site. The HSE has advised that the tender process for these modular units is now complete and a contract has been awarded. Contract documents have been exchanged and active engagement with the successful company is in progress.

I assure the Senator that the Department and the HSE have implemented a number of measures to address overcrowding at University Hospital Galway. The Government is committed to fixing the situation in our emergency departments and breaking the cycle of overcrowding in the health service. To do this the Department is pursuing three priorities in 2018, namely, increasing capacity across the system using evidence provided by the health service capacity review beginning with some additional hospital beds; implementing reform through Sláintecare; and increasing services provided through primary care by negotiating a new GP contract.

The situation in University Hospital Galway is challenging, with 41 patients waiting on trolleys yesterday morning. Infection control issues remain of concern with six beds closed due to norovirus, which is impacting on congestion and admissions and transfers to wards. I wish to acknowledge the distress for staff, patients and their families of the current situation. Funding has been provided in 2018 to open 28 additional inpatient beds in University Hospital Galway and access was provided to seven additional home care packages per week and two additional transitional care beds per week for the duration of winter. Furthermore, the Department of Health is also engaging with the HSE to fast-track the recommendations of the recent health service capacity review with a view to opening more new beds within the system as soon as possible this year.

Both the Department and the HSE are working on alleviating the overcrowding situation

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at University Hospital Galway and ensuring that the orthopaedic theatres at Merlin Park are operational as soon as possible.

**Senator Keith Swanick:** I acknowledge the opening of the theatre in Merlin Park and I am delighted that one theatre is opening. However, there is a huge backlog of surgery with over 1,000 patients awaiting elective surgery in Merlin Park. When will the second theatre open? A huge phase of catch-up work needs to commence as soon as possible. I acknowledge that the contracts have been issued for the modular units but the Minister of State did not answer my question with regard to when work will begin on those modular units.

**Deputy Jim Daly:** On the Senator's second question, as negotiations are continuing with the contractors, I do not have a date for when the work will begin but I will seek an update on the matter for him. I will also ask the HSE to respond directly to the Senator on the timeline for the opening of the second theatre.

**An Leas-Chathaoirleach:** I had occasion to visit Merlin Park recently. It is a fantastic asset.

### **Family Resource Centres**

**Senator Rose Conway-Walsh:** I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Daly, for taking this matter but I had hoped the Minister, Deputy Zappone, would be here to address the urgent need for a family resource centre in Erris, north Mayo. I welcome the recently announced additional family resource centre provision but, unfortunately, there is no provision for north Mayo. I have not intervened on this matter up to now because I was sure the urgent need for a family resource centre in Erris would be recognised. I am not sure if the Minister of State has been to Erris but I am sure he has heard of Belmullet which has a population of almost 8,000 people. In terms of isolation and the difficulties around access to services, it is a 154 km round trip to the county town of Castlebar and a 124 km round trip to Ballina. The primary and secondary routes connecting to those towns are prone to flooding and in need of urgent upgrade. However, that is a matter for another Minister.

The recent Social Justice Ireland report shows an increase in poverty in rural areas. There is also a poverty of access to essential services. It is not feasible for support services, such as those provided by Tusla through the family resource centres, to travel to and from Erris to meet the needs of individuals and families. That Tusla and HSE staff have to spend half their days travelling to and from the main centres is not the best use of their time and not conducive to providing quality support services to individuals and families. The reality is that families and individuals are being deprived of the life-saving and life-changing supports and services available to people living in other areas.

A family resource centre located in Erris would facilitate an early intervention and prevention approach that would assist in preventing cases escalating to the social work teams and mental health teams that are already overstretched. Following on from the closure of community development projects in 2015, there is an even more severe gap in services for the Erris community. Over the 13 year timeframe that the CDP was in existence, along with the one-to-one supports provided by it, initiatives such as whole community responses to bullying, domestic violence, poor mental health, isolation and many other key issues, were developed. It also acted as a facilitator and an anchor for parenting programmes, community participation in primary

care and other anti-poverty and social inclusion initiatives. The combination of family support services and community development that could be provided by a family resource centre would tackle disadvantage and address the inequalities that are preventing people from living full, healthy and self-determined lives.

Erris is a wonderful area in which to live or to visit. The deprivation statistics included in the application for a family resource centre in Erris speak to the underlying severe disadvantage when it comes to accessing services, unemployment levels, the level of lone parents and the number of people living in isolation. It speaks to all of those things. Young people with acute mental health difficulties must still travel to north Mayo CAMHS which is based in Ballina. If a young person recovering from a bereavement or something traumatic needs the support of CAMHS and other services, it is not feasible to take him or her out of school for a whole day to access those services. That is why I ask the Minister of State to reconsider the family resource centres and to put one into the Erris area as a matter of urgency. I would not ask if it were not desperately needed. I ask on behalf of the families and individuals.

**Deputy Jim Daly:** I welcome the opportunity to respond to the issue raised by Senator Conway-Walsh. The family resource centre programme was established in 1998 and was overseen by the former Family Support Agency until the transfer of responsibility to Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, on its establishment in 2014. Until 2018, there were 109 family resource centres in the programme, seven of which are operational in County Mayo at Ballina, Castlebar, Westport, Claremorris, Ballyhaunis, Ballinrobe and Kilmovee. Family resource centres are independent voluntary organisations that deliver universal services to families in local communities based on a life-cycle approach. Centres seek to combat disadvantage and provide supports to improve family life. The family resource centre programme emphasises the involvement of communities in tackling the problems they face, working inclusively with service users and creating successful partnerships between voluntary and statutory organisations at community level.

In budget 2018, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Deputy Katherine Zappone, secured an additional €3 million for Tusla to support the family resource centre programme. The additional funding is being used to support existing family resource centres and to provide for the expansion of the programme with the inclusion of 11 new centres. Following a public application process, Tusla announced recently the 11 centres which are being included in the programme this year. I understand that applications to Tusla to join the programme were of a very high standard. The criteria considered included the size and make-up of the geographical area, the social and economic conditions in the specified area and the overall population breakdown of the area that would be serviced by the proposed centre. The criteria also considered the structure of the organisation applying to the programme, its objectives, targets, current relationships with other organisations and the inclusion of available research, community projects and needs assessments with the application. A high number of applications, 47 in total, were received by Tusla, one of which was from an organisation based in the Erris area of Mayo.

Tusla was faced with a difficult decision-making process to select 11 new centres for inclusion in the programme. It is important to emphasise that Tusla recently established an online virtual child and family support network for Erris and Ballina. Child and family support networks represent services which play a role in the lives of children and families in a given area such as statutory service providers and local voluntary and community services. The aim of these networks is to ensure that if a family presents to a service which cannot meet its needs, the service can redirect the family to another service which is more appropriate. The new online

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network will enable services to develop an understanding of the work of other providers in order to facilitate the provision of a more integrated service to families in the community. Tusla has advised that it also funds a full-time family support worker in the local area. The Mayo children and young people service committee also brings together representatives of State bodies and community and voluntary services who work with children and young people in the county. The committee is currently finalising a three-year plan for Mayo which will include an audit of services working with children, young people and families in Mayo, as well as a local needs analysis. Future commissioning of services by Tusla in County Mayo will take the completed local needs analysis into account, including any gaps in services wherever they may be identified. Through its prevention partnership and family support network, Tusla will continue to provide supports through the targeting of additional resources to services which will impact positively on vulnerable children and families.

I thank Senator Conway-Walsh for raising the matter. It is of key importance that the needs of children and families are met in the best way possible, in particular in areas of disadvantage. I assure the Senator that my colleague, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, will continue to support the work of family resource centres. Family support is a key priority for her.

**Senator Rose Conway-Walsh:** I hear what the Minister of State is saying. I have worked in the middle of all of this. In the context of interagency co-operation and the work that can be done, what is needed is a family resource centre. I welcome the fact that a support worker will be in place but it is not enough. However, that is not adequate to replace the community development project and the extra family support that is needed in the area.

The Minister of State will know there has been severe tragedy across that area in recent years and even in the last number of months. These services are desperately needed. I will contact the Minister, Deputy Zappone, separately but I ask the Minister of State to ask her about this.

There are exceptional needs in this area which will not be covered in the local needs analysis. There will be lives lost in three years. The quality of life in those three years for people who desperately need the services which could be provided through a family resource centre will not be improved. That really concerns me. We have all these headline figures. We need

*11 o'clock* to get down to these people who are extremely vulnerable. Time is of the essence in doing so. I will write to the Minister separately to ask her to consider Erris on an exceptional needs basis. I do not want to get caught up in an audit.

The deprivation figures speak for themselves. This has the backing of all of the statutory agencies, which do not do things like this lightly, because they know the need. Some of them are working in the area and people who they work with in their teams have to travel out to the Erris area. I thank the Cathaoirleach and the Minister of State, but this is just the beginning of the fight for a family resource centre in Erris.

**Deputy Jim Daly:** I will just reiterate the point that the Minister, Deputy Zappone, is very committed to supporting Tusla in its work, which we all acknowledge. Tusla is doing a very good job in the area of children, an area in which I have a particular interest having chaired the relevant committee previous to my current appointment. There was an additional €3 million allocated for family resource centres this year, which was very positive and which was an acknowledgement by the Government of the good work which they do and the need for them in communities. We are all in agreement with the Senator on that.

As I said in my initial reply, there were 47 applications. Only 11 were successful on this

occasion. I cannot speculate on the level of funding which will be made available in 2019 but I will sincerely be supportive and hopeful that an additional allocation will be made next year. If there is, I have no doubt that the Department will be more than willing to work with the Senator, the Mayo children and young people's services committee and the child and family support network for Erris and Ballina in order to identify the needs there and to recognise the very genuine and legitimate issue which the Senator has raised here today.

### **GLAS Administration**

**Senator Victor Boyhan:** I would like to thank the Cathaoirleach for selecting this item, which relates to agriculture and GLAS 3 payments terms and conditions. I acknowledge the presence of the Minister of State, Deputy Jim Daly, who has kindly agreed to step in and take this issue on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Michael Creed. I received a telephone call from the Minister's office today informing me that he was unavoidably absent. I fully understand and respect that.

I want to address a number of issues. As part of the criteria for GLAS 3, there is a requirement to undertake a soil analysis and nutrient management plan. An applicant must be compliant with that to avail of the funding and supports under GLAS 3. I have had a look at the guidelines provided by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine in respect of the European regulations on the GLAS payments and the co-funding for them. I have set this out in an email to the Minister, but on page 36 there are strict criteria. Failure to comply with the nutrient management plan and to have it filed by 31 March 2018 will incur penalties. No GLAS payment will issue to farmers for completion of the nutrient management plan if they fail to comply with the terms and conditions.

My case and the case of farmers and people who have lobbied me in this regard is that we know that the land is swamped. I spoke to a farmer in Tuam the other day. His land is swamped with water and yet he has to have soil cores bored and tests complied with and filed by 31 March. He will simply not be able to do it. Anyone, urban or rural, driving around this country in the last few weeks would be aware that we had Storm Ophelia, Storm Eleanor, Storm Fionn and Storm Emma. We had vast flooding of our grounds. Nobody wants not to comply with the terms and conditions of GLAS 3. We heard time and time again of the failure of farmers under GLAS 1 and GLAS 2. We still have ongoing issues with people not receiving their payments. Some of that was to do with compliance. We cannot tolerate people who do not comply. I accept that. I am not here to make a case for people who do not comply with the GLAS terms and conditions. I am here today, as someone who sits on the agricultural panel in Seanad Éireann, to make a strong case for flexibility and a reasonable approach by the Department and all those involved. I accept that it had these terms. My proposal, which I ask the Minister to consider, is that as we monitor the situation in the run-up to 31 March, the Minister and those administering the scheme, both locally, nationally and through the European funding mechanisms, should have some flexibility. Can we extend that period for up to three or four weeks? That is a reasonable request. I acknowledge the Minister will have to be consulted but I ask the Minister of State to revert to the Minister and to the Department and to make a case for a reasonable, fair approach to farmers whose lands are swamped and who cannot comply with the soil testing and the nutrient management plan data they have to file by 31 March. These farmers need leeway in order that they will not be penalised and struck off for what is effectively a substantial and important payment for them under the green low-carbon agri-environment scheme, GLAS 3.

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**Deputy Jim Daly:** I thank Senator Boyhan for raising this matter and ask him to please accept the apologies of the Minister, Deputy Creed, for his absence, as he is at a funeral this morning.

On his behalf, I wish to outline the current position regarding GLAS. We are very pleased that the GLAS scheme has proved to be such a popular scheme among Irish farmers and that the original target of 50,000 participants was surpassed well ahead of the date scheduled. Given that the first approvals under the scheme run from 1 October 2015, it is a remarkable achievement that this 50,000 target was exceeded within a period of 15 months. GLAS has a maximum annual payment of €5,000 under the general scheme, with provision for payment up to €7,000, known as GLAS+, where the farmer is required to give exceptional environmental commitments in a limited number of cases. Last year we paid out almost €200 million on GLAS and have continued payments each week this year with a further €32 million paid to date.

GLAS, like previous agri-environment schemes, supports participants in improving their agricultural productivity and practices in a sustainable manner. GLAS was opened in three tranches. The issue being raised here today relates to the third tranche of the scheme, known as GLAS 3. There are more than 13,000 participants in this tranche who are required to submit a nutrient management plan to the dedicated online nutrient management planning, NMP, system operated by Teagasc. The deadline for the submission of these plans is, as Senator Boyhan pointed out, 31 March 2018. This deadline, as with all such deadlines, is being monitored on an ongoing basis. The relevant participants have received ongoing reminders of this deadline and it is matter for them now, in conjunction with their advisers, to ensure that they meet this deadline.

The GLAS scheme delivers overarching benefits to the rural environment and addresses the issues of the mitigation of the impacts of climate change, the enhancement of biodiversity and the improvement of water quality. The scheme provides valuable support to participants who deliver public goods and environmental benefits that benefit all of us. The scheme is co-funded by the national Exchequer and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development. As required under EU regulation, two payments issue each year, namely, the advance payment followed at a later stage by the balancing payment. In 2016 and again in 2017, the advance payment represents 85% of the annual payment, with a balancing payment being 15%. The 2017 advance payments commenced on schedule in November 2017 and continue to be made on an ongoing basis as tranches of cases are cleared. The current position is that 97% of eligible participants have now received their GLAS 2017 advance payment. In some of the outstanding cases, applicants remain ineligible for payment until they complete the steps they must take before the Department can process their payment. There is nothing we can do to advance these payments until the applicant completes their obligations. In most of these cases, this relates to outstanding documentation which they must submit. As soon as this is received and assuming everything is in order, the Department will move immediately to issue payments. The main issues include the need for advisers to commence a commonage management plan in the case of participants with a commonage action and to submit the required documentation in the case of the low emission slurry spreading and rare breed actions.

It is simply not possible for the Department to make payments in these cases because the participants have not met the requirements. I appreciate that the Senator has made the same point. Updates are published weekly on the Department's website and clearly show that steady progress is being made. While the officials are prioritising the clearing of cases and where a farmer has been contacted for additional information, it is important that any such request is

responded to as the information requested is essential to finalise all checks. While the issue of payments is of importance, we must also recognise what the scheme is delivering in terms of the environmental and public goods. What the buy-in to the scheme by the farming community is achieving includes the fact that the low-input permanent pasture and the traditional hay meadow actions are delivering more than 350,000 ha of diverse grassland species. Moreover, 29,000 km of river bank are managed to protect rivers from pollution under the protection of watercourses from bovines and riparian margins actions. There are over 200,000 ha of farmland bird habitat managed to protect bird species, over 20,000 ha of wild bird cover planted, providing winter feed for farmland birds, over 2 million trees planted, almost 5,000 farmers using new technologies to spread slurry, and 10,000 ha of arable land cultivated using minimum tillage techniques. These achievements will deliver public goods across the key areas of water quality, biodiversity and climate change, and will place Ireland in a positive position in discussions on future agri-environment schemes.

I thank the Senator for the opportunity to outline the achievements under the GLAS scheme.

**Senator Victor Boyhan:** The Minister of State's reply is comprehensive, though I note the reply spells my name wrong. It is Boyhan, not Boylan.

**An Leas-Chathaoirleach:** We will not blame the Minister of State for that.

**Senator Victor Boyhan:** I want to keep the focus on one simple thing, namely, that there have been storms Ophelia, Eleanor, Fionn and Emma and lands are flooded. The Minister needs accurate readings and to get them one needs proper, drained soil. There are many complications because people feed cattle out on the land and we need appropriate readings in order to comply with the conditions for grants. The issue is a four-week extension but I accept that the Minister of State cannot tell us today that he is extending this for a month. Nevertheless, I ask that he keep it under consideration, engage with and consult the relevant people in the area and, perhaps, come back to us before the end of the month. There is a crisis and there will be weather issues in the next week or two. I will not support people who do not comply but I know the Minister is flexible and reasonable. He comes from the agricultural sector himself so he will have experience of these difficulties.

**Deputy Jim Daly:** The Minister has assured me that it is still being monitored. I thank the Senator for being reasonable. He makes a logical and reasonable argument and I will relay it to the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

*Sitting suspended at 11.15 a.m. and resumed at 11.30 a.m.*

### **Order of Business**

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** The Order of Business is No. 1, motion regarding Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 (Section 4(2)) (Designation of professions: counsellors and psychotherapists and establishment of registration board) Regulations 2017, back from committee, to be taken on the conclusion of the Order of Business, without debate; No. 2, motion regarding the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 (Section 4(7)) (Membership of Council) Regulations 2017, back from committee, to be taken on the conclusion of No. 1,

without debate; No. 3, motion regarding the extension of the term of the Citizens' Assembly to 27 April 2018, to be taken on the conclusion of No. 2, without debate; No. 4, address to Seánad Éireann by Mícheál Ó Muircheartaigh to mark Bliain na Gaeilge, to be taken at 1 p.m., in accordance with the arrangements set out in the motion passed by the House on Thursday, 8 March 2018; No. 5, Private Members' business, Electoral (Amendment) (Voting at 16) Bill 2016 - Committee Stage, to be taken at 3.15 p.m. and to adjourn no later than 5.15 p.m., if not previously concluded; and No. 6, statements on Ireland's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, to be taken at 5.15 p.m. and to conclude no later than 6.30 p.m., if not previously concluded, with the time allocated to all Senators not to exceed six minutes and the Minister to be given not less than five minutes to reply to the debate.

**Senator Catherine Ardagh:** I wish to start by congratulating the Irish rugby team on its grand slam victory in the Six Nations Championship. In the wake of Brexit and the talk of a hard border, our rugby team gives us hope and promise of what we can do when we work together on an all-Ireland basis. We were able to celebrate this amazing achievement thanks to the sacrifices made by the members of the team, their support teams and their family members, who do not see them for weeks on end. I thank them and say "well done".

The second item I would like to raise also relates to sport. Unfortunately, this House was not sitting last week when a further allocation of sports funding was announced by the Minister, Deputy Ross. My heart was broken when I went through the list of recipients as I sat at home. I was sure some of the large projects in Dublin 8 and Dublin 12 would finally be acknowledged and much-needed funds would be allocated to assist them in their work with young people in my area. I was astonished to see that Wesley College in Dublin was awarded €150,000. Drimnagh Castle CBS, which educates and nurtures some of the finest young men in Dublin, was hoping to get a similar grant for a similar sporting facility, but it was badly let down. Schools in Dublin 8 and Dublin 12 rear and educate our young people without the benefit of private funding and are wholly reliant on the State. I cannot understand why those most in need of sports funding were overlooked again. The Government pays lip service on a daily basis to how it intends to look after inner-city communities, but on this occasion it has not put its money where its mouth is. Communities in Dublin 8 and Dublin 12 are sick of being dumping grounds for services that other areas do not want, including wet hostels and injection centres. To add insult to injury, the Liberty Saints sports club was handed a cheque for €7,000 while Malahide Rugby Football Club was given over €100,000. There is absolutely no fairness in this. Inner-city communities need proper facilities and adequate housing. This Government is failing at every level. In my opinion, the self-indulgence of the Minister, Deputy Ross, in giving sports allocation grants to private colleges is sickening.

The third item I would like to raise is the use and sharing of personal data on the Internet. The mining of that data by companies has come to light as a result of the Cambridge Analytica scandal. The debate on this issue, which has been raised by Senator Higgins and others in this House, had been simmering away, but now it has exploded. When I watched "Prime Time" yesterday, I learned that psychological operations, or planned political operations, are deployed to convey selected information to audiences to influence their motives and political voting patterns. It seems from my understanding that computer scientists and data analysts have figured out how to brainwash us, almost, and to manipulate us our voting patterns. This is very worrying. We need to ensure we have proper legislation in place to govern the sale and use of our data on online platforms. Ultimately, we need to be more self-aware. We need to question our

willingness to use and share our personal and private data, thoughts and emotions online. Did those who filled out a Facebook quiz know that the results would be used to target them for their political motivations? Probably not. Many of these platforms are based in and have their headquarters in Ireland. We need to know whether they acquiesced to or had knowledge of what our data would be used for. I am calling for the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment to come to this House to make a statement on the matter. How does he plan to ensure our data will not be misused and manipulated for political gain?

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** I wish to raise the retweeting of a tweet by my colleague, Senator Devine. I know Senator Devine as a hard-working person here in the Seanad, but I could not allow such a thing to go without comment. Brian Stack was a prison officer who served this country during the Troubles. He was murdered by thoughtless people. Like many other members of this country's security forces - prison officers, gardaí and soldiers - Mr. Stack stood guard and looked after this country during the worst of times. It is totally unacceptable that anybody would seek to denigrate his name in any way now. In my view, Mr. Stack was a true patriot of Ireland. He needs to be respected for standing his ground in dealing with prisoners during some of the most troubled times we have known in this country.

I am not going to condemn Senator Devine here today. Instead, I am asking the Leader to set aside time for Senator Devine to come to this Chamber, as a Member of the Seanad, to explain to her colleagues how she got involved in this series of tweets. The retweeting was one thing, but to argue online with Brian Stack's son was totally unacceptable. Many of us in this House have met Austin Stack on various occasions. I have met him at several committee meetings. The man has dedicated much of his life to working towards reconciliation with people. I am absolutely devastated. I had grave reservations about raising this issue coming in here today because one never wants to take one's colleague to task. However, at the end of the day, the murder of a patriot in this country cannot be allowed to be in any way debased or diminished by anyone. Nobody has the right to go after the likes of Mr. Stack. It is so easy to say what one wants about the dead because they cannot speak for themselves. I just think of the family. We have all seen the bots on social media - the faceless people who attack all of us. They will attack my colleagues in Sinn Féin as quick as they will those in Fine Gael or anywhere else. We should not give these people oxygen. I believe that Senator Devine is entitled to time to come in here and explain how she found herself in that situation because all of us have made mistakes in our lives. The Stack family, however, are entitled to a formal apology at the very least.

**An Cathaoirleach:** Senator Devine's attendance, as suggested by Senator Craughwell, is obviously a matter primarily for herself. I will not go into it. Perhaps the Leader can respond later.

**Senator Rose Conway-Walsh:** Senator Devine did indeed make a very serious error which caused much hurt to the Stack family. She has rightly profusely apologised for her unacceptable actions. Our party president, Deputy Mary Lou McDonald, acted swiftly and decisively to implement the disciplinary process which led to Senator Devine being suspended from the party for three months.

Today I want to talk about this week's report from Social Justice Ireland, which once again exposed the reality of systematic poverty which is hidden behind the flashing lights, spinning headlines and fancy presentations designed to mask the inequalities and struggles of the 780,000 people, or 16.5% of Ireland's population, who live below the poverty line. We continue to see that having a job does not equate to coming out of poverty. Behind all the data we see that

individuals and families are working day and night while struggling to make ends meet. These are the families that have to deliberate over whether their children are sick enough to warrant the €50 or so it costs to take them to the GP.

They are also the individuals who end up on hospital trolleys, who have no medical card and who cannot afford medical insurance. They are charged the standard Government levy of €80 per night, regardless of whether they get a bed or not. Can it be believed that one has to pay a Government levy of €80 to spend a night on a hospital trolley while being stripped of dignity and left at risk of cross-contamination on a draughty corridor? That is absolutely unacceptable and the Government needs to look at it in light of the huge and ever-increasing numbers of people on hospital trolleys. The people who are being hit by this levy are the working poor. They are the people who have already paid €100 as an emergency charge. They are the people who struggle to find the rent, the mortgage payments, the school transport charges and other household bills. We also see that the poverty rates in rural Ireland are increased by higher costs, including travel costs, and by low-income employment.

Government policies which protect the extremely wealthy while draining every last cent from those on low incomes can be stopped and have to be stopped. We have to heed the report from Social Justice Ireland, which is similar to the reports made by the Combat Poverty Agency ten and 12 years ago. We have to seriously look at those who are working in this country and yet cannot afford a basic standard of living and who are continuously kept below the poverty line.

**Senator Ivana Bacik:** I thank colleagues for their support for the idea of a cross-party motion on Syria. Over the days since this House last sat the horrific news from eastern Ghouta in particular has continued, with increasing civilian casualties and civilian evacuations. I am grateful to those who have expressed support, and I hope to bring a cross-party motion before this House tomorrow or perhaps early next week. Perhaps the Leader could ensure that it is on the Order Paper without debate so that we can say that the Seanad has agreed this motion. It can then be presented to the Minister, whose office I have been in communication with, and also to other interested parties, such as the Russian ambassador.

I also want to commend the Trinity College Dublin Students' Union and the Take Back Trinity campaign for their campaign last week which challenged the ridiculous and sudden imposition of a new supplemental exam fee. Along with my Trinity colleagues I was delighted to support the students and was proud to be in Front Square on Thursday when the students emerged from their occupation. It felt like old times, to see students engaged in this sort of radical action. The students were entirely supported by staff unions in the college, both administrative and academic, including my own union, the Irish Federation of University Teachers, IFUT. They had really strong support from across the college community for their actions, and I commend the provost for engaging with the students. I am glad to see the matter appears to be moving towards a resolution.

I welcome the progress being made in the other House on the Thirty-sixth Amendment to the Constitution Bill. I am glad to see that it appears to be moving to Committee Stage today. It should be before this House next week; I know that we will be discussing that at the leaders' meeting. From the point of view of the Labour Party, we will co-operate in any way we can to ensure that the Bill is passed before Easter so that we can run a respectful and dignified campaign for repeal.

However, to follow on from what Senator Ardagh said, I would have a real concern about the role that social media campaigning is going to play in this referendum, and indeed in future referendum and election campaigns here. I want to pay tribute to Carole Cadwalladr, the *Guardian* and Channel Four teams, and the whistleblowers from Facebook and Cambridge Analytica who have come forward to highlight concerns about the misuse of the personal data of Facebook users. Clearly there is more to come in terms of the revelations. We see, for instance, the UK information commissioner seeking a search warrant to search the English offices of Cambridge Analytica. It raises a bigger question for us in Ireland, given that Facebook has its headquarters here, as to how we may regulate Facebook and other such companies to ensure there is adequate protection for personal data. The Data Protection Bill is before us tomorrow, and the Minister has indicated he will be moving certain amendments to that Bill in light of those revelations, but I would ask that in the near future we have a more broad debate over how best to resource and empower our own Data Protection Commissioner to ensure adequate regulation. This started many years ago with the case of Max Schrems. It was an Irish case which led to a landmark ruling by the European Court of Justice, effectively preventing Facebook from misusing data, but we are still seeing the repercussions of such misuse. Again, there are real concerns about how this might play out in a referendum campaign. I will ask the Leader for that debate in due course.

**Senator Lynn Ruane:** I also congratulate the students in Trinity. I went into the Dining Hall on the second day of the occupation and I felt very proud to see the majority of my campaign team who helped get me into that presidential office occupying the room. They were accompanied by the students from Fossil-Free TCD, and also Students Against Fees, which are campaigns which emerged during my presidency, so I was very proud to see them all join together in a joint effort to protest the commercialisation of education and other issues.

I want to raise the issue of social welfare inspectors and the overstepping of the mark in terms of when they knock on a person's door, especially the doors of lone parents. Perhaps this is more suitable for a Commencement matter. I thought this practice had ended years ago, but I spoke to a few mothers over the last few weeks who have had social welfare inspectors visit them who then searched their wardrobes and presses, looking for any sign that another person is living in the house. This must be an invasion of privacy, and there have to be rules and regulations against this type of searching. Single parents are already living below their means. They may already feel helpless and unable to stand up for themselves against social welfare inspectors because they believe that social welfare inspectors must have the right to go through their wardrobes. This practice has to stop and we need to trust single parents. One has to be able to refuse a request to go through one's drawers. I wish to ask the Minister and the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection whether this is accepted practice. Are there guidelines in place? Do social welfare inspectors decide to do this or are they instructed by the Department to go through people's belongings and their private space?

**Senator Maria Byrne:** We had a great weekend of sport with Ireland winning the grand slam. I was there when we won it in 2009 but I was watching it on the streets of Limerick when it happened this year. It was wonderful to see a Limerick man presenting the trophy to the team and we had two Limerick players on the team, Keith Earls and Conor Murray, whom I congratulate on being short-listed for player of the year. I also congratulate the team in general and it was a great weekend for Ireland. Cuala and Na Piarsaigh, a Limerick team and a Dublin team, also gave us value for money and will replay on a date to be fixed.

The Minister of State at the Department of Health, Deputy Finian McGrath, announced

during the week that a dual-diagnosis clinical programme will be set up for addiction and mental health, which is something I raised in the form of a Commencement matter on behalf of a family whose son had both mental health and addiction issues. I have come across a couple of families with this problem and people have been falling between two stools in respect of help, being only able to get one type of assistance or another. Now there will be a dual-diagnosis clinical programme, with a programme manager and a national clinical lead. There will also be a literature review. Can the Leader find out the timeline for the establishment of this programme? Many families across Ireland would welcome it.

**Senator Keith Swanick:** Yesterday was the 25th anniversary of the Warrington bombing. Two bombs, placed in bins, were exploded without warning by the Provisional IRA on Bridge Street, Warrington. Three year old Johnathan Ball died at the scene, 12 year old Tim Parry died five days later from his injuries and 54 others were injured. Nobody was ever prosecuted for these murders and this barbaric incident shocked our two islands. It perhaps brought a renewed focus on peace. I worked in London and then as a GP in Wales and when one said one was from Ireland, the atrocity of Warrington was often mentioned.

Colin and Wendy Parry, the parents of 12 year old Tim Parry, established the Tim Parry Johnathan Ball Foundation for Peace, which works nationally and internationally for peace and non-violent conflict resolution. In 2000, on the seventh anniversary of the bombing, a peace centre was opened and I am sure people like Colin and Wendy Parry never imagined the tragedy visited upon them. When violence and death arrived at their door, however, they chose to make a difference for others. I salute them and every other victim who had the courage to stand up and say bombings never bring people together.

Mar fhocal scoir, ba mhaith liom cúpla focal a rá faoi Chomhaontú Aoine an Chéasta. B'ócáid stairiúil é agus táim i bhfabhar díospóireacht a reachtáil sa Seanad maidir leis an bpróiseas síochána agus Comhaontú Aoine an Chéasta. The Good Friday Agreement will be 20 years old in a few weeks and it is timely that we should have a debate on it in the Seanad. The agreement was overwhelmingly approved in two referendums in both parts of Ireland in May 1998, only the second time in a century that the people of Ireland voted on the same issue on the same day on their constitutional status, the first being the election of the first Dáil in 1918.

