



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

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

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SEANAD ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 18 Aibreán 2018

Wednesday, 18 April 2018

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

*Machnamh agus Paidir.
Reflection and Prayer.*

Business of Seanad

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I have received notice from Senator Catherine Noone of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Health to amend section 49 of the Medical Practitioners Act 2007 to allow doctors who have graduated, or completed an internship, outside of the EU access to the trainee specialist division accredited by the Medical Council.

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

The need for the Minister for Health to provide an update on parental representation on the HSE primary care steering group.

I have also received notice from Senator Kevin Humphreys of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government to provide an update on the delivery of 900 housing units in the Poolbeg west development, Dublin, and the steps being taken to ensure delivery of the additional 550 affordable housing and rental units.

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

The need for the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht to make a statement on the management of the native red deer and sika deer population in Killarney National Park, County Kerry.

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

The need for the Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine to make a statement on the Government's planned support and financial aid for the commercial horticulture sector, following losses incurred as a result of Storm Emma.

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I have also received notice from Senator Aodhán Ó Ríordáin of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Education and Skills to outline the justification for the non-phased closure of St. Thomas's School, Clonshaugh, County Dublin.

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

The need for the Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills with special responsibility for higher education to address the capital funding requirements for St. Angela's College in Sligo in light of increasing student numbers and the consequential demand for additional accommodation.

Of the matters raised by the Senators suitable for discussion, I have selected those raised by Senators Noone, Devine, Humphreys and Coghlan and they will be taken now. The other Senators may give notice on another day of the matters that they wish to raise.

Commencement Matters

Qualifications Recognition

Senator Catherine Noone: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Jim Daly. In light of the issue regarding recruitment and retention of doctors, I wish to ask the Minister for Health to consider amending section 49 of the Medical Practitioners Act 2007, which currently limits access of trainee specialists to those who have graduated within the EU or completed a period of internship within a restricted list of countries. There are many young doctors working in this country who, despite having plenty of experience, are being blocked from accessing further training as they do not fit these restrictive criteria. These are skilled and experienced doctors that the Irish health care system badly needs to retain.

The Medical Practitioners Act 2007 states that a medical practitioner must have completed a period of internship to the satisfaction of the Medical Council to gain access to the trainee specialist division, which is fair enough. However, the Medical Council states that doctors who gained their qualification outside the EU cannot gain access to training schemes unless they have completed their internship in a restricted list of countries, namely, Malaysia, New Zealand, Pakistan, South Africa and the Sudan. If these doctors completed their internship in a country outside that list, they are deemed ineligible for the trainee specialist division, which is currently a requirement to apply for any of the medical training schemes. There are currently no means to remediate this. Many of these doctors have accumulated considerable experience and are working alongside and helping to train junior colleagues who are on training schemes, so there is an irony there. Any career progression for these doctors is pretty much blocked and, as a result, we are losing these doctors, who are leaving to go to jurisdictions where they can access training and upskill to progress their careers, which is obviously basic for anyone in the profession.

It was a young doctor, Dr. Sarah Barry, who brought this to my attention. She was a trainee in the midlands GP training scheme and also worked in smaller peripheral hospitals, such as the Midland Regional Hospital in Mullingar, Portlaoise and Tullamore, and St. Loman's psychiatric hospital in Mullingar. She has seen how reliant these smaller provincial hospitals are on

doctors who have completed their medical degrees outside the EU and completed their intern foundation years outside the designated six countries.

This issue has been flagged repeatedly with the national doctors training and planning association as part of the MacCraith reviews and it has been flagged to the HSE and the Medical Council but, as yet, I am unaware of any concrete plan to rectify the situation. It appears that simply adding the words “or its equivalent” to section 49 of the Act could address the intern year issue blocking access to trainee specialist division and the intern year. Priority could be granted first to EU residents as a similar system prioritises Australian citizens for their trainee schemes. I have made my point and I am interested to hear the Minister of State’s reply.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jim Daly): I thank Senator Noone for raising these issues and for giving me the opportunity to update the House on the position in regard to them. I am pleased to say that, at the end of February 2018, there were 2,977 consultant whole-time equivalents employed in the public health services, which is 98 more than at the end of February 2017 and an increase of 750 in the past decade. The number of non-consultant hospital doctors also increased by 288 from February 2017 to the end of November 2018, with 6,327 non-consultant hospital doctors employed, an increase of 1,438 in the past decade.

I acknowledge the current difficulties attracting and recruiting consultants, particularly to certain specialties, including psychiatry and paediatrics. The HSE has been focused on addressing these issues and is now giving effect to the report, “Towards Successful Consultant Recruitment, Appointment and Retention”, completed in December 2016, as well as to the implementation of the MacCraith group recommendations to support the recruitment and retention of consultants and non-consultant hospital doctors.

I acknowledge the valuable contribution made by doctors who are from outside the European Union to the Irish public health system. I am very aware that they play an important role in Irish healthcare. I am also aware that specialist medical training may be an important career pathway for these doctors but that some are unable to access this training. The Medical Practitioners Act currently provides that doctors whose qualifications are from non-EEA countries require the equivalent of a certificate of experience, that is, an internship, to access specialist training in Ireland. The Medical Council currently recognises internships from Australia, New Zealand, Pakistan, South Africa, Sudan and Malaysia as being equivalent to Irish internships. A doctor whose qualification is from a country other than those cannot access specialist training. The Minister, Deputy Simon Harris, has therefore decided to amend the Medical Practitioners Act 2007. The amendment will be introduced by a regulated health professions (amendment) Bill, which will amend the five health profession regulatory Acts in respect of a number of areas. This Bill will amend the Medical Practitioners Act to remove the requirement to hold the equivalent of the certificate of experience to access specialist training. It is a large and complex Bill and is currently at an advanced stage of drafting by the Office of Parliamentary Counsel in liaison with Department officials. It is expected to be published in this Dáil session, subject to no major issues arising.

It is important to mention that Ireland is committed to a national policy of health worker self-sufficiency and has signed up to implementing the World Health Organization global code of practice on international recruitment of health personnel. The code establishes and promotes voluntary practices for the ethical international recruitment of health personnel and the strengthening of health systems. Article 3.6 of the code recommends that members states “strive [...] to

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create a sustainable health workforce and work towards establishing effective health workforce planning, education and training, and retention strategies that will reduce their need to recruit migrant health personnel”.

Senator Catherine Noone: I do not think I have ever had such a satisfactory answer to a question I have asked as a Commencement matter. The fact that the Minister, Deputy Harris, has decided to amend the Medical Practitioners Act and the fact that the amendment is in train is great. I will be very happy to communicate that. I was at the Irish Medical Organisation conference the weekend before last and it was one of the concerns that was raised. It is great to see that the Minister, Deputy Harris, and the Minister of State, Deputy Daly, are on top of it. I thank the Minister of State.

Deputy Jim Daly: I thank the Senator for continuing to keep the focus and pressure on this issue. That will be welcome into the future. We will progress this as best we can.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: The next item is in the name of Senator Máire Devine. There is no sign of her. Perhaps we will move on to the matter being raised by Senator Kevin Humphreys as it is being answered by the same Minister of State. We will take his Commencement matter now.

Social and Affordable Housing

Senator Kevin Humphreys: I thank the Leas-Chathaoirleach. I am sorry that I am slightly out of breath. I have just returned from An Bord Pleanála where I attended in respect of the 3,500 units being developed at Poolbeg west, which is in Ringsend. Last week, it came to public attention that the receiver was appealing the requirement for 900 social and affordable units. There was an agreement on 18 May 2017 that there would be 900 social and affordable units on that site. It was written into the special development zone, SDZ, terms. It then followed that there were to be negotiations between the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, Dublin City Council and the receiver in respect of the delivery of the 550 units which are not covered by legislation. Unfortunately, nothing happened for ten months. At five minutes to midnight yesterday, the assistant CEO of Dublin City Council, Mr. Shakespeare, issued a letter saying that negotiations commenced at the weekend. The inaction and inactivity by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, which says that social and affordable housing is a priority, is a joke. What is going on?

We are not only in a social housing crisis, but also an affordable housing crisis. The programme for Government states that an affordable housing scheme would be announced. There is an affordable loans scheme, but no affordable housing scheme. I have spent two days at An Bord Pleanála. I have raised this issue twice under Commencement matters in this House. The Minister of State, Deputy Damien English, told me 18 months ago that there was no need for a pilot scheme on affordable housing on the Poolbeg west or the old Irish Glass Bottle sites and that there would be a national programme. We have no national programme and we have no plans for affordable housing. We nearly lost, and may still lose, 550 units in a prime location 2 km from the city centre. We will have no integrated housing, rather we will have a dormant village in the heart of the city. That is poor planning.

This is at the Minister of State's door. I am sorry that neither the Minister of State, Deputy English, nor the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, are here because I am angry, as is the local

community, but this goes much further than just Ringsend, Sandymount and Pearse Street. Affordable housing is a national issue. All we have heard from this Government is talk, but we have seen no action. Negotiations only began at five minutes to midnight with the likelihood of losing 550 units. That is unacceptable to me. We want to see action. This is in the Minister, Deputy Murphy's own back garden, yet we have seen no action from him. Do we not care about affordable housing and social housing? Certainly in the community in which I live, my neighbours feel that the Government no longer has any focus and only worries about the next headcount, which is getting bigger. Urban villages in this city are being destroyed due to a lack of planning, a lack of commitment from this Government and a lack of policy.

I am sorry the Minister of State is here because it should be the Minister of State, Deputy English, or the Minister, Deputy Murphy, taking this debate. I know the Minister of State, Deputy English, has a pain in his head from listening to me talking about affordability in this city and I wonder if that is the reason he is not here today. We need action, not words.

Deputy Jim Daly: I thank the Senator for raising this issue. First, it is encouraging to note recent media reports which suggest that the receiver has agreed to enter into negotiations with Dublin City Council on the provision of affordable housing on the site with the aim of entering into a binding agreement which will result in the provision of additional affordable units. I wish the parties well in their discussions and I know that the Minister, Deputy Murphy, and his Department are ready and available to support and encourage such engagement by providing the necessary policy clarity at the relevant and appropriate time.

It is worth clarifying that the Minister's role in relation to the planning system is primarily to provide the policy and legislative framework to which planning authorities and An Bord Pleanála are obliged to have regard in the exercise of their statutory planning functions. Therefore, in respect of the appeal which has been made in relation to the planning scheme for the Poolbeg SDZ, it is ultimately a matter for An Bord Pleanála to determine this appeal and neither the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government nor his Department can be involved in the case.

It is very important for the public to know, however, that his Department has consistently supported engagement on the development of Poolbeg west in order to ensure the level of social housing delivered on this site is far in excess of the 350 or so homes that would be ordinarily delivered through Part V of the Planning Act. For example, the observations made by the Minister's Department on the draft planning scheme are very clear on this point and also clearly signal that there could be no compulsion about such matters. Such arrangements would have to be progressed in the context of an agreement that would detail the various funding, delivery and value for money considerations that apply in the ordinary course of such matters parallel to, but separate from, the finalisation and consideration of the planning merits of the scheme. The negotiations currently under way and the appeal process to An Bord Pleanála do not alter this position.

The Minister, Deputy Murphy's Department remains committed to working with the city council, any relevant approved housing bodies and either the receiver or developers of the SDZ area in securing additional social and affordable housing from this site over and above Part V obligations and at the scale proposed in the adopted planning scheme, but subject to agreement on all the normal relevant terms including value for money aspects. It is, therefore, for the relevant parties using the array of social housing delivery mechanisms supported by the Minister's Department, including capital and current funded programmes delivered through the local

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authorities and approved housing bodies, to realise the potential for this site including enhanced social housing delivery.

As I said at the outset, the Minister wishes all parties well in these discussions and he is hopeful that a resolution will be reached in the short term to pave the way for the development of the Poolbeg west SDZ, realising the much needed housing mix that it promises to deliver. Whatever the result of the hearing currently under way, the Minister would like to assure the local community of his continued commitment to ensuring that the commitments regarding social and affordable housing will be met.

Senator Kevin Humphreys: I find the answer the Minister of State gave to be totally unacceptable. The Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government was on the phone to Dublin City Council on 18 May 2017. It was party to the negotiations with the receiver and Dublin City Council. Those phone calls took place on 18 May 2017 and I challenge the Minister of State to say that they did not take place. Representatives of the Minister, Deputy Simon Coveney, were negotiating at the time. The Minister of State mentioned recent media reports which suggest that the receiver has agreed to enter into negotiations. The receiver has been ready to enter negotiations since 18 May 2017. The Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government has not stepped up to the plate over the past 11 months. I challenge the Minister of State to give us the details regarding the contact and information details between the receiver, Dublin City Council and the Department.

In the context of the Minister having no hand, act or part in this, the CEO of Dublin City Council is on public record as telling council meetings that he notified the Department a number of weeks ago when the appeal came in from the receiver. The receiver only put in the appeal because of the lack of negotiations about the additional 550 units. This matter has been laid at the door of the Department. Let us be very clear about that. In a letter yesterday, Richard Shakespeare, assistant chief executive, planning and property development, Dublin City Council clearly indicates that the negotiations are taking place between the Department, the council and the receiver. Therefore, the Minister of State has misled the House. I ask him to go back to the Department, seek clarification, come back to the House and correct the record. I find his answers to be totally unacceptable. I do not think there is an urgency in the Department regarding affordable housing. I do not want to further embarrass the Minister of State because I know he is only stepping in for the Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy English, and the Minister and that he was given a prepared speech. I ask him to return speedily because his reputation is on the line and his remarks are on the record of this House. He should seek clarification on whether the Department is actively involved in negotiations. Is it playing an active role? The Minister of State indicated that it is not. He quoted recent media reports in which Mr. Richard Shakespeare stated that the Department is involved in negotiations. I really do not feel the need to embarrass the Minister of State but I believe the record of the House needs to be corrected.

Deputy Jim Daly: I will seek clarification from the Department regarding its role and the negotiations. I will ensure that the relevant information is forwarded to the Senator directly. I will send him a transcript of the conversation here today and seek the clarifications he has sought from the Department.

Senator Kevin Humphreys: The clarification needs to be given to the Seanad, not to me personally. I say that on foot of what has been said on the record of the House.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Would the Senator be kind enough to wait? I am obliged to take Senator Devine's matter now. I had to take Senator Humphreys' matter out of turn in her absence. Senator Devine is very welcome.

Primary Care Steering Group

Senator Máire Devine: In February, the House passed, unopposed, a motion which stated clearly that a non-HSE parent representative should be on the HSE primary care national steering group for children with complex medical needs. The parents of these children, who, through their experience, are experts, rightly rejoiced after the motion was passed. They believed that, finally, they would be listened to and respected, particularly in the context of their experience, their voice and their input. This has not happened to date. On 16 February, members of Our Children's Voice, the warriors who have been at the forefront of this fight since the very beginning, met the representative from the HSE and were assured that he was very happy for parent representatives to be on the steering group and that he would be in touch with an invitation. There was silence thereafter until just two weeks ago. At that point, the HSE representative emailed to state that the executive will proceed with the establishment of the reference group and that further consideration will be given to the issue of the steering group.

Let me be clear. There is no need for those in the HSE to exercise their grey matter. There is no need for the executive to give further consideration to this issue. The House made its decision on 6 February. Non-elected HSE representatives do not have authority over the decisions and determination of the Seanad. Every Member of this House should be very concerned by the brazen disregard of the decisions of this House by the HSE. I want to reiterate why this House passed my motion unopposed. A few years ago, the HSE used a steering group, the membership of which included service users, in order to develop its policy on service user engagement. This was the much-lauded and forward-thinking strategy on service user engagement by the HSE and the Department of Health. Authentic service user engagement is vital and best practice.

Our Children's Voice was represented on the HSE clinical group on domiciliary care for children. There are precedents for this type of representation. The parents making this representation today have long been organised in advocating on behalf of their children and have the necessary skill set to operate at steering group level. This is about listening to the real experts, namely, the people who live with this day in and day out. They are experts through experience and necessity. The HSE has a real opportunity to gain from their expertise. Our Children's Voice's mission statement indicates that it is "a group of parents, hoping to give children who have high medical/physical needs or life-limiting conditions a voice that will be heard". I ask the Minister of State to tell me why they are being silenced. Why are we allowing the HSE to dictate to the Seanad, which passed my motion unopposed in February? What is happening is disgraceful and disrespectful and it will be brought up in this House again and again until the HSE decides - or is instructed by the relevant Minister - to allow parents to join the steering group.

Deputy Jim Daly: I thank Senator Devine for raising the issue of parental representation regarding the care of children with complex medical needs. Both the Minister and I understand the importance of this issue for parents. Children with complex healthcare needs have substantial medical requirements as a result of one or more congenital, acquired or chronic conditions and there is frequently a need for technological assistance and ongoing nursing care to support

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parents in caring for their children at home. The care of these children is best managed in partnership between parents and specialist medical staff who work together to help children lead as normal a life as possible and to avoid hospital admission. To this end, the Minister secured additional funding in budget 2018 to increase the number of clinical paediatric home care packages delivered from 507 in 2017 to 584 this year. I am sure the House will welcome this expansion of such an important service.

Turning to the specific issue of parental representation, some parents and representative groups have recently sought to be included on the HSE's primary care steering group for children with complex medical needs. Following discussion in this House on 6 February, the matter has been re-examined in recent weeks. However, as was referenced in the House previously, this steering group is a clinical group which, as part of its remit, scrutinises commercially sensitive issues relating to the business process. Representation on the group is, therefore, not the best or most appropriate means of securing the views of parents.

We all want to ensure that parents can contribute their full expertise and knowledge regarding the needs of their children. It is for this reason that the HSE will establish a parental reference group that will feed directly into the work of the steering group. Although some details are still to be finalised, it is intended that the reference group will have an independent chair and up to ten parent representatives and will include the national lead for children with complex medical conditions as a member. The group will meet up to three times each year. This will include meeting the steering group. The proposed structure will ensure that the voices of more parents from across the country can be heard directly in order to help us shape how we deliver care to their children.

It is also important to note that, as part of a national quality assurance process, individual meetings have taken place between the HSE and parents in respect of the provision of paediatric care packages and these meetings will continue throughout the year. The HSE will also be holding workshops with parents, which, again, will enable parents to be heard in respect of the needs of their children.

The provision of additional paediatric home care packages and the establishment of the parental reference group demonstrate that the Government is committed to supporting the families of children with complex medical needs and to ensuring the provision of a service that works for parents and reflects their expertise and knowledge regarding those needs.

Senator Máire Devine: The Minister of State's reply is completely unacceptable. It is also disrespectful to this House. We did not have a discussion in February. We passed a motion unopposed. There is a precedent. Phrases such as "commercially sensitive" are always used to keep people's voices down. These parents are responsible and they will be accountable.

It is disgraceful that the Minister of State is using the words "commercially sensitive" or a "business process" when we are talking about the care of the complex medical needs of our children. I am beginning to question the usefulness of this House or even the
11 o'clock Lower House when the motion that was passed there on 22 March to abolish the *in loco parentis* clause and homecare nursing contracts for sick children has also been ignored. Where do we go from here when the wishes of both Houses are completely and utterly ignored and disrespected, and disrespect is shown to the people who we want to represent and get on those boards to have their voice heard? It is not acceptable from the Minister of State and I will be furthering this issue if I can find a way to do so and if I am advised by the

Cathaoirleach how to best do so.

Deputy Jim Daly: The role of the Seanad and of the Dáil is not within my remit. Senator Devine will have to take that argument elsewhere. On the issue, all I can do is to clarify for Senator Devine again that it is not appropriate in this instance that parents would sit on this steering group because of issues of commercial sensitivity. That is why it has been agreed to establish a reference group that will feed into the steering group, which will ensure that the voices of parents will be heard, which is very important to all of us, not just Senator Devine. I can assure her of that fact.

Deer Culls

Acting Chairman (Senator Kevin Humphreys): I welcome members of Ballinteer Educate Together to the Gallery. I hope they enjoy their visit to Leinster House. I call Senator Coghlan.

Senator Paul Coghlan: I welcome the Minister of State and thank him for taking this matter on behalf of his colleague, the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Deputy Madigan. This situation speaks for itself and has led to a lot of recent publicity because there is an increase in comment, and more importantly, concern among residents and the general public.

Deer populations have greatly increased in the last few years. Before I get into the matter I would like to congratulate the Minister of State's colleague, the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Deputy Madigan, on the further investment announced in the national development plan for trails and other amenities in the national park. That is very important for Killarney and for tourism.

I refer to the deer situation. As I have said, the deer population has greatly increased. What is primarily needed is a proper management plan and engagement between the National Parks and Wildlife Service and Kerry County Council. In the last few years the deer are encroaching on farmland all over the place, well outside the national park. I know they are a wild animal and we cannot say they are totally the responsibility of the National Parks and Wildlife Service, but in a sense they are because that is the deer's primary home. I know that farmers can get a licence, and if the deer are on their property and damaging vegetation and feed, they can deal with it. There has been a significant cull this year of about 97 animals. Once the culls are happening properly in the open season, I think it is proper.

We do not have an exact count for the native red or the sika, but the sika are also growing in number and, as we know, they are an imported species. The Kerry Deer Society, of which I am a member, would not mind seeing a huge reduction in the number of sika. They are more difficult to deal with than red deer. They probably do not do as much damage to grazing, but they are all over the place and there was an unfortunate incident on Innisfallen Island where a few of them were found starved to death because there was no grazing left for them and the number there has been culled down to about 20. I would argue that 20 is still too many sika to be left on Innisfallen Island, but that is a matter for the National Parks and Wildlife Service to consider further.

I wonder if the service is considering not alone depopulation, but translocation of deer. I am thinking of the Kerry red, and in the interests of genetic purity, that we could transport some of

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these deer to other national parks. I do not know about Ballycroy. It is a vast acreage in Mayo. There are some deer in Letterfrack already and in Doneraile. The State should consider other offshore islands. There have been some deer for years on Inishvickillane, thanks to the former Taoiseach, Mr. Haughey. There are other offshore islands that could be considered. Perhaps that would be good for the deer as well.

The concern is among neighbouring landowners on all sides of Killarney National Park - north, south, east and west. The deer are even encroaching slightly on the town, coming in at King's Bridge, opposite St. Mary's Cathedral. There are grass verges there and there has been some good grass growth. The deer have been encroaching during the night and have been photographed right outside the cathedral gates. That has been a new development.

I could go on about a whole lot of other aspects but I do not think there is any point. I am looking forward to hearing the statement the Minister of State has on the matter and I am sure we can have further engagement. However, I would ask in the interests of road safety as well as everything else, that there be an active engagement with Kerry County Council on the matter.

Deputy Jim Daly: As Senator Coghlan will be aware, the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht together with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine published Deer Management in Ireland - A Framework for Action in 2015, which recommends a series of actions on deer management and conservation in a number of areas, including addressing the impact of deer in places where they are widespread.

There is a significant challenge in attempting to balance the demands of agriculture, forestry and conservation with the need to ensure that deer populations occupying the same land resource are managed at sustainable levels, and in a responsible and ethical manner. It should be noted that while the National Parks and Wildlife Service of the Department does license the hunting of deer, the Department does not own the deer population. They roam freely throughout the countryside and are present in many parts of the country. It is not part of the remit of the Department, nor indeed would it be generally possible to cordon them onto specific areas of land. Ultimately, however, where deer species are increasing in range and numbers, depending on the annual count and instances of damage caused by deer to habitats, especially woodland, culls need to be carried out to ensure that deer populations do not reach levels that would have negative ecological consequences.

With regard to Killarney National Park in particular, Senator Coghlan will be aware that the Department, as part of its regular ongoing management operations, carries out localised annual deer counts on State lands, where appropriate. Deer have the potential to impact significantly on woodlands, including the iconic yew, oak and also wet woodlands within the park, for example by bark stripping of mature trees and preventing regeneration.

The Department commissioned a comprehensive survey and report in the winter of 2016 on the distribution, population density and population structure of red deer and sika deer in Kerry national park. The study found that the total estimated red deer density over the entire study area of 13.64 sq. km. was some 708 deer. A further census of areas of the park was commissioned by the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, southern division and conducted in spring 2017. On foot of these reports *circa* 100 deer have been culled within the park to date during 2018. This is in addition to more than 120 deer which have been culled between 2015 and 2017.

As part of the Department's ongoing proactive management of the habitats and species in Killarney National Park, it is also proposed to conduct a Killarney National Park deer census during 2018. This work will be undertaken by external specialists. It is hoped to initiate this process shortly. As mentioned earlier, the Department does not own the deer population. Deer are wild animals and they roam freely throughout the countryside. Control of deer on private property is the responsibility of landowners. Wild deer in the State are protected under the Wildlife Acts, however, there is an annual open season during which deer can be legally shot under licence. The open season for deer operates generally from 1 September to the last day of February, depending on the species and gender of deer. Landowners may also apply to the Department for a permission under section 42 of the Wildlife Acts to cull deer where necessary outside the annual open seasons. These permissions offer a facility whereby a person can obtain a permit, on a case-by-case basis, to prevent serious damage caused by individual deer on specific lands. Permissions are only issued where there is evidence of such damage.

The Department has granted over 5,000 deer hunting licences for the current deer hunting season. Licences are issued for an annual period with all licences expiring on 31 July 2018. Last year the Department issued 21 section 42 permits for deer in Kerry. To date this year, eight section 42 permits for deer have been granted for Kerry with nine applications currently under consideration.

The Senator will also be aware of the issue of fencing, which has sometimes been raised with regard to deer management in Killarney National Park. There are no plans to fence the national park. Fencing it would not be a viable solution and would not achieve the desired results for a number of reasons. The presence of deer is not confined to the national parks and consequently fencing of these properties would serve no practical purpose in terms of wild deer control or management. The park is over 10,000 ha in size, including some rugged terrain. Fencing this area would be an enormous task that is unlikely to result in the desired objective. Sika deer are capable of going under fencing that is eight inches off the ground, while red deer are capable of knocking down fences that are preventing them from reaching traditional feeding and shelter grounds. The erection of a fence this size could also impact on the sensitive habitats within the park. There are many deer outside the park boundaries. I am aware that there have been cases where wild deer have been involved in collisions with vehicles. I am of the view that improving sight lines for motorists, as well as improved, possibly larger, signage is likely to be the most effective measure to assist motorists in remaining vigilant when driving through areas where populations of deer can be expected.

Officials from the Department have discussed this with Kerry County Council and I understand that Kerry County Council has prepared a scheme of works, which includes a number of measures including the trimming back of overhanging tree branches and the enhancement and relocation of roadside signs etc., in this regard.

Senator Paul Coghlan: I thank the Minister of State for his response. I am delighted to hear his remarks towards the end regarding the work with Kerry County Council and the scheme of works it is preparing. I accept there always has been culling of old and infirm animals, I refer to the native red deer primarily, which has been important but it is now necessary to do more. There are over 200 deer at Knockreer and Killarney golf club alone, which is only a small section of Killarney National Park. In Muckross there are several herds, which is apart from what is on Torc, Mangerton and the rugged terrain which was referred to. I am sceptical about the number given of 708 but am delighted that another deer count by external specialists will be undertaken this year, which I welcome very much.

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The Minister of State spoke of the number of licences that had been issued. It is quite in order for farmers to be allowed do this on their own ground because if the deer are on their land, they are the farmer's property. However, within Killarney National Park, where so many people roam freely through trails and walks, it is essential that the Department would not issue licences to anyone apart from its own staff or rangers.

Deputy Jim Daly: I thank the Senator. I will pass his sentiments on to the Minister and ensure she is aware of his concerns.

Sitting suspended at 11.14 a.m. and resumed at 11.30 a.m.

Order of Business

Senator Jerry Buttimer: The Order of Business is No. 1, Childcare Support Bill 2017 - Second Stage, to be taken at 12.45 p.m. with the time allocated to group spokespersons not to exceed eight minutes and that of all other Senators not to exceed five minutes; No. 2, statements on Northern Ireland and the 20th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, to be taken at 4 p.m. and to conclude no later than 5.30 p.m., with the time allocated to group spokespersons not to exceed eight minutes, that of all other Senators not to exceed five minutes and time may be shared, and with the Minister to give no less than six minutes reply to the debate; and No. 62, motion 14, Private Members' business, to be taken at 5.30 p.m. with the time allocated to the debate not to exceed two hours.

