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DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

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

Retirement of Staff Member. 766

SEANAD ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 14 Deireadh Fómhair 2020

Wednesday, 14 October 2020

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach i gceannas ar 10.30 a.m.

*Machnamh agus Paidir.
Reflection and Prayer.*

Retirement of Staff Member

An Cathaoirleach: Before we get to the business of the day, I want to announce that, as some of you may know, the head usher, Colm O'Rourke, is retiring. He has served in this House for 14 years. He is a dedicated member of the staff and always worked diligently on behalf of Members and all of the visitors who came to this House. He is not with us today. He will retire on 30 October and Members might meet him between now and then. We of course wish him a happy retirement and ask that if he knows the secret of how to spend time without spending money he shares it with us all. We wish him, his wife and his family all the best in his retirement.

Commission of Investigation (Mother and Baby Homes and certain related Matters) Records, and another Matter, Bill 2020: Order for Second Stage

Bill entitled an Act to provide for the deposit with the Child and Family Agency of certain evidence received by, and certain documents created by or for, the commission of investigation established by the Commission of Investigation (Mother and Baby Homes and certain related Matters) Order 2015 (S.I. No. 57 of 2015); to clarify certain matters with regard to the application of section 43 of the Commissions of Investigation Act 2004 in relation to other evidence received by, and other documents created by or for, the said commission of investigation; for other unrelated purposes, to amend the Judicial Council Act 2019; and to provide for matters connected therewith.

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: I move: "That Second Stage be taken today."

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? It is not agreed.

Senator Michael McDowell: I want to put on the record of the House that I and other Members of the House have tabled an amendment which states:

“To delete all words after “That” and to substitute the following:

“the Bill be read a Second Time on 21st October, 2020, to allow for a further consultation on certain provisions of the Bill, including the insertion of the words ‘another matter’ into the title of the Bill and the insertion of section 6 into the Bill, noting the power of the Minister to further amend the Terms of Reference of the Commission to provide for a later date for the delivery of its final report.

I understand Senator Boyhan will second the amendment.

An Cathaoirleach: We are on the Order for Second Stage. The amendment will be taken at the end of Second Stage.

Senator Michael McDowell: It will be taken at the end of Second Stage.

An Cathaoirleach: We have to agree this first and then the amendment can be taken-----

Senator Michael McDowell: The point I am making is that, as I understand it, the vote will be taken at the end of Second Stage as an amendment to the Government’s motion that the Bill be read a Second Time. I want to reiterate the point that, as far as I know, no Member, other than a Government Member – and I do not even know about them – was warned about section 6 and the other matter. There has been no informal consultation of any kind whatsoever with my group. This is an instance where we are being asked to legislate on something without any pre-legislative scrutiny or prior discussion. It has appeared out of nowhere in a Bill that is scheduled to be run through in two days. It is not acceptable to my group or, I believe, the great majority of the people who are not members of Government parties.

Senator Ivana Bacik: I want to second Senator McDowell’s proposal. I know Senator Boyhan’s name is also on it as a seconder. If needs be, I am happy to second it on the basis that, as Senator McDowell has said, we are very concerned about the way in which the Bill is being rushed through and the projected ordering of Committee and Report Stages for Friday. I know that has not yet been ordered by the House. That will be put by the Leader on Friday morning.

The many thousands of emails we have all received in recent days shows the level of concern about the Bill and the need for further consultation. I want to support Senator McDowell on this reasonable proposal to delay somewhat the taking of Second Stage. Given the Order of Business for today, am I right in saying that if we are seeking to amend the Government order, any division we propose at the end of Second Stage at 12.30 p.m. today - or before if we finish before that - will be postponed until Friday? I think I am right about that.

Senator Fintan Warfield: I welcome any time legislation is either debated in this House or begins its journey here, but I am concerned that this Bill is due to be considered in one week and that we have three hours after the debate today to submit amendments. It is unacceptable for that to happen in the context of legislation that will have such a profound impact on the lives of so many people who have been badly let down by the State already. It is right out of the Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil playbook to - particularly this coming Friday - stifle debate in this fashion.

Senator Seán Kyne: It was ordered last week that the House would take Second Stage today. The Minister is here to hear all the views of Members and it is right and proper that, rather than postponing anything, we have the debate and that Members on all sides put across

the points they want to make and the Minister can respond. We will have plenty of time for debate on Second Stage and, again, subject to the order of the House, on Committee and Report Stages on Friday.

Question put and declared carried.

**Commission of Investigation (Mother and Baby Homes and certain related Matters)
Records, and another Matter, Bill 2020: Second Stage**

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

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): Ireland’s history is sadly littered with a legacy of failings related to the care of our most vulnerable citizens in institutional settings. Previously, the State has ordered investigations into specific institutional settings and shone a light on the pain and anguish experienced by people who found themselves in these institutions through no fault of their own. In 2015, the Government established the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes and Certain Related Matters to comprehensively examine the experiences of mothers and children who were resident in mother and baby homes and related county homes. These matters have never been the subject of a statutory investigation before and it is vitally important that there is a comprehensive examination and understanding of the experiences of those who were resident in them. Vulnerable women were hidden away in these places because of the societal shame and stigma associated with being an unmarried mother at that time. The commission is charged with investigating specific sensitive issues relating to the practices and procedures regarding the care, welfare, entry arrangements and exit pathways for the women and children who were residents of these institutions. It was also tasked with completing an academic social history spanning 75 years. This will chart the journey of many who passed through these places and the lifelong shame and stigma which they experienced as a result. The commission’s report will put these experiences into the context of the time they occurred.

The commission established a confidential committee to enable former residents to provide an account of their experiences in private. These accounts will be captured in the final report, thereby giving an explicit voice to the mothers and children who began their lives inside the walls of these institutions. The lived experiences and hidden secrets of life in these establishments, as told by survivors, will finally be reported.

This has been a long time coming for many who have associations with the homes. I understand that the anguish felt by many former residents of mother and baby homes and their families has been prolonged by the commission’s need for additional time to complete its work. However, I know they understand that the commission is investigating important, personal and sensitive matters which happened over a period of more than 75 years. The commission of investigation is due to submit its final report to me by 30 October of this year.

The commission was established under the Commission of Investigations Act 2004. As prescribed under this Act, on submission of its final report, the commission will stand dissolved and, prior to its dissolution, it must deposit all commission records with me as the prescribed Minister. The 2004 Act further provides that this archive of records will remain sealed for a period of 30 years after which time its availability for public inspection is governed in accordance with the National Archives Act 1986.

The Bill I am putting before the House today deals with serious legal and practical issues that were raised by the commission of investigation with regard to finalising its records. This Bill aims to safeguard the records gathered by the commission over the course of its complex five-year investigation so they are preserved intact and available into the future in an appropriate way.

This is a technical Bill so I will be using phrases such as “database” and “records” and other technical language during the debate but I am acutely aware that each record represents a person and very real suffering in the past but also emotional wounds that are still very much open today for many of the survivors. The commission has compiled digital databases with details of the mothers and children who were resident in 15 of the main mother and baby homes under investigation from the records that are available to it. These databases have been painstakingly developed over a long number of years and at considerable cost. The commission believes that these databases and related source records would be of assistance to those involved in providing information and tracing services. However, the commission believes that as the information compiled in its records contains sensitive personal information, it is obliged to redact the names and other identifying information about the residents of these homes from its archive, including its database and related records, prior to transfer. Notably, the commission believes that legislation is required in order to address those matters.

Having examined the issue, the Government concluded that there was a strong rationale for legislation to be passed to protect the complete records of the commission and to specifically provide for the transfer of the valuable database and related records from the commission to Tusla so that it can support information and tracing services for former residents. This is the essence of the bespoke legislation before us today.

This Bill ensures that the records of the mother and baby homes commission of investigation are deposited without redaction. While the main archive will be deposited with the Minister, in line with the provisions of the 2004 Act, significantly, this Bill provides for the transfer of the database and related records directly to Tusla. That ensures that this invaluable resource is preserved and maintained, and remains available, albeit on a limited basis in the first instance. That limitation is reflected in the restrictions set out in the Bill. These provide that the processing of records or data is limited to the purposes authorised by the data protection regulation, the Data Protection Acts 1988 to 2018 or any other enactment. However, nothing in the Bill prevents Tusla from processing information from a related record given to the commission by Tusla itself. The Bill also enables appropriate access for the essential maintenance of the digital database and related records. The Bill provides no new entitlement to information.

By legislating for the urgent protection and limited use of these databases now, my intention is to provide an important foundation upon which we can build. In the future, I plan to advance comprehensive information and tracing legislation, which will expand access to the entire suite of information now being transferred to Tusla. However, as Senators will understand, this is a challenging task that requires a balance between the complex constitutional rights, and its not a balance that we can achieve in this particular urgent legislation.

The Bill also includes a number of technical amendments to the Judicial Council Act 2019 as proposed by my colleague, the Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy McEntee. Given the timeframe for the finalisation and submission of records, there is an urgent need for this Bill to be passed and signed into law prior to the dissolution of the commission on 30 October. It is imperative that the valuable information compiled and developed by the commission is pre-

served for posterity by passing this legislation before that date.

I will outline the Bill's key provisions, which should be read in the context of the relevant powers, procedures and protections in the Commissions of Investigation Act 2004. Section 1 is a standard provision which provides definitions of key terms used in the Bill. The term "database" specifically includes all the databases developed by the commission with regard to the former residents of the institutions being examined. The definition of "related record" refers to the source material from which information was obtained for the purpose of creating the database. In practical terms, these sources are institutional and public source records which were obtained by the commission in the course of its work.

Section 2 provides for the commission to deposit the database and all related records with Tusla as soon as possible after enactment. The Bill substitutes Tusla for the Minister as the recipient of these specific records. Section 2 also confirms that the material shall be transferred without redaction. It is declaratory of the current provision under section 43(2) and has been included in the Bill purely for the avoidance of doubt.

Section 3 deals with restrictions on processing of the database and records received by Tusla. It stipulates that Tusla may not process records or information provided to the commission except where authorised or required under the data protection regulation, the Data Protection Acts 1988 to 2018 or any other enactment, or for legitimate purposes related to maintenance. The section expressly states that nothing in the Bill or the Act of 2004 shall prevent the processing of information which originated from any record given to the commission by Tusla. The Bill does not provide any new entitlement to access information in the possession of Tusla or to the archive which transfers to the Minister in accordance with section 43(2) of the 2004 Act. This would have to be addressed by separate legislation in the future.

Section 4 deals with the application of section 45 of the 2004 Act in respect of evidence and documents to be available to tribunals. This section ensures consistency with the 2004 Act insofar as the evidence and records to be deposited with the agency can be made available to a tribunal of inquiry in the event of the future establishment of such a body.

Section 5 provides that, for the avoidance of doubt, the obligation to deposit records with the Minister in accordance with subsection 43(2) of the 2004 Act is an obligation to deposit such evidence and documents without redaction thereof. This section is declaratory of the current position under section 43(2) and has been included in the Bill purely for the avoidance of doubt.

Section 6 amends the Judicial Council Act 2019. That Act provides for the establishment of various committees of the Judicial Council including the personal injuries guidelines committee. It provides that the committee shall submit the first draft of personal injuries guidelines to the board of the council within a defined period and also provides that the draft guidance guidelines will be considered and adopted by the council as soon as is practicable and in any event no later than 12 months after their submission. It is these provisions which are the subject of the amendments in the Bill.

Section 6 substitutes a new paragraph for section 7(2) of the Judicial Council Act 2019 and amends section 18(4) of the 2019 Act to allow the personal injuries guidelines committee to complete its work with a new extended statutory deadline of 9 December 2020 and for the council to adopt the personal injuries guidelines by 31 July 2021 at the latest. Section 7 is a standard provision enabling expenses incurred in the administration of the Act, other than by

section 6, to be paid by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs out of moneys provided by the Oireachtas. Section 8 is a standard provision to provide for the Short Title of the Bill which reads, “This Act may be cited as the Commission of Investigation (Mother and Baby Homes and certain related Matters) Records, and another Matter, Act 2020.”

The provisions of this Bill are not expected to give rise to any significant additional costs to the Exchequer. The associated costs will be met from within the Vote from the Department of children, equality, disability, integration and youth.

As colleagues will be aware, access to information is a recurring and priority concern for those directly involved with the mother and baby home institutions. This legislation represents an important and urgent measure in terms of preserving valuable databases and records which speak to that very concern. I understand there are genuine expectations that this database should enable additional information to be made available to residents. In that regard, it is essential to understand that Tusla is still bound by the continuing significant constitutional constraints in terms of access to information. This can only be addressed by future legislation, something to which I am absolutely committed. I appreciate that some stakeholders have argued that the database and related records should be transferred to a body other than Tusla. The rationale for specifying Tusla as the recipient of the database is that it already has statutory responsibility for adoption tracing services under the Adoption Act 2010 and dedicates substantial resources and expertise to carrying out tracing functions. Crucially, it currently holds the originals of many of the relevant institutional records. Legally, this enables the maximum value to be obtained from the database in the immediate term while comprehensive information and tracing legislation is being put in place. A transfer to any statutory body other than Tusla, such as the Adoption Authority of Ireland, AAI, would mean that two different statutory bodies would hold the same records, with Tusla holding the originals and the AAI holding the database and associated copies. Such duplication would be inefficient and lead to confusion.

Tusla will be fulfilling an important public service in safeguarding this database in the immediate term. The appropriate body to retain such records in the long-term will be the subject of further consideration in the course of bringing forward new legislative proposals for enhanced information and tracing services. I will, of course, seek further engagement with stakeholders as I advance these deliberations.

Due to the urgent need to pass this legislation before the commission is dissolved, I appreciate there has been limited time to review the proposals. The requirement for pre-legislative scrutiny was waived by the House Business Committee at my request. However, I hope that the recent briefings I provided, as well as the information outlined today, have been helpful to Senators. I thank the Seanad for the opportunity to come before it today to outline this important Bill and I look forward to the debate. Ireland has come a long way from the Ireland of the 1920s. Ours is, I hope, a more progressive, tolerant and equal society. Our commitment to remembering and learning from our past must be absolute. The forthcoming report of the commission is a crucial element of that national process of learning, understanding and acknowledgement. This legislation is also crucial to ensure that records of the commission are preserved and the opportunity presented by the database, in terms of laying the path towards fuller access to early life information, is not overlooked. We have a duty to the former residents and survivors of these institutions to pass this legislation and I would welcome Senators’ support for it.

I commend the Bill to the House.

Senator Erin McGreehan: I welcome the Minister of State. I reflect on this opportunity to speak here today on the mother and baby homes as an honour and a great responsibility. What the State, the country, the church and our people did to these women and babies was disgusting. It was wrong and I am ashamed that this is the story of our nation in terms of the way it treated women, girls and children. It is incredible that we, as a nation, we were so cruel to the most vulnerable. That we abused that vulnerability in ways that were so depraved should make us all completely ashamed. In terms of the numbers, the commission that was established under the Commissions of Investigation Act 2004 has examined records for over 70,000 mothers and a greater number of children in 18 different institutions all across our country.

Between the years 1922 and 1998, women were subjected to forced labour, psychological or physical torture, ill-treatment, denial of education to children, sexual assault and many other forms of abuse. This is sometimes described as historical abuse but we cannot describe the 1990s, when the last laundry was shut, as historical. This is our modern Ireland - an Ireland that was, even in the 1990s, a member of the EU and the United Nations. This is our present and these women and the children who were interned in the mother and baby homes deserve respect, care, understanding, support, dignity and a break. They have been fighting for survival, to live, to be heard and for respect and they had to fight for an apology. This is not history, it is our citizens' present stories. They are not artefacts, they are people.

In the Magdalen laundries, girls as young as nine and women were locked away and forced into penal servitude for a wide variety of spurious reasons. The institutions solved a problem, one of avoiding shame on a society - the irony of this. Our people, our State, our church, our schools and everyone turned a blind eye, closed their doors, closed their minds to "that girl" who was in trouble or difficult to deal with. They were dealt with: they were put away.

To speak directly and specifically to the Bill, there has been much discussion about what it covers and the reason it is being fast-tracked. It deals with serious legal and practical issues raised by the commission in relation to finalising its records. In the absence of the important changes contained within this Bill, the commission would continue to be obliged to redact sensitive personal information before depositing its records.

The commission was established under the Commissions of Investigation Act 2004. Under the 2004 Act, investigations are held in private. That confidentiality applies to the evidence and records gathered by the inquiry.

Earlier this year, the commission informed the Department of Children and Youth Affairs that it had created a database tracking who was in the main mother and baby homes, but did not feel it had a legal basis to transfer that database and would be compelled by law to redact the valuable information contained within it. This Bill ensures that the records of the commission are deposited with the Minister or with the Child and Family Agency, without redaction. Most significantly, the Bill provides for the transfer of specified databases and records relating to the former residents of the institutions being examined by the commission to Tusla.

The database contains information relating to the mothers and children who were resident in 11 of the 18 institutions being investigated by the commission. Into the future, a database of this nature, as discussed by the Minister, is undoubtedly required to support a statutory information and tracing service for individuals who resided in these institutions and have fundamental questions about their identity or their time in these institutions. The complex constitutional and

legal issues which arise in this area would require further legislation. The Minister has stated that he is committed to separately advancing robust information and tracing legislation to provide an enhanced statutory framework for the release of birth and early life information and will have my full support in that.

We have received thousands of emails as I am sure the Minister has also. The sealing of documents, which is not part of this Bill specifically, has become the main talking point of this Bill. However, it is a very important matter and needs to be discussed here. The Minister's intentions regarding this 30-year sealing needs to be questioned. It is worth noting, and everyone must acknowledge, that the oral witness statements given to the commission will be printed without personal details in the report when it is published.

I understand that the 30-year rule cannot be amended in blanket fashion in the 2004 Act as it would change the legal framework and remit of other very important commissions of inquiry established under that Act. I also certainly know that this 30-year locking up of testimony is far too long for too many people. They do not have 30 years. They have had a lifetime of torment and if their lives will be helped or healed in any way whatsoever we must act. We must immediately set about doing a review on how these stories of the women in the database can be in a public record for those who wish it to be a public record. I fully understand that not all of the women want their names made public.

I spoke to Dr. Maeve O'Rourke from NUI Galway who is one of many tireless campaigners for these women and children and I hope that the Minister might consider three things. First, that a copy of the entire commission archive be kept in his Department. Second, that personal access requests to the archive are facilitated when his Department receives them. Third, that an appropriately anonymised index to the archive be published in a timely manner after his Department's receipt of it, so that debate and consultation can be facilitated on the further unsealing of the commission's archive, and the future creation of a dedicated archive of historical abuse records, detailing what it might contain, and how and where it could be established.

This country needs to accept its horrendous past and face it head-on. It needs to establish a dedicated archive in Sean McDermott Street where we as a country can see the cruelty of what we did to the women and these precious little children that we neglected. We also need a monument to honour all of these lives, to honour their stories, to face the truth, and to respect our women and children.

I again urge the Minister to review my request concerning these amendments, if not in this Bill, then in the weeks and months ahead, because it is very important that these women who want their stories told and their lives made clear to us all and to our children are facilitated, so that our children will know what our State and our people did to these women. I fundamentally believe that these women deserve a break and the chance to have their stories told and deserve some sort of healing. If the Minister can give any sort of healing to these women at this stage I would greatly appreciate it.