**Senator Victor Boyhan:** Yesterday, the European Court of Human Rights rejected the Government's case that 14 internees, the so-called "hooded men", were tortured by the British army and the RUC in the early 1970s. If we are to be fair and if we are to be advocates for human rights, be it in Guantanamo Bay or anywhere, we must be consistent that human rights are fundamental to everybody and justice must prevail and that due course of action must prevail. What was alleged to have happened to those men was nothing short of a disgrace. I want to support the Government. I particularly support the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Coveney, in the stand he has taken. I would appeal to the Minister to meet the victims and their legal representatives within days because what happened was wrong and cannot be countenanced regardless of the political sensitivities. In 2014, the Government agreed to have this case re-examined by the European Court of Human Rights but the court yesterday rejected those claims. Speaking for myself, I abhor and hate violence on any side. I advocate justice for all, regardless of their background, tradition, creed or political affiliation. Our thoughts must be with the men who suffered these appalling violations against them as human beings. I simply call for the Minister to meet these men and their legal representatives soon and for the Government to give serious consideration to appealing this decision to the Grand Chamber of the court. This is about human rights. It is about taking a stand, regardless of how

long ago it happened, against the methods of torture of people in Northern Ireland. Torture, no matter where and by whom, must stop. I am conscious, as I stated earlier, of Guantanamo Bay, but all over the world, we as parliamentarians must take a stand and defend human rights and justice. I acknowledge the work the Government, and Deputy Coveney, as Minister, has done and I ask that we in this House are kept informed as to progress.

**Senator Tim Lombard:** I welcome the announcement yesterday by the European Commission about the investment it proposes to put into Wi-Fi. It is proposing that free Wi-Fi would be available in public spaces and it has launched a new project where it is giving a €15,000 voucher to local authorities or local districts to provide free Wi-Fi in public spaces, such as public health centres, community centres and even main streets. It proposes there will be free Wi-Fi in towns. It is a welcome initiative whereby approximately 8,000 local authority districts across the European Union will be connected up with free Wi-Fi in the next two years.

*12 o'clock* It is what we need to see more of. I encourage local authorities to apply for this funding and to work with the towns, in particular, the chambers of commerce, in order that these projects can get off the ground. It is a significant tranche of funding for an issue that is important for us. In my part of the world, one would hope it would be another tool in our box regarding tourism and where we are going in promoting west Cork because if one can provide free Wi-Fi in towns such as Dunmanway, Skibbereen, Clonakilty and Kinsale, one will have another tool along that Wild Atlantic Way, which will help everyone. It is an important step. It needs to be publicised but the local authorities now need to be proactive and need to apply for it. The date set for this funding is 20 May and they must look for it now. The sum of €15,000 for free Wi-Fi in every town in Cork, Dublin, or even Ireland, is very significant. It is there and it only needs to be applied for. I call on the Minister to ensure that the local authorities work actively to ensure we get this infrastructure because the funding is there and it can benefit everyone.

**Senator Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** Like myself, the Leader will have looked at the Taoiseach and the Ministers in the United States over the past week raising the issue of the undocumented Irish.

It is a just and important cause. I do not think anybody in the Chamber does not have family who fit that category.

However, one has to compare our approach to the undocumented Irish to our approach to those who come to this country seeking asylum. A few years ago I was chairperson of the public service oversight committee. The committee visited asylum seekers in the direct provision system throughout the State. We went to disused family centres, hotels and buildings and saw families living in surroundings which were entirely inappropriate for their needs. We listened to their stories and prepared a report. I am pleased today that the Ombudsman and Ombudsman for Children have oversight of that system.

I was horrified recently to learn that the Department of Justice and Equality intended to place 150 men, women and children seeking asylum in Lisdoonvarna in west Clare, a village which has a population of 300 outside the summer holiday season. The asylum seekers will be housed in an old hotel in a rural area. It is a great deal for the person who owns the hotel, and good luck to him or her. It is a great bit of commerce, but it is completely inadequate, in particular for the children in the system. The decision is completely unfair. In the main, those who objected did so in the interests of the families who were going to be placed in an entirely inappropriate setting.

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Some attempted to misrepresent those who objected as racist or whatever, but that was not the case. They raised the same issues as those raised by our committee, namely, that 150 human beings, in particular children, from all parts of the world were being sent to a hotel in rural Ireland without the necessary amenities or community support. How dare the Department of Justice and Equality make a decision like this without consulting asylum seekers and the local community. I appeal to the Leader to stop the hypocrisy of talking about the undocumented Irish in America while treating asylum seekers, in particular children, in the manner in which we do in this country. We need to sort out this issue.

**Senator Ray Butler:** I welcome the review of hospital parking charges by the Minister for Health, Deputy Simon Harris, for people who are in hospital for a long time. It is long overdue. A man whose wife has cancer spoke on RTÉ recently. Over a six-month period he paid €1,000 in parking charges. My local hospital in west Meath, Navan, charges €4 for parking whether one is there for two minutes or two hours. There is a simple solution to this. If a person is not well over a long period of time and is staying in hospital, there should be no charge for parking for close family members. It is as simple as that. Some hospitals give free passes for certain cases, but this is not common knowledge and most patients and family members are not told about it. They have to keep paying the charges and it is just not good enough. I hope the Minister for Health can come before the House and provide us with a positive outcome. The review is long overdue.

There was a violent post office robbery last week in my constituency of Meath West. I hope the staff get over their terrible ordeal. The staff had to go back behind the counter and give out pensions and other entitlements. Fair dues to them for doing that. It is to be hoped that the brave man who tried to stop the robbers getting away recovers from his injury and the perpetrators are caught. I congratulate the staff on reopening the post office and giving people their entitlements in such difficult times.

**Senator David Norris:** To complete the trio of Trinity Senators, I spoke on the dining hall steps on behalf of students.

I have sent in a motion to remove Standing Order 41 which prohibits Seanad Éireann from putting down amendments which create a charge on the Exchequer. Within ten minutes I had 12 signatures. People from every single party in the House consistently complain about this issue. A lot of people thought it was in the Constitution; it is not. It is in our Standing Orders. We have the right and the power to remove Standing Order 41, and-----

**An Cathaoirleach:** I do not wish to interrupt the Senator but this matter is on the agenda of the Committee on Procedure and Privileges for this evening.

**Senator David Norris:** Very good.

**An Cathaoirleach:** I am not saying that guarantees anything but perhaps the Senator will wish to reflect on the outcome of the committee's deliberations.

**Senator David Norris:** That is splendid. I thank the Cathaoirleach very much for that information. If this is a decision for the Committee for Procedure and Privileges then we will have time to discuss this matter. I hope it will be a positive decision, otherwise there will be no excuse for anybody to complain about it.

I also wish to raise the decision of the European Court of Human Rights that what happened

to the hooded men was not torture. Of course it was torture. A blind bat could see that it was torture. This is extremely important. I do not refer to historical importance pertaining to the people involved in the case. This is used as a precedent by other countries, including the United States of America, to justify extraordinary rendition and torture, including waterboarding. This is where it leads. We have to stand up. The European Court of Human Rights is a creaky old body, and it does not like reopening cases. It has to be pressurised into doing this and I urgently ask that the Minister appeals this matter. It is essential that Ireland appeals this matter to the Grand Chamber. We cannot permit torture, which this plainly was. The European Court of Human Rights got it wrong. It was reluctant to reopen this case. It must do so in the name of humanity.

**Senator Robbie Gallagher:** Today I raise the issue of the crisis that is the shortage of general practitioners, GPs, throughout this country. It is an issue I have raised in this Chamber many times, and I refer to and compliment the work recently done by *The Sunday Business Post*, which conducted a survey of GPs throughout the country to ascertain the extent of the problem. The results of that survey showed that 64% of GPs surveyed have now closed their doors to new patients. What does that mean? In County Monaghan, in both Carrickmacross and Monaghan town, GPs have closed their doors to new patients completely. I encountered a young couple who returned home with their two children to set up life again in County Monaghan. They approached every GP in the town and none would take them on. Where are these people meant to go? I can only imagine how stressful that is with two young children. They have now been told to approach doctors on call. That is the only option available to them. The doctor on call service is now so overwhelmed that it has capped the number of patients not registered with GPs who will be seen. That cohort includes this family. This is a very serious situation and it has been allowed to get worse under the Government's watch. I ask the Leader to call the Minister for Health before the Seanad to advise Members and the people as to what he is doing to address this serious issue.

The reality is that if someone gets sick he or she cannot go to his or her GP. Now we find that such people cannot go to a doctor on call service. Where will they end up? They will end up queueing, like everybody else, in accident and emergency departments. It is simply not good enough. Everyone knows that the GP is the first line of defence when someone gets sick. We talk about promoting primary care in order that we have a properly functioning system that alleviates the problems in accident and emergency departments. Here is a serious problem that needs to be addressed.

**Senator Gabrielle McFadden:** I concur with the sentiments expressed earlier by Senator Craughwell. What happened at the weekend falls far below the standard expected of anybody in elected office. In recent years Mr. Austin Stack has been engaged in a long-running battle to find out what happened to his father. As everybody knows, Deputy Adams facilitated a meeting in 2013, and he was taken to that meeting in a blacked-out van, which was ridiculous in 2013. At the time, Austin was told that the perpetrators of that attack on his father were still alive and they had been disciplined. I use inverted commas - as youngsters do - on the word "discipline" because if the discipline is anything like the discipline our colleague received at the weekend than I am not inspired. Perhaps by way of making a proper apology to the Stack family for what happened at the weekend, our Sinn Féin colleagues in the House and in the Dáil might encourage their colleagues in the IRA to actually help the Stack family to find out exactly what happened to their father, and perhaps bring the perpetrators to justice?

**Senator Paul Gavan:** I commend Senator Robbie Gallagher. The GP issue has been

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brought up with me regularly in Limerick also. It is a real concern and is worthy of debate because perhaps we need to look to a new model of GP services delivery.

I wish to speak today about Liam O’Flynn. It is important to remember Liam O’Flynn, who passed away last week. He was particularly close to my heart because when we lived in England in the 1970s, the emigrant experience was much tougher for my parents back then and for people of that generation. They would not get home to Ireland that often, maybe once a year if they were lucky. The music of Liam O’Flynn, and especially on the first album *Prosperous*, by Christy Moore - which is a Planxty album in all but name - really spoke to those people and it resonated with that generation. Like so many others, I followed Liam O’Flynn’s career with huge admiration. I was lucky enough to be at the Planxty reunion concert in 2004. When the sound of Liam’s uilleann pipes came soaring in at the beginning the huge cheer that went up from the audience was completely spontaneous. It spoke of the huge admiration for the splendour of his work. It is very important to mark the passing of this man. Liam O’Flynn worked with Seamus Heaney and with Shaun Davey. A piece of work by Liam O’Flynn is a song written by Shaun Davey called *Winter’s End*. It is from a 1993 album called *Out to An Other Side* and I contend that it is the most magnificent piece of music ever written. It is important to commend the work of Liam O’Flynn and remember the great man who passed away last week.

**Senator Paul Coghlan:** Well said.

**Senator Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** Hear, hear.

**Senator Frank Feighan:** I am shocked at the revelations around Cambridge Analytica and the harvesting of data of 50 million Facebook users. This obviously helped with the election of President Trump. Over the years we have talked of dirty tricks and underhand methods in elections but they are in the ha’penny place to what is happening now. We need a debate on this issue with regard to bribes, ex-spies, dirty tricks and fake news. We certainly need a debate to find out what exactly is happening with social media. As we have discussed today, it is far from user-friendly and is being used to model human behaviour. It could be used to undermine the democratic process in elections.

Senator Gavan referred to the UK. I was in the UK for most of the week. I was in Cheltenham, in Twickenham and in the Houses of Parliament in Westminster. There is goodwill towards the Irish in the UK but we need to discuss Brexit. It is looming large and if the United Kingdom leaves the EU it will have a huge impact on the island of Ireland.

The Irish people in England and the Irish on the island of Ireland were united with the wonderful result last Saturday. I am more of a soccer man than a rugby man but this year it is 30 years since Ireland beat England 1-0 in Stuttgart. As with the uilleann pipes, Shaun Davey and Planxty, sport also gives the Irish people living in the UK a great sense of pride, nationalism and patriotism, without spilling any blood. I believe the Cathaoirleach worked in the UK.

**Senator Diarmuid Wilson:** I welcome this morning’s announcement that Pope Francis is to visit Dublin for two days at the end of August on the occasion of the world meeting of families. I am disappointed, however, that there seems to be no indication that the Pope will visit the North of Ireland. That would be regrettable if it is the case.

My main reason for raising this issue is to ask the Leader if he would indicate whether there is any proposal to invite Pope Francis to address both Houses of the Oireachtas. This is a proposal that has been made in the past by Senator Norris and there was general acceptance and

agreement that that should be the case. It would be appropriate that the Pope, as the leader of hundreds of millions of Catholics throughout the world and head of the Vatican State, should be invited to address a meeting of both Houses. I ask the Leader to indicate whether that is being considered. If not, I propose that it should be considered and ask what process we must engage in to ensure that it happens.

On Senator Feighan's comments regarding Brexit, it is time that the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade came back to the House to give us an update on the situation pertaining to Brexit, which is changing on a day-to-day, week-to-week and month-to-month basis. In recent weeks, we have heard indications from certain elements of the Conservative Government that perhaps a solution to the Border difficulties would be that people from the Republic of Ireland who intended to travel to the Six Counties would register their intention to do so. As somebody who comes from a Border community, who was born and reared in that community and who saw at first hand the detrimental effect it had on that region, both economically and personally, I want to put it on the record of this House that I and the community from which I come have no intention of registering our intent to visit another part of our country. I call on the Tánaiste to come before the House to provide an update on Brexit, especially as it pertains to the Border region.

Finally, I welcome those from St. Mogue's college in Bawnboy, County Cavan, who are visiting both Houses this afternoon.

**An Cathaoirleach:** Senator Wilson covered a wide range of issues. I call Senator Colm Burke.

**Senator Colm Burke:** I join my colleague, Senator Gavan, in his tribute to Liam O'Flynn and the contribution he made to Irish music over a long number of years. He is a huge loss. It is important that we give recognition to those who have made a major contribution in the promotion of Irish music over a long period.

I have raised with the Leader on a number of previous occasions my concerns regarding the issue of the GP contract. I welcome that the Minister for Health has announced that the negotiations for a new contract are to start in April but I would hope that this is not another process *ad infinitum*. The contract has been in place for over 40 years. We need to progress the issue of how GPs are supported in the community and, as a result of their contribution, how they support people in communities and keep them out of hospital. On the Commencement debate earlier, I raised the need to train and upskill people in the context of providing home care. Likewise, we need to ensure that we have a sufficient number of GPs - working together with public health nurses, community nurses and those who provide home care - to provide care in the community and keep as many as possible out of the hospital and nursing home systems. Although it will not happen before Easter, I suggest that it might be timely to have a debate after Easter on community care and health care outside the hospital structure. All of our focus has been on the hospital structure and the HSE. It is something we should really consider doing.

In respect of priorities, I am concerned that staffing levels in the HSE have gone up by 11,000 in the last three years. There is now nearly one new person in administration or management in the HSE for every general practitioner in the country. That is a disproportionate growth in administration and management in the HSE.

**Senator Paul Coughlan:** I support and wholeheartedly endorse Senator Diarmuid Wilson's

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proposal as regards Pope Francis. We have a fine tradition in this country of inviting visiting Heads of State to address these Houses. As he is the Head of the Vatican State, which we have long recognised, it would be appropriate that he be invited to address the joint Houses of the Oireachtas. I join with Senator Wilson in asking the Leader to make the necessary inquiries as to how this could be set in train.

I also support what the Senator has said about Brexit. I do not think any of us would want to be getting involved in any paperwork and that we would frankly refuse to do so. I think it is accepted by both sides, anyway, and indeed by the EU, that this will not happen. Hopefully they will facilitate an all-encompassing trade agreement involving the entire EU and the UK. They will not enter a customs union but they may call it something else, a customs partnership or whatever, and that would satisfy the matter, please God. Some of us are going to spend Monday and Tuesday of next week in the so-called palace of Westminster, meeting committees of the Commons and the Lords. We will be delighted to give the House an update when we return on Wednesday or Thursday.

**Senator Rónán Mullen:** As it is the spring equinox, I would like to wish everybody a happy lengthening of the days. It is also World Down Syndrome Day. It is a day to reflect on the joy that those good people bring into so many people's lives, the inspiration they are for so many. It is also a day to reflect on our need to include them and people with disabilities generally more and more in our society. We have had debates here during which we have probably all spoken from time to time about special needs, education and so on. It is a good day to remember that we still have a long way to go towards genuine inclusion.

I compliment people and companies in the private sector who make space within their workforce, sometimes quite visibly, for persons with Down's syndrome, who make a wonderful contribution. I also pay tribute to those people, prominent and not so prominent, who do their best to make them more visible in our society. I would encourage colleagues, if they have not already seen it, to look at a documentary called "A World Without Down's Syndrome?", produced by a woman called Sally Phillips a number of years ago. Some Senators may know of Sally as an actress. She featured in "Bridget Jones's Diary" and she set out to explore in an emotional but quite compelling way why it is that with increasing possibilities of screening, such children are being screened out in other jurisdictions, to the point where it is predicted that after a period of years children with Down's syndrome simply will not be born. There is a lot of food for thought for us in that. I would recommend to people to watch that particular documentary, produced by Sally and featuring her son, Olly. It is really very compelling.

Most of us have been called on to comment on what our colleague said on social media. It is an embarrassing situation because the person making that call, Austin Stack, is somebody who needs to be heard. He is an important voice for the justice that is due to his family over what happened to his father. Therefore, it would be wrong of us to engage in a kind of an embarrassed collegiality and just pipe down. Equally, it would be wrong for us to engage in the business of virtue signalling, which goes on a lot in politics these days where we want to show how well behaved we are. Senator Devine has already apologised but I would like her to have the space to do so in this House as well. I have always believed that a culture of allowing people to up their game and learn from their mistakes, and let us face the fact that we all make mistakes, is better than a culture of calling for heads to roll. The reconciliation, apology or amends must be sincere and for too long there has been tribalism in politics where people say they embrace new politics but fall back to embracing oppositionalism and hostility.

**Senator Victor Boyhan:** Yes.

**Senator Rónán Mullen:** The Cambridge Analytica business is, quite frankly, beyond me in its technical complexity. It seems to concern bots which seems to be where robots imitate human beings. Perhaps when it comes to social media we need to avoid the phenomenon of human beings acting like robots, in other words robotically getting into a language, and I am not just talking about the particular incident I have mentioned. There is too much abuse, negativity and nastiness in social media and that is why some of us are pulling away from using social media, to a certain extent. Let us, as politicians, given the privileged position that we enjoy, give a lead in the responsible use of social media and point the finger at ourselves as much as we might be tempted to point it at others.

**Senator Victor Boyhan:** Well said.

**An Cathaoirleach:** Before I call on the Leader, I wish to be associated with two things, the first being the remarks made about the great Liam O'Flynn. He was a great musician but he was also an artist.

**Senator Paul Coghlan:** Hear, hear.

**An Cathaoirleach:** I also wish to acknowledge and congratulate the Irish rugby players on their great victory in Twickenham. I have attended matches in Twickenham a good few times but, unfortunately, the result mostly went the wrong way. The people of west Cork have a huge claim to Tadhg Furlong who wore the No. 3 jersey because his mother comes from Whiddy Island. The people of west Cork are very proud of him. His number one supporter is his grandmother, Mrs. Noreen O'Leary, who still lives on Whiddy Island. She is a lovely lady and I have often had the good fortune to visit her house for a cup of tea. When I go to these matches, although it is not often, I always claim that a man from Bantry or Whiddy Island - where only 20 people now reside - is on the front row of the Irish team. His mother took up a teaching job in south Wexford and I am sure his father, James Furlong, will have a different claim. I have been very fortunate to have met him on a few occasions and they are lovely people. This was a great and uplifting occasion for the country. I felt that I had to make those remarks.

In terms of No. 5, Private Members' business, Electoral (Amendment) (Voting at 16) Bill 2016, can the Leader clarify whether the Order for Committee Stage and Committee Stage will be taken together?

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** Yes.

**An Cathaoirleach:** Ar aghaidh leat anois.

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirligh. I thank the 20 Members of the House for their contributions on the Order of Business. I begin by joining with all of the Senators in congratulating the Irish rugby team on their magnificent success on Saturday. The occasion brought great joy and celebrations to us as a people. I also congratulate Rory Best and commend Joe Schmidt on their leadership and tremendous success in winning the Grand Slam, in particular winning in Twickenham on St. Patrick's Day. I thank all of the supporters, clubs, mentors and family members who supported or assisted all of these players to reach the pinnacle of their professional careers last weekend.

I thank the Irish supporters for the way they celebrated and behaved during the course of St.

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Patrick's Day. I commend all who organised and participated in the St. Patrick's Day parades that took place across the country. It was a wonderful showcase for us, as a people. It highlighted the importance of community, creativity and art in this country. I join with Senators Gavan, Feighan, Coghlan and tú féin, a Chathaoirleach, in paying tribute to and remembering the late Liam O'Flynn. I wish to convey on my own behalf, and on behalf of the House, our sympathies to his family on his sad passing.

I wish to refer to the contribution made by Senator Gavan. I would love to have been at the Planxty reunion. The evocative image Senator Gavan created this morning is something Liam O'Flynn did through his music, work and art. I wish to be associated with the remarks on his sad passing.

Data protection was raised by Senators Ardagh, Bacik and Feighan, among others. The misuse of personal data is both wrong and worrying. The Data Protection Commissioner is having a meeting with representatives of Facebook. It is important that we realise the significance of what has taken place with Cambridge Analytica and to commend all involved in unfurling this issue. It is a cause of worry. It is our personal data and data harvesting, whether is on Facebook or elsewhere, is wrong and cannot be condoned. Whether it occurs in the United States, Ireland or the UK, we must be careful and cognisant of it. I am sure part of the Minister's Bill tomorrow will address some of the issues involved. However, we must be vigilant in how we use our information online and how we use online apps and information. It is critical to ensure that what we do online is not given away. I realise there are some who will use this as a stick with which to beat people but Facebook's European headquarters is in this country. It has a duty to live up to its obligations and I hope it does so. The Minister will be in the House tomorrow to discuss the Data Protection Bill and I hope he will address some of the significant issues mentioned in the House this morning. However, it is a worry. The trend has begun and I hope it can be curtailed and eliminated. We have a precious democracy and our vote. We do not have electronic voting but there is the ability to be influenced by online platforms, as we have seen in other jurisdictions. I hope that cannot continue.

Senator Ardagh raised the sports capital funding. For the record, 35 of the 149 appeals under the sports capital programme appeals process proved successful. I am not familiar with the information the Senator gave this morning with regard to the school she mentioned, but schools are eligible to apply. It is ironic that the Senator is complaining about the sports capital programme given that the party of which she is a member closed it down and deprived clubs and schools of the ability-----

**Senator Diarmuid Wilson:** We created it.

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** It was actually the former Minister, the late Donal Creed, who set up the sports capital fund under the national lottery. Rather than playing one school against another, the sports capital programme is about investing in community, sporting and educational facilities. There was an appeals process. There were some clubs in my constituency that were unsuccessful. I wish they had been successful. It is important to understand the importance of the sports capital programme. Many clubs, community groups, schools and facilities are celebrating the sports capital programme, having been awarded an allocation from it.

**Senator Paul Coghlan:** Very much so.

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** With regard to the inner city, the Government established an

inner city task force which is investing in Dublin's inner city. As regards the point made by Deputy Ardagh about Dublin 8 - to be fair, she has made it previously - I certainly hope that Dublin 8 would not be seen as a dumping ground for the issues the Senator raised. The people of Dublin 8 and surrounding areas are fine people who invest in their community, promote it and have a great sense of community. I will be happy to arrange that debate with the Minister in the House.

Senators Craughwell, Conway-Walsh, McFadden and Mullen raised the tweet by Senator Devine. In my political life I never call for a head or make a matter personal but it is fair to say that Senator Devine's actions were grave and catastrophic, to quote Deputy McDonald. The response of Sinn Féin has been less than adequate, to be honest. I will not get into a political row about this because that is not my style. Brian Stack was killed. He was a prison officer doing his job. It is not like anything any other Member of the Oireachtas or politician retweets. This man was killed and Austin Stack is seeking justice for his father and his family.

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** Murdered.

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** Yes, he was murdered. His life was cut short. I agree with Senator Mullen. It is about ensuring that we allow Senator Devine the space to come to the House, if she so chooses, to make a comment. In our online activity, none of us can support or retweet anything which is so uncaring in terms of what the Stack family is trying to do. There is a duty on all of us, whether we are Independents, members of political parties or members of society, to be careful what we say, what we tweet or what we put online. I have no time for cowards who hide behind anonymous Twitter handles and issue bile against all of us. They have no place in a democracy. As democrats, we go before the people and appear on television programmes or radio panels and are accountable. The issue of keyboard warriors, who are cowards, needs to be addressed. I hope Senator Devine will reflect on her position. Other people have made comments but I have never been personal or sought someone's head in my political life. We all have a duty to understand that this is not just any person, it was a prison officer who was murdered while doing his job. His family deserve justice.

Senator Conway-Walsh referred to the Social Justice Ireland report. I have not seen the report but I know Social Justice Ireland held a press conference earlier. It is important to recognise that unemployment is decreasing and that more people are back at work, which means that people have more money in their pockets and that the level of poverty is decreasing. I accept that we have a long way to go. That is why, in a recovering economy, it is important to spend money on services and programmes which deliver for people. It is also important to recognise that we have a finite amount of money to spend. I would like someone to tell me why, given that we are spending over €13 billion on health this year, people are still waiting on trolleys and, as Senator Colm Burke inquired, why there has been an increase in the numbers in management. The fundamental structure of the HSE, which was created by Deputy Micheál Martin, is wrong and unsound. That is why the Sláintecare report was published.

Senator Gallagher referred to GPs. As Senator Colm Burke said, the talks with GPs begin now. We should not procrastinate or allow the process to become an elongated discussion. We need investment in primary care. We need to get rid of the FEMPI legislation, which was introduced by Fianna Fáil, and restore pay to doctors, nurses and those working in our health system. That is why the all-party report on Sláintecare was published. It is extraordinary that we have inequalities and inadequacies in our health system at a time when we have the highest ever budget. Something is not right. In my opinion, it is the management structure of the

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HSE. Senator Colm Burke is 100% correct. We have too many managers and people walking around hospitals with clipboards and pens. We need investment in real people. I speak from experience in that regard.

I agree with Senator Bacik on the all-party motion on Syria. I am endeavouring to have an all-party motion from the point of view of the Government, as she knows.

I join Senators Norris and Ruane in commending the students of Trinity College. They raised the ridiculous decision to introduce a fee for students repeating exams before the St. Patrick's day break. As I said, students are vulnerable and under stress. The decision was wrong and I welcome the talks and intervention by the student body. It is always important to have a good student body. Senator Ruane was a member of the student body when she attended Trinity College. It is important that students' unions recognise that they have power, legitimacy and a mandate from their peers to negotiate on their behalf.

I hope the referendum Bill goes through the Dáil today and tomorrow. As we discussed at the leaders' meeting last week, I hope to have the Bill in the House next week and to conclude the debate on it by Easter in order that we can allow for the establishment of the Referendum Commission. All Senators should allow for our deliberations on the Bill to be concluded before the Easter recess.

Senator Ruane referred to social welfare inspections. I am not familiar with the issue she raised. We have always had social welfare inspections but there is a need for decorum and due process. Equally, there are people who are abusing the system who need to be held to account. I agree with the Senator that there is a balance we can strike in this regard.

Senator Byrne asked when the dual-diagnosis clinical programme for addiction and mental health announced by the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, will be established. I will endeavour to have that information provided to the Senator.

One the eve of the anniversary of the Warrington bombing, I join Senator Swanick in paying tribute to Colin and Wendy Parry on their bravery and courage and in remembering Jonathan Ball and Tim Parry, who were killed in that bombing. We all remember the effect it had on us and so many people around the world. The Senator is right to praise and commend them on their bravery.

It is my intention to have a discussion on the Good Friday Agreement post Easter. I will endeavour to have that debate the first week after the Easter recess. We had hoped to take statements on issues pertaining to Brexit related to the North but owing to changes to the Minister's schedule, we will have to rearrange the taking of that debate.

Senator Boyhan's contributions are, in the majority of cases, profound. His commentary this morning regarding the rejection by the European Court of Human Rights of the Government's case around the so-called hooded men is baffling. Those men were tortured by the British army and the RUC and their human rights were denied. Irrespective of who they are, they are entitled to be treated with respect and dignity. I agree with the Senator that human rights are applicable to everybody.

**Senator Victor Boyhan:** Sorry, I cannot let that stand.

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** I was agreeing with the Senator's commentary.

**Senator Victor Boyhan:** For the record, I know exactly what I said. I am clearly supporting the Government and calling for an appeal.

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** I am not disagreeing with the Senator; I am agreeing with him. Our thoughts are with the men who suffered appalling treatment and whose case must be heard again. The Minister was due to meet with them but owing to Storm Emma that meeting had to be cancelled. I am not disagreeing with the Senator so I am not sure where he is coming from.

**Senator Victor Boyhan:** The Leader used the word “baffling”.

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** I am baffled by the decision of the court.

**Senator Paul Coughlan:** We are all in favour of an appeal.

**Senator Victor Boyhan:** I welcome the clarification.

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** There was no ambiguity in my position, Senator Boyhan.

Senator Lombard spoke about the WiFi4EU programme. It is important that all local authorities, the Government and the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Naughten, get on board with this programme. Yesterday, President Juncker spoke about connectivity in every village and city by 2020. I hope that we can do that.

Senator Mac Lochlainn raised the issue of asylum seekers in Lisdoonvarna. All of us accept that we have a duty to take in refugees and to make them welcome here. I am not familiar with the details of the case in Lisdoonvarna but I am certain that the Minister of State, Deputy Stanton, as a former Chairman of the Committee on Justice, Defence and Equality and a person with huge interest in this area is working with the Department on this issue. The Senator might get a speedier response were he to table a Commencement matter on the issue. All of us recognise that we must people who come to our country with respect and dignity and that is what, I am sure, the Minister of State, Deputy Stanton, is endeavouring to do in this case. As I said, I am not familiar with the case.

Senator Butler raised the issue of hospital parking charges. I congratulate the Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, on being the first Minister to examine the issue of hospital parking charges. To be fair, Senator Noone raised the matter here long before the current furore about it. It is important that there is recognition of the reason family members visit hospitals. Some hospitals provide a voucher to the families of people who are in cancer treatment. It is important to acknowledge that the review is under way.

I join with Senator Butler in congratulating the staff in the Athboy post office on their decision to return to work immediately and in wishing the innocent member of the public well in his recovery.

Senator Norris also raised the issue of European Court of Human Rights decision. The other matter raised by the Senator is one for the Committee on Procedure and Privileges.

Senators Gallagher and Burke raised the issue of general practitioners, who play a critical role in our health system. It is important that a new GP contract is signed immediately. We also need an increase in capacity and to bring about reform.

Senator Gallagher has become a little absent-minded in his outlook in life in respect of his

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contributions on the Order of Business of late. He is coming to the Chamber with rose-tinted glasses. He should look upon the FEMPI cuts imposed by his own party and the way in which they decimated the health system when Fianna Fáil was in government. Now we are seeing an increase in the number of training places and a recruitment campaign. However, I recognise that we have a way to go and should see a reversal of FEMPI and pay restoration for our GPs, who are at the vanguard of what is done in the health system. Primary care is important, and it is important, as I said earlier, that the talks, including the contract talks, begin immediately and do not become an prolonged talking shop. Our GPs deserve pay restoration and improved pay and conditions. If we are to give due recognition to reform in our health system, our GPs must be part of that and we need that done immediately.

**Senator Robbie Gallagher:** I remind the Leader that his party has been in government for the past seven years. He is beginning to believe his own spin.