Senator Mark Daly: Will the Leader ask the relevant Minister to come to the House to discuss the advertising campaign that was axed, as outlined in the *Irish Examiner*? The fact that two out of every five people in Ireland know someone who is experiencing domestic violence is obviously a concern for everybody but another concern is how taxpayers' money was used in formulating a campaign that has since been pulled because obviously it is not fit for purpose. One key issue is that approximately 28% of people suffering from abuse, abusive relationships and domestic violence are separated from their partners and the abuse still goes on. One issue - it comes back to housing believe it or not - is there simply is no place for people to go when they are suffering in a domestic relationship which has turned violent and abusive. As well as outlining what went wrong with the advertising campaign, the Minister might outline what strategy is in place to assist those women who need to move out of the family home with their children. Many of them are facing little or no choice other than moving into the house of a friend, relation or family member. In some cases, tragically, they must sleep in their cars to avoid the abuse they are suffering. The current statistics are that Women's Aid dealt with 21,451 calls last year, of which domestic violence issues accounted for 15,000.

While the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade is coming to the House to discuss the Good Friday Agreement and its 20th anniversary, there is also the issue of the undocumented Irish. Promises were made by President Trump on St. Patrick's Day in the White House on a reciprocal arrangement on visas for the Irish in the US and for US citizens here. We on this side of the House introduced a Bill in 2012 to give to US citizens who come to Ireland, and who find it extraordinarily difficult to get work permits to stay in the country, 10,500 visas a year. Our hope is this would be the basis for a reciprocal arrangement with the United States. The Irish Pastoral Centre in Boston, led by Kieran O'Sullivan from my part of the world, does extraordinary work in helping the undocumented Irish. This is in light of the increasing numbers being deported, with 50% to 100% more undocumented people being arrested and deported from all communi-

ties, including the Irish community in the United States. This issue needs to be addressed. The window of opportunity that was afforded to the Irish Government by President Trump on the St. Patrick's Day visit needs to be pursued in terms of turning that promise of doing a deal between Ireland and the United States into a reality in the time available to us.

Senator Victor Boyhan: Will the Leader arrange to have a debate with the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy? It is timely and appropriate that we should keep the focus on Rebuilding Ireland. I am involved in the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government. It is an excellent committee chaired by Deputy Maria Bailey, and a lot of work is going on there. It is central and critical as housing is a major issue. Everyone agrees that health, housing and education are the three major issues that need to be focused on. It is important that this House has some update from the Minister on the Rebuilding Ireland plan. I want to focus in particular on several issues. The Minister deemed it necessary to have two summits, whereby he summoned all 31 local authority chief executives to the Custom House to discuss the housing crisis. We know there is a housing crisis. I checked with the Department last night and the Minister has failed to publish targets. He undertook that he would set ambitious targets for the direct build and delivery of social and, more importantly, affordable housing in each of the 31 local authority areas. I have seen them and they are not ambitious, which is an issue I want to debate. That schedule and list has not been published. I call on the Leader to ask the Minister to publish the list of the targets set for the 31 local authorities without delay and I will issue a statement to the press later today in that regard. There are substantial landbanks within State ownership, be that through councils, port companies, education and training boards, health boards or other State agencies, and we need to maximise the potential of these lands for direct build and for the provision of social and affordable housing.

I have no personal ideological or political hang-up as to who builds houses for people. It could be the private sector, the semi-private sector, public private partnerships, local authorities or whatever. We want houses built and we want to reduce the unacceptable waiting lists for people who want homes within their communities. I acknowledge that a lot of work has been done. I would like the Minister to come in and update us and the Leader should use his influence in government to have published within the next few days the list setting out the delivery targets for social and affordable housing as set by the Minister as a result of these summits.

Senator David Norris: I intend to circulate a resolution of this House to the effect that Seanad Éireann requests the Committee on Procedure and Privileges to delete Standing Order 41. This will be seconded by Senator Boyhan and I will make it available for all Members to sign, which I sincerely hope they will. I understand this matter has been referred by the committee to a Dáil committee on finance. I find this quite extraordinary. It seems there are many Sir Humphreys in the network. The first loyalty of all the servants of this House, including ourselves, should be to Seanad Éireann, not to Government and certainly not to the Dáil. I find it quite extraordinary that this matter should be referred to a Dáil committee. This House controls and directs its own business and that is as it should be. The two Houses should be independent of each other. I have done a little bit of research and I have discovered that the Seanad established under the 1922 Constitution had the ability to make recommendations, just as we now do on the finance Bills. We make recommendations. That is the same thing as amendments. However, in 1937 the late Mr. de Valera, who was a very remarkable politician, said that he thought that there might be some reason to reconstitute the Seanad as long as the Dáil kept it under its thumb. I do not think that is a sentiment which would find much of a positive response from

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any Members, including Fianna Fáil Members, today.

An Cathaoirleach: For the record, the matter has not been referred to the Dáil for decision. It is still with the Seanad Committee on Procedure and Privileges. I do not think the Dáil will have any final remit with regard to the issue raised. It is still a live issue at the committee and I am sure the Senator will be updated shortly on where we are going with it.

Senator David Norris: I thank the Cathaoirleach very much.

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Norris can take it that the Dáil will not be telling the Seanad Committee on Procedure and Privileges what to do on that issue.

Senator David Norris: I am very glad to hear that. I hope that at some time in the near future, the Cathaoirleach will be able to advise the House as to the progress of this matter because I would not like to see it delayed endlessly. I am afraid this notion of referring it to the Dáil committee has an element of delay to it that I do not welcome. This is an opportunity. We have heard so much talk about the reform of Seanad Éireann and absolutely nothing has been done. This is a small way in which Seanad Éireann, directing its own business, can make a significant reform to the business of the House. As I have said, Members from every side, including practically every Member of this House, have complained bitterly about having amendments rejected on the grounds that they created a charge on the Exchequer. I am only talking about getting matters fully discussed in Parliament and I think every Member would be able to support that.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: Today I raise the issue of the fodder crisis. While it is being discussed later on this afternoon, due to bereavement I have to head west. I will just make three brief points on it. If the Minister is serious about supporting agriculture, he needs to immediately instruct the payment of all outstanding payments to farmers. I refer not only to GLAS payments, but to all of the other payments. This would mean a huge amount to farmers, particularly farmers in the west who are really struggling to survive at this time. There is no reason whatsoever why these outstanding payments cannot be made. I urge the Minister to make them and to make a commitment that he will have them paid by the end of the month.

I also ask him to suspend all inspections for the moment because of the awful weather we have had. There is no point in inspecting farms at this time, when farmers are in crisis mode. Those inspections can be delayed and it is within the Minister's capacity to do so. I also appeal to the co-operatives not to take advantage of the fact that the demand for hay and silage is so high and to be considerate of the fact that the customers they have in those farmers are reliable customers who support them year after year and month after month. Obviously the voucher system, for which we have been calling since last October, needs to be implemented by the Minister. It would have been simple for him to do that. A framework needs to be in place whereby something will be ready when we again have crises such as those caused by the really inclement or savage weather we have had in order that a button can be pressed and farmers can be helped in their time of need. As one farmer put it to me yesterday, there is no use in telling the cow that she will be given a bale of hay next week. It just does not wash. I ask for those things to be done.

Senator David Norris: The cow does not speak English.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: Probably not. Not as well as Senator Norris anyway.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: One would have to meet the cow.

Senator David Norris: Agus tá Gaeilge flúirseach agam freisin.

An Cathaoirleach: Can we return to matters of relevance?

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: The other matter I want to bring up is very simple. I want to the Taoiseach to come to the Seanad to discuss why he withdrew the Trans-European Transport Network, Ten-T, projects in respect of the west and the western rail corridor. He owes us an explanation. He needs to tell us exactly what is being put in place now in order that the available EU funding can be availed of and that the projects will be on both the core list and comprehensive list again. People in the west are really concerned that we have lost out on opportunities for EU funding for these projects which are vital to the sustainability of the west.

Senator Frances Black: I want to share my experience of the emergency department. Last Tuesday night my sister, Mary, was very sick and was taken very ill. She was given a letter by her doctor stating she had to go to the emergency department immediately. She had a condition called Ramsay Hunt syndrome, which is like shingles in the ear and with which there is a very strong possibility of losing one's hearing or having one's face paralysed. In any event, I brought her into the emergency department. She was as weak as a kitten and she sat in the emergency department. Eventually I got a very nice nurse to bring her in and get her on a trolley because she was about to faint. It was at 8 p.m. last Tuesday evening that she was admitted. We knew by the letter which she had been given that she had to be put on intravenous antibiotics straight away. Unfortunately she did not get to see a doctor until 7 a.m. the next morning and did not receive antibiotics until 8 a.m.

I am not just talking about Mary. What I really want to talk about is what I saw in there. It was like something out of a war zone. That is the only way I can describe it. The poor doctors and nurses were trying to walk around trolleys. They could hardly move with the trolley situation. The old people there were crying out in pain and crying out for their loved ones. My heart went out to the doctors and nurses. At one point I pleaded with one of the nurses to try to see if we could get Mary on this antibiotic. We were worried because she could lose her livelihood if she lost her hearing. That is what we were concerned about. The poor nurse told me that they did not even have her chart yet. I repeat that this emergency department was like a war zone. I do not know how the doctors and nurses manage. The nurse with whom I spoke was glazed over and almost traumatised by the amount of work she had to do. Could the Minister come to the House to give us an update on the progress being made in emergency departments in hospitals all over this country? One old woman broke my heart. She was so frightened. She did not know where she was or what was going on. Another man came in with a heart attack while another woman was screaming for the nurse to come and help her but there were no nurses available. They were run off their feet. Hopefully, Mary will be okay. She has just got out of hospital. I would like to ask the Minister to give us an update on the progress being made in emergency departments in hospitals all over this country.

Senator Frank Feighan: The Republic of Ireland Act came into force on this day 69 years ago. This Act declared a republic, because of which we were automatically excluded from the Commonwealth. Two weeks later, the rules were changed to allow republics to be members of the Commonwealth. India availed of that but we did not. That is for another day.

I attended the Goliath Trust gala in the Europa Hotel in Belfast last Wednesday. It is helping to tackle educational disadvantage and lack of achievement in Northern Ireland. It was a wonderful night with various people from all backgrounds coming together to tackle educational

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disadvantage in Northern Ireland. One aspect of the night caught me unawares. Sometimes the political parties are unaware. I am referring to Bertie Ahern's speech. He said one thing to the two main parties in Northern Ireland, which was to stop the messing. It was greeted with a round of applause from the 500 people there.

I would send a warning to the two main political parties in Northern Ireland. Sometimes in politics, we are behind the curve. That night and Bertie's few words were greeted well. He sounded a warning. Perhaps it is now time to get together, particularly on the 20th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement. I was in Queen's University the previous day. The Agreement was something we should celebrate. Perhaps it is a wake-up call. I understand there are issues but it could be a wake-up call to the two main parties, as Bertie said, to stop the messing. It is not often that I agree with Bertie Ahern but on this occasion, he got it absolutely right. The reaction of the crowd at the gala told me that the people in Northern Ireland want the assembly to sit. I hope the two main parties can come together with all other parties to set up the Stormont assembly again.

Senator Terry Leyden: Yesterday, Senator Craughwell referred to the number of personnel leaving the Defence Forces. Both of us are nominated by PDFORRA, the Representative Association of Commissioned Officers, RACO, and the Irish Conference of Professional and Service Associations so we are well aware of what is happening within the Defence Forces. I second the Senator's call for a debate in the House with the Taoiseach and-or the Minister of State with responsibility for defence. Our most valuable resource is our Defence Forces. It is defending our country. We have one of the top armies and navies in the world in terms of their loyalty to the State. I wish fair sailing to the officers and crew of the *LÉ Samuel Beckett* which has been deployed to the Mediterranean as part of Operation Sophia to follow up on the excellent work carried out by the *LÉ Niamh* during the previous mission. I wish Lieutenant Commander Eoin Smyth and his crew of 54 a very safe and successful mission to the Mediterranean.

We should be very proud of the work they are carrying out on our behalf. They are putting themselves at risk for the sake of refugees. They have a tremendous track record of saving lives. If the media takes note, both the Army and Naval Service are now recruiting. The closing date is 22 April. A person has to be under 25 to join the Army and under 27 to join the Naval Service. There are good opportunities there for young men and women to join our Defence Forces and I would encourage them to submit their application as quickly as possible. I wish them success.

The points raised by Senator Craughwell are very real. We have 1,094 personnel and eight ships, which are mainly deployed for fisheries protection. Some of the ships are undermanned. The Leader comes from the Haulbowline area of County Cork and I am sure he has a lot of contacts within the Naval Service so I ask him to arrange an open discussion to report on progress and where we can increase the number of personnel in our Defence Forces.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: One does not get a chance to respond to the Leader's response at the end of the Order of Business. Yesterday, he put up a sterling defence of the pay rise given to the Department of Defence people. Indeed he was correct. It was a 24% increase, not 25%. This means that 84.12% of members of the Defence Forces are 7% worse off than every other worker in this State based on averages. We also learn that if a serving soldier from the rank of captain and below has three children, he or she qualifies for family income supplement. A commandant and below with four children qualifies for family income supplement so it is hardly a gold-plated career.

Let us look at strength. With effect from 17 April, the 7th Infantry Battalion had one colonel, of one, three commandants of five, two captains of eight and three lieutenants of 11. It is 64% deficient. The 6th Infantry Battalion, Athlone, has one colonel of one, two commandants of five, four captains of eight and two lieutenants of 11. It is 64% deficient. The 28th Infantry Battalion at Finner Camp has one lieutenant colonel, two commandants of five, five captains of eight and three lieutenants of 11. It is 56% deficient. The 27 Infantry Battalion in Dundalk has no lieutenant colonel of one, one commandant of five, three captains of eight and two lieutenants of 11, one of whom is a second lieutenant. It is 76% deficient. The 2nd Artillery Regiment has no lieutenant colonel, two commandants of five, two captains of eight and one lieutenant of 11. It is 79% deficient. If one is telling me that the Defence Forces are in a solid state, I am afraid somebody somewhere is telling porkies.

I asked for the Taoiseach to come to the House and address the crisis that is the Defence Forces today. We are all very good at seeing them march up and down outside the GPO and pinning medals on their chests. The truth is that the Defence Forces are being run into the ground. These are decent men. Recruitment has fallen by 55% since 2016. I really do think we have a crisis. I join with Senator Leyden in asking for the Taoiseach, who is the *de facto* Minister for Defence, to come here and debate these issues. Unless we do something, we will not have our Defence Forces. I will release additional information over the next few days. The information I have given this morning is empirical. It is not something I dreamt up. It is empirical.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Who gave it to the Senator?

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: It is based on a submission to the Public Service Pay Commission so it is not something I am dreaming.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: This morning's edition of "Today with Sean O'Rourke" contained one of the most profound and heart wrenching interviews with a young doctor and her husband. She outlined a story which I will not go through because the point I want to make to Senators arises from it.

The story related to the loss of her child at 28 weeks. The child was not going to survive outside the womb and she went to England to give birth. What I heard on the radio - if Senators have the opportunity, they should listen back to it - was a discussion about profound sadness and bereavement in respect of the loss of that young life. I ask that the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs come before the House. When we discuss the eighth amendment, how the people will, should or might vote and the legislation on the termination of pregnancy, whatever decision the people make, we must speak about the profound loss and bereavement that accompanies such decisions. The Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, spoke well about family planning, contraception, counselling and sexual health in the context of legislation. However, very little is being done regarding bereavement counselling, mourning counselling or the outstanding and lifelong grief that family and their children were experiencing as a result of the woman's loss. I recommend that Senators listen to the interview. The woman in question was not judgmental in any way. She was just telling her story.

In my report on dying, death and bereavement in Ireland, I mention how all of us are affected by this - 100% of our lives and 100% of the time. The report contains recommendations as to what should happen with families, mothers, fathers and children when life is lost. Life will, for whatever reasons, be lost under the new legislation. I want to see the development of services relating to bereavement, counselling, mourning and grief for our young people. Those

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services should be there in parallel to the legislation, whatever shape it takes. I would like the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs to come to the House to discuss this matter. I would also like her to take on board my recommendations, which relate - in the context of every sphere of young people's lives, of education, of teaching and of family life - to how we can and should deal with this matter. A loss such as that experienced by the woman to whom I refer will be with her and her children for the rest of their lives. She was completely outside any judgment.

Senator Máire Devine: I congratulate the Ombudsman, Mr. Peter Tyndall, on his tenacity and determination in getting the Government to accept his recommendations on redress for the Magdalen survivors. The previous attitude was one of reluctance. Ultimately, it was aimed at limiting the numbers of those who might qualify for redress. It was also mean-spirited in nature. Yesterday, however, the Government and the Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Flanagan, indicated and acknowledged that to exclude specific cases was a mistake. I welcome this more constructive approach; it is long overdue. There is a need for compassion towards women whose only crime was being poor and vulnerable and who were considered and treated as being worthless by society. I ask that the Minister come to the House to outline how the Magdalen survivors might be afforded redress. There is a particular need to establish timelines. Many of those affected have already died, while others are in their later years and do not have much time left. I also ask that the Minister inquire of the HSE as to how many patients are still languishing in long-term care facilities, such as psychiatric hospitals or in nursing homes, particularly as these people do not have a voice and are unaware of the redress scheme. I have been asking about this matter since 2012 when I was a local councillor. The people to whom I refer need to be included, supported and guided. They probably need guardians to be appointed to take care of these matters on their behalf.

Senator Michelle Mulherin: I want to challenge the populist rhetoric of Deputy Darragh O'Brien of Fianna Fáil at the weekend in the context of the housing situation. Personal attacks on the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, or the Taoiseach do not get us anywhere. If anything, what was said at the weekend about these members of the Government displays ignorance on the part of the Deputy in question. It is easy to play the blame game in respect of housing. The issue of housing is very serious. The housing crisis does not just affect people from one socioeconomic background. Regardless of whether they are working, people face a challenge in terms of finding affordable houses they can either rent or purchase. More and more, it is becoming evident that there is no divide regarding this problem. The idea that one has to be from a certain socioeconomic background in order to find solutions or to have the will to serve the people is utter nonsense. However, it seems to fit into a certain populist rhetoric.

It would be better if Deputy Darragh O'Brien sought to hold local authorities to account. For example, this year alone, the capital budget for the construction of house has risen from €307 million to €638 million. On the other hand, very little social housing is being built. The lack of construction of social housing is impacting on the entire market. As a result of it, people who should be in social housing are trying to find private rented accommodation. The latter is placing increased pressure on that sector. Until 2010, 6,000 social houses were being built each year. The question that arises in this regard relates to what local authorities are doing with the funding to which I refer. Fianna Fáil controls a significant number of local authorities. Is property being acquired for the construction of social housing? Have the appropriate personnel been hired in order that local authorities might have the relevant expertise available to them to allow them to build houses? Questions have to be asked at this stage. The Government is not

going to build these houses. From a statutory point of view, as housing authorities, councils have an obligation to build houses. Why are they not doing so? Why are they not being held to account by councillors from other parties who have been very critical of the Government regarding the lack of social housing. We have gone beyond the point whereby this matter is being treated as a political football. There are solutions available but they must be implemented. The local authorities need to play their part and Deputy Darragh O'Brien needs to begin with the representatives from his party who are members of those authorities.

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call the next speaker, I wish to acknowledge the presence in the Gallery of representatives from the Historical and Reconciliatory Police Society, known affectionately as the HARP Society. The society comprises former and retired members of the police forces in the Republic and Northern Ireland and its representatives are our guests in the Seanad today. They are very welcome and I hope they enjoy their visit.

Senator Aidan Davitt: I was going to speak about another matter but I cannot let Senator Mulherin's comments on housing - and some of the inaccuracies they contained regarding county councils - pass. Ultimately, the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government calls the shots and provides funding for the councils. The previous Minister - he held the portfolio for some time - and current Tánaiste, Deputy Coveney, was before the House in respect of this matter. He is a fine individual and comes from a fine political family. At the time, however, I told him when he was here that his plans and the way in which he intended to spend his Department's money would not solve the housing crisis or improve the supply of housing. That proved to be the case. The facts and figures regarding what the then Minister provided when he held the position speak for themselves. I have not commented once on the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy. I afforded him due process and allowed him to get his feet under the table. However, he has been in office for ten months. In today's newspapers, the best he can come up with in the middle of a housing crisis is to talk about rogue landlords and refer to this matter as a priority. I have never heard such rubbish in all my life.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: Absolutely. Hear, hear.

Senator Aidan Davitt: Fine Gael should face up to the problems that exist. There are simple reasons for what is happening. Those in the construction industry have spoken to us and have suggested a reduction in VAT. This was done in the case of the hotel industry, which has been revolutionised as a result. Why not examine this suggestion?

In the context of social housing, the reality is that costs have gone through the roof because houses need to be A-rated and engineers have to oversee their construction. A lot of land was de-zoned under the spatial strategy. There are many things that make the delivery of housing much more expensive.

Senator Michelle Mulherin: Local authorities are not spending the money.

Senator Aidan Davitt: I did not interrupt the Senator. I know she is worried about trying to win back her seat in the Dáil. Costs have increased dramatically and there is only one way to reduce them. Even if we do not want to take a chance and talk about developers, money and all the rest, we should seek to reduce the cost of social housing. Social housing involves a set cost. Builders can provide such housing. When Westmeath County Council redeveloped the Ennell Court estate recently, it cost €200,000, less VAT, to renovate some of the houses. That is crazy

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when one considers that the council got the sites for nothing. The figures do not add up. That is why builders are not engaging. There is also the fact that the banks are not supporting them. We need to get our heads out of the sand. That is the reality. We are all here to work on this together. We supported Fine Gael with similar proposals on a previous occasion. There will have to be a serious rethink in respect of a reduction in VAT as the only way forward on this issue.

Senator Maria Byrne: I congratulate Joy Neville on becoming the Rehab sportsperson of the year. Joy is from Limerick. She is a neighbour of mine and I know her well. She may not support the same rugby club as me but her brothers do. Joy played for Shannon and UL Bohemians, as well as Munster and Ireland. This latest accolade adds to her Grand Slam achievements in the past and her 70 caps for Ireland. She has shown great commitment. When she was awarded the title of sportsperson of the year on Sunday evening last, Joy said she was dedicating it to all young sportswomen. The message she gave to them is that they should dream and achieve.

There have been many reports recently, however, which have highlighted the lack of participation in sport on the part of young females. Will the Leader invite the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport to a debate on how we can encourage future participation of females, especially young females, in sport? Many reports on this issue encouraged the Minister for Education and Skills to make physical education a compulsory subject in schools, which I welcome. We should have a debate on how we can encourage further participation of young females in sport.

Senator Grace O’Sullivan: I second Senator Byrne’s request that the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport attend the House for a debate on supporting the participation women in sport. I was a surfer when I was growing up in Tramore, County Waterford, and I recommend more participation in sport.

I welcome the Government’s announcement last week of plans to construct 42 new schools in areas of need across the country. Since then, however, we have heard many reports of the serious issues facing the principals, boards, teachers, parents and students in the 575 schools awaiting delivery of previous commitments to refurbishment, repair and expansion. Yesterday, I attended a meeting of the Joint Committee on Education and Skills to represent my colleague, Deputy Catherine Martin, who has been fighting for the Balinteer Educate Together national school, Dublin 14, as it tries to get its premises improved. I heard from this and other schools about the problems this causes. One in particular, Gaelscoil Chnoc Liamhna, County Dublin, has been waiting 22 years for the delivery of new school buildings. Trish McGinley, the chair of the school’s board outlined to RTÉ’s “Drivetime” on Friday the effect such unfathomable delays have had on the staff and pupils at the school, as well as the incredibly poor response they have received from the Department of Education and Skills in this regard.

I was contacted by Tramore Educate Together national school, County Waterford. The population of Tramore is rising exponentially. When I was a child, it was 3,000. In the 1990s, it rose to 6,500. In 2016, it stood at 10,381. Fortunately, the Minister recently turned around a proposed constraint on class intake. While this was welcomed, the school needs to move to a new site. There is land available close by and the Department has proposed that the school will have to split classes between two sites. This is not good for health and safety. I will raise this as a Commencement matter soon.

I am hearing from many schools about the lack of communication from the Department

regarding building projects. Will the Minister for Education and Skills come to the Seanad to discuss the lack of communication between the Department and schools?

Senator Fintan Warfield: I want to raise the issue of equal parental rights and the family rights of children with same-sex parents. Three years ago, many Members of both Houses stood in celebration with the LGBT community as the announcement came from the RDS that the civil marriage equality referendum had passed. The legislation that gave effect to marriage equality, the Children and Family Relationships Act 2015, affords equal rights to same-sex couples who wish to have children and form families. It has been three years since that historic legislation was passed by the Oireachtas. However, Parts 2 and 3, which confer equal family rights for those who can only conceive through assisted human reproduction, have to be yet commenced by the Minister for Health. While we claim that in this State all family formations hold equal esteem before the law, there are many stark realities that face these families, aside from simply not having equal status to others. There are realities such as preventing a family from applying for an Irish passport and citizenship for their child, preventing the child from accessing his or her parents' estate if they pass away intestate and preventing a parent from making emergency health decisions on behalf of a child in the case where the other parent may be out of the country.

I, like the Leader and many others, have been seeking certainty in respect of this matter for some time. I am saddened that I and many others have been fobbed off by the Department of Health with deadlines which have been consistently missed and responses which have not been transparent or reasonable. In that context, I wish to propose an amendment to the Order of Business to call on the Minister for Health to come to the House to explain this delay, which has gone on for too long without any rationale. I do not do this lightly. However, given that I have attempted to get clear answers through different Oireachtas avenues on this issue, the Department seems unwilling to give them to me.

An Cathaoirleach: Is the Senator proposing an amendment to the Order of Business that the Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, come to the House?

Senator Fintan Warfield: Yes.

Senator Colm Burke: Several people referred to the delivery of housing. It is important to note that in the context of the delivery of student apartments, over 2,600 bed units have been provided in the past 18 months. Another 5,000 are under construction and the target is 21,000 units by 2024. This will remove approximately 5,000 houses from student accommodation and make them available to those working or families. The delivery of social housing is occurring but I accept that delivery is not fast enough. We seem to have a problem with procedures right across the system, from agreeing that social housing should be built to navigating the planning process to proceeding to commencement and on to getting the work done. The position needs to be reviewed. Last Thursday, I attended a launch in my former local authority area in respect of the completion of 52 new houses and the turning of the sod regarding construction of a further 47. That is just one of nine ongoing projects in Cork city. The last time I had a Commencement matter on this issue, the Minister announced the provision of €39 million in funding for seven different projects involving the construction of 134 houses. That was a welcome development. I make no apologies for bringing the Minister in and ensuring that projects are followed up on. Local authority members and management, the Department and the Minister all have a part to play in that regard.

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When the downturn hit the construction industry, there was a significant loss of jobs. Between 2008 and 2011, over 200,000 jobs were lost. We are now back to having full employment. We have a problem in the sense that the construction industry has not returned to the same level of production, however.

Our challenge is to ensure we have an adequate number of people with the skills and expertise necessary to increase the level of construction. This is a challenge we need to consider. It might be worth bringing the Minister to the House for a debate. Let us be positive, in that the jobs have been created here in other areas and we need to consider the challenge in the construction industry and how we can bring in the people with the relevant skills and how we can get the private sector moving at a far faster pace. We must also examine how we are currently delivering local authority and social housing.

I also wish to raise one area of the 2040 national development project, namely, the healthcare sector. Last week, the Department of Education and Skills announced plans for the building of new schools and it will set out the programme for the next four to five years. An important issue in the health service concerns me. Under the last Government, by which I mean the Administration prior to 2011, it took more than 25 years before the children's hospital was even started. I am concerned that we have set up a clear programme for the building of new hospitals. We need to bring the Minister for Health before the House to set out how this programme regarding the building of new hospitals and the new healthcare facilities will be implemented, the timeline in each case and a clear programme of action. I am concerned that it may fall between two stools, that is, between the Department of Health, the HSE, local authorities and so on. It is something we need to look at and something on which we should hold a debate.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I also want to address the school builds. I will ask for the Minister for Education and Skills to come to the House, if not tomorrow then early next week. I second Senator Grace O'Sullivan in this regard. I have significant concerns about promises being made that seem impossible. Last week, while the schools were on holiday, an announcement was made that a large number of new schools, 42 of them, would be built across the country.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: The schools were open last week.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: The schools were on Easter holidays the week before last.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: They were back last week.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: Well, the week before that. Many of them were on Easter holiday.