Senator Michael McDowell: I welcome the Minister to the House. I am concerned that some of the contributions made today are confusing various concepts involved in this legislation. I want to reiterate at the outset that the Minister has not explained the circumstances in which section 6 came to be necessary and the Minister for Justice and Equality is not here.

An Cathaoirleach: Is the Senator moving his amendment?

Senator Michael McDowell: I move amendment No. 1:

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

“the Bill be read a second time on 21st October, 2020, to allow for further consultation on certain provisions of the Bill, including the insertion of the words ‘another matter’ into the title of the Bill and the insertion of section 6 into the Bill, noting the power of the Minister to further amend the Terms of Reference of the Commission to provide for a later date for the delivery of its final report.”

Senator Victor Boyhan: I second the amendment.

Senator Michael McDowell: I am concerned about the fact that section 6 appears in this Bill without any explanation whatsoever. No Members of this House, other than perhaps the Government Members, were consulted about section 6. I do not believe that. The Minister has not advanced the reasons this extension of time became necessary. I will leave it at that, but I do not think it is satisfactory that a justice provision dealing with the Judicial Council should be just added onto the back of a legislative train like an oil tanker being put behind a passenger train and suggesting it can go down the line without any pre-legislative scrutiny or real explanation as to why it was necessary.

The confidential committee established under the terms of reference of the commission was set up for a particular reason. I bring the Minister’s attention to terms of reference 3 and 4 of the order of 2015. Paragraph 3 stated:

The Commission shall establish a Confidential Committee to provide a forum for persons who were formerly resident in the homes listed in Appendix 1, or who worked in these institutions, during the relevant period [...]

Paragraph 4 stated:

The Confidential Committee shall -

(a) operate under the direction of and be accountable to the Commission,

(b) provide in its procedures for individuals who wish to have their identity remain confidential during the conduct of the Commission and its subsequent reporting, and

(c) produce a report of a general nature on the experiences of the single women and children which the Commission may, to the extent it considers appropriate, rely upon to inform the investigations set out in Article 1.

It was mainly women, and some children, who came forward to the confidential committee. They received a leaflet from the committee which stated:

The Confidential Committee will make a general report which won’t name you or any specific person or institution. This is because people who go to that Committee will not wish to have any information about them given to anyone outside the Commission or to be questioned by anyone outside the Commission.

They were also told, “No report on anything you tell the Confidential Committee will be given to the authorities.” Those were solemn undertakings to people that they would never be identified. The effect of the Bill that the Minister has tendered before the House is to tear up that undertaking and say that their testimony can go into an archive in his Department and, in 30 years’ time, be opened up. If somebody comes before a State organ and is told that he or she will never be identified to the authorities but will be given absolute anonymity, it is wholly wrong for the Department to produce legislation the effect of which is to tear up that guarantee and put a ticking time bomb for many families in the State archives.

It is different for people who are part of the database. I strongly support the accumulation of material which enables people to trace their parents. However, this material consists of people describing the circumstances in which they were put into these homes, parental pressure, bullying, who they met in the homes, their attitude to their child being taken from them and all of those things. They were given an absolutely cast-iron commitment by the commission, in accordance with its terms of reference, that they would not be identified. The Minister is tearing that up, saying that it goes into the archive and can come out in 30 years’ time. That is fundamentally wrong. The amendments we will be tendering to the Bill will ensure that the database goes to Tusla for preservation and that the documents that go to the Department are redacted so that it will not be open to anyone, in any circumstance, to upend the solemn guarantee that was given to those women and children who came forward and gave evidence under an absolute guarantee of anonymity and non-identification. It is a central obligation of the Irish Government to uphold what was a solemn undertaking given to people that what they said would not be identifiable and that their evidence would never be used in such a way as to make what they said identifiable. Either we believe in that or we do not. The Minister’s Department has not adequately considered the constitutional injustice of getting somebody into a commission and saying: “You will never be identified, your names will never be given to the authorities, what you say will be absolutely confidential” and then passing a Bill in a hurry without any consultation on this point and just rushing it through in a few days without pre-legislative scrutiny. There are fundamental issues here. There is an argument between the Minister’s Department and the commission over general data protection regulation, GDPR, issues. I still believe GDPR is not completely overcome by simply saying there is an Act involved. If the Act itself is such as to make sensitive information available and to allow it to be processed in breach of a solemn undertaking given to the persons who gave testimony to that commission, the GDPR probably makes what is envisaged here unlawful.

The alternative is to simply allow the commission to do what it asked to do, that is, to black out a few names on these personal accounts as it does not affect the database in the slightest. However, it does guarantee to these people that their evidence will be anonymised in a manner and will not be dragged out by somebody in 30 years’ time to say, “Your grandfather did this”, “Your grandmother did that”, “These are the circumstances of your family”, “You are the result of incest”, or “The person who you believed was your grandmother was in fact your aunt”, or *vice versa*, or something like that. These things were extracted from volunteers on an absolute guarantee of confidentiality and anonymity and we now find ourselves in a situation that that is being torn up by the Minister’s Department and no excuse is being offered for it. It is not necessary to renege on those commitments. The Minister’s Department will be none the wiser if the general report, which will not mention any people or any individuals - which is what the terms of reference said - is published and if the people who painted the day-to-day picture of their existence are delivered the anonymity they asked for. There will be no advantage to naming names in 30 years’ time. There will be a huge disadvantage in 30 years’ time for families

who thought they were descended from one person finding out that in appalling circumstances they were dealt with in a different way, especially when that information was volunteered by somebody who said, “I am only volunteering this on the basis that the identity of the people in my evidence will never be given”.

I will finish by saying that the Minister should by all means send the database to Tusla. It is a sensible thing to do. He should bring in his tracing legislation and that is fine. However, he should not tear up a solemn commitment, given by an organ of the Irish State in accordance with its terms of reference, to people who were told that what they said would remain secret as far as their identity was concerned, forever. I remind the Minister that even the tape recordings of some of their interviews were destroyed afterwards. These people deserve justice. I ask the Minister to consider the amendments that I and my colleagues have put down because they are the minimum that is required to deal honourably with people who were guaranteed anonymity as a condition of testifying.

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: I welcome the Minister. The Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation was established to provide a full account of what happened to women and children across named mother and baby homes and four county homes between 1922 and 1998. The personal experiences I have watched, heard and read about thus far were undoubtedly harrowing. At no point in our remarks in the House should we lose sight of the absolute suffering of women and children and their lifelong experience, their state of not knowing and the abuse and hardship they endured. There were also those who did not have long lives and whose remains were treated so despicably and appallingly.

The commission’s interim reports, particularly the fifth one, indicate an Ireland that was harsh and judgmental and that had no compassion. While the focus of the investigation is rightly on the actions of the institutions, we, as a society, either expressly or otherwise - and I appreciate the complexity of the word “otherwise” in that context - colluded to condemn women and children to lifelong suffering and torment. Children did not know their mothers or the circumstances of their separation from them. For mothers, there was the unspeakable pain of not knowing what happened to their children. In many instances, the mother and child were condemned to lifelong abuse, hardship and slavery. This is our shameful history. When the report comes out, I have no doubt we will recoil from the horror of it. Our State and people stood by and were involved in the infliction of terrible pain.

I want to remind us of what the commission set out to do. It was to establish the circumstances and arrangements surrounding single women in these institutions, all of the relevant decisions taken and their agency within those decisions. It was also to examine their living and care arrangements and the mortality rates as compared with the national law and to investigate whether the institutions were compliant with regulatory and ethical standards of vaccine trials. It was also to examine how children became residents without their parents, how they left the care of their parents and their mothers, what were the child welfare measures and how those women made their decisions and the lack of full, free and informed consent. Within this is also the systemic treatment of people on the basis of their religion, race, membership of the Traveller community or disability.

I fully support that we need a national memorial and archive in Sheriff Street - I am completely behind the proposals in that regard - but right now we are dealing with the commission. To get individuals to come forward to it and state, with clarity, their experiences and everything that surrounded the experience and the lead-up to what happened in their lives, they were as-

sured confidentiality. The terms of reference set out that the commission was not set up to establish an account of individual cases in such manner that would intervene and-or assist individuals to resolve questions relating to their identity or trace their birth relatives. In fact, the frequently asked questions section of the website very clearly states the commission will not help people who were adopted from these institutions to trace their identity and birth relatives, and that the commission has no role in resolving identity and tracing relatives. The website refers individuals with such inquiries to Tusla and the AAI.

When the final report issues at the end of this month, the commission will cease to exist. At that moment, a decision needs to be made on the records and database compiled in the course of the commission's work. Without the Bill, these records cannot be transferred unless redacted. If redacted, they will be of no use or assistance to anyone attempting to access the valuable information in the database created by the commission during the course of its work. The law, as it stands, will not allow this unredacted transfer and the Bill is about dealing with this.

The commission was established under the Commissions of Investigation Act 2004. The Act predates the commission by 11 years and predates today's Bill by 16. The establishment of the commission occurred under the Act and its powers flow from the Act. The treatment of evidence and records is prescribed by that Act and the implications of records being sealed for 30 years were envisaged in it, for a well thought-out and good reason. We cannot turn back time or change the law. The evidence that has been given and the records created through the lens of the provisions of the Act cannot suddenly be subject to a change in the legislative conditions. Were the rules to be suddenly changed after the fact, it would render any future commission of inquiry untrustworthy and impotent.

I disagree with Senator McDowell, who expressed the view that what is being done tears up the confidentiality. It moves to secure it. I believe that what the Minister intends to achieve in future legislation, about which I have heard him talk, will address any anomalies or other matters that arise. The evidence was heard in private and in confidence, and confidentiality still applies.

We are receiving thousands of communications on this. I have had over 4,000 emails at this stage from people who are hurting in many instances, and from others who no doubt are well intentioned and want support to be given. What they call for, however, is not addressed by today's Bill. The wrong that they claim is being perpetrated is neither being perpetrated under this Bill nor exacerbated by it. Those from whom we did not receive an email are the contributors who want to remain anonymous and who have participated on the condition that their evidence would be kept confidential, as provided for in the 2004 Act.

I believe in the Minister. I believe he is sincere with regard to addressing how people are assisted in tracing their identity and relatives. I believe him with regard to his intentions and I believe he will set up an authority. I believe his statement that there will be a national archive. Today's Bill is about the database of the commission. It seeks to preserve that invaluable database, not to put it beyond reach. It places it in the care of Tusla. While I question that, the more I have read and thought about this since the Minister's very fine briefing the other day, the more I believe that Tusla is the correct recipient for the time being. The law, as it currently stands, prohibits access and disclosure by the Department. The Bill cannot amend that, nor should it. The Bill is about the preservation of the database. I commend it to the House.

Senator Fintan Warfield: I pay tribute, as others have done, to the women of the mother

and baby homes and to their families and campaigners for maintaining dignified pressure on successive governments to see the process through to completion. Five interim reports have been published and the inquiry was granted a one-year extension. That extension was necessary in part owing to the lateness of materials submitted through the discovery by the Department of Health and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. Despite these setbacks, the women concerned never gave up hope that the completion of the commission's work would bring a measure of closure and leave a legacy. I can only imagine their disappointment when they learned that a Bill was to be rushed through the Upper House that would hide away for another generation the attitudes, policies and shameful neglect that condemned thousands of women to incarceration and robbed them of their dignity.

In an answer to a question by Deputy Mary Lou McDonald last month, the Minister indicated that once the report of the commission was published and read by him, the offering of an apology to the women and their families would be considered. Is that still the intention when the report is published on 30 October?

Under the terms of this Bill, some of the records gathered by the commission, referred to as the "database and related records" of women and children detained in 11 mother and baby homes, will be given to Tusla. The rest of the archive will go to the Minister for "sealing". How is it acceptable to release some, but not all, of the records? How did the Minister decide which records would go to Tusla and which would be retained and sealed away by the Department for 30 years?

I disagree with previous speakers. It is our belief that Tusla is not the appropriate body to retain these records. Tusla operates legally troubling and discriminatory practices, including defining adopted persons' birth names as third party data and undertaking risk assessments of all adopted persons who request their records. We need a body with the expertise in archival upkeep and associated skills in interpretation and historical placement. The work of the commission should not just be used to set the historical record straight. It should be used to a much greater effect and there needs to be input from those very people who suffered in the first place.

To be clear, this will not be the last inquiry or commission of inquiry. There are many more issues around how our society treated some of its most vulnerable people. We need to see solutions emerge with any findings, recommendations or reports such as this. Does anyone in this House doubt that some day in the future we will see a commission of investigation into the shameful practice of direct provision? I hope that when that report is released the associated records and testimonies are not locked away because when that happens we can never learn from the mistakes and injustices of the past.

The public needs to know that the vast sums of money and long periods spent on the work of the commission impact positively on those who were so badly let down. The clear message that my colleagues and I are hearing is that the Bill does not meet that test. We will table robust amendments on Committee Stage. As I stated earlier, I welcome decisions to commence legislation in the Seanad but the process in this case has been stifled, especially as we look towards Friday when the House will debate Committee and Remaining Stages in one day. I also pointed out that guillotining a Bill after a few short hours is right out of the Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil playbook. Sinn Féin will propose robust amendments on Committee Stage and we will also propose an amendment to Friday's Order of Business to prevent what will be, in effect, a guillotining of the Bill.

We need to be conscious of public opinion. Senators have mentioned the thousands of emails we have received in recent days concerning the years of delays and extensions to the work of the commission, which will potentially be lost to poor and rushed decisions at the end of this process. The volume of correspondence all of us have received over the last few days is a sign of solidarity from citizens with the women affected. For many years, citizens have listened in shock to the stories of these women. They now see that this legislation has the potential to retraumatise people who have been through so much. The idea that people gave testimony, hard as it was, only to find out at the very end of the process that it will be hidden away from any examination is hard to accept. We will table amendments to see that this does not happen. If we cannot secure amendments on these key issues of access and openness, Sinn Féin will not be able to support the Bill in its current form. We want to see this process bring closure to so many who were wronged and we cannot condone the sealing of abuse records. We stand in solidarity with those women who entered this process in the belief that they would have access to the entire truth and that the horror they endured would be held up as a warning to us all to never allow this to happen again.

Senator Ivana Bacik: I welcome the Minister to the House and acknowledge his comments on our shameful history, as a society, of treatment of women and children over many decades, in particular of those citizens who were incarcerated in homes like the mother and baby homes and so many other institutions.

In my previous life as a practitioner, I had the privilege of representing many survivors of abuse before the Residential Institutions Redress Board. I learned from so many of them of the terrible injustice they suffered in those institutions at the hands of the State and religious orders. I commend Christine Buckley, Carmel McDonnell Byrne and others who have done so much to expose the failings of the State. It is in that context that all of us should recognise the immense work that has been undertaken by the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes and its three members - Judge Yvonne Murphy, Professor William Duncan and Professor Mary Daly - in carrying out their terms of reference. I recognise the huge scale of their inquiry, over a 75-year period, to look into the appalling treatment of women and children in 14 mother and baby homes and four county homes. I acknowledge that the commission has published five interim reports to date. We should also recall the origins of the setting up of the commission. I refer to the huge public outcry following the discovery of a mass unmarked grave at the site of a Bon Secours home in Tuam that shocked the nation. There was a further shock for those of us who read the fifth interim report last year, 2019, at the finding that the burials of so many children were unaccounted for, in particular in the Bessborough mother and baby home in Cork. There was one line in the report that really stood out for me: "It is not known where the vast majority of children who died in Bessborough are buried." The findings are appalling. What was shocking in reading that interim report, as with others, was the obstructiveness of some of those involved, in particular the obstructive approach taken by the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, who ran the Bessborough home, in terms of providing information to the commission.

We acknowledge the hugely important work the commission has done, and is doing, and acknowledge the importance of the context in which the commission was set up. Having said all that, I am deeply disappointed, as are my Labour Party colleagues and others across the House, at the rushed nature of this legislation. We have serious concerns about the way in which the Bill has come before us. Other speakers have expressed those concerns. I attended briefings with the Minister and his officials, and I thank him for that, but despite that and the documents

we have been given the clear legal rationale for this legislation has not been fully made out to us.

In particular, other colleagues have raised questions about why, given the terms of the 2004 Act and existing data protection legislation, there are provisions around the transfer of records without redaction to Tusla and a further provision later in the Bill on the provision of the database to the Minister. It is still not clear which subset of data is being provided to whom. We do need assurances. I thank in particular Dr. Maeve O'Rourke and Ms Susan Lohan from the Adoption Rights Alliance and the many thousands of others who have expressed their concerns to us about this legislation.

I seek assurances from the Minister on three points. The first is why he, as Minister, cannot keep a copy of the entire commission database. Why is there a need for this legislation? The clear need must be provided to us on the record of this House.

Second, could the Minister assure us that a data access request to the archive will be facilitated? There is a clear need for information. There are so many survivors and so many family members who have expressed to us their urgent desire for information. I have heard comments about privacy and confidentiality but the commission is now in possession of a significant amount of information, which does not relate to the confidential statements given by witnesses to it. There are large amounts of records kept by the religious orders and provided to the commission and kept by other officials. I know from the redress board experience the extent of information that the commission will now be in possession of and that survivors and their families do not have access to and that they urgently want. I seek a commitment from the Minister about that second assurance.

The third assurance I seek is also one that has been outlined by others. It is that an appropriately anonymised index to the archive will be published by the Minister so that a debate and consultation can then be facilitated as to future unsealing of the archive and that we can talk then about the 30-year rule. Undoubtedly, there are complexities there, but we need to talk about this, and we need to facilitate the future creation of a historical abuse record archive, sensitively and respectfully maintained. We must facilitate access to those who wish to have it, to whom we owe it. Because of our legacy of shameful treatment of women and children, we owe their family members access. Unfortunately, the tenor of this Bill is not in keeping with those assurances around information and access to people's identity information.

I accept the Minister stated in his speech and we have been told in the briefings that the Bill is not about providing access and that it will be dealt with in future legislation. However, sadly and with respect, I think that is putting the cart before the horse because we need to sort out the issue of access and information. We did attempt to do it. The Minister's predecessor, Katherine Zappone, made valiant attempts to address this, which I acknowledge. I worked constructively with the Minister and departmental officials to try and ensure that we saw an appropriate balancing of the rights to which the Minister referred, that is, the constitutional rights to privacy and information. The Adoption (Information and Tracing) Bill 2016, which was last debated in the Seanad on Committee Stage in June 2019, fell because we could not reach a compromise. In that Bill, as in this Bill, there is undue regard to privacy rights at the expense of the right to information and identity for those persons most directly affected, namely, the women and children and their descendants. At the time we debated the Bill, when we were trying to reach a compromise, I pointed out that privacy rights should not be used to trump information rights and I say that again in the context of this Bill.

In the context of this Bill, we should not only be debating rights of information and identity but also the issue of accountability for the State that colluded in the incarceration of women and children in homes and the issue of the enormous accountability that is still owed to the State in financial redress as much as anything else by those religious orders, which were so directly and shamefully responsible for the abuse of those who were incarcerated. The Labour Party has tabled amendments to this Bill and despite recognising the importance of the work of the commission, we are unable to support the Bill in its current form due to the way in which it is being rushed through this House. I am sorry about that because I want to acknowledge the importance of the work the commission is doing. We need to see more respect paid to the interests and concerns that have been eloquently expressed to us by many survivors and relatives and families of survivors. They deserve better and more extensive consultation, as well as more regard to their rights of information and of access to their identity.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly: I can agree with an awful lot of what has been said. As Senator Bacik said, we need to talk about this. We need to talk about the State collusion and shame on the one hand and the abuse on the other hand. I come from a constituency that is deeply impacted by this and I have been contacted by a number of my friends in this regard in recent days.