**An Cathaoirleach:** We will not-----

**Senator Robbie Gallagher:** In many ways he reminds me of the guy in the race-----

**An Cathaoirleach:** Senator Gallagher-----

**Senator Robbie Gallagher:** -----who is so far behind all the rest he thinks he is in the lead.

**An Cathaoirleach:** Senator Gallagher, please let the Leader-----

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** Senator Gallagher protests too much, I think. I know he is under pressure with the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, in the constituency, but he should acknowledge some of the things that are happening. This Government has seen the publication of the rural practice support framework. I would be happy to have a debate on this. Where I agree-----

**An Cathaoirleach:** Sometimes it is best not to poke the bear.

**Senator Diarmuid Wilson:** The Leader causes trouble-----

**Senator Robbie Gallagher:** Yes, he causes trouble.

**Senator Diarmuid Wilson:** -----even when agreeing with someone.

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** I join Senators Wilson and Coghlan in hoping Pope Francis will come to the four corners of the country, not just Dublin. It is important he is welcomed into our country. He is the Head of State of the Vatican and the head of the Catholic Church, the Pontiff. I would very much support and welcome an address by him to a joint sitting of the Houses of the Oireachtas. I am very much of the view that we should facilitate that if his itinerary allows him to do so. I also hope the organisers of the conference in Dublin will recognise the diversity of family units in our country. It is not just husband and wife; there are also single mothers, members of the LGBT community, who are well able to raise their children, and widows and divorcees raising their children. I therefore hope the idea of family is broadened as that would be inclusive and welcoming to everyone.

I have addressed the issue Senator Colm Burke raised. He is right about community health care. We should have that debate also.

Senators Feighan and Coghlan raised the issue of Brexit and the significance of the talks next Friday. I wish our Taoiseach, our Tánaiste and the Minister of State, Deputy McEntee, ev-

ery success in them. From our perspective, an Irish perspective, the Government and the Taoiseach next Friday will determine what happens and decide if enough progress is being made, but the important point for us is that nothing is agreed in respect of Brexit until everything is agreed. The backstop is, as the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste have said, as legally firm as the Government said it would be in December. The decision by the UK and Europe is one on which we need to see further talks and negotiations. Where Senator Wilson and I agree completely is that, as Senator Coghlan said, no one wants to see, and no one will countenance, having to apply to travel north of the Border in our own country or to have-----

**Senator Diarmuid Wilson:** We will not do it.

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** -----a piece of paper before doing so. The Canadian model was rejected because of the paperwork and the unnecessary steps that would have to be made in this regard.

Senator Mullen raised World Down Syndrome Day, which is today. I hope he is wearing odd socks because we were asked to do so today.

**Senator Rónán Mullen:** I missed that, but on any given day I possibly am wearing odd socks.

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** As someone who has been involved with Cope Foundation all my life, whose parents worked in Cope Foundation, and who has always been a supporter of young and old men and women with Down's syndrome, I know the joy they bring is one we should all celebrate. There is a duty on all of us to ensure they are included in society. It is also important that anyone having a discussion about men and women with Down's syndrome recognise that they are human beings who are well capable of thinking, articulating and advocating on their own behalf. We should celebrate them and rejoice with them. Equally, it is important they are not used as pawns in any debate that takes place in our society or in any campaign by anyone because they are not pawns to be put on billboards. They are men and women deserving of treatment-----

**Senator Rónán Mullen:** They are speaking for themselves on the issue to which the Leader is referring.

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** That is what I am saying. I am not disagreeing with the Senator.

**Senator Rónán Mullen:** They must be allowed to speak for themselves.

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** Unlike others, I have never silenced anybody. I am all in favour of it. That is why the Joint Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution voted to reject that particular issue as part of the referendum.

**Senator Rónán Mullen:** That committee was disgraceful on the issue.

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** It is important that we have balance on the matter. However, I agree that they are people who should be celebrated.

**Senator Rónán Mullen:** The Senator brought the issue up.

Order of Business agreed to.

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### **Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 (Section 4(2)) Regulations 2017: Motion**

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** I move:

That Seanad Éireann approves the following regulations in draft:

Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 (Section 4(2)) (Designation of professions: counsellors and psychotherapists and establishment of registration board) Regulations 2017,

copies of which were laid in draft form before Seanad Éireann on 9 November, 2017.

Question put and agreed to.

### **Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 (Section 4(7)) Regulations 2017: Motion**

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** I move:

That Seanad Éireann approves the following regulations in draft:

Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 (Section 4(7)) (Membership of Council) Regulations 2017,

copies of which were laid in draft form before Seanad Éireann on 9 November, 2017.

Question put and agreed to.

### **Citizens Assembly: Motion**

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** I move:

That the resolution of Seanad Éireann of 15 July 2016, as amended by the resolution of the Seanad of 3 October, 2017, regarding the Citizens' Assembly, is amended by the deletion of 'but in any event not later than 29 March 2018' and the substitution therefor of 'but in any event not later than 27 April 2018'.

Question put and agreed to.

*Sitting suspended at 12.50 p.m. and resumed at 1 p.m.*

### **Address to Seanad Éireann by Mr. Mícheál Ó Muircheartaigh**

**An Cathaoirleach:** Cuirim fáilte roimh an Uasal Mícheál Ó Muircheartaigh; a bhean ché-

ile, Helena; baill dá chlainne, Éamonn Ó Muircheartaigh, Niamh Ní Mhuircheartaigh, Aonghus Ó Muircheartaigh, Neasa Ní Mhuircheartaigh, Nuala Ní Mhuircheartaigh, Eadaoin Ní Mhuircheartaigh agus Doireann Ní Mhuircheartaigh; Dominic Wilkinson, céile Neasa; Éibhlín, Máire agus Caitlín, deirfiúracha Mhícheál; Liam de Barra, céile Chaitlín; Dónal, dearthair Mhícheál; Éibhlín, céile Dhónail; Caitriona Ní Dhúbháin, iníon Éibhlín agus neacht Mhícheál; Bríd Uí Mhuircheartaigh, baintreach dhearthair Mhícheál; Mícheál Ó Muircheartaigh, mac Bhríde; agus Emer Uí Chrualaioch, neacht Mhícheál.

Is onóir speisialta atá agam inniu bheith in ann, thar ceann gach Comhalta sa Teach seo, fáilte mhór go Seanad Éireann a chur roimh an Uasal Mícheál Ó Muircheartaigh. Aoi speisialta atá ann, anseo linn inniu faoi fhorálacha Bhuan-Orduithe an tSeanaid. Tugann na forálacha sin deis dúinn cuireadh a thairgeadh do dhaoine a bhfuil obair mhór déanta acu i réimse an tsaoil phoiblí agus an tsaoil chathartha chun aitheasc speisialta a thabhairt don Teach. Theastaigh uainn Bliain na Gaeilge a chomórath agus a chéiliúradh agus ba dheacair duine níos oiriúnaí a roghnú don ócáid seo ná Mícheál Ó Muircheartaigh.

Is duine é an tUasal Ó Muircheartaigh a bhfuil an-aithne air i ngach contae agus ag gach crosbhóthar in Éirinn mar thoradh ar na blianta a chaith sé ag craoladh ó Pháirc an Chrócaigh agus go leor áiteanna eile faoinár geluichí náisiúnta. Agus é ina chraoltóir den scoth, thug an tUasal Ó Muircheartaigh an Ghaeilge díreach isteach i ngach teaghlach in Éirinn agus chuig na mílte Éireannach atá scaipthe ar fud an domhain.

Ní hamháin gur sheas an tUasal Ó Muircheartaigh amach mar gheall ar an stíl chraolacháin speisialta a bhí aige agus an saineolas atá aige ar chúrsaí peile agus iomána, ba é freisin an modh inar nós leis an Ghaeilge a úsáid, í fite fuaite leis an mBéarla, blas breá Chiarraí le clos, chun scéalta na geluichí a thabhairt dúinn. Thuig an tUasal Ó Muircheartaigh go maith, in ainneoin easpa líofachta a bheith ar chuid mhór den lucht éisteachta agus féachana, go raibh dúil ag líon suntasach acu sa Ghaeilge. Thug sé rochtain do dhaoine ar a dteanga náisiúnta féin leis an stíl nádúrtha cainte a bhí aige agus an meon dearfach a léirigh sé.

While the death of the Irish language has been foretold on many occasions, and while we would be failing in our duty not to recognise the challenges it faces, I believe that there are also many reasons for positivity. The evident goodwill that so many of our people have towards the language needs to be harnessed and their use of an Ghaeilge encouraged. I hope that the presence of Mícheál Ó Muircheartaigh here today, with the popular approach to the language which was the hallmark of his broadcasting style, will help to remind people that the language can be accessible and inspirational at the same time.

Sula leanfaimid ar aghaidh, ba mhaith liom ár mbuíochas a ghabháil leis an Seanadóir Pádraig Ó Céidigh a mhol dúinn an ócáid seo a eagrú agus a rinne go leor oibre chun an ócáid a chur i gcrích. Tá an Seanadóir Ó Céidigh ar na daoine is mó a spreagann muid chun úsáid a bhaint as an nGaeilge anseo sa Seanad, fiú mura bhfuil Gaeilge líofa againn. Anois tá an fheadóg séidte agam agus tá Mícheál i lár na páirce.

**Mr. Mícheál Ó Muircheartaigh:** Gabhaim míle buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach agus leis na Seanadóirí uilig. Tá sé i gceist agam labhairt faoin tionchar a bhí ag an stair ar chúrsaí Gaeilge agus gnéithe eile de chultúr na hÉireann i rith na mblianta fada. Táim thar a bheith buíoch as an gcuireadh seo a sheol an Seanad chugam chun aitheasc a thabhairt anseo agus Bliain na Gaeilge mar théama. Tá sé i gceist agam labhairt faoin tionchar sin, mar a dúirt mé, a bhí ag an stair. Bhíomar go léir imithe i dtaithe ar Sheachtain na Gaeilge i rith na mblianta when it

was suggested to people to use whatever Gaeilge they had during that special week. Mar sin, tá sé ionann agus bheith réabhlóideach, revolutionary even, to brand 2018 as Bliain na Gaeilge. It is a mighty leap forward in comparison with the usual reminder about a week's promotion of the native language.

Molaim Conradh na Gaeilge agus eagrais eile as ucht an mhisnigh agus an díograis atá acu i leith na bliana seo, the 125th anniversary of the founding of Conradh na Gaeilge, or the Gaelic League as some people refer to it. Dar liomsa tá cúrsaí i bhfad níos fábharaí ag an bpointe seo dár stair ó thaobh cur chun chinn na Gaeilge agus na préamhacha eile de chultúr na tíre ná mar bhí aon uair ó bunaíodh an Stát. The present is a time of great opportunity for further development in the cultural field and I will return to that later. Más ea, beidh gá le dáiríreacht - sincerity - a chur leis an iarracht ar an mbliain seo a úsáid go tairbheach. The sincerity must come from the top down ag tosú anseo i dTeach Laighean, mar a bhfuil Dáil Éireann agus Seanad Éireann lonnaithe. Nach breá an spreagadh a bheadh ann do phobal na Gaeilge ar fud na tíre agus dóibh siúd go bhfuil bá acu leis an teanga dá mbeadh Gaeilge ar a dtoil ag cuid mhaith dos na Teachtaí Dála agus Seanadóirí? It would encourage the people of Ireland who want Irish to survive if a greater number of Deputies and Senators were fluent in the Irish language.

Beidh cuimhne agam go deo ar chlár teilifíse a craoladh le linn feachtas toghcháin Dála na bliana 2011. During the 2011 general election campaign, bhí ceannairí na bpáirtithe ar fad faoi agallamh trí mheán na Gaeilge ar TG4. Bhí an ceathrar, an Teachta Éanna Ó Coinnigh, an Teachta Micheál Ó Máirtín, an Teachta Gearóid Mac Ádhaimh agus an iar-Theachta Éamon Mac Giollamóir, ar a suaimhneas ag plé na gceisteanna, na polasaithe agus mar sin de. All the party leaders were perfectly at ease debating the affairs of the election in the national language ar an gclár seo a bhí ar TG4 sa bhliain 2011. Maybe this will be expected of future leaders as time moves onwards. Ní nach ionadh go raibh pobal na Gaeilge bródúil as an gclár teilifíse sin. Bhaineadar taitneamh agus sásamh as agus thug sé misneach dóibh. Tá súil agam go bhfeicimid a leithéid go luath arís, maybe during the next general election campaign. It is a question of whether the leaders of the moment will be ready. I hear that one leader is already in training for it. Tarlóidh sé má bhíonn an toil ann. If the will is there to do it, it will happen. It will put very little strain on the national resources.

Projects and schemes that have been prepared or are about to be prepared by organisations in the wide-ranging cultural wing will need financial support if we want to drift with the renewed interest in language, etc. As I see it, language is by far the most significant element in our culture. Creidim go bhfuil sórt Éire nua againn faoi láthair agus gur athrú meoin is mó atá á spreagadh. Tá an ghlúin óg agus roinnt mhaith de dhaoine beagáinín níos sine ná iad lárnach san Éire nua seo. Is deisceabail iad agus is sárchomhartha dóchais dúinn go léir é sin. The new Ireland I see is of relatively recent birth. It is accepted that the gradual decay of the use of Irish as a spoken language began in the cities and towns of eastern Ireland many years ago. There is no need to list the causes right now, but the wheel turns if it is given time. Eastern Ireland is now foremost in embracing a good deal of what we call Irish heritage. For example, tá níos mó imreoirí le Gaeilge labhartha le fáil iontu ar fhoirne Bhaile Átha Cliath. There are more people with fluent Irish on Dublin teams of all grades nowadays than there are on the teams of any other county outside the Gaeltacht counties.

A strong leaning towards Irish heritage is evident in most of the country and in many places overseas, go mórmhór i gcás ceol agus rince. Tá teanga na Gaeilge chun deiridh sa rás forbartha leis na healaíona. Ní mór a thuiscint gur moille forbairt ar theanga ná na cinn eile. Is féidir a rá go bhfuil na cathracha agus bailte ag tabhairt tacaíochta don scéim seo anois. Is maith an

múinteoir í an stair. Tuigimid go léir go raibh muintir na hÉireann scriosta brúite tar éis an Ghorta Mhóir, the devastating Famine of the 1840s. Mar a déarfadh Peig Sayers, bhí spiorad na ndaoine le cos amháin san uaigh agus an chos eile ar a bhruach. The spirit of the people had one foot in the grave and the other on the brink. That was the measure of the people's spirit in the post-Famine period. Níor fhollas dóchas i mórán áiteanna. Efforts were made to rekindle the spirit. I refer, for instance, to the Fenian movement and to the agitation among tenant farmers for freedom from the power of landlords.

I mo thuairim, tharla eachtra sa bhliain 1876 a chur síolta as ar tháinig préamhacha athbheochana, agus atá lárnach i stair na tíre. Sa bhliain sin, bunaíodh an Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language. This vibrant society attracted the attention of many people, including Michael Cusack, an fear a bhunaigh an GAA ocht mbliana níos déanaí. Ba mhó go mór suim an Chíosógaigh sa Ghaeilge roimhe sin. Cainteoir dúchais Ghaeilge a bhí ann ó Chontae an Chláir. Dúirt Dubhghlas de hÍde, fear eile a bhí sa chumann a bunaíodh in 1876, gurb é Mícheál Cíosóg an cainteoir Gaeilge is fearr a chuala sé riamh. Bíodh sin mar atá sé, ach is féidir a rá gur eascair a lán gluaiseachtaí, coistí agus eagraíochtaí as an Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language. Chuir sé daoine ag machnamh. There is nothing like putting people thinking. From the varied deliberations, it became clear that the state of Irish music, song, dance, sport and drama, etc. was poor and low. It was almost close to extinction at that time.

It was timely for the seeds of preservation of the many facets of the old native traditions to be truly sown. The results are relevant to us today as a vital part in defining who we are. Tháinig an dóchas thar n-ais. Bunaíodh Cumann Lúthchleas Gael nó an GAA sa bhliain 1884, Conradh na Gaeilge in 1893 agus Sinn Féin in 1903. Several other movements began at this time. All of them were geared towards getting Ireland to be a better place. Bhí an seanspiorad thar n-ais i muintir na hÉireann. Bhí éileamh mór ar chraobhacha de Chonradh na Gaeilge. Chláraigh daoine gan Ghaeilge agus lucht gnó leo. Is é sin an míniú ar an gcúis gur i mBéarla a bhíodh miontuairiscí roinnt de chruinnithe chraobhacha an chonartha sna blianta tosaigh. That the minutes of meetings of the Gaelic League in many places were written in English suggests that people with little or no Irish were anxious to be part of the new confidence. Is cosúil go raibh fáilte roimh gach duine a tháinig thar thairseach isteach.

Ina iomláine, the last 25 years of the 1800s must be viewed as setting the scene for Ireland's future, with thoughts of freedom and self-government becoming more frequent as the years went on. Bhí an spiorad i réim arís, buíochas le Dia, agus tá sé linn ó shin. Bhí daoine cuma-sacha bainteach leis an Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language. Mar a luaigh mé, bhí Mícheál Cíosóg, Dubhghlas de hÍde agus go leor eile gníomhach ag múineadh ranganna Gaeilge in ionaid mar an Celtic Literary Society. They were all active where action was needed. Músclaíodh arís an tsuim a bhíodh i gceol na hÉireann sna seanlaethanta nuair bhíodh na taoisigh Ghaelacha i gcumhacht agus pátrúnacht á dhéanamh acu ar ghnéithe a bhain leis an traidisiún Gaelach. Bhí an traidisiún sin bríomhar agus folláin agus mar a chéile leis na préamhacha eile de na seantraidisiúin, an spórt ina measc.

Ar shlí amháin, tá sé ait go raibh spórt san áireamh ag an am nuair a bhí na seantaoisigh ann, mar bhí bac ar dhaoine teacht le chéile chun spórt a eagrú de réir Acht a ritheadh 500 bliain roimhe sin agus nár cuireadh ar ceal go dtí aimsir an Ghorta. Is é sin an fáth nár bunaíodh aon chumann spóirt in Éirinn go dtí gur tháinig na 1860í tar éis an Ghorta. Bhí spórt ann d'ainneoin an dlí. A very strange law that was passed in 1367 had made it illegal for any group of people to come together for the purpose of organising sport. Chuirfí i bpríosún iad. Dá mbeadh an riail sin ann anois, bheadh a lán agaibhse agus mise i bpríosún chomh maith. Dar ndóigh, buille

trom don chultúr a bhí ann nuair a thit córas agus cumhacht na dtaoisigh Ghaelacha as a chéile tar éis Cath Cionn tSáile na bliana 1603. The defeat at the Battle of Kinsale dealt a deadly blow to Irish culture for a while. The defeat of the Irish chieftains led to a road of decline for poetry, music, language and Irish heritage in general due to the lack of patronage from any source. Is as sin a thuigtear an tábhacht a bhí le gluaiseacht na hathbheochana sa bhliain 1876. Is as a tháinig na feiseanna a bhí go líonmhar agus cosa curtha i dtalamh athuair ag na míreanna éagsúla den traidisiún. I saol na linne seo, is léas mór dóchais é an fhorbairt atá tagtha ar oireachtas na Gaeilge le cúpla bliain anuas. Is féile mhór í anois, go bhfuil aird ag pobal mór ar le cúpla bliain. Cad déarfadh sibh le hoireachtas breise i mbliain seo na Gaeilge agus an ceann seo amuigh faoin aer mar a bhíonn a lán rudaí na laethanta seo agus é a bheith amuigh faoin aer in aice le Teamhair na Rí? Cinnte go gcosnódh sé roinnt airgid ach deireann Baill an Rialtais linn go bhfuil an eacnamaíocht ag treabhadh leis go maith agus cá bhfios ná go mbeadh deontas le fáil i gcomhair an oireachtas a thabhairt amach faoin aer. Tá sé go maith istigh i dtithe agus in óstáin agus sna hallaí móra ach is fearr fós a bheadh sé anois agus arís amuigh faoin aer.

Creidim go láidir i gcleachtadh na poiblíochta agus nach cuid dár n-oidhreacht é, nach duine dár saoithe fadó a dúirt muna bhfuil agat ach pocán gabhair, bí i lár an aonaigh leis. Even if you only have a puck goat for sale you should be in the middle of the market with it agus sin rud gur cóir breis béime a chur ar phoiblíocht na Gaeilge.

Leanaimis orainn anois i dtreo na linne seo agus b'fhéidir go bhféadfaimis truslóg fhada a thógáil ó thús na haoise seo caite go dtí an lá inniu. Tuigim gur sa tréimhse sin a tharla eachtraí móra i stair ár dtíre ag tosú le réiteach ar Chogadh na Talún le hAcht Wyndham 1903 a bhí i bhfad chun tosaigh ar Achtanna a chuaigh roimhe. Bhí Éirí Amach na Cásca sa tréimhse sin, Cogadh na Saoirse agus Cogadh na gCarad sular bunaíodh An Saorstát. The solution of the Land War and the events of the Rising of 1916, the War of Independence that followed agus an Cogadh Cathartha have all been well chronicled and they are familiar to the current young generations only in recent times.

I suggested earlier that they belong to a new Ireland. Éire nua ach conas ann dó? How did it happen and why did it happen? Athraíonn an saol de réir a chéile agus sin mar a bheidh go deo na ndeor. Is dóigh liom go raibh tionchar an-mhór ar fad ag an mbealach gur deineadh comóradh agus ceiliúradh ar eachtraí Éirí Amach 1916 sa bhliain 2016. Chuaigh an léiriú agus an comóradh sin go mór i bhfeidhm ar na daoine óga agus daoine eile nach raibh eolach ar na cúrsaí sin roimhe sin. Chuaigh an comóradh a bhí snadmtha le chéile i bhfeidhm ar a lán daoine agus thuigeadar don gcéad uair an spiorad, an dóchas agus an íobairt a rinne daoine ó gach páirt in Éirí Amach 1916 agus na heachtraí ina dhiaidh.

Sin é an ghlúin nua. D'fhoghlaim siad le déanaí agus tá siad fillte ar an ndúchas go mórmhór na daoine óga. Is mó go mór anois a meas agus a grá ar thraidisiún an chultúir, ná mar a bhí roimh 2016 agus gan amhras ar na daoine a bhí saite san iarracht chun an lá sin a thabhairt chun cinn, saoirse a fháil agus an cultúr a chothú.

Ní gá go mbeadh aon sampla amháin a thabhairt agus is é Pádraig Mac Piarais a roghnaím agus roghnódh a lán daoine é. Múinteoir a bhí ann. Bhunaigh sé Scoil Éanna i Ráth Fhearnáin i mBaile Átha Cliath. Bhí éileamh ag tuismitheoirí ar an léinn, an Ghaeilge teanga na scoile agus bhí béim ar iomáint mar phríomhspórt na scoile. Bhí baint ag Pádraig le heagrú comórtais spóirt do na scoileanna i mBaile Átha Cliath. Chuir sé féin comórtas ar siúl. File ab ea é agus eagarthóir *An Claidheamh Soluis*, the sword of light, the promotional organ of Conradh na Gaeilge. B'shin é an sórt duine a bhí ann agus tá cuma ar an scéal gur fear é a bhí thar a bheith

gnóthach leis na cúraimí sin go léir ach bhí fíis aige. Thug sé cead a chos don bhfís a bhí an-ghar dá chroí agus tá sé luaithe i ndán leis ag deireadh an dáin:

Do thugthas [m'aghaidh]  
ar an ród so romham,  
ar an gníomh do [dhéanfad],  
's ar an mbás do gheobhad.

Eisean agus na daoine a bhí ina theannta sa ghluaiseacht a d'fhág oidhreacht shaibhir againn agus tá sé sin anois ag an Éire nua a rinne mé tagairt dó.

Tá muinín agam as an nglúin óg agus creidim go bhfuil sé caothúil don Stát ag an bpointe seo céimeanna a thógáil chun cur leis an dea-mhéin atá ann faoi láthair don Ghaeilge agus iliomad gnéithe eile den gcultúr uasal saibhir atá inár seilbh. Narbh fhiú go mór saineolaithe a ghairm le chéile ag an Rialtas go luath i mbliain na Gaeilge chun teacht ar scéim. A scheme that would give an injection of energy and invention to the giant which is our native language. That language is calling for extra support agus ba chóir go dtiocfadh sé ón Rialtas.

Tugaim an meon nua faoi ndeara nuair a bhím ag spaisteoireacht ar fud na tíre. Labhrann a lán daoine Gaeilge liom agus is léir go mbíonn fonn orthu sin a dhéanamh. Is léir dom go bhfuil méadú mór tagtha ar an líon daoine go bhfuil Gaeilge acu agus a bhaineann úsáid aisti nuair a bhíonn an deis acu. Is breá liom casadh leis na daoine sin.

In a gcás, ní mór creidiúnt a thabhairt do thuismitheoirí agus don gcóras oideachais ó thaobh na Gaeilge de a thug misneach, tuiscint agus mothú tábhachta dóibh. Mar a tharla céad bliain roimhe sin, tháinig eagraíocht nua isteach i réimse an oideachais go luath i 70í na haoise seo caite, Gaelscoileanna. Arís, ní mór dul siar sa stair. Rinne an Rialtas a tháinig i gcumhacht tar éis bunú an Stáit iarracht fóna lena chinntiú go mbeadh fáil ag na bunscoileanna ar fud na tíre go léir ar mhúinteoirí go mbeadh togha na Gaeilge acu. Bunaíodh coláistí ullmhúcháin, coláistí cónaithe in ionaid eagsúla sa tír. Cuid acu do bhuaicillí agus scar eile do chailíní den aois ghrúpa a bheadh ag freastal ar oideachas dara leibhéal. De bhunadh na nGaeltachtaí a bhformhór, ach tháinig daoine ó chontaetha eile chomh maith. Gaeilge gnáth-theanga na gcoláistí sin agus deineadh an múineadh ar fad trí mheán na Gaeilge.

Tar éis dhá bhliain a chaitheamh i gcoláiste oiliúna ina dhiaidh sin, chiallaigh sé go raibh sruth de mhúinteoirí go raibh togha na Gaeilge acu ar fáil chun dul ag múineadh ins na bunscoileanna ar fud na tíre ar fad. Tús maith a bhí ann cinnte ag an Rialtas nua. I lár na 1920í a bunaíodh na coláistí ullmhúcháin sin ach nach bhfuil sé ráite nach mbíonn i ngach aon rud ach seal agus cuireadh deireadh leo go luath ins na 1970í.

Ag an am bhí a lán scoileanna dara leibhéal ag teagasc trí mheán na Gaeilge ar fud na tíre agus baisteadh A scoileanna orthu siúd. Tháinig laghdú de réir a chéile ar líon na scoileanna sin agus ar an líon a bhí ag teagasc trí mheán na Gaeilge ins na bunscoileanna freisin. I dtús na 70í den aois seo caite, ní raibh ach ceithre scoil déag lasmuigh de na Gaeltachtaí ag teagasc trí mheán na Gaeilge agus b'shin géarchéim má bhí géarchéim ann riamh.

Ó thaobh na Gaeilge de, bunaíodh eagraíocht Gaelscoileanna agus é de mhian aige go mbeadh oideachas ar fáil trí Ghaeilge agus go mbeadh béim ar gach aon chéim de chultúr na Gaeilge ins na scoileanna sin. Mar a dúirt mé ní raibh ach seacht scoil sa tír iomlán ag an am

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a bhí ag teagasc trí mheán na Gaeilge ach d'éirigh go seoigh le gluaiseacht na nGaelscoileanna agus na Gaelcholáistí dara leibhéal atá ar fud na tíre anois agus tá rath orthu. Is folláin é go bhfuil rogha ag tuismitheoirí oideachas trí mheán na Gaeilge a bheith ar fáil chomh maith le scoileanna trí Bhéarla a deintear an teagasc go léir. It is of the utmost importance that parents have a choice of having their children taught through the medium of either Irish or English agus glacann gach aon duine leis sin anois.

Sula rachaidh mé go dtí cúpla pointe breise, teastaíonn uaim sampla amháin a thabhairt den éifeacht a bhí i bPádraig Mac Piarais chun daoine go raibh fis acu féin teacht go dtí Scoil Éanna. An t-ainm a luafidh mé ná, duine darbh ainm Proinsias De Búrca. Bhí aithne agam ar Phroinsias De Búrca, fear go raibh an-aithne aige ar Phádraig Mac Piarais. Rugadh é i gContae Chill Dara ach d'aistrigh an clann go dtí Ráth Fhearnáin go luath ins na 1990í, 1990 nó bliain nó dhó ina dhiadh sin. Cuireadh é go dtí scoil chónaithe dara leibhéal thíos i gCeatharlach. Bhí sé bliain ann. Thóg sé a chamán leis ach dúradh leis nuair a shroich sé an áit gur cruicéad spóirt na scoile. Ní raibh aon dul as aige ach cruicéad a imirt. Ach ar ámharaí an tsaoil, mar a dúirt sé féin liom nuair a bhí sé sa bhaile ar saoire an samhradh ina dhiadh sin, do chonaic sé fógra i bhfuinneog siopa i Ráth Fhearnáin i dtaobh scoil an Phiarsaigh. Thaitin sé leis go raibh gach rud trí Ghaeilge agus thaitin an Gaelachas leis, ach ba é an rud is mó a chuaigh i bhfeidhm air ná gurbh é iomáint cluiche na scoile. Chláraigh sé ansin ann. Bhí sé faoi thionchar Phádraig Mac Piarais. Chuaigh sé go dtí an ollscoil. D'fhill sé ar an gcoláiste mar mhúinteoir. Ghlac sé páirt san Éirí Amach. Bhí sé sa GPO sa bhliain 1916 agus bhí sé i ngéibheann ina dhiadh sin. Nuair a bhí deireadh leis na trioblóidí bhuaigh sé bonn uile-Éireann faoi dhó san iomáint le hÁtha Cliath agus sa pheil faoi thrí. Go dtí an lá a fuair sé bás níor labhair é le héinne a raibh Gaeilge acu aon rud ach Gaeilge leo. Is minic a dúirt sé mura bhfaca sé an fógra sin a tharraing é go dtí Coláiste Éanna, ní ghabhfadh sé ar an mbóthar ar thug taitneamh an-mhór dó.

Anois mar chríoch, tá cúpla moladh le cur i láthair agam. Is dóigh liom gur chóir díriú ar na Gaeltachtaí. Ní fheadar an dtuigeann a lán daoine sa Rialtas chomh tábhachtach is atá na Gaeltachtaí. Tá an Ghaeilge agus na traidisiúin chomh láidir ansin agus a bhí siad ar fud na hÉireann 500 bliain ó shin. Ba chóir dul i dtoll orthu scéimeanna atá curtha le cheile i rith na mblianta nár cuireadh i bhfeidhm riamh, iad a chur i bhfeidhm agus deis a thabhairt don Ghaeilge leathnú amach ó na Gaeltachtaí. Tá súil agam go dtarlódh sé.

Rud eile a dhéarfainn - agus nílim ag cáineadh an Rialtais - ná go bhfuil dualgas air a chinntiú go mbeidh soláthar cuí d'oidí bunscoile le hardchaighdeán Gaeilge ar fáil chomh luath agus is féidir. Tá sé sin práinneach mar níl dótháin dóibh ann ag an bpointe seo i mo thuairimse. Tá an óige go maith agus tá nós acu anois a bheith gafa leis na meáin chumarsáide. Is dóigh liom gur chóir béim níos mó a chur leis sin - le teagmháil idir na scoileanna éagsúla a bhfuil Gaeilge acu. Tá sé go hiontach go ndéanann siad an rud sin go léir trí Ghaeilge.

Táim chun Páirc an Chrócaigh a lua anois. Bíonn an Ghaeilge labhartha ar fheabhas ar fad ann. Tá tabhairt ainmneacha na bhfoirne, caint faoi na himreoirí agus na hathruithe agus gach rud go hiontach ar fad. Ach níl a oiread agus focal amháin Gaeilge le feiscint os na hardáin ar fud na háite ar fad. Tá a lán fógraí ann ach theip orm - agus thriail mé é cúpla uair - focal amháin Gaeilge a aimsiú. Nuair a luaim é sin le daoine deir siad go gcaithfear a bheith branded chun rudaí a bheith ann agus de réir dealraimh níl an Ghaeilge branded. Fiú amháin nuair a bhítear ag féachaint isteach ar an ardán ón bpáirc, nuair a bhíonn bronnadh á dhéanamh, ní fheictear Páirc an Chrócaigh scríofa faoi ach Croke Park. Ní chosnódh sé aon rud rudaí mar sin a athrú agus tá súil agam go dtarlóidh sé.