An Cathaoirleach: I ask the Leader not to antagonise the speaker.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I am just giving information to the House.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: Some 42 schools were announced.

An Cathaoirleach: The Leader's can assist when he replies, he should not interrupt others.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: What about the schools that are incomplete? What about the 30% increase in the use of prefabs between 2015 and 2017? I am sure that the

Leader will address that now. Good schools are surviving in substandard accommodation and it is not good enough. The current school building programme is not keeping up with demand. This led to a massive increase in the use of prefab classrooms.

Senator Tim Lombard: You were in power.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: Yes, I have the figures.

The Minister, Deputy Bruton, promised to construct new schools but at the same time deferred vital building works aimed at reducing the need for prefabs. This needs to be addressed. A message was being given that there is a commitment to finish long-promised plans for schools, for the prefabs to be finished and for there to be new classrooms. However, there is no action whatever. For example, in Carlow we are told that two long-promised schools are 90% complete but they sit idle. These schools were being built by Carillion and the Sammon Group. With 90% of the work done, the works have stopped. The Minister has said there will be a review. I ask that he come before the House and that he ensure there is a review and that these works are finished urgently.

Subcontractors are deeply concerned about money and work, parents are concerned about their children's destination and pupils who are finishing primary school and want to attend the new second level in Carlow, Tyndall College, are worried about more than their entrance examination. Moreover, staff are worried about the environment in which they are forced to teach. It is a mess which needs to be sorted. There needs to be clarity on this before promises of more schools for more students are made. I once again call on the Minister for Education and Skills to come to the House tomorrow or early next week to clarify these issues, especially in respect of prefabs.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank the Senator.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: A school in Bagenalstown has been promised a sports hall for years and is still waiting. It has nearly 700 pupils. Many other works remain to be done and we need to get them finished. It is great to see new schools being built but the Minister also needs to deliver on his commitments to the other schools on which he is not delivering.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: It is rhetoric.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: If the Senator is concerned, her party can always put them out of power and go to the people and see how that goes.

Senator Aidan Davitt: Sinn Féin can prop them up afterwards.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: Ba mhaith liom tacú leis an leasú atá moltha ag an Seanadóir Warfield don Ord Gnó. I formally second the amendment to the Order of Business moved by Senator Warfield.

As we are having statements from the Minister later, I will not dwell too much on the theme of the Good Friday Agreement but I wish to respond to some of the remarks made earlier. I was somewhat amazed to hear Fine Gael Senators laud the advice of the former Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, notwithstanding how he entertained us greatly at the celebrations of the Good Friday Agreement. However, I want to continue to challenge the narrative that has crept into this Chamber and elsewhere that the current situation in the North derives from two problem parties

or parties not getting on-----

Senator David Norris: It does.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: It does.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: -----or it would be as simple as going in and sorting it out.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: It is.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: It is not quite that simple, and the Minister, Deputy Coveney, who is a very nuanced, considered and thoughtful man when it comes to the North, unlike some of the Members here, conceded that it was much bigger and broader than that and much more complex. As we mark 20 years of the Good Friday Agreement, it lays out the path of what should happen in instances such as this, namely, for the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference to be convened.

When people make assertions that two parties need to just get on with it-----

Senator David Norris: Hear, hear. They should do.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: -----I wonder what exactly that means, when we had an agreement only a few months ago. Two parties did not walk away from that agreement; only one party did so. It is easy for people to fall into the lazy narrative of playing politics in here but sometimes we must deal with the facts. That draft agreement was a compromise agreement. Republicans in Sinn Féin compromised in respect of that draft agreement. It was not a case of two problem parties that could not get along or sort it out, it was one party which walked away from it. As Senator George Mitchell and President Bill Clinton said as recently as last week in Belfast, the onus falls on the two Governments, as is laid out in the Good Friday Agreement, to be more directly involved, to assert themselves and convene the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference. That is a much more considered, necessary option available to us. I want to see the Executive back up and running, I would have liked to have seen this some months ago, but in the absence of that, the onus falls on to the Leader's colleagues and the British Government also.

An Cathaoirleach: There is a two-hour debate this evening. People raising this matter will have ample time to speak later.

Senator Kieran O'Donnell: I rise to commend Shannon Airport, from which Norwegian Airlines will operate a daily service to Stewart International Airport in New York. Shannon Airport now has six airlines which fly to seven destinations in America. We regularly hear about Dublin Airport being over-capacity and not having enough room, whereas Shannon airport has excess capacity. We are a small nation. Our network is very good and when the M20 is built it will be even better. People will be able to travel to Shannon to fly abroad. I ask that we invite the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Ross, to come to the House to have a wide-ranging debate about using our resources in the best way possible. People go to Dublin Airport on buses straight from Limerick, while we have a local airport capable of a much greater capacity. We should look at ways to encourage people from Dublin and other regions to use services in Shannon. Perhaps something needs to be done in Government policy because Shannon Airport is now independent. It is not a matter of funding; it is about policy. Dublin Airport is discussing building another runway. We forget how small an island we are. I

ask that we invite the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport to come to the House and we can have a structured debate. Senator Norris made reference to what the Seanad can do. These are the type of debates I would like to see. It pertains to policy. Being a former Member of the Dáil, I find the big difference is that issues are debated at length here. The Senator was speaking about Seanad reform. One area in which one could do that is to consider ways whereby a certain share of Bills would start in this House. We may have differing views but we saw how the alcohol Bill was debated here in great depth. These are the areas.

The Leader should ask the Minister, Deputy Ross, to come in before the House. We could double the capacity in Shannon Airport. Why do we not look at it in terms of balanced regional development? At the same time, we are speaking about building another runway in Dublin and I question whether it makes economic sense for the State.

Senator Tim Lombard: I acknowledge the contribution of my colleague, Senator Kieran O'Donnell, regarding where we are going with a national strategy on connectivity. He mentioned the issue of Norwegian Airlines cutting the winter flights. The airline has done that in Cork as well. The winter flights from Cork and Shannon are not happening this season. That has a major knock-on effect for both the tourism sector and the self-confidence of the region. It is important to have this debate about regional development, what we will do with Project Ireland 2040 and how we will develop the country. If we are to develop Dublin Airport to its full potential and put a second runway in there, we must ensure that the other airports are protected. We have a motorway journey from Cork to Dublin of two hours with buses going on the hour, if not on the half-hour. That connectivity is there. What we need is a connectivity to ensure that the airlines will work appropriately and will come into these regions, whether it is Shannon or Cork, in order that the tourism sector and the business sector in particular in those areas can flourish.

We find in Cork that the lack of connectivity to the United States for the business sector is a big issue. They want to be hitting the US mainland directly from Cork. What they do not want is to be obliged to go to Dublin and then get a flight out because that is not how they want to spend their day. The big pharmaceutical and bio-pharmaceutical plants in Cork are huge operations and need that connectivity to their American bases. A debate with the Minister is important because unless we model and change Government policy on these issues, Dublin Airport will develop into a monster and the two other regional airports that have an international focus, Shannon and Cork, may not achieve their full potential. Shannon has an advantage over Cork because it has independent status. Perhaps we should consider re-opening that debate in Cork because if we had independent status, we might be able to have a bigger slice of the cake we need to deliver both Project Ireland 2040 as a national plan and the regional development this country badly requires.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I thank the 20 Members of the House for their contributions on the Order of Business. Like the Cathaoirleach, on behalf of all of us in the House, I acknowledge and welcome to the Gallery the members of the Historical and Reconciliatory Police Society and thank them for their contribution to public service and to public life. I worry that they are with Senator Craughwell. I am not sure whether that is a good or bad omen but, knowing Senator Craughwell, it could lead to a long day. They are most welcome in the House and I thank them for being here.

On a sad note, on behalf of the House, I extend our sympathies to our colleague and friend, Senator Ó Céidigh, on the loss of his mother, Rita, during the Easter recess. Our thoughts are

with the Senator and his family.

Senator Mark Daly raised the issue of the advertising campaign on domestic violence. It was raised yesterday on the Order of Business. The Minister of State, Deputy Stanton, when confronted about the issue at the publication yesterday, agreed to reflect upon the issues that were raised. All of us recognise that this campaign has been going on since 2016. It is an issue that requires huge support to be given to the victims of domestic violence. As the Senator rightly said, that involves legislative means plus support. Any issues that have been addressed need to be taken on board. The campaign was well intentioned. We are seeing extra resources being directed to assist the victims of domestic violence. It is, as I stated yesterday, a menace in society that we must stamp out. It has no place in Irish society. The Government is committed to doing all that it can in the area of domestic violence. As I stated yesterday, the Domestic Violence Bill 2017 is going through the Lower House. The second national strategy on domestic, sexual and gender-based violence has been published. It has three central pillars, namely, prevention, provision of services to victims and holding perpetrators to account, along with implementation, monitoring and data. It is important to recognise that the advertisement campaign was commissioned to reach an audience, raise awareness and encourage support. If anybody has an issue with the campaign, he or she needs to be listened to as well. The Government is committed to ensuring that the voices that spoke yesterday will be heard. I would be happy to have the Minister come to the House on the matter.

Senator Mark Daly also made reference to the issue of the undocumented Irish. It is an important issue and the Senator rightly highlighted the issues raised on the St. Patrick's Day visit by An Taoiseach to the White House and the remarks of President Trump. I would be happy to have the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Coveney, come to the House on the matter. I note Deputy Deasy has been appointed as the Government envoy on this important issue. There was a telling contribution on radio this morning of a young man who spoke eloquently about whether he would come home and about the text alert system that is activated when US immigration is on the move in parts of the north-east United States. It is an issue that will not go away and one on which we need to see continuous work. I will work on a bipartisan basis on that. It is important that we all support the initiatives being taken.

Senator Boyhan raised the issue of housing and the two housing summits with the Minister and the CEOs of the different councils. The Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, will be in the House next week to have a debate on housing and I would be happy to have the issue raised there.

Senator Norris's motion is a matter for debate within the House. The Cathaoirleach stated, by way of information, the current position but I would be happy to have that debated as part of a motion that the Senator is putting forward.

Senator David Norris: I thank the Leader.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: It is a bit like everything else. There are different viewpoints but there is a process that the Committee on Procedure and Privileges has commissioned. Maybe we can see what the outcome from the Committee on Procedure and Privileges is. I do not want to pre-empt the result of that but we will come back to it, if that is okay with Senator Norris.

Senator Conway-Walsh raised the issue of fodder to farmers. I think we all agree there is a need to see fodder provided, be it in the east, west, south or north of the country. The Min-

ister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy Creed, has been proactive on the matter, as have Members of this House. I pay tribute to Senator Lombard who in his own constituency of Cork South-West - I do not wish him to come back to Cork South-Central - has been proactive in working with the co-operatives and farmers in the area. I compliment him on that. It is important to recognise that payments have been made. The Minister has been proactive on the matter and action has been taken by Government. It is about ensuring that we have cattle fed. It is about ensuring that fodder is provided to farmers. It is also about ensuring that the co-operatives, which have worked with farmers, will not be seen to be overzealous in demanding payment. The Government has put in place a range of incentives. We will have the debate as part of Private Members' business later on. It is also important to recognise that we also need to look at the issue of climate change and how that has an effect on us as a country. As Members know quite well, we have now had weeks of incessant rain during which I would say we have not had two days of drying. Moreover, land and underfoot conditions are very wet. The Minister has been proactive. We always have an animal welfare scheme. There is a range of farm relief schemes available to farmers and that will come across as part of the debate tonight on the Private Members' motion. I am not familiar with the issue the Senator raised regarding the transport issues in terms of the projects but if the Senator wants to give them to me later, I would be happy to take them up with the Minister.

Senator Black raised the issue of trolleys in hospitals. I completely empathise with the Senator, not only on her family's situation but in that every patient who is on a trolley is a person who deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. At a time when we have the biggest spend on healthcare in the history of the State and our spend *per capita* is one of the highest in Europe there is something fundamentally wrong. The political class and the Minister are blamed when there is no money available. There has been an increase in recruitment and more hospital beds have been opened but I recognise that there has been an increase in attendances at emergency departments. In budget 2018 €40 million extra was provided to respond to winter pressures, €25 million was allocated this year for social care measures which included €3.5 million for 480 additional transitional care beds and €18 million for 1,080 additional home support packages. An additional 204 beds have been opened but someone coming into the country from abroad would imagine there was nothing happening. It is not good enough that there are people on trolleys or that people have to be treated badly but the Government launched a national development plan which allows for an increase of some 2,000 extra acute beds. It is important to consider the Sláintecare report. It involves an emphasis on primary care and the need to see that develop. I would be happy for the Minister to come to the House. What is the HSE doing to eliminate the problems? We blame the Government in many cases. I have been in a situation similar to the Senator's because family members of mine were in the emergency department over the Easter break. There is something fundamentally wrong when a patient has to wait three hours for a discharge letter to be told they can walk out the door because they are okay. There is something fundamentally wrong when a triage nurse cannot tell them they can go home, or if they have to wait eight hours when it is clear that the system is not working to benefit the patient. As a former Chairman of the then Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health and Children I believe it is time all the vested interests in the health sector came out of their silos and into the centre on behalf of the patient. That is the point that comes through in the Senator's story today, that it is distressing and should not have to happen.

Senators Feighan and Ó Domhnaill raised the North and the Good Friday Agreement. The Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade will be in the House today. We should all take note of Bill Clinton's remark, "don't let it go, you can't let it go by doing nothing". We want to see the

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Assembly back in Stormont. That requires everybody, gach duine le chéile, working together. The Minister has said repeatedly that we cannot go back to the bad old days and we do not want to go back to them. We want to see mature, sensible decisions made to return to power-sharing and the Assembly, to work for the people. That requires compromise on all sides. This morning we remember the former First Lady of the United States, Barbara Bush, who said compromise is not a filthy thing, it is a good thing. The same applies to politics around the world.

Senators Leyden and Craughwell raised the issue of the Defence Forces. We debated this yesterday on the Order of Business. I do not want to get into an argument again but I understand that the Senators represent Permanent Defence Force Other Ranks Representative Association, PDFORRA, and other organisations. We all want to see the men and women in our Defence Forces treated fairly and properly. Senator Craughwell spoke about family income supplement; 1.3% of serving members receive that support. To hear Senator Craughwell this morning one would swear half the Army was on that support. It is not acceptable that people are on family income supplement. I am not advocating that. The Minister of State with responsibility for defence has started an independently chaired review of the conciliation and arbitration scheme over the past two years when more people have joined the Defence Forces than left it. In addition, new pay scales have been introduced for the post-2013 recruits and starting salaries have increased by 25%. Those are facts. Under the national pay agreement all wages up to €70,000 will be restored. There is a review of 1994 and 2006 contracts. In addition, there has been capital investment in ships, equipment, barracks, planes and there is an active recruitment campaign such that 751 people joined the Defence Forces last year. I do not want to have a political row because I value and respect the members of the Defence Forces, some of whom are my friends, some past pupils, and, as Senator Leyden said, many live around Haulbowline. We want to see pay and conditions increase and the achievements of our Defence Forces recognised and respected and I hope that will happen. Politicising it is the wrong way to do it. I would be happy to have the Minister of State, Deputy Kehoe, come to the House again.

I agree with Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell about the story of Caroline and Michael who spoke on the "Today with Sean O'Rourke" programme. They deserve great credit for the way they told their story and their bravery in coming forward. The committee I chaired produced an end of life care report and the Senator did major work in her own right which should not be left sitting on a shelf. We must have empathy, compassion, care, respect and always treat people properly. The Senator was correct in what she said this morning. As part of the heads of the Bill relating to the eighth amendment the Minister for Health has spoken about maternal care and the care of infants. The ancillary recommendations of the committee on the eighth amendment will also resonate with some of what the Senator said this morning. We need to take greater care of people. I would be happy to invite the Minister to the House on this as a stand-alone item. I do not wish to patronise Senator O'Donnell but we cannot allow a report that is a landmark be left sitting on a shelf because it is about people. People should not have to go on a radio programme being personal and open about their situation. I compliment their courage in telling their story. We need to have compassion in our maternity services and I hope we continue to have it.

I join with Senator Devine in commending the Minister for Justice and Equality on broadening the Magdalen laundries redress scheme. The sign of a good Minister is that he listens. It is a question of including women who were doing the same work as others and being treated in the same way. I welcome that decision.

Senators Mulherin and Davitt got into an argument on housing. As Leader of the House I try

not to be personal but when the only remark of Fianna Fáil's spokesman on housing is about a Minister or a Taoiseach without reference to policy that does not say a whole lot. We will have a debate on housing. We have come through the worst of recessionary times. I remind Senator Murnane-O'Connor, who is looking at me, that it was her party in government-----

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I am on the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government and have met the two Ministers from the Leader's party who made commitments but not one has been delivered on. I have been to every meeting of the committee since I came in here two years ago.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Please, Senator, the Leader is anxious to conclude.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Methinks the Senator doth protest too much.

Senator Mark Daly: We are anxious.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I tell the truth.

Senator Tim Lombard: The Senator's version of it.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I tell the truth.

Senator Catherine Noone: Alternative facts.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I am smiling because some of the members of Fianna Fáil remind me of an under-14 team. They wore the jersey and banged the hurley off the desk for Micheál Martin this morning and they are all coming in with a pep in their step in this first week back after the Easter break. The lads need to know it is a question of being in government-----

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: The Leader should not make promises his party cannot commit on. Fine Gael has made a lot of them.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Does the Senator want me to list-----

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: There is lots more stuff here and Fine Gael cannot-----

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Does Senator Murnane O'Connor want me to list the broken promises of Fianna Fáil?

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I could make a list myself.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: If she wants me to, I will. The fundamentals are that we do need to see a collective end to the scourge of people being homeless and being put into hotels. We need to see a continuation of the social housing building that the Government has commenced. We need to see the issue of the affordability of land being tackled and we need to look at all measures that can increase the output and supply of housing. Personalised attacks on the Taoiseach or the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government have nothing to offer in any debate. What we need to see is not just idle rhetoric but actual reality happening in terms of policy development. I look forward to working with all Senators to see that happen.

Senators Maria Byrne and Grace O'Sullivan raised the issue of the participation of women in sport. I congratulate Joy Neville on being awarded one of the People of the Year awards. It

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is great to see young women being able to reach the pinnacle of their careers, whether it is Katie Taylor, Katie Walsh, Joy Neville or whoever. It is fantastic and I support any initiative we can undertake to encourage women's participation in sport.

Senators Grace O'Sullivan and Murnane O'Connor raised the issue of school accommodation. I am not familiar with the particular issues they raised in terms of the specific schools but the refurbishment of schools is something the Government is committed to. If I may educate some of the Members of the House who come in making statements - I am not sure what kind of research they do - in 2017, the Government spent half of what the Fianna Fáil Government spent in 2008 on rented prefabs. We are planning for the future. That is why we have seen the announcement of new schools and €8.4 billion in a school building programme. That compares with €4.9 billion in the previous ten years. In 2008, we had about 2,000 rented prefabs in use.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: We had a bigger population.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Today we have 1,325. In any man's language, that is a decrease. That is going down. The €8.4 billion allocated by the Government will allow for prefab replacement. I taught in a prefab in my previous life. I was the person who, on a wet and wild day, could hear the wind and have the rain coming through, with a storage heater that worked if I gave it a kick and did not work at all if it was a bad day. I had to take classes in that type of school.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: There has been an increase of 30% in prefabs between 2015 and 2017. The Leader's information is wrong.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: The Government is committed to modernising, investing and refurbishing-----

An Cathaoirleach: I remind the House that we are nine minutes over the allocated time. This cannot happen every day. There is a Minister waiting to come in and another piece of business to be commenced. I ask Senators to refrain from argy-bargy across the Chamber. I ask the Leader to try to conclude.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: The Minister, Deputy Bruton, as I said yesterday, is committed to coming to the House to discuss the Action Plan for Education.

Senators Warfield and Ó Donnghaile raised a very important issue around the enactment of the Children and Family Relationships Act. To be fair, Senator Warfield outlined to me before today that he was going to raise the matter. I was in touch with the Department. A number of technical drafting issues have come to light in respect of Parts 2 and 3 of the Children and Family Relationships Act 2015. The implications of these issues are being explored by officials in the Department and the Office of the Attorney General and clarification on whether primary legislation is required to resolve these issues is being sought.

In the event that primary legislation is required, the Minister will seek this as a matter of urgency. I ask Senator Warfield to give the Minister a bit more time to come back to us on the matter. I have flagged the matter with the Department because it is a very important one. As the Senator has said, there are people affected by this delay. As I have outlined to the House, there are issues that need to be addressed and more time is required in regard to the matter. I would be happy to come back to the House again with the Minister at a later date. Rather than creating a debate now on it, I have given the House an updated position and would be happy to

return to the matter in a number of weeks.

Senator Colm Burke raised the issue of investment in health and I will have the Minister come to the House regarding that matter. Senators Kieran O'Donnell and Lombard raised the issue of the connectivity in the context of Shannon Airport. I congratulate the airport on its New York Stewart International Airport daily flight. As Senator Lombard rightly said, those of us in the southern capital of Cork have been disproportionately affected by Norwegian Air's decision. I have written to the Joint Committee on Transport, Tourism and Sport requesting that the DAA come to the committee to explain why Cork Airport lost out in this case. As Senator Kieran O'Donnell rightly said, it is about having a structured debate around our aviation policy in the future whereby we do not allow everything to happen in Dublin and where the growth is not just centred around Dublin but that both Cork and Shannon can be seen to grow exponentially as well. I would be happy to have that debate with the Minister, Deputy Ross, in the coming weeks.

If Senator Warfield would allow me to have the Minister come back to me again with an update rather than divide the House on a very important issue, I would be happy to come back to him. I will not accept his amendment on the basis of the reply I have given to the House to the effect that the Department is working to iron out the difficulties and I would hope that he would allow that space.

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Fintan Warfield has moved an amendment to the Order of Business, "That the debate with the Minister for Health on the rights of same-sex parents be taken today." Is the amendment being pressed?

Senator Fintan Warfield: We have heard it all before.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I am as anxious as the Senator to get the matter resolved. That is why I took his request as seriously as I did.

An Cathaoirleach: It is Senator Warfield's prerogative if he wishes to have it pressed.

Senator Fintan Warfield: We have given the Minister three years.

Senator Martin Conway: Give him a chance.

An Cathaoirleach: If the Senator wishes to withdraw the amendment and reinstate it in a month's time, he has that prerogative as well.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I am happy to work with Senator Warfield. I am as anxious as he is to get the matter resolved.

Senator Fintan Warfield: Can we meet the Department?

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I will put in a request to have the Senator meet the Department and I will go with him if he wants. I have no problem with that.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I thank Senator Warfield. It is a very important, sensitive matter and the lives of people are being discommoded in a variety of ways.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: Does the Cathaoirleach think it is right that the Leader

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of the Seanad has to answer accusations from a Senator who is not here and that we go over time because out of his deference-----

An Cathaoirleach: That is a matter for the Leader. I will just say this as a word of warning-----

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: They were serious accusations about the navy and the Army.

An Cathaoirleach: As a warning to all, I have been very accommodating to people but in future I will strictly cut people off and the Leader will have a limited time. It is not realistic that we go 15 minutes over when there is a Minister and other matters waiting.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: A Chathaoirligh, the people who do stick to time-----

An Cathaoirleach: That is a matter for the Leader.

Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell: I think it is very unfair that Senators sit here and wait, with the grace of the Leader, while other Senators who have actually accused the Government of things that are possibly not true are not here to have them answered.

Senator Martin Conway: Excellent point.

An Cathaoirleach: That is a matter for the Leader. I cannot rule on that one as it is not a decision for me. It is up to the Leader to respond. Some people for different reasons may have to leave early and they say so to the Leader. They may have other committee meetings, for example. If people want me to record the amount of time Senators are in this Chamber, I might give the answer that some people might not desire me to give.

Order of Business agreed to.

Childcare Support Bill 2017: Second Stage

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

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): I am pleased to have the opportunity to introduce the Childcare Support Bill 2017 to the Seanad. In March, the *1 o'clock* Bill completed its passage through the Dáil, following positive and constructive engagement with Deputies. There was cross-party support for the Bill and cross-party collaboration on a number of amendments which have strengthened the Bill and resulted in the text we now have before us. I look forward to working with Senators to examine the Bill further over the coming weeks.

The cost of childcare places a huge financial burden on many families, especially on parents who are trying to get out of poverty, or who want to take up job opportunities or take part in education but who cannot afford to do so because of the financial barrier of childcare fees. The high cost of childcare is also a barrier to the participation of young children in high quality early care and education, which we know from international research can make a lasting difference to children's life chances.

Making childcare more affordable for families will bring many benefits. It will improve

outcomes for children. It will also support parents to transition from welfare to employment and support lifelong learning for parents. It will advance gender equality, supporting women's labour market participation and helping to close the gender pay gap. It will also help to tackle child poverty and support economic growth. These benefits are why I am so proud of the progress we have already made in making childcare more affordable, and why the Bill is so important.

The Bill provides the legislative underpinning for a new affordable childcare scheme, which will replace all existing targeted childcare subvention schemes with a single, streamlined scheme. It is a scheme that will provide the framework for sustainably increasing public investment in childcare over the years ahead. The scheme will make childcare more affordable for parents by providing subsidies which will be paid on the parents' behalf to their chosen registered childcare provider. The provider must use the subsidy to offset the fees it charges.

The scheme will provide income-related financial support, which targets support towards parents who face the greatest financial difficulty in affording childcare. It will also provide non-income related, or universal, financial support, which allows a level of support for all parents of children of a prescribed age who use registered childcare services. The Bill also allows for additional support for families where there is an identified need for childcare on the grounds of child development or child welfare. It names five statutory bodies that may make referrals for free or additional childcare support. This, for me, is one of the most important aspects of the Bill, intended to help ensure we can meet the needs of the most vulnerable children and of families that may be a long way from participation in the labour market and that would otherwise benefit from only limited childcare support.

The Bill marks the first time that any of our childcare funding schemes will have a statutory basis. The Bill is critical for good governance in a number of ways. It will establish clear eligibility and scheme rules, it will create clear procedures, including an appeals process, and it will ensure the Department and the scheme administrator have adequate powers to ensure that public funds are being used efficiently and to take action where public funds are misused. Crucially, the Bill will enable the introduction of a streamlined, automated income-assessment process, providing a statutory basis for data sharing between the scheme administrator, the Revenue Commissioners, and the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection. This new income assessment process will allow the targeting of childcare supports towards those with the greatest need, in particular families seeking to enter the labour market but that have a low or moderate level of income. It will also allow us to move away from the current reliance on social welfare payments and medical cards as the only means of assessing financial need for childcare. It will be quite monumental when we get to that point and will impact everyone positively, providers as well as families.

The IT-driven approach at the heart of the affordable childcare scheme will also improve administrative efficiency and streamline the application and registration procedures for parents and childcare service providers. My goal is the creation of a world-class system that is user-friendly for parents, efficient for childcare providers, and excellent value for money for the public Exchequer and society. While I am keen to introduce the scheme as soon as possible, the IT system required is complex and I want to be sure it is robust and long-lasting. The development of the IT system, which is being carried out in close co-operation with the office of the chief information officer, is well under way. A request for tenders for the IT development was published in January and the evaluation process is ongoing at present. Earlier delays regarding the IT system are, indeed, regrettable. However, the improvements I introduced last September

involving the introduction of a universal childcare subsidy for all children under three years of age and increases of up to 50% in the value of existing childcare subsidies mean that more than 71,000 children and their families are already benefitting from increased childcare subsidies. These important measures allowed me to fast-track many of the benefits of the affordable childcare scheme without compromising on the rigour and time needed to develop and launch this landmark new scheme.