It is incredibly difficult to put a shape on this because it is not about this Bill but is about the larger issue. I have a fear in respect of those who state they will not support this Bill because of its technicalities. The impact of that is to not support those in our communities who need to access the information. It has already been mentioned here that significant work was done by the previous Minister in trying to pass legislation that would allow people access to the records. Over that time, it was not achieved. Therefore, I am not sure how we think we could achieve that before 30 October in order to secure access on an ongoing basis in order that we can pass proper legislation, do the scrutiny and engage with the stakeholders.

That is the nub of it and the fact that Senator McDowell has raised the issue of privacy goes to show the divisions around this issue, that there are competing interests and that there are interests in respect of privacy that we have to address. Those people also must be involved in the stakeholder engagement. I would like people to have access to their records because it is incredibly important that one has access to one's biological database. However, that cannot be achieved today.

I would like to give assurances, however, and the Minister has given assurances that it is important for the Government that we solve the issue. I hope everyone across the House will join with me and with all of us in trying to solve the issue of those competing interests.

Senator Lynn Ruane: I thank the Minister for being in the Seanad today. I thank the many survivors and their advocates and allies who have contacted me and other Members this week on this Bill. I have not had a chance to go through the more than 4,000 emails I have received since Monday but I and others have heard the concerns being expressed loud and clear.

There has been a strong reaction for a reason. We are legislating in an extraordinarily sensitive area where we are beginning the process of trying to come to terms, as a society, State and Parliament, with the incomprehensible horrors of what occurred in mother and baby homes across this country in our all-too-recent past. The importance of the kind of records we are discussing cannot be understated in helping us to understand, memorialise and reconcile with that shameful part of our history. These records will play a crucial role in the national process we are engaged in to build narratives based on historical and intergenerational justice and that

appropriately and sensitively memorialise the women and children who were resident and lost their lives in these homes. What happened to them in homes such as that in Tuam cannot be forgotten or swept under the rug; it must be remembered in all its shameful detail to honour their memories and the experiences of the survivors and their descendants. As a result, how we manage these records, as well as how we manage access to them and whom we give responsibility to for holding them for safekeeping, are vital. This goes to the heart of the legislation.

To respond to Senator McDowell's comments on privacy, we have learned from the likes of the Retention of Records Bill 2019 and other legislation that survivors are not a blanket group. Moreover, there was not, as I understand, an option to waive anonymity. Anonymity was assumed and people were not given an option to waive it.

I turn to the process used to progress the Bill through the Seanad. Forcing a Bill through the House in the space of a week, on a sensitive subject such as this, has provoked significant and justified reaction. The Bill will not move through the House in a vacuum or without the context of what has gone before us. As the Minister will be aware, legislation on adoption, information and tracing came before the previous Seanad and, unfortunately, stigmatised and belittled adopted people. It is clear the damage done by that Bill is still raw, as we have seen reflected in the strength of the reaction this week. Taking an additional week to allow for additional debate in the House would have allowed for more consultation with survivors. This has, unfortunately, been a central complaint about how the Bill has progressed. Being seen to move too quickly, or without due scrutiny of legislation of this kind, damages our credibility with the public and, in particular, with the survivors affected.

As for the Bill itself, our concerns will be familiar to the Minister. Any pronouncement about a 30-year sealing of records will always be a cause of concern, especially when it comes so soon after the intense debate on, and the eventual withdrawal of, the Retention of Records Bill 2019. We need to listen to survivors when they tell us they want to access their personal information and testimony, something we should be able to guarantee them. Where appropriate and sensitive memorialisation is the aim, efforts should be made to anonymise records for their inclusion in crucial historical projects, such as for the proposed archive to be built on the site of the Magdalen laundries on Seán MacDermott Street. We are concerned this will not be possible under the Bill.

There are also concerns about the legislation in regard to the general data protection regulation, GDPR, and particularly about how data subject access requests are currently being denied by Tusla on spurious grounds relating to the conduct of future commissions. How can a survivor being able to access his or her personal records harm the conduct of a future investigation? Our central concern is that Tusla will be given control of these records, despite its track record and its highly conservative interpretations of what should be released under GDPR. There are also concerns about how appropriate the Commissions of Investigation Act 2004 is for sensitive investigations such as these. In 2017, during statements in this House on the setting up of the commission, many of us all called for it to sit in public, a request that was ignored.

These are just some concerns. We will discuss them in further detail on Committee Stage, when we will table amendments. I reiterate the importance of moving and legislating sensitively and respectfully on these issues. All of us here will play a crucial role in deciding how this shameful part of history will be remembered, and we must take the responsibility seriously.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I welcome the Minister to the House. He will know the

volume of distress and concern this matter has caused. He spoke about learning from the past and moving into the future, but we are not yet at a point where we are talking about simply learning from the past. We are still seeking justice, satisfaction and basic rights for those who lived through that past. They are still with us. Their families and their children who were adopted through the systems in place at that time are still seeking identity. People are still trying to find out whether they have siblings and where their siblings may have been buried. People are still trying to find out basic information about who they are and who their families were. The Minister has the dual task of vindicating the rights of those affected by these issues and of national archiving.

I have submitted more than 20 amendments which address some of the key issues. We speak about having our hands tied by legislation from 2004. I disagree completely with Senator McDowell. I know he was involved in that legislation but it does not necessarily trump developments that have taken place since 2004. For example, we had a constitutional referendum which placed the rights of the child, including the right to identity, at a central point. We also have European legislation on people's right to information about themselves. I will ask that sections 39 and 41 of the 2004 Act, which deal with restrictions on the right of the individual to seek information and the 30-year binding rule, respectively, should not apply to individuals seeking information about themselves.

We talk about future commissions and safeguarding participation. It is unacceptable that people are being denied their own testimony, which is gut-wrenching to give. I have looked for specific exceptions to ensure that people can access their own testimony and story. Not giving that basic right will undermine the operation of future commissions and co-operation by future witnesses.

We need a timeline. We all heard the apology made to the victims of the Magdalen laundries, which feels as if it was millions of years ago. We have not had justice. It has been a scramble for individuals to try to have peace in their own families and lives. We need to know when there will be legislation that guarantees appropriate access to the right to information and the right to identity. There is an issue with Tusla. The Minister stated this information will be preserved but there is nothing in the Bill to indicate how it will be preserved. How do we know the records will not be scatter-shot back to whatever filing cabinets they came from originally? That is a fear. Patching together the stories of people's lives involves substantial work. Will these records be kept to an archival standard? I ask because, as we know, the Adoption Authority of Ireland had made plans to keep documents to an archival standard. There are real questions about the physical documents and rights and we will push them on Committee Stage. I urge the Minister not to take Committee and Report Stages together but listen to us on Committee Stage and change the Bill.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I thank the Minister for attending to listen to our comments, observations and concerns. Undoubtedly, the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes is investigating one of the darkest periods in Irish history. Mother and baby homes represent some of the worst aspects of our collective history and humanity. Their existence was underpinned by a complex web of culpability and responsibility. Since it was established in 2015, the commission of investigation chaired by Judge Yvonne Murphy has worked to gain a deeper understanding of the practices and experiences in these institutions. It was required to conduct a great amount of document discovery work and carry out interviews with survivors, as well as workers and authorities in these institutions. Although the commission of investigation was initially scheduled to make its final report by February 2018, the deadline was extended

three times and we have had five interim reports. It is extremely important, therefore, that the commission makes its final report on 30 October.

It is important to acknowledge that three postponements of the commission's findings have been deeply distressing and disappointing for many of the survivors, particularly the elderly. It is in the best interest of all survivors that the commission of investigation be given sufficient time to finish its work before making recommendations on redress. I am hopeful that a redress scheme will be established after the report is finalised. Obviously the completion of the report was the priority.

The commission of investigation has been at the forefront of all our minds. The shocking details from this shameful chapter in our history have been seared in all of our memories from the point when we started to learn and absorb the horrific practices that had occurred. It is correct to say that we all share a determination to do what is right for the survivors. It is vital that we give them confidence in the process. It is very important in this context to also mention the specific focus of the work to investigate institutional patterns of referral and relationships with adoption societies and other intermediaries involved in the placement of children, and of illegal registration.

It is also important to note the courage of the survivors and the help of a brave local historian and committed journalist, Catherine Corless. It is thanks to her courage and hard work that we can bear witness to the considerable harms experienced by mothers and their children in one of the darkest periods of Irish history. Most of us in this Chamber were overwhelmed this week by the volume of correspondence we received from people about the proposed legislation before us today. Significant concern is evident and that is completely understandable in light of the horrendous treatment meted out to women in these homes and how protective we all feel about the survivors of the homes.

There is a perception that this Bill seeks to put information beyond the reach of people. I understand that is not its intention. The aim is to safeguard the records of the commission. The original legislation specified that the investigations into the mother and baby homes were to be held in private because confidentiality allowed people to give testimony freely. I was very much taken by Senator McDowell's comments in that regard. These testimonies are hugely important because they are the lived experience of women who were treated so badly by institutions of the State. I am comforted by what the Minister says and by his commitment to ensure that the records are to be preserved intact and will be available in the future in an appropriate way. We must preserve this information, not destroy it. The Bill provides for the transfer of the records, as opposed to their destruction.

I have been contacted by numerous women who object to this legislation because they feel it prevents them having access to their own information. Those women should be able to decide what happens to their personal records. For those who have passed away, their children should be able to decide what happens to their records. Everyone should have access to their birth information. I understand that the Government has a better system for this in the pipeline.

Senator Aisling Dolan: I welcome the Minister to the House for this debate on what is a very difficult topic. With the exception of Senator Craughwell, it is all women in the House today. We realise how important this situation is for women, including young women. I come from east Galway and the mother and baby homes in Tuam and Glenamaddy are the ones that are very much on my mind. I am mindful of the impact those homes had on these extremely

rural areas in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, when society here was extremely conservative and where much importance was afforded to the Catholic Church, which was not balanced in terms of rights for women and children.

I very much welcome this debate. Members across the parties really understand the importance of what the Minister is doing, but also the necessity for further legislation regarding access for those who wish to have it. They also very much understand the confidential nature of the information that needs to be protected in terms of names and of the people who have gone before.

As a councillor in Galway County Council, last year I was very fortunate and privileged to receive testimonies from the mother and baby home in Tuam when a number of people came before the council. We had children who had gone through the process of being adopted illegally. Others who spoke had worked with the historian Catherine Corless, to whom tribute has been paid here today. Ms Corless is a champion, and NUI Galway has paid tribute to her as a person of note in Galway. She discovered this and worked tirelessly to ensure the records of those children were brought forward. She worked with the commission as well.

It is very important that the Department shows the vigilance required of it on this sensitive issue. I hope it will be a priority for the Minister who I know has many competing priorities in his Department. I also hope that, as previous speakers requested, he will provide easier access for those who require further information, including on illegal adoptions.

This was a very emotional issue when I was a member of Galway County Council. Of the 39 councillors at that time, seven were women. I am not saying this issue does not impact on men too but as a young woman growing up in east Galway, I understood from a young age the impact of having a child at a young age in a strongly conservative Catholic society. I am happy that we live in a different society today. W.B. Yeats spoke about how Ireland was “no country for old men” but to be honest, Ireland was no country for women, mothers or babies. That has to be taken into account.

This is an important topic that I do not feel qualified to speak about. I thank the Minister for his time.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: There has been much talk today about the rights of a child to know about his or her parentage and historical background, and I support all of that. I am coming to this debate as somebody who grew up in Galway in the 1960s and the 1970s. No young girl got pregnant in my time in Galway. Many young girls went away on holidays and came back nine months later without a child, however.

I had personal experience of this. It involved someone I know and who is dear to me. We knew she was pregnant and we believed she went to a family to be looked after during her pregnancy. When all of this started, we heard about Bessborough and of women being confined in a home. We heard of the trauma this woman went through. She was not a woman but a child at the time she was pregnant. I mention the trauma she went through and goes through every day of her life, remembering what happened to her. She is only one of the victims.

I agree with tracing. I will mention the story of a girl who sought to find her mother. When she found her mother, they met in a café in Dublin. Her mother explained the circumstances behind the pregnancy and the delivery of her daughter. She then told the girl that, now that she knew all she needed to know, she never wanted to see her again. Can Members imagine the

devastation this caused in both their lives or even think for a moment about what is going on here?

The 4,000 or so emails Senators have received in recent days are heartbreaking. They are from people who want to know more but there were also a couple of hundred emails from people who do not want anything to be known about their previous lives. These are women who delivered children and had their hearts broken to have their children taken off them. They did not willingly give them up but they were taken off them and these women were then sent back to wherever they came from. They have lived with that for all of their lives. Some of them went on to get married and have families. They hold this secret deep within their minds and hearts and they live every day with that. We are about to blow all of that wide open and we have to think about what we are doing. The right to trace one's parentage is vital, the right of the child who was the mother because, God damn it, no man ever came forward and admitted to fathering one of these children. We hid away in the background and let the girls take the full brunt of societal condemnation.

I cannot express how distressed by this I am. I had many dear friends who were pregnant in the 1960s and 1970s who disappeared from Galway and came back nine months later. Nobody ever asked where they were; we all knew. Nobody ever spoke about it; it was buried. Nobody ever questioned what happened to the poor, unfortunate child who was born. As my colleague, Senator McDowell, noted, the women who went into the commission did so on the basis that what they said was between them and those they were giving witness to. I do not know where this will lead us, but it is leading us somewhere where we need to be very careful.

The Bill is being rushed through the House in two days, even though we were promised this would stop. Democracy demands that legislation be scrutinised. This is not scrutiny of legislation. The Government has the numbers on its side of the House to ram through anything it wants, and that is not fair. It is not fair on the Government and it is not fair on us.

I am absolutely appalled that the Minister allowed section 6 to end up in the Bill. Personal injuries have absolutely nothing to do with the matter, so why are they included in the Bill? This is heartbreaking enough as it is.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: I thank the Minister for coming to the House and bringing this very important legislation for our consideration. I thank the members of the commission, the three judges who have worked for five years and who will produce a report that will document such a dark piece of our history, spanning 75 years, 18 institutions and more than 70,000 lives, most of them women and children. I thank the 4,000-odd people who sent me emails. I have no doubt they are all heartfelt. Most important, I want to speak for the survivors and their friends, families and supporters. It has been a long, lonely road for them. It is important that this House is taking the time, and that politicians in the Lower House also take the time, to consider these issues.

I come from Dublin Central which has the most recent Magdalen laundry site on Sean McDermott Street. It only closed its doors in 1996, after the tragic discovery of the burial of 150 bodies at the site. I ask the House to think about this. It is less than 500 m from O'Connell Street and 150 bodies are buried there. Our capital city was conducting its business all around that site, and buried, unknown to anybody, were 150 bodies. I also come from the Navan Road, where the St. Patrick's institution is located, as the Minister will be aware. My grandfather

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was born before 1922, before any mother and baby homes had been established. He was born illegitimately and my great-grandmother kept him. This tragedy, this horrible history, is of the State's creation, and it is really important that the State deal with it and apologise. As a Senator today, I apologise for my part.

I welcome the action the Minister is taking to protect and preserve the records, which is vital. Nevertheless, we live in an era of data and it is important that the data be retained intact and unredacted, in one complete set. I appreciate that the intention to try to separate the data into personal records in order to allow for access is good. However, it is important that an entire set of the archive documents be kept in one location. In the initial stages, the Department is the best place for this. That issue needs to be dealt with.

I am extremely concerned about the 2004 legislative requirement in respect of a 30-year seal. Earlier, we heard the voice of male privilege in this House talk about rights to protection and argue in very legalistic language. It is that language which stifled those women and hid them away. I oppose it strongly. I want the Minister to guarantee that all of the living survivors will have access to their personal data. I ask him to publish an anonymised index of the archive.

Finally, I return to the requirement to recreate a national archive. For the entirety of this, I propose that it be housed at the two acre State-owned site at Seán McDermott Street. There is an excellent concept proposal to create an archive at the site and to address the issues of homelessness, housing poverty and lack of community facilities in the area. I ask the Minister to champion this proposal at the Cabinet table. If he does so, he will have my support and that of my party.

It is important that we take this action today but that we do not stop because there is much more work to be done in order to do justice to the survivors, make some reparation and give a degree of peace.

Senator Lynn Boylan: I welcome the Minister. First and foremost, all of us in this House should acknowledge that the speed and pace with which this legislation is being dealt is, as proven by the volume of emails we have received, unnecessarily re-traumatising the survivors of mother and baby homes. In fact, this entire Bill is unnecessary.

The Commission of Investigation Act 2004 was never the appropriate legislation on which to base an inquiry into grave and systemic human rights abuse because of its provisions around confidentiality. However, the Government is not bound by the 2004 Act because it can legislate and legal experts have set out how that can be done. After all, it is legislating today in order to unseal selective records for a Tusla database.

We have heard the Minister claim that he is protecting the interests of those who suffer abuse by archiving the remaining records for 30 years. I thought we had moved away from the paternalistic attitude to citizens. In the context of the Retention of Records Bill 2019, the then Government made the same argument when it wanted to seal records for 75 years but, rightly, the Committee on Education and Skills of the previous Oireachtas pointed out that doing so would re-abuse survivors. The argument that the Government knows what is best for a person is the attitude that led us to the point at which we find ourselves today. The history of this State is marked by its arguing that it knew what was best for its women, children and young mothers. I ask the Minister to please reconsider what he is doing today because it will only visit further abuse on survivors.

Nobody is saying that the public should have access to the personal data of those affected. Of course they should not. These are people's lived experiences we are discussing. Those affected by the abuse that this State meted out to them should have the option to receive all of their personal data and information. They should also be entitled to the transcripts of their evidence because these are their life stories. This Bill, as I read it, seems to want to take away the ability of people to understand what happened to mothers and babies in this State. There is also the fact that the Government wants to seal up vast amounts of State and institutional administrative records that are critical to helping us to understand how the system of forced family separation operated in this country. I beg the Minister to listen to the thousands of people who wrote to us over the past 24 hours and not rush this legislation through the Houses. The Government side has the numbers so all we are doing today is talking but trying to give voice to the 4,000 people who contacted us over the past 24 hours and the survivors who are being re-traumatised. I ask the Minister to listen to the survivors. I ask him to find a solution that ensures survivors have ownership of their evidence and their lived experience and seek to ensure that we, as a State, learn from this and ensure it never happens again.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I welcome the Minister to the House. I was mindful when I was Acting Chairman earlier and now as I stand here that I am someone who has travelled this journey. I was born in 1961 in the St. Kevin's Dublin Union Institution and lived in many institutions throughout my life. If I were to be honest and asked myself what politicised me then it was that sense of injustice and denial. It was the sense that there was so much wrong going on with people with whom I shared dormitories and living quarters. These were institutions where one ate, slept and were educated but never left. These were institutions where one looked through a pane of glass in the hope that someone might hear one's voice and listen to what one had to say so I bring personal experience to this story.