Chuala mé ar Raidió na Gaeltachta inné go bhfuil stráice talún ar Oileán an Bhlascaoid fógraithe ar díol. Is cuid dár n-oidhreacht é an t-oileán féin as ucht na ndaoine a tháinig as. Molaim go gceannódh an Rialtas an stráice talún sin agus úsáid a bhaint as chun scéim Ghaeilge éigin a chur ar siúl. B'fhéidir gur mithid go mbeadh club Gaelach i dTeach Laighean nó, mar a thugann na daoine óga air anois, pop-up Gaeltacht.

Pé rud, is dóigh liom go bhfuil mo dhóthain ráite agam. Táim an-bhuíoch ar fad as an gcuireadh a fuair. Dúradh gurb é an Seanadóir Pádraig Ó Céidigh a chur tús leis. Gabhaim míle buíochas leis agus le gach duine as an gcuireadh agus an onóir a thabhairt domsa bheith i láthair inniu. Críochnóidh mé le seanfhocal Gaeilge eile - go mbeirimid beo ar an am seo arís nuair a bheidh an Ghaeilge slán sábháilte.

**An Cathaoirleach:** Bhí sé sin go hiontach ar fad. Is í an chéad chainteoir chun tús a chur leis an ndíospóireacht ná an Seanadóir Catherine Ardagh as Baile Átha Cliath. Tá cúig nóiméad aici.

**Senator Catherine Ardagh:** Ar dtús báire, cuirim fáilte mhór roimh an Uasal Ó Muircheartaigh agus a chlann sa Ghailearaí uaimse féin agus ó ghrúpa Fhianna Fáil sa Seanad. Tógadh mé ag éisteacht leis an Uasal Ó Muircheartaigh ar an raidió gach Domhnach. Tá guth álainn suaimhneach aige agus lean a ghuth gach clann, mo chlann féin san áireamh, timpeall na tíre. Bhaineamar go léir an-sult agus an-taitneamh as ar feadh a ghairme ar fad. Gabhaim buíochas leis chomh maith as ucht an obair atá déanta aige maidir le feabhsú agus cur chun cinn na Gaeilge, go háirithe trí mheán an spóirt, le 60 bliain anuas. Gabhaim buíochas freisin leis an Seanadóir Ó Céidigh as an lá seo a réiteach. Is Seanadóir den scoth é agus tá sé an-phaiseanta maidir le cur chun cinn agus feabhsú na Gaeilge sa tír.

Maidir le Bliain na Gaeilge, tá sé ar cheann de chuspóirí Fhianna Fáil ó thráth a bhunaithe an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn mar theanga bheo i measc na ndaoine agus cearta na ndaoine a labhraíonn an teanga a chosaint. Is gá dúinn cinnteacht i bhfad níos dearfaí a chur ar fail ó thaobh polasaithe fádtéarmacha don Ghaeilge. Caithfear deireadh a chur leis an éiginnteacht a tharlaíonn mar gheall ar an ngá a bhíonn ann go rialta le troid i gcoinne iarrachtaí stádas a bhaint ón teanga. Ba chóir go mbeadh meas ag gach páirtí ar an nGaeilge mar ghné éigeantach den scolaíocht agus mar ábhar príomhthábhachtach sa tseirbhís phoiblí i gcoitinne. Nuair is gá díospóireacht a dhéanamh go rialta ag amanna toghcháin, treisítear leis an tuiscint go bhféadfaí athrú a theacht air sin. Cuirtear an díospóireacht féin as a riocht nuair a chuirtear cúis na teanga i gcónaí ar an gcosaint. Ba mhór an chéim chun tosaigh a bheadh ann dá n-aontódh na páirtithe go léir gur cheist sin nach bhféadfaí í a chur ar chlár díospóireachta a thuilleadh.

Nuair a sheol an Teachta Éamon Ó Cuív an straitéis 20 bliain don Ghaeilge ba é an chéad uair gur aontaigh rialtas ar bith cur chuige cumasach fádtéarmach maidir le forbairt na teanga. Is ní aithiseach gur bhrúdh go leor de phríomhghnéithe na straitéise ar leataobh leis an neamhaird ar fhorbairt phobail agus leis an séanadh, le seacht mbliana anuas, Aire sinsearach Rialtais a cheapadh ar a mbeadh cúram pearsanta maidir leis an réimse sin. Cuireadh cuid mhór smaointe iontacha i láthair le linn an phróisis comhairliúcháin don straitéis sin agus níor dearcadh orthu ó shin. Mar a tharlaíonn le réimsí eile chomh maith, is é an teip seo pleannanna a chur i bhfeidhm an rud is tromchúisí. Is é mo thuairimse gur chóir cúram pearsanta maidir leis an nGaeilge agus leis an nGaeltacht a leagan ar Aire sinsearach agus gur chóir don Aire sin ceannródaíocht a dhéanamh ina leith. Tá an deis ann i gcónaí maidir le teanga na tíre seo. Tá éileamh mór i gcónaí ar an nGaeilge sa chóras oideachais agus seasann cuid mhór den phobal le bearta cúnata a dhéanamh maidir leis an nGaeilge mar chuid de ghnáthshaol, den gcultúr agus

den saol poiblí.

Mar fhocal scoir, ba mhaith liom aontú leis an Uasal Ó Muircheartaigh. Ceapaim gur chóir dúinn club Gaeilge a bhunú anseo i dTeach Laighean. Is smaoinemh iontach é seo.

**An Cathaoirleach:** Is é an chéad duine eile an Seanadóir mórtábhachtach, Pádraig Ó Céidigh.

**Senator Pádraig Ó Céidigh:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCeannaire as ucht a thacaíochta le cuireadh a thabhairt chuig an Uasal Ó Muircheartaigh teacht anseo inniu, labhairt linn agus a chuid físe, a chuid tuairimíochta agus an taithí atá aige ó thaobh na Gaeilge de a chur i láthair chuile duine sa Seanad. Ón uair a luaigh mé é seo den chéad uair thug chuile Sheanadóir fíor-thacaíocht don chuireadh d'Uasal Ó Muircheartaigh. Tá cúis mhaith leis sin mar is laoch é do phobal na tíre seo. Ní hamháin do mhuintir an tSeanaid, do mhuintir na Dála agus do phobal na tíre seo, is cuma cén aois iad, óg meánaosta nó sean. Tá níos mo déanta agatsa ní hamháin ó thaobh Chumann Lúthchleas Gael ach ó thaobh an chultúir agus na Gaeilge de, ná mar atá déanta, dar liomsa, ag aon duine eile a bhfuil aithne agamsa air sa tír seo. Luann tú ansin Pádraig Mac Piarais. Bhuel, tá Pádraig Mac Piarais eile ina shuí ansin, agus táimid an-bhuíoch de sin, agus táim lán-dáiríre faoi sin. Do do bhean agus do do chlann, is iontach an onóir go bhfuil sibhse anseo freisin, mar is sibhse cuid de gné lárnach na seoda fíor-thábhachtaí atá againne sa tír seo. Molaim go láidir sibh agus an tacaíocht agus an cúnaimh atá sibh ag tabhairt do Mhicheál i rith na mblianta. Go raibh míle maith agaibh.

Rinne an tUasal Ó Muircheartaigh cúpla pointe atá, dar liomsa, fíor-thábhachtach. Mar a dúirt an Seanadóir Ardagh ansin, tá sé thar am againn, go mbeadh cumann Gaelach againn anseo sa Seanad. Is é sin rud beag ar féidir linn a thosú. B'fhéidir go labhróimid faoi sin níos deireanaí, go dtosóimid air sin díreach anseo sa bhliain seo. Freisin, a Chathaoirligh, roinn mé mo chuid ama le mo chara agus mo chomhghleacaí as Tír Chonaill, an Seanadóir Brian Ó Domhnaill, agus beidh mé cúig nóiméad nó mar sin uilig ag labhairt. Meabhraigh dom le do thoil tar éis cúig nóiméad.

Cúpla rud ó thaobh na Gaeilge de. Rugadh is tógadh mise sa Ghaeltacht i gConamara agus ní raibh aon airgead againn; bhíomar bocht. Is í an Ghaeilge an chéad teanga. B'éigean do m'athair dul go Sasana nuair a bhí sé ina leaid óg. Chas sé le mo mháthair ann, is as Baile Conaola do mo mháthair. Ní raibh aon Bhéarla ag m'athair. Bhí air an Béarla a fhoghlaim. Bhí seisean ag iarraidh go mbeadh cúpla focal Béarla ag chuile dhuine againn mar dúirt sé gurbh shin é an passport a bhí agat le dul thar sáile le jab a bheith agat. Buíochas le Dia tá an saol athraithe. Ta meas mór ar an nGaeilge anois. Tá thart ar 1.75 milliún duine sa tír seo a deir go labhraíonn siad an Ghaeilge, nó go bhfuil roinnt Gaeilge acu. Bhí mé ag plé le páipéar Gaeilge, mar is cuimhin leis an Uasal Ó Muircheartaigh, *Foinse*. An bhfuil a fhios aige cé mhéad léitheoir sa tseachtain a bhí ag an bpáipéar sin? Suas le 200,000 léitheoir sa tseachtain a bhí aige. Tá suim an-mhór ag pobal na tíre seo sa Ghaeilge, agus cén fáth? Mar feiceann siad gur Éireannaigh iad, agus go bhfuil an Ghaeilge agus an cultúr sa teanga lárnach maidir le cén sórt daoine muid féin. Our language is part of who we are. It is an asset one cannot touch, one cannot feel it, it is like the air one breathes; it keeps one alive. It keeps us energetic, it gives that uniqueness of what we are about. Molaim an Taoiseach go láidir nuair a dúirt sé go mbeidh 2018 againn ó thaobh Bliain na Gaeilge de. Mar a dúirt an tUasal Ó Muircheartaigh, is rud é seo nach bhfuil ann ach deireadh seachtaine Lá Fhéile Pádraig. Is rud leanúnach a chaithfidimid a choinneáil ag imeacht. Is cuma liom, ní gá go mbeadh tú ar chuid mhór Gaeilge. Má ta cúpla focal Gaeilge ag duine, tá sé sin chomh tábhachtach céanna le duine ar nós an Uasail Uí

Mhuircheartaigh nó mise, a bhfuil an Ghaeilge ar ár dtoil againn.

An fhís a bheadh agam ó thaobh na Gaeilge de, ná go mbeadh gach saoránach sa tír seo in ann an Ghaeilge a úsáid go feidhmiúil, go laethúil má tá sé sin ag teastáil uathu. What do we mean when we say that every Irish citizen can use the Irish language on a daily basis, if and when they so wish? Má tá daoine ag iarraidh a gcuid gasúr a thógáil le Gaeilge, do we mean go mbeadh siad in ann é sin a dhéanamh? If they want to send their kids to an all-Irish language education school, or institute, they can do it, they should not be blocked from doing it. Does it mean that we actually become serious, dáiríre ó thaobh na Gaeilge de? Molaim Rialtais éagsúla, ó thaobh na Gaeilge ach tá i bhfad níos mó le dul againn. Mar sin í an fhís. Tá na fíricí ag dul ar an taobh mícheart. Mar shampla sa daonáireamh 2016, bhí 39% in ann an Ghaeilge a labhairt. Tá laghdú ag teacht air sin ó thaobh an phlean 2010 go 2030. Tá na cainteoirí dúchais ag laghdú, cainteoirí na nGaeltachtaí, is é sin tobar na Gaeilge: na Gaeltachtaí. Caithfidimid brú mór a chur air sin agus béim mhór a chur ar na Gaeltachtaí, rud nach bhfuil muid ag déanamh. Tá infheistíocht ó Údarás na Gaeltachta laghdaithe go 70% le deich mbliana anuas.

B'fhéidir gur tuairim é seo maidir le cúrsaí gnó de. If one wants to really do something and make a difference where does one start? One starts from where one is at now. One has to understand where one is now. Cá bhfuil mé anois? Where do I want to go? Cá bhfuil mé ag iarraidh dul? The strategy is the road one takes to get there. I am asking that this vision be shared, that every Irish citizen would have the ability and possibility to actually use Irish as frequently as they want, particularly in dealing with State bodies. If that is where one wants to get to, let us look at where we are at now. Let us make sure we build the bridge together. That is not political, that is for the people of Ireland to get there. Micheál, you have inspired us to actually start thinking and working in that direction.

Tá sé an-tábhachtach go dtabharfaimid tacaíocht dár gcomhghleacaithe i dTuaisceart Éireann, ó thaobh Acht na Gaeilge de agus fhorbairt na Gaeilge. Tá an cead céanna acusan agus atá agamsa agus ag aon duine eile ó thaobh labhairt agus úsáid na Gaeilge ar bhonn laethúil de. Tá sé sin an-tábhachtach, dar liomsa, domsa agus do mhuintir na hÉireann ar fad.

An rud deiridh a iarrfaidh mé ná, ó thaobh múinteoirí, tá an ceart ag an Uasal Ó Muircheartaigh. An bhfuil a fhios aigr go gcaithfidh ábhar oidí dul ag an nGaeltacht faoi dhó i rith tréimhse traenála? Suas go dtí cúpla bliain ó shin, bhí an Roinn ag íoc as sin. The Department used to pay for it, now people have to pay for it out of their own pocket. What is that saying to people who want to teach in our primary and secondary schools? These are students and the State used to fund this. Caithfidh athrú a theacht air sin. It is not a lot of money.

Freisin, ba chóir go mbeadh seans ag chuile scoláire idirbhliana dul go dtí an Ghaeltacht; every transition year student should be given an opportunity to go to the Gaeltacht for a week to learn Irish. It does not cost a lot of money and this also supports the Gaeltacht. There is a lot more I can say, a Chathaoirligh, but I would like to give Seanadóir Brian Ó Domhnaill, an deis cúpla focal a rá.

**An Cathaoirleach:** Tá sé thar am. Beidh seans ag an Seanadóir Ó Domhnaill labhairt níos déanaí. Anois an Seanadóir Joe O'Reilly as Contae an Chabháin.

**Senator Joe O'Reilly:** Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirligh. Sular fhágann sé an seomra ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas agus mo chomhghairdeas a ghabháil leis an Seanadóir Ó Céidigh as ucht na hócáide iontaí seo a eagrú. Is cúis áthais agus bróid dom fáilte ó chroí a chur roimh

an Uasal Ó Muircheartaigh. Is laoch mór ár dtír agus ár dteanga é. Craoltóir den chéad scoth é le cumas iontach sa dá theanga. Ba bhreá liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis as ucht an méid atá déanta aige don spórt agus don teanga ar feadh na mblianta. Tá líofacht agus flúirse teanga aige. Tá sé nádúrtha. Tá greann faoi leith aige chomh maith agus tugann sé sin beocht croí agus fuinneamh do na cluichí. Baineann achan duine ó gach aois agus gach ceantar ar fud an domhain sult as a líofacht, a ghreann, agus a mhíoneolas faoi na himreoirí agus faoina gclanna.

Ba mhaith liom sampla den ghreann sin a chur os comhair an Tí. I would like now to break into English for a moment to remind Micheál of some of those great humorous moments in his commentaries: Seán Óg Ó hAilpín, his father from Fermanagh, his mother from Fiji, neither a hurling stronghold; Anthony Lynch the Cork corner back will be the last person to let you down, his people are undertakers; and, Colin Corkery on the 45, let us go with the right boot, it is over the bar, this man should not be playing football, he has made an almost Lazarus-like recovery from a heart condition, Lazarus was a great man but he could not kick points like Colin Corkery. That wonderful humour has done so much for our language and our games. Before I go back to an Ghaeilge, one of the features of my childhood growing up in the same community as Senator Wilson, was young lads trying to emulate your commentaries and attempting to repeat them. None of them ever reached the standard that need worry an tUasal Ó Muircheartaigh but it was the ultimate tribute that young lads were trying to be Micheál Ó Muircheartaighs all over the place.

Inniu táimid ag ceiliúradh Seachtain na Gaeilge. Is eochair do sheoid luachmhar í ár dteanga. Is eochair dár n-oidhreacht, dár gcultúr agus dár litríocht shaibhir. Is fiú í a chosaint agus a labhairt agus a fhorbairt, agus go háirithe a labhairt. Rinne an tUasal Ó Muircheartaigh an t-iomlán don teanga, do chluichí Gaelacha agus don chultúr. Tréaslaím leis sin agus lena chuid dea-oibre. Ba chóir dúinne anseo dea-shampla a thabhairt agus iarracht faoi leith an Ghaeilge a labhairt agus aontaím leis an Uasal Ó Muircheartaigh mar gheall ar an gclub Gaelach. Tugann sé dúshlán dúinn iarracht dháiríre a dhéanamh, mar a deir sé féin. Dúirt sé gur cheart dúinn, mar pholasaí, níos mó acmhainní a chur ar fáil. Is iontach an smaointe é an tOireachtas a thógáil amach faoin spéir. Aontaím go mór leis an Uasal Ó Muircheartaigh go bhfuil na Gael-scoileanna ag méadú agus ag spreagadh ar fud na tíre. Ag an am céanna, mar a dúirt an tUasal Ó Muircheartaigh, is cúis díomá é dúinn go léir go bhfuil cineál meath ag teacht ar labhairt na teanga sa Ghaeltacht. Tá sé de dhualgas orainn mar pholaiteoirí rud éigin a dhéanamh faoi sin. Mar a dúirt an tUasal Ó Muircheartaigh, caithfidimid bheith dáiríre faoin Ghaeltacht. Ar ndóigh, ba cheart dúinn cabhair a thabhairt do mhúinteoirí agus seans a thabhairt dóibh dul go dtí an Ghaeltacht. Is iontach an ócáid í seo. Bhain mé an-sult as smaointe an tUasal Uí Mhuircheartaigh a chloisteáil. Labhair sé faoin stair agus faoi rudaí eile. Guím ádh mór air leis an dea-obair atá ar siúl aige.

**An Cathaoirleach:** Is é an Seanadóir Niall Ó Donnghaile ó Bhéal Feirste an chéad chainteoir eile.

**Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile:** Cuirim fáilte mhór chroíuil Ghaelach roimh an Uasal Ó Muircheartaigh agus é i dTeach Laighean agus sa Seanad inniu. Tá an cuma ar an scéal, ag amharc ar an nGailearaí inniu, gur thóg sé foireann peile leis. Tá na sluaite Gaeil linn sa Ghailearaí fosta. Is mian liom fearadh na fáilte a chur roimh chuile dhuine atá i láthair. Is ócáid cheiliúrach í seo ó thaobh cúrsaí Gaeilge agus Bliain na Gaeilge de. Tá ardmholadh tuillte ag an Seanadóir Ó Céidigh agus tréaslaím leis as na hiarrachtaí atá á ndéanamh aige faoi láthair chun an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn sna hinstiúidí seo.

Mar a luadh cheana féin, tá ról, stair agus taithí lárnach agus thar a bheith tábhachtach agus suntasach ag an Uasal Ó Muircheartaigh i saol na tíre seo, i saol Chumann Lúthchleas Gael agus i saol na Gaeilge. Luaigh an tUasal Ó Muircheartaigh na tréimhsí sin i stair na tíre seo nuair a bhí an Ghaeilge faoi chois agus i ngéibheann. Níl an stair sin chomh fada sin uainn, áfach. Ba choinneal lasta é an tUasal Ó Muircheartaigh le linn tréimhsí mar sin. Lonraigh sé slí chuig an Ghaeilge fá choinne na sluaite daoine amuigh ansin. Táimid fíorbhuíoch agus fíorbhródúil as an mhéid oibre atá déanta aige ar son na Gaeilge.

Mar a dúirt an Cathaoirleach, is Feirsteach bródúil mé. Is Ultach bródúil agus Gael fíorbhródúil mé chomh maith. Déarfainn go bhfuil seanaithne ag an Uasal Ó Muircheartaigh ar an dán, “Mórtas Gael”, as a thagann an mana a bhí ag Meánscoil Feirste - Coláiste Feirste a thugtar air anois - nuair a d’fhreastail mé air fadó:

Is Gael mise, nach uasal sin?

Gael im’ chroí, Gael im’ mheoin

Gael ón sheacht sinsear Gael.

Gael mise agus mé á mhaíomh.

Dúshlán faoin domhan uile cine Gael a shárú.

Táimid iontach bródúil as sin go fóill. Is cineál réalt stiúradh dúinn an dán sin agus muid imithe ón scoil agus ag dul tríd an saol. Mar a luaigh an tUasal Ó Muircheartaigh agus cainteoirí eile, is cuisle agus bunchloch na hathbheochana é an Gaeloideachas. Is sa chóras Gaeloideachais a thosaíonn an chuid is mó againn ag dul trí shaol na Gaeilge. Mar a luaigh an Seanaóir Ó Céidigh níos luaithe, go bunúsach is saol trí Ghaeilge atá uainn, mar shampla agus muid ag idirghníomhú leis an Rialtas, le seirbhísí Stáit, le cuideachtaí príobháideacha, leis na pobail timpeall orainn, le Páirc an Chrócaigh agus le Cumann Lúthchleas Gael. Tá an t-iarratas bunúsach simplí sin de dhíth orainn in achan réimse. Saol trí Ghaeilge atá uainn.

Roimhe sin, d’fhreastail mé ar Bhunscoil Phobal Feirste i nGaeltacht Bhóthar Seoighe i mBéal Feirste. Scoil aonad dár gcuid féin a bhí againn. Is cuimhin liom go mór agus go maith nuair a bhí an tUasal Ó Muircheartaigh mar aoichainteoir ag ceiliúradh 40 bliain na scoile san Óstán Europa. Bhí mé mar Ard-Mhéara Bhéal Feirste ag an am. Is sampla é sin den turas atá glactha ag an Ghaeilge ní hamháin ó Thuaidh ach ar fud na tíre ina iomláine ón tréimhse nuair a rinneadh bagairt ar na ceannródaithe ar Bhóthar Seoighe go gcuirfear i bpríosún iad mura stopfaidís an cineál réabhlóide a bhí ar bun acu ar Bhóthar Seoighe. Dúradh leo go gcuirfear i ngéibheann iad gan bac agus deireadh a chur le scoil Bhéal Feirste. Tá tréimhse iontach gairid agus gasta caite ón ré sin. Nuair a bhí an scoil ag ceiliúradh 40 bliain ar an bhfód, bhí duine d’iardhaltaí na scoile mar chéad saoránach ar an chathair. B’fhéidir gur sampla maith é sin den dul chun cinn atá déanta san earnáil Gaeloideachais.

Cá háit a bhfuilimid faoi láthair? Mar a dúirt na Seanadóirí a labhair romham, tá orainn a lán a dhéanamh. Tá sé tábhachtach a rá go mbeidh mé gasta. Beidh pop-up Gaeltacht againn i mbeáir na Dála an tseachtain seo chugainn. Beidh fearadh na fáilte roimh an Uasal Ó Muircheartaigh má tá sé ag iarraidh freastal ar an ócáid sin. Faoi láthair, níl cultúrlann againn i mBaile Átha Cliath. Níl Aire sinsearach don Ghaeilge againn. Níl plean ná straitéis fá choinne an Gaeloideachais againn. Níl an plean 20 bliain don Ghaeilge curtha i bhfeidhm go fiúntach agus go héifeachtach. Tá titim tagtha ar an mhaoiniú caipitil don Ghaeilge agus don Gaeltacht

ó €75 milliún in 2008 go dtí €10 milliún i mbliana.

Ní theastaíonn uainn béalghrá a thabhairt don Ghaeilge. Níor cheart go mbeadh na ráitis thábhachtacha seo á ndéanamh againn ina n-aonar. Ba mhaith linn go mbeadh níos mó ná béalghrá i gceist ón Rialtas ó thaobh na Gaeilge de. Mar a luaigh mé an tseachtain seo caite, bhí mana simplí - “ná habair é, déan é” ag na seanfhondúirí a bhí mar cheannródaithe i nGaeltacht Bhóthar Seoighe i mBéal Feirste. Is é sin an t-éileamh atá againn mar Sheanadóirí ón Rialtas i dtaobh na Gaeilge de inniu. Ba cheart go mbeadh “ná habair é, déan é” mar mhana ag lucht an Rialtais in achan rud a dhéanann siad ó thaobh na Gaeilge de, mar shampla sna meáin chumarsáide, sa Stát, san earnáil Gaeloideachais agus san earnáil oideachais níos leithne.

**Senator John Dolan:** Mar a dúirt an Seanadóir O’Reilly, is iontach an ócáid í seo. Tá áthas mór orm caint ar an ócáid thábhachtach seo. I sometimes have a sense of what is being said in Irish, but my confidence in speaking Irish is weak. Today, I publicly ask for the support of others to help me improve my Irish. I also want to ask others to be more conscious and appreciative of how we speak English in Ireland. I will come back to the question of Hiberno-English i gcúpla nóiméad. An Seanadóir Ó Céidigh said that Mícheál Ó Muircheartaigh is a hero. I think he is also greatly loved throughout this land by young and old. People who do not have a word of Irish love to hear Mr. Ó Muircheartaigh weave between the Gaeilge and the Béarla. I think it says something about the fact that Irish, and the way we speak English in Ireland, is oral. It is an oral tradition. It has not been captured by the written word and the power of a written grammar in the same way that the English language and other languages have.

Compulsion or force is a very poor teacher. Our first President, Dubhghlas de hÍde, who has been mentioned, founded the Gaelic League. He referred the School Attendance Bill 1942 to the Supreme Court on the question of compulsory Irish. In 1943, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the foundation of the Gaelic League, he said that “a nation without a language is like a soldier without a weapon”. If he had been from my native county of Tipperary rather than from County Roscommon, he might have said that a nation without a language is like a hurler without a hurley, but we will forgive him that one.

Mícheál went through very well in his presentation that our language and national games, through the work of the Gaelic League, the GAA and others, were vital in raising our spirit and self-confidence, which is an-tábhachtach ar fad, prior to achieving our freedom, and as part of being able to achieve our freedom. This sense of self is a missing ingredient in many of the former Soviet states, as I would see it. I have travelled to many of them in my work with regard to disability, and it is restricting their development. I have mentioned disability, and Mícheál has been a great supporter of the National Council for the Blind of Ireland. He has supported my organisation with regard to our disability inclusion and equality campaigns and many others. I thank him so much for this.

As I travelled through other states in Europe with my work, I became aware that I needed to change how I speak. I cannot speak as I speak at home because if I do, no one will understand half of what I say. This is mostly about stripping back my Irish way of speaking English, of which I have not always been aware. We forget we speak English in an Irish way, with an idiom, a turn of phrase, vocabulary and grammar. The further west, south west and north west we go in this country the more we see this. The idea of a cumann Gaelach in the Oireachtas has been rightly mentioned, but let us also remember we have people in both Houses of the Oireachtas and otherwise, and I am thinking of some of the Kerry Members in particular, who speak English in a very Irish way. This is something we should not lose because it is part of not

having been consumed by the empire.

I want to mention very briefly Professor Terence Dolan who was professor of old and middle English in UCD. He was the one back in the early 1980s who brought me alive to the idea of Hiberno-English and the way in which we speak and our grammar and turn of phrase, the way words have migrated from Irish into our English language and how words from English have migrated the other way. He said that a great thing about Hiberno-English is that it is a distillation of the Irish character. We often speak in code and people from rural areas can be very oblique. Over the centuries, Irish people have been oppressed and, therefore, they do not want other people to know what they might be thinking or saying. There are lots of influences. Towards the end of his contribution, Seanadóir Ó Céidigh asked cá bhfuilimid anois. From my perspective, two legs of the stool are strongly standing. These are sport and song and dance. We should not be without hope that we will bolster the third leg of the stool, which is to revive and bring back the Irish language. An important step in this is for us to be conscious of how we speak English. We speak it in a very Irish way and we should be proud of this and let it help us.

**Senator John O'Mahony:** Ba mhaith liom míle fáilte a chur roimh Mhícheál Ó Muircheartaigh. Is cuairteoir cáiliúil, speisialta é. Tá meas faoi leith ag muintir na hÉireann air. Micheál is heartily welcome to Seanad Éireann to mark Seachtain na Gaeilge. I am more than familiar with meeting him over the years, mainly in Croke Park and around the country, and I am delighted to meet him in this setting. He has visited more dressing rooms on tension filled all-Ireland days than any player or manager in the country. What some people here may not know is that over the years he has also been a trainer. For many years, he trained the Kerry and Mayo players in Dublin. He got great credit for Kerry winning all-Irelands, and he is the only man I know who never got any blame for Mayo not winning the all-Ireland. This is unique in itself.

He has been an excellent ambassador for the Irish language over the years, officially and unofficially. He has been instrumental in giving people pride in our native language and has had a huge influence in popularising and promoting the Irish language, our native tongue, over many years. I am not a fluent Irish speaker, but he gave me the love of the language to send my children to Coláiste Iascaigh and the Gaeltacht in Galway over the years. I am proud to say some of them are now fluent Irish speakers because of this. His influence has been paralleled by TG4 and Raidió na Gaeltachta, on which he has been many times. They have also popularised our language, games and culture over the years. Guím rath Dé air agus ar an obair fhiúntach a dhéanann sé.

**An Cathaoirleach:** Anois glaoim ar an Seanadóir Mark Daly ó Neidín i gContae Chiarraí.

**Senator Mark Daly:** Is ócáid speisialta agus stairiúil í seo. Ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur roimh Mhícheál Ó Muircheartaigh agus a chlann. Nuair a bhí mo chlann féin ag féachaint ar chluichí Chiarraí ar an teilifís san am ina raibh Mícheál fós ag tráchttaireacht - when Mícheál was commentating on matches involving Kerry and everybody else - chas siad fuaim na teilifíse síos agus d'ardaigh siad fuaim an raidió. Dúirt sé gur múinteoir maith í an stair. It is true that history is a great teacher. I do not think Mark Twain put it as well, but he did also say history does not repeat itself as much as it rhymes. Micheál spoke about our greatest generation that gave us an saoirse. In many ways, that struggle began with the cultural and language revolution of 125 years ago and the sporting revolution of the GAA. Without all of this creativity in culture and identity there would not have been a 1916 Rising. All of the people who were central to the language revival and cultural revolution over 100 years ago were part of that revolution in 1916.

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He also spoke about history being a teacher in terms of the fact it is also part of our future. As well as our sport and culture being part of our future, our language must be part of that identity and future. Micheál touched on a number of issues and I want to address them in terms of the Gaeltacht and the need to assist it in terms of jobs and opportunities. The election of people to represent the Gaeltacht was a step in the wrong direction. It was not something that was positive but, of course, it can be revisited. I agree with my colleague with regard to teaching in schools through Irish and making sure the teachers themselves are proficient. What he has organised is great. With regard to people having to pay to go to learn Irish, every transition year student should go and learn it. There will be an opportunity now, with the change in the transition year teaching methods that will start this September, whereby those ideas and concepts can be embedded, but it comes down to this idea of how it is paid for. In Clare County Council €35,000 was spent translating the county development plan into Irish as is required by law, which is as it should be. While it would be the right of any citizen to have that document translated into Irish, perhaps that funding should instead be ring-fenced for an initiative to send transition year students from Clare to the Gaeltacht. Senator Ó Céidigh might agree with this as a businessman. If somebody still wanted to have it translated into Irish, so be it. That should happen too. However, a cost-benefit analysis should be done on what would benefit the Irish language the most.

I take the point, which is important and which was well made, on signs and signage being in Irish and on encouraging both State institutions and others - including all our churches whether they be Catholic, Protestant, Muslim or Jewish - to have signage in Irish. Mr. Ó Muirheartaigh also mentioned the Blaskets, which are dear to his heart, to those in Kerry and to those around the world because of their rich cultural and literary history. He also mentioned an Irish club in Leinster House. I know that has been done before and is ongoing. Go mbeirimid beo ag an am seo arís.

**Senator Rónán Mullen:** Ba bhreá liom i dtosach báire fáilte mhór chroíúil a chur roimh Mhícheál Ó Muirheartaigh. Gabhaim míle buíochas leis as a bheith linn. Cuirim fáilte roimh a mhuintir - an treabh mór atá tagtha ó Chiarraí agus, b'fhéidir, ó áiteanna eile le bheith inár measc inniu. Mar a dúirt mé, is onóir mhór é agus is ócáid tábhachtach í freisin.