An important aspect of the Bill, and one that has so far been underestimated, is its importance for raising quality standards in childcare. We know that childcare must be of high quality if it is to improve outcomes for children. While the primary focus of the affordable childcare scheme is affordability, the approach embodied by the scheme reflects the international evidence that supply-side funding gives the Government greater leverage to improve quality standards than demand-side approaches such as tax credits. It does this in several ways. The Bill limits participation in the scheme to childcare providers registered with Tusla, including registered childminders, providing assurance that critical quality standards must be met by all providers in the scheme. All childcare providers who wish to participate in the scheme will have to sign a contract with the Department. Section 8 of the Bill allows quality conditions to be specified in the contract that are more rigorous than those required by the early years services regulations. The Bill allows for future development of the scheme, with section 13 allowing the possibility of quality-raising incentives to be built into the formula for determining how much funding the scheme provides. More broadly, the flexibility of the Bill allows us to change the subsidy rates over time, enabling the Government to adjust the scheme in response to the findings of the independent review of the cost of quality childcare, as well as in response to the ongoing professionalisation of the early years workforce.

If we are to support the move to a professional workforce with wages and working conditions that reflect the importance of the work carried out by early years educators, inevitably the cost of delivering childcare will rise over the years ahead. Subsidy rates will, therefore, also have to rise if childcare is to remain affordable to parents. Finally, by requiring all participating childcare providers to register with Tusla, I am very aware of the historical anomaly that school-age childcare remains unregulated. To address this anomaly, I announced last December that I would introduce regulations later in 2018 in advance of the childcare scheme's introduction to enable school-age childcare services to register with Tusla and, thus, participate in the scheme. In the first instance, these new regulations will be limited to registration requirements. Work will then commence on the drafting of full regulations that will cover quality issues such as qualification requirements.

I turn to the Bill itself. Senators will recall that I published the heads of a Bill and general scheme in January 2017. In February 2017, the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs carried out pre-legislative scrutiny. The recommendations made by the committee were very useful and have helped to shape the Bill that I am presenting today. During the Bill's passage through the Dáil, a number of important amendments were made. I greatly appreciate the positive contribution of Deputies from all parties who worked together with me on those amendments.

In setting out the main provisions of the Bill, I will briefly highlight some of the key amendments that have been made since the Bill was published. Section 1 provides definitions of key terms. In particular, it ties the definition of "childcare services provider" to the list of registered providers maintained by Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. Throughout the Bill, the term "childcare services provider" therefore includes registered childminders. The definition of

“parent” in the Bill includes a person acting *in loco parentis* and, therefore, includes guardians.

Section 2 provides for the establishment of the scheme which will be funded out of moneys provided by the Oireachtas each year and states that the scheme will be operated by the scheme administrator. Sections 3 to 6, inclusive, provide for the appointment of the scheme administrator and describe its functions and governance arrangements. Section 6 allows for the scheme administrator to outsource certain functions while retaining responsibility for administration of the scheme.

Section 7 sets out the eligibility criteria for parents seeking to apply for financial support under the scheme. The residency requirements allow for applications not only from parents who are ordinarily resident in the State, but also from EU and EEA citizens who are not resident in the State and from other categories of parents who are formerly employed or self-employed in the State. However, financial support will be limited to childcare services registered under the Child Care Act 1991, and these must be located in the State. Where parents are separated, section 7 allows both parents to receive financial support, but each parent may only receive support for the days or times that he or she has care of the child. Section 8 limits participation in the scheme to “approved” childcare services providers, which must be registered with the Child and Family Agency and also have signed a contract with the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs to participate in the scheme. As such, I assure Senators that the wording of the Bill provides that registered childminders will be able to take part in the scheme.

Section 9 specifies the process by which parents may make applications for financial support, including the information they must provide. When applications are for income-related financial support, in most cases the income-data will be gathered through an automated process involving the Revenue Commissioners and the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection. Income data will be gathered with the consent of the applicant and on the basis of PPS numbers supplied by the applicant. The Bill allows for the maximum number of hours of income-related financial support to vary depending on the parents’ participation in the labour market. As a result, section 10 requires employers, education and training providers to verify information provided by an applicant on his or her labour market status when asked to do so by the scheme administrator. Section 11 provides for the income-assessment process, which must use the definitions of “income” and “allowable deduction” in Schedule 1.

Section 12 specifies the information that the scheme administrator must provide to the applicant after determining the amount of financial support, if any, for which the applicant qualifies. It also stipulates that a determination may be valid for 12 months at most, after which the application must be renewed. Section 13 provides for the calculation by the scheme administrator of the amount of financial support for which an applicant qualifies and sets out the factors to which the Minister must have regard when making regulations on the calculation of financial support. Amendments made to section 13 in the Dáil require the Minister, when making regulations on the number of hours of childcare to be subsidised, to have regard to parents’ availability to care for a child, and also to have regard to transition periods between work and study, namely, those brief but crucial bridging periods before a parent’s employment, self-employment or study commences or after it ends.

Section 14 allows for additional support where there is an identified need for childcare on grounds of child development or child welfare. It builds on existing arrangements under the administrative schemes being replaced. Additional support may take the form of higher rates of payment, such as the provision of childcare at no cost to parents, or additional hours of financial

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support each week, or provision of financial support for children who would otherwise be too young or too old to participate in the scheme. This section allows for agreements between the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs and certain statutory bodies. These agreements will set out the procedures by which those statutory bodies may refer children for additional childcare support as well as the additional support to be provided. An amendment made to section 14 in the Dáil requires the Minister and statutory bodies, when making those agreements, to have regard to the objective of stability for children attending childcare services.

Schedule 2 lists the relevant statutory bodies and the purposes for which they may make referrals. An amendment to Schedule 2 of the Bill strengthened the wording regarding the purpose of referrals for childcare support from Tusla, which will be a key source of referrals for families in need of additional care. Section 15 provides for procedures relating to the payment of financial support to approved childcare service providers and for conditions to be prescribed in respect of those payments. Section 16 requires an applicant to notify the scheme administrator if he or she is no longer eligible for financial support under the scheme or if he or she ceases work or study. Section 17 allows for parents and childcare services providers to request reviews of decisions made by the scheme administrator. In cases where an application has been assessed through an automated process, a review allows a parent to request an administrative officer to examine the application. A review is the first stage of the appeals process. This section also allows the scheme administrator to carry out reviews on its own initiative, for instance to verify information provided by a parent or by a childcare service provider.

Sections 18 and 19 allow for the appointment of authorised officers who may enter the premises of childcare service providers in order to examine attendance records, financial records and other documents relevant to the scheme to ensure the proper use of public funds. Section 20 establishes the appeals process which follows completion of the review process under section 17. The Minister's consent is required for the appointment of appeals officers who will be required to be independent in the performance of their functions. Parents and childcare service providers will also have recourse to the Ombudsman and to the High Court on a point of law. Section 21 allows the scheme administrator to recover money from parents and from childcare services providers, both in cases of fraud or misrepresentation and in cases of overpayment.

Section 22 amends the Child Care Act 1991 to address issues arising from the regulation of school-age childcare which, as I stated earlier, will commence in 2018 in order to allow school-age providers to take part in the scheme from the outset. The amendments to the Child Care Act clarify the purpose of school-age childcare and ensure that the definition of "school-age service" covers services for children up to the age of 15. The amendments also set a limit on the number of school-age children for whom a childminder can care while remaining exempt from the requirement to register with Tusla. I stress that these amendments are an immediate necessity to enable the registration of school-age childcare services in advance of the introduction of the scheme. However, at the same time, I will be advancing an action plan on childminding which I intend to publish in the year ahead. This plan will build on the recommendations of the working group on the childminding sector, which published its report in March. The action plan will set out reforms and supports to provide a pathway for a progressive increase in the number of registered childminders over the years ahead. This is consistent with my broader policy goal to continually drive quality improvement across the early years sector, including by supporting ever-growing numbers of childminders to come within the scope of regulation.

Section 23 amends the Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005 to refer to the affordable childcare scheme as a "relevant purpose" for which specified bodies may share information on

the basis of a PPS number. This amendment will allow the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection to transfer information on an applicant's income to the scheme administrator on the basis of the PPS number provided by someone who applies for income-related financial support.

Section 24 allows for the sharing of data between the bodies named in Schedule 3 for specified purposes, which include assessing an applicant's income, registering a child, making payments, verifying children's attendance, and carrying out a review, an appeal or the prosecution of an offence.

Section 25 describes the regulation-making powers under the Act. Following an amendment made in the Dáil, section 26 requires a review of the scheme to begin 12 months after the first payments under the scheme are made.

Section 27 allows beneficiaries of the existing administrative schemes to continue receiving the same level of financial support for a transitional period after those schemes are replaced by the new scheme. This would arise in circumstances where existing beneficiaries choose not to move over to the new scheme.

Section 28 provides for expenses incurred by the Minister in the administration of the scheme to be paid out of moneys provided by the Oireachtas. Section 29 creates sanctions for persons guilty of offences under the Act. Section 30 allows commencement of different provisions of the Act at different times.

I look forward to hearing the views of the Members of the Seanad and to working with them to formulate the best possible legislation to help families to access affordable, quality childcare. I commend the Bill to the House.

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee: I thank the Minister for her very comprehensive statement. Fianna Fáil is happy to support the Bill and we look forward to it commencing. Our criticism is with the 18-month delay which did not provide certainty for families or childcare providers. I am happy that it is now being commenced.

I am very passionate about childcare, partly because I am in the throes of it as a parent of two small children. It is a key issue for women in Ireland. We need to improve the provision of childcare if we are to bridge the gender pay gap, a matter in which I have a great interest. I appreciate the Minister's commitment to the professionalisation of the childcare sector. I ask her to outline the additional supports she will provide for workers in the sector. As she said, their pay is not great. They are becoming more professionalised and their pay is not reflecting that professionalisation. They need extra support to provide the quality service they want to and have the ability to provide. I would like to hear the Minister's comments on that.

I am also concerned that many people living in rural parts of the country do not have ready access to childcare centres. I know the Minister is trying to professionalise and regularise the childcare sector, but parents will often find it hard to access. Does she have any ideas for moving that forward in an acceptable fashion? As childcare has not been to the forefront of politicians' minds over the years, we are now playing catch up.

The Minister said that separated parents can apply for subsidies separately. I ask her to clarify if the income threshold will cover the two parents or will each of them have a threshold they need to reach. As separated parents run two separate households, their expenses would be

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greater than those of a couple living together. It becomes a catch-22 if both separated parents have separate thresholds and it might mean that parents living together in the one household might be disadvantaged. I ask the Minister to make reference to that in her closing remarks.

The budget will be presented in a few months and I presume the negotiations are going on at the moment. Is the Minister fighting for anything in particular? Is she seeking to get extra resources into this scheme? Is it for the professionalisation of the profession or is it to increase the subsidy available for parents or is there something else on her horizon?

Senator Colette Kelleher: I welcome the Minister, Deputy Zappone, to the House. I welcome the drive, energy and hard cash that she has been investing in our young children since her appointment.

As the Minister said in her speech, research has proven that access to good quality early childhood care and education, integrated with maternity, parental and paternal leave is good for children, especially in tilting the balance for children experiencing disadvantage. I am thinking about the 3,500 children living in emergency accommodation, the estimated 139,000 children living in consistent poverty highlighted by CSO in December, Traveller children and children with disabilities. I am also thinking of children living in direct provision. I volunteered this summer in a holiday-placement scheme supporting them. They really are living in the most dire and limited circumstances.

Investing in early childhood care and education has a multiplier effect. It is good for children. It is also good for their mothers and fathers, in supporting them and allowing them to take up training, study and work opportunities. Investing in early education and childcare also means that Ireland is at last beginning to catch up with what parents and children take for granted in other countries in Europe, a matter to which I will return later. For too long we have been an outlier and laggard in this regard, letting down our children, compromising their parents' ability to get on and damaging our society and even our economy.

The Childcare Support Bill is a definite step in the right direction. I welcome that it is putting the affordable childcare scheme on a statutory basis for the first time. It was very heartening to listen to the budget and, as well as the usual lines we all look out for, having childcare there as a line to look out for, to monitor and to fiercely argue for because we are really only beginning as far as I can see.

I welcome that a single, streamlined system is being put in place. Bureaucracy, poor policy design and complexity often get in the way of good political intention. The affordable childcare scheme needs to be simple for providers. I remember getting an angry call from the then Secretary of State, David Blunkett, now Lord Blunkett, for being critical of the 45 funding streams for childcare the UK Government had put in place back in the late 1990s. Investment is only good if it can reach the parts, if it is straightforward and simple, and if it is under good governance. This is especially so for parents. Schemes must be user-friendly, as is mentioned in the briefing note, particularly if the Minister's intent to reach poorer parents and reduce child poverty is to be achieved. I will be scrutinising this and other measures as the Bill progresses through the House. I may table some amendments.

I welcome the supply-side approach. Demand-side subsidies really do not work. I speak as someone who previously argued for them in the UK, but I was wrong. The Minister is right in having this supply focus.

I also welcome the amendments to section 13 when making regulations and having regard to parents' availability to care for a child, and the bridging periods before, after and between periods of work or study. It is really important that we get this right so that the scheme can be workable in real life for parents. Sometimes the policy makers' design is impossible to work in practice. It would be a disappointment if such a worthy scheme were to fall foul of complexity.

I welcome the amendment to section 14 around the provision of support for vulnerable children and measures to enhance the child's stability. We are all aware of how moving around, dislocation and different arrangements can affect children's sense of security and well-being, the very children who may already have suffered greatly. We want to do everything to support them and not make anything worse for a child by the poor design of a well-intentioned scheme.

I welcome the commitment to regulate school age childcare. This was the focus of my first job in childcare in the UK in 1990s. When we hear about scandals in sports and in scouting it is about time that Ireland brought in these much needed regulations to safeguard children. Children who attend can also benefit from the affordable childcare scheme. I welcome commitment to strengthen the quality and availability of childcare with childminding to come under the scope of the regulations.

The proposal to begin review of the scheme 12 months after the first payments are made is also welcome as is the commitment to strengthen the wording in relation to the purpose of referrals for childcare support from Tusla.

I direct the Minister to a good report from the OECD, Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Ireland, in which I was involved. This report was published in 2004 - 14 long years ago. At the time I was working as an adviser to the UK's Minister of State for Children, Margaret Hodge, embedded in the Department for Education and Skills in Whitehall. I was also part of the OECD review team under the leadership of John Bennett. I dug out the report on Sunday and in many ways it makes for disappointing reading. In spite of great efforts and energy on the part of the Minister, Deputy Zappone, Ireland is still lagging far behind our European counterparts with regard to early childhood care and education. The 2004 OECD report made many sound observations and good suggestions to the Government that have yet to be taken up. It is a useful checklist for the Minister, Deputy Zappone and her officials and I shall now highlight some key points from the report. It advises the integration of all early education and care policy under one Ministry; annual targets so that progress can be checked; and, attention to the early years and childhood needs of disadvantaged children, children from the Traveller community and children with disabilities. The 2004 report stated explicitly that the educational achievement of Traveller children is a matter of deep concern. It was then and it still is. Report after report shows this and it would be good to hear from the Minister what she is going to do about the early childhood and education gap for Traveller children through this Bill and other measures.

Other good suggestions made by the OECD in 2004 include funded parental leave of sufficient length; free accredited early education; a publicly funded morning education session for all children from the age of three; and the wisdom, positive effects and cost effectiveness of intensive early intervention. I would love to see a Sure Start style scheme rolled out in Ireland. I have seen the benefits of this type of scheme and I am heartbroken at its dismantling in the UK. We should look to this type of scheme and be ambitious about it.

The OECD strongly advised that Ireland should quickly reach the average rate of public ex-

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penditure for OECD countries for early childhood education and care. The affordable childcare scheme will help but I would like to know where we stand now regarding the average spending *vis-à-vis* the OECD league table of investment in early childhood care and education. As pointed out by Senator Clifford-Lee, I would also like to see how we are faring and what we should aim for in the budget with regard to achieving the goal of getting to the average.

I thank the Minister for her drive and commitment to improving early childhood care and education in Ireland and for bringing forward the Childcare Support Bill 2017. I look forward to working with her to make the Irish early education and care system fit for the modern State that we are, and above all good enough for Ireland's children and their parents.

Senator Catherine Noone: I welcome the Minister and her officials to the House. I thank her for her ongoing work in this area. I will be brief. I support the Bill in full but I wish to raise just a couple of points.

Ireland has come a long way in a relatively short period of time in childcare. It is in the relatively recent past that the first Minister for Children and Youth Affairs was appointed. This showed a focus on children's affairs. Over and over again, the issue main raised in areas where younger couples live is the issue of childcare. It is clearly an issue the Government has listened to. Much has been done, and is being done with this legislation. I join with Senator Clifford-Lee in her question on the budget. While not ungrateful for the work done in this regard - and we give kudos for it - we also need to know what direction we are going and what it is we hope to achieve in the upcoming budget. This would be very interesting.

The Government is clearly delivering on its election commitment to help ease the financial costs of childcare for hard-pressed working families. The Minister would say, and I would join with her in this, that Ireland is building a world class, properly funded childcare system, which should last for generations. We have, unfortunately, been generations out so it will have to be done incrementally.

This universal measure is implemented to ensure that all families benefit, which is welcomed, and a further targeted payment will be made to help those families who need it most. This money is intended to help families who have borne the brunt of one of the most expensive childcare systems in the world caused by years of Government neglect and under-investment. It is about breaking down the barriers that stop people getting a fair chance to fulfil their potential and it is a big part of the republic of opportunity idea. The gender pay gap is hugely significant in this space. If we bring in more of the types of measures that have already been brought in around parental leave - rather than maternal leave - employers will not now automatically assume that a woman will disappear for a large proportion of her career with that particular organisation.

The Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, has allocated an additional €20 million in 2018 to support these initiatives. I am hopeful we will get further significant investment in this area for 2019. The new affordable childcare measures introduced by the Government in September will continue to be supported in 2018 and into 2019.

I have been contacted about some slight issues in this regard that I wish to raise with the Minister, and I shall give the Minister an opportunity to respond to them. One Family and the Children's Rights Alliance are concerned that the Bill retains an intention to means-test child maintenance. I would welcome the Minister's comments on this. From a policy perspective we

want all income to be treated equitably. As the Bill stands, could it be said that the scheme acts as disincentive to employment for lone parents? Stakeholders believe that child maintenance should be seen as income for the child, not parental income. Perhaps the Minister will explain where she is coming from around this aspect. Organisations believe that the addition of this child maintenance as child income would be an excellent tool to bring more income into low income households. This will be the outcome of the legislation.

I entirely support the Bill but I believe there is a lot more for the Minister to do in this space. I wish the Minister the best of luck in her Department's interactions with the Minister for Finance in the upcoming budget. That is the only show in town in improving access to childcare and in increasing equality for families and children.

Senator Fintan Warfield: Sinn Féin will support the Childcare Support Bill 2017. It marks an important step in the right direction to bringing our childcare provisions to a more formalised standing and to give certainty to a sector, the instability of which has seen childcare costs spiral out of control. Sinn Féin wants to see childcare costs reduced and we believe this can only be achieved through State subsidies and investment. Childcare costs disproportionately affect working class communities, single parents, young mothers and young families *en masse*. We want fair pay and conditions for workers in the sector where the average pay, only €10.27 per hour, is less than the living wage. The Government has consistently failed to get to grips with this issue and the Bill does nothing to address it. While the Minister has stated numerous times that the Department does not dictate wage levels, the Government dictates the standards and conditions that are to be met by childcare providers. A discussion is needed about the lack of fair standards and conditions for those who choose childcare as a career.

Sinn Féin is also concerned regarding the delay in implementing the information technology system for the new scheme. I understand it will not be in place before the commencement of the scheme in September. In the meantime, childcare providers will administer the scheme, which generates additional costs and adds to their workload. The funding allocated makes no provision for this additional burden. I hope the Minister is mindful of this and her Department provides the utmost assistance in this matter.

Furthermore, while the Minister assures us that the scheme is open to Tusla registered childminders, much more needs to be done to encourage childminders to register with Tusla. Obviously, we do not want a scenario to develop in which the State subsidises people who are not subject to regulation and oversight. This is an area on which work must be done in the period ahead. In the medium to long term, the State needs to move beyond simply subsidising private providers towards a publicly-funded system.

I commend the Minister on accepting a number of Sinn Féin amendments tabled by Deputies Denise Mitchell and Kathleen Funchion during the Dáil Stages of the Bill, particularly on the issue of holding a review of the scheme after 12 months and providing supports for vulnerable children. I hope to continue this positive relationship as the Bill proceeds through the Seanad.

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): I warmly thank Senators for their words of support for the Bill. It is great that they support it, although it does not surprise me. At the same time, it is important for me to receive their encouragement in respect of the Bill and my ongoing work on childcare and early years education and care. I genuinely mean that.

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I found the contributions of Senators thoughtful and their excellent questions spurred me into thinking further about certain issues. In answering some of their questions, I will use the opportunity to speak briefly on our current thinking on some of the issues, which my officials and I may not articulate as much as we may like, including perhaps in the Dáil. I will also answer some of the specific questions raised. That is meant as a compliment to Senators whom I thank for preparing such excellent contributions to the debate.

All the contributions noted the significant progress we have made on the journey to date. I appreciate those comments. Statements to the effect that we have a long way to go are also helpful to me and this is a view shared by me and my excellent officials, some of whom are present. It is important that parliamentarians in both Houses offer constructive criticism as it will support our efforts to secure increased investment.

Senators will be aware that the affordable childcare scheme will not be the only vehicle on this journey. The scheme will replace a number of other schemes and result in the streamlining of financial supports. I am especially excited that it will offer a way to wrap around the early childhood care and education, ECCE, free preschool programme, our largest early years scheme as measured by funding and number of participants. While the Bill has been designed to support quality-raising measures, the quality of childcare will also be addressed through other measures, including training, the inspection regime and efforts to improve wages and working conditions in the childcare sector.

I appreciate Senators' comments, specifically regarding the amendments that were proposed and accepted in the Dáil. As Senator Kelleher noted, it is not just good policy that is important but also policy that is informed by practice. The Senator was able to speak from the perspective of her professional background. Some of our colleagues in the Dáil were also able to use their professional background when offering recommendations on amendments. We also heard from other sources, including advocates. Senators referred, for example, to organisations such as One Family, the Children's Rights Alliance and Early Childhood Ireland which work hard advocating from a perspective of expertise as well as the experience of their members. All of that is good.

I will now address some specific questions, not necessarily in the order in which they were raised. I am grateful for the support expressed by Senator Clifford-Lee on behalf of the Fianna Fáil Party. I also note the Senator's focus on women. She raised the issue of additional supports for workers and asked a question on rural areas. I am keenly aware that the professionals who work as childminders are critical because many of them have told me that in some areas, particularly in rural settings, centre-based childcare is not available and parents must, therefore, use childminders. For this reason, it is important that we implement as quickly as possible the initial actions and recommendations of the working group. As the Senator is aware, I have increased the number of family resource centres and provided a slight increase in support for existing centres. While there are not as many family resource centres as I would like, some are located in rural areas and provide a base for childcare centres.

I will address the questions many Senators asked on the budget presently. Senator Kelleher focused on children living in more vulnerable contexts and those who are experiencing difficulties or harm regarding some aspects of their identity and background. I am aware of this issue and have already tried to address it. Section 14, for example, enables us to identify certain categories of children and their sponsors who can access free childcare for such children on the basis of agreement between me and the providers in question. This will also mitigate or reduce

harm in the context of children in emergency accommodation and even reduce the harm of poverty. I am trying to get access to free childcare for families in emergency accommodation, even in circumstances where they move from their original place of residence. My vision for the childcare scheme is to ensure it focuses on families who have less.

The Senator also asked a question on the OECD review carried out in 2004. She is correct that Ireland lags far behind other countries in this area. It would be good to use the review as a checklist.

The access and inclusion model, AIM, takes a wider approach in developing a charter addressing what it means to be inclusive and setting out how we operate in that context. The Department is sponsoring an incredible amount of training of professionals in order to ensure that they operate as inclusive childcare providers and that will potentially have an impact on Traveller children. We could look at that a bit more. The Senator mentioned Sure Start. Naomi Eisenstadt had a lot to do with establishing that. She will be coming here as my guest in early May. I am having her meet a number of people for them to glean her wisdom.

There were a couple of other questions. On maintenance, all means-tested schemes run by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection include maintenance payments. As they include child maintenance within the income assessment, this scheme is no different in that regard. Including maintenance payments within the income assessment is essential to the principle of treating all income in the same way regardless of the source and the principles of equity and fairness in the treatment of all applicants. Another question was raised in respect of separated parents. Each parent is an applicant in his or her own right and enjoys the full benefit of the thresholds when being assessed for a subsidy. That clearly answers the question. Each qualifies for a subsidy in his or her own right for the days and hours for which he or she cares for the child. Where a separated parent is paying maintenance, that would be acknowledged and deducted when calculating assessable income. The needs of lone parents have been explicitly taken into account from the outset in the design of the scheme.

On Senator Clifford-Lee's concerns regarding professionalisation of the early years workforce and its low wages, of course those issues are of great concern to me. On the specific requirements of professionalisation, I will mention something which I announced at the weekend when I was with the membership of Early Childhood Ireland. On Saturday I announced our new support for continuing professional development. We are now going to establish a systematic approach and a structure for the support and formation of an ongoing continuing professional development programme for workers. We will be employing a person to do that. For the first time we will provide some training for professionals that will be paid for. It will be brought to the professionals themselves or the centres from which they come will receive money to support them in replacing staff while they are receiving training. That is another step forward in terms of supporting the professionals.

There are two other things I wanted to mention. The first has to do with the money. I will reply to some of the comments of Senator Warfield and his colleagues in Sinn Féin, who are very clear in the way they articulate a focus on the model of investment which we have in Ireland and on a public model. Obviously we have a mixed model in the country. Here is the question on which my officials and myself have been really focused in recent days and on which we will be focused in the upcoming weeks as we work on the early years strategy. How do we get public moneys to the practitioner and the professional? That starts to address the question of the focus on the public but also on the professionals and the practitioners. How do we get

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the public moneys to the professional? We are going to be doing a more intensive examination of a couple of other jurisdictions to help us answer that, perhaps in a different way than we have in the past.

On the budget itself, the goal I have and the point about increasing the percentage of GDP invested in the area, of course I will be focused on those issues. The question is how to approach the matter strategically and in a way that will get significant investment. Again, this is something that is happening in the context of our discussions on the early years strategy. As we develop a draft, we will put it out for a big open policy debate and hear what people have to say on it. I note the headlines today about some of the conversations we have had in Cabinet recently, in which our Minister for Finance said there potentially could be a big pot there and that a lot of the focus will be on housing, health, education and capital spend. That list did not include childcare. That is not to say that childcare is outside of that focus or that it will not be emphasised but I am noting that and I know the Minister knows this.

I understand the strategy of focusing on capital spend and so on as we move towards a more prosperous economy, because capital spend is a once-off which does not result in a fuelling or heating-up of the economy in the same way as does investment in ongoing expenditure. In light of my concerns about significantly increasing the investment in childcare beyond the €20 million which we got this year - because, as Senator Noone pointed out, that will not be sufficient for 2019 - I will be asking the Minister for Finance whether there is some way to spend more. Are there certain strands of spending in which increases do not necessarily fuel the economy in the same way as would increases in other spending strands? Are there some strands of spending in which an increase may contribute to further fuelling of the economy but in which there is a greater justification for such an increase because of all we know about the state of the childcare sector as it stands? These are not comments coming from my officials or my Department. I am asking these questions myself as a politician but I am engaging with my Department in that regard.

Reducing the gender pay gap, which was mentioned by Senators Clifford-Lee and Noone, can be achieved by paying professionals in the childcare sector more. Most of them are women. That is a way to develop in terms of that issue. If many of our childcare professionals are not making a living wage, a fact pointed out by Senator Warfield and of which I am aware, then if moneys going into that sector are increased and more is given to the people earning that money in low-income households, does it not necessarily mean that the income of the household will be raised, thereby impacting on child poverty in a different way than through subsidies for childcare? I am just sharing a couple of the thoughts I have been having recently in order to begin building my arguments with the Minister for Finance. I understand the dialogue and the thinking being developed by the Government in respect of the upcoming budget. I am thinking about where I sit as the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs and about my absolute and passionate commitment to look for a considerably more significant investment that we have had in the past. I want to be able to indicate that ambition in the context of the next ten years and the early years strategy.