I am not a child of a single mother as many people here referred to. Many of the children who were incarcerated in these institutions had both a mother and father. I am happy to say that I am the youngest of seven siblings and even though we were kept in different places, we all speak and are a family of brothers and sisters.

One thing that I said as a young child when leaving the institution, something we always ritually said was "never forget us"; we said "do not leave" and "never forget us", which are words that I have kept in my heart, mind and spirit. I was elected to Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council many years ago and if I were asked which was more important, being elected and walking through the doors of the county hall in Dún Laoghaire or walking into the Dáil and Seanad of Leinster House, my answer would be becoming a county councillor because the Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown community took me on board. It is a community that I ended up joining not by choice but by circumstance. By choice, I chose to live there because it was there that I found colleagues, friends and a supportive community.

It is very important that we all have the opportunity to tell our story. We have lived it but, more important, we must be believed. Too often, too many children were labelled as bitter, twisted or angry and presumed to either have an axe to grind with the institution, their own family or with somebody else or there was another agenda. People do not tell lies about their experiences. People do not make up stories of physical, emotional and sexual abuse. People want just justice and truth. People want to be able to tell their story. We have had the Ryan commission, the Martin McAleese report and the Residential Institutions Redress Board. Many are the same people who have come through different strands to seek redress. However, I urge the Minister not to lock away people's unique stories. We are all unique and everybody has a

unique story to tell. Please allow survivors to access their information on their basis. The appalling story of life, death and adoptions inside and outside of mother and baby homes and other institutions cannot be hidden away for another 30 years.

I hope that when Mr. Justice Murphy's report is published that it goes to the Cabinet, the Government and the Attorney General. I hope that within days it will go to the Garda Commissioner because he and his staff must also analyse this important document for breaches, criminality or wrongdoing and ensure that people are brought to justice. It is also important that we have redress.

Finally, I keep in touch with many people who are homeless in Dublin, have addiction problems, never got opportunities and were never able to be educated because they were held and dampened down physically and emotionally, and were unable to grow spiritually, academically or realise their potential. Let us hope for more of this because it is all information but good must come from the flow of this information. There must be a recognition of what has happened, rehabilitation, housing and medical support, and any other support required. Having all of this information sitting in boxes in rooms is no good if we are not going to be motivated by all of this to help these people get on with their lives.

I thank the Minister. He has a difficult job. We must bear in mind the people who have lived these experiences. The Minister must listen to their requests. That is important.

Senator Rónán Mullen: I welcome the Minister. This is the first time I have seen him in this House and I wish him well in his post. I look forward to engaging with him on this and other issues.

I do not like the way things continue with regard to procedure in this House with the rushing together of Stages of legislation. It seems to me that a necessary delay of a few weeks would allow us to tease out the difficulties and problematic aspects of this legislation. I would say the same about Second Stage. If more people want to speak for longer, we should have the flexibility to do our work properly.

I dislike the sudden, ill-advised tacking on of extraneous issues to legislation. It reminds me of the pork barrel politics in America where Bills about one thing involve shunting money off to a particular region, or whatever, on something completely unrelated. We need to get away from that.

To come to the substance of today's legislation, I feel that where promises have been given to people, for example to women at the time they put their children up for adoption or people who gave information relying on complete confidence, we must be at pains to ensure those promises are kept. I do not think that is the voice of male privilege speaking. It is being honourable and respectful.

Nobody supports the right of people to know their identity more than I do. It often surprises me that some of the people who push surrogacy, for example, seem to care little about whether a child can know who his or her father and mother is, or whether they have the right to the society of their father and mother or birth mother. There are amazing hypocrisies and inconsistencies around some of these issues in our society.

I start from the perspective of supporting a child's right to know who he or she is and genetic identity is particularly important. However, I believe that one cannot ignore the context of the

past and where people were given promises, they should be kept. Senator McDowell's amendments are sensible. This commission only deals with a certain number of institutions. In a case where somebody tells his or her story and it might be the only time the person intends to do that, I would not like that information to be lost in case it could be used for tracing in the future. That can only happen if specific permission is sought from the person involved that his or her name not be redacted. Nothing else shows respect for people, having regard to the promises that they were given.

I would like to say a little about how we talk about the past. There was harshness in our past but when we think about the decade of commemorations that we are going through, we see how dangerous it is to get into the business of assigning blame. Senator Dolan referred to the Catholic Church and people talk about the dark periods in Irish history. Are people open to recognising that even though there was harshness, there were people who had positive experiences of how they were treated? Are people open to considering that some who worked in these institutions had the best of intentions? Do people think that things were significantly better in other countries? Do they think that the church institutions involved were only doing it for money or the sexual control of people's lives? Is it not the case that, in the context of a poor and difficult society, some, many or most of those people were trying to be a part of a caring agenda? Are people interested in that kind of nuance or do we all want to be running with the pack in condemning the past? It is easy to condemn the past because the people who were involved are either dead or weak and voiceless now.

Senator Lynn Ruane: This line of debate is insulting to the survivors about whom we are speaking. We are speaking about a specific area of the church and institutions. We are not here to defend something that clearly happened. It is disrespectful.

Senator Rónán Mullen: That is precisely the kind of response that closes down respectful debate in our society because, as I have said, we should all want to look at the past in all its ugliness but also to look with honesty at the redeeming aspects that were there in the context of some people's stated experiences. Are we willing to talk about the families, for example, who did not show love? I ask that people be less preoccupied with anger and blame, and to think about the hypocrisies of the present. Senator Warfield mentioned direct provision. I could ask how we treat unwanted babies in the present. Does our law not now sentence them to death in many situations? People think that is an inconsistent-----

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: That is shameful.

Senator Rónán Mullen: Of course it is shameful.

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: That is shameful commentary in our national Parliament.

Senator Lynn Ruane: Shameful.

Senator Rónán Mullen: Is it not interesting when somebody has a different perspective about what justice to children involves-----

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: It is not different. That is shameful.

Senator Lynn Ruane: This is not about Senator Mullen's agenda. It is about the survivors and the Senator is making it about his agenda and is using the backs of survivors to do so.

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: Hear, hear.

Senator Lynn Ruane: It is a disgrace.

Senator Rónán Mullen: I also care about survivors. I have explicitly stated that I want to support people who want to find out more about what their experience was. I just ask colleagues to remember that this is a kaleidoscopic situation where many people have different stories to tell. If we are only interested in some stories, that marks us down as some kind of hypocrites. That is all I will say.

Acting Chairman (Senator Tim Lombard): Senator Norris has only a minute or so.

Senator David Norris: That is all I need. I welcome the Minister to Seanad Éireann. I have been contacted by a constituent who is concerned about this matter. She is concerned about the apparent lack of consultation and I wonder if the Minister will comment on that.

The other issue is that all the administrative files which show how the abusive system worked will be withheld. That is a mistake. My view is that people should be entitled to information about their background. That is a natural and absolute human right. Under the Bill, some of the records gathered by the commission of investigation, a database and related records of women and children detained in 11 mother and baby homes, will be given to Tusla. The rest of the archive will go to the Minister for sealing. How is it acceptable to release some but not all of the records? The Bill ignores the views of the collaborative forum of former residents of mother and baby homes, which was established to advise the Government and repeatedly stated that Tusla should have no further role in adoption information and tracing.

Just two weeks ago, the Minister promised that he would receive a copy of all records gathered by the commission of investigation but this Bill breaks that promise. It states that the database and related records transferred to Tusla will not form part of the Minister's archive. I am suggesting that the Bill be amended so that the Minister takes custody of the whole archive and provides immediate access for affected individuals and families to all records concerning them or their disappeared relatives once he receives those records. In fact, this is currently required by section 43 of the Commissions of Investigation Act 2004 and section 198 of the Data Protection Act 2018.

The Government should commit to establishing a dedicated archive at Seán MacDermott Street to provide national education and truth-telling regarding all connected forms of historical institutional adoption-based abuses. Administrative records can be anonymised as necessary to protect survivors, adopted people, natural mothers and relatives. Individuals should be entitled to voluntarily deposit their testimony.

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): I thank all of the Senators for their detailed and heartfelt contributions today and in some of the earlier consultations they have had with my Department. The debate we have had demonstrates the complexities and sensitivities touched on by this Bill and the wider legacy issues arising from our past and the treatment of certain categories of people, particularly women, in that time.

I have heard the dissatisfaction that Senators have voiced about the process. The sole reason this has been done in a rapid fashion is because of the upcoming deadline of 30 October, at which point the commission of investigation stands dissolved. The reason this is being done in a rapid fashion is because of the 30 October deadline, at which point the commission stands dissolved. That is the sole reason for the rush in this situation. When we bring forth the legislation I mentioned we will take the time to go through it in detail in both Houses so the very

significant complexities can be teased out. This legislation is brought before the Seanad today as an opportunity to save an invaluable resource of information being lost forever. If this legislation does not pass, the database will be redacted and it will no longer be useable. It is important to note that that is the nub of what we are doing here.

I have listened to the individual contributions from Senators today. I want to get this right for the people who have been directly involved with the institutions. We all have that shared responsibility and duty. I have heard directly from former residents and their advocates and by way of the very significant email campaign as well. I understand their concerns and their need for reassurance. I thank Senator Boyhan for his personal contribution in which he reminded us of the real impact these legacy issues have on individuals.

Senator David Norris: Hear, hear.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: This is not solely a matter for history. We have spoken about this in a historical context but we must remember that there are existing issues of deep concern for many people who have lived through the experiences of the mother and baby homes and other industrial schools and the impact this has had on their relatives and descendants. I reassure the people who are watching this debate and have real and legitimate anxieties about future access to birth information and tracing that I am committed to addressing the long-running matter of birth information and tracing legislation. This is not what the Bill before us today will address but I am committed to following up on the other legislation. I note the points made by Senator Bacik. I am going through the correspondence between the former Minister, Katherine Zappone, and the Attorney General. The former Minister did an enormous amount of work on this matter. I will take up that work and engage with the many people in this House who I know are interested in this issue so that we can get it right.

In passing this legislation in the next week, no future opportunity for access to this information will be lost by virtue of it coming into effect. Its purpose is to preserve information, including the critically invaluable database, for future use to the maximum extent possible under the law. We are passing this legislation to save this resource, which we can use for existing purposes but also future purposes that will be developed through future legislation. I am satisfied that the Bill as presented is needed to preserve invaluable information now and in the future. Contrary to how some have interpreted it, the intention of the legislation is not to put information beyond reach. Rather, it is to ensure that information is not destroyed and also that relevant information can be made available for information and tracing purposes in line with current law and any future law. The Bill is necessary to resolve the serious legal and practical issue that were raised by the commission in finalising its records in accordance with the Commissions of Investigation Act 2004. The intent of the legislation is to safeguard the records of the intensive five-year investigative process that the commission of investigation into mother and baby homes has commenced. I hope we can all agree with the principle of saving that body of work.

When the Government decided to establish its inquiry into mother and baby homes the model it chose was that of a commission of investigation under the Commissions of Investigation Act 2004. I know there have been criticisms of that model today. I note those criticisms but that is the model that was chosen and the model we are operating to. The consequence of choosing a commission of investigation as the model does impact on the reporting functions of the commission. The Bill must be read in the context of the relevant restrictions and safeguards of the 2004 Act. The effect of the confidentiality provisions woven into the 2004 Act is that

the commission's archive of records must be deposited with the Minister in sealed form and must remain so for a period of 30 years, pending transfer to the National Archives. Guarantees of confidentiality in respect of the information and the evidence given must be understood in the context of that legislative framework. While the records must transfer in their complete and unredacted form, the anonymity of those who provided testimony is maintained by virtue of the requirement that the records are sealed. For the avoidance of any doubt, it is important to clarify that the commission is not in possession of original departmental records and no original records will be sealed by these arrangements. State records remain in the possession of the relevant statutory bodies and public access is regulated in accordance with existing law. Any proposal to amend the legislative arrangements under which evidence was provided to a commission would need to fully address the privacy rights and legitimate expectations of third parties who are engaged with the commission. I am open to looking at this issue but it would have to be understood in the context of other commissions of inquiry that have taken place and of balancing the rights of the various parties involved, Cabinet colleagues who are responsible for this legislation and other Cabinet colleagues. This legislation is not the appropriate place to deal with those issues, in my view.

Earlier this year, the commission advised that it had created a database tracking who was in the main mother and baby homes and related institutions. It did not feel it had a legal basis to transfer this system and would be compelled by law to redact the valuable information we are now trying to preserve. Most important, this Bill provides for this and allows the database and related records to be transferred to Tusla, which will be fulfilling a public service in safeguarding this database. On the criticisms of Tusla holding these records, it is important to point out that the Bill does not provide for an expansion of Tusla's role. Section 3 is declaratory in that it only allows the records to be used for the purposes already defined in statute and data protection regulations. The majority of the records on which the database is based are already in the possession of Tusla. The digitalised and index records could be a notable enabler for Tusla's current services in this area, notwithstanding that no new right of access for information has been created. Again, it should be noted that the institutional records held by the commission are copies of the original documents supplied by various bodies to the commission. The Bill does not introduce restrictions on access to the original documents.

We have a duty to the women and children who passed through these institutions and to their families to ensure their lived experiences are shared, acknowledged and understood. The commission is due to submit its final report and stand dissolved on 30 October. This Bill needs to be passed and signed into law prior to its dissolution. A failure to act will result in an incomplete archive transferring and in the database being effectively destroyed and unavailable for information and tracing. This bespoke legislation addresses the urgent issues which have emerged in regard to the commission's records. Everything in this Bill is there for a reason. No future opportunity for access to this information will be lost by virtue of this Bill coming into effect. Its purpose is to preserve information, including a critically invaluable database for future use to the maximum extent possible under this law.

I look forward to seeing the amendments proposed by Senators. I will examine them thoroughly but I do ask that they support this Bill so we can safeguard and protect these records for future generations.

Amendment put.

Acting Chairman (Senator Tim Lombard): In accordance with the order of the Seanad of

Wednesday, 7 October, the division is postponed until Friday, 16 October 2020, and the Seanad is suspended until 1 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 12.35 p.m. and resumed at 1 p.m.

Budget 2021: Statements

An Cathaoirleach: I thank the Minister for coming to the House after a long day in the Dáil yesterday and having appeared on radio this morning, which is sometimes equally as challenging.

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am pleased to have the opportunity to appear before the Seanad today to contribute to the debate on budget 2021. As I informed the Dáil yesterday, this year's budget has been prepared in circumstances that are without precedent. The outbreak of the coronavirus has hugely impacted individuals, communities, societies and economies throughout the world, and our country is part of this.

Economic activity in the Irish economy is projected to fall by around 2.5% this year with modified domestic demand, a better measure of domestic conditions, expected to contract by around 6%. Along, of course, with the immediate prospect of dealing with this disease, we continue to have Brexit on the horizon. In these most challenging of times, I am keenly aware of the impact of this disease on the lives of people and their livelihoods and of the need for us to find a balance between health and well-being. The substantial efforts we have made to date have focused on minimising the economic and social impact of this virus, cushioning household incomes and supporting micro-sized firms and small and medium-sized enterprises while strengthening the capacity of our healthcare system.

The highly fluid nature of this disease demands a response that can change. Our ability to respond in a timely and effective way is in no small part due to how our national finances were managed in recent years and, of course, the work of the European Central Bank. On this point, we are not facing into this challenge alone. The global nature of this pandemic requires and demands an international and coherent response. The actions of the European Union have complimented national measures and have allowed national policy decisions to achieve more.

Given the levels of uncertainty, the budget focuses purely on the coming year and is based on a number of careful assumptions. In particular, the central scenario underpinning budget 2021 is that bilateral trade between the European Union and the UK will be on WTO terms from January and that Covid-19 will continue to be present next year in the absence of a broadly available vaccine. Overall economic activity is not expected to return to last year's levels until at least 2022. In addition, unemployment is expected to remain high at around 10.25% for next year. This is why the Government is absolutely determined to do all we can to address unemployment, particularly among our young people. This has influenced the shape and size of this budget.

Significant resources were required to support policy actions to mitigate the impact of the pandemic. Against this challenging backdrop, the appropriate budgetary approach is to continue to provide support to our economy. This is why we are aiming for a deficit next year of €20.5 billion, or 5.7% of gross domestic product. Over the medium term we will need to correct that. For now, we need to act to support our economy.

Ultimately, budgetary policy will have to steer a course that sets expenditure and taxation at levels that allow us to reduce our deficit while at the same time supporting our economy and society. In finding this balance, however, employment growth is absolutely central to reducing our deficit and, in turn, allowing our debt to be safely managed. This was the context of the budget package yesterday.

Included within it is €8.5 billion for public services to address the challenges of Covid-19. This includes a €2.1 billion Covid contingency fund, €3.8 billion to support existing services, in particular those that are health-related, and €1.6 billion for core capital programmes. Capital expenditure will increase to €10.1 billion, the largest amount that has ever been allocated to invest in our schools, homes and public transport.

Alongside these measures, a targeted and time bound recovery fund worth €3.4 billion has been established. This fund will be focused on infrastructure development, reskilling and training and supporting investment in jobs. This recognises that the business sector and the SME community are a cornerstone of our economy. Further supports will be provided by way of an extension of the tax debt warehousing scheme to include repayments of temporary wage subsidy scheme funds owed by employers and preliminary tax obligations for self-employed citizens who have been adversely affected. My Department has begun the process of applying for EU funding towards the cost of the wage subsidy scheme and, of course, will also seek to avail of the Brexit adjustment reserve.

I am conscious that while the employment wage subsidy scheme is due to remain in place until the end of March, a similar scheme will likely be required until the end of next year to provide greater certainty for businesses. A new scheme, the Covid restrictions support scheme, also provides targeted and timely support for businesses in restricted sectors or locations which are prohibited from opening temporarily or effectively closed due to restrictions introduced to contain the virus.

In terms of VAT, the standard rate reduction to 21% will be in place until 28 February. Yesterday, I announced a further VAT reduction for the hospitality and tourism sector to 9% with effect from 1 November and to continue to 31 December 2021.

With regard to income tax, I have made some specific and targeted changes. With regard to housing, from a taxation perspective, in addition to the many measures announced by the Minister for Public Expenditure, Deputy Michael McGrath, I am extending the July stimulus additional measures to the end of next year and I plan to make a number of changes to the stamp duty residential development refund scheme.

Another key issue I highlighted at the outset is climate change. We are making a further change in respect of carbon taxation in that we are ring-fencing the revenues from carbon tax to provide support to the most vulnerable. Our vehicle registration tax, VRT, tax regime will transition to the more robust worldwide harmonised light vehicle test procedure from January, with the aim of accurately relating the tax which people pay when they buy a new car or an imported car from elsewhere to the effect that car has on our environment. I am also changing a measure I brought in last year, namely, a surcharge relating to nitrogen oxide emissions.

Turning to corporation tax, I reaffirm our commitment to ensure that our regime remains competitive with the 12.5% rate at its core. However, I am alert to the changes that are developing across the world in this area. I have been involved in this over the past number of years and

the Government will be publishing a further updated statement of our roadmap for corporate tax reform in the coming months. Finally, I am announcing the establishment of a commission on welfare and taxation with further details and its membership resources and terms of reference to follow.