It is very hard to address the serious points which Mr. Ó Muirheartaigh has made without attempting to pay him the tribute he deserves for the important role which he plays and has played in Irish life. Déarfainn go bhfuil trí bhua ar leith aige gur chóir dúinn a bheith buíoch astu. Is é an chéad cheann an chaoi a bhfuil sé ar fáil do dhaoine, is cuma cé hiad. He is to be seen everywhere. He could be speaking at a novena, he could be visiting a school and he is turning up on our televisions. He is a cultural unifier in a way that is very important but at the root of it is his generosity with his time. Is cuimhin liom féin, nuair a bhí mé i mo mhac léinn in DCU ag déanamh máistreacht san iriseoireacht, go raibh mé ag déanamh tionscnaimh bheag faoi stair an Chumann Lúthchleas Gael, faoi ghnéithe den chultúr agus faoi cheisteanna conspóideacha a bhí ann ag an am maidir le cluichí eile a bheith á n-imirt i bPáirc an Chrócaigh nó na bans éagsúla a bhí ann. I remember how Mr. Ó Muirheartaigh did not just give generously of his time but came to meet me and shared his expertise, a shaineolas, ar go leor bealaí. Tá feicthe agam ó shin go ndéanann sé an rud ceannann céanna le gach duine. He is comfortable with the daoine mór le rá inár sochaí, but he is just as comfortable with gnáth-chosmhuintir na hÉireann. That is why he is so appreciated.

Is é an dara rud ná a thuiscint ar an gcultúr. Spreagann sé tírghrá ar leith atá cuimsitheach agus oscailte. He is a cultural unifier and a carrier of an attractive kind of patriotism. Sprea-

gann sé an Ghaeilge gan a bheith ag crá daoine fuithi. Bíonn sé ag moladh daoine agus ag tabhairt spreagadh dóibh teacht leis. It is remarkable how two of the best cultural unifiers in Irish life during my time came from the world of GAA commentary. Mícheál Ó hÉithir, before Mr. Ó Muircheartaigh, was something more than a commentator. He had a special place in many people's hearts. He figured at other important moments outside of sport and Mr. Ó Muircheartaigh has done the exact same thing. That is very important at a time when there are things that can divide us and when there is a screechy element in our culture. We have been talking a lot in these Houses about social media - its use, its misuse and how people can attack each other, sometimes very gratuitously. Léiríonn an tUasal Ó Muircheartaigh go bhfuil bealach eile le pointí a dhéanamh. He is not someone who has the uncharitable word, a mhalairt atá fíor. He is an encourager and he brings people with him.

Is é an tríú rud ná, é sin ráite, tá rudaí tábhachtacha le rá aige. Níor chaill sé riamh seans an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn. Ní hé an cúpla focal atá i gceist. Bhí go leor daoine ann nach raibh sásta lena gcuid scolaíochta agus leis an gcaoi inar mhúineadh Gaeilge dóibh - b'fhéidir an ghlúin a chuaigh romhainn. Déarfainn go ndearna an tUasal Ó Muircheartaigh cúiteamh tábhachtach sa chaoi sin. A lot of people who might have had negative experiences of the Irish language through schooling were encouraged by Mr. Ó Muircheartaigh's attractive presentation of Irish to take an interest agus a bheith báúil don Ghaeilge. Tá sé sin fíorthábhachtach.

Tugann sé inspioráid freisin do dhaoine atá ag dul in aois. Tá sé tábhachtach go bhfuil sé chomh gníomhach ag an staid seo dá shaol. Ní tharlaíonn sé do gach duine go mbeadh siad chomh géar san aigne agus atá an tUasal Ó Muircheartaigh. Tá sé tábhachtach freisin. That is also really important. He probably has not heard of a thing called head tingles. Perhaps he has. I do not know if he is an expert on autonomous sensory meridian response, but that is one of the many gifts that he is supposed to have. Somewhere in the happier parts of the Internet, one can find a video of Mr. Ó Muircheartaigh making a ham sandwich in a very entertaining way and talking about it in very sporting terms. Apparently it caused a sensation because people thought this guy was so relaxing to listen to. They said it caused this phenomenon.

That is the lighter side of Mr. Ó Muircheartaigh but níor mhaith liom tógáil, mar a dúirt mé, ó na rudaí tábhachtacha atá le rá aige agus atá le múineadh aige, mar is múinteoir den scoth é. As part of our response around the promotion of the Irish language ba chóir dúinn chuimhniú i gcónaí gurb é an áit le tosú an earnáil phoiblí. Ansin, rachfaidh daoine eile. I understand what people say about compulsory Irish and how it can create the wrong effect but is mór an trua the decline of Irish within the Civil Service and the fact that the rules were changed so that there are now very few people in the Civil Service who can provide people with a basic service through Irish, if that is their wish. Léiríonn sé gur gá le níos mó ná lip service ón Rialtas agus ó na daoine mór le rá sa tír seo maidir leis an nGaeilge. We have to find ways to put Irish at the centre of life. We need to look again at how Irish has declined within the Civil Service and to address that.

Tá áthas orm col ceathrair Mhíchíl, Iognáid Ó Muircheartaigh, a fheiscint inniu. Is iar-uachtarán mo choláiste féin é - UCG, nó NUI Galway mar a ghlaoitear anois air. Dar ndóigh, fear mór Gaelach le Gaeilge é freisin. Tá áthas orm gur Gaeilgeoir a chomarba is déanaí, Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh. I mention that because, linked with the respect that our public institutions need to show for the Irish language, I was disappointed that my own *alma mater*, NUI Galway, changed the rules about the selection of presidents of the college so that Irish would no longer be a requirement. Tá áthas orm, I am delighted, that they picked a very fine Gaeilgeoir as well as a very competent person to be Iognáid's latest successor as uachtarán. Dr. Jim Browne also

had that capacity.

I say that because ba chóir go mbeadh sé indéanta go mbeadh sé riachtanach go mbeadh Gaeilge ag uachtarán Choláiste na hOllscoile i nGaillimh. If some very talented person from abroad is found, he or she should be given three or four years to get to a certain standard mar tá ionadaíocht i gceist maidir lenár gcuid ollscoileanna. Ní chun airgead a mhealladh isteach ag an tír le haghaidh taighde amháin atá na hollscoileanna. Tá fíor-ról ionadíochotha i gceist le huachtaránacht agus le hollscoileanna - go háirithe an ollscoil i nGaillimh. I make that point in passing by way of welcoming Mr. Ó Muircheartaigh's distinguished relative, Iognáid, but also to say that is an example of how the public sector needs to take Irish more seriously.

Leis sin gabhaim buíochas leis an Uasal Ó Muircheartaigh arís as ucht na n-éachtaí uilig atá déanta aige go dtí seo. Gabhaim buíochas leis ach go háirithe as ucht an bhealaigh agus na cuirtéiseachta atá aige agus a theachtaireacht a chur ar aghaidh. Ach gabhaim buíochas níos mó ná sin as tábhacht na teachtaireachta atá aige dúinn inniu.

**Senator Ned O'Sullivan:** Gabhaim pardún as a bheith déanach. Bhíos thuas sa Ma-ter. Bhí check-up bliantúil agam. Ba mhaith liom fáilte is fiche a chur roimh Mhícheál Ó Muircheartaigh agus é sa Seanad inniu. Tá náire orm, go háirithe mar Chiarraíoch, nach bhfuil ach Gaeilge bhriste agam. Bainim triail as mo chuid Gaeilge chomh minic agus is féidir liom. One of the reasons people like me love Mícheál Ó Muircheartaigh is that he understands that not everybody has Gaeilge líofa and he encourages us to use what we can. As a Kerryman, I am ashamed of the Irish I have. Níl an cleachtadh agam. I am not keeping it up. Every now and again, I make my mind up to improve my Irish. When my children were going to school, we used to speak Irish at the table as much as we could. Mícheál Ó Muircheartaigh has made the Irish language attractive and appealing to people who do not have Irish but would like to have it. Down through the decades, we have had a lot of coercion in relation to the teaching of Irish. Perhaps there was too much pressure on people. Many of my former colleagues in school would say that the manner in which Irish was taught to them meant they did not learn a love of the language. Regrettably, there is a certain validity to that argument.

Is fear cáiliúil agus spóirtúil é Mícheál Ó Muircheartaigh. Go háirithe, is fear na ndaoine é. He is a people's person. I will not labour this point. I was late for this debate because I had an unavoidable medical appointment. I think Mr. Ó Muircheartaigh has done more for the Irish language than many professors, scholars and experts. Regardless of whether he is speaking in Irish or in English, he speaks the language of the people. When he is commentating on a game or talking about how to make a ham sandwich, as mentioned by Senator Mullen, he has an appeal and people take to that. I had the privilege of being ar an ardán leis i Lios Tuathail ar Lá Fhéile Pádraig. We shared a platform in Listowel last week. Mr. Ó Muircheartaigh is always willing to come when he is called. Many people are called and do not turn up, but Mr. Ó Muircheartaigh always turns up and it is appreciated. Mícheál O'Hehir was famously the voice of Gaelic football at one time. There is no doubt that Mícheál Ó Muircheartaigh is the voice of Gaelic football and a living successor to Mícheál O'Hehir. He is totally unique in his own way. As a Kerryman, I am proud to be able to be here in the Seanad. I am ashamed of my Irish, but I am certainly proud of Mícheál Ó Muircheartaigh.

**Senator Robbie Gallagher:** Ba mhaith liom fosta fáilte mhór a chur roimh Mhícheál Ó Muircheartaigh agus a chlann go dtí an Teach seo inniu. Labhair mé leis an Uasal Ó Muircheartaigh ag Comórtas Peile na Gaeltachta ar an gCeathrú Rua i gContae na Gaillimhe na blianta ó shin. Bhí mé ag imirt ar fhoireann an Tearmainn ó Thír Chonaill ag an am sin. Bhí

eolas an-mhaith ag an Uasal Ó Muircheartaigh ar na himreoirí go léir ó gach Gaeltacht sa tír. His knowledge of the GAA and of all the players who had assembled in An Cheathrú Rua in Connemara for the all-Ireland Gaeltacht football championships has stayed with me until the present day. At the time, I was playing for a team called Termon from County Donegal. As we spoke on the sideline, I was impressed by Mr. Ó Muircheartaigh's knowledge of the team. He asked about imreoir an-mhaith, Tomás Ó Riain, a bhí againn agus a bhí ag imirt d'fhoireann an chontae ag an am. Thomas Ryan would have been our most famous player at that time, which was 20 or 25 years ago. Mr. Ó Muircheartaigh knew about him and about the minors who played on the team in a small country area like the area I come from thuas i dTír Chonaill. It has stayed with me that he took the time to inform himself about the players from our club who had previously played with Donegal. There is no better ambassador for the Irish language or for Gaelic games than Mícheál Ó Muircheartaigh. As a sporting person, I often listen to commentators as they try to explain a crucial moment during a football or hurling match. There are some who get it and some who do not. Mr. Ó Muircheartaigh has the God-given gift of being able to capture the moment and set the scene when commentating on a hurling match in a way that allows someone travelling in a car to envisage it in his or her mind's eye. As one listens to his commentary, it is as if one is actually looking at what is happening on the pitch. That is a fantastic gift.

What I like about today is that it gives us an opportunity to look back with fond memories on Mícheál Ó Muircheartaigh's fantastic talent as a commentator and to hear about his love for the Irish language. People normally have to pass away before we get an opportunity to idolise them. I am glad Mr. Ó Muircheartaigh is alive today and his family is here with him. I am glad we have this opportunity to pay tribute to him by highlighting the respect and love that we, as a nation, have for him. I wish him many more years of good health and happiness. I have no doubt that he will continue to promote Gaelic games and the Irish language. An advertisement for the Allianz football leagues that is running on RTÉ at present sets a unique and iconic scene. It shows Mícheál Ó Muircheartaigh, after being involved with the GAA for many years, with some children at an under age football match against a backdrop of the wild Atlantic Ocean. It is a fantastic image and one I associate with Mr. Ó Muircheartaigh. I wish him many more years of good health and happiness. I hope we will get an opportunity to enjoy listening to him yet again, regardless of the subject matter he is discussing. I suppose there is an onus on us all le bheith ag caint as Gaeilge. Cosúil le mo chara, an Seanadóir Ned O'Sullivan, bhí níos mó Gaeilge agam nuair a bhí mé óg ná mar atá agam anois. Nuair a d'fhreastail mé ar an scoil náisiúnta thuas i dTír Chonaill, bhí orm an Ghaeilge a labhairt an t-am ar fad. With the passage of time, ní cuimhin liom an chuid is mó den mhéid Gaeilge a bhí agam ag an am sin. Déanaim iarracht an Ghaeilge a labhairt anois is arís. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Uasal Ó Muircheartaigh. It is a pleasure and an honour to be in his presence here this afternoon.

**An Cathaoirleach:** Is é an Seanadóir Terry Leyden an chéad chainteoir eile.

**Senator Terry Leyden:** Or even an Seanadóir Traolach Ó Loideáin. Cuirim fáilte roimh Mícheál Ó Muircheartaigh. Níl mórán Gaeilge agam. In 1982, when I was appointed as Minister of State by Charles J. Haughey, I spent many weeks travelling to Dublin to do a Gael Linn course. I was very conscious of the fact that my Irish was not up to standard. I had a driver who spoke fluent Irish, so I used to be briefed before I went into functions so that I could speak as much Gaeilge as possible. Fortunately, my wife Mary, my daughter Orla and my granddaughter speak very good Irish. Mícheál Ó Muircheartaigh has brought Irish to the fore. Many years ago, RTÉ had a very good Irish-language programme that he might recall. He has

done a tremendous amount for the Irish language and for sport. He is basically an icon. I am delighted that he has been given this honour in the Seanad today. As I reflected on what he said, I wondered why, after all these years, Mr. Ó Muircheartaigh has not been made a Senator. He would be a fantastic ambassador here. I am sure Senator Ó Céidigh will decide to give up his seat. Maybe Deputy Micheál Martin will appoint Mr. Ó Muircheartaigh as well. No greater love can one give.

**Senator Ned O’Sullivan:** Senator Leyden has been around for a long time so he might make way.

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** Éirigh as an suíochán.

**Senator Terry Leyden:** Even though I was taught Irish by a lovely brother, Brother Paul O’Dwyer from Tipperary, who had lovely Irish, I must say that when I was in school there was far too much emphasis on the past, present and future tenses instead of the spoken language. Perhaps the Government or some Minister will research the teaching of the Irish language to make people love speaking it. That would be a great thing for Mr. Ó Muircheartaigh personally. All the young women who came out of the Convent of Mercy schools in Roscommon spoke very good Irish, but very few of the lads who left the CBS spoke good Irish. We were taught Irish for an hour nearly every day of the week, but we were not spoken to about things like the weather. My appeal is for people to be taught ordinary phrases like “tá an aimsir go maith”, “tá sé ag cur sneachta” and “tá mé ag dul abhaile” so that they can speak the language. I was not going to contribute to this debate because I am conscious of the factors I have mentioned. Senator Ned O’Sullivan has excellent Irish. I must say that Senator Mullen has lovely Irish. If we are to achieve something today, I would like it to be a renewed focus on spoken language in schools to make people love the language and get speaking it as well as they can. There should not be this kind of elitism. Senator O’Sullivan made the point that some people who are too fanatical about the language are elitist about it, but Mr. Ó Muircheartaigh embodies the real Irish language and the love of it. The fact that he is bilingual and so fluent in both languages is brilliant. I am just delighted to be here today. It is a great honour for the Seanad that Mr. Ó Muircheartaigh addressed us here today. I wish him continued success. He is a national figure and long may that continue.

**An Leas-Chathaoirleach:** Mar chríoch, táim an-bhródúil a bheith in ann fáilte mhór go dtí an Seanad a chur roimh duine eile ón ríocht. Is mór an onóir dúinn go bhfuil an tUasal Ó Muircheartaigh anseo chun cabhrú linn Bliain na Gaeilge a chéiliúradh. I agree with everything that has been said by all of my colleagues. It is well deserved. Mr. Ó Muircheartaigh has been a great ambassador for our language and his broadcasting has been truly wonderful down through the years. Ar son Sheanad Éireann, mar Leas-Chathaoirleach, gabhaim buíochas dó as a bheith anseo inniu agus as an aitheasc spéisiúil ar thug sé dúinn. He has done us proud. Gabhaim buíochas leis. Ar mhaith leis freagra a thabhairt don Teach? He might like a very brief focal scoir.

**Mr. Micheál Ó Muircheartaigh:** Bhí sé an-suimiúil a bheith ag éisteacht leis na Seanadóirí. Tuigim ó bheith ag éisteacht leo go bhfuil sé in aigne acu anois rud éigin gníomhach a dhéanamh i leith na Gaeilge agus i leith gnéithe eile de chultúr na hÉireann i rith na bliana atá romhainn. Is maith an rud, ar shlí, gur Bliain na Gaeilge í in áit Sheachtain na Gaeilge. D’fhéadfaí rud a chur ar siúl ar feadh bliana ach ní fhéadfaí mórán a dhéanamh i seachtain ach an spiorad a chothú.

Bhí rudaí suimiúla le rá. Labhródh faoi éigeantas, compulsion. Bhí sé sin ann ó, b'fhéidir, na 1940í agus na 1950í. Níl sé ann a thuilleadh. Nuair a théitear isteach anois go dtí na bunscoileanna, if one goes into primary schools now, the múinteoir is not Ms or Mrs. so-an-so agus ní hé an fear an tUasal, he or she is Múinteoir Máire nó Múinteoir ainm éigin eile. The students just take the teacher's name as if he or she was one of themselves. It is a group thing. Mar a dúirt peileadóir ó Chiarraí, Mick O'Connell, liom uair amháin, nuair a chuir duine ceist air cé a bhí ar a mharcáil, nó who was marking him, on a given day, dúirt sé nach raibh éinne riamh ar a mharcáil ach go raibh sé ag imirt leo. He said that he did not play against the others, he played with them. Tá an rud sin sna scoileanna anois. Tá na daltaí agus na múinteoirí le chéile. It is not that one has all the power. Tá an éigeantas imithe and that is a great thing for Irish. People who learned Irish in school in the last 20 or 30 years have a different experience completely. The compulsion was there in a time when everything was certain agus gach rud. It did a lot of damage. It turned people who did not have the ability to learn Irish quickly against it. That was a pity. Is dóigh liom go bhfuil sé sin thart.

Luaigh mé ré nua. We are into new times now and there is an opportunity. It is okay to talk about things and to have strategies and everything, but one must be able to say five years later that strategy worked. Caithfear gníomh a dhéanamh. That is what I like about all the people connected with that Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language. Not alone did they point needs out but they actually went to do different things where they saw such needs and brought other people in. From what I heard here from the Seanadóirí I am very hopeful that they will do their part. Tá a lán daoine anseo a bhfuil Gaeilge acu. If they can have any influence on it and if the people are available I would love it if, when elections come around, as well as having debates in RTÉ and other stations, there were also some as Gaeilge ar TG4 - Teilifís na Gaeilge nuair a bunaíodh é.

Ba é ár nUachtarán, Michael D. Higgins, who launched Teilifís na Gaeilge, as it was called, way back in 1996. Is cuimhin liom go maith an oíche sin agus ba chóir creidiúint a thabhairt dó. Dúirt sé go raibh sé an tAire - that he was the Minister - but he also said that only for the people that went before him who got the legislation through and made the money available, ní bheadh sé ansin agus ní bheadh Teilifís na Gaeilge ann. Dúirt sé go gcaithfear féachaint amach ar an rud go léir. Cuireann rudaí mar sin áthas orm mar ní maith liom rudaí caolaigeantach. Cosúil leis na scoileanna, if the Irish club develops bheadh na Teachtaí Dála, the Senators and others meeting more often and, unknown to themselves, in a while they will be speaking as Gaeilge when the opportunity is there. Déanaim comhghairdeas leis na Seanadóirí.

There was a move a few years ago to get rid of Seanad Éireann. I do not know what the purpose of that was. It would be a sad day. Going way back to an old Irish poem: ná tabhair do bhreith ar an gcéad scéal go mbeiridh an taobh eile ort - do not pass judgment on a story you hear until you hear the other story. You are in a better place then. A system that allows for two levels, two views, is a better way to form positive opinions. Is dóigh liom go bhfuil mo dhóthain ráite agam. Táim dóchasach that the future is good. On some aspects like the music and the dance, people are dancing Irish dances all over the world - Australia, America, and so on. With the new opening up of China there will be Chinese people coming here to the Oireachtas in a few years' time. Beidh siad ann. Gabhaim míle buíochas leis na Seanadóirí. Tá áthas orm go bhfuair mé cuireadh agus go raibh fáilte romham ar son na Gaeilge.

**Senator Terry Leyden:** A standing ovation such as that is very rare in the Chamber.

**An Leas-Chathaoirleach:** Gabhaim míle buíochas leis an Uasal Ó Muirheartaigh. Leis

na himeachtaí a thabhairt chun críocha, glaoim ar an gCeannaire, an Seanadóir Jerry Buttimer.

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** Nílimid críochnaithe fós. Is cúis mhór bróid orm fíor-fháilte a chur roimh an Uasal Ó Muircheartaigh agus a chlann ar an ócáid speisialta seo. Lá iontach ab ea é. Déanaim comhghairdeas leis an Seanadóir Ó Céidigh as ucht an rún a chur faoi bhráid an Choiste um Nós Imeachta agus Pribhléidí. Bhí tacaíocht mhór ó gach duine sa Seomra seo.

Tá muintir na hÉireann faoi dhraíocht Mhíchíl Ó Mhuircheartaigh le blianta fada. Anuas ar thráchtairacht a dhéanamh ar chúrsaí Chumann Lúthchleas Gael, bhíodh sé in ann an Ghaeilge agus an Béarla a mhúineadh fiú agus é ag tabhairt ár ndúshlán dúinn. Agus sinn ag éisteacht leis, bhí an suim, an dúthracht agus na sceitimíní orainn chomh tréan riamh agus a bhí sé anall thar na blianta. Is fíor a rá go bhfacamar an suim agus an dúthracht céanna ann agus é ag gníomhú mar chathaoirleach ar Bhord na Gaeilge. Mar chraoltóir, thug sé grá don Ghaeilge dúinn, uaireanta le corrhfocal, uaireanta le frása agus uaireanta eile le habairtí iomláine. Cuireadh múscailt suime agus bá dár dteanga dúchais orainn. Tréasláim leis an saibhreacht theanga a spreagann an chuid eile a bhíonn ag gníomhú i dteannta a chéile chun cloí le labhairt na Gaeilge. Táimid ag plé cúrsaí Gaeilge agus táimid i measc bliain na Gaeilge. Mar a dúirt an Taoiseach ar ócáid an Rialtais a phlé, is é aidhm an Rialtas ar feadh bliain na Gaeilge, an Ghaeilge a chéiliúradh agus an gnáthduine a spreagadh páirt a ghlacadh ann. Sin í aidhm an Rialtais agus mar a dúirt gach duine inniu ba chóir dúinn an Ghaeilge a úsáid i dTeach Laighean, i gCorcaigh nó gach áit. I had the pleasure of knowing Mr. Ó Muircheartaigh for a long time. We had the distinction of working in RTÉ; I was a lowly RTÉ radio Cork sports commentator, Mr. Ó Muircheartaigh was a man we all admired and loved. I had the pleasure of working alongside his daughter and his son who travelled the country with him, ag scríobh na notes agus gach rud mar gheall ar an gcluiche. Their love, their interest and their comhrá epitomised what this man stands for. It is not the grand plan, it is not the overarching vision. It is an Ghaeilge a úsáid gach lá, mar a dúirt gach duine, an advertisement ar RTÉ for the ham sandwich. Fear an-speisialta is ea é, a man who deserves to be here today. Not because of what he did in making our Gaelic games attractive, inviting him into our homes, but for the way he made the Irish language accessible. In my humble opinion, we speak about great people like Pádraig Pearse but to me, i ré nua, we have a patriot in front of us today. This is a man who took his love of the Irish language from west Kerry and brought it to the four corners of our country. Senator O'Mahony spoke about the exhilaration of being in a dressing room on Munster final day in Thurles or Páirc Uí Chaoimh. I had the pleasure of being there too. For every player, official, steward, maor, bhí focal leis an Uasal Ó Muircheartaigh aige nó aici. He spoke to everybody. It was not the Pope, it was not the prince, it was the ordinary person that was treated the same way. It is the measure of a man that he treats everybody fairly.

In his use of the Irish language and the way in which he has challenged us, he is an inspiration to a new generation. Mar a dúirt an Seanadóir O'Sullivan, níl an Ghaeilge go líofa agam, ach d'úsáid mé é. Rinneamar cleachtadh, téann muid go dtí an coffee dock le ranganna Gaeilge agus údáideann muid í timpeall an Tí seo. For as long as the name Míchaél Ó Muircheartaigh is spoken about, the Irish language will always be remembered and will always be used. For as long as we remember Mr. Ó Muircheartaigh and as an Seanadóir Reilly said, the phrases he used in his match commentary, then our Gaelic games will be safe and secure. We stand here today Cathaoirleach, to pay tribute and say thank you, in a very humble but very symbolic gesture by us as Baill Sheanad Éireann. Bhí ceist againn ar an ráiteas, cad é Éire nua? What is the new Ireland? What do we stand for? "Reeling in the Years" was on on St. Patrick's night and Riverdance was being played. Tá an ceart ag an Uasal Ó Muircheartaigh; Irish music,

Irish song is being celebrated around the world. We paid tribute today to Liam Ó Floinn on the Order of Business. Tá spiorad an Uasal Uí Mhuircheartaigh láidir. Fear íontach is ea é, lán de chreideamh, míle buíochas dó as ucht a mhéid oibre ar son na gnáthdaoine, ar son Chumann Lúthchleas Gael, ar son chumann polaitiúil agus go mórmhór ar son chúrsaí Gaeilge. Mar Cheannaire an Tí, gabhaim mo buíochas leis. Maith thú.

**An Cathaoirleach:** Sin deireadh na n-imeachtaí. Go raibh míle maith agat arís a Uasail Uí Mhuircheartaigh as a bheith anseo linn inniu. An féidir leis an gCeannaire moladh go gcuirfí an suí ar fionraí go dtí 3.15 p.m.? An bhfuil sé sin aontaithe? Tá an suí ar fionraí go dtí 3.15 p.m.

*Sitting suspended at 2.45 p.m. and resumed at 3.15 p.m.*

### **Electoral (Amendment) (Voting at 16) Bill 2016: Order for Committee Stage**

**Senator Fintan Warfield:** I move:

That Committee Stage be taken now.

Question put and agreed to.

### **Electoral (Amendment) (Voting at 16) Bill 2016: Committee Stage**

#### SECTION 1

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paddy Burke):** I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Phelan, to the House. He is just in time to see his people from Castlecomer.

Amendment No. 1 in the name of Senator Murnane O'Connor is out of order. Amendment No. 2 in the name of Senator Murnane O'Connor is also out of order.

**Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** They are both linked and if the Acting Chairman likes, I can do the two together.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paddy Burke):** They are both out of order. The Senator cannot speak on them but I will allow her in on the section.

Amendments Nos. 1 and 2 not moved.

Question proposed: "That section 1 stand part of the Bill."

**Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** I welcome everyone here today, and particularly the young students in the Gallery. Hopefully, we will see change in the near future. I believe that young people should have a say.

Fianna Fáil's proposal involves the establishment of a select committee. It is what I speak about in my first amendment, in subsection (1), which states "A Select Committee shall be established ...". In general, we believe in the principle of this Bill. I just want to let people know

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that. The reason we are here talking about this Bill today is to question how can we vote on something on which we do not have all the information.

I will explain why we are doing this and why we put these amendments forward. I have been speaking to secondary school students in Carlow in this year commemorating 100 years of women's suffrage and I have been shocked at how unfamiliar they are with our political system. This is common among young people. I would even go as far as to say it is common among Irish people in general.

When we get a voter turnout of 48%, we think we are marvellous but that is terrible. When one looks at it in general, whether it is local elections or general elections, one is praying that it will not rain or snow, or the weather will not be bad, because one's biggest fear is the turnout. If can be 48%, it can be 44% or 42%. It depends on the different constituencies.

This year we celebrate 100 years of women's suffrage. In our history, women and men died just so that we could get the chance to vote, in private and on our own. We have a fantastic democracy but we do not engage with the public so they cannot enjoy it. Recently, during the cold spell, people were comparing us to Russia. Actually, there is a grain of truth in that. Following the election of Putin, many voters stated they did not vote because they knew the outcome. They stated their vote did not matter. Irish people tell me that all the time. They see no point in voting. If the adults in this country feel like that, how can we expect the 16 year olds to feel any different?

The Constitutional Convention recommended the voting age be reduced to 16 years and while this Bill seeks to reduce the voting age in European and local elections to 16, the Bill is not complete, as seen by these amendments. My party is today putting forward these amendments.

We have tabled an amendment to have the Houses of the Oireachtas establish a select committee to consider: reducing the age at which a person shall be entitled to be registered as a European elector in a constituency to 16 years, provided that person is ordinarily resident in that constituency and is a citizen of Ireland, or a national of a Member State other than the State, and; reducing the age at which a person shall be entitled to be registered as a local government elector in a local area to 16 provided that the person is ordinarily resident in that area on the qualifying date. We further propose: this select committee be comprised of eight persons - four sitting Teachta Dála and four sitting Senators; a chairperson shall be selected by the members of the select committee; and the select committee may accept and invite submissions from interested bodies and shall prepare a report and make recommendations. It is vital that this gets appropriate consideration and a select committee is the way to do this.

The reason we are putting this proposal forward is that it is about all of us working together. It is about parents, teachers and students, and everybody, working together.

There is a need for an awareness campaign, particularly for 16 year olds but also for 18 year olds, and for people in general. As I have stated previously, we need to look at the awareness around voting. People died so that we would vote and it is outrageous that we are lucky, at general, local or European elections, if we have a turnout of 40% or 50%.

I believe that, in future, 16 year olds should vote. I can categorically say that the committee to which I refer will work to ensure that we raise awareness and we work with the 16 year olds to ensure that they have that vote. However, to start off this process, we need to get a committee

set up. We need to get teachers, parents and students and everybody aware of the commitment of the vote. It is so crucial. That would be my first amendment.

**Senator Fintan Warfield:** I welcome the fact that amendments Nos. 1 and 2 have been ruled out of order.

We need to create the space in which to craft a new discourse. That is particularly relevant in the time that faces the European Union, because what we are talking about here is local and European elections. I refer to a European discourse that includes citizens from diverse settings, beliefs and cultures about how our continent might present itself. In order to facilitate that dialogue, we need alternative political options, options that generate debate and options that involve citizens, extending the electoral franchise to include those at 16 and 17 years of age who wish to vote, and indeed, proper citizens' initiatives that are democratic because the current European citizens' initiative has been an embarrassing failure.

I quote President Michael D. Higgins:

We are, in contemporary Europe, confronted with uniquely difficult challenges. But the essential response lies in striving towards an open politically engaged but questioning, socially and culturally aware citizenship - a citizenship that develops and protects the institutions that protect individual rights and foster a sense of duty, responsibility and accountability.

That is what we are asking for.

That is what young people are asking for. I commend the young people who have joined us in the Seanad today.

**Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile:** Hear, hear.

**Senator Fintan Warfield:** I commend all of the young people who have expressed their aspirations to our political representatives over the past week.

I introduced First Stage of this Bill in the Seanad on 12 July 2016. I remember it well as it was my first piece of legislation. I worked alongside Senator Lynn Ruane and felt immense pride in being in a position to introduce the legislation. I again thank the National Youth Council of Ireland for its constant support and note that its work, long before my time in Leinster House, inspired this Bill. I do not take my role as a legislator lightly. I believe that the work we do has a substantial impact on people's lives and on their role in shaping our society.