Question put and agreed to.

Acting Chairman (Senator John O'Mahony): When is it proposed to take Committee Stage?

Senator Catherine Noone: Next Tuesday.

Committee Stage ordered for Tuesday, 24 April 2018.

Sitting suspended at 2 p.m. and resumed at 4 p.m.

Northern Ireland and 20th Anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement: Statements

Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey): I welcome the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Coveney, to the House. I also welcome the group from the Presentation secondary school in Thurles. I hope they can listen to some of this important debate as we commemorate the Good Friday Agreement and the importance of it to the country.

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): I am glad to participate in the Seanad statements on Northern Ireland as we mark and celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement.

I welcome that this House is taking the opportunity to discuss and reflect on the anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, which comes at another critical time for Northern Ireland. Twenty years on, it is important that everyone should recognise just how far the peace process has been able to progress since the agreement was signed on 10 April 1998, but also the path that is still ahead of us.

The anniversary is an opportunity, first, to remember all that has been collectively achieved through the agreement. The horrendous violence of the past has been ended and peace has been secured. Politics and daily life in Northern Ireland has been transformed, as anybody who takes the time to travel to Belfast or Derry will see. The agreement ushered in a new era in North-South co-operation, which brings practical benefits for people across the island. The Good Friday Agreement has also served as a key to unlock the full potential of relations between Ireland and Britain, which is so important given the depth of the mutual connections between our economies and our people. Perhaps most profoundly, the agreement enabled the journey to full reconciliation to begin, but there is a lot of work still to do on reconciliation.

In reflecting on these achievements secured through the Good Friday Agreement, we must also remember all of those who lost their lives in the violent events of the Troubles. We remember also the survivors, the family members and communities who suffer still from this legacy. The legacy of the past has still to be addressed and this requires the implementation of the Stormont House Agreement framework and there are, of course, other difficulties and challenges today that also need to be overcome within the framework of the Good Friday Agreement. Most immediately, the devolved institutions and the North-South Ministerial Council need to urgently operate again, and the Government is working with the British Government to seek a way forward from the current impasse.

In the declaration to the Good Friday Agreement, participants pledged to work in good faith, “to ensure the success of each and every one of the arrangements to be established” under the agreement. As we seek to address today’s challenges, that commitment to the Good Friday Agreement, in all of its dimensions, must be renewed. The Good Friday Agreement is the fundamental framework for relations in Northern Ireland and across these neighbouring islands. The anniversary is a moment to renew our commitment to that indispensable framework and our belief in what can be achieved collectively through the agreement.

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Partnership between the Governments, power-sharing between the parties and parity of esteem between communities is what was agreed on 10 April 1998. The agreement was then endorsed by the people in the historic referendums, held North and South, the following month. It is incumbent on everyone with responsibilities under the agreement today to ensure that the overwhelming and enduring democratic mandate for the Good Friday Agreement is upheld. The agreement must be fully implemented, all of the institutions of the agreement need to operate, and the principles of partnership, equality and parity of esteem need to be respected and lived, particularly by those of us in politics. This demands leadership, courage and sheer hard work and diligence. That is something that the two Governments, working with the political parties, can and must provide in order to get all of the institutions of the agreement operating effectively and to continue to move the peace process forward in the years ahead.

As the House will be aware, over the course of the last year the Government and the British Government, as co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement, have worked to support and facilitate the parties in their efforts to form an executive. The devolved power-sharing institutions are at the heart of the Good Friday Agreement and they need to operate, as does the North-South Ministerial Council, as I have already mentioned. Unfortunately, to date it has not proved possible to reach an agreement on the formation of an executive, despite intensive engagement.

Following the absence of an agreement between the two largest parties in the last talks process at Stormont, the Taoiseach spoke to the British Prime Minister, Mrs. May, and emphasised the Government's full commitment to the Good Friday Agreement and our continuing determination to secure the effective operation of all of its institutions. I have been keeping in close and frequent contact with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Karen Bradley, who I met in Belfast on 10 April and again in London two days ago. I will continue my contacts with the main parties in Northern Ireland, as will the Secretary of State, and we will meet again in two weeks' time.

We must also work together in the context of Brexit, to protect all of the relationships and co-operation that the agreement has built - within Northern Ireland, between North and South and between the United Kingdom and Ireland as a whole.

As we renew our commitment to the Good Friday Agreement at this time of its 20th anniversary, I have also been placing the focus on the duty to seek a full reconciliation, which was finally made possible with the accord in 1998. Reconciliation is the deepest part of the peace process and it is understandable that it is a slow and difficult process given the tragedy and history involved.

I want to highlight and commend the many people, organisations, communities and politicians who have made enormous progress to try to advance the reconciliation that is needed. The Government is proud to support this work through my Department's reconciliation fund and through our contributions to the International Fund for Ireland. Our commitment will be sustained in the years ahead, as we seek collectively to further the process of reconciliation. We only have to switch on the news, listen to political debates or see some of the simply unacceptable views that are posted on social media to understand that we are not where we need to be in moving on from the past.

The full promise of the Good Friday Agreement can only be realised through the commitment in its first lines "to the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance, and mutual trust". That means neighbours living together in peace and treating each other as neighbours. The Irish

language version of the agreement translates reconciliation as “athmhuinteras”. Athmhuinteras means friendliness, neighbourliness or connection. The Good Friday Agreement enables us to live together on these islands as neighbours and friends, realising the full potential of our connections, without in anyway diminishing our identities, cultures or language - allowing for Irish or British, or both. A more complex set of identities is possible through the agreement and that can only enrich us all.

All of us need to keep that focus on reconciliation at the forefront of all that we do in respect of the Good Friday Agreement and Northern Ireland - to seek a connection, and to speak and act, as a friend, or at the very least as a neighbour. As I have said, there is a particular onus on those of us who are politicians to stretch ourselves and to make ourselves uncomfortable if necessary to try to advance the greater good. That will not always be easy but it will be needed to make progress with the demands of this stage of the peace process, just as it was displayed at Castle Buildings in April 1998.

There is no better alternative than the Good Friday Agreement to reach the higher goals of peace and reconciliation through sheer determination to bridge practical differences because we are all in this together. After hundreds of years of strife and decades of recent conflict, we all stand - Irish, British, unionist, nationalist, loyalist, republican or something else entirely - as people who have the responsibility to find a way of living together.

Twenty years ago, we agreed through the Good Friday Agreement an accord to pursue new and better possibilities. Since that time, we have realised many of them, however imperfectly. On the anniversary of the agreement, we should remember how much has been achieved by brave courageous people from communities, from political parties and in terms of broader leadership. We should renew our commitment to the new beginning the agreement represents. We must take the next steps in our peace process with confidence and determination to address today's challenges and to achieve the full reconciliation that the Good Friday Agreement and its structures make possible. I look forward to hearing Senators' views.

Senator Mark Daly: I thank the Minister for coming to the House. He will remember the words spoken at the SDLP dinner on the Friday night a fortnight ago, quoting the words of John Hume asking people to live for their country and not die for their country. People often refer to the two communities in Northern Ireland. I think we need to refer to them as the two traditions and the aspiration, of course, is to have one community. That is what the Good Friday Agreement promises.

An analysis of 64 peace processes around the world showed that at the time only 19 were successful. While there are numerous reasons that most of them had failed, there are common themes as to why peace succeeds or fails. One of those, which was tragically present in Northern Ireland in the late 1990s, was the concept of a hurting stalemate where both sides were inflicting massive wounds on each other to the point where neither could suffer any more and therefore decided that rather than continuing the bloodshed, they would sue for peace.

The analysis of those 64 peace processes also identified the need for an outside actor, who is neutral and able to act as an honest broker. We were lucky that we had the United States in that regard. Both sides need to pursue the same objective - in this case the Irish Government and the British Government. For the first time in centuries, all the stars aligned. All the actors and all the people and the leadership that were required were in place, in the form of John Major and Albert Reynolds initially, then and Tony Blair, Bertie Ahern, David Trimble, Deputy Gerry

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Adams, and on the Protestant paramilitary side, David Ervine and all the rest, all pursuing the same agenda. Even then we saw how difficult it was up to the last day for it to come together.

Peace is not an event; it is a process and it will go on for decades. The current impasse can be resolved when one considers the scale of the mountains that have been traversed - bigger than Mount Everest. Decommissioning, the RUC and the UDR have all been addressed and we are stuck on a language Act. It is bigger than that; it is an issue of respect and is about culture. It is about the issues of identity and how two traditions can live in the one community. That is the challenge that still faces us.

Of course, we are despondent that Stormont is in mothballs and therefore the North-South Ministerial Council is not in existence, possibly at the worst time with the issue of Brexit. The most recent House of Commons report on our own Border identified that there are no current technological solutions anywhere in the world that would keep that Border frictionless and open, other than, to quote the House of Commons report, the aspirational. We are facing a very real threat that the existing 275 Border crossings will be reduced again to the number of Border crossings that were open during the height of the Troubles when 40,000 security force personnel could not keep them open and could not keep them secure. It looks like we will be reduced to 20 Border crossings.

There have been calls for the Irish and British Governments to get together and hold an intergovernmental conference, that in the absence of the parties in the North being able to reach agreement that there might be a role for Senator George Mitchell or some other individual, although there is no one else in the world like Senator George Mitchell. However, as we reflect on all the things which are not going right at the moment, we must reflect on the last 20 years and all the things that have been achieved in that time and all the lives that have been saved as a result of the peace process. Brexit is a huge challenge to Northern Ireland. I fail to understand how the unionists are not pursuing the best outcome for the people of Northern Ireland which is a foot in both camps and special status within the EU, while being part of the United Kingdom. It would give them the best of both worlds, yet they do not pursue it for ideological reasons. John Hume had many things to say about the pursuit of ideology for its own sake rather than asking what is the best outcome for the citizens.

It is interesting that the Minister quoted from the beginning of the agreement, regarding the achievement of “reconciliation, tolerance, and mutual trust,” which as we all know is largely absent in Northern Ireland at the moment between the DUP and Sinn Féin. Expressions on all sides on the cultural issue in relation to the Irish language are not helpful. Once again, what I do not understand from the unionist perspective is how when one can have a Welsh language Act and Scottish language Act, and police vans in Scotland have “police” painted on them in Gaelic, why can this not be done in Northern Ireland? If I was a unionist, I would think that it strengthened the union, by respecting people’s identity as they do in Wales and Scotland. It is something that makes them British.

If unionism was a business, it would be going out of business because it cannot attract new customers. Its new customers are to be found in the middle ground, they have been described to me as “small “N” nationalists and small “U” unionists” and are asking themselves what is the best future. I debated with Sammy Wilson on the radio on BBC Northern Ireland, when I said that we have a vision for the next 20 years and we think it is a united Ireland. The vision is down the line but it is one we can make; can unionism make an argument of what the best future is for all the people in Northern Ireland? Will a Brexit Britain be better than Northern Ireland

in the EU? Sammy Wilson had no answer to that. There is no answer to that because as we all know, Northern Ireland will be the region most affected by Brexit, more than Scotland, Wales or England itself, which voted for Brexit. That is part of the problem. The unionist communities have concerns that do need to be addressed. If Stormont was up and running, we would be celebrating a huge success. In the challenges that lie ahead in getting it reconstituted, having it up and running again and having the trust back, it needs leadership from the DUP and Sinn Féin but also from Britain. The stars aligned in 1998, but they are not aligning now. With the DUP it is the tail wagging the dog in Westminster and Theresa May is largely hamstrung.

The Good Friday Agreement is lodged with the United Nations as an international agreement. To hear a British Prime Minister row back from the undertakings of the Good Friday Agreement and other agreements that Britain has no strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland and it is up to the people of Northern Ireland to decide their own future, and say it is no longer Britain's position, is a concern for us all. We know she is doing that because the DUP is the tail wagging the dog. When that situation ends we might see Britain being more flexible. The Government's approach in the negotiations on Brexit and on Northern Ireland are positive but the issue of the backstop is very important and more clarity is needed on it. Of all things that could destabilise Northern Ireland, the return of physical infrastructure on the Border would be the biggest backward step. We could live with Stormont being mothballed but the return of the Border, whether permanently or for a period, would be a very serious step backwards.

Acting Chairman (Senator Catherine Noone): I thank Senator Daly. Senators Boyhan and Craughwell are sharing time, and each has four minutes.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I welcome the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade and thank him for his statement on Northern Ireland. It can be tempting when we think of Northern Ireland to look at its history. I do not want to dwell on the political history of Northern Ireland, the island of Ireland or indeed the United Kingdom for one minute. I had the privilege of being at a dinner held by the Goliath Trust at the Europa Hotel at which George Mitchell gave the after-dinner speech. Bertie Ahern was also there and there was a live link with Hillary Clinton and Tony Blair.

The Goliath Trust is an initiative which came out of the peace process to co-fund children and young people at disadvantaged schools from different cultural traditions and none. There was much conversation that night and music over the evening. That night I was struck by the number of young people who spoke of their disillusionment with both the DUP and Sinn Féin, who spoke of being let down. That is not a criticism of the parties, *per se*, but it is what they told me and I want to tell the House. They said that there was a vacuum, yet they had seen vigilantism, crime and a new appetite for aggressive and unacceptable behaviour in their communities and they felt helpless. They did not feel supported.

After a long evening, and various events the following day, having met teachers and community leaders, the thing I took away was that they all felt let down. In his own style, Bertie Ahern said something that only he could say - maybe he planned to say it - but he concluded the evening saying, "Lads, stop the messin'". I told someone that would be on the papers the next day, and sure enough *The Mail* Irish edition featured it. Our Bertie had come up trumps again. What he said was that the politicians ought to get on with the job that they were elected to do to represent their communities and their people and to show strong leadership with integrity and get on with the job. That is what I took from it. As the Minister has said, the Good Friday Agreement is the only game in town. People want parity of esteem and they also want

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leadership. They want the agreement to stick. There is a whole cohort of people who are totally disillusioned with politics who want people to lead them. That is the message that I took away from the people I spoke to in Belfast.

It is important that we build relationships and we continue our work. The Acting Chairman is on the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly as I am. Just speaking to people, socialising, meeting them, travelling North and South is important.

I conclude by referring to Brexit. I pay tribute to Sinn Féin which produced a very comprehensive paper on it looking at special economic status for Northern Ireland. It produced a paper and that is more than I have seen from most people. It is worth looking at and taking a fresh look. The Minister is committed to it, but there is a strong case for a special economic zone for Northern Ireland.

It is a long process requiring patience. I thank the Minister for his work and acknowledge it in this area.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I had the pleasure of entertaining the Historical and Reconciliatory Police, HARP, Society in Leinster House and hosted them for lunch. It is a combined society of police officers from Northern Ireland and the Republic and includes the old Dublin Metropolitan Police and Royal Irish Constabulary. That could not have happened without the peace process and the Good Friday Agreement. As we had lunch, I recalled 1974 and being dragged out of public houses or wherever I happened to be to reassure my mother that I was alive because the IRA had sentenced me to death purely because of a career choice I made when I joined the British Army. Hundreds like me came under the same threat. One colleague from my battalion was taken from Derry into Donegal and shot. It was no joke.

It is important that we remember where we were then because I believe that history is being lost among the younger people in Ireland. We have had such wonderful peace for so long that people are inclined to forget what it was like; it was horrible. Many is the poor mother, widow or father who suffered badly. They are still suffering. With the Good Friday Agreement we got peace and the ability to reconcile among ourselves. I pay tribute to Sinn Féin, which has played its own part. The party members found it in their hearts to vote for me in the by-election that got me into the Seanad the first time. That cannot have been easy and I acknowledge that. Mind you, Fine Gael did too.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: Boy were we sorry. They will know what to do the next time.

Senator Mark Daly: No good deed goes unpunished.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: To try to remain-----

Senator Mark Daly: Regrets, I have had a few.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: At any rate----

Acting Chairman (Senator Catherine Noone): The Senator has brought the interruptions upon himself.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: -----if ever this State needed somebody with understanding and with a sensitivity to what exists between the traditions in Northern Ireland, it is now. I

am proud to stand here and say that the Minister is that man. The Minister is aware that I have met unionist groups in Northern Ireland. Their praise for the Minister has been second to none due to the Minister's understanding, his compassion and his patience. This is what our country needs right now. I am aware there are people who would like to see a Border poll and who believe we could get a Border poll over the line in the morning. We need to remember, however, that for some people when they live in Belfast they are British and when they are on holidays in Spain - for example - they are Irish. We have to try to understand this. I believe that the Minister, Deputy Coveney, and the Taoiseach, have hit that note. They understand that particular sensitivity. I pay a public tribute to the Minister for that.

The Assembly in Northern Ireland needs to get back and working together. I caution those people in the South who say "Why can they not just get together and sort out their differences?" It is not that easy. If it was they would be together now and they would have sorted it out. I will not lay blame on either side because, as anybody knows, in a divorce situation there is no guilty party; there are always two parties. There are two parties in the current Northern Ireland situation and among themselves they must find a way to get the Assembly up and running. They have to find the accommodation to do so. I am not ashamed to say it - and people may criticise me for supporting the Government - but we need people like the Minister out there, facilitating on the periphery, and we need a Government to continue chipping away at that granite block to break it down to eventually finish up with the goal we all want, which is peace. The goal we want, as Irish people North and South, is to be able to live together in harmony. We can worry about Border polls at some other stage. Let us first learn to accommodate each other, respect each other and get to know one another. It is so sad that so few in this Republic have ever travelled to the north of Ireland to see the beautiful coastline, to meet with the people and have the experience of Belfast, County Down, north Antrim and other parts of this beautiful country. It is sad that so few people from the North have come down to enjoy what we have down here. We need to do this. Border polls will not sort out that problem. Understanding and patience is the way to go.

If I am to say anything about the peace process it is "steady as you go". The Minister is doing a good job. He should just keep on the way he is going. If there is any help I can give at any time - and I am sure I speak for every Member in the House - we are behind the Minister. We will do what we can to support the Minister at any stage.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: I welcome the Tánaiste to the House and I salute his hugely patient efforts in Northern Ireland. We have picked up anecdotally, and from various trips to the North and to London, that there is no doubt the Minister, Deputy Coveney, is winning the confidence of all the actors and major political figures in this whole drama. This is due to the Minister's sincerity, patience and genuine attempts to deal with this. I am aware that the Minister is putting long hours into this, leaving Northern Ireland to go back to Cork at all hours of the night. This merits our acclamation and encouragement. It is clear from the Minister's remarks today that he is not letting up on that.

I come from County Cavan, close to the Border, and I have an acute awareness of all that goes with this and all of the rawness of it. I can openly say that we were very close to being a Balkans situation at many stages during the Troubles. It got very close. What existed was shocking but on many occasions, such as at the time of Kingsmill, we were on the brink of being another Balkans situation or worse and becoming a genocide. Thank God this was avoided, and it was a great achievement. The Good Friday Agreement was born out of the Anglo-Irish Agreement and it merits repetition in a non-partisan way because we must be fair to everyone.

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That agreement was a prototype and it set the process in motion. It was crystallised and developed further into the Good Friday Agreement. The merit of the Good Friday Agreement was that it had the North-South structures, the east-west structures, an international agreement that the Republic was to give up its claim on Northern Ireland and the principle of a plebiscite of a referendum or Border poll was implied. It was a very wonderful and intricate political exercise. We should salute all of the actors and parties that were involved in it, and everybody who brought it about. This includes the Government of the day, the UK, Sinn Féin and the American dimension - which is very important to us. We salute everybody involved in the process who brought it on and subsequently the Governments on all sides who went on to work it.

At the event in Queen's University the Tánaiste said that it is very easy to forget how things were before the agreement, especially the winter and spring before that Good Friday. They were shocking. Every morning we arose to more bad news. The agreement was so important. At the event in Queen's University Bill Clinton said that the agreement is a "jewel" in a world "where there are people who are aggressively trying to destroy the very idea of popular democracy". The points made by the Tánaiste and by Bill Clinton at Queen's University, that the agreement got rid of something that was dreadful and that we should never lose sight of what it was like before the agreement, can only drive us on to hold on to it.

I put it to the Tánaiste and to Members that there is a generation that does not remember what happened then. There is potential to romanticise the past and there is potential for dissident activity to grow. We should never have illusions about that or be naive about it. Areas of disadvantage in Northern Ireland with high unemployment and vulnerable areas require positive interventions. We should advocate for this at all times. This is crucially important.

I shall now turn to the issue of Brexit. Any physical infrastructure on the Border such as cameras will be a potential pot-shot for dissidents, and the soldiers who then go to defend the infrastructure could also be a target. We could then be back to a dreadful situation. Apart from all the economic arguments, which are transparent, there is a compelling case to not have a hard border in the context of Brexit. There is a compelling case for the backstop solution to be implemented if necessary. Let us hope there will be a solution to involve the EU and the UK that will, effectively, maintain a customs union and will allow the Border issue to be dealt with. We have established the commitment for the free movement of people, which is vital. As a local in that area I realise the extraordinary significance of that commitment. While it is not germane to today's discussion, the significant social and economic impact of Brexit merits discussion on another day. I am a member of an all-party committee that is dealing with this issue. It is important that we preserve a seamless border and defend the Good Friday Agreement. In that regard, we fully support the Tánaiste's efforts.

As a parent, teacher and resident of a Border area, we should encourage as much cross-Border interaction as possible, for example, groups from the South travelling North and *vice versa*. It is often overlooked that substantial funds and grant aid were provided under the PEACE programme. The North-South dimension should have been tied in more strongly to this peace dividend. Physical evidence should be provided of links with groups on the other side of the Border. For instance, if a sports club in the Republic benefits from a grant under the PEACE programme, it should play games in Northern Ireland. While this may be a simple point, real peace is achieved from the bottom up. As a previous speaker stated, peace building is a process and not something one wakes up to some morning. The process dictates that there must be much more North-South interaction and the Tánaiste should seek to make greater interaction a condition of funding.

We aspire strongly to the establishment of a power-sharing administration in the North, the bedrock of the Good Friday Agreement. I cannot see why the Irish language needs to be politicised or why there should be a difficulty around the support of the language. Having checked earlier today with some of those involved, I understand communities can opt out of having Irish street names placed in their areas. A language commissioner should be appointed. I appeal to the DUP to view this solely as a cultural, identity and heritage issue. The Irish language is not a threat to anyone and should not be interpreted as such. I also appeal to Sinn Féin to continue working towards reaching an agreement and to provide as much reassurance as possible on the Irish language issue. In accepting that an Irish language Act should be introduced, I ask Sinn Féin to make further concessions if it is possible to do so.

The two critical issues are the need to maintain a seamless border in the context of the Good Friday Agreement and the imperative of getting the devolved institutions up and running again. The self-interest of the people of Northern Ireland dictates that this be done. Political representatives who are not prepared to do so are not doing the right thing by their people.

Senator Frances Black: I welcome the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Coveney, to the House. I am honoured to be able to mark the 20th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, a momentous achievement and one of the most significant political milestones of my lifetime. I still remember the incredible feeling of optimism and hope that prevailed on 10 April 1998. The Good Friday Agreement has been an essential vehicle for peace on this island. As parliamentarians, we must do everything in our power to maintain and strengthen it. As the Minister stated, there is no better alternative to the agreement.

While strengthening the Good Friday Agreement will not be an easy task, it is more necessary than ever that we do so. Britain's decision to leave the European Union has put serious pressure on the agreement and dedication, leadership and commitment will be needed to protect it. In that respect, I note the Tánaiste is working extremely hard and doing his best. We must not forget the spirit of reconciliation and desire to put conflict behind us. We cannot accept those who would speak flippantly about the progress the agreement has brought, imperfect though it may be.

I am delighted to note the firm commitment to support the agreement evident across the Chamber today and in my work on the Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. The committee's recent outreach to community groups in east and west Belfast had a great impact on members and brought a renewed sense of hope regarding the importance of the committee's work. I spoke previously to the Minister about our amazing trip to Belfast where we met representatives of Irish language groups. I was moved to hear them speak from the heart about their belief that their identity was being taken from them. We then visited the Shankill Road where people told us they did not have a problem with the Irish language and wanted decent homes, jobs and mental health services and the regeneration of their communities. The visit was an eye-opener for me.

We must be clear that the Good Friday Agreement is not just a political agreement negotiated to put an end to conflict, but an aspirational document which sets out a vision for a transformed and shared society. The large majorities, North and South, who supported the agreement voted not only for peace but also for shared progress, opportunity, and development. They did not just want a peaceful society but a society that protects the rights of all citizens and provides the education, employment, health care and housing needed for human dignity and to flourish. These goals remain to be realised.

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As the Minister will be aware, because we met at the event, I visited St. Mary's College, Belfast, last week where I was struck by some of the testimony on how far the North had come and how much still needed to be done, particularly on the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. I was especially impressed by speeches on the challenges faced by members of the LGBTQ community and the disproportionate barriers and discrimination that still exist. A young transgender person, Alex Moore, gave an incredibly moving description of the discrimination members of the community face in schools and colleges and the impact this has on their mental health. I fully support the vitally important fight for marriage equality. However, we must ensure the principles of equality enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement extend to all aspects of society. Speaking at the event, Ms Grainne Teggart of Amnesty International summed up the feeling very well when she stated that we cannot claim to be a rights-based society until we are a society of equals, that we cannot be a society of equals while rights are denied and that human rights and equality are fundamental to progress in the North. I was struck by Ms Teggart's words. We must ensure that Britain's decision to leave the European Union does not undermine the human rights and equality protections that are such a crucial part of the Good Friday Agreement.

Much of the discussion on Brexit so far has focused on economic issues, particularly trade and agriculture. While these are vital issues that affect the daily lives of many, we cannot allow an exclusive focus on economic issues to overshadow the impact that human rights laws and protections have had. Under the Good Friday Agreement, the European Convention on Human Rights was incorporated into the North's domestic law. The convention prohibits discrimination based on "sex, race, colour, language, religion, political or other opinions, national or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth or other status". In 2010, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union came into force and built on the convention, offering improved protections on workers' rights, fair and just conditions, protections against unjust dismissal, access to healthcare, housing and social support, environmental standards, non-discrimination, gender equality and disability rights. The British Conservative Party has stated Brexit will mean a repeal of the Human Rights Act that underpins these protections. We must be absolutely clear that this cannot result in a diminution of human rights protections in the North. We must ensure the protections currently available are upheld and remain legally enforceable and equivalent to those available to people living South of the Border. This equivalence is vital.

Similarly, the extreme recklessness with which the British Government is pursuing a hard Brexit could have a serious impact on the work done to support peace and reconciliation in the North. In my role on the committee dealing with Brexit, I have observed at first hand the vital role European Union funding has played in addressing the legacy issues from the conflict. For example, the EU-funded PEACE programme has provided thousands of people with direct support related to post-conflict recovery.

Acting Chairman (Senator John O'Mahony): I ask the Senator to conclude if she wishes to share her time.

Senator Frances Black: This includes assisting victims and survivors, conflict resolution workshops, trauma counselling, dealing with post-conflict substance abuse and addressing barriers, physical and non-physical, to fully acknowledge and deal with past trauma. This is the slow, daily, almost unremarkable work that is important for realising the hopes and aspirations contained in the Good Friday Agreement.

As we mark its 20th anniversary, I want to see the British and Irish Governments show real commitment to these principles, and give a firm promise that funding for individuals, families and communities will be maintained, no matter what happens in March 2019. We simply cannot allow a hard Brexit to undermine the work that has been done over the past two decades. More than anything, we should see this anniversary as a moment of renewal, a chance to rely upon the spirit of co-operation and reconciliation that brought the Good Friday Agreement into being in the first place. As elected representatives we must make that our daily work.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I am lucky enough to share a birthday with the Good Friday Agreement. I still remember the incredible power and hope on that day. It has been a beacon globally which has been shown to impact on peace agreements in Bosnia, Sudan, South Africa, Colombia and around the world. It is a beacon not only in itself but because of how it was achieved, including the role played by women, from Betty Williams and Mairead Corrigan, who won the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1976 for their work in building reconciliation, to Monica McWilliams, who represented the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition in the talks, to people such as Inez McCormack and Mo Mowlam. Ireland has followed through on this in championing UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on the role of women in peace building.