I acknowledge the individual and collective efforts we have made to respond to this disease. It has not been easy. It has been so difficult for so many. As always, I extend my sympathies to the families of all those who have lost their lives and to people whose health has been affected. In recent months there has been true inspiration to be found in the strength and determination of our country to fight this disease. We have worked together to support and protect each other and we have taken tough but necessary steps to limit the damage and devastation caused by this insidious virus. We are all too aware that this disease will be a continuing presence in our lives for some of the future but, equally, we know we are up to the task of containing this invisible enemy and minimising its impact on our country.

The main message I want to convey today is that, while I accept that we are living in uncertain times and facing immense challenges, we can and will get through this. With this budget, the Government is seeking to provide as much economic certainty as it can to allow families and businesses to plan ahead and to allow individuals, families, communities and employers to have a sense of a different future. The Government is doing its part but all citizens continue to have a crucial role to play in fighting this virus. Through our common purpose and collective efforts, we will reduce the impact of this disease on our country and build a more sustainable and resilient Ireland.

Senator Pat Casey: I warmly welcome the Minister. Yesterday, we saw the introduction of the largest budget in the history of the State. It is designed to take us through the greatest challenges faced by the people of Ireland since the formation of the State. Each of these challenges is massive but together they present a clear and present danger to the health and well-being of every man, woman and child in Ireland. Covid-19, Brexit, climate change and our housing crisis are continuing to wreak untold damage on people.

This budget, the first since Fianna Fáil entered the partnership Government, is the most significant investment by the State in the history of Irish budgetary policy. The saying “Put your money where your mouth is” is rather coarse for this Chamber but it has meaning today. Just less than €18 billion is being put into action for one purpose, namely, to protect all our citizens against these massive threats to our nation. Yesterday’s budget spending measures, as outlined by the Ministers, Deputies Michael McGrath and Donohoe, are designed to give hope the tools necessary to succeed. I am proud that Fianna Fáil in government stood true to its word and delivered a budget that can facilitate the commencement of the vital work of rebuilding our society and economy.

The immediate emergency is Covid-19 and the additional €4 billion for health will allow our front-line health workers to get the resources they need, not only to treat the pandemic but also to restart all our other vital health services, such as those relating to cancer care and mental health. Fianna Fáil pledged to bring in a step change in resources for mental health and disabilities if elected to office. A sum of €36 million is a good start for mental health provision for the coming year and €100 million for the disability sector provides hope that the State wishes to cherish all its children equally.

I have a strong interest in housing policy having served as Vice Chairman of the relevant

committee of the previous Dáil. The budget is very strong on housing. We promised to hit the ground running and I am happy that this has taken place with across-the-board increases in respect of all areas of housing. We all know the massive crisis that exists in the context of housing and, ultimately, it is all about building houses. It is great that yesterday's budget is targeted at delivering a further 12,750 social houses. Some 9,500 of these will be built by local authorities and approved housing bodies. If one adds to this the 27,500 such houses that have been delivered in the past four years, it is obvious that we are beginning to see a consistent delivery of social housing through the relevant processes.

What has been forgotten in the past decade is the issue of affordability. Also forgotten are the people who do not qualify for social housing but who also do not have the income to allow them to buy houses. I am delighted that €110 million has been allocated in respect of affordable housing. I welcome the proposed shared equity scheme which, I believe, the Minister will be announcing today. This is a start and it goes back to the word "hope" again. It gives a generation a hope that they can own their own homes in the future.

I welcome the allocation in respect of deep retrofitting to provide energy efficient social housing. Most people here have served as councillors. Many local authority houses only need new doors and windows but we do not seem to have a scheme to provide them. I would like that matter to be that addressed. An organisation that never gets credit or the focus it needs is Irish Water. We cannot be resilient unless we invest in Irish Water. It is not as sexy as roads infrastructure or other issues, but we cannot do without it. I welcome the commitment to provide an additional €44 million by the end of this year and the organisation's overall budget of €1.3 billion. However, we must ring-fence a percentage of that for small towns and villages in rural Ireland so that they can be sustained, grow and keep their services.

On job creation and sustaining jobs, I heard Opposition Members say there was no certainty. If I give the Government credit for anything, as a business person who has had his business closed, opened and closed again, it is that it has done all that it can in a very uncertain time to give certainty to businesses and employers to try to sustain their future. Yesterday's announcement of the Covid restrictions support scheme, CRSS, is a new and welcome approach. The Minister might consider changing the 80% threshold because we have support up to 70% and then we have support up to 20%. A little tweaking of the figures could help the 50% in the middle to sustain themselves. It is wrong to say that we have not given certainty. I cannot emphasise that enough.

I welcome the VAT reduction for the hospitality sector, as I am in the sector. I have admitted every time I spoke in the Chamber recently that it is all about our margins at the moment. It is all about cash flow. Anything that can help our cash flow and allow us to survive this period while we are trying to negotiate our way out is a help. A VAT reduction will help that. It adds 4.5% to our bottom line. That is its aim. There will be occasions where we will be allowed to use the 4.5% to provide a better offer and make it more attractive for people in the domestic economy to stay in hotels. Initially, however, it is all about the survival of the industry and having the cash flow to see ourselves through this period.

I also welcome the commercial rates waiver scheme and the employment wage subsidy scheme. Reference was made to uncertainty, but the Minister has provided certainty on all of these issues. The employment wage subsidy scheme has been guaranteed until the end of March 2021 and the same applies to the VAT rates. I have run out of time. My final message is that both Ministers gave hope yesterday that we will survive this, that people will keep their

jobs, homes will be built and businesses will be kept afloat. I thank them both for that. I am sorry for exceeding my time.

Senator David Norris: This is a most unusual budget, which was introduced in the face of the coronavirus. For a start, that makes it extremely unusual and extraordinary. We are extremely fortunate to have this Government in place, in particular this Minister for Finance. The Minister knows very well I would say very clearly if I thought he was useless, but I have watched his career with great interest since the days when he sat in front of me here in Seanad Éireann. I remember his very clear grasp of financial matters, which was extremely welcome.

Large numbers of submissions came in and it was impossible to deal with them all, but I am sure the Minister has received most of them. I welcome the reduction in the VAT rate to 9% for the hospitality sector, but I wonder why that was not done earlier. It should have been done earlier.

I have a specific interest in the car tax, which I will declare. I have a lovely old Jaguar XJ 16.5 l, which I bought for €5,000. It costs me that, between tax and insurance, to keep it on the road every year. That is absolute madness. I made this point before when the Minister in the chair was Mr. Gormley. I said to him that he should put the tax on petrol, based on the polluter-pays principle. That is the most efficient way of tackling the issue and I return to it now. This crisis has produced a situation in which there was a possibility of readjusting the global financial system, as there was also with the economic crisis, to make things a little fairer and reduce the enormous, grotesque amounts of money that some individuals have in contrast to the poverty we see. However, the Covid crisis has increased this divergence, which is extremely sad. That is something that will have to be tackled in the long run.

One of the submissions I received was from the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, which is a marvellous organisation. It wants to extend the ban on evictions. How could people be evicted under these circumstances? The submission also asked that we put in place an adequate financial guidance and support package for tenants in rent arrears, to help them out. The psychological strain of being in this situation is very difficult. The submission also called for an increase in the rent limits for rent supplement and housing assistance payment, alongside enhanced rent certainty measures, so that supports are adequate and in line with market rents. It called for the designation of sufficient funding for the homeless prevention workers required under section 10 of the Housing Act 1988. I know the Minister will have received these submissions and I ask him to look at them very carefully.

Let us look at some of the sectors that are especially hit. Travel agents have been badly affected by the pandemic. They are very strongly in favour of the traffic light protocol, which I hope the Government will adopt as it would be very useful. Travel agents are probably the only sector that has had to keep paying employees, despite having no income. They have been in a terrible situation since 1 April.

The employment wage subsidy scheme is a help but it is not sufficient to keep businesses open considering all the overheads such as rent, electricity and telephone charges, IT costs, legal commitments, audit fees, insurance and financial charges, among others.

Disability is a very sensitive area. There was a call for a cost of disability payment to be introduced in budget 2021 to address the inadequacy of income support for people with disabilities. People with disabilities on low incomes should be properly protected against increases in

the carbon tax. Additional funding should be assigned to address the digital divide to ensure that people with disabilities and other disadvantages are not left stranded during the pandemic. The wage subsidy scheme for people with disabilities should be improved to boost employment opportunities.

Turning to the international context, I have been contacted by Concern, which is another extraordinarily valuable organisation. Prior to Covid-19, a record 168 million people required humanitarian assistance. That is a hell of a lot of people and we are a rich country. Now, thanks to Covid-19, that number has rocketed to 421 million. This is a disastrous situation. We must maintain the overseas development aid, ODA, budget. This is a song the Minister may remember me singing loud and clear in the Seanad when there was a possibility that it would be reduced. Concern suggests that we recognise the humanitarian need precipitated by Covid-19 and allocate additional funding accordingly. It says we must work to ensure the Government's budgetary support to Irish organisations such as Concern is adequate and proportionate to the amount allocated to multilateral mechanisms.

Returning to the domestic situation and housing, I know the Government has made a very brave and courageous commitment. Taking into account the fact that if we go to level 5, which I think will have to happen, unless extraordinary measures are introduced to protect the building industry, building sites will close down as well. How are we going to get those houses built? I simply do not know.

Then there is the question of the psychological services. I have a great friend who is a psychotherapist. I suggest that in response to this situation tax relief be provided for counselling and psychotherapy sessions. I also call for an extension of the medical card service and the benefits under the PRSI system.

On aviation, Aer Lingus has been hopeless. It has not supported its employees but as far as I can see, the Government has not supported the employees either. We should do something for them. On top of that, Aer Lingus is being difficult on the issue of social welfare benefits in not supplying the information and filling out the forms. There is an awful lot more I could say, for example, on the Irish Cancer Society. I had a thick file to bring into the Chamber. I am very grateful for the time I have been allowed and I congratulate the Minister on his wonderful work for this country.

Senator Seán Kyne: What a difference a year makes. The Minister is welcome to the Seanad. It is an extraordinary budget for an extraordinary time. Last year, the greatest challenge facing our country was Brexit and budget 2020 was framed with Brexit in mind. Budget 2021 has been framed with not one but two extraordinary challenges facing us, namely, Brexit and Covid-19.

We are in the midst of a global pandemic battling an invisible enemy that has worryingly regrouped in recent weeks, a stark reminder that we are nowhere near the end of it. Every country in the world has been impacted by Covid-19, their economies devastated and lives and livelihoods lost. At home, domestic demand has fallen by approximately 6% and 320,000 jobs will have been lost by the year end. Our deficit has been forecast to be €21.5 billion.

We cannot forget for a moment the threat that a disorderly Brexit poses. I am reassured by the fact that the budget has been prepared on the basis that there will be no trade agreement between the EU and the UK, although we all hope and would prefer if a comprehensive agree-

ment were reached by 1 January. It is within the parameters of Covid-19 and Brexit that budget 2021 should be reviewed.

This budget is the largest investment in the history of the State. It continues the swift action to support people, businesses and communities throughout the country. The rainy day fund from last year along with the careful and prudent management of the finances of our country in recent years have enabled us to access the funding that is needed now. This point is lost on many people. The budget has a range of measures to support households, businesses, farms and communities, including €8.5 billion for Covid-related supports and an increase of €1.6 billion to bring to €10.1 billion the investment in longer term capital infrastructure.

While the expenditure elements of the budget garner more attention in the coverage for various reasons, the policy changes relating to revenue, taxation and other financial supports are equally important. Let us consider the personal taxation measures. I warmly welcome the increase in the earned income tax credit to €1,650. This brings the figure into line with the PAYE tax credit. We introduced this measure several years ago in recognition of the risk that self-employed people take to create business and jobs. That is most welcome. I welcome the significant increase in the dependant relative credit from €70 to €245. This is clear recognition of the work of so many people throughout the country who care for a relative in various ways. The importance and value of caring have been amply demonstrated this year on account of Covid-19. This measure is an important statement of the type of society we wish to be.

The increase in the ceiling of the second category of the universal social charge will benefit all workers but especially those on lower incomes. With the extension of the help-to-buy scheme, which provides up to €30,000 or 10% of the purchase price of a new home, we will continue to support people to buy their first home. The increase in the carbon tax is a necessary step to combat climate change. I am heartened by the inclusion of enhancements to the living alone allowance and the fuel allowance which will protect the most vulnerable.

In addition to the positive changes to personal income tax measures, the budget also contains key financial policy changes to support businesses and specific sectors. The new Covid restriction support scheme will support businesses that have closed or endured a substantial decrease in turnover on account of Covid-19. The scheme will be of particular importance to businesses in the hospitality, tourism and entertainment sectors that are impacted by various levels of the living with Covid-19 plan. It will, insofar as is possible, provide certainty and enable businesses to continue to meet fixed costs. The scheme, along with the employee wage subsidy scheme, will be vital in supporting viable businesses and maintaining jobs. Another vital support for the entire country, especially for counties dependent on hospitality and tourism, is the reduction in the VAT rate from 13.5% to 9%, effective from 1 November. Will the Minister set out what amount was raised from the recent increase in that tax? Was it in line with projections? I know the industry representatives have said the projections were overestimated. Taken with other supports, including the wage subsidy scheme and the stay-and-spend scheme, the VAT cut will be instrumental in supporting sectors that have been heavily hit by the pandemic and the necessary public health measures.

While the revenue raising measures and additional spending that budget 2021 involve are necessary to support households, businesses and communities, we cannot escape the responsibilities that borrowing such vast sums of money bring. I have no doubt that running a deficit and spending reserves, such as the rainy day fund, are the right steps to take at the moment. However, we cannot ignore the risks. An increase in interest rates - it is a case of when and not

if - will push up the cost of borrowing and make accessing new finance or restructuring existing liabilities more expensive. Such outcomes will have consequences for the spending choices of the Government. How much have the changes to the EU rules on the deficit changed due to Covid-19 facilitated this increase in borrowing in budget 2021?

It is essential that we ensure proper oversight of this additional expenditure. It is essential that we avail of EU supports such as the instrument for temporary support to mitigate unemployment risks in an emergency, among others, designed to support member states and their citizens. It is also essential that we engage only in sensible and responsible borrowing with a focus on gradually reducing the deficit and leading towards balanced budgets once again.

No one can say how long Covid-19 will continue to impact on our lives but we must hold on to hope and keep in mind the work of so many researchers, scientists and others who are working to develop vaccines and treatments that will enable our communities and countries to return to normality. Again, I thank the Minister for his work on budget 2021.

Senator Paul Gavan: I welcome the Minister. When I was listening to the speech yesterday I was minded of the great philosopher and musician, Noddy Holder, who, in 1973 on “Top of the Pops”, screamed through the microphone, “I said Mama but we’re all crazy now”. It is nice to see the Government move ever so slightly to the left. It is fair to start with some positives on the budget. As the House knows, Sinn Féin likes to give a balanced approach to these matters.

I welcome the additional funding for disabilities. I pay tribute to the many campaigners in that sector. The Government has made a good start this year. I also welcome the education funding. We would have gone further. We would have made a difference of two points in the pupil-teacher ratio, but one is still welcome. We want to especially welcome the funding for the shared Ireland unit. Again, we would have made it €140 million instead of €100 million, but it is important to recognise it. We also recognise the Christmas bonus. It is not technically part of the budget but it is important that people know that it will be included.

In a similar vein, we regret that the increase to the minimum wage next year is a pitiful 10 cent. This has led effectively to the end of the Low Pay Commission, as matters stand. That is more than regrettable in terms of the way that has worked out.

Overall, we are disappointed and I will summarise why that is the case. Yesterday was clearly a day for action but there was no relief for the people who saw their pandemic unemployment payment cut. There was no relief for renters. There was no right to a pension at 65 years. There was more new money for developers and landlords than for genuinely affordable housing. Nothing was delivered for families paying the highest childcare costs in Europe. There was not enough to help small businesses survive. We will see increasing costs for people throughout rural Ireland with carbon taxes and motor taxes. There is little ambition to get to grips with the crisis in our health service.

Our first priority would have been those who are struggling and barely clinging on having lost jobs and incomes, those who need the pandemic unemployment payment restored, those locked out of home ownership in the middle of a pandemic as well as the renters who simply need a break. The Minister should have reversed the cut to the pandemic unemployment payment for those who have lost their jobs as increased restrictions are reintroduced. Unfortunately, he did not do so. The Minister should have reversed the cut to the temporary wage scheme,

but again he did not do so. This means we will have businesses closing unnecessarily. This means families slipping into further debt and, in some cases, at risk of losing the roof over their heads. The Government should have grasped this unique opportunity to have the largest house-building programme in the history of the State while stimulating the economy, addressing the affordable housing shortage and giving people real hope in these difficult times that they can secure a home for their families.

I will go into further detail about the housing issue. The new Government has failed its first and most important test on housing. The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, has failed to secure the level of capital investment required to tackle the social and affordable housing crisis. This is more of the same failed policy of the previous Government. It is a missed opportunity to invest in a truly ambitious public housing programme. I will highlight some key points. The budget was totally silent on the needs of renters. We saw 593 extra real social homes above what had already been committed to for 2021 by the former Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, in *Rebuilding Ireland*. Only €110 million for affordable housing split between 400 cost rental homes and an as yet undefined shared equity scheme. There was no additional funding above what had been committed for local authorities to deliver affordable homes to rent or buy on council land. There were no targets for affordable homes to rent or buy in 2021. Perhaps most disappointingly, more new money will go to private landlords and developers. Some €208 million more will go to the various housing schemes than will go to genuinely affordable homes for working people. Less than €110 million is set aside for affordable homes when the shared equity loan element has been deducted.

I also want to raise the issue of health. The Government failed to adequately invest in critical care and intensive care beds. This is the fundamental reason we were so vulnerable to Covid-19 last March. It remains the key reason that we are so vulnerable to a second wave. The Government has only provided for 66 ICU beds, an increase of only 41 from where we are now. Sinn Féin would have delivered an additional 100 ICU beds. The Government announced 1,146 new acute beds for hospitals but what the Government did not tell us is that the difference between the number of beds we will have at the end of next year compared with this year is just 107. The Government was double counting and was including temporary beds that it intends to close. The Government once again failed our front-line healthcare workers. Yesterday was a day to turn claps into actions and deliver pay equality for nurses. Sinn Féin would have used this budget to deliver this. The Government failed to provide additional home help hours beyond the winter plan, which ceases in April. Sinn Féin, on the other hand, provided for an additional 1 million hours.

The cut in support for the employment wage subsidy scheme, EWSS, from €410 to €203 was short-sighted and should have been reversed. Extending this flawed scheme to the end of the year at the lower rate is far less than what was required. It is widely accepted that subsidising the wage bill of employers and keeping the connection between employee and employer is one of the most important interventions we can make. Cutting it to this level has already forced businesses to close their doors and has moved people onto the PUP, which is more costly to the State. There is no logic to such an approach. Our proposal will allow a maximum of €410 for the most affected sectors, namely, the hospitality and tourism sectors and parts of the retail, arts and leisure sectors if the business suffers a 50% downturn.

The retrofitting programme is welcome. Sinn Féin supports any measure that simplifies and makes green energy grants and supports more accessible. However, the Government's announcements on plans to introduce a national retrofitting programme are deeply flawed, as they

require many householders to acquire more personal debt to retrofit their homes.