I introduced Second Stage on 29 March 2017. As we know, the Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil parties voted for a motion that delayed the progress of the legislation in 2018. They stated that they needed more time to consider the Bill despite the issue having been debated in public forums on a regular basis, despite both parties having policies that support a lower voting age, despite the issue being considered at the Constitutional Convention, and despite the Bill being on the Order Paper for nine months before First Stage commenced.

Before the Bill was heard in this House I wrote to representatives in both parties and sought a meeting to discuss the Bill. Unfortunately, I did not receive a response. During the Second Stage debate in this House the Opposition *en masse* called out the Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil parties for their cynicism, and shared that opinion. Once Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil united to pass a motion that would delay the Bill, I set about working with both of them so that we

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would utilise our time and ensure that Senators were satisfied. I wrote to the then Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, Deputy Simon Coveney, the current Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, and the two Ministers of State at the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, Deputies English and Phelan, and Deputy Cowen. Eventually, I met the Minister of State, Deputy Phelan, and Senator Neale Richmond. I thank them both for their assistance.

For nearly 12 months Fianna Fáil, in particular, has failed to engage in any dialogue on the Bill. That leads me to believe that the motion it tabled today to delay proceedings, that has thankfully been ruled out of order, was a cynical attempt to again delay this issue, having previously delayed it on Second Stage. That concludes my remarks.

**Senator Ivana Bacik:** I welcome the Minister of State to the House and I welcome the representatives of youth groups who are seated in the Gallery.

I commend Senators Ruane, Warfield and Mac Lochlainn for introducing the Bill. I wish to confirm that my Labour Party colleagues and I support Committee Stage of the Bill. My colleague, Senator Ó Ríordáin, spoke eloquently in favour of the Bill on Second Stage. The National Youth Council of Ireland, Foróige, Youth Work Ireland and the Irish Second-Level Students' Union have contacted all of us to express their support for the Bill.

I believe that the proposal is modest and deserves support. I echo the words expressed by Senator Warfield who criticised any further delay in bringing forward the legislation. The Bill simply provides for the expansion of suffrage to people who are 16 years of age and over in local and European elections. Many of us would like to see the legislation go further. Indeed, in forthcoming referendum campaigns, like the referendum and campaign on the eighth amendment, it would be very good and appropriate if the franchise was extended to 16 year olds and 17 year olds.

Senators have referenced the centenary of women's suffrage this year. As chairperson of the Vótáil 100 committee in the Oireachtas, I am glad to celebrate the expansion of suffrage to women back in 1918. Let us recall that in the years preceding the enactment of the Representation of the People Act 1918, which gave the right to vote to some women and only those over 30 years of age, the people who opposed the expansion of suffrage to women and opposed the right of women to vote expressed similar arguments to what we have heard about the right of young people to vote. For example, a lack of maturity or an inability to understand politics. Nowadays, in a contemporary and modern Ireland, we should not be afraid to extend the franchise to 16 year olds and 17 year olds, particularly in this limited way. I was proud to support the proposal some years ago at the Constitutional Convention, on behalf of the Labour Party, and I am proud to support it again today. I hope the Bill will be passed today and urge all colleagues on all sides to support same.

**Senator Victor Boyhan:** I welcome the Minister of State to the House. I also welcome the people who are seated in the public Gallery, in particular the young people.

Like previous Senators, I thank Senators Fintan Warfield, Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Lynn Ruane for sponsoring the Bill. I think I have spoken about the Bill before and I fully support same. It is important that we again state our commitment to the legislation.

As the Minister of State will be fully aware, the Young Fine Gael movement has adopted a strong line in terms of the legislation. A number of them have contacted me, particularly after

the last time we discussed the legislation. Senator Neale Richmond was a great advocate of it in terms of his politics within Young Fine Gael and empowering young people aged 16 and 17 years to have a say. I do not quite know how the matter has got lost in Fine Gael but that is a matter for the party. Senator Richmond was here before and made a good case for the legislation but it never went any further, which is a pity.

It is important that we engage with people, tap into youth and explore diversity. Young people bring something to politics with their rich ideas and different ways of expression. For that matter, every age brings something to politics in terms of the social life of our society and engagement with same. Let us reflect on the fact that a 16 year old can do the following: consent to medical treatment; leave school and enter the workplace or training; be paid and be eligible to pay tax, including the universal social charge, USC, on his or her income; obtain tax credits and welfare benefits in his or her own right; the common age of sexual consent, whether heterosexual or homosexual, is 17 year of age; enter a meaningful and loving relationship; and become a member of a trade union. I have listed some of the things that people of this age can do yet somehow we have a problem with allowing people aged 16 and 17 years of age to engage in the political process.

On 7 March of this year, we discussed the Vótáil 100 committee, the political process and the suffrage movement. I spoke on that occasion and I shall quote the transcript of the debate. I said:

I met a girl outside the gates of Leinster House today. She told me she was 16 years old and that she would love to be in politics.

I know that when she got through the gates she took a photograph of herself standing in front of a little statue of Countess Markievicz. I asked her what stopped her from engaging in politics and said it was important to engage in one's school or college. I like to think that we will be in a position by 2019, when local elections are due to take place, to allow people who are 16 years of age to vote. The Minister of State has an enormous input into this matter due to the fact that his brief is local government and electoral reform. It is not too late for us to do something. If we are focused, committed and determined enough we can ensure that 16 and 17 year olds and, indeed, people who are up to 18 years of age, are able to vote in the local elections that will take place in 2019. We should aim to achieve that goal. I refer to the small margin of people who are currently excluded. There is a long lead in to the local elections and the European elections but we need to get moving. Ultimately, it is good and healthy to engage with all of the people because it will improve the political life of this country. I urge the Minister of State to support the Bill. I want him to set out a constructive pathway that will start this process.

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** I do not believe what I have heard here this afternoon. Senator Murnane O'Connor is a very good friend of mind and I hold her in high esteem-----

**Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** Yes.

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** -----but come on. In terms of young people being uninformed, engaged or not engaged, she has suggested that we should talk to teachers, the mummies and the daddies to raise awareness. I presume that when we are finished doing that she hopes we will have a tea party and that we will all sit down to chat a little bit more. For God's sake, we are talking about people who are 16 years of age. If we engage them in politics at 16 years of age then we will have them for life. Why does the Senator think banks go out of their

way to set up school banks? They do so because they know that if a child opens a bank account with them then he or she will be loyal and remain a customer for the rest of his or her life.

I am sure that Members who have email addresses will have received numerous emails from youth organisations and individual young people asking for support. The Senator has suggested a committee be set up to discuss this matter. We all know what happens when a committee discusses an issue. The committee produces a camel rather than a horse so a committee would not work.

There is no need for Fianna Fáil to fear the Bill. All Fianna Fáil needs to do is recruit young people of 16 years of age and over, thus providing a future for the party. The same applies to Fine Gael and any other party that wants young people. I can assure Senators that young people want to engage in politics.

Senator Murnane O'Connor is right in what she said about the turnout for elections. I believe the turnout is low because old people like me gave up voting years ago.

**Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell:** Senator Craughwell has not given up.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paddy Burke):** That is news to the House.

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** I am delighted that I have provided the House with something to chuckle about. This is really serious; 16 year olds are not children. A couple of weeks ago, we tried to amend the Data Protection Bill to raise the digital age of consent to 16 and the House went berserk. Members said, "No, it should be 13." They are not going to kill us and it is unlikely they will do silly things. They will probably spend a lot more time researching how they will cast their votes than most adults of 18 plus do. Get them young. Get them in there. Get them engaged. Get them to be members of political parties. I am delighted that seems to have brought the Minister of State to life. I assume he will support the Bill given his broad smile.

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy John Paul Phelan):** To get them young.

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** As he is going to support the Bill, I can sit down and relax for the rest of the afternoon. It is great to see a progressive Minister of State who wants to see a progressive society in which 16 years olds and above vote in European, local and, eventually perhaps, presidential elections, not that I have any great interest in that.

**Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell:** The Senator being the visual aid.

**Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile:** Mol an óige agus tiocfaidh sí. Does the Minister of State remember that old saying from school? Praise the young and they will flourish. Cherish and enfranchise the young, enable, empower and trust them. These are all very modest political requirements for the House. That Seanad Éireann would, on receipt of a carefully considered Bill which has been the subject of consultation, as brought forward by Senators Warfield and Ruane, send it to an obscure, opaque committee somewhere, having seen it kicked to touch at an earlier stage, insults the processes of the House. This is the Seanad and this is the place to table and enact laws. It is also a great slight on those who have worked to put the Bill together and proposed it here this afternoon.

At the earlier debate on the Bill, I noted that a pattern was emerging in the House. I reflected

on my remarks at that debate before coming to the House today. It should be clear to a blind man or woman on a galloping horse that it has gone beyond a pattern to become a very clear, overt political stance on the part of Fianna Fáil to oppose any legislation Sinn Féin brings to the House. Sin é. That is it. It does not matter if the legislation reflects that party's own policy or if it is completely in unison with its stated aims. It does not matter if giving 16 year olds the vote is the right thing to do. Fianna Fáil is to oppose it. It is negative, nasty and base politics. So much for new politics. It cannot be denied any longer that this is the stated position.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paddy Burke):** The Senator is moving away from the section.

**Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile:** I am referring to the committee.

**Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** The Senator is just playing. That is what Sinn Féin does.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paddy Burke):** I ask Senator Murnane O'Connor-----

**Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** I ask to come back in.

**Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile:** The Senator does not have to come back in. She has had her say.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paddy Burke):** Senator Ó Donnghaile without interruption.

**Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile:** Without interruption because sometimes people do not like to hear that they are going to get up and vote against this because that is their party's stated policy. Fianna Fáil has the opportunity with young people in the Gallery. Young people have no doubt because they are engaged in the political process as Senator Craughwell rightly said. The notion that young people are not following this and judging it is wrong.

If Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and others had any sense, they would rush to empower and enfranchise young people. It is a very short window of time before they will have the opportunity at 18 to vote and they will remember who taxed them at 16 and, as Senator Craughwell said, expected them to meet certain conditions in life in terms of their public contribution. They will remember who wanted them to contribute to the State and put their trust in it but who would not return the favour and gratitude. The coalition Government of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael would not trust them and empower them. They come in here and give all of the plamá and beal grá about how great it was 100 years ago to enfranchise some women, which it was. At this point in time, however, it is as plain as the nose on one's face that the people driving politics not just in this State but across the country are young people. As it has always been, they are at the fore to demand social change and progress and changes in the law.

It is as simple as I said in the last debate on the matter. Governments of the last ten to 15 years have punished young people. They have been on the receiving end of the worst excesses of economic illiteracy. They have been driven into poverty and the so-called recovery in which they cannot afford a home or child care. They can hardly get a job. The *status quo* and the establishment are afraid of those young people being empowered and entrusted with their democratic right to vote. I believe fundamentally as a republican in enfranchising and empowering citizens and providing them with equality and rights. If young people are to be expected to contribute to many other aspects of political, social and legislative life in the State, why are they not trusted with the vote? What is the rationale? The parties say they will talk to teachers,

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youth groups, youth clubs and parents as if young people do not exist outside the classroom, as if they do not have an identity, life, experience and relationships and as if they do not contribute to life and politics. The most basic courtesy we can extend to 16 year olds is to trust them and give them the right to decide on us. I am happy to put myself out in front of 16 year olds if I have the honour and privilege to go forward for election any time in future. I wonder if other potential candidates can say the same.

**Senator Lynn Ruane:** I thank the Minister of State for his time this afternoon. I am delighted and proud to debate the Bill in the Seanad. I thank Senator Warfield for approaching me way back in July 2016 to co-sponsor the legislation. The right to vote is the most fundamental right a citizen in an active democracy wields. As legislators, it is our responsibility to support and encourage all of our citizens to engage in democracy at all levels. I support strongly the empowerment of young people in all areas of public life.

Irish people between the ages of 16 and 18 have a valuable contribution to make to the State culturally, socially, economically and, indeed, politically. Young people are hugely impacted by political decisions. Decisions made in the Oireachtas around education, employment and infrastructure will impact on the young most of all because it is their future for which we legislate. Under our current laws, however, they are excluded from political decision-making which is why the Bill seeks to make a change. Local government in Ireland is the most accessible form of democracy for young people. Councillors are engaged in their local communities and are familiar to our young people who deserve to be given the chance to elect them. At this critical juncture, we need now more than ever to engage young people in the debate over the future of the European Union. That is why we have tabled this important Bill and it is why we are pressing it further through the Oireachtas.

While the amendments were ruled out of order, I want to speak to them to highlight what their true intention was in terms of Fianna Fáil putting them forward. First, I want to comment briefly on the turnout at elections. It is an odd thing to say a certain demographic should not have the vote because we do not have a turnout in a particular group. If so many 18 year olds do not vote, should none of them vote? If people from a certain demographic, perhaps with low socio-economic backgrounds, have a low turnout, maybe we should take the vote off them all. Just because everyone does not vote, one does not exclude the ones who want to and will, hopefully setting an example for their peers and their friends to follow suit.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Gerard P. Craughwell):** I have given the Senator a fair amount of latitude. She should be dealing with the section not the individual amendments.

**Senator Lynn Ruane:** Everyone else spoke to the amendments. Senator Murnane O'Connor spoke to the amendments.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Gerard P. Craughwell):** The Senator is specifically outlining one after the other. The section is what is up for discussion and the amendments have been ruled out of order.

**Senator Lynn Ruane:** Why?

**Acting Chairman (Senator Gerard P. Craughwell):** I cannot speak for the last Chairman. I have only been in the Chair for the past few minutes.

**Senator Paul Gavan:** The Chairman spoke to the amendments. Is it one rule for Senator

Ruane and one for the Acting Chairman? That is poor.

**Senator Lynn Ruane:** Speaking to the section, the Bill is not going to be supported by Fianna Fáil in one way or another. It is Fianna Fáil policy but I could have torn its amendments apart. It has had 12 months since we last dealt with this, when its members said they needed time to go through the Bill. I wonder what Fianna Fáil has been doing for the past 12 months so that its members cannot consider a Bill that is only a few lines long. The youth wing of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil are good enough to go out on the streets to canvass, fundraise and knock on doors to get people to vote for them but they are not good enough to cast a vote. I do not understand what the parties are afraid of and I ask Fianna Fáil, now that their amendments have been ruled out of order, to support the Bill and continue with their promise to reduce the voting age to 16 in local and European elections in 2019.

I remind the House that Senator Murnane O'Connor said, "We support the principle of the Bill but we believe that the proper scrutiny should take place before it goes to Committee Stage." That was a year ago and surely that has been enough time for proper scrutiny. Senator Davitt said, "Fine Gael can discuss whatever it wants to do, for example, sending this matter to a committee, but I do not know why that needs to be the case." However, that is exactly what the party proposes to do today. Senator Wilson said:

[W]hen we resume after Christmas. I give a commitment to this House that if this matter is not put on the agenda by the Government, I will table it on behalf of the Fianna Fáil Party.

The party, however, tabled two amendments designed to weaken the legislation and delay this crucial Bill. In the last debate, Senator Horkan said:

I do not want anybody in this Chamber to say Fianna Fáil is not in favour of implementation of this proposal in the fullness of time. We absolutely want it to happen.

However, the party tabled amendments designed to set up a committee with no time limit, and which would clearly not have allowed Fianna Fáil's own manifesto commitment to be realised.

All I ask is that Senators in this House stand by the statements they made the last time we debated this Bill. We have already been forced to wait 12 months due to a Fianna Fáil amendment stalling the Bill as they attempted to support lowering the voting age while delaying every attempt to make it happen in practice. Let us not do that again. Let us empower our young people to participate in politics. We can do it today. We do not need a special committee to write a report telling us what we already know, which is that the strongest and most vibrant democracies are those that include all citizens, young and old. I strongly oppose any more delays to this Bill and I urge Senators to support it.

**Senator Colette Kelleher:** I commend Senators Warfield and Ruane for bringing this Bill forward. Democracy, as we have known it, is under threat. Governments are out of touch with their citizens and the gap between the citizen, particularly disenfranchised groups such as 16 year olds and 17 year olds and others who are marginalised or not heard, and their governments is fertile ground for the activities of the likes of Cambridge Analytica and its paymasters in the UK, the US and elsewhere. It is truly disturbing.

Having a committee in order to kick this Bill into touch is exactly the kind of antic which turns ordinary people off because they have no idea what it means. They do not know what

happens in such processes and they see whatever comes out at the other end as just delaying the Bill. We need to find ways of combatting the manipulative, shadowy forces which are at work and to act urgently to make governments, including our Government, connect to the citizens they seek to serve. One of the changes needed is to expand the franchise and to ensure that everyone is truly heard. That is why I am supporting the vote at 16 Bill today. Let us remember the people who will be given new voting rights if this Bill passes are often already old enough to drive, and until recently to get married, to join the Army and pay income tax. The current state of affairs is taxation without representation, which is something we are all supposed to be against.

If we reflect on the decisions made in these Houses over the past decade, it becomes abundantly clear that the voice and input of young people were absent and that young people bore the brunt of the great recession, as well as the one before it. Their views, their perspectives and their realities were not reflected in these Houses and we were out of touch with them. The ESRI states that one quarter of young people suffer from at least three of the following: income poverty; unable to afford basic goods; financial strain; poor health; mental distress; poor housing; overcrowding; neighbourhood problems; mistrust in institutions, including this one; and lack of social support or feeling safe. In 2012, youth unemployment was over 30% and while the Government has made great progress, today the rate is still twice what it was in 2007. Some 16,000 young people are still long-term unemployed and 90% of them said that being unemployed had had a negative effect on their sense of well-being.

To add insult to injury, jobseeker's allowance for young people was cut from €188 to €100, an act of unforgivable blatant age discrimination. With average room rents of €80 per week, and maybe more, thousands of young people are left with €20 to survive. Those in work face the exploitation of zero-hour contracts or often dangerous food delivery-type jobs. I look in horror at young people on the back of bicycles delivering pizzas and takeaways to the well-heeled. Very often they have no sick benefit if they fall off their bike and injure themselves and that is a huge dereliction of duty which disproportionately affects young people aged 16, 17 or upwards. This is the gig economy.

In this House there is the blight of the unpaid internship, which happens all over the place. Those who wish to study now pay the second highest fees in Europe and significant indebtedness is now the norm for young people. Care leavers have been left to drift with no support and millennials are the first generation to be poorer than their parents since the Great Famine of the 1840s. Security of tenure in housing and affordable housing, let alone owning a home, is beyond the wildest dreams of younger people these days. The least we owe young people is a say, a vote and a voice so that we do not make the mistakes that put young people in that position.

Reducing the voting age could be truly transformative as it is real political reform which would lead to meaningful change, especially at local level. A lot of 16 year olds and 17 year olds are still living at home and it would be transformative in their own communities. I hope we are not too late for the 2019 local elections and we need to act now, support the Bill today and reject any attempts to delay, committees or otherwise.

**Senator Paul Gavan:** The first thing that strikes one about the Bill is that it is very simple and short, with only eight or nine lines in it. It is very clear and states that a person shall be entitled to be registered as a European elector in a constituency if he or she has reached the age of 16 years and if, on the qualifying date, he or she was ordinarily resident in that constituency and is either a citizen of Ireland or a national of a member state other than the State. In most

circumstances, they would be allowed to vote in European or local elections. Given that it is such a simple and straightforward Bill, it is strange that both Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil said we need to wait, perhaps for nine months, to think about it. That is about a month for each line. We have done that now and I hope we can demonstrate to the young people in the Gallery, who are all welcome, that we are here to legislate and not to procrastinate.

We are here to support this simple Bill, which, in theory, all political parties are apparently in favour of. I have here the Fianna Fáil document, *Engaging the Future*. Perhaps it should be called “Engaging the Future In the Future” or “Engaging the Future, but Just Not Now”.

In fairness, there is a very good lesson here for the young people in the Gallery. This debate demonstrates how pitiful politics can be at times. I am referring to Fianna Fáil, which tells people that it is in favour of the Bill, but not today. Its document states that it wants to legislate so that young people aged between 16 and 18 can vote in local and European elections next year. We have discovered today that what it really wanted to do was set up a committee to look into the issue in the fullness of time. That is the phrase I use when my son is asking me for a new phone. We know what it means.

Luke Casserly, a member of the Irish Second-Level Students’ Union, wrote to me. He made the case much more eloquently than I could in terms of why we need to support the Bill. He said:

I support the lowering of the voting age because I feel we need to empower young people to become actively involved in civic engagement and the political process. I truly and honestly believe that there has never been a time when young people were so impassioned and engaged in their society. Mental health, disability awareness, the eighth amendment and so many more issues prompt young people to write articles, start petitions and take to the streets. It is time to empower these young people and respect them to the degree that we allow them to be equal to everyone else in Ireland.

That is all we are looking to do today. It is a shared Bill between civic engagement and Sinn Féin and we know we have the support of the Labour Party and a range of Independent Members on the issue. According to their policies, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil are in favour of the Bill. Let us not make a show of the Chamber today. Let us do what all of us know is the right thing to do, namely, support the Bill on Committee Stage, move it forward and ensure that the people in the Gallery and tens of thousands of others like them have the right to vote this time next year. It is that simple. Let us do the right thing today.

**Senator Frances Black:** I welcome the Minister of State and I also welcome the young people in the Gallery. I want to speak briefly on the section. I wish to express my disappointment that an important measure may end up being long-fingered. Senators Warfield, Ruane and Mac Lochlainn have done great work in getting the Bill to this stage and they outlined very clearly why the measure is needed. I want to offer my full support. This is a positive and progressive step to expand and improve our democracy and I would not like to see it being delayed.

When we debated this issue in March 2017, it was agreed that the Bill would be paused for nine months to allow Senators and parties more time to deliberate on it. There was a lot of support for the idea in principle across the Chamber, which was fantastic. We were given the space to hear the arguments, look at the details and be ready for the Bill to return today. Approximately one year later, it appears as though the Bill will be needlessly stalled again. How

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many of those looking to delay the Bill actually used the time available to reach out to young people and youth organisations? In the nine months granted to look at this issue, did anyone sit down with the National Youth Council of Ireland, Foróige, students' unions or the Children's Rights Alliance to hear how the Bill could help to boost youth participation? We owe it to young people to take this issue seriously and I urge my colleagues across the House not to delay and cynically kick this to touch until after the next local elections.

The proposal was discussed at an Oireachtas committees as long ago as 2010. The Constitutional Convention debated and supported the proposal in 2016. That is why the Bill is before us today. There have been years of discussion. I urge colleagues to support the Bill. I appeal especially to Fianna Fáil Senators to support it. In 2017, Fianna Fáil produced a manifesto which explicitly promised to lower the voting age from 18 years to age to 16 in time for the 2019 local elections. It is only right that this promise be kept.

We often speak about youth disengagement from politics and the lack of trust in formal democracy. Political parties failing to live up to clear promises is a root cause of this problem. We cannot say one thing and do another. If we do, distrust in the system is an obvious response.

Young people are interested, capable and want to participate. Ireland can join a growing number of European states, including Austria, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Malta and Norway, which have implemented or trialled a voting age of 16 years. In particular, the enthusiasm and record turnout level of the UK's first 16 year old voters in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum showed what can be achieved when we trust and empower young people. In response, the European Parliament officially backed voting at 16 years of age for the first time and urged member states to consider it for the 2019 European elections. We now have the opportunity to be ready for 2019 and to allow young people across Ireland to vote in local and European elections. I urge colleagues to support the Bill.

**Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell:** I welcome the Minister of State. I want to tell the young people in the Gallery that I am the only Independent Senator in the Seanad. Every other Independent Senator is part of a group. Within that group, there is a tendency to speak for, with, by and around the group. I am a completely Independent Senator and not, as somebody in Sinn Féin tried to point out, a person who cannot speak for herself. That was co-ordinated into speaking against Sinn Féin because that is the way we all work in here. It is not true.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Gerard P. Craughwell):** The Senator should speak to the section and leave the teachers to teach the students.

**Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell:** It is very important to state the case of which one is certain. I find the level of unhappiness and joylessness here fascinating. It appears that if one does not get the vote at 16 and 17 years of age, life will never be the same. In some ways there is a lack of joy here.

I say a resounding and echoing "No" to the vote at 16 and 17 years of age. It is fine at 18 years of age. Four or five years ago, some of those in the Gallery were 12 years of age. I am against the proposal.

I received lots of brilliantly written emails from many students during the week. I am not really interested in what happens in other countries. One of the greatest weaknesses is when we copy other countries. We should be entirely independent in the way we do things. We are also not a students' union and do not think like one. We are the Upper House of the Oireachtas and

we have to think about the common good.

I suggest that students stay away from politics. It is quite sacrilegious of me to say that. I suggest that, instead, they should get on with the creative and imaginative things I know they are brilliant at and continue to get on with their education, travel, arts, romance, music, expression and sport.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Gerard P. Craughwell):** The Senator is really pushing the boat out.

**Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell:** I know.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Gerard P. Craughwell):** I already told Senator Ruane to maintain the line.

**Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell:** I am just about to conclude. When one is young, one should get on with youth.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Gerard P. Craughwell):** I have already told one Senator that she has to stick to the section. Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell has had quite a lot of latitude. She should stick to the section.

**Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell:** I am against the vote for those aged under 18 years. The Bill will not get my vote. I will not circumvent that. I am against it and I will not be going to a committee or believing in committees. I advise the students to stay away from politics and get on with their lives because they can create their lives quicker than they think when they are over 18 years of age.

**Senator Fintan Warfield:** I was going to suggest that the Senator speak through the Chair-----

**Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell:** I was speaking to the section.

**Senator Fintan Warfield:** -----in line with Standing Orders.

**Senator Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** I strongly support the Bill because of my direct experience. I had hoped Senator O'Donnell might be able to stay for a few minutes.

**Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell:** Sinn Féin thinks I have no sense of independence. I am not going to stay and listen to that.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Gerard P. Craughwell):** The Senator should have a little respect for the speaker.

**Senator Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** Perhaps the Senator can read the transcript later to see what I have to say.

A number of years ago the Donegal Youth Council was established. If the Minister of State speaks to his colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy McHugh, he will discover that he was one of the people who advocated the council back in the day. It has been a tremendous success. Students elected their representatives from various secondary schools across the county onto the youth council and then those councillors attended local area council meetings and submitted to us the issues of concern. It could have been mental health, supports around drugs or, as often

was the case, resource centres. These were issues that were pertinent to young people, and the issues they brought to our attention as councillors came from their fellow students. I am immensely proud of it, and every time I engaged with their elected councillors I made it clear to them that they did not come to us as anything other than equals, that they had a mandate, just like we did, and that they had a right to put their issues on the table and then come back in a number of months' time to see whether those issues had been addressed. That is an excellent model. Those young people in secondary school are engaging with the political and democratic process. They are realising that they have rights and the capacity to raise those rights and to ensure they are acted upon in their community. It was empowering. It was the right way to go.

I found myself a number of years later watching the young people take part in the debate on the independence referendum in Scotland, discussing whether or not they would vote for independence. It was the first time, as the Minister of State knows, that 16 and 17 year olds had the ability to participate. I found it inspirational to see these young people so well informed on such a huge, profound issue as the future constitutional position of their country and arguing either side of that debate. We must stop patronising young people. We must stop talking to them as if we know what it is like to be a 16, 17, 18 or 19 year old. I am 44. I am totally disconnected from these matters. People say I am young. I am not young; I am middle-aged.

**Deputy John Paul Phelan:** It is the beard.

**Senator Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** I do not know what it is to be a young person, to grow up in the social media age, to be bombarded with imagery of what one should be, what one should speak like or how one should dance or any of those things, just like the middle-aged people in my time did not know what it was like when I was a teenager.

The Minister of State is a thoughtful guy. I have always thought so in all my times engaging with him. I ask him to look at the potential of this in the context of the local and European elections next year. Imagine the exciting opportunity it will present to engage with these young people I have seen who have continued to be elected in my time and since in the local authorities in Donegal and all across the country, because of course these frameworks are replicated across the State. This is a really exciting opportunity to say to young people who are finishing their secondary school education, who have been through their transition year, who are thinking about their future, going into college and what they are going to do with their lives, that they can now participate in the process of local government and European elections. I hope they will elect Deputies and Senators at some stage in the future.

**Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** They cannot vote in general elections.

**Senator Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** I said "in the future".

**Acting Chairman (Senator Gerard P. Craughwell):** Senator Murnane O'Connor, please.

**Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** I need to come back in on that point.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Gerard P. Craughwell):** The Senator will have her opportunity.

**Senator Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** I said, just to calm-----

**Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** I heard what you said.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Gerard P. Craughwell):** Senator Murnane O'Connor will have an opportunity to contribute. I ask her to let the speaker finish.

**Senator Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** To calm Senators down, I said "in the future". There are many things for which we have aspirations for the future, but today we are debating the local and European elections and the ability of young people to participate in them. Senator Murnane O'Connor, if you ring your colleagues on Donegal County Council this evening and ask them what they think of the Donegal Youth Council, what they think of the calibre of the young people on it who have now gone on to be leaders in their own right in society-----

**Acting Chairman (Senator Gerard P. Craughwell):** I ask the Senator to address his comments through the Chair.

**Senator Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** Of course. I was interrupted.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Gerard P. Craughwell):** That is fine.

**Senator Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** The Acting Chairman will appreciate why I responded. I will just say that this is an opportunity for us in this Chamber to stop patronising young people, to involve them in a real way in the political process and, perhaps, God forbid, to capture the imagination of young people across the State and, in a tangible way, empower them to be involved in who represents them at local and European elections. These are our future - there is that word again - leaders. Let us stop patronising them.

**Senator Grace O'Sullivan:** I am delighted, on behalf of the Green Party, to support the Bill brought forward by Senators Warfield and Mac Lochlainn and the Civil Engagement Senator, Lynn Ruane. It is perfect timing for the people of Ireland who are 16 years of age. I have full confidence in their ability to process information and vote in European and local elections. The school years of transition year, fifth year and sixth year are a perfect time to bring our young people of Ireland into the whole process of voting. Therefore, I cannot understand why Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael will stop this process or why, as some of my colleagues have said, they will kick it to touch and throw it back into another committee. What exactly is the problem?

I believe in the people of Ireland, the students, those involved in so many different committees, those who campaign and go out door to door canvassing for different parties and Independents at the age of 16 and those who went out around my home town of Tramore - my own daughters, in fact - at the age of 15 and 16, canvassing for marriage equality. I urge the House to give the people, the students, those at the age of 16 the choice and the chance and allow them to vote in the European and local elections. I really do not understand what some Members' problem is. The Green Party fully supports this legislation, and I hope Fianna Fáil will consider its position and support it also.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Gerard P. Craughwell):** The Minister of State has kindly agreed to allow two speakers who have spoken before to come back in. Senator Murnane O'Connor is first.

**Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** A political battle was made of the Bill today, particularly by Senator Ruane. I actually complimented them all on this issue they are bringing forward. I was a councillor for 18 years and worked with young people. I am a mother of four children. I canvassed from a very young age so I know exactly what I am talking about and I represent everyone. Senator Ruane asked whom we are representing. I have just given statis-

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tics of elections I have gone through. I fought five local and general elections. I do not know whether you have ever been through any such elections. Have you fought a local or general election, Senator?

**Acting Chairman (Senator Gerard P. Craughwell):** I ask Senator Murnane O'Connor to address her comments through the Chair.

**Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** I am just wondering, for clarification, as someone who has gone through elections and canvassed-----

**Senator Lynn Ruane:** I vote. This is not about running for election.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Gerard P. Craughwell):** No-----

**Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** Yes it is.

**Senator Lynn Ruane:** It is about voting.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Gerard P. Craughwell):** Senator Ruane-----

**Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** I brought up elections as an example, where you went-----

**Acting Chairman (Senator Gerard P. Craughwell):** Senator Murnane O'Connor, please.

**Senator Lynn Ruane:** This is about voting.

**Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** I just want to clarify-----

**Acting Chairman (Senator Gerard P. Craughwell):** We are not in the business of allowing cross-----

**Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** Absolutely. I am just clarifying-----

**Acting Chairman (Senator Gerard P. Craughwell):** -----so I ask the Senator to address her comments this way.

**Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** I just want to clarify. Fianna Fáil supports a referendum in 2019. We will support 16 and 17 year olds in general elections, local elections and European elections. As a mother and as someone who has worked with the public for 20 years and with ógra and other groups, I will 100% support them. That is not the issue. I have said we in Fianna Fáil will work with this. We have made such a commitment in our manifesto. However, we feel that a general election is every bit as important as local elections and European elections and we will get the three together and deliver this to the 16 and 17 year olds in Ireland. I hear Sinn Féin-----

**Senator Paul Gavan:** In the future, not now.

**Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** -----going on about this, that and the other and that everyone is against them. That is not true. Fianna Fáil supports a referendum in 2019. We will support a referendum to get the youth of Ireland to vote. I am giving that commitment. I was a councillor for 18 years and have been a Senator for two years. I knocked on doors from the age of 14 or 15. I will always work with Ógra Fianna Fáil and always have. Like everyone else here, I have gone into schools and given talks supporting politics. There is no point play-

ing the blame game here. How does Senator Ruane know when a referendum will take place? We have said that we will put this to the people in a referendum. We will support young people having a vote in local and Europeans election. I will go back to my party today and clarify that point.

**Senator Paul Gavan:** Senator O'Connor could give them rights today.

**Senator Lynn Ruane:** I will say it again. Fianna Fáil does not support 16 year olds voting in the 2019 local elections. If it did, it would support this Bill today. Having a referendum next year does not fulfil their manifesto promise for a vote in local elections in 2019. Holding a referendum next year does not fulfil the manifesto. By the time the referendum happens and legislation is enacted, the local elections will be long over.

**Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** How does Senator Ruane know that?

**Senator Lynn Ruane:** Senator O'Connor should look at the timeline. We have actually spent the past 12 months looking at this issue, unlike Fianna Fáil, which needed 12 months to look at absolutely nothing.

*(Interruptions).*

**Senator Lynn Ruane:** It is true. I never engage in party rivalry, but it is not fair to stand here and list off commitments for general elections. Being involved in politics is not about standing for election. That is for a very small minority of people in this country. I wish to counteract the patronising contribution that addressed young people a few minutes ago.

**Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** I want it clarified that it was not me. Senator Ruane must clarify that.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Gerard P. Craughwell):** Senator Ruane.

**Senator Lynn Ruane:** I am not referring to Senator Murnane O'Connor. I said "a few minutes ago". Senator Murnane O'Connor will not give people the vote at 16, but people in this Chamber will interrupt all day, like children. They will not wait for their turn to speak.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Gerard P. Craughwell):** Please, we are trying to have a debate here. We cannot have it if we shout at one another. All comments must be directed at the Chair.

**Senator Lynn Ruane:** A few minutes ago, we heard Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell discourage people from getting involved in politics. That is such a negative message to send to young people. It comes from a position where politics does not affect one's life very much. However, if someone comes from a background like mine, where political decisions to which people do not have access literally shape the environment without them being able to contribute to it, politics is very important. I learned that at a very young age. Maybe if one has the ability to focus solely on one's hobbies or education, then politics seems like some sort of luxury but for people who are outside the loop of politics, without access to some of those things, politics is what will decide their fate for ever more. It will determine if they are able to access education in the first place. It will determine whether they have a sports ground on which to pursue the hobbies Senator O'Donnell talks about. We do not have the same access, and politics was very important to me.

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When I was 13, I remember standing out on a street after my friend was knocked down by a bus. We had experienced a few deaths leading up to that incident. There were no ramps on that road. It was the first time I felt really exercised and conscious that I needed politicians to do something. We needed ramps, and we protested for three days. The protest was made up of children. There was not an adult, 18 year old or 25 year old in sight. We were aged ten, 11, 12 or 13 years old, and we barricaded that ring road for days until somebody put ramps in to stop children from dying on it.

Young people need to be able to have a say in their community. We, the young people, got those ramps built. In the schools, we got the uniforms changed for those who did not want to wear skirts. My 11 year old is educating her class in school on the issue of trans people's rights. I would trust her with my vote more than some people in this room, and they are elected. She is 11 years old. It is very patronising to tell me I should discourage young people from getting involved in politics. I know this is verging on a rant, but it really upset me.

Politics is about activism, involvement and community. It is about having a say and being heard. It is about being able to be part of a decision-making process. It does not mean being among the lucky few that get to stand in this House. We are the minority, and I reiterate that. Politics takes place across the country in many forms, at many levels. It is not all about elections or youth wings of parties. It is about people being enfranchised, empowered and able to make change in their own lives, their communities and their families. We should never ever discourage that.

**Senator Rose Conway-Walsh:** I do not want the time taken up to be an impediment to the passage of this very important Bill so I will forfeit my time to the Minister of State and hope we can proceed.

**Deputy John Paul Phelan:** I will try to address each of the Senators individually. It is indeed a short piece of legislation and I commend the Senators who produced the Bill, namely, Senators Warfield, Ruane and Mac Lochlainn, who is young, despite his protestations earlier as I was trying to interrupt him. The only interruption I made was to say that his beard makes him look young.

The Government and I support the reduction of the voting age to 16, but we oppose this legislation on the basis of the decision made last September to publish a list of upcoming referendums. One of these, on the eighth amendment, is to be held this summer. Two are scheduled for the fall of this year, on blasphemy and on the provisions in the Constitution regarding women, respectively. At the same time, there is the possibility of plebiscites in Dublin and Cork with regard to directly elected mayors. The next scheduled referendum concerns the reduction of the voting age, and this is due to coincide with the local and European elections in 2019.

I wish that I could say, particularly to the people in the Visitors Gallery, that it would happen sooner. I made a decision approximately 20 years ago, roughly around this time, to stand for local government. I was 19 years of age. My parents, friends and family thought I was absolutely mad, but it was the correct decision for me and I do not regret it for one minute. The Acting Chairman spoke about parties getting people involved. I joined my party when I was 15. I was not a fundraiser, but I was a leaflet dropper, canvasser and campaigner.

I commend most of the contributions. I could not disagree with much of what was said by Senators across the House. Senator Warfield mentioned 29 March 2017, when this Bill was on

Second Stage. The Government decision to outline when the list of eight referendums would be held was made on 26 September. We could all argue about the timing of different referendums, but the ones that are scheduled prior to the voting age are equally important measures.

One of the privileges I have, after spending nine years as a Member of this House, is the assistance of officials who help me in my role as Minister of State. I had their assistance in looking back at the results of the questions on the issue of voting age that were put at the Constitutional Convention. This Chamber, including the people who are watching and those in the Visitors Gallery, is not very reflective of what the convention said, if we are honest. It said that 52 of those who voted were in favour of reducing the voting age, 47 were not, and one person expressed no opinion. This is central to the legislation we are discussing. Overwhelmingly, the convention said that if the voting age is reduced to 16, it should be reduced for every election and not just for local and European elections. Some 68% of the members present at the Constitutional Convention favoured that and only 28% favoured what we are discussing today, a partial reduction.

**Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** The Minister of State took my spiel at the end.

**Deputy John Paul Phelan:** I have a little disagreement with Senator Murnane O'Connor. On the issue of this being put to a committee, I note that the committee has happened. The committee was the Constitutional Convention.

*(Interruptions).*

**Acting Chairman (Senator Gerard P. Craughwell):** We cannot have cross-floor engagement here.

**Deputy John Paul Phelan:** The next stage is to hold a referendum.

**Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** We need a referendum.

**Deputy John Paul Phelan:** To deal with what other Senators said in their contributions, I have spoken about what the Acting Chairman said. There are similar pieces of legislation in the Dáil on extending voting rights. I disagree with Senator Gavan in the sense that while his point about this being a simple piece of legislation is absolutely right, it is very fundamental because we are speaking about changing the register of electors on which every campaign and election is based. The last time this area was broached was in terms of electronic voting, and whatever we might think about the electoral process at times, the general public guards jealously the integrity of the process. I am not saying that increasing the register would necessarily compromise that integrity, but it would be a significant change and it is incorrect to describe it as modest or small.

Senator Boyhan said I should be aware of what is happening in Young Fine Gael. It is a long time since I was directly aware, I have to say.

Senator Black stated she was in favour of the Bill, but I want to point out again the Constitutional Convention, to which numerous Senators including Senator Black referred, specifically in its vote went against this proposal. Its point overwhelmingly was there should be a reduction across the board rather than just for European and local elections. There is an issue with regard to whether 16 should be the age. In principle I favour, as does the Government, the reduction of the voting age, but all of these numbers are arbitrary in a sense. Where did 18 come from origi-

nally? Why is it used for so many things now? What special status does somebody who is 18 have, that somebody who is 17 years and 364 days does not have? Lawmakers and legislators make decisions to draw a particular line, and 18, 16 or 17 are the ages at which certain coming of age events happen, such as getting a driver's licence and being able to have a drink, vote or enter a committed legally based relationship.

Senator Boyhan asked whether this had disappeared within Fine Gael or the Government, but it has not. The Taoiseach took office last summer, and in September the Government decision was this should be listed as one of the referendums to be held. As I have said, a number of other equally serious topics are to go to a referendum.

Senator Ruane gave one of the best speeches I have ever heard. I disagree with her on virtually everything in terms of her economic outlook, but with regard to her reasoning as to why young people should be involved in politics, I hope some people are watching what is going on in the Seanad and have seen what she said, because the decisions made here and at local authority level, mostly at local level, have such an impact on the lives of young people as well as those of older people.

I am not sure whether Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell is sometimes provocative. The point she was trying to make, perhaps, was that young people should not necessarily devote all of their time to party politics, but politics is a very different thing and she gave as fine a description of this as anybody could on ensuring the views of younger people are represented.

Senator Kelleher spoke about taxation without representation. Alas, it exists. Even for a right-winger, Fine Gaeler like me, I have long been a supporter of a points system for citizenship. Thousands of people in this country pay a lot of tax and do not have a vote because residency does not entitle people to a Dáil vote. They might have a vote in a local or European election if they are from the EU. The principle of taxation without representation exists, but I accept the other points she made. She spoke about zero-hour contracts and the jobs younger people do. There is legislation on changing the rules and outlawing zero-hour contracts, which is to be greatly welcomed.

Senator Grace O'Sullivan spoke about her family involvement in politics at 15 and 16. Other Senators have also spoken. The position is the Government has made a decision this referendum should be held in 2019. The reason we feel we cannot support this legislation is if 16 and 17 year olds have a vote in the next local and European elections in 2019 and the general public comes out and votes against it in a referendum on the same day, while it would not necessarily be open to legal challenge, because the Oireachtas has the power to legislate on the voting age in terms of European and local elections, it would just be wrong to have a situation where people who are 16 and 17 have a vote that day but the general public might say something quite different in a referendum. This is the position the Government is taking. I do not think it is kicking it down the road. I think it is a logical position for the Government to take.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Catherine Noone):** Senator Craughwell has indicated he wants to come in but everybody has already spoken on this.

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** A number of people have spoken twice. Unfortunately, I was not in a position to do this.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Catherine Noone):** That is why I am indulging the Senator.

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** I apologise to the guests I brought in for the condescending way in which they were spoken to by one of my colleagues. I trust them a damn sight more than I trust many of those my own age.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Catherine Noone):** Sorry-----

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** I apologise.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Catherine Noone):** Through the Chair please.

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** The Minister of State is one of the more progressive guys around here, and it must be absolutely gutting him to sit there, having read out what he just did-----

**Acting Chairman (Senator Catherine Noone):** We are on section 1 now, and we will keep the personal out of it.

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** Voting at 16 in local and European elections, if the legislation were passed now, would do two things. It would engage 16 and 17 year olds now. It would also give some statistical data to go on as to the overall engagement of 16 and 17 year olds. The Minister of State did not kick it down the road. He kicked it down the motorway so far I cannot see it any more. Promises of referendums are nothing but promises that blow in the wind. We make promises in here, in manifestoes and in all sorts of things all the time. This is a simple piece of legislation that would offend nobody, but perhaps it is scaring the living day-lights out of the traditional political parties who might have to face a young electorate in 2019.

**Senator Paudie Coffey:** Why so?

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** Why are they opposing it?

**Senator Paudie Coffey:** All the polls show our parties are going extremely well with young people.

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** This is good politics. It is good to engage young people. I taught young people for 25 years. They are an eye-opener. They are the leaders of tomorrow and the only way to get them involved is to get them young and keep them.

**Deputy John Paul Phelan:** Change that phrase “get them young”. It just-----

**Acting Chairman (Senator Catherine Noone):** Sorry, please.

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** Throw party caution to the wind. I ask the Minister of State to stand up again and tell us he has reconsidered this and he will go ahead and accept the Bill. He would do himself a massive amount of good, and perhaps even be Taoiseach in 2020.

Question put:

The Committee divided: Tá, 15; Níl, 18.	
Tá	Níl
Bacik, Ivana.	Burke, Colm.
Black, Frances.	Burke, Paddy.
Boyhan, Victor.	Butler, Ray.

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Conway-Walsh, Rose.	Buttimer, Jerry.
Craughwell, Gerard P.	Byrne, Maria.
Gavan, Paul.	Coffey, Paudie.
Humphreys, Kevin.	Coghlan, Paul.
Kelleher, Colette.	Conway, Martin.
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	Lombard, Tim.
Nash, Gerald.	McDowell, Michael.
O'Sullivan, Grace.	McFadden, Gabrielle.
Ó Céidigh, Pádraig.	Noone, Catherine.
Ó Donnghaile, Niall.	O'Donnell, Kieran.
Ruane, Lynn.	O'Donnell, Marie-Louise.
Warfield, Fintan.	O'Mahony, John.
	O'Reilly, Joe.
	Reilly, James.
	Richmond, Neale.

Tellers: Tá, Senators Lynn Ruane and Fintan Warfield; Níl, Senators Gabrielle McFadden and John O'Mahony.

Question declared lost.

## SECTION 2

Question proposed: "That section 2 stand part of the Bill."

**Senator Fintan Warfield:** We all think about local democracy, schools, communities and the young people who came forward calling for gun control following the mass shooting in the high school in Parkland in Florida. The latter group were taking on the most redundant stereotypes of young people as apathetic and stuck on smartphones and they were the adults in their community in that situation. They are in conversation around lowered voting ages across the United States.

Senator Bacik mentioned the Vótáil 100 events taking place this year and on 17 April the Seanad Chamber will play host to a debate among transition year students as part of the events. We would all support such an event and we should dwell on the irony of inviting young people to this Chamber as part of a suffrage programme while trying to deny them their suffrage. Young people are mature enough to debate societal issues in their Parliament but we are telling them not to come anywhere near us if they want voting rights or to truly have their say.

Senator Craughwell mentioned the promises of referenda but the referendum to lower the age at which a citizen can run for President was one of the greatest defeats of any referendum in the history of this State. If the Government really wanted to pass that referendum in 2019 it should pass this Bill today, and follow Malta's example, where they lowered the voting age for local and European elections two years ago and have now moved to lower it across all elections.

**Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** It is great to have a good debate and we are all making sure that 16 year olds and 17 year olds get to vote. It is time for the much-promised referendum on reducing the voting age to 16 or 17. We must look at the voting age in other countries. In Austria, only 16 year olds who are working can vote and in 2015, 16 and 17 year

olds in Scotland were granted the vote for local and Scottish elections. They had been allowed to vote in the previous year's referendum on independence, with a claimed turnout of at least 75%.

In many South American countries voting reforms were taken in tandem with education reforms. We must start with education and give the power of knowledge to our young people so that, one day, they might use it. We need to introduce political studies into primary schools and offer it as an exam subject in the secondary curriculum. I was delighted to hear of two primary schools in my constituency, Bennekerry national school and the Educate Together school, holding their inaugural student council meetings last week with students, aged between eight and 13 years old, elected by their peers. I am told that some of them could be budding politicians.

Our 16 year olds and 17 year olds are the future and Sinn Féin needs to realise that we all know how capable they are of voting.

We all have a different point of view, but we all know - and this has to be clarified in particular for Sinn Féin - that young people, 16 and 17 year olds, are capable to vote. This is why we say that our young people need to be encouraged, we need to help them and make sure we have conversations, and we need to educate them.

I am aware there has been some disappointment, which I can understand, but perhaps the Minister of State, Deputy Phelan will confirm a point for me. A referendum is supposed to be in line for next May; a referendum for young people of that age group of 16 and 17 to vote. Is this referendum going to happen? I guarantee that Fianna Fáil and I will knock on doors about this issue to make sure these young people will get the vote. We will then definitely look at local elections and European elections. The young people today deserve to vote in local, general and European elections. If Sinn Féin was of the same mind it would be making sure, from today, that the referendum is held next year. We in Fianna Fáil will work to make sure there is a referendum next year and that the young people of Ireland who are our future, our young budding Presidents, our young Taoisigh and our future Ministers will get the choice and they will be able to vote in the three elections.

*5 o'clock*

**Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile:** One cannot become President until the age of 35. This is an important point given what was said previously. I am aware that this issue was looked at in an earlier referendum, but in the spirit of the topic under discussion today it may be something we could look at moving forward.

I could reiterate nearly everything I said in my last contribution about the semantics of the aspiration to give young people the vote for local government elections but I will not. It applies right across the board. I am for giving young people the vote at the age of 16 in all elections. Sinn Féin brought forward a Bill in the last Dáil that sought to enfranchise all Irish citizens with a vote in presidential elections. Part of the Bill proposed to lower the voting age in presidential elections to the age of 16. Sinn Féin is consistent in this and we have put our money where our mouths are in the limited capacity we have in both Houses, to try to ensure people from the age of 16 have the right to be full and equal participants as we seek to tax them and seek to impose upon them laws that are created in this House, which would impact on their lives while we would not trust them to have a vote in return.

While I support the lowering of the voting age across the board, local government elections are probably the front face of politics and they are probably the level at which most people - not

just young people - engage with elected representatives. During this debate reference was made to the Youth Forum in Belfast, which does a fantastic job. It is very active and sometimes it puts the elected representatives to shame with the passion, energy, commitment and drive it brings to campaigns and important issues in the city. The Youth Forum really inspires me. There is a notion of *béalghrá* and platitudes towards young people. The previous contribution was one of the most dishonest political sentiments I have heard expressed in the House. The position is clear for all to see. It is on the record so I will not get into a back and forth with Senator Murnane O'Connor about it; to be honest I actually feel a wee bit sorry for her as a colleague. The Senator has been left in here to fight the so-called good fight on her own. It is telling as to where Fianna Fáil's heads are at in this regard that they cannot come in to stand by the Senator and to try to justify the stance taken today and previously.

I will now turn to the sentiment of the Bill. Young people should have the vote. It is right. I expressed this view earlier. Young people are energised and they are engaged on the political issues of the day, be it at international, national or local level. This Bill seeks to empower young people in the first instance at local government elections. I was 25 years of age when I was appointed as Belfast's youngest Lord Mayor. I think I was 20 or 21 when I first stood in an Assembly election in the North, for Belfast East, in 2007. Young people are engaged, they have been engaged and they will be engaged as we move forward. We have seen this over recent referendum campaigns in this State and I am sure that we will certainly see it in the upcoming referendum campaigns.

As I said earlier, it is about trusting young people. It is not about coming in to the House and giving it the tired old clichés or kicking it down the lane, as we have heard some Members profess. In the spirit of republican politics, this is about enfranchising citizens, empowering and enabling people and giving them a full and equal say in the life of their State and their politics.

**Senator Rose Conway-Walsh:** What we have heard today is highly disingenuous in respect of young people. It is insulting. I ask people to not insult the intelligence of young people. We speak about encouraging and helping young people but we are not listening to them. We are certainly not hearing them. They say that they do not want a referendum; they want to have the votes. We have the power to do that here and now, and we are not doing it. By not doing that we say to them that we do not trust or respect them - end of story. One should not insult their intelligence with a promise that something will happen in the future.

There is a practical aspect to people having a vote at the age of 16 and 17, especially in rural areas. If a young person goes on the electoral register at the age of 16 while he or she still at school and still at the home address, there is a better chance of that person voting as he or she goes through the life cycle. We should not be afraid of it but there is a fear. Why will people not change things? It is often because they are afraid of it. The fear comes from possibility that the *status quo* might change and the order of society might, in some way, change to cause discomfort to those who have all the power. As a mother of a 14 year old and a 16 year old it really disheartens me today to hear these are other young people being patronised around this issue. It is very plain and simple; young people should be trusted to vote and people should be encouraged to vote and have a say in their society. Otherwise one should forget about it and rather than giving them the words and they should simply be told it is not going to be done. One should at least be honest.

**Senator Paul Gavan:** The section is very simple. It proposes to extend voting for local elections. It is three lines in all. Once again, I ask Members to consider the fact that Fianna

Fáil and Fine Gael consider this Bill so onerous that they wanted us to wait nine months, nine months ago, for these nine lines of a Bill. Now they want to push the boat out again. They are very clear in saying to the young people “we are in favour of you having a right to vote, but just not yet”. This is the same as saying “until you are 18”.

I commend the Minister of State. While I disagree with the responses he has given to the House, I acknowledge that he has responded to all of the points made. This is a refreshing change. I smiled when the Minister of State described himself as a right-wing Fine Gael member. There is no other kind.

**Deputy John Paul Phelan:** Would that there were.

**Senator Paul Gavan:** I genuinely feel sorry for my Fianna Fáil colleague, Senator Murnane O’Connor because she has been put in here to defend the indefensible today. It is absolutely appalling.

**Senator Jennifer Murnane O’Connor:** I would-----

**Senator Paul Gavan:** The Senator contradicts what is actually in the party’s policy document, which commits Fianna Fáil to legislating for voting in the 2019 local and European elections. We have it in black and white. The party is “engaging the future” but not just yet.

I urge those young people who are here today to go out and tell people what happened here. Tell people which Members stood up for their rights, who did not and who played cynical party politics; they are sitting over there.

**Deputy John Paul Phelan:** I reiterate that we will oppose this section. I do not want to repeat the reason I gave initially but I will re-emphasise one of them. The whole basis for this discussion, and for the numerous Private Members’ Bills in both Houses, is the decision of the Convention on the Constitution with regard to reducing the voting age. The vote of the convention was 52 members in favour, 47 against with one abstention. I believe the flavour of the debate here has not been reflective of the public opinion. I do not share Senator Warfield’s pessimism that a referendum on lowering the voting age would necessarily be lost. He spoke about lowering the age at which a citizen can run for President, and other Members also referenced that. A proper campaign could be fought on that issue and people are free to make up their own minds on that question.

I would refer to the results of the vote on the subject of this legislation at the Constitutional Convention, namely, the splitting of voting ages with a different voting age for local elections, European elections and Dáil elections. The results of the vote at the convention were 68 in favour of a common voting age for all elections, 28 in favour of different voting ages for them and five abstentions.

I advise Senator Murnane O’Connor that the referendum that will be held this May is on the eighth amendment. The other amendment is to be held the following May.

**Senator Jennifer Murnane O’Connor:** Yes. The following May, in 2019.

**Deputy John Paul Phelan:** The proposal, as approved by the Government on 26 September last, is that a referendum on reducing the voting age and a referendum on reducing the time in which a person can get a divorce would be held together. I hope I am not coming across as patronising.

What Senator Mac Lochlainn said earlier about older people pretending to be younger and knowing what younger people want, struck a chord with me. I tend to agree with him on that. However, we have an onus to be honest with people. It would be unconscionable for any Government to vote now to reduce the voting age in marked contravention of the vote at the Constitutional Convention on this question which said that there should be a common voting age across all elections. There is also the possibility that a future referendum might overturn that decision. Whoever will be in government at the time will act to implement the result of any referendum on the voting age. I am sure the Oireachtas as a whole will act to do so, but until that referendum is held, to hold European and local elections, which would have voters of 16 and 17 years of age casting a ballot on the same day that the public might make a different decision would be completely unsatisfactory to say the least. I am not disputing the legitimacy of the arguments that have been made.

Senator Warfield spoke about the involvement of secondary school students. It is a matter of luck in terms of the year one is born and when one gets a vote. The age of 18 or 16 are arbitrary. There are plenty of 15 year olds who are interested. My political awakening happened when I was eight years of age and Garret FitzGerald signed the Anglo Irish Agreement. I decided at that age that I wanted to be a politician but I was a particularly weird child. My first vote was in the 1997 general election when I was doing my leaving certificate. The vote on the Good Friday Agreement, which took place very shortly after that, was my second vote and I was a secondary school student at the time. Even under our current system, secondary school students have a vote, but that is not the point. The principle is whether the voting age should be reduced. A decision has been made that this question should be put to the public in 2019.

Question put:

The Committee divided: Tá, 15; Níl, 20.	
Tá	Níl
Bacik, Ivana.	Burke, Colm.
Black, Frances.	Burke, Paddy.
Boyhan, Victor.	Butler, Ray.
Conway-Walsh, Rose.	Buttimer, Jerry.
Craughwell, Gerard P.	Byrne, Maria.
Dolan, John.	Coffey, Paudie.
Gavan, Paul.	Coghlan, Paul.
Humphreys, Kevin.	Conway, Martin.
Kelleher, Colette.	Feighan, Frank.
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	Hopkins, Maura.
Nash, Gerald.	Lombard, Tim.
O'Sullivan, Grace.	McDowell, Michael.
Ó Donnghaile, Niall.	McFadden, Gabrielle.
Ruane, Lynn.	Noone, Catherine.
Warfield, Fintan.	O'Donnell, Kieran.
	O'Donnell, Marie-Louise.
	O'Mahony, John.
	O'Reilly, Joe.

	Reilly, James.
	Richmond, Neale.

Tellers: Tá, Senators Lynn Ruane and Fintan Warfield; Níl, Senators Gabrielle McFadden and John O'Mahony.

Question declared lost.

**An Cathaoirleach:** As we have now exceeded the time allocated for this matter, I ask Senator Warfield to report progress.

**Senator Fintan Warfield:** I report progress.

Progress reported; Committee to sit again.

### **Ratification of UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: Statements**

**Acting Chairman (Senator Diarmuid Wilson):** I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, and invite him to make his contribution.

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Finian McGrath):** I am delighted to be here to discuss the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, UNCRPD, and I thank Senator Buttimer for the invitation. As many Members will be aware, the ratification of the convention has been a deeply held commitment of mine since I was appointed as the very first Minister of State with responsibility for disability issues. The very creation of this office signals a firm commitment by this Government to improve the lives of people with disabilities.

Today, 21 March, is World Down Syndrome Day. The day is significant in that persons with Down's syndrome have a third chromosome on the 21st strand, hence the chosen date of the 21st day of the third month. Later this evening, I will leave this House to launch a photographic exhibition organised by Down Syndrome Ireland. The theme of the exhibition, "What I Bring to My Community", encapsulates so much of my thinking regarding people with disability in society.

As a father to a daughter with Down's syndrome, this is an important day for my family and me. It reminds me of one of my primary reasons for being in politics, namely, to advocate for the rights, inclusion and well-being of all persons with disabilities. There has been some recent commentary and criticism suggesting that the ratification of the convention is a paper-based exercise or PR stunt or that it will not make any difference to people's lives. I assure Senators that if that were the case, I would not have pursued ratification so doggedly. The issue was so important to me that I made sure it was a part of the programme or Government.

People ask if ratification will make any difference to everyday lives. I firmly believe that it will. The purpose of the convention is to promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities and promote respect for their inherent dignity. To put it another way, the convention provides that people with disabilities should have the same rights as everyone else, and should be provided with the

practical supports that make that aspiration a reality.

Ratifying the convention signals our commitment to the ongoing improvement in the provision of disability services. In keeping with this principle, I recognise that there is always much to be done, including ratification of the optional protocol. Furthermore, while we have already made significant progress in reforming the law on decision-making capacity and participation in family life, there still remains some legislation to be enacted. I accept the points on that issue.

It was originally intended to introduce the deprivation of liberty provisions in the Disability (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2016 as amendments on Committee Stage. However, owing to the complexity and far-reaching implications of the proposals and in response to feedback, the Government decided it was better to deal with the issues separately. The provisions will now feature in a stand-alone Bill to be sponsored by the Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, and me. My target for the enactment of the legislation is the end of this year. A public consultation on draft heads of the Bill on this issue concluded on 9 March. I offer my sincere thanks to everyone who made a submission. A number of organisations have been granted an extension until mid-April, and I look forward to receiving these submissions in due course.

The central problem to be addressed by the new provisions is that existing legislation does not provide a procedure for admitting persons without capacity to relevant facilities in which they will be under continuous supervision and control and will not be free to leave. Existing legislation also does not provide a procedural safeguard to ensure that individuals are not unlawfully deprived of their liberty. The draft legislation proposals that I published for public consultation last December are designed to address this gap by providing safeguards for older people, persons with a disability and some categories of people with mental illness, to ensure they are not unlawfully deprived of their liberty in certain residential facilities. The development of these deprivation of liberty legislative provisions is a highly complex undertaking. In addition to satisfying the requirements of the UNCRPD, the provisions must also align with our obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights and existing legislation such as the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015 and the Mental Health Act 2001.

Other implementation issues that are required to meet our obligations under the UNCRPD will be addressed via the Disability (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2016, which is currently awaiting Committee Stage in Dáil Éireann. The Government has given the approval for the Bill to receive priority within the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel, and work is under way to progress the Bill for enactment by the end of the year, hopefully sooner.

The Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015 also needs to be fully commenced. A total of €3 million in funding has now been allocated in 2018 for the establishment of the decision support service, which will be the engine room in the context of the UN convention. There has been some commentary in recent weeks on the ratification of the optional protocol, which has not been ratified at this time. It will be ratified as soon as possible following the completion of Ireland's first reporting cycle. This will provide an opportunity to identify areas for improvement and any actions needed for a high level of compliance. While I accept that a commitment to ratify the optional protocol at the same time as the convention was given in the 2015 roadmap, my current focus as Minister of State has been on ratifying the convention in the first instance. This was to be the first step.

As I have outlined, the convention and the optional protocol cover a broad range of commit-

ments, some of which will require substantive cultural change. Indeed, an analysis of some 14 complaints brought under the optional protocol since 2010 highlights a range of areas that we are working hard to address, such as the deprivation of liberty and the right of deaf persons to participate in jury duty. Work is continuing on the final reforms needed for Ireland's compliance with the convention's requirements. For this reason, a phased approach is seen as the most practical and realistic way of moving forward.

The other question people often ask me about the convention relates to resources. This has been raised many times by my colleagues in the Seanad. I fully agree that to support people effectively in accessing their rights, the proper allocation of resources is a key consideration. As politicians, we need to be mindful of any changes in policy and resourcing that could significantly impact on everyday circumstances. For example, since the closure of the mobility allowance, the Government decided that the HSE would continue to pay an equivalent monthly payment of up to €208.50 per month to 4,133 people in receipt of a mobility allowance, pending the establishment of a new transport support scheme. Work on proposals for the replacement scheme is at an advanced stage.

I have always placed a strong emphasis on securing adequate funding, with €1.76 billion allocated by the Department of Health for disability services in 2018 representing an increase of 4.4% on 2017. Furthermore, in December 2017, following consultation with families and members of this House, I announced an additional €10 million in funding for respite care had been secured.

It is not just about funding. We need to focus on this point. We need to challenge attitudes and recognise the valuable contribution that persons with disabilities can make to our economy and society when supported to do so. We need to focus on ability rather than disability. In Ireland, we have strong equality legislation which prevents discrimination on the basis of disability. However, people with disabilities are still only half as likely to be in employment as others of working age. This is why we launched the comprehensive employment strategy in 2015. The strategy sets out a ten-year approach, ensuring that people who are able to work and want to work are supported and enabled to do so. There is a huge pool of talent in the disability sector. It includes commitments such as an increase in the public services employment target on a phased basis from 3% to 6%; special public service competitions, and the opening up of alternative recruitment channels; and the provision of an employment helpline, assisted by the National Disability Authority, NDA, to provide expert guidance and peer support to employers. These are concrete examples of how Ireland can fulfil its obligations under the convention. I note also that we are way ahead of some other countries that have already ratified the convention. This country has embarked on an era of unprecedented change in services for people with disabilities over recent years which means we are now ready to meet those obligations.