It is important that this beacon is not dampened or quashed. Committing to the success of every arrangement must involve the assembly, the human rights and equality commitments and community co-operation. I welcome the Minister's acknowledgement of that. It is not only an important time, however, in the North it is also a hawkish moment worldwide. It is vital that we do not slip into the old politics of interests, alliances and big powers but champion the multilateral diplomacy and the complex work of peace building represented by the Good Friday Agreement over any lure of militarism. Ireland can and will, I hope, continue to lead in this area.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Tánaiste. Tá lúcháir orm go bhfuil deis agam cúpla focal gairid a rá i gcuimhne go bhfuil 20 bliain caite ó síníodh Comhaontú Aoine an Chéasta. I thank the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade for attending and speaking at the community event organised by Féile an Phobail in St. Mary's University College and his attendance at Queen's University. St. Mary's, Queen's and Féile an Phobail are very important institutions in the political, cultural, educational and social life of the people of the North. Both universities are important centres of learning for the people of Ireland, North and South. I also thank former Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, and the former leader of Sinn Féin, Deputy Gerry Adams, for their participation in both events. I extend my appreciation to all those who took part in the events at both universities, including former US President, Bill Clinton, former Senator George Mitchell and former British Prime Minister, Tony Blair. Both events were very impressive and complemented each other's focus and content. The organisers deserve our appreciation for their efforts.

The importance of the Good Friday Agreement as a living document was reflected in the breadth of the attendance at both events and the content of what was said. It was also a time to say thanks to, and remember, Mo Mowlam, David Ervine, Inez McCormack, Martin McGuinness, John Hume and many more for their invaluable contribution to the formation and implementation of the Good Friday Agreement.

The Minister's speech was thoughtful, set in an all-Ireland context and addressed the totality of the relationships within this island and between this island and Britain, just as the Good Friday Agreement did 20 years ago and still does to this day. His speech revolved around three themes, and he touched on some of them today: remember, renew and reconcile. In addressing

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the politics of the here and now in this way he set a fresh framework for today's political leaders in their endeavours to re-establish the all-Ireland institutions on the only credible and sustainable basis, namely, equality and respect.

It is important to remind ourselves that much progress has been made in the past 20 years in moving our society out of centuries of conflict but much more needs to be done. The agreement provides a solid foundation on which to build a democratic and progressive society in the North as part of an island-wide arrangement, as we journey peacefully toward a new, united and independent Ireland. The Irish Government is central to the development and achievement of a democratic society in the North. It is particularly important now because of the behaviour and attitude of the British Government and of the Democratic Unionist Party, DUP. They are supporting each other and blocking essential and democratic reform in the North and of course the added dynamic of Brexit in this already toxic environment has made a bad situation much worse. In my view, despite what the British Government and the DUP say in public, they do not want the institutions of the North restored on the basis of equality and respect for all, not for now at least. For these reasons it is important that the Irish Government steps into this political vacuum with proposals based on the Good Friday Agreement to steer the North forward. The people of the North, not least those who do not vote for the DUP or support the Tories or Brexit, should not be denied their democratic rights or access to their political leaders and institutions.

The Irish and British Governments should convene the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference. The political impasse must be filled with political initiatives to ensure the progress made over the past 20 years is not frittered away because of political inertia. The North is not a foreign affair. It is a home affair. It is a national priority and must remain so because of the failure of partition and the inherent unstable and undemocratic nature of politics there. The Irish Government's presence in the North and its leadership role are crucial in moving politics forward progressively. The Good Friday Agreement provided momentum for change on many fronts and continues to do so. That is the welcome reality 20 years after it was agreed.

I am acutely aware of, and am a privileged beneficiary of, the change the Good Friday Agreement brought about for us. I am conscious of the loss, the hurt, the sacrifice and the pain that still prevails but I am also thankful for the courage to take the leadership steps that were required at that time and continue to prevail, thanks be to God. I am conscious too of my generation who were young at the time of the signing of the agreement who looked on with great expectation and continue to do so, but unfortunately are disappointed. They are aghast, frustrated, annoyed, angry and fed up at the failure to fully realise that agreement. Even now when we reflect on the momentous initiatives such as policing reform and decommissioning the agreement is being held up by a denial of people's rights, their place, national identity, culture, language and citizenship. I do not believe that is insurmountable. If the recent celebrations have done anything that was to act as a reminder and catalyst and if the political will is there, if the Governments are invested we can overcome those issues. We look upon the agreement, the Governments and political parties with a great deal of expectation. We want delivery and to see the promise of the Good Friday Agreement fully realised.

When we all talk about reconciliation it is not a process between two parties or blocs in the North, the reconciliation envisaged in the agreement was promised to all of us on this island. The legacy of conflict is not a recent phenomenon. It permeates every aspect and fabric of life across the island. We need to look inward for reconciliation, to reflect on the sentiments of what we say and the word and letter of the Good Friday Agreement. We too in this State have an obligation to engage fully in the reconciliation process. That does not mean just attending

a meeting or a dinner or looking on in support and a cheerleading role but to be invested and involved, practically, tangibly, on the ground in this process. It also means that people in this Chamber should reconcile with me as a republican from Belfast and I with them. It means accepting the democratic will of the people of the North. I urge the Minister to continue to stand firm in defence of the Good Friday Agreement not least given the potential threat to, and jeopardisation of, it posed by Brexit.

Again, I thank the Minister for being present for the celebrations last week. That is not lost on people and is an important part of the Irish Government's role, which I would respectfully suggest was somewhat missing before the Minister's tenure in office. I call on him to keep it up. I urge colleagues in this Chamber and the other House not to take their eye off the ball. Yes, remember, but as the Minister rightly says, reconcile and I would say above all, renew. Renew the passion, renew the dedication and renew the leadership to see the Good Friday Agreement through.

5 o'clock

Senator Frank Feighan: I welcome the Minister here today on this very special day. I do not think most people realise that the Republic officially came into existence on this day 69 years ago. I suppose with every issue, there is always a counterbalance. That brought the Ireland Act 1949 to the House of Commons, which effectively recognised Northern Ireland. Some would say this drove partition or ensured that partition was even more divisive. One of the great days of my life was the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985. It was signed by Garret FitzGerald and the British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, and I believe it paved the way for the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. It also ensured that the Republic of Ireland had an official consultative role in affairs in Northern Ireland and brought Ministers from the Irish and British Governments together for the first time since partition.

I have talked to many politicians who say that in the 1950s and 1960s, we effectively operated in our own little silos. There was a big island on the other side, and diplomatically and politically nothing happened. I acknowledge the Anglo-Irish Agreement had its critics but it gave us a role and a say in the affairs of Northern Ireland, and we are now in a much better place.

I was also in Belfast last week, and I must reiterate what Senator Boyhan said at The Goliath Trust gala in the Europa Hotel on Wednesday night. That organisation works hard to improve disadvantaged areas in Northern Ireland that are underachieving in education. Bertie Ahern summed it up. When he was asked for his opinion, he replied that those involved should stop the messing. Before a crowd of perhaps 500 people, he called on the two parties to do so. I understand that it is much more complex than that but he made that appeal. One could see there is a cohort in Northern Ireland that wants Stormont to set up again. To me it was an iconic moment.

Another iconic moment came the day before, when the Minister was at Queen's University in Belfast. We have come a long way, but I think Seamus Mallon sent out a signal when he said that unionism needs to breathe. He noted that at present, its adherents are angry and fearful but they need space to breathe. As a Parliament, with Brexit imminent, it would not be helpful for us to call for a Border poll. That is only my personal opinion.

From what I am hearing and what I see on the ground, we are in a much better place. I pay tribute to all the brave leaders of all the political parties, to the men and women in Northern Ireland, the island of Ireland, and the two islands who made a huge difference in the Anglo-Irish Agreement. There are a few difficulties we have to iron out but we are in a much better space

than we were 20 years ago.

Brexit is bringing huge challenges to the Good Friday Agreement and its implementation. I still believe that the Irish Border will be the Achilles' heel of Brexit. The people of Britain, rightly or wrongly, did not think of the Border issue or the island of Ireland when they were making deliberations on Brexit. These things happen in referendums. We have had 27 referendums in 27 years. People sometimes do not vote on the question that is put to them in referendums. They may not like the Government. It could be due to turf-cutting or water. In this case, it was immigration and the Irish Border did not come into play. I hope it will be the Achilles' heel for Brexit and that the British people will have a change of heart but I it poses huge challenges to the Anglo-Irish Agreement, which has been so successful for the last 20 years.

Finally, I note we are in a much better space. It is great that we can talk about all the good that has come out of the Good Friday Agreement and it is wonderful to see that the people of Ireland are united in one thing; that they want peace and a better future for the people coming behind them. As parliamentarians, we have a role to lead and to challenge the narratives but we are in a much better space.

Senator David Norris: I welcome the Minister and his adviser to the House, and I compliment him on the sterling work he continues to do. This undoubtedly is a day of celebration. I am old enough to remember the Troubles in Northern Ireland and the appalling violence that went on and I do not think it was justified. While there was discrimination, the lies that were told were completely obnoxious. I refer, for example, to the idea that there was not one man, one vote. Of course there was, except in the local authority elections, where there was a property qualification and that was exactly the same down here in the South. The tragedy was that those property qualifications roughly followed the line of the sectarian divisions in Northern Ireland and that made it really poisonous. There was also gerrymandering.

The Good Friday Agreement is wonderful and we do celebrate it. On the other hand, there is a great deal of black bitterness among some sections of the community in Northern Ireland and we must recognise that fact. We have to work to educate those people and bring them forward into a future that is not threatening. I recite today with great pride the names of some of those who were involved in the Good Friday Agreement, such as Seamus Mallon, who is often forgotten and sidelined nowadays. He may have been socially very conservative but was a real beacon of rationality, decency and good faith. John Hume took decisions, very courageously, to meet the IRA leaders and sacrificed his own political future in so doing. There was no doubt that one of the dividends of this agreement would be that the moderate parties would be greatly diminished in political strength. That was an act of great political courage.

On the other side, David Trimble often is not given credit. He took a very courageous decision in the Good Friday Agreement. Then there was Bertie Ahern. I remember that during a sensitive stage of these negotiations, his mother died but he continued. That was an act of great courage on the part of Bertie Ahern. Mo Mowlam, although sick, played a sterling role in this regard. Then of course, there was Senator George Mitchell. Tribute has been paid to the patience of the Minister but if anyone ever had patience, it was George Mitchell. One also must acknowledge the role played by Deputy Adams and Martin McGuinness. Interestingly, as I recall it - I am sure I am right - Mary Robinson actually argued against the Good Friday Agreement because of her sensitivity to the feelings of Northern unionists. That is a very curious little sidelight on history.

The position of the Good Friday Agreement must be maintained in the teeth of the disastrous decision of the British people to leave the European Union. If a Border comes back, with Border posts and the rest of that paraphernalia, it will be a magnet for the lunatic fringe of republicanism. I was in the North recently and went past Newry, where there used to be enormous fortifications, barbed wire, gun emplacements and so forth. All gone. Please God we will keep that gone.

I have to say that the Good Friday Agreement was a very useful fudge in many ways. It is not fully democratic. Let us be honest and open about it: it is not democratic. The d'Hondt mechanism, for example, flies in the face of democracy. However, it was necessary. I hope the stage will be reached where this sort of fudge of political reality will be unnecessary. We have a job to do on education also. I spoke about educating the people of Northern Ireland, but we must also educate some British Members of Parliament such as the Labour MP who said the Good Friday Agreement was nothing but a shibboleth. It is complete nonsense and ignorance. We had 30 years of violence which the younger generation does not remember. I remember it very well. I remember being a colleague in this House of both John Robb and Gordon Wilson who added a great deal to the proceedings of the Seanad.

The Republic of Ireland paid a price for the Good Friday Agreement. We got rid of Articles 2 and 3 from the Constitution, which was a visionary thing to do. The process which led to the Good Friday Agreement was an essentially democratic one. A referendum was passed in both parts of the island, the figures in respect of which I will place on the record. It was passed in the North of Ireland by a "Yes" vote of 676,966 votes, or 71% of the Northern community. The "Yes" vote in the Republic was far higher. Here, it was passed by 94.39% of the Irish population, which was absolutely overwhelming. It was 1,442,583 votes. More than 2 million people on this island gave their assent to the Good Friday Agreement. From this, we must continue in the construction of a new Ireland, whatever form that takes, which is in the interests of all the people of this island.

Senator John Dolan: Senator Alice-Mary Higgins spoke about women and families and we can start and finish there in relation to many things when it comes to trauma, stress and violence. It is the women who pick up the pieces. I am reminded of a poem from the First World War, although I cannot remember who wrote it, which asked did not the German mother sitting at home knitting socks for her son at the front have the same instinct and feeling as the British mother. There is no difference when it comes to families. Can we move back from the centre and find something we all understand emotionally?

When I was a small fellow in second class at school in Tipperary, one of the teachers, Mr. Corcoran, who was not a Christian Brother, told us a story about a British soldier who jumped onto a grenade from which the pin had come out to save his comrades. He gave his own life. It was not until 20 years later that I began to take an interest in the Somme, Passchendaele, and the First World War, having studied the war poets. I wanted to see where some of them were buried. I was interested in Thomas Kettle, Francis Ledwidge, Isaac Rosenberg and Wilfred Owen. Reading a book by Philip Orr on the 36th Ulster Division, I realised that the man Mr. Corcoran referred to was a member. It was the only division with a placename in it. The incident happened a day or two before the Battle of the Somme commenced. I reflected on his sense of love, care and respect for his brothers. The tragedy of Northern Ireland is that there is as yet no settled understanding of who are our brothers and sisters there. We are coming to that slowly.

A different story relates to disability. The Irish Wheelchair Association and its athletes have

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always operated on a 32-county basis. There was no division. Lads would go from Dublin or wherever to play basketball on teams from the UK or Northern Ireland. I know one man who lost his leg in a sawmill. He played basketball with lads who lost legs in other activities. They were participating in a sport they could enjoy. On the way home from Belfast, these lads needed a comfort break, so to speak, and their bus pulled over on a country road north of the Border. The lads disembarked to do their business and were surrounded in the next instant by British soldiers. The tension was diffused when one of the lads said with typical Dublin wit “If ye put away your weapons, we will put away ours”. There was a sense of sport and the community thing it can be.

There is a Seanad by-election around agriculture currently. Surely, that is something that can be dealt with on an all-island basis given that it is the same weather and farmers face the same issues. There has always been great support from the Republic for Northern farmers, often more than has been provided by their own government which may not have the same sympathy or closeness to it. I go to the Continent of Europe and people ask me what is happening now. They have a sense of fear about it. I have more colleagues on the Continent in respect of disability than I have in Northern Ireland. It is something I have to ask myself about also. The paraphernalia and psychology of a border have the potential to trigger us too easily backwards. The ability to take risks is needed again. Another way to look at risk-taking is as the building of confidence. If we are not building confidence, we are eroding it. Since the start of last year when democratic processes, such as they are, were placed on hold, it has caused an erosion which is very dangerous. Senator Higgins referred to the hawkishness in Europe and around the world now. It is too easy for some people to slide us back into something. Those of us in the Chamber and those who have an involvement in Northern Ireland must step closer to each other. Even if it is only in relation to sport, people must come together. We are at a very difficult moment. I am grateful for the opportunity to have contributed to the debate.

Acting Chairman (Senator Gerard P. Craughwell): Only Senators Richmond and Mac Lochlainn are left to speak. The Minister must speak at 5.24 p.m. I ask the Senators to facilitate that by dividing the remaining time between them.

Senator Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: We will take three and a half to four minutes each.

Senator Neale Richmond: A number of members referred, quite rightly, to individuals and bodies who played an important role in achieving the Good Friday Agreement. They have been remembered over the last fortnight. Senator Norris listed quite a number of people, including Gordon Wilson, who went to the same school as me, while Senator Higgins made particular reference, importantly, to the many women who played such an important role in the peace process and the agreement. One body which has not been mentioned much, if at all, in today’s debate is the European Union, formerly the EEC. It also played a role in the peace process, not least financially going back to 1989 with the commencement of the peace funds which have pumped billions of euro into Northern Ireland to maintain peace. Those funds were very welcome.

Northern Irish MEPs like John Hume played a role in that as did John Cushnahan, albeit representing a Southern constituency, and Jim Nicholson, who remains in the European Parliament. They pushed the peace agenda constantly in Brussels and Strasbourg, as has the Tánaiste during his time, on the foreign affairs committee of the European Parliament.

That is a very important role that was able to grow into a much more benevolent one, in that our common membership of the European Union meant that after the Good Friday Agreement

Ireland, North and South, was able to reach normality far more rapidly than other conflict zones on the Continent. People were able to cross the Border with ease due to the common travel area. They were able to trade with ease, able to go to each other's universities and hospitals, to benefit from various levels of funding, Common Agricultural Policy funding, Horizon 2020, Erasmus+ and so much else. All of that is under attack, not by individuals in Northern Ireland or this jurisdiction but by the concept that is Brexit, and the ignorant opinion of what Brexit should mean held by many people in England, and I say England specifically.

Senator Norris was right to say that the comments by the Labour Shadow Secretary of State for International Trade, Barry Gardiner MP, referring to the Good Friday Agreement as a “shibboleth” or a purely economic concern were not only ignorant they were insulting. We must take it upon ourselves to educate, inform and where necessary argue with people in the UK who take the Good Friday Agreement for granted and allow an apathetic mindset to prevail. I would like to conclude with those comments, and I thank the Tánaiste for giving us so much time.

Senator Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I will pick up where Senator Richmond concluded. As somebody from Buncrana, my peninsula of Inishowen is intrinsically linked to Derry city. It is our city, and the difference between the way it was during my childhood and what it is today is absolutely incredible. Hearing Brexiteers in England, some of them senior politicians, talking about the Good Friday Agreement being dismantled is absolutely shocking in its ignorance of the reality of our lives.

On a positive note, what Brexit has done is unite political opinion on this island around the importance of the Good Friday Agreement. There is another point. I do not think I fully appreciated this either, and Senator Richmond touched on it. What underpinned the peace process was the fact that both jurisdictions and both of these islands were part of the European Union. That meant there was free movement of goods, capital, people and services on the island. That underpins the new sense of normality. It underpins the new peace process, and has underpinned it for all of the years since. Indeed what we have sought to do in Donegal, Derry and Tyrone is to further break down the Border by co-operating in health services and education. We try to see the north-west of Ireland without a border, but with access to 500 million people who need services. That is the positive progress that we have made. We cannot even contemplate that being undermined by the political desires of some in England, and a much smaller number in Northern Ireland, in the form of the DUP.

To comment on some of the issues that are blocking progress in re-establishing the institutions, I was part of a parliamentary delegation that went to Wales. I was the Chair of the Committee on Public Service Oversight and Petitions. We reviewed the Welsh Language Commissioner and compared its services to our own Coimisinéir Teanga. We were mightily impressed with the Commissioner and the resources it had to promote the Welsh language. We then went to the National Assembly for Wales, where one hears both Welsh and English being spoken not only in their Assembly chamber but in their committees. One has the ability as a visitor to listen to both languages. That was a beautiful thing, and right and proper and representative of all the people of Wales.

Similarly when one goes to the Scottish Parliament, one sees the equality of esteem for the languages. Is it too much to ask that we can be mature enough on this island to respect both the English language and the Irish language equally? Unionists in the North particularly, who I fully accept see themselves as British and intrinsically linked to the United Kingdom, must surely look at the practice in Wales and Scotland and understand that they must do the same in

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Northern Ireland. It has to happen.

Obviously the fact that the ten DUP MPs hold the balance of power in Britain makes it difficult for the British Government to focus its mind on what has to be done. I ask the Minister to continue his good work and continue to defend the interests of the Irish people across this island, whether they are nationalists, unionists or whatever, as he has done. I ask him to continue on the path he is on. As long as he does that, he will have the support of the people in this House.

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Coveney): What strikes me about this debate is the unity of purpose across different political parties. I am glad to say that no one is taking the opportunity to be unnecessarily provocative here, and it is always easy to be that way when we talk about Northern Ireland. I thank everybody for their contributions, which I think were thoughtful.

It is true to say that at times in England there are comments that are infuriating for us to listen to. I think it is important to understand that there is sometimes a genuine ignorance about the British-Irish relationship, and comments are sometimes made without understanding of the significance of their meaning. At times in Ireland we simply need to correct the record firmly, but not take deep offence at some of what is genuine ignorance. I think Irish people's understanding of Britain is much deeper than many British people's understanding of Ireland, if we are honest about it. I say that as someone who lived in England for over three years and worked in Scotland. When we grow up, our history lessons in Irish schools are dominated by Ireland's relationship with Britain. In England in particular, but also in other parts of Britain, education is certainly not dominated by Britain's relationship with Ireland. That being said, that is all the more reason for clarity from Ireland on the significance and importance of the Good Friday Agreement 20 years ago and the importance of that Agreement today.

Let us not forget a number of things. This is the people's agreement. This is not owned by Governments. There is no mandate for any Government, British or Irish, to change the Good Friday Agreement. This is a treaty registered with the United Nations. It is an intergovernmental agreement. It is a party agreement also, and I was delighted to see the DUP represented at the highest level in Queen's University last week. That is a recognition that they also recognise the importance and significance of the Good Friday Agreement, despite the fact that they did not support it 20 years ago. Of course, it is most importantly an agreement that was endorsed by a huge majority North and South. As such, nobody has the right to undermine, change or amend the Good Friday Agreement without a process that deals with the significance of the mandate that the people have given for the implementation of this Agreement. I say that very clearly 20 years later, now that I have a responsibility on behalf of the Irish Government to ensure that we on this island provide clarity on the significance of this Agreement, why it is so significant and important today, and why it has so many of the solutions for the challenges that we need to overcome today.

In the Good Friday Agreement there are many mechanisms that are not being used today, mechanisms that if triggered, implemented and used in the spirit of the Good Friday Agreement can help us overcome many issues. They can put structures in place around east-west relationships between Britain and Ireland post-Brexit, to ensure that we as neighbouring islands continue to live together in a way that actually improves the quality of life in both countries and on both islands.

In regard to the challenges we face today, the re-establishment of the Northern Ireland Executive is perhaps the most important issue that we need to try to overcome. Without that, some of the broader reconciliation issues are very difficult to deliver on. However, I would hope that even in the absence of the re-establishment of the Executive, we see some of the new legacy structures that were agreed in the Stormont House Agreement brought forward, along with the public consultation process that has been promised and new legacy structures. I hope that, even in the absence of the re-establishment of the executive, we would see the bringing forward of the new legacy structures agreed in the Stormont House Agreement and the promised public consultation process on them. I hope we will see these progress sooner rather than later. I supported that position several months ago. Then we wanted the re-establishment of an executive and the bringing forward of a legacy consultation at the same time because we felt they would be mutually reinforcing. We felt it would help create a new positive momentum in Northern Ireland where political leaders could show the way of working together and communities could start to show the way in understanding each other's pain in the context of memories, history and legacy.

We have much to do. This generation needs to show the appetite for risk. This generation of politicians must also show it has the appetite to actually take decisions that make themselves and the communities they represent uncomfortable. They must show the leadership to be willing to do that in order to move the process forward for the betterment of everybody. I say that to nationalists, as well as to unionists. When one thinks of what was overcome 20 years ago, the challenges we face today are not so large. This is about trust and respect for each other and for each other's communities.

Twenty years after that trust and respect delivered an extraordinary new opportunity for Northern Ireland, for the island of Ireland and the relationship between Britain and Ireland, which was transformed as a result, along with EU membership, we need that kind of spirit again. That is why I have focused all of my speeches over the past ten days on these themes of remembering why this is so important and of renewing the spirit of the Good Friday Agreement to try to instil the leadership needed today from politicians and community leaders. I have also focused on what the peace process, ultimately, needs to lead to, namely, reconciliation on the island of Ireland which will contribute to a quality of life in a way which, unfortunately, generations which have come before us could not have even dreamed of.

I thank the Seanad for the opportunity to discuss these matters.

Fodder Shortage: Motion

Senator Paul Daly: I move:

That Seanad Éireann:

notes:

- the major role agriculture plays in creating employment, generating economic activity and acting as a custodian of the countryside in Ireland;
- the unique vulnerability and exposure of agriculture to fluctuations in the weather;
- the on-going hardship inflicted upon farming communities across Ireland due to the

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fodder crisis that has been evident in the country since last Autumn and the sacrifices farming families have made to protect their livestock;

- the failure of the Government to address the fodder shortages meant there were no contingency plans in place despite Teagasc advising of the need to prioritise the feeding of meal/cereal based concentrates to plug the fodder gap;

- the contradictory situation with the Government reaffirming on 4th April, 2018, that there was an availability of fodder in the country while Co-operatives were ordering fodder imports from the UK on the very same day;

- that due to inaction, the fodder crisis has become a national emergency putting a huge strain on farmers' mental health and creating animal welfare issues;

- that some farmers are spending €2,500 weekly due to the fodder crisis according to IFAC, while Teagasc estimates reduced profitability for every day that cows are not grazing at between €2.20 and €3 per cow;

- that the fodder transport scheme has failed to address the crisis as signified by the low uptake and excessive regulatory criteria put on farmers to access the scheme, which had the impact of driving up the demand and price for already scarce domestically sourced fodder;

- the belated move by the Government to open the Fodder Import Support Scheme to all Co-operatives and private feed merchants; and

- that the Government chose not to include a measure in Ireland's Rural Development Programme (RDP), 2014-2020, which would compensate farmers for losses caused by adverse weather as is currently permitted;

and calls on the Government to:

- immediately bring forward a hardship fund to help small and medium size farmers who have been severely impacted by the fodder crisis;

- introduce a meal voucher scheme for farmers affected;

- swiftly make available low cost credit for farmers to help pay for the costs of sourcing fodder and concentrates, while immediately finalising and opening the low cost loan scheme announced over seven months ago in Budget 2018;

- ensure all balancing payments for outstanding 2017 RDP scheme payments such as the Green, Low-Carbon, Agri-Environment Scheme (GLAS) and the Sheep Welfare Scheme are paid immediately as farmers' cash flow problems mount;

- dedicate a budget to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine Early Warning System (EWS), which supports farmers at local level before any welfare problems occur;

- establish a special standing committee comprised of relevant stakeholders to monitor and report quarterly to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, to keep fodder supplies under review with fail safe measures to ensure that such a crisis does not emerge again;

- temporarily halt all cross compliance inspections on farms as well as Bord Bia farm audits;
- include a permanent scheme in the RDP to compensate farmers for losses caused by adverse weather; and
- ensure that flexibility is shown regarding the upcoming 2018 Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) deadline.

Since last September, Fianna Fáil has called for action to tackle the issue of fodder shortages. In the end, what began as a fodder shortage has become a fodder crisis because of the Government's failure to act. This has caused huge stress to farmers and created animal welfare issues.

In December 2017, I raised this matter in the Seanad and said that taking a wait-and-see approach simply would not work. However, that is exactly what the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy Creed, did. Now we see the consequences. Last week at the Oireachtas agriculture committee, the Minister said that even if the Department had sanctioned fodder importation at an earlier date, it would not have happened. He said everyone had expected the weather to improve which would have resolved the issue. While we all hoped for better weather, we know from experience that one needs to prepare for the worst, even while hoping for the best. Instead, the Minister put his faith in blind optimism and was left scrambling around at the last minute for a solution to the crisis. Assumption is no foundation for policy.

In January in the House, the Minister referred to the introduction of the transport subsidy which has since proved to be a total failure. The fact that there were only 16 applicants says it all. The Minister also said there was enough fodder on the island but that it was just in the wrong places. By encouraging movement from one area to another and not acknowledging the need for fodder importation at that stage, the problem was compounded in areas where fodder was moved from and which are now in crisis. On that occasion, I emphasised the severity of the crisis and called for urgent action. The Minister's response was that I was only looking for a headline. That could not be further from the truth. I was outlining my genuine concerns which, unfortunately, have now been shown to be well-founded. In the end, it is the Minister who has received the headlines on this issue, headlines, no doubt, he would have preferred to avoid.