There are many more points I would like to make but I am sure my colleagues will do so in due course.

Senator Marie Sherlock: I thank the Minister for coming into this House. There has been a lot said about the historic nature of yesterday's budget. It was the single largest budget in the history of the State and there were important elements in it to support businesses and various sectors of society. There were a number of missed opportunities and serious oversights in this budget, however, and they undermine the project to rebuild the livelihoods, lives and jobs of workers and families.

We have seen billions of euro rightly being allocated to keeping the economy afloat but it was a mistake to not look at how we allocate some of that money. In particular, when I look at the likes of housing, which Senator Moynihan will talk about, there was the promise of delivering more housing through direct builds and less through the private rented sector and yet, we saw that turned on its head yesterday.

On the employment wage subsidy scheme, there was a real opportunity, not only to keep businesses afloat but to enable and empower workers to train during the hours that they are not working with their companies. The Labour Party clearly said in the run up to the budget that we need to use the employment wage subsidy scheme to both train workers and support firms, following the example of what is happening in Germany and the Netherlands. Unfortunately, that did not happen.

The other key issue for me with the composition of the budget is that there are holes in how we make our workforce, and those who are out of work, more resilient and ready to take up jobs in the future. To be frank, unemployment will be the single greatest challenge this Government will face. There is also an issue with income supports for those who are out of work. The number of training and skilling places that were announced yesterday are to be welcomed but there is a serious issue that if somebody has to take up the back-to-education allowance or the vocational training opportunities scheme, VTOS, allowance, they have to move from the PUP payment to the jobseeker's benefit and so they must take a loss in income support to take up that training.

The following point has not been aired well in this debate so far. We saw an exodus of almost 90,000 people from the labour force in the middle of this year. These are not people who would come up in the unemployment statistics, rather, these are people who have come out of the labour force and who are not looking for work. A disproportionate share of them are women and if we are to encourage women back into the workforce - we need more women in the workforce if we are to boost the Social Insurance Fund and pay for the pensions of the future - then we need to look at the issue of childcare. It was disappointing that no effort was made to ensure there was more affordable childcare for families. In the case of those working in childcare, which has a workforce that is predominantly female, people suffer low wages in that sector and it is disappointing that no effort was made to ensure greater access to affordable childcare in the country yesterday.

Senator Rebecca Moynihan: I thank the Minister for coming to the House. I will address some of the issues around the much lauded largest ever investment in housing. The pandemic has exposed the cost of our broken housing system. We see people in low-paid jobs not just

sharing rooms but hot bedding, renters being evicted and the crisis in social housing and homelessness continuing. The spin is that this is the largest investment ever in housing but when one drills down into it, the detail shows little progress. Anybody at the coalface of the housing crisis will get little relief from what was announced yesterday.

It is clear that there is nothing in the budget that will address the underlying causes of the housing crisis. Extra funding for homelessness was welcome but without radical State building, it will not address the root of the problem and Housing First should be the strategy when it comes to addressing homelessness. Our two-tier system will continue unless the State finally stops relying on the private market and on developer-led planning. The much lauded increase in capital spending will only add 593 direct build houses to the Rebuilding Ireland housing stock targets for 2021. There is no mention of the 7,000 houses that have not been built this year because of the impact of Covid-19. That is not nearly enough to make a dent in the 50,000 houses over five years that we were promised in the programme for Government and it is a lot less than the 80,000 we need at a minimum.

Following the loss of thousands of jobs since March, the ending of the eviction ban and the imposition of level 3 travel restrictions, there is nothing in this package for renters. The Government continues to pretend there is not a crisis in the private rented sector and that there is not a looming rental arrears crisis. Perhaps the most telling part of the budget for me is the so-called affordable housing package of €110 million. When I saw that yesterday, I wondered who wrote the housing section of this budget and who had the audacity to call it the affordable housing section. It looks like we are back to the days of the construction industry setting housing policy for us. The shared equity scheme has been promoted in its pre-budget submission by the Irish Home Builders Association, which is a subgroup and an offshoot of the Construction Industry Federation. The so-called affordable measures of a shared equity scheme and the insistence on continuing the help-to-buy scheme at the inflated grant level of €30,000 will simply drive up prices for young people, while padding the pockets of developers.

Fianna Fáil in government has not reversed the disastrous policies of Fine Gael but it has added to our problems through its insistence on shovelling money to developers through the so-called affordable housing plans and the help-to-buy scheme.

Senator Vincent P. Martin: There is one certainty about where we are, namely, that it is uncertain. Considering the complete uncertainty of the situation, the challenge the Government faced was mammoth. In a record spend of €17.75 billion, there are a number of headline figures to which my colleagues have already alluded. There is so much to be welcomed about the €4 billion on health. Ill winds blow good fortune and some of that investment, leaving aside the Covid-19 part of it, might remain with us in the long term.

The record €5.2 billion spend on housing has got to be welcomed.

At the heart of the Government's budget is that it boosts business, although it invests heavily in public services also. It was a war footing budget and business was at the heart of it. Not so long ago, there was criticism of budgets in which the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, may have been involved to the effect that there was something for everyone in the audience or a little bit for everyone. This is the complete opposite. We will not have that argument from yesteryear. This budget did not go down the populist route. It went down a macro visionary route whereby the Government has recognised that business will drive the economy and protect individuals' jobs. Support of up to €5,000 per week for businesses is a lifeline. A number of

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business owners have been in touch with me since it was announced and they were emotional about that. With a bit of luck they can survive, thanks to the initiative of the Minister and the Government.

This budget is very different. It is not seen through the lens of the welfare State. It is not a case of one for everyone in the audience. It is a visionary budget. I accept it will not please all the people.

I do not wish to be critical but, with respect, some of the Opposition responses to the budget yesterday struck me as being scripted. I felt some of them were stumped because of the record spend in this budget. There is such a thing as constructive opposition but a test of any budget is not necessarily about the Minister for Finance or the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. We should listen to the stakeholders, who have welcomed it, albeit with a qualified welcome. There is a lot more positivity today than before the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, took to his feet in the Dáil yesterday.

I welcome the €1.8 billion investment in sustainable transport and the DART+ programme. Unfortunately, it stops in Maynooth and does not go on to Kilcock. It stops in Leixlip also and does not go on to the capital town of Naas but that is a conversation for another day.

Staying with “The Late Late Show” theme, it might not have the popular viewings of yesterday but at the time of the caretaker Government the Taoiseach, Deputy Varadkar, threw down an invitation during a live conversation with Ryan Tubridy. He said that if the Green Party really wanted its agenda implemented this was an incredibly opportune moment to tie down Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael in that regard. There will always be an Opposition but he said that if Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, the two big bastions of democracy in Ireland, were on the Green Party’s side in communicating its message to the country, it was an opportunity it could not give up. We did not give it up.

The €7.50 increase on fossil fuels brings that to a total of €33.50 per tonne of carbon. Crucially, that will reach €100 per tonne of carbon by 2030. Carbon tax, which the Green Party has been fighting for over years, is now guaranteed to increase each year. The Government has done that by taking politics out of it. I know there is broad agreement in the Oireachtas but the die is cast in respect of the tax on carbon and the issue is now outside of party politics.

There is a major redesign of motor tax and vehicle registration tax, which is to be welcomed. It got off to a poor start the last time the Green Party was in government. At the heart of this way of doing it is just transition. We must protect the most vulnerable. My party leader, Deputy Eamon Ryan, tweeted a graph yesterday showing that the lower income households in the bottom four deciles, according to an analysis done by the Department of Finance SWITCH model, are the most protected in this budget.

The living alone allowance will be increased by €5 and the fuel allowance will be increased by €3.50 per week. In terms of targeting child poverty, the €5 increase for children over the age of 12 and the €2 increase for children under the age of 12 is to be welcomed - the increase for a qualified child.

Every party loves the arts but the arts and heritage are particularly cherished in the Green Party. Those two sectors have been given a huge boost in the budget. For the first time, live entertainment has been recognised. It was centre stage in the Minister’s speech.

In terms of overseas aid, we are very proud of what Ireland has done. In tough times we saw the bigger picture and increased that aid to approximately €30 million.

I listened to the interview with the Minister and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy McGrath, this morning. It was harmonious, uplifting and represented a new beginning for this Government. I believe this Government has found its mojo. It was unfortunate in that it had a difficult start but it is pulling for Ireland in a harmonious and united way. I wish it well as we go through more difficult times. I am concerned about how the money will be repaid. Eventually, in the next budget or budgets 3 or 4, taxation measures will have to be introduced but these first steps are to be welcomed.

I am a Senator from a Government party but if I was to be objective about this budget, I would have to welcome it. Senator Casey outlined in great detail many of the wins in this Government's budget. The Green Party welcomes and supports it.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I welcome the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, to the House. In his speech yesterday he highlighted two underlying assumptions in respect of this budget, first, that Covid-19 will remain with us for a long period of time and, second, that, unfortunately, we may be looking at a scenario of Brexit without a deal from January. I would agree with both of those assumptions and it is important that they are factored into and reflected in the budget. However, there is a third assumption that underpins this budget, and has underpinned fiscal policy for a long period of time, which needs to be challenged and re-evaluated. That third assumption is that reducing the deficit must remain a priority and be a central focus, even in a time of crisis. That assumption goes against what we have heard from international institutions not simply responding to the urgency of Covid-19 but also in terms of learning from some of the mistakes that were made in response to previous crises we have experienced.

There is a point I need to nail down. I worry sometimes that we might forget history. We know what happened when risks developed in our national finances. We will not let that happen again. We really need to be clear on history. It was not public expenditure that caused the financial crash in 2008. It was inappropriate speculation by financial actors followed by an extraordinary act in terms of a State having to bail those out. It is very important we do not have a retrospective narrative that somehow we did public expenditure before and it all went wrong. That is not the case. We need to be clear on the history.

We also need to be clear on the fact that others have learned that we do need stimulus. I recognise that there are steps towards stimulus in the budget but we need to look at valuing that stimulus in a crucial way. We know that the EU has suspended some of its fiscal rules for the coming two-year period. That is not indefinitely but those are two years in which some of the issues we always hear about such as something having to be off-balance sheet or on-balance sheet are allowing for large-scale transformative public expenditure. This is a chance not simply for the public expenditure we need to respond to the crises in terms of Covid-19 or Brexit but to remake our public expenditure in a way that prepares us for the future climate crisis. In this budget and, crucially, in the next one, we have an opportunity to operate outside some of the constraints we faced previously in terms of having resilient public services, hiring enough public servants and having systems that will carry us into the very challenging decade ahead.

To what extent will that vision, and the recognising of the need for front-loading action during the suspension of the fiscal rules, be reflected in the national economic plan? To what

extent has the Minister applied the principles of equality-proofing and gender-proofing to his section of the budget? I refer not simply to public expenditure but to those other aspects of the budget. To what extent will those commitments to equality-proofing and gender-proofing be reflected in the national economic plan? To what extent will the sustainable development goals, and the very micro and specific targets we have signed up to in regard to them, be reflected in the national economic plan? Even the European Investment Bank, for example, recognises that the sustainable development goals need to be integrated.

Will the Minister clarify the relationship between the proposed recovery fund and the EU recovery fund? Is this where we can expect that portion of the recovery fund from Europe to be routed through? The recovery fund is not simply an opportunity to support business. That is important, but not everything can be done through business, as we saw in our Covid-19 response. Sometimes it is about public employment, public services or public infrastructure, and the State as an employer and a driver of the economy, not simply supporting business to drive the economy but in itself as an innovator and creator of economic action.

There are concerns about a K-shaped recovery. We do not want to see headlines where the economy recovers but jobs do not. That is the fear and the danger if we do not approach this correctly. We were told, when the Financial Provisions (Covid-19) (No. 2) Bill 2020 and the Credit Guarantee (Amendment) Bill 2020 were moving through the House, that increased public expenditure would be clear and forthcoming. We have heard something about transport but I have concerns about housing. Short-term leasing was what was used ten years ago and it has given us problems now. How can we ensure there is not just leasing but also building of public housing? They are questions for the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform.

I am concerned about climate action. Will the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, clarify that it is not his understanding that climate action and retrofitting must come from the climate action fund and that other resources within the financial budget will be dedicated to issues such as the rewetting of bogs and retrofitting? We do not want to set a constraint that there is only one well from which climate action can be drawn.

We spoke about the impact of Covid-19 on young people. I worked with rural young unemployed people during the previous crisis. Unemployment is a key issue but it is not simply about work. There are also youth services. The mistake of cutbacks on community development services and youth services in the previous recession had a very damaging impact. We need to learn from and avoid that. Similarly, there are measures in the budget to prevent people from falling into poverty, but those who are already in poverty are not as protected as they should be. I am concerned about renters, as well as those who are at high risk of poverty or in consistent poverty.

I would appreciate the Minister's response to these issues. I apologise that I must step away to the Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach, but I will read his contributions with great interest.

Senator Lisa Chambers: Budget 2021 is colossal in both scope and spending levels, with an overall package of almost €18 billion. It will do exactly what the country needs it to do at a time of great uncertainty for Irish people and Irish businesses. I am unaware of any time in our State's history when our country and economy faced such severe challenges, with the double threat of a prolonged global pandemic and the possibility of a bad Brexit deal. The Ministers, Deputies Michael McGrath and Donohoe, did a good job yesterday of striking a bal-

ance between borrowing what is needed, spending to support the most vulnerable indigenous businesses and looking to the future with a contingency fund of €5.5 billion to allow for additional spending in social welfare, health and Brexit supports as they are needed. This flexibility shows a Government that is agile and dynamic, ready to move and deal with the uncertainty and changing needs of our country in the year ahead.

There was little scope yesterday to be negative about the budget, given how much was being spent to protect our people and economy, but some in opposition nonetheless scrambled to find any fault they could, simply for the sake of finding fault. The general public's reaction to the budget, however, has been very positive, with the hospitality and retail sectors broadly welcoming it.

In the area of business, and in particular hospitality and retail, the reduction of the VAT rate to 9% is very welcome. I am sure every business in hospitality and retail in the country breathed a sigh of relief yesterday as that measure was announced. It will help to ease pressure on those sectors most impacted by Covid-19. The supports for businesses that are closed due to the restrictions of level 3 and above, of up to €5,000 per week, are also very welcome. The two supports, as well as the extension of the wage subsidy scheme, are so welcome and there was a sigh of relief across the board. In my county of Mayo, particularly in the areas of tourism and hospitality, which are major employers, people in business were worried for the future. These supports, however, will keep the wolves from the door and help businesses to survive and to protect jobs by creating much-needed cashflow to address the overheads that remain even when their doors are closed.

My colleague, Senator O'Loughlin is sitting beside me. I commend her and the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, on a dementia package of almost €13 million. I thank them for the new memory assessment and support service hubs, one of which is to be located in County Mayo, with the other three in Sligo, Waterford and Wexford. This will mean people can get an assessment and, hopefully, early diagnosis and treatment in their communities and regions, without having to travel to St. James's Hospital. From speaking to people in County Mayo, I know this has been very welcome in that community, which should look forward to the opening of those services in the latter part of 2021.

This pandemic has shown how important education is for the well-being of our children. I was pleased to see the teacher-pupil ratio reduced in the budget. We have some of the largest classroom sizes in Europe and this is a positive step towards addressing that. The budget has delivered a one-point reduction in the pupil-teacher ratio for primary level to 25:1, an historic low. This will, in turn, create hundreds of additional staffing posts in the primary system, an important step that takes into account the Covid-19 pandemic and the pressure it has placed on every school in the country. More than 400 additional posts for children with special educational needs have been allocated, as well as 265 additional posts to meet demographic demands. Another important aspect of the budget, and one I raised directly with the Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Foley, was the need to address the decline of small rural schools. That there has been a delivery of a three-point reduction in the number of enrolments required to maintain an existing teacher has been welcomed by many rural schools.

I turn to the area of carbon tax and climate change. Living in a rural community, I know that many are worried about the cost of fuel, whether diesel or petrol, and the impact that may have. Broadly speaking, however, people understand the need to tax pollution and carbon. People appreciate that doing this is not about collecting money but rather about changing behaviours.

Gradually increasing the tax and addressing it in the years ahead, and giving people advance notice of the changes coming, will change behaviour. I fully accept that electric vehicles are expensive, but those who can afford to change their cars to cleaner, more efficient vehicles should do so. It is in the interest of protecting our environment, keeping our air clean and protecting the country and environment for children in the future.

One important aspect of the package was the social welfare measures to protect those most vulnerable to these changes. Accordingly, we have created a very progressive carbon tax system. This means we will spend the carbon tax we take in on retrofitting homes and funding environmentally friendly agri pilot schemes. This is most welcome and progressive and it is something younger generations want to see. We have to protect our climate and environment for generations to come and we must start that in this budget.

I spoke directly with the Minister, Deputy Michael McGrath, about the support for students and, in particular, the €50 million hardship fund. We in Fianna Fáil are really proud of our tradition in education. We see education as the great equaliser. Every child and student in the country should have access to the best possible education and money should not be a barrier. As somebody who had a part-time job all the way through college, I would not have been able to go to college were it not for access to part-time employment. Many students facing into the college year without access to a part-time job face the prospect of not being able to go to college this year. Having access to a hardship fund will alleviate that pressure and ensure access to education for every citizen.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: The next speaker is Senator Ahearn who I understand wants to share time with Senator McGahon. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Garret Ahearn: I welcome the Minister to the Chamber. We are living in a different time at the moment and this budget reflects that space we are in now in terms of the amount of money we are borrowing and investing. We are, however, doing the right thing. As Senator Chambers mentioned, it seems almost impossible to be against this budget with the amount of money we are investing in it but, somehow, the Opposition has still managed to find a way of being against funding and investing in our country.

I welcome, particularly, the €4 billion for health. It is important. Much of it was flagged beforehand but never before have we seen so much money put into health and for obvious reasons this year more than most.

The €3.3 billion put into housing and the extension of the help-to-buy scheme is important for people to get a start in life and get on the property ladder.

In terms of justice, I welcome the announcement of 620 new gardaí coming through in 2021 which increases the force to more than 14,500. Templemore in County Tipperary is where they will be trained so, obviously, it is important for me.

The €23 million extra funding in rural affairs for projects under the Department of the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, is massive for local or small communities which will get €10,000 or €20,000 for local projects. There was an announcement this Monday on projects around the country and it means an awful lot to them. The extension and the extra funding on that is important.

I will focus some of my time on the announcements for businesses and enterprise and trade.

I believe the Minister will agree with me that since Fine Gael has been in government we have prioritised businesses and jobs since 2011. Whether that is the Action Plan for Jobs brought through by Deputy Richard Bruton that sought to have 100,000 extra jobs, which most people did not believe would happen at the time but it did and exceeded that, we as a Government have always supported jobs. Yesterday is a prime example of that.

The VAT rate reduction from 13.5% to 9% is huge for businesses, even in my area in towns such as Cahir, Cashel and Lough Derg in north Tipperary which would be predominantly tourist hotspots. This reduction is a massive security for them. The extension of the commercial rates holiday is really important. The extension of the employment wage subsidy scheme through to 2021, should it be required, is important. It gives people and businesses certainty. The most important thing is the new Covid-19 restrictions support scheme of up to €5,000 for businesses. That is massive for businesses to get them through the next number of months and survive and thrive again in 2021.