In July 2017, I launched the national disability inclusion strategy. It takes a whole-of-government approach to improving the lives of people with disabilities and contains more than 100 measurable and time-specific actions that relate to the areas of education, employment, provision of public services, health, transport, and personal safety and autonomy. The strategy and the robust monitoring framework supported by the NDA leaves us well placed to respond to the requirements of the convention.

In the context of living in the community, we will continue to implement Time to Move On to give those who currently reside in institutions the choice and control over where and with whom they live. Relevant to this is the programme for Government commitment to reduce the

number of people living in congregated settings by at least one third by 2021 and to ultimately close all such settings. At the end of 2017, there were fewer than 2,400 people living in a congregated setting, and this year the HSE intends to move 170 more out of these old-style institutions into the community and support them to live independently. The national housing strategy for people with a disability has been extended to support this objective.

Another key commitment in the programme for Government was the establishment of a task force on personalised budgets for people with disabilities, which I launched in September 2016. The task force has been asked to analyse approaches in other jurisdictions and recommend an approach and an implementation strategy for the introduction of personalised budgets in Ireland. This task force is an example of my thinking and belief regarding people with a disability that we must allow them to say how they wish to lead their own lives. It will be a core element in responding to some of the fundamental principles of the convention that we respect dignity, autonomy, independence and the freedom to make one's own choices.

**Senator Keith Swanick:** My colleagues and I obviously support the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This has the potential to be an important moment for tens of thousands of people living with disabilities in this country.

Ratification has been a long time coming and we have criticised the Government for delays on many occasions. Of course, ratification alone will not end the systemic discrimination that those with disabilities face day in, day out in this country. One should bear in mind that ratification coincided with the fifth anniversary of withdrawal of the mobility allowance for new entrants and we are still awaiting its replacement, even though I acknowledge the Minister of State said that the replacement scheme is at an advanced stage. For ratification to be meaningful in the longer term and to be prompt, we need to end this discrimination. It requires each and every organisation and agency to look at itself and how it treats persons with disabilities, and it fundamentally requires the Government to end structural bias in terms of accessing services from the State.

Ratification is a welcome step in the important journey towards equality. Ireland signed the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2007 and since then successive Governments have emphasised Ireland's commitment to proceed to ratification as quickly as possible taking into account the need to ensure all necessary legislative requirements under the convention are met. We are all aware, unfortunately, that "urgent" and "immediate" do not have the same meaning in the political world as they do in the real world.

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities follows decades of work by the United Nations to change attitudes and approaches to persons with disabilities. The UN continues to lead fantastic campaigns. For example, I am sure the Senators are all aware today is World Down Syndrome Day. It is a global awareness day when we, as a single global voice, advocate for the rights, inclusion and well-being of people with Down's syndrome. The convention is intended as a human rights instrument with an explicit social development dimension. It adopts a broad categorisation of persons with disabilities and reaffirms that all persons with all types of disabilities must enjoy all human rights and fundamental freedoms. It clarifies and qualifies how all categories of rights apply to persons with disabilities and identifies areas where adaptations must be made for persons with disabilities to effectively exercise their rights on areas where their rights have been violated and where protection of rights must be reinforced.

I take this opportunity to particularly commend the work of our colleague, Senator John

Dolan, in this regard. I heard Senator Dolan state he celebrated the ratification with a cup of tea, and importantly a biscuit, with his wife and daughter. No one knows better than Senator Dolan that this ratification, while fantastic, is only the beginning. There are complex challenges ahead of us all. I say “us all” because this is an issue not only for disability campaigners alone. This is a job for every leader, every party and every public representative.

**Senator Victor Boyhan:** I welcome the Minister of State.

I will not repeat what I stated previously about this issue but only say, “Well done.” It has been a huge personal ambition as well as a political ambition for the Minister of State to get the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities ratified. It has been a difficult road. I have been here and at other meetings where people have been critical. The Minister of State has been consistent. He has been patient. He has built the foundations and the bricks to something important which is really positive. I accept it was slow and disappointing and there were many setbacks along the way but I want to acknowledge, first, the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath’s work.

I want also to take a bit of time to thank a few people. I thank the disability advocates up and down this country who, time and time again, have waited outside the gates of Leinster House in the rain. They went all over this country. They campaigned with Senators, Deputies and county councillors. It is a great day for them.

I also acknowledge - Senator Swanick was right to say so - the work of Senator John Dolan and his background team, including Ms Doreen Magee, because the day I met Senator Dolan he spoke about this and the vision to get this done. Senator Dolan is a great advocate for the disability sector. Senator Dolan will be aware, from those he has dealt with, there have been many disappointments and setbacks but I think we can genuinely say we are now going forward, and I acknowledge that.

I acknowledge the work of Senator Mark Daly on his Irish Sign Language Act 2017 and what he did in terms of another strand of advocacy for the disability sector. I also acknowledge my colleague, Senator Martin Conway, for his work on the NCBI and his other work in terms of the visually impaired. Senator Conway has been a long-time advocate for the disability sector. He kindly received a large delegation I invited here some years ago from the Irish Guide Dogs for the Blind who were greatly taken by the fact that a Senator should take the time to invite them in, show them the House, explain the processes, and give them a sense that they could be empowered and lobby politicians. They really appreciate that. I salute Senator Conway and say that I, too, was an outsider coming in and I was very impressed. It is worth taking time out to thank people.

Finally, I thank a champion for the disability sector in Arklow, County Wicklow, Councillor Miriam Murphy, who has single-handedly advocated in the community and the local authority. She attends the local authority and experiences the great difficulties of being wheelchair bound, in terms of accessing her town of Arklow, her community and her council. As she herself would say, she has continuously been a thorn in the side of officials in terms of advocacy.

Councillor Murphy asked me to ask three questions and I will ask them for her today because I want to use my time for advocates rather than for what I think. What sanctions will there be if people do not comply? Can we be assured that every one of the 31 local authorities in this country will have a full designated disability access officer who will deal with the issues?

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I have heard of terrible stories where persons with disabilities have arrived to public toilets in local authority offices and been told the staff are sorry that the toilets are locked or there is no one available to facilitate them. This is unacceptable behaviour. Hopefully, we have moved past that situation.

Through his work as Minister of State with special responsibility for disabilities, will Deputy McGrath seek to have a designated, full-time, funded and resourced disability officer in each of the 31 local authorities? I do not want this to be an appendix to some other position or some other person who does something three days a week and does disability advocacy on the other days of the week. That is a really important question that Councillor Miriam Murphy asked me to put to the Minister of State today.

Social housing and special access housing is another issue. I am a member of the Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government and this issue has exercised us. We must be proactive on it. The Minister of State mentioned empowering people, independence, dignity, autonomy and the right to decide one's future. Those are key words. However, I also know people who have lived in congregated settings and who enjoyed living in such settings. The difference is that they do not necessarily wish to live in an old, run-down, institutional building. People get comfort from living in community. A person who has a disability and who has lived in care for many years might wish to continue to live in care. That must also be an alternative choice. I have visited people from a place which ended the congregated setting in south County Dublin. The reports are not good. I have met people who have been put in isolation in flats and bedsits. They did not have the supports. We might say it is institutionalisation but some people get comfort from being with one another. That is not a bad thing. Some of us like to live alone but it is all about choice. We should not rule out the need for a modern new approach for village or community living for people with disabilities.

I wish to mention a final area. In the disability sector, people somehow fail to realise that people have rights of expression, sexual needs and rights to be authentic as people. These are important fundamental rights. They are areas that people in the disability sector have spoken about to me recently. They are personal and intimate conversations where they feel in some way that they are not allowed to express themselves and that they are not valued and supported in that way. They feel dehumanised. They feel that somehow they are not valued if they talk about their needs over and above accommodation, education, a job or training. This is about respect, allowing people to feel authentic, secure and supported and expanding their horizons. Many people never got that opportunity. I am talking about a group of people in their 60s and 70s. There is still a lot of living for people in those age groups.

I thank the Minister of State. I realise this has been a personal journey for him and his family. He has been absolutely committed. He has had to broker many of the frustrations and to build consensus, including within the Government which is not always easy. The challenge now will be to have the money and resources he requires to set out his vision. I ask the Minister of State to pass on my thanks to his staff and background team whom I have met on many occasions. They have always been available and have been with the Minister of State consistently on this journey. Well done to everybody.

**Senator Martin Conway:** Like my colleagues, I welcome the Minister of State back to the House and congratulate him on the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It is a significant step forward in establishing the rights of people with disabilities.

I will start where Senator Boyhan concluded and acknowledge the backroom staff of the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, in particular Gerry Maguire and Damien O'Farrell, who have done great work in terms of bedding down what is a relatively new Ministry. We have not previously had a Minister at the Cabinet table with specific responsibility for disabilities. When the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, took up his position in 2016, there was high expectation that he would deliver quickly. Unfortunately, as with everything in life, big bodies move very slowly. It can be very technical and challenging. One could have the best heart in the world to get something done in a particular timeline but when one actually undertakes it one can discover complications, challenges and difficulties that might not have been anticipated. Anybody who has ever carried out a house extension or renovation will have discovered on commencing it that much more was required to get the product right than would have initially been tendered. I see that very much in the case of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. There were probably many technical issues that had to be ironed out. To get it over the line within less than 24 months of taking over that portfolio, given the fact that the process had been going on for so many years prior to that, is a significant achievement.

I see the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities as a mission statement, to a large extent. It is a very important one. Our country is saying that it will do what other United Nations countries are doing. Senator Swanick referred to Senator Dolan having a cup of tea and a biscuit with his wife and daughter to celebrate the ratification and the Minister of State jokingly asked where the champagne was. The champagne will be drunk when there are plenty of employment opportunities for people with disabilities, no problem with housing for people with disabilities, when they have no problems with access to services and when we can truly say in 2028, the date mentioned by the Minister of State, that this is a country that respects every one of its citizens equally.

I tend to look at the glass as being half full, although I certainly see that there is another half to go. Throughout my personal journey with disability, I have always tried to be positive and to advocate in a positive manner. I believe that works well. My good friend and colleague, Senator Dolan, does the same. Consider what this House has achieved with Senator Mark Daly's Bill on Irish Sign Language and the advocacy that is carried out by Members such as Senators Dolan and Mark Daly. We play a role in reminding the Minister of State that there is a significant amount of work to be done. We are getting there. We are all using our personal experiences to give leadership and to cajole and push.

I am clearly on the record in the Fine Gael Parliamentary Party as stating that I would prefer to see no tax cuts in the forthcoming budgets until such time as we get the key priorities right. These include having proper housing, not just for people with disabilities but for society in general, dealing with the hospital issues and until we have gone a long way to ensuring there is equality of opportunity and services. As a people we should not be looking for tax cuts. We should seek to leave the current taxes in place and if there is an increase in the budgets it should be diverted to areas where we now have a responsibility, given that we have ratified this UN convention. It will take hundreds of millions of euro to backfill the damage that was done to the disability sector as a result of the recession and the lack of investment prior to that. The Minister of State has my full support in terms of what I can do in my political party to push for the type of increased funding we need in the budget.

The mission statement is there. It is very welcome and we are all delighted. However, a mission statement is like the introduction in a book. We need to see the chapters. We must have proper employment. Increasing the 3% to 6% is a doubling of the target, but we should aim

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for 10% because 10% of the population have a disability. Some 10% of the workforce in the public service should be people with declared disabilities. That probably will not happen for a while but we should aspire to it. The task force on individualised budgeting established by the Minister of State is important. Many people have spoken about it. I honestly cannot say what is the best model to work from or to aspire to have but the task force can do that. I sincerely hope it will report within a reasonable period.

In conclusion, I was pleased to be asked by the Leader of the House to take the Order of Business on behalf of the Government on the day after the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was ratified. It was a recognition of me and my story, and the fact that there are other Members of the House who have their own stories, that it was appropriate for me to lead on behalf of the Government on that day.

I hope that is the first of many instances of leading for the Government in different capacities. The Minister of State is doing a good job. It is not an easy job because the expectations are enormous but he has a great opportunity to make history in this country. He is going about it the right way but there is still a lot of work to be done.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Diarmuid Wilson):** I note that there are six speakers remaining and the Minister of State must be called upon at 6.25 p.m. Consequently, I ask for Members' co-operation. Perhaps some people can consider sharing time, to give the Minister of State the opportunity to respond.

**Senator Rose Conway-Walsh:** I thank the Minister of State for coming into the House to discuss this important matter. I also thank him for his genuine approach and his obvious understanding of the need to support people with disabilities and to ensure they have the rights that many of us enjoy. I welcome the disability advocates and those with disabilities in the Visitors Gallery as well. I thank them for their interest and for all the work they have done and continue to do on this matter. I thank Senator Dolan for what he has done, along with many others, including Senator Conway. I am very heartened to hear Senator Conway, as somebody who is part of the party in government, explicitly stating that we need to put resources for both people with disabilities and people who are vulnerable within our communities before tax cuts for the wealthy. I wish him well with that, and he has our full support. He can always join Sinn Féin if they do not do what he needs them to do.

6 o'clock

**Senator Martin Conway:** I thank the Senator for the invitation.

**Senator Rose Conway-Walsh:** As well as all the advocates, I wish to recognise the parents of children with disabilities. They are the people I meet every day who struggle so much. They have to fight so hard on behalf of their children and when their children become adults with intellectual disabilities. We have to address this issue, and we have a huge responsibility. That is why I, together with my party, Sinn Féin, welcome the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, especially, as the Minister of State noted, on the happy occasion of World Down Syndrome Day.

Since 2007, when Ireland first signed the convention, we have argued both in the Oireachtas and outside it that it needed to be ratified without delay. This convention provides a framework to promote, protect and ensure the rights of all people with disabilities and promotes equal rights in all areas of life. These are the basic fundamentals that should be afforded to any per-

son in a decent and modern society, able-bodied, disabled or otherwise. While all agree the ratification of the convention is most welcome, I must stress that it is only the first step and I believe the Minister of State recognises that. The real measure of delivery of the rights that are contained in the convention will be in its timely and speedy implementation. We are fully conscious that a raft of legislation must be introduced, amended or enacted to afford the rights that are enshrined in this convention.

People with disabilities in Ireland have long suffered at the hands of not just the current Government but successive Governments. The phrase, “put your money where your mouth is”, is particularly relevant when it comes to disability rights in Ireland and I appreciate the Minister of State has addressed the issue of personalised budgeting. In his response, the Minister of State should indicate when that report will be completed because parents of people with disabilities are waiting for that report and for personalised budgeting. This is not just an issue of resources. We need to be able to track where the resources are going at present, and where they have been going. We have to make sure that they get to the people with disabilities and their families to improve their quality of life and increase their access. We cannot do that without transparency around where exactly the money is going.

In the 2018 budget there was little mention of the resources to implement the comprehensive employment strategy for persons with disabilities to which the Minister of State referred. People in receipt of disability allowance were afforded the crumbs off the table with an increase of €5 per week. Given the extra costs that arise for people with disabilities, €5 a week just does not cut it.

The rights that are afforded in this convention can only be delivered with the necessary immediate allocation of resources. This is especially relevant with regard to the ongoing preparation for the 2019 budget. It is important to discuss this issue today because, as Senator Conway and the Minister of State have noted, as we prepare for the budget, money must be ring-fenced to make sure that this ratification means something.

The convention will be rendered useless and the *status quo* will remain in place without these additional resources. I appeal to the Minister of State to not allow this situation arise and to not further fail persons with disabilities. We all know that travel on public transport can be a nightmare for people with disabilities. The email all Members received from two avid campaigners about their journey to Leinster House for the Dáil debate on this issue was the height of irony. In it, the sisters described how they left Greystones, County Wicklow in their wheelchairs and got on the 4 p.m. DART with no personal assistance. These are two women who have fought extremely hard for disability rights in Ireland. When their day had finally come, they described the effort required to be at Leinster House as being monumental. The Government has failed to show it really cares for children or adults with disabilities.

I must also raise the issue of respite care with the Minister of State. A response to a recent parliamentary question tabled by Sinn Féin revealed that the number of nights of overnight respite care provided to children and adults with disabilities has dropped by more than 22,600 in the past three years. We need to be straightforward and honest about what resources are available. Overnight respite is vitally important for allowing other responsibilities to be attended to and for the running of a normal household where a valuable member has complex medical needs. There is much more I could say on this. I trust the Minister of State. I trust that he is going to do the right thing and that we are going to see real, tangible changes. The changes must really matter to people of all abilities and people with disabilities. Funding must be provided

and must go where it is needed and most deserved.

**Senator John Dolan:** It is unfortunate that we have such a short time this evening for this debate. Given our late start, we have 60 minutes, with our time topped and tailed by the Minister of State. I ask that the Seanad might be able to extend or come back to this matter fairly soon. I thank the Minister of State for being here and the Leader of the Seanad for making sure we could have this early debate.

I have no doubt but that the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath's, heart is in the right place. I have no doubt but that the Minister of State wants very much to make it happen for people with disabilities. However, I do not have any trust in the national disability inclusion strategy. I set out my reasons for that on 26 September when we first had statements on this matter. This vehicle will not deliver what the Minister of State very clearly wants delivered. It will not do it. I critiqued it on that day and I can critique it again. I am happy to hear any other comments on it. The document before Members today, comprising three and a half pages, does not give me any solace that things have changed. I will use the word "trust". The Minister of State said he was let down and misled by officials in his Department. He said that publically a year ago. I put it to him last September; he did not respond to it. This document has no reference to ratification by the end of last year, even though it was published a month after the Taoiseach had committed to it. I disagree slightly with Senator Martin Conway in this regard, with respect. The Taoiseach intervened in the middle of June and said that even if the process had to be changed, it would happen by the end of the year. It happened in early March of this year. We will not quibble over that. He said that we had to change the process and it was changed.

I revert to the document before Members and the issue about the optional protocol. A commitment was given, and the Minister of State says that it would be met when the convention was ratified. It has now been changed. There is no rationale in this document as to why it has changed. We are doing it differently now. The Minister of State said that the optional protocol, which was to be ratified at this current time, will be ratified as soon as possible following completion of Ireland's first reporting cycle. When will the first reporting cycle be completed? When does the clock start? Has the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Coveney, gone to New York to sign the papers? Has the 30-day timeline started yet? It clearly has not. There are real issues here but no reason is set out as to why the optional protocol cannot be signed. This document comes from the Department of Justice and Equality. I suggest - I might be totally wrong about this - there is a divergence of view between that Department and the view and will of An Taoiseach. I do not wish to say this gratuitously but people with disabilities need an explanation, as do I. There is absolutely no reason why Ireland cannot now sign up to the optional protocol.

We need to get on with a number of practical matters very quickly. A budget is coming up. That budget, across all of the different Departments, has to have the smell, taste and bite of a budget that is about people with disabilities and their families and not just a package of this and that from one Department. Let us see, between now and the end of the year, if the pieces of legislation are put in place. I expect that the optional protocol can and should be dealt with now.

The Minister of State spoke about unemployment, and he mentioned it in his 2017 strategy. We are now two and a half years into the ten-year comprehensive employment strategy. The Minister of State's speech contained no figures to tell us how many people have been employed although we are one quarter of the way through the strategy.

He has spoken about people coming out of congregated settings. There are 1,200 people under the age of 65 in nursing homes in this country and that is a deprivation of liberty which does not require legislation to sort out. There were 3,919 people on the social housing lists in 2013. In 2016 it was 4,456. The number is going up. Poverty is increasing. There is no sense in this document of the scale of what has to be dealt with or a resolve to actually deal with it. I acknowledge we are told about a number of very useful and important initiatives.

I wish to correct the Minister of State when he stated, "To put it another way, the convention provides that people with disabilities should have the same rights as everyone else". That is incorrect. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of December 1948 stated that disabled people are the same human beings as anybody else. This convention intends to sort out something that has not been sorted out by states across the world for 60 years. It is about making the human rights of disabled people real, including rights to transport, employment, housing and education.

**Senator Joe O'Reilly:** I welcome the Minister of State to the House. We are unanimous in the view that he is doing a huge job and that he is truly committed to what he is doing. He believes in what he does every day and that is great. He paid two visits to my native county of Cavan. That gives me the context to ask him to comment on the progress of the Holy Family school in Cootehill, which is a very important facility for my county and to comment on his wonderful visit to Enable Ireland on the invitation of my colleague, Deputy Brendan Smith. On that occasion, he came to Enable Ireland and the point was made to him that there was a problem with waiting lists in the various sectors for professionals such as speech therapists and occupational therapists, among others. I am happy that the Minister of State got a 4.4% increase in his allocation, meaning that the budget for this year will be €1.76 billion for this year. That is progress.

I want to race through a few things that I believe are important. I know, from speaking to the Minister of State, that my words will not fall on barren soil. Living in the community is so important. Supports need to be there in terms of home help. We need to have a broad interpretation of home help because it is a bit narrow at the moment. It is important that meals are cooked sometimes and that physical support is available, including help with shopping and different activities. Sometimes the definition of home help is defined narrowly as only being available for the personal care of those who require it. Perhaps the Minister of State could look at that. I mention it because of my practical experience of things.

The carer's allowance remains important, and the increases are welcome but we need to continue to increase the allowance and to continue to make it attractive. I was glad to see that medical cards for people in domiciliary care were introduced. Any help we can give carers or persons looking after people, and any supports and services they can be given, should be provided.

I am anxious that the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act be fully commenced. It is very important, because for so long the opposite existed. Nobody in this House needs a lecture on that situation. We need to support people in defining their own sick care.

Supported housing is very important. We have much to do in that sphere. We need supported housing where people can live in a community with in-built support and with professional assistance available in so far as it is required, including care assistance. That is a really important thing.

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The housing adaptation grants for persons with disabilities are important. They have been embraced in Cavan and Cavan County Council has really made a success of that programme. However, there is still a waiting list and delays, and there remains a need for more resources in that area.

I do not believe that the employment quota system is working very well. It absorbs people who are ill or who have acquired disabilities within the institutions and it is not taking in any new people from outside. That really needs to be looked at and perhaps should be increased. It also requires a very proactive approach from the Minister of State, and perhaps heads need to be banged together on that one. I will discuss one personal case privately with the Minister of State concerning someone who has great potential to work very positively, who has been trying to get employment for a long time but it is like banging one's head against the wall.

I was happy to see that the Minister of State approved the Irish Sign Language Bill and I congratulate Senator Mark Daly on bringing that Bill forward.

The Minister of State is doing great work and we support him on it. I hope he will be in our constituency more often to give us more good news.

**Senator Maura Hopkins:** Like other Senators I welcome the Minister to the House today. We are all very clear that the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is a truly historic moment for us and it is great to see cross-party support for this ratification. However, it is only the beginning of a new journey.

I recently visited The Hub in Strokestown, which the Minister of State visited approximately one year ago. It is run by the Brothers of Charity and creates meaningful employment for people with disabilities. I also recently visited Triest Press in Roscommon town, which supports people with intellectual disabilities. I do not like to view them in that way. They are wonderful people who now have opportunities for meaningful employment and we need to see much more of that. It is very positive that €70,000 has been provided under a community services programme to support that company in respect of its high-tech digital centre and the services it provides.

I agree with Senator O'Reilly who called for increases for home help and home care packages. People need to live in their communities for as long as possible. It is absolutely crucial to support them in every way with home help and multidisciplinary team involvement. As an occupational therapist, I am very aware of the challenges in accessing timely and specialist rehabilitation. This is very relevant to people with disabilities. The evidence is clear that this access gives those people better outcomes. As a result, they have less disability and can lead more meaningful lives.

I do not want to see beds closed in the National Rehabilitation Hospital in Dún Laoghaire. I have spoken to the Minister of State previously about that and some beds have been opened. I want to see the rehabilitation unit in Roscommon County Hospital delivered as quickly as possible. It will serve the west of Ireland and will be linked to the National Rehabilitation Hospital in Dún Laoghaire. People need to have the best opportunities to lead meaningful lives and that means proper access to rehabilitation as inpatients and in the community.

**Senator Mark Daly:** I thank the Minister of State for outlining the issues and challenges involved in the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. While we are one of the last countries to ratify it there were many steps legally required for it

to be successful. There are many challenges ahead to fulfil all our aspirations for people with disabilities and for our society to ensure that they have the wherewithal to reach their potential in employment, social life and interaction with the State. Colleagues have pointed out all that needs to be done but this Government has not met all the targets set out in various strategies. We need to do more in the way of setting targets and ensuring they are met.

Part of the process involved in the recognition of the Irish Sign Language for the deaf community is ensuring that there are reviews of the implementation of the Irish Sign Language Act 2017. All too often we have passed legislation with good intentions, great ideas and aspirations on all sides but with no review to ensure that they are met. The Act ensures that members of the deaf community are equal citizens of this State, have access to all State services like any other citizens and are not suffering the extreme marginalisation described during pre-legislative scrutiny of the legislation by the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Justice and Equality. That is a huge step in fulfilling one of the elements of the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities.

**Senator Colette Kelleher:** It will be a matter of pride for the Minister of State to have the UN convention ratified. It is a wonderful accolade for a politician. I pay tribute to Senators Mark Daly and Conway and also to Senator Dolan, my colleague in the Civil Engagement Group. They will not rest till the option protocol is in place but, more importantly, until the necessary resources are provided to make ratification and the rights involved real. This has come home to me because the youngest member of my extended clan, a 15 month old grand-nephew, was diagnosed at eight months as having significant challenges. He is a wonderful smiling boy but his parents have been pulling, dragging and fighting to get a chair that allows him to live. As someone said to me, it is hard enough for them to face this challenge they did not expect but the chair should be delivered with a bow instead of their having to fight for it. Coming from the disability sector, I know that fight is ahead of them. This seems to characterise how we approach disability in this country. It is always a big bare-knuckle fight. I would like to think we could get beyond that.

I am glad to hear about the work on the proposals for the replacement scheme for the mobility allowance, which we talked about at the Joint Committee on Public Petitions. That is long overdue and involved more pulling, dragging and fighting. It should not have to be that way. Until such time as we have not just the good intention and the rights on paper but the resources that back them up and make them real, we will not be able to go beyond offering a cup of tea and a biscuit.

The report *Time to Move on from Congregated Settings* was published in 2011. I was with the Cope Foundation at the time and there were many people in congregated settings. It is shocking that we are pushing that deadline out to 2023. Those institutions were due to be closed this year. There are 1,200 people younger than 65 years living in nursing homes. They are being detained. We have to do better than this. It is great that we have ratified but we need the resources to make that ratification real.

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Finian McGrath):** I thank all the Senators for their contributions and for their support over the past two years since I was appointed Minister of State. I accept some of their valid criticism because ratification of the UNCRPD is a common goal which should unite us all, parties, Independents, civil society groups and stakeholders. We are all keen to see it ratified. We are dedicated to continuous improvement where equality and human rights are concerned. If I run out of time in responding

to questions, I will reply individually to Senators.

When I was appointed Minister of State almost two years ago, I set myself ten objectives. The first was to deal with the crisis of 18 year olds in the adult services. I had to ask the Minister and the Government to get an extra €31 million to deal with those day places for 18 year olds. The next issue was the restoration of the carer's grant to 101,000 families, at €1,700 per family. The third issue I moved on to was to provide medical cards for the 11,000 children in receipt of the domiciliary care allowance. Other issues I dealt with during the year include the €3 million for the disability support service, which is very relevant to this debate today and the increase of €10 in the disability and carer's allowances in the two most recent budgets, the €10 million for the ability programme for education and training of young people and an increase of €167 million in the HSE social care plan for 2017 and 2018. Members referred to the respite issue. In December, €10 million extra was allocated for respite care. The final issue is the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, UNCRPD. These are my objectives. Of course I have a lot more to do, and I intend to do a lot more. I have listened to some excellent ideas presented here today, some of which I will take on board.

With regard to the debate on the convention, if Ireland was fully compliant, we would not need a convention at all. That is the reality for people with disabilities. The disability Bill still needs to be enacted and it includes a range of provisions that are needed to improve compliance with the convention. These include amendment of the Juries Act, amendment of the Electoral Act to repeal the prohibition of persons of unsound mind from standing for election to the Dáil or Seanad, provisions to establish a monitoring framework involving the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission and the National Disability Authority, and amendments to increase the standards required for the provision of reasonable accommodation. There is also a proposal to increase public service employment of people with disabilities from 3% to 6% by 2024. I have listened to the proposals for the higher objective of 10%, which is a very concrete proposal that I welcome. Now that the priority draft has been approved for the disability Bill and it has been decoupled from the deprivation of liberty provisions, work is under way to bring it forward to Committee Stage as soon as possible.

A number of amendments that are mostly technical in nature will be brought forward on Committee Stage and I will ensure that appropriate arrangements are made for pre-legislative scrutiny of them. I want to talk to people and to listen to them. The aim is to enact the legislation by August 2018, and certainly not by the end of the year. The Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015 also needs to be fully commenced. This Act provides for comprehensive reform of the law on decision-making capacity that aligns it with Article 12 of the convention. It also provides for the setting up of a new body called the decision support service. This leads on to some of the points raised by Senator Martin Conway. The role of the decision support service will be to support decision making by and for adults with decision-making capacity difficulties. Key preparations are being put in place under the oversight of a high level steering committee. The recently appointed director of the decision support service is working in a determined way to get the necessary staff, resources, processes and IT systems, expert panels, codes of practice and regulation in place to get the service up and running as quickly as possible. I accept that there were delays in that regard, but an excellent director has been appointed and we are moving on to fill the other gaps.

Turning to the optional protocol, it is absolutely the intention to opt in and I can say this very strongly. I want to ensure, however, that progress is sustainable and to ensure the maximum benefit. Our time and resources in the initial implementation phase are being better spent on

improving the standards of services. These improvements, many of which have been flagged in the House today, are much needed.

It is my intention that the optional protocol will be ratified once we have completed the first reporting cycle under the convention. This will provide us with an opportunity to reflect and prioritise actions to achieve the highest possible level of compliance. With the ratification of the convention in place, I can now focus on using the convention - many Members are missing this point - to better equip and resource people with disabilities to improve their quality of life. Once we have this in the bag, we can use it to push forward. Ratification was a key commitment in the programme for Government.

Senator Dolan referred to the change of approach. Given the advanced progress that has been achieved towards compliance with the convention, and taking into account the remaining implementation requirements, the Government has decided that the State is now ready to become bound by the terms of the convention and become accountable under the UNCRPD. This is an important point. I am pleased to announce that Ireland's instrument of ratification was deposited yesterday with the UN Office of Legal Affairs. It will become legally binding in 30 days, which is 19 April.

**Senator Martin Conway:** Hear. Hear.

**Deputy Finian McGrath:** These are the issues, and I take on board the points raised by various Senators. I thank Senators Keith Swanick, Victor Boyhan and John Dolan, and also Doreen Magee and all the team. I also thank Senators Mark Daly and Martin Conway for their magnificent contributions. I also wish to acknowledge my advisers on disability issues, including Gerry Maguire, who is in the House today, and Damian O'Farrell, both of whom have been very supportive in helping me to drive this forward. I also thank Senator Rose Conway-Walsh. The Senator has always been very involved in disability issues. I absolutely agree with her and Senator Conway on tax cuts versus services and on the issue of parents.

I received a lovely email today from a group of parents who thanked me, but they also asked me not to forget the parents. We must also not forget the brothers and sisters of people who have disabilities. They make a massive contribution. I thank Senators John Dolan, Joe O'Reilly, Maura Hopkins and Mark Daly. I mentioned Senator Daly earlier with regard to the Irish Sign Language.

I know and appreciate that the people involved in this debate tonight care passionately about the rights of all people with disabilities. In order to make this a reality, we have to put the services in place. It is my objective to do this over the next couple of months. I will work very hard in the interests of all people with disabilities and their families.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Diarmuid Wilson):** I thank the Minister of State. This concludes our statements on the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. I thank all colleagues for their contributions and co-operation. When is it proposed to sit again?

**Senator Martin Conway:** Ar 10.30 a.m. maidin amárach.

The Seanad adjourned at 6.40 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Thursday, 22 March 2018.