This crisis has shown just how out of touch Fine Gael is with rural areas. Its amendment to this motion shows it is still a party in denial and unable to understand the reality for farmers as this crisis has spiralled and spread. The Minister has belatedly introduced an import scheme. This is insufficient, however, on its own and Fianna Fáil is calling for additional urgent measures to be put in place. In particular, the Government needs to introduce, with immediate effect, a meal voucher scheme for affected farmers. This should have been introduced some time ago. People are now of the opinion that, because the weather has taken a slight turn for the better, this is not a necessity. The Minister of State and I know that the stock turned out onto grass, whenever that option becomes available in particular areas, will be in a very poor state, with many animals suffering from malnutrition. The cows in the suckler herd will have serious fertility problems. We have factual evidence, depending on which of the co-ops is providing the figures, that dairy milk production is down by up to 10%. Without any research or similar figures, we can take it that the milk production rate relating to suckler cows has decreased in the same way and that calves are suffering in that instance. Meal vouchers will be needed, with grass, to supplement the animals coming out in poor condition to try to get them back to the

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respectable condition in which the farmers of this country strive to have them. Grass alone will not do this.

Despite what some people might say as a result of the sun shining today, it is not too late to introduce these much-needed meal vouchers. They will also be needed to supplement grass because farmers have had to put cattle out early due to a lack of feed. They are grazing them on what would normally be silage ground. Silage cutting and production is now way behind. In a year in which we will need extra silage to replace the vast silage stores and back-ups that people had in reserve and which they have been using, we need to be able to preserve this silage ground and feed cattle on fewer acres. A supplement will be needed to accommodate this. It is not too late and it is vital that a meal voucher system be introduced forthwith.

Low-cost credit must be made available to farmers. A low-cost credit loan scheme was announced in the budget. This scheme should be finalised as a priority and made available to farmers in need. Practically all farmers who have stock have a serious cashflow deficiency because they had to buy feed for which they did not plan or budget. They are faced with a situation whereby they will need extra fertiliser to catch up on growth in circumstances where land has taken a hammering from the bad weather we have experienced during the past seven months. If they can manage it, they will also have to set aside extra ground for silage. If we get a bad harvest or autumn, there may not be an opportunity to have the second or third cut required to build up these reserves. In order to maximise output, there needs to be, more than in any previous year, a correctly managed application of fertiliser. Unfortunately, in many instances the merchants from whom the farmers buy their fertiliser are at their limit in the context of extending credit as a result of the fact that they had to provide additional meal and food during the winter months. I know of smaller merchants who have said openly that they will not stock or sell fertiliser this year for fear that they will not be paid for it. Low-cost credit is one solution to this problem. It will help farmers invest, get themselves back on their feet and get their land and animals back into the condition they would have been in had this crisis not arisen.

The Minister should immediately bring forward a hardship fund to help the small and medium-sized farmers who have suffered most. While low-cost loans and cheap credit are advantageous and helpful, loans have one major problem in that they must be paid back. Every sector in agriculture is struggling. However, the suckler sector in particular is struggling as a result of what happened in the past seven months. It is difficult to see how people will be able to pay back loans for fodder that has now been eaten. While fertiliser assists the growth of grass, some farmers will hope for the best. They will be of the view that we will, perhaps, have a good year and that they will get grass without using fertiliser. This is because they cannot afford to buy it. A hardship fund is also a necessity in such circumstances.

It goes without saying that outstanding GLAS and sheep welfare scheme payments should be paid immediately. Farmers are in dire straits regarding credit from their merchants and suppliers. To be owed money by the Department that should be overseeing this crisis is farcical. Every move should be made in order that this money can be paid immediately. It is the farmers' money and for it to be sitting in the Department's bank account when they are in such dire straits is inexcusable.

Flexibility must be shown in respect of the upcoming 2018 basic payment scheme and beef data and genomics programme deadlines. A major issue I see coming down the line, which has been highlighted to me in the context of the beef data and genomics programme, is the four-star and five-star 20% target for October 2018. In October, consideration must be given to farmers

who cannot meet this deadline where it can be proven this is due to actions they have taken in recent months to try to get through the crisis, such as selling heifers to bring in money to buy feed or because they did not have feed for those animals. There has to be some relief from the penalties in these situations.

Fianna Fáil is calling for a temporary halt to all cross-compliance inspections, as well as to Bord Bia farm audits, until the immediate problems are solved. This is common sense. We all know the major stress that farmers are under. They are trying their damndest to get things back in order. They are working on a 24-7 basis in many cases. The last thing they need is the possibility of inspection. In solidarity with their plight, it would be advisable that inspections be suspended.

The Minister should also establish a standing committee to keep fodder supplies under review. If this matter is not managed properly from now on, seeing as it has not been to date, it is a fact there will be another fodder crisis in 2019. I do not like stating this because I do not want to come across as an eternal pessimist adding more bad news to a bad news story. While it is being called a fodder crisis, it is an agricultural crisis. No spring crops have been sown and practically no ploughing has been done. This means that farmers are a month to six weeks behind. Anyone who knows anything about tillage will say that if barley is not sown until the next three weeks, the best case will be stunted straw growth, although the grain might come out okay. By its nature, barley will still ripen in August when it normally does but there will not be an extra month's growth at the end of the season. This indicates to me that next winter will commence with a shortage of straw.

As already stated, if there is not correct management of pasture rotation and fertiliser spreading, we will not build up the reserves of silage we need. All of this depends on the imponderable that got us to where we are, namely, that we get a summer during which we can make silage and that we get a normal autumn. There needs to be a standing committee to keep fodder supplies under review and to advise and help farmers to get the maximum from their financial and land resources, mineral additives and anything that can help to get them over this hump and out the far side with enough reserves for, potentially, an equally long winter next year.

The Government should include a permanent scheme in the rural development programme to compensate farmers for losses caused by severe weather. The Government could have included this in the rural development plan for the period 2014 to 2020 but it refused to do so. There is no EU regulation or directive and no diktat from Brussels to state that we could not have done this. We could have done so and the Government ignored it. If that were *in situ*, we would not be here today raising many of these issues. The time has come to put in place the necessary structures to resolve this crisis and prevent similar problems from arising in future. Any further inaction on the part of the Minister will only damage Irish agriculture further. As I said at the outset, I along with others have been raising this issue here since autumn and early winter last year. It is time now for action. For many people and many animals, it is too late. We learned nothing in 2013. Any time we raised it, we were told there was a fodder action group being headed by Teagasc. Perhaps the time has come to have a review of the role of that group and of Teagasc, if the solutions and the proposals they came up with are what got us here. If we are to believe the Minister, he acted on their advice and guidance and as his action was limited, they must be questioned.

Senator Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I second Senator Daly's motion. It is very important.

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I thank the Minister of State for coming into the House tonight because we have a crisis and farmers are facing a double whammy from weather woes, as costs surge due to fodder bills, while milk collections slump. Demand has been reported as strong among dairy and dry stock farmers for the thousands of tonnes of hay, haylage and maize that has been imported recently. Fianna Fáil is calling for the hardship fund and meal voucher schemes and that is crucial. Farming is the backbone of Irish society. There are farmers selling their animals to feed what remains on the farm. Dairy bosses have warned that further milk price cuts are inevitable due to weakening global demand. Meanwhile, Teagasc estimates put the reduced profitability for each day that cows are not grazing at between €2.20 and €3 per cow. That needs to be looked at. Since November 2017, Fianna Fáil has been calling on the Minister to address the deepening crisis and implement a fodder scheme to establish a fund for affected farmers. The response from the Minister of State was that Teagasc assessed the fodder supply in Ireland and that 2017 was, in fact, a record year for grass growth and that there was sufficient fodder in the country. That worries me now because I need to know whether the Minister of State is listening to the farmers on the ground who are out digging the soil and doing the work for the Irish people. That needs to be addressed.

The agrifood sector in Ireland in 2017 showed an increase in exports of 13% to €13.5 billion. When employment inputs, processing and marketing are included, the agrifood sector accounts for almost 10% of employment. The agrifood sector is one of Ireland's most important indigenous manufacturing sectors, accounting for employment of approximately 167,500 people. It includes almost 700 food and drink firms that export food and seafood to more than 180 countries worldwide. Economic activity in the agriculture and food sector produces a far bigger return than the equivalent activity in other trade sectors of the economy. That is because agrifood companies source 74% of raw materials and services from Irish suppliers, compared with 43% from all manufacturing companies.

At the annual general meeting of the Irish Farmers Association, IFA, the Minister outlined that the previous scheme, that is, the €150 million agriculture cashflow support loan scheme was a success and that the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine intended to build on that. In conjunction with the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has put together a new €300 million loan fund, of which 40% was ring-fenced for the agrifood, small medium enterprise, SME, sector. I seek clarification from the Minister of State as to how much of that funding is to go ahead because I have heard different stories. The Minister of State should confirm that 40% will be ring-fenced for the agrifood SMEs. In light of the current crisis, this needs to be implemented as soon as possible. Funding is crucial because farmers are asking why low-cost loans in Ireland are made available at interest rates that are still well above those being charged by mainland European banks on their farm loans. I agree with my colleague, Senator Paul Daly. We need to have a hardship fund. That is crucial.

The ongoing fodder crisis is particularly severe for suckler and sheep farmers who do not have a monthly cheque coming in and whose farming enterprise do not sell stock at this time of year. Cashflow is a significant issue for suckler and sheep farmers and with virtually no fodder left to move around the country, meal vouchers to supplement fodder are now essential to alleviate the hardship. The farmers have been arguing that meal vouchers were an essential component to fend off this crisis since last December. The Minister of State has been aware of this crisis since last December and it is now the middle of April. We now have what I can never remember, namely, a farming crisis. Farmers are proud, hardworking people and we in

Fianna Fáil are fighting for their rights. I acknowledge that emergency assistance is available to farmers whose animals are experiencing serious welfare issues and to farmers who are unable to cope with the situation. I urge all farmers to use this facility, which was set up precisely for the conditions farmers are now experiencing. I am very disappointed that we are in this position today. There is always the good news, in that we believe beef will be exported to China. All these things are welcome and we get all these good announcements but the reason I am here today is to ask the Minister of State to listen to the farmers because at the end of the day, they are the backbone of the country. It was the farmers who have taken us out of recession. Ireland is known for its farming and green grass. If the Minister of State does not listen to the farmers we are on a road to nowhere. I have seconded this motion and I hope the Minister of State will support it because this is what the farmers are looking for. I will be very disappointed if Fine Gael do not stand up and fight for the farmers.

Senator Michelle Mulherin: I move amendment No. 3:

To delete all words after “Seanad Eireann” and substitute the following:

“notes:

- the major role agriculture plays in creating employment, generating economic activity and acting as a custodian of the countryside in Ireland;
- the competitive advantage Ireland has in sustainable livestock production, particularly dairy, beef and sheep farming, based on a grass-based production system, which is both relatively low cost and carbon efficient;
- the shared Food Wise 2025 strategy for the development of the sector, which highlights the opportunities to grow the value of farm output, value added and agri-food exports; growth that must be managed in an environmentally sustainable manner;
- the unique vulnerability and exposure of agriculture to fluctuations in the weather;
- the on-going hardship due to fluctuations in the weather and the sacrifices farming families have made to protect their livestock;
- the role the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Teagasc, Co-operatives, Farming organisations and farmers have played in working through this challenging period;
- the securing of an increased advance payment in October 2017 under Pillar I and Pillar II of the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP);
- the payment of €1.6 billion in CAP direct payments to Irish farmers before the end of 2017, providing an important source of income support for farm families;
- that for the first time, in winter/spring of 2017/2018, under a new Sheep Welfare Scheme, advance payments totalling €16 million issued to sheep farmers, with a further €3 million to issue in the coming weeks, providing valuable support to the sheep sector;
- the securing of an additional €25 million in Budget 2018 for payments under the Areas of Natural Constraint (ANC) Scheme, where the highest level of support is targeted at those who are faced with the highest level of constraint on their land, bringing

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the total amount allocated to the 2018 ANC Scheme to €227 million;

- the prioritisation by Teagasc of the provision of direct support to these farmers through fodder budgeting and nutritional advice, not only then, but throughout the winter and spring;

- the convening of a stakeholder group chaired by Teagasc comprising of all the main stakeholders including feed merchants and Co-operatives, banking and farm bodies to monitor the fodder situation;

- the timely introduction of a targeted Transport Subsidy Scheme to address the shortage of supplies of fodder in the North and North West in January this year;

- that the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine is in regular contact with all the stakeholders following the introduction of this scheme;

- the timely introduction of a Fodder Import Support Scheme to cover all Co-operatives and importers approved by the Department for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to import fodder;

- the extension of the deadline for the submission of Nitrates derogation plans until 30th April, 2018;

- the extension of grazing under the Traditional Hay Meadows (THM) measure in GLAS until 1st May, 2018;

- the securing of a commitment towards flexibility in the 'three crop rule' under Greening requirements in Pillar 1 of the CAP;

- the availability of rapid emergency feed assistance to any farmer facing immediate feed shortage through the Department's Animal Welfare Helpline that supports the Farm Animal Welfare Advisory Council's Early Warning Intervention System (EWS);

- the need to ensure that farmers are adequately equipped with the necessary knowledge and advice to deal with fluctuations in the weather and to keep fodder supplies under review;

- the one-to-one assistance being provided to farmers by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine to lodge their Basic Payment Scheme applications;

- the continuous monitoring of the situation by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and Teagasc;

- the increased regularity of severe weather events and the need to consider the inclusion of appropriate risk management tools to mitigate against the impacts of such events on farming enterprises in the next iteration of the CAP."

I welcome the Minister of State to the Seanad Chamber and I welcome the opportunity to debate this issue. The sun is shining in Dublin today but I know from talking to farmers in Mayo and elsewhere that it is not necessarily shining there and in fact shines a lot less. While the sun is shining, farmers are dealing with a grim situation. The Minister, Deputy Creed, appeared before the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine last week and going back to the Easter weekend, because the weather did not turn and we still had a cold biting

wind, there was no growth. The ground was wet and ground conditions were poor. We would have hoped that things might have advanced naturally a lot better than they have but that is not the case. Animals still are being housed. Last weekend, some farmers attempted to let their cattle out for a few days, especially dairy farmers, but they are back in again. In the meantime, since we last spoke, it has been necessary to provide another two weeks of fodder for these animals. Animals still cannot be let out at present because they will dig up the ground and no crops will grow to provide fodder for next year. Farmers are in an awful bind. We talk about low-cost loans and about flexibility with banks and co-operatives but there are farmers who cannot get credit from their co-operatives any more. Co-operatives are places with which dairy farmers in particular deal but this is not so much the case with suckler farmers. They are not necessarily getting credit and the banks are not necessarily showing flexibility. We cannot assume they are and this is a predicament farmers face. They continue to have to feed their animals. I argue that in the north and north west, the fact that this problem was coming down the line was first highlighted when many farmers failed to cut a second crop of silage last autumn, as they normally would have done. We knew immediately that there would be a problem, that farmers would not be able to provide for their animals in the normal way, that is, the most efficient and cheapest way that farmers can. Since then, things have got worse around the country with the extended winter and bad weather. I argue that the farmers in the west and north west are in the worst and most difficult position because some of them have already been buying fodder since January. Many of them have been buying additional meal to stretch their fodder. I must agree that the initial transport scheme that was suggested worked very well. I welcome the flexibilities that were introduced but farmers are dealing with a depressing situation. My fear - not just for farmers - comes from considering the input that farming and the farming community have to local economies.

Rural market towns throughout the country are dependent on farmers and their spending power. If farmers are up to their necks in debt trying to pay for fodder, with another bill coming down the tracks for fertiliser as they will have to fertilise the land, there will be far less in their pockets for spending in the local economy. I foresee a depression in rural market towns because if the farmers' circumstances are on the up, the circumstances of these towns are on the up but, currently, that is not the case. There is a case to be made, with strict criteria, for farmers who are in very difficult situations to be assisted. If we do not find some type of formula, and we all accept that the weather is not going to improve suddenly and that we will have to deal with varied and inclement weather for longer periods, many people will leave farming. Many of the farms where I live are marginal in any case, so why would one opt to farm when there are plenty of options in cities? We are near to having full employment so why would one plan a career in farming if one is a suckler cow farmer? These are very big challenges. I cited this at the committee because it is quite sobering.

The reality is that this is a weather problem. I agree with the Minister, Deputy Creed, that if he had announced last November or December that he was going to start importing fodder, people would have laughed at him. That does not mean one should not try to take measures. There was fodder in other parts of the country, and the issue was how to get it to the farmers who needed it. I believe the crisis is as much a financial crisis for farmers, especially for those in the west and north west. They have paid on a large scale and most of them have not been able to avail of the transport subsidy scheme because it was unworkable for them.

We cannot blame the Minister for the weather. In 2014, according to figures from the Department, there were 6.3 million cattle in this country. In 2018, before counting calves and

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the additional stock that are due to be counted by May, the national herd is 7.4 million cattle. In all our plans, our objective is to ramp up production on all sides, so this will be a recurring problem. We must get a handle on how we are going to deal with this into the future. There are issues with overstocking, which some farmers have been encouraged to do as there is no milk quota any more. There must be a reality check about what is happening or we will have farmers on the breadline and people will not wish to get involved in farming. If that happens we will not achieve the Food Wise 2025 targets.

I welcome the news about the opening of the Chinese market which was announced by the Minister, Deputy Creed, during the week. There is great potential there, but we must get this issue right. I accept that the Minister is monitoring the situation on an ongoing basis but we will continue to be reminded of these realities, both in this House and in the agriculture committee, and of the fallout from what has happened with the weather. If it does not improve, we will be talking about this issue a great deal more and very soon again.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I thank the Minister for attending this debate. I am conscious that the Minister comes from a rural constituency and has a strong background in agriculture. As he represents an agricultural constituency, he is clearly aware of the challenges in agriculture. Wicklow is a diverse county in terms of agriculture. It has a lot of marginal land but there is also very good land in west Wicklow, with which I am particularly familiar.

We all acknowledge that agriculture is enormously affected by its vulnerability to the weather. That is a factor which we must take into account. I have brought forward a number of Commencement matters in this House regarding a meal or fodder allowance and other interventions, and only a few weeks ago the Minister told us there is loads of fodder in the country, that it is a commodity and people are holding onto it, so it has become valuable and expensive. That is what he told the House, but the reality is that there are difficulties. To summarise, we are talking about farmers' welfare, animal welfare and family farm income. It boils down to that so let us keep the language simple about what resonates with farmers. It is about putting a loaf on the table every week and the family farm income. We must not lose sight of that. The hardship of the weather has had a real impact on those people.

I raised the issue of GLAS payments and the deadlines that were required for soil testing and soil cores. I told the Minister about farms in Tuam where cattle have been kept in sheds since September and they are still in them this week, up to their oxters in dirt and muck. The farms are in muck. The farmers have been told they are not going to get their GLAS payments because they have not filed their soil bores. One cannot carry out a proper soil analysis from a soil bore in marginal land that has been swamped for nine months. There must be flexibility to deal with this issue.

I thank Fianna Fáil for taking the opportunity of its Private Members' time to bring this important issue before the House for discussion. To focus on the motion, it has set out nine key actions which it calls on the Government to do. The first is to set up a hardship fund to help small to medium-sized farms, the second is to introduce a meal voucher scheme for farmers affected by the weather and the third is to make low-cost credit available to farmers to help them pay the costs of sourcing fodder. The fourth action is to deal with the GLAS payment issues and the sheep welfare scheme, the fifth is to dedicate a budget to the Department's early warning scheme, EWS, and there is much merit in that, the sixth is to establish a special standing committee to monitor and report to the Department on the supplies of fodder, to keep supplies moving and to have data in that regard and the seventh is to halt temporarily all cross-compliance

inspections on farms as well as Bord Bia farm audits. I have an issue with that. This is about quality and standards, even though we must acknowledge the severity of the weather and its impact. The eighth action is the inclusion of a permanent scheme in the RDP to compensate farmers for losses.

I cannot see the Minister objecting to any of that. I realise that he is constrained by resources and so forth, but these are tough times and there is a crisis. The proposals are worthy of support and need to be addressed. I am conscious that the Minister represents these farmers. He is not an urban Minister but is in the heart of agriculture, as is the Minister of State in the Department. Some type of action plan is required. This debate is timely and these are concrete proposals. I will be interested to hear how the Minister responds to them.

I wish to take this opportunity to welcome the good news in the Minister, Deputy Creed's, announcement that, at last, Ireland has been granted access to the Chinese meat market. That is an enormous achievement. We cannot underestimate it. I also acknowledge the work of Bord Bia in opening markets. We regularly talk about Food Wise 2025, the Bord Bia strategy for agriculture and horticulture and the expectations in that regard. It has to be a win-win situation for agriculture. Farmers are diversifying and they are going into organic production, but they need support to do that. In acknowledging the work of Bord Bia, I also acknowledge the very significant funding the Government gives that body. It has a good big budget. I received a copy of the top ten trade destinations for agrifood which was produced by the Department. I will not go into the figures but they are the United Kingdom, United States, China-Hong Kong, the Netherlands, France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Spain and Poland. I could go on to name the top 20, which include the United Arab Emirates.

We have also seen the opening of markets for live exports of cattle. These are always controversial, but this is about the economy, business and scale. There is much good news in agriculture. It is due to diversification and meeting the challenges. It is also about having Government support. There is a really good news story about agriculture. I am also conscious of the national planning framework and what that envisages for agricultural communities in terms of other soft options and other ways of diversifying in agriculture to sustain rural communities, which is critical. However, I know too well the other side of coin. I have family members in the Glen of Aherlow who are considering getting out of farming or leasing their farms. I have family members in Kildare who are struggling on good land. There are challenges. One needs large scale and quality of scale to make farming produce an income that will sustain a family. I will conclude by stating that what Fianna Fáil is proposing is reasonable and timely. A positive response from the Government on this issue is long overdue. We must remember that it all boils down to farmers' welfare, animal welfare and family farm incomes. We need to work together collectively to sustain those incomes.

Senator John Dolan: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Doyle, who I have known for a long time, to the House. I am delighted Senator Boyhan mentioned the Glen of Aherlow. It is a place very close to my heart. I grew up close to it. I remember the first oil crisis in November and December of 1973. We went from 30p for a gallon of petrol to 50p overnight. Schools closed down for longer over Christmas, which was joyful for some of us at the time. It is now unreasonable of us not to consider that the Irish winter is longer and deeper. I hope I am wrong about that, but we cannot plan based on a five-month winter. We have to see it as being closer to seven months. If one does well and gets a shorter winter than that, as the fellow says one then will have money in the bank or some assets for next year.

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There is no doubt that the removal of the quota increased the numbers of cattle and livestock in this country. If, in addition to that, winters are extending, as they have been prior to that removal and since, there is less time for cattle to be out on grass. The hallmark of our cattle and horses is that they are out on grass. They cannot be swimming on it, however, it has to be dry. Fodder cannot be cut off it if it is not dry. We have to plan differently. I will bring a military analogy to this. If one does not know when to hold one's ground or when to be more conservative and retreat, one will, to mix metaphors, only plough into trouble. It is hard to have that instinct to pull back, consolidate and take a little bit of a hit when one can bear it and to then recalibrate and move on. There is no doubt but that our winters are getting longer and more difficult.

We have a precious product in agriculture across all the elements of the sector, including the area of horse breeding. Central to that, as I have already said, is livestock being able to be outdoors working off grass for as much time as possible. We provide approximately 10% of the world's baby formula. In the bad early days of the recession, Dell went wallop in Limerick and Waterford Crystal went into receivership. Does the Minister of State remember that winter? It was the end of 2008 and the beginning of 2009. The thing that gave many people hope at that time was that our agriculture and agrifood industry kept going and thrived. Getting the golden egg out of the goose by killing it is not a good plan. We need to hold and preserve what we have. If we have to consolidate a bit, that is what we have to do.

I want to slightly change tack. One could say that agriculture and agrifood is the backbone of rural Ireland. Where I come from in the Golden Vale, small towns such as Tipperary, Fermoy and Mitchelstown are very different from what they were like 100 years ago because agriculture has changed but yet, agriculture and agrifood is still the backbone of rural Ireland. There are more families with disability in rural Ireland than there are farm families. I will give that as an example. There are people who are not in farming but who are small shopkeepers, business people and this, that and the other. There are families trying to survive who are not farming. Many farm families also have a second income. In fact, it is pretty much necessary to have one now.

I want to make one real solid point. We need to not merely read the signals - we have read them - we must do something fairly quickly to get back to sustainability. It is not a mediocre industry. It is what Ministers go out to promote with trade delegations in March and at other times of the year. I was with some friends in Germany two weeks ago. They were proud to show they had Irish butter in their fridge. I just take that for granted but let us not do that. We have something so precious that we need to step back. There was a bit of madness in recent years where stock numbers were ratcheted up. As far as I know, there is not one extra acre of land in Ireland since the quotas went. There is probably less in marginal ways. There is not one extra acre. From the 1970s onward, we had doubled and trebled and done magnificent things with productivity. We do not have too much room on that side any more. It is not like the early 1970s when we went into the EEC, as it was then, when there was plenty of room to improve performance in many different ways.

I will leave it at that. We talk about information and communications technology, ICT, and all these brilliant things but we need to hold onto this thing that is so core to us. We saw this during the bubble. It did not bother us if manufacturing firms around the country went bust because lads and women who worked in them were able to jump up onto diggers on building sites. We need to keep the ordinary, real, indigenous, practical things that people need going. Agriculture is at the core of that.

Senator Maura Hopkins: I thank the Minister of State for speaking to us this evening on the difficult issue of the fodder crisis. Reflecting on my own contact with farmers over recent months, there appear to be two aspects to the crisis. If we look at this year, farmers, particularly in the west and north west, have had to house their livestock early. We had a bad summer which resulted in late silage and therefore quality was, at times, compromised. As we are all very aware, we have had a prolonged winter and farmers have been extremely stressed and exhausted trying to support their animals as best they can. Obviously, the big concern is around access to credit to purchase fodder and meal over that timeframe. As the Minister of State is aware, this is an issue I have raised with him on a number of occasions, particularly with regard to the transport scheme that was introduced. As he knows, I had concerns at the time with regard to certain counties being included within that transport scheme.

From speaking and working with quite a number of farmers locally, I know that corrective action was taken by many of them. Some farmers bought fodder locally, as that is how it works in rural communities. Others sold stock. Cattle prices were quite good. That allowed them to take a level of corrective action. However, we know that we are seeing the impact of climate change. There is no doubt about that. As Senators Dolan and Boyhan said, this is more of a norm than an exception. We certainly need to work with farmers to ensure they now plan for longer winters with regard to fodder reserves. This is crucial because we need to see a situation where, at the very minimum, one month's feed is planned for as a reserve.

There is much debate around the meal vouchers. Currently when farmers run out of fodder we know that the animals' diet should consist of a maximum of 50% meal and 50% fodder. The introduction of meal vouchers at this stage is not the full solution. It is positive that the import scheme is now introduced but for the future we need to be proactive in trying to ensure planning for longer winters and that we work with all of the different agencies such as Teagasc and farming organisations to assist farmers. The positives within the agricultural sector have been mentioned here. I have listened to a number of radio debates on the immense work undertaken by Bord Bia and by Department officials to try to progress the market in China. I am very aware that a huge amount of work is being done to diversify and to support farmers in the best ways possible so they can make a sustainable living. In this regard, we need to learn lessons from what happened over this prolonged period and we need to try to support farmers to ensure there is a greater fodder reserve. This is especially difficult in the north and the north west when one is dealing with more marginal land.

Senator Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Sinn Féin welcomes the motion. With regard to the analysis of how we got to this point I cannot see how anyone could argue with the wording of the motion. I also cannot see how anyone could argue with the solutions proposed. They are completely in keeping with what the farming organisations and the farmers, as representatives across rural Ireland, are telling us. We could not see anything wrong with this motion so I am very disappointed that the Government has submitted a counter motion. We have sought to add to the motion with a couple of points, which I shall now address.

Action on this issue is long overdue. The fodder crisis is playing havoc with farmers' well-being. We have all heard the stories of the worry and the serious strain that farmers are under. Farmers are extremely angry. Their warnings and our warnings have been ignored. The extent and the impact of this crisis cannot be overstated. Macra na Feirme has said:

[We urge] farmers not to suffer in silence, speaking to a friend or neighbour can help ease the mental burden. The amount of stress, anxiety and worry in the farming profession

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is enormous. Farmers are responsible for so much but cannot control the weather.