Senator John McGahon: Yesterday in the Dáil, the Minister said the climate crisis is the greatest crisis facing our generation. As a result of my role in this Chamber as the Fine Gael Seanad spokesperson on climate action, I wish to focus the majority of my remarks on the climate action measures we put forward in the budget yesterday.

The budget had measures in it that were transformative in terms of the green aspect. It will help us to make the move as a society towards a green economy and, more importantly, a low-carbon society. We did that through a whole range of measures. When I look, however, at the amount of effort governments around the world put towards the Covid-19 crisis, I believe we need to take the energy we are putting behind the Covid-19 crisis and move that towards climate action because that is the greatest enemy the safety of this planet is really facing.

When we look at the carbon tax we have increased, the Minister said yesterday that not one single cent or euro will go to Government expenditure, it will go right back to Irish citizens to help the most vulnerable in our communities reduce their carbon emissions and footprint and insulate their homes. We saw that with the retrofit programme which, as far as I am concerned, is one of the most ambitious projects in this budget whereby we will be able to retrofit homes right across Ireland and reduce people's energy bills. Overall that will benefit our climate.

We have put €109 million into the warmer homes scheme which will go towards the free energy upgrades of people from low-income families and backgrounds. We are talking to businesses about the targets they must reach and how they can go about meeting those reduction targets.

Equally, the grants for electric vehicles are substantial. We have seen grants for home and public charging points. More importantly, we have seen even more investment than ever going behind our national infrastructure network. We make the transition to electric vehicles simple by making it simple for individuals to make that change. We are doing that by putting substantial money behind it.

I will conclude because I do not want to take any more time away from colleagues. This was a transformative budget in terms of green issues and transforming our economy and society towards a greener economy. That is what we must do if we have any chance of this country meeting its required targets by the end of this decade in 2030.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I thank our two colleagues for absolutely accurate timing be-

cause we are under pressure. Senator Craughwell will share time with Senator Conway.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: First and foremost, I wish to thank the Minister for the calm, cool way he has dealt with the coronavirus to date and the reassurance people get when they see him on TV. He has had, however, too many people compliment him today so I might as well join the Opposition. I refer to the Moorhead report. The Minister's councillors and foot soldiers had been expecting something in this budget. I sincerely hope that by the time we get to the Finance Bill there will be something there for them. They are the people out there on the ground doing the hard work to support this Government, their political parties and, more importantly, their communities.

I welcome the additional 600 gardaí and 500 civilian employees which will put the best part of 1,100 more gardaí on the street. That is to be welcomed. I also welcome the initiatives the Minister has taken in housing. They are of particular interest to me.

Today, however, I am more concerned about the Defence Forces than anything else. The Minister was at the launch of the high-level plan which is now months behind time and we do not really know where it is going. The current expenditure budget for 2021 is €14 million, of which, €10.5 million is already gone. That leaves €3.5 million to deal with allowances in the Defence Forces. The Minister cannot be unaware of the fact the Defence Forces is disintegrating as we speak and yet, at a time of crisis in this country, the Naval Service provided testing facilities in Dublin Port, Cork and Galway. The Army provided transport and erected pop-up testing centres all over the country. The Air Corps provided mercy missions and flew Covid-19 tests to Germany for testing yet, as I said, the high-level plan is behind time. An opportunity was missed to compensate members of the officer cadet training wing who suspended their training to support the country during a testing period and, for all intents and purposes, have suspended or lengthened their period of training. No allowance was paid to them. They must be the only public servants in the country who did not get an allowance and that is unforgivable. Very soon, we could find ourselves needing the Defence Forces more than ever. If we get a hard Brexit we will, whether we like it or not, have to impose a border somewhere in this country. We may well have to close the Border because of the difference between the northern Executive and the southern Government with respect to the way in which the pandemic is being looked after. That is of extreme importance.

The dereliction or dilapidation of Army barracks and Army assets throughout the country is a matter of great concern. I am hopeful that the Minister for Finance will be able to bring the various Departments together to provide military housing, establish a third level institution in the Curragh, refurbish barracks and restore the parklands of which we are so proud. Some €137 million is going to search and rescue. I hope to see some initiative to bring the Air Corps back into search and rescue. Let us not privatise the search and rescue function, as it has been. A ten-year contract is a long time.

The Naval Service has two ships tied up. We have €2.23 billion worth of assets off the shores of this country and are facing drug and people trafficking but those waters cannot be patrolled unless the Naval Service is brought back to full power. I acknowledge the Minister for Defence, Deputy Coveney, is doing a lot and that the Minister will assist him in any way he can but I needed to put those things on the record. I thank the Minister for any assistance he can give.

Finally, the Defence Forces should be the driving force behind cybersecurity in this country.

Senator Martin Conway: I thank Senator Craughwell for sharing time. I thank the Minister, not necessarily for yesterday's budget, but for the budgets of the past four years. Were it not for the way in which the economy and the country's finances were managed over that period, we would not really have been in a position to have the budget that was unveiled yesterday to respond to the Covid crisis. It was a necessary budget and an appropriate response. I have often discussed tourism-related issues with the Minister over the years and am very pleased he has reintroduced the 9% VAT rate because when the hospitality industry gets back on its feet, it will be a useful vehicle for sustaining employment and hopefully growing the business again. I also thank the Minister for providing additional support to Shannon Airport through the €5 million that has been announced. There is a long way to go in rebuilding the aviation industry which is critical to the west of Ireland and to the mid-west in particular but this is a welcome start. The Minister will closely observe how aviation is developing in other parts of the world and hopefully the Government will adopt best practice.

I welcome the funding and suite of measures provided for healthcare, which is the area for which I have responsibility in my party in this House. An extra €4 billion in health is completely unprecedented. I sincerely hope we see significant results from that and value for money as well. Particularly in the area of disability, which is obviously close to my own heart, I thank the Minister for what are transformative financial commitments that have not been widely reported. I thank the Minister again for what he has done for our country. This budget will make a difference with helping to retain employment going forward.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I remind colleagues who have not got in that the debate will resume at 2.45 p.m. with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform and they are listed for that.

I welcome the Minister for Finance and congratulate him on his recent appointments and European achievements.

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I thank the Leas-Chathaoirleach and thank Senators for their contributions. The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath, will be in the House for the afternoon to respond to other points Senators will raise in that debate.

I am going to respond to a point made by each Senator and thank them all for their contributions. While I will deal with individual points, it is important to frame the budget in terms of where we are collectively. It has become the case that many difficulties our country has faced in recent years have been framed in language that refers to emergencies and crises. That is because, for those who have been experiencing them, they are emergencies and crises. It is because of the care and solidarity we want to show to those in difficulty. Truly, with this awful disease in our midst and the prospect of the familiar difficulty of Brexit returning again, we are at a point without precedent. That is why the budget that was brought in yesterday by me and the Minister, Deputy Michael McGrath - the Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Ossian Smyth, played a very important role in it as well - brought forward the best efforts from three different political parties to try to create a framework within which our country can be safe. We truly are facing a challenge that does not have a comparison and that is why we brought forward a budget of the scale and scope we did yesterday. A number of measures in it in particular would have been unthinkable at the start of this year but are needed today.

Senator Casey talked about the need to try to give hope to many at the moment. Hope, as former US President Barack Obama once wrote in an earlier book, can sometimes be an audacious thing. It is an audacious thing at a time in which we can see many dark clouds ahead, despite it being a nice afternoon at the moment. What we were trying to do yesterday as a Government was to outline our view, which I believe is the view of the Oireachtas overall, that our country will get through this. It is our view that no matter how dark the day and how severe the challenge, it is something our country will overcome through a combination of the qualities of our people and of our economy and we will prevail. The budget sought to put in place a framework to allow us to do it.

In his contribution, Senator Norris touched on the international environment of the national decisions being made. He raised the very important issue of the way in which the financial system is organised across the globe. It is important to note that the attitude of the leading central banks across the world to this crisis has been fundamentally different to the position a decade ago. Within the euro area and within the European Union, the action taken by the President of the European Central Bank, Ms Christine Lagarde, was a fundamentally different approach to what was possible a decade ago. What President Lagarde did early on in this crisis was something for which it took her predecessors many years to build the consensus. It has made a fundamental difference to the national decisions that are now possible.

Senator Kyne touched on a number of different matters. In particular, he asked whether the increase in the VAT rate on the hospitality sector raised the revenue we believed it would. The answer to that question is “Yes”. He also raised the issue of the change to the Stability and Growth Pact rules and what that means for the deficits we can fund at the moment. The European Commission has indicated that the rules that were there will be in abeyance for this year and are unlikely to be restored immediately next year, which in turn creates the flexibility for individual nations to respond to the challenge we face. What is crucial for Ireland, however, is that the level of deficit we have run for this year and are likely to run for next year is in the middle of the range when compared with other European countries. That is where we want to be. We want to be in a situation where the growth in our borrowing and our indebtedness does not make Ireland unique and that is not the case for us in Europe or across the world.

I wish Senator Gavan were here. In his contribution he made the point that yesterday, Sinn Féin looked to be balanced. That balance was absent yesterday. Perhaps there has been a change of tone for today because the party has realised that the budget we put forward will, like any budget, not be able to meet the needs of all of our country or the needs of every individual. No budget can do that, even that of yesterday, but what we have looked to do is to do enough for many to help them get through the challenges they and our country are facing at present. I note the Senator did acknowledge some positive aspects of the budget.

Senator Sherlock made a point on where we are with the childcare sector. She registered her disappointment regarding the developments in the budget yesterday. I emphasise, however, that the introduction of the wage subsidy scheme is probably the biggest economic intervention in the country’s history apart from, arguably, the decisions taken to support our banking structure at the time of the last crisis. When the history of this period is written and we look back at all of the different changes that were made across that time, we will find that the Irish State, in effect, stepped in at one point to pay the wages of nearly 600,000 people. In essence, we used the creditworthiness that was regained very slowly to step in and allow the State act as an employer over a number of months. It is factually incorrect to say that a subsidy was cut from €410 to €150 per week. Under the temporary wage subsidy scheme, the maximum subsidy

that somebody could get was €410. It is not the same as saying that everybody got €410. To go back to Senator Sherlock's point, in the current scheme we have deemed that the childcare sector can participate in that scheme regardless of what happens to turnover, which is an effort to respond to the issues touched on by the Senator.

In her contribution, Senator Moynihan touched on where we are with regard to housing. I would make the point to her that the 9,000 homes that will be delivered next year, in particular through our local authorities, represent the highest level of contribution that will be happening next year, given the likelihood that the private sector will, at that point, continue to face challenges in the delivery of homes.

Senator Higgins made the point that, in her view, we should be running a larger deficit for next year. Our deficit for this year is €21.5 billion. Our deficit for next year is, at this point in time, €20.5 billion. It is, in truth, probably a more moderate pace of deficit reduction than we could have aimed for earlier in the year, but we have had to make that choice because the virus is in a different place to where we would have hoped earlier in the year. We have to get the trade-offs right between how we manage deficit reduction and how we deal with the challenges we are facing at the moment. At that level for next year, we are well inside the range in comparison with other countries that are in similar circumstances to us.

A challenge to her argument is a point I frequently make, in particular to those on the left who make the case for more borrowing, namely, that those on the left who are making that case are very suspicious and critical of the powers of financial markets. At the same time, they look to deepen our dependence on those same financial markets by getting us to borrow more. That is not a path that I think is appropriate for our country. It is all about having a level of borrowing that is safe and never, in any contribution I have made recently, have I inferred that the difficulties of the last crisis were caused solely by levels of public expenditure that were too high.

I very much agree with a particular point Senator Martin made about the Government. We of course had a difficult start with regard to a number of different measures. This is, however, a stable Government that is responding to levels of challenge that few Governments have ever had to deal with. It has three different political parties that perhaps did not imagine that they would be in government in these circumstances. It has, at its heart, personal relationships that are good and trust that is growing, and we are working very hard to deal with the circumstances that we are now in. Decisions over recent weeks show that.

The time ahead is going to be a challenge. There may well be things that we have to do and decisions that we will have to make that will be challenging for many citizens. The three party leaders-----

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: We will have a break for the sanitisation of the Chamber. I ask the Minister to finish when he can.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I will wrap up now.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I thank the Minister.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: The three party leaders are focused on trying to make the right decisions for our country.

Senator Chambers made the point about the increase in carbon tax and how we are looking

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to do that. We want to do it gradually with all of the gains from that change in carbon tax being used to deal with the issues to which she referred.

On Senator McGahon's contribution, there was indeed a wide array of measures in the budget yesterday to deal with the green issues he touched on.

I want to again recognise the way Senator Ahearn has raised many different issues with regard to tourism within his community. That is why I believe that the reduction in VAT is the right move at the right time.

In response to Senator Craughwell, we are doing much to support and respond to the needs of the Defence Forces. I am very much aware of the work they have done in recent months in dealing with this terrible disease.

In response to Senator Conway, we have all played a role in trying to get our economy to the point where it is able to fund the kind of measures it is now funding. Maybe, just maybe, the impact of many decisions over many years has a different quality now when we need to borrow more than €20 billion very suddenly. The Senator has, over many years, raised the issue of tourism businesses in County Clare and beyond. He also raised the issue of the importance of supporting Shannon Airport. In the budget yesterday, as the Senator has been good enough to acknowledge, we looked to respond to that unbelievably important part of our economy that offers so much to our society.

In conclusion, in this budget we have tried to create a framework within which our country can navigate through the time ahead. We will do that and will come through this crisis. While I acknowledge those words can appear hollow to many at the moment who are dealing with such difficulty in their lives due to this disease, in the decisions we have made and may yet make, we will do all we can to support our country in the journey ahead.

Sitting suspended at 2.37 p.m. and resumed at 2.45 p.m.

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath, to the House and thank him for coming before the Seanad to discuss yesterday's historic budget. I invite him to address the Senators.

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I thank the Cathaoirleach. This is my first address to the House and I am delighted to have the opportunity to come to the House to say a few words about budget 2021. I will engage with Senators on the different issues they may wish to raise.

In framing the budget, the Government has been faced with a level of uncertainty without precedent in modern times. We continue to live with the Covid-19 pandemic and also face the prospect of the United Kingdom trading with the European Union on World Trade Organization terms from 1 January next. In the face of these extraordinary challenges, budget 2021, which I prepared with the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, seeks to protect our economy and society by supporting businesses and livelihoods, and investing in key public services as we continue to live with this virus.

Importantly, the budget also seeks to make progress on key programme for Government commitments that will benefit society over the longer term, namely, implementing Sláintecare, building more houses, greening our economy and supporting the labour market. As I said yes-

terday, we cannot wait until next year to make moves to further protect people and businesses. That is why I have made available an additional €500 million in exceptional expenditure measures between now and the end of the year. These measures include extending the commercial rates waiver in the fourth quarter of the year, which will help the funding position of local authorities and provide vital relief for businesses, and allowing Irish Water to unlock new housing development by providing it with an extra allocation of over €40 million for works between now and the end of the year. We have also provided €80 million to the Department of Education and Skills to accelerate works on its school building programme and to support its ICT and minor works schemes.

Many Senators have raised a number of the issues to which I am about to refer. We are now in a position to provide immediate funding for voluntary disability service providers, voluntary hospices and the wider community and voluntary sector through an additional allocation to the Covid-19 stability fund, which is so important for them. To clarify, there will be €20 million for the voluntary disability service providers, €10 million for voluntary hospices and €10 million of additional money will be invested in the Covid-19 stability fund for community, voluntary organisations and social enterprises. This is in recognition of the real difficulty that many of those organisations have had in fundraising over the past six months and the impact that this has had on their funding position.

Looking to next year, the key expenditure priorities for budget 2021 focus on: the provision of an envelope of €8.5 billion for our public services in order to address the challenges of Covid-19; a recovery fund of almost €3.5 billion to be used for measures to support the economy as we respond to the twin economic challenges of Brexit and Covid-19; incremental improvements in the delivery of public services across all areas of Government; and meaningful improvements in key priority areas like healthcare, housing, climate change and education.

The level of resources for which provision is made in budget 2021 is without parallel. The Revised Estimates for Public Services for 2020 published last December, which seems like a very different time now, set out an overall gross voted expenditure allocation of €70.4 billion. Taking into account the €3.4 billion relating to the recovery fund, public expenditure will increase by €17.4 billion above the expenditure planned for this year before the emergence of Covid-19 to €87.8 billion in 2021. This gives a sense of the scale of the additional expenditure we are making available to support the economy and public services. I acknowledge that we will be borrowing a significant amount of money in the short term in order to pay for these measures. Going into this year, our debt was in the region of €200 billion. By the end of next year, it is likely to be in the order of €240 billion. Notwithstanding that, this is the right package and the right thing to do. When the economy is weak, the State needs to step up, deliver investment and support and pursue counter-cyclical policies. That is exactly what we are doing.

Many people will have concerns about the level of borrowing. At this time, however, borrowing is the prudent thing to do. Interest rates are at record low levels and the funds raised will allow us to protect public health and livelihoods and invest in much-needed infrastructure across the country. I am confident that a renewed economy can generate tax revenue to ensure that our national debt will be on a sustainable footing.

In addition to taking these necessary steps to deal with the challenges posed by Brexit and Covid-19, we also need to make progress in the areas of health, housing and tackling climate change. This is why core health expenditure is to increase by €1.9 billion next year. This expenditure is targeted at building up permanent capacity and resilience in the health service. The

funding provided will increase the permanent number of critical care beds to 321 by the end of 2021, add a further 1,146 acute beds and 5 million in additional home care hours on top of the 19 million hours provided in 2020. The provision of mental health services is a key priority for this Government, which is why I have made €38 million available to implement Sharing the Vision, our national mental health strategy.

Critically, the planned increase in capacity in the health service will be supported by funding for an increase in staffing right across the service of up to 16,000 people. I and colleagues in government have studied the lessons from past recessions when capital spending was cut, which exacerbated the economic downturn. We are not going to make that mistake. We are making a significant investment in the future of the country and progress in health and a range of other areas will be supported by a record level of Exchequer capital investment next year. Over €10 billion will be spent on major roads projects and active travel measures, and there will be significant investment in public transport to ensure that our recovery is a green one.

Building projects across the education sector will increase capacity for students and teachers. As well as ensuring a safe learning environment, it is important to note that these initiatives will provide employment opportunities for contractors and staff across all parts of the country. In addition, investment in broadband and in our Defence Forces will be prioritised.

A key priority of the Government is to address homelessness and the numbers of people on social housing lists. This will require that the State return to directly building new social and affordable houses in significant numbers. Such a programme, extending over a number of years, will increase supply and reduce price pressures for struggling individuals and families. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage will receive an additional €500 million in capital funding next year, bringing the total capital allocation to €2.8 billion. This funding will support the delivery of 12,750 additional build, acquisition and leased units in the social housing stock. Of these, 9,500 will be build, with 800 targeted acquisitions and 2,450 leased homes. We have made the very conscious decision that we are going to shift the emphasis on to direct builds by local authorities and approved housing bodies. There will always be a need to work with the private sector and avail of turnkey projects and acquisitions, but we want to tilt the overall balance to be in favour of building public housing on public land.

In recognition of the massive challenges being faced, Government is providing significant supports for our labour market and for businesses. This builds on the measures delivered in the July stimulus, such as the extension of the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, and the employment wage support scheme to the beginning of April next year.