Farmers seeking to buy in fodder drastically outnumber those attempting to sell forage on. To help alleviate the burden of the fodder crisis on farms, a new sourcing app, developed by Herdwatch, has created a fodder platform to connect farmers who can help each other out. An article, however, published a week ago showed that the list of those seeking to buy fodder is nearly 20 times the level of those selling, with more than 200 farmers seeking fodder compared with a mere 12 suppliers. This crisis is nothing new; it has been happening for years in wetter parts of the State such as in the west and the north west. I put it to the Minister of State that the Minister should not have waited until the crisis hit Cork before paying attention. The hard lessons from this fodder crisis must be learned by the Government.

The drive towards huge expansion in agriculture as outlined in Food Wise 2025 - the ten-year plan for the agrifood sector - may look good on paper, but in the context of Brexit and climate change is this feasible or indeed desirable? Avoiding another fodder crisis needs discussion and proposals from the farm organisations, Teagasc and the Department. This may involve a reduction in stocking levels. Sinn Féin has called for action on this issue for years. Since last September we warned the Minister of the number of farmers in the north west who had been unable to get second cuts of silage and had to house cattle early due to severe rain in August and September. Last October we warned again of a looming crisis but our concerns were dismissed by the Minister, Deputy Creed, who continued to claim that there was no crisis and that there was lots of fodder in the country. In December, farmers, including some from my area of Donegal, contacted Teagasc regarding fodder shortages, with the majority of the farmers having a 50% shortfall in fodder. We warned that the proposed fodder action group would be kicking the can down the road but our warning fell on deaf ears. In January of this year we called again on the Minister to provide meal vouchers to help subsidise the cost of meal, a feed which farmers are assured of as to the quality. Sinn Féin has been consistent in raising this issue with the Minister but he has systemically ignored our calls.

The family farm is an integral part of rural Ireland and Irish society. Making it sustainable is a key aim for the future of our State. We cannot allow circumstances to arise where only the big, industrialised farmer can survive and the small family farm goes to the wall for lack of foresight and planning to avoid crises. We call on the Government to properly compensate and support our farming community for its losses during this crisis. I reiterate that the proposals in this motion from Fianna Fáil must be agreeable in seeking to address this crisis. They are sensible and practical proposals and the Minister of State cannot disagree with them.

The Sinn Féin amendment seeks to address the need for assistance to farmers to drain marginal land to prevent a fodder crisis from happening again. Climate change issues, specifically more frequent and heavier rainfall, are serious for farming. This cannot be allowed to continue to happen every year and measures must be taken to avoid fodder crises. More and better drainage could alleviate some of the waterlogging that has meant farmers, particularly in the north west, could not get a second cut of silage. Combined with a long, cold winter, which meant that spring growth was delayed, this created the severe shortages. If accepted, our amendment would go a long way to accomplish this.

At the very least it is vital that the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Teagasc and the farming organisations, pull together to learn the lessons from all of this. We must understand that climate is changing and that we have to look at the macro farming model on this island to see how we can sustain farming. We must keep a particular eye on it. The Minister

of State is aware of the statistics from the Council for the West; 42% of family farms across the west of Ireland have gone in the last two decades. There has been a huge reduction in the numbers of young farmers in Ireland in the last ten years. We have huge issues already and we need to address this, look at the long-term sustainability and learn the lessons.

Senator Colm Burke: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Doyle. There has been a change in farming over recent years. We have gone on to a high stocking rate, which poses challenges.

I come from a farming background, and although some would say that my own local area is half urban and half rural, the rural area is one where there is very intense farming. There is a lot of dairy farming and it is set at a very high stocking rate and people must plan for something like that. Farmers can plan for so many weeks of the year the amount of fodder they think they might require, which is an understanding farmers acquire from their own experience. They also tend to provide for an additional period when the weather may not be suitable for leaving stock out. So to be fair, farmers do plan.

The last six or seven months have been an unusual period where weather has not been on the side of farmers. Climate change is something that appears to be posing challenges for us in Ireland. Nevertheless, we are very lucky as a country because we have stock on land for a longer period than most of Europe. That is something we sometimes seem to ignore. Cattle grazing naturally, where milk is produced in that way, is one reason we can produce the produce we do. Most milk produced is from cattle out on grass rather than indoors, as in other jurisdictions. Over recent years, farmers have faced challenges and they are aware of them, but this year was exceptional. The Minister did respond in a timely manner in setting up the transport subsidy scheme and the stakeholder group composed of people from the farming organisations, the co-operatives and food merchants which was established to monitor the situation and see how to react. There is also the fodder import support scheme to co-operatives and importers. The Minister has responded and put in place the necessary measures to assist farmers.

We must now look at how farmers are advised. It is an issue I have increasingly come across. As someone involved in the legal profession, I regularly deal with farmers and one complaint I often hear from them is that they are constantly advised about increasing stocking rates. They find themselves under a lot of pressure and are being told they are not competitive enough because they do not have the same stocking rate as someone two miles down the road. We need to get a balance on this. In looking for a balance it is important that we ensure we advise farmers about planning and ensuring that there is adequate fodder and that they take into account the extra two or three weeks they might need to keep stock inside.

This has been an exceptional year. The dairy farmers are lucky in that milk prices have been extremely good and hopefully that will continue. We have a great product to sell and we are doing very well in that regard. The recent success in the Chinese market is proof of how good we are doing and the products that we are producing. The farming community adds to the local economy but also the wider economy in the number of people employed in the downstream industries. It is a huge industry in this country which adds greatly to our exports and it is important that the farming community gets the support it needs when difficulties arise. The Minister has responded appropriately and has delivered. Hopefully in the next week to two weeks we will see the change the farmers need to see in the weather in order to allow stock out to graze rather than feed them indoors. I thank the Minister for coming before the House and dealing with this issue.

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Senator Aidan Davitt: I thank the Minister for coming before the House to facilitate this debate. I fully concur with the remarks of our spokesperson, Senator Mark Daly, and Senator Murnane O'Connor and the case they outlined, the notice of amendment to the motion which was made and the Sinn Féin amendment on the drainage scheme. That makes a very good point and would provide much help, especially in the Shannon Basin. There is a call from many of the areas within the Shannon Basin and also the Boyne Basin.

The whole rural community is suffering due to the somewhat unexpected, prolonged winter we have had and the heavy rains but we must also call into question the Government's inaction. I fully agree with the proposals outlined in my party's motion, including: to immediately bring forward a hardship fund to help small and medium-sized farmers who have been severely impacted by the fodder crisis and the lack of available fodder; the introduction of a meal voucher scheme for farmers affected - they are well known to all the Teagasc offices up and down the country and local IFA representatives; and to swiftly make available low cost credit for farmers, which would alleviate many of the immediate problems. Hopefully the next couple of weeks will see us over this bump. If one were to look outside today, it is hard to believe that land is as wet as it is. It was no one's intention that we would end up where we are but we must take measures. If there was another week of rain, we would be in a seriously bad position. There is no time like the present and it is time to act.

Senator Tim Lombard: I welcome the Minister of State and the opportunity to contribute to this very important debate. The current fodder issue is something we need to learn from. We are now looking at a situation where there may be five to six month long winters. When we look at the question of fodder we must also look at who is advising our farmers and working with them. I am a dairy farmer and I am buying fodder because I have to. We would usually have the cows out day and night by St Patrick's Day, but our cows are inside every night and most days because of the environment and the amount of rain that is falling.

Two colleagues in the House are on the agriculture committee with me. It is something that we need to examine in detail. I question what Teagasc has been doing on this matter. We have had situations where Teagasc was pushing a Jersey cross on farmers, with 12 to 14 week winters and it does not work. We have to look at the green fields experiment and all the issues attached to that site. We are pushing something that does not work unless one has the ability to put something into the system when things go wrong, which they do. The weather situation has seen a winter of effectively 21 weeks, from last October until now. It is phenomenal. One would not believe the amount of rain that fell in the last ten days in Cork unless one was there. That is what we need to plan for. We need to look at a herd to which meal and silage can be brought and move away from the Jersey cross proposal that has been pushed for the last 15 years.

We also need to talk about the tillage sector. The tillage lads are really under pressure. Nothing was ploughed and nothing will be sown. They are looking at a situation where they will be unable to put in spring grain for another few weeks, beet will run until May and maize will definitely run until May. The next big issue will be from where the fodder for next spring will come. Very little of the first cut silage will be done in May, if at all; we are looking at this being done from June onwards. In that case there is a question of quality. When it comes to the second cut there will be a big issue with quantity. The planning for next winter will be the big issue.

The last time we were in this mess was in 2013. There are 365,000 extra dairy cows since then, and they all need to be fed. That is the issue we need to look at with regard to Food Wise

2025 and our policy vision. I personally believe that there is a body of work for the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine to do in really looking at our advice for farmers. Farmers have become slaves to the system and something needs to be looked at. The advice they have been given regarding the length of the winters and the early spring rotation which suggests having livestock out by 10 or 11 February only works on some lands in some parts of the world. There is an awful lot of work at which we really have to look.

Farmers are stressed. They are physically exhausted and under pressure financially, but they are mentally drained. It is an issue about which we need to start talking. The farmers out there have put up with literally 20 weeks of winter. They are mentally exhausted. Farmers need to talk about what is happening. They need to talk to Teagasc and to their friends and neighbours. Unless they have that conversation about how they are feeling we will have accidents and tragedies. That conversation needs to happen. What I would like to get out of this debate tonight is that conversation, one in which farmers will say that they are under pressure and that they are feeling it mentally. They should talk to their families and to their parish. The parish will have to come in to ensure that we can, as a community, get through this.

The next few days will tell a lot. At the moment it is raining in Cork, and I mean it is raining. If that continues, we will have a very tough few days ahead of us. I am buying in fodder because I need to. We have to ensure that we get over the next few weeks. The next ten days will be crucial. Ground conditions are terrible. I ask the Minister of State to get personally involved in talking about that mental issue and the stress farmers are under. I ask him to ask farmers to get involved in that conversation in order to get the message out there that if farmers are under pressure, the best thing to do is to talk about it.

Senator Brian Ó Domhnaill: I was listening to the debate from my office. I commend Senator Paul Daly for tabling the motion and I acknowledge the Sinn Féin amendment. I support both. This is a crucial issue which affects a large number of farmers and farms across the country. It is having more of an impact economically and socially on smaller farmers than on larger farmers, given the capital constraints which smaller farmers are under and their lack of ability to raise any finance to buy necessary feeding material. In the north west this has had, and continues to have, a huge impact. As Senator Lombard has said, despite the fact that the sun is shining today, land in the north west is effectively waterlogged and it is very difficult to farm. I come from a small farm. We ran out of material just like other farms. The cost of replacing or replenishing it is very substantial.

I know that this is an issue for which the Department has been heavily criticised. However, while some of that criticism is fair, there are other issues outside of the control of the Department and farmers which need to be taken into consideration and addressed for the long term. There is a short-term issue here. The Minister and the Department have spoken about the establishment of a hardship fund. The co-ops have done some valuable work. There is a short-term solution with regard to getting people through this process. There are probably also farmers out there who are too proud to ask for assistance. That is also a big issue in respect of farmers who find themselves isolated financially but who are also isolated because they feel too proud to ask for support. That issue needs to be dealt with compassionately on the ground. I ask that the Department instruct Teagasc to deal with this issue on the ground in as effective a manner as possible, whether that be through holding clinics or local meetings, or getting on the ground. It is fair enough to set up and announce all the schemes, but we have to grapple with the issue locally as well and provide whatever support we can.

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In terms of financial assistance to get through this crisis, the warm weather will come and temperatures are due to rise. That is a fact. It is also a fact, however, that our climate is changing for the long term and that climate change is causing massive problems. There has been research done on the effects of projected climate change on Irish agriculture over the next 30 years. My fear is that the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine is perhaps not doing enough to address this. It is coming at us fast. Projections from Teagasc and other academic researchers predict that rainfall will increase by 10% by 2050. That is during the winter period. By 2050 rainfall in the summer period is expected to decrease by between 12% and 17%. There are changing circumstances coming towards us. That will have an impact on the type of grass that will grow and on the economic output of each farm. We have to be ready for that and farmers have to be ready for that.

We need to look at making sure that the best available research is made available to farmers at the local level. We need to provide reassurance that whatever training is required will be provided, but also that financial assistance will be provided to farmers who need to change their farming enterprise model. That will have to happen if we are to meet the objectives set out, for example, in Food Wise 2025, particularly the productivity objectives. If we are going to meet those objectives post 2020 we need to look at bringing all of that research together, informing farmers and assisting them economically.

There is much work to be done. There is a short-term programme required over the coming weeks to get farmers through this very difficult period. I would love to hear the Minister of State's perspective on the long-term strategy because we can expect that this will happen again next winter. The probability is high that it will. What is the long-term strategy not just for next winter, but for every other winter between now and 2050 and 2080, when climate change will have had a much bigger impact on the world and our environmental footprint? There is a long-term issue. We politicians generally talk about short-term cycles. Everyone is now focused on the terrible crisis before us this week, next week and the week after. We sometimes forget once the sunshine comes. There is a need for long-term planning. That may well mean that a certain element of the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, budget will have to be used to assist farmers, particularly younger farmers, in adapting their enterprises in order to be economically viable into the future so that we will not see a situation in which smaller farms are gobbled up due to Teagasc not providing them with the wherewithal, resources and research capabilities. That is all I have to say. I am glad to have the opportunity to support the motion here tonight.

An Cathaoirleach: I will call on the Minister of State. Just to alert people who are looking at the sunshine, I was talking to a farmer in my own area a while ago and he has lambs inside in a shed under red lamps. He said that there is no sun shining in west Cork today. It is raining heavily there.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Andrew Doyle): How long do I have?

An Cathaoirleach: The Minister of State has 15 minutes.

Deputy Andrew Doyle: I hope I will get through it all. I hope Senators do not mind that I waited until everybody had made their contributions before thanking them. It was a far more measured debate than we had last night in the Dáil. Many of the points which were made are very reasonable and I would like to acknowledge that at the outset. Just before I start into my script, I would like to note that Senator Ó Domhnaill is the only Member here who was on the

previous committee. We talked about long-term strategy and put together a report on optimising land use potential. We also compiled a report in advance of the lifting of quotas. Our summary statement, which appeared in the RTE report, included the phrase “get better before you get bigger”. There are salutary lessons in some of what is contained in those two reports and perhaps we could return to them. I served as Chairman of the committee but it was the members who brought the reports forward.

Being from proud farming stock that has farmed for six generations on the same high-altitude land - I was feeding my suckler cattle and sheep this morning - I am acutely aware of the challenges presented by the weather and the dramatic impact the latter can have on farming communities in particular. As we are all aware, this past year there has been exceptionally bad weather that has brought unwelcome hardship to farming families. The Minister, Deputy Creed, and I have closely monitored evolving weather events and have worked, through our Department, with Teagasc, co-ops, farming organisations and farmers to find ways to help the farming community to deal with this very challenging time.

In response to the problems experienced in the west and north west in late autumn and during the winter, the Minister and I took a number of steps to ensure the availability of fodder. Teagasc was asked to prioritise direct support for farmers at risk of not having enough fodder for the winter by providing fodder budgeting and nutritional advice throughout the winter and into the spring. The payment of farm supports to assist farmers with cashflow was prioritised. The Department has paid out over €1.6 billion to Irish farmers under Pillar 1 and Pillar 2 and will continue to make residual payments. The Minister convened a fodder group, chaired by Teagasc and consisting of all the key stakeholders, to ensure a co-ordinated approach to the issue of fodder availability in affected areas. A targeted fodder transport support measure, with an allocation of €500,000, was introduced by my Department on 29 January 2018 to provide additional assistance to livestock farmers in the west and north west who were severely affected by ongoing fodder shortages.

Throughout this challenging time, my Department’s animal welfare helpline, which is run by a dedicated team, has been continuously available to offer assistance to any farmer experiencing animal welfare issues, including the provision of essential feed so that no farm animal need suffer due to hunger.

As we know, the continuation of unseasonably cold weather during March delayed the onset of spring, inhibited grass growth and resulted in livestock having to be housed for longer than usual. As a result, the fodder problem became more widespread and extended to the more heavily stocked regions of the south and east. In response, Department officials arranged meetings with Teagasc and industry representatives on 29 March and 4 April to assess the extent of the problem and identify what further action might be taken. Teagasc established a register of fodder to identify suppliers and buyers of fodder locally in order to free up any surplus supplies. A decision was taken at ministerial level to extend the fodder transport measure to all counties and to introduce a fodder import support measure, with an allocation of €1.5 million, to ensure that there was sufficient fodder available to feed the national herd.

The fodder import measure was introduced on 5 April to reduce the cost to farmers of imported forage from outside the island of Ireland and will run until 30 April. This measure, which is being operated through the co-ops and other approved importers, is helping livestock farmers to access fodder from abroad without having to contend in full with the substantially increased cost of transport. The measure will support the importation of approximately 20,000

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tonnes of fodder into the country, if required, and will be kept under review until the current crisis is over.

In addressing the problem of fodder shortage, a comprehensive approach has been taken and all avenues have been explored. For example, following engagement between my Department and the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, the Road Safety Authority of Ireland has agreed to greater operational flexibility for road hauliers engaged in the transport of fodder and feed because of increased demand. The GLAS traditional hay meadow grazing date has been extended to 1 May next. This releases an additional 27,000 ha of land that would otherwise not have been available to be used for grazing livestock. The closing date for nitrates derogation applications has been extended to 30 April. This will ensure that agricultural advisers have more time to assist farmers in planning how to cope with current difficulties until grass growth resumes and ground conditions improve.

Planning in respect of balancing payments under certain Pillar 2 schemes is under way with a view to commencement of balancing payments, including the sheep welfare scheme in the coming weeks followed by the GLAS scheme in mid-May. The animal welfare helpline continues to be available to farmers. A small number of inquiries has been received and the Department's local offices will arrange assistance where needed.

The Minister and I are very conscious of the fact that this prolonged winter has put some individual farmers under pressure in terms of cashflow. In recognition of this, the Minister invited the CEOs of the main banks to meet him to discuss the current cashflow and liquidity position of the primary sector. He emphasised at those meetings that the banks should recognise the temporary nature of the current situation and that they should be flexible and put in place measures to support their farming customers. The banks replied that, while there are no signs that there is a liquidity issue across the sector as a whole, there may be pressure in individual cases. These banks have also assured him, and stated publicly, that they are monitoring the current situation and that they have alerted front-line staff to be supportive in any cases where difficulties arise. They have also stated that measures such as extended overdraft facilities and term loans will be made available to their customers.

The farming sector is very close to my heart and I know that all farmers understand that severe weather events come with the territory. However, I am strongly committed to supporting farmers in managing as much risk as possible. In addition, we will need to consider selecting risk management tools within a future CAP. I facilitated three CAP regional discussion meetings and in each instance where this was mooted as a provision under the next rural development programme, RDP, the general feedback was that farmers knew what they were getting from Pillar 1 and did not want anything taken from it. This may be revisited and we should take it on board. To date, such tools, which include mutual funds, insurance schemes and income stability tools, have been optional for member states to take up and Ireland, like some other member states, has not taken them up.

It is well known that Ireland has a natural competitive advantage in sustainable livestock production, particularly dairy, beef and sheep farming, based on a grass-based production system which is both relatively low cost and carbon efficient. Food Wise 2025, the shared strategy for the development of the sector, emphasises the opportunities to grow the value of farm output and value added and agrifood exports in response to growing demand, particularly from new markets. It emphasises, however, that this growth must be managed in an environmentally sustainable manner. Ireland is a world leader in sustainable food production and animal welfare.

I have no doubt that this most recent challenge to the primary production sector will be one we will successfully overcome and that we will continue to meet our targets under Food Wise 2025. I agree, nevertheless, that the model on which it is based needs to be looked at and amended.

The desirability of Irish agrifood products in the most discerning of world markets was brought home to me this week when the Minister announced the opening of the Chinese market to Irish beef. The opening of this lucrative market presents an outstanding opportunity for the Irish beef sector, from farmers through to processors, in line with the market development theme of our Food Wise 2025 strategy. This decision by the Chinese authorities represents a powerful endorsement of Ireland's superior standards by the Chinese Administration, for which food safety is a prerequisite for trade. The anticipated extra demand for beef will help our primary producers considerably and follow on from the success of our dairy sector in exports to China, where growth has been dramatic.

Live exports also play an important role in stimulating price competition for domestic cattle and providing an alternative market for farmers. Last year, my Department reduced the veterinary inspection fee payable on live exports of calves under three months of age to €1.20 per animal from €4.80, which is one quarter of the previous price. This gave an important boost to trade and brought greater equity in the fees payable for calves, weanlings and adult cattle. Exports of calves rose by 20% to just over 100,000 in 2017 compared with 2016.

I emphasise these positive developments simply to highlight that despite the latest weather events, the overall story is extremely positive. There is huge potential for the growth of our exports to bring about buoyancy in the sector. I have every confidence that our robust farming sector will recover from this latest challenge. As we finally navigate our way to the other side of this really difficult period, it is an absolute priority to ensure that in future years we conserve enough fodder to deal with whatever winters come at us. Teagasc has been asked to make this a matter of priority throughout its advisory campaign in the months ahead. My Department will also continue to operate its early warning system whereby emergency assistance may be provided to farmers whose animals are experiencing serious welfare issues with which those farmers are unable to cope. I am confident that the actions outlined above will ensure that farmers can successfully plan more effectively for winters such as the one we have just witnessed.

To pay out the schemes, inspections are necessary. Bord Bia quality assurance inspections can be deferred quite easily. In other cases where there is an issue, farmers should contact their regional office to request some leeway. It is important that inspections continue, however, to allow payments to proceed at the end of the month for sheep and in mid-May for GLAS.

We must look at the whole model. I do not necessarily agree that we are overstocked. The nitrates directive and other environmental measures will ensure we are not overly stocked. If dairying is going to be the main driver, however, we have to look at a model which considers dry stock and arable farmers as part of that whole industry and not as separate silos. In other words, if farmers are going to increase stock, they will have to make provision. I note that there are 365,000 more cattle since the last fodder shortage. The Teagasc advisory service will consider tweaking the model so that land on which milk can be produced is looked at in the context that not every winter will be 12 to 15 weeks. There is a saying where I come from that one should have enough hay until 10 May. It is slightly different. However, I did not follow that advice myself this year and actually sold some fodder earlier on. We have to look at the model. We have learned a salutary lesson that one can take nothing for granted when it comes to the weather. We must bear that in mind when we plan for the future. We can still meet all of

the challenges with a proper land-use policy and joined-up thinking across all sectors.

I thank the Members for the debate. I note that in 1985 and 1986 we had two very difficult harvests and there were tragic stories. Combines got stuck and farmers took drastic measures. In May 1986, I had a large number of sheep and was buying nuts until the end of May to keep my lambs' mothers fed. There was no mention or expectation of support or schemes and one just had to get on with it. During those very challenging harvests in 1985 and 1986, even the quality of brewers' grain and milling wheat was undermined, in particular in the second year. We have been here before. I am not saying I disagree that there are climate change trends, but we should look at the long picture going back to learn how we should go forward. It is something we should bear in mind as we look not only at the last six or seven months, but also at the future.

An Cathaoirleach: Very challenging times. I call Senator Paul Daly to conclude. He has five minutes.

Senator Paul Daly: I am glad to have the opportunity to conclude the debate. I thank Members across the House who have supported the motion. While I thank the Minister of State for his response, to say I am disappointed would be an understatement. In his statement, he rehashed the actions which have been taken by Government since last September. In essence, that is why we are here today. There is no mention in the statement of any future planning. While the Minister of State acknowledged that we can meet Food Harvest 2025 if there is correct planning, on which I agree with him, what planning is there? The Minister of State and the line Minister, Deputy Creed, are the go-to people in agriculture. It is their baby. It is the Department's baby and they are at its head. All they say here, however, is that they acknowledge what has been done without acknowledging that it is what has been done since September that has got us to where we are. There is no indication or mention of acceptance of any of the proposals in our motion or of any other suggestion of their own to help people to get over this.

There is no future in history. I am a farmer myself and I remember the bad winters to which the Minister of State referred. While we got over 1973, 1985 and 1986, the resilience of farmers has been worn very thin at this stage and we are very close to a breaking point, if not at it, for many. It is bad form if the best answer of a Minister of State in a situation of crisis is to quote the resilience of farmers to say they will get through it. As I said at the committee, the Minister of State and the Minister are waiting for Joanna Donnelly and Jean Byrne to announce at 9.30 p.m. some night on RTÉ 1 that the crisis is over. That is what will happen. The weather will get us out of the crisis, but it will not get us beyond this and it will not form the plans for avoidance of the same situation into the future, not least into the winter of 2019, which we are already at the start of on the basis of the reasons I quoted in my opening address. We need leadership, but it is not forthcoming.

As has been said here, the farming community and farm enterprises in rural Ireland are its economic backbone. When farmers have no cashflow or money to spend, SMEs, shops and high streets in small towns and villages suffer. Given the situation in which the farming community finds itself, farmers do not have a red cent to spend on food for hungry animals and, in the circumstances, they are not going to be going to town. Everybody in the community suffers as a result. Nevertheless, the Minister of State provided no solution or plan for the future in his address. He provided no clue as to how we are going to help these people overcome the situation in which they find themselves to build for the future and avoid the same happening again. We are fire-fighting because we allowed ourselves to get into this situation. Prevention is far

better than cure and I hoped the Minister of State would, if he was not accepting our motion, provide some answers as to what we can do to avoid getting into this situation again.

There is no future in history and while there is no future in blaming people for something which happened in the past, lessons must be learned going forward. We were here in 2013 too but, apparently, we learned nothing. From the Minister of State's response today, it looks like we have not learned anything from 2017-18 either.

Amendment put:

The Seanad divided: Tá, 16; Níl, 13.	
Tá	Níl
Burke, Colm.	Boyhan, Victor.
Burke, Paddy.	Clifford-Lee, Lorraine.
Butler, Ray.	Daly, Paul.
Buttimer, Jerry.	Davitt, Aidan.
Byrne, Maria.	Gavan, Paul.
Coffey, Paudie.	Leyden, Terry.
Dolan, John.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.
Feighan, Frank.	Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.
Hopkins, Maura.	Ó Céidigh, Pádraig.
Lombard, Tim.	Ó Domhnaill, Brian.
McFadden, Gabrielle.	Ó Donnghaile, Niall.
Mulherin, Michelle.	Warfield, Fintan.
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Wilson, Diarmuid.
O'Mahony, John.	
O'Reilly, Joe.	
Richmond, Neale.	

Tellers: Tá, Senators Gabrielle McFadden and John O'Mahony; Níl, Senators Paul Daly and Jennifer Murnane O'Connor.

Amendment declared carried.

An Cathaoirleach: As amendment No. 3 has been agreed, amendments Nos. 1 and 2 cannot be moved.

Amendments Nos. 1 and 2 not moved.

Question put: "That the motion, as amended, be agreed to."

The Seanad divided: Tá, 17; Níl, 14.	
Tá	Níl
Burke, Colm.	Boyhan, Victor.
Burke, Paddy.	Clifford-Lee, Lorraine.
Butler, Ray.	Daly, Mark.

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Buttimer, Jerry.	Daly, Paul.
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Conway, Martin.	Leyden, Terry.
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Feighan, Frank.	Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.
Hopkins, Maura.	Ó Céidigh, Pádraig.
Lombard, Tim.	Ó Domhnaill, Brian.
McFadden, Gabrielle.	Ó Donnghaile, Niall.
Mulherin, Michelle.	Warfield, Fintan.
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Wilson, Diarmuid.
O'Mahony, John.	
O'Reilly, Joe.	
Richmond, Neale.	

Tellers: Tá, Senators Gabrielle McFadden and John O'Mahony; Níl, Senators Paul Daly and Jennifer Murnane O'Connor.

Question declared carried.

An Cathaoirleach: When is it proposed to sit again?

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Ar 10.30 maidin amárach.

The Seanad adjourned at 7.40 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Thursday, 19 April 2018.