Next year, we will also provide the investment for upskilling thousands of workers, including through: retrofitting courses; 4,000 new apprentices under the apprenticeship incentivisation scheme; supports through our local enterprise offices and Enterprise Ireland to assist SMEs and companies with the negative impact of Covid-19; and significant investment in tourism, arts, culture and sport to protect those most impacted upon by the Covid-19 restrictions.

We will also protect our economy from Brexit insofar as we can, with €340 million of voted expenditure allocated for next year. This includes an additional allocation to finalise work at our ports and airports and for hiring additional staff. As we seek to protect our economy from the impact of a no-trade-deal Brexit, the recovery fund we have established represents a significant allocation of resources that will enable us to respond in the most appropriate way in the context of the sectors of the economy that have been most affected.

Addressing the challenge of climate change will require a whole-of-government approach. All of our policies and strategies must point in the one direction if we are to make progress in achieving our long-term climate targets. The carbon tax is part of this and, as I said yesterday, every single additional euro raised through the increase in the tax will be returned to citizens by means of a package of supports to protect vulnerable people, secure a just transition and reduce our carbon footprint. Other changes to motor tax and large increases in funding for energy efficiency schemes will also make a difference.

The 2021 allocation for the Department of Education and Skills is almost €9 billion. This will support children with special education needs, the reduction in the pupil-teacher ratio at primary level and investment in school buildings.

At third level, €3.3 billion will provide for a range of initiatives and deliver some respite for students at a really difficult time for them.

We all recognise that tourism is a sector under considerable pressure. Alongside the extensive tax measures announced by the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, the Government is providing an additional €55 million for a tourism business support scheme and €5 million for tourism product development, which I believe will be of considerable assistance at this time.

Similarly, as we all know, Covid-19 has had a devastating impact on arts, cultural and sporting activities. The allocation of €50 million in live entertainment supports and a €50 million increase in Arts Council funding, to €130 million, along with an increase of €36 million in funding for Sport Ireland, are in recognition of the Government's determination to support and preserve the cultural and sporting life of our nation, despite the unprecedented challenges.

In committing to a total expenditure package of €87.8 billion for next year, the Government is determined to take the necessary actions to protect our people, support our workers in returning to employment and help our businesses to recover. We are in the midst of a national economic fightback. It is my firm belief that we will emerge from this crisis with greater capacity in the health service, more effective training and education supports and a model of housing provision that reflects and addresses the needs of families across the State. It will take time but I am confident that, through a combination of government support, entrepreneurial effort and the skill and dedication of employees, we will restore employment to pre-crisis levels. Ultimately, the unity of purpose we have shown in tackling the health aspects of the Covid-19 virus is exactly the same spirit that will allow us to overcome the economic crisis. I have no doubt that Ireland will rise to the challenge.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank the Minister for coming to the House. This is his first visit. It is an important one dealing with the budget.

Senator Seán Kyne: I welcome the Minister. This is my tenth budget as a Member of the Oireachtas. Like many of us, we have seen everything from the IMF and budget cuts to a regaining of sovereignty, an increase in expenditure and the pressure and uncertainty of Brexit when balancing the books a year ago. This year has shown the rationale for a rainy day fund to those who doubted it. The reason it was needed is clear. It has been utilised. This time last year, the threat of Covid was not known.

The global pandemic and forced shutdown have led to uncertainties over our finances and health services. Businesses have been shut down. We have seen the advent of the pandemic unemployment payment and the temporary wage subsidy scheme, followed by the other schemes

put in place by the Government to support businesses and people.

The ability of the State to fund this budget and the increased spending this year are based on borrowing. Ireland's reputation and good name have meant that we have been able to borrow. Had we defaulted and burned the bondholders, as some had wished, where would we have got the money necessary to support the borrowing to fund our response to Covid? In this regard, I am referring to the response in our business community, the response to the need to protect jobs and the response in our healthcare system.

This budget is framed with several objectives. First, it aims to protect lives from the threat of Covid-19. The measures the Minister has put in place for health are certainly welcome. Second, the budget aims to safeguard jobs and businesses. Third, it aims to increase investment in our infrastructure and increase capacity in our public services.

Protecting people from Covid-19 involves healthcare, education, social protection, housing and other measures. The commitments and funding the Minister has provided will certainly aid in all these areas with a view to getting through the Covid pandemic in 2021.

With budget 2021, we have the largest ever health budget, of €22 billion, including funding for direct Covid-19 measures, such as testing, contact tracing, personal protective equipment and extra hospital capacity. The budget also provides for extra hospital beds, extra critical care beds and community beds. It includes €38 million for mental health services, an area that has been sorely tested during the pandemic. The budget also includes €100 million for disability services, including supports for school-leavers and respite care, among other areas. It also includes provision for 5 million home care hours, bringing to 24 million the number of home help hours available. This measure, along with the fund that includes funding for home adaptation grants, will help older people to live independently and securely in their homes for longer.

With such demands on healthcare, I am heartened by the targeted increases secured by the Minister responsible for social protection, Deputy Humphreys, including increases to the living alone allowance, fuel allowance, carer's support grant and island allowance, and by the payment of the Christmas bonus, affecting all those on longer term support payments. This will directly help and support vulnerable people in our communities. The Tánaiste, Deputy Leo Varadkar, secured a package of supports for businesses and workers. It is crucial at this time. Confirmation that the employment wage subsidy scheme will continue through 2021, along with a new Covid restrictions support scheme, will be the difference between survival and bankruptcy for many businesses.

Many Members will recall the last recession and the scourge of unemployment. The devastation of unemployment for individuals, families and communities cannot be overstated. Many people have faced unemployment this year who never believed they would. This time last year, they did not believe they would be in circumstances in which they would be out of work. The State always has to step in to be the safety net for those who lose their jobs. We must be mindful of the damage that unemployment causes. This is why the measures in the budget, including enhanced support payments, reskilling and upskilling opportunities and changes to the student grant scheme, are so crucial.

The capital plan is important, as the Minister knows. A range of projects, including urban renewal and development projects under the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage are important. They are important in terms of measures in the Galway transport

strategy, for example. They pertain to new bridges over the old viaducts on the Corrib and the Galway city ring road, which got Cabinet approval in October 2018. With regard to the latter, the An Bord Pleanála oral hearing has resumed. While there is a variety of views on the project in this Chamber, it is important to the economy of County Galway and Galway city, the regional capital of the west. I hope that, subject to planning permission, the commitment will be seen through. The Moycullen bypass has gone to tender. It is a local project from my perspective, and it will improve journey times and the safety and attractiveness of Moycullen as a place to live.

There are many other positive aspects to the budget in terms of expenditure. There are far too many to mention in the time allowed. I have no doubt that borrowing, the running of a deficit and spending reserves such as the rainy day fund are the right steps to take at this moment. These steps will lead us to a better place where Covid-19 can be eradicated, jobs are plentiful, budgets can be balanced and surpluses can be achieved but, until such time as this happens, this budget is the right budget at the right time. I commend the Minister on his work on all aspects of it.

Senator Sharon Keogan: The Minister is very welcome to the Chamber. I wish him good luck in his portfolio.

I welcome the budget. It reminds me of Fianna Fáil budgets of the past. It is a budget that Fianna Fáil can be proud of and it certainly shows the boys are back in town.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I hope they are not. Bring back Bertie, is it?

Senator Sharon Keogan: I am sorry but credit for this budget must go to the people of Ireland because this is their budget. They have sacrificed so much in carrying the burden they have carried for the past 12 years, or since the crisis in 2008. This budget is one they have made themselves. Without them, we could not have borrowed money to invest in our future. Great credit must be given to the working men and women and the businessmen and businesswomen of our country.

There are a couple of measures I really welcome, the first being the Covid restrictions support scheme. It is an excellent scheme and I look forward to seeing the terms and conditions and to the opening of applications next week. I welcome the shared island fund and the €500 million the Government has put in there to strengthen our Border communities. There are about 1,500 cases of Covid-19 in the North today so now more than ever we need to be investing in our people as an island.

I welcome the €19.2 million for our local government fund. It is important that we strengthen our local government and anything we can do in that area that puts the citizen first, is important. I am looking forward to finding out the details.

There were a number of misses and I will mention two of those which are important to me. I would have really liked to have seen something like a medical card for the terminally ill in this budget and we talked about it before with the Minister for Health. This is a time when euthanasia is being discussed in this country and yet we are cribbing about giving those who are dying a medical card. We can do better. This was also an opportunity to bring back the bereavement grant, which we got rid of in December 2013. Many families who have been affected by Covid-19 may not only have one funeral but they may end up having two funerals within their family and the cost of funerals is significant.

There is one issue I want to highlight most specifically, namely, mental health. The winter plan does not seem to give that matter due attention. The budget rightly acknowledges the significant stress, anxiety, worry and fear that Covid-19 has brought to the people of this country. There has been much talk by healthcare professionals in this area of a tsunami of mental health issues, which is expected to hit in the coming months. The Psychological Society of Ireland has predicted a threefold increase in general mental health difficulties as a direct result of Covid-19, as well as stating that the impact of this will be felt for a long period of time. Considering this, while the funding outlined in the budget is welcomed, as is the case with any funding aimed at mitigating the effects of our mental health crisis, I must point out that it still falls short of what we should be doing. The mental health funding outlined in the budget amounts to 1.25% of the moneys made available to the health service as a whole. The World Health Organization recommends that each state dedicates 12% of its health spending to mental healthcare. While €50 million is no small sum, it is dwarfed by the figures which surround it in this budget. Most notably perhaps, I mention the €1.3 billion fund ring-fenced for Covid-19 measures, when the mental health fallout may prove to be the longest lasting effect of this virus.

The additional pressures associated with the Covid-19 pandemic have unmasked the underlying tension and fragility that many Irish people live with, including: strained social bonds; overstretched families; inadequate childcare provision; drug and alcohol misuse; and financial uncertainty. I do not know how many young people I have known who have lost their lives to suicide during this pandemic. Anything we can do to support our young people and those who are affected as a result of the fallout of Covid-19 needs to be done and we need to do better. I have serious doubts as to whether the funding allocated in this budget will be enough to allow the relevant services to attain the goals set out by the Government in this year's Sharing the Vision mental health policy. Let us not pursue a frugal course of action in this regard that will result in our saying in years to come that we should have done more. I echo the call of Fiona Coyle of Mental Health Reform to not "leave those who need mental health support out in the cold".

Senator Ollie Crowe: I want to begin by thanking the Minister, Deputy Michael McGrath, for his efforts since the formation of the Government. We are facing one of the greatest challenges in the history of the State and along with the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, the Minister delivered a budget yesterday that invests in the resilience of the Irish people, Irish businesses and the entire society to come through this challenge and emerge stronger, as we have done with so many challenges in the past.

The labour market supports implemented yesterday are the most extensive in the history of the State, as they needed to be, given current circumstances. The extension of the PUP and the employment wage subsidy scheme were necessary as a crucial support. The allocation of €200 million for training, skills development, work placement schemes, recruitment subsidies and job search measures is especially welcome.

The elderly have been most impacted by Covid-19 in health and in their lifestyles. Covid-19 has also had a huge impact on young people and youth unemployment is a serious concern. The budget outlines how young people will be supported, with 10,000 upskilling opportunities and 4,000 new apprenticeships being provided for under the apprenticeship scheme.

I come from the hospitality sector, as the Minister is aware, and I know the budget was especially well received in that industry. The hospitality sector provides 180,000 jobs across the country, the vast majority of which are outside Dublin and they are vital for town and regional

economies across the country. As we know, all of the hospitality sector has been particularly hard hit by Covid-19. The measures outlined yesterday provide a lifeline for businesses in the sector and represent a path forward. This sector has seen off challenges in the past and I have no doubt it will overcome this challenge, following the supports outlined yesterday.

I also want to welcome the increased funding in education. “Trust the youth and they will deliver” goes the old Irish saying. This budget has placed confidence in our young people, recognising that enhancing investment in this area will always benefit the country in the long term. As we all know, education was a huge issue in the last general election. Our class sizes were too big and the pupil-teacher ratio must be lowered in line with EU averages. The additional more than 500 teachers being hired for next year’s school year is an important first step and I have no doubt it will be a priority over the term of this Government. As Fianna Fáil will ensure, our commitments in this area to reduce class sizes can be honoured. The recruitment of almost 1,000 additional special needs assistants is a measure which will have a positive impact. Knowing people who work in this area, it is crucial that we enhance supports and yesterday was a massive step in the right direction. The increased funding for higher education is also an investment that will pay dividends in our future. The standard of education in the country has always been a crucial element of why Ireland attracts so much foreign direct investment. Fianna Fáil in government has always sought to raise the standard of education in this country, the best known example being former Minister, Donogh O’Malley, and former Taoiseach, Seán Lemass, making the decision to make second level education free. I am delighted this Government will continue that trend.

I welcome the additional funding for 620 new Garda recruits and of an additional 500 administrative staff in budget 2021. We need more gardaí in Galway and the Garda plays a vital role in our communities. There is huge demand for additional gardaí, as I alluded to, in Galway city and Galway county, where the resources are stretched. I look forward to Garda numbers increasing in Galway when I raise that matter with the Minister for Justice and Equality.

I note the commitment of €500 million for the shared island unit, which is positive. This is an area where outreach across communities is required and where we need thoughtful consideration and study of what type of country a 32-county Ireland will be and of how that can be advanced in a peaceful and united method that will seek to convince all on the island that a united Ireland is best for their futures.

I am conscious of the time constraints so I will not discuss social protection measures except to simply say that they are all very welcome, in particular the increase in the carer’s support grant. There are no words strong enough to adequately commend the role played by the thousands of carers in this country. We must enhance supports for them in the coming years.

Yesterday, the Minister stated that our medium-term approach to public expenditure must be sustainable and that he would develop a framework to ensure that. I ask him to tell us more about the timeline and process involved in that.

Senator Elisha McCallion: I welcome the Minister to the House and congratulate him on his appointment. I look forward to working with him in the term ahead.

I will begin on a positive note by referring to work on which I and many others have been involved for a number of years. I welcome the Government’s commitment to provide €500 million in the years to 2025 for opportunities for North-South co-operation. This is a welcome

first step in the right direction and lives up to the commitments that were made by the Irish and British Governments last January in the New Decade, New Approach agreement. I am particularly pleased to see that the beneficiaries of the fund includes the north west, Border communities, the Ulster University Magee Campus and will strengthen North-South health links. The Government knows too well the deep seated damage that has been caused to the people who live along each side of the Border, especially economically. This investment will sit alongside that made by the North's Executive and, indeed, the British Government earlier this year. It is that joined-up approach in dealing with the decades or century of neglect that we, in Sinn Féin, have advocated and pursued for many years. It is essential if we are to overcome the economic disparity that exists between the people in the Border region and the rest of the island. I assure the Minister that I will hold his feet and the feet of his ministerial colleagues very close to the fire regarding the investment to ensure it goes where it is most needed.

Generally speaking, however, notwithstanding all the hype and spin we have heard over the past 24 hours, this budget will not bring much comfort to those most in need. Like every other budget by Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil before them, it delivers very little in terms of substance. The only difference this year is that it is a coming together of both parties to deliver a package of promises. I fear these will turn out to be empty promises.

For struggling families to pay rent or for people who have vulture funds breeding down their necks, there is no protection to keep a roof over their heads. There was nothing for the childcare sector or families struggling to pay for their childcare.

For our hospitals and healthcare workers, the numbers of beds promised are not ambitious enough. As far back as 2009, we had 289 critical beds. At the time, it was determined that we needed 579 critical beds by 2020, yet 11 years later we still only have 280 such beds. Sinn Féin, in its alternative budget, would have provided for 100 additional critical care beds and 1,100 additional care beds to enhance the surge in capacity that will come and protect the non-Covid surgeries and procedures that we will see in the future. The concern is that without extra capacity, hospital care beds for Covid patients will again result in non-Covid care being delayed, thus denying care to cancer patients, chronic cardiac patients, surgery patients and leading to the closure of acute services for new patients. Sinn Féin would have expanded capacity, increased staff numbers and provided extra funding ring-fenced for mental health and cancer care. It is obvious that the promised beds cannot be delivered without increasing staff levels. To do so would require the political will to address pay inequality and engage in a meaningful recruitment drive. The Government failed to do that in this budget and continues to ignore this major problem.

The student supports set out in the budget are welcome but once again they are a one-off measure. The budget provided no vision for the future of higher and further education. It did not address the funding crisis in universities or the financial barriers to accessing third level education which, despite Student Universal Support Ireland, SUSI, continue to exist. Sinn Féin proposed an additional €60 million in core funding to address the funding crisis in third level institutions on top of what the Government set aside in its additional funding. The Government provided €20 million for SUSI grants as a result of Covid. It is important to note that this does not necessarily represent an expansion of the scheme. It means that more people will have lost their income and will, therefore, become eligible for a SUSI grant. I ask the Minister to clarify that matter.

Sinn Féin proposed an expansion of Student Universal Support Ireland to cover more people

by increasing thresholds and supporting more students. We would also have cut registration fees by €500 and we set out a strategy to abolish fees and remove financial barriers to accessing third level education once and for all.

Funding for apprenticeships is inadequate and the figures simply do not add up. The Department of Education estimates that the cost of an apprenticeship is between €7,000 and €9,000. The €8 million in the budget for 4,000 apprenticeships only covers 2,000 apprenticeships based on those figures. The funding does not cover traditional craft apprenticeships, for which close to €10,000 per apprenticeship is required. I am sure that the Minister will agree that high-quality apprenticeships should be a priority.

More was needed to give hope to families who are struggling, to give renters more hope and to give hope to cancer patients and those who suffer from mental health issues. Those with disabilities had to fight for their supports. Everything has to be a fight with this Government, which is quite simply exhausting. People should not have to fight at the most difficult time of their lives. Unfortunately, I see this budget, once again, as a missed opportunity. People deserve better.

Senator Mark Wall: I welcome the Minister to the House and look forward to working with him over the period ahead.

Listening to the live broadcast of the Minister for Finance and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform announcing a budget of almost €18 billion, of which more than €17 billion would be on expenditure, like many others, I looked forward to a new social contract with the Irish people, one of which we could all be proud. Granted, there are many fine aspirations in the budget but as the dust settles on yesterday, we see that there are also lost opportunities.

The budget was an opportunity to create an Irish national health service that operated on medical need rather than an ability to pay. The alternative budget proposed by the Labour Party recommended additional funding of €35 million to tackle the backlog in cancer services, cancer screening and cardiac care. We welcome the resources the Government has said it will put into these services this year but there is no plan or, more important, no details on how to get cancer care back on track. Those with loved ones who are suffering who listened in yesterday wanted to know when their family members would be seen or, if needed, begin their treatment.

As I stated on previous occasions, John Wall is leading a campaign to implement medical card reform for terminally ill patients. It is incredible that there was no mention of this comfort blanket in the budget. The Labour Party has estimated that the change would cost €20 million. I appeal to the Minister to find that money in the additional moneys announced yesterday as it would give comfort to all of those who need it at this very difficult time in their lives.

We all know that early intervention is critical for the prevention of medical issues in our children further down the road. Free GP care is a critical component of early intervention and the prevention of Covid-19 and non-Covid illness. The first steps were taken; we need to see the next step.

In the months since this pandemic started, we have correctly praised and applauded the carers of this country. Yesterday, the Government had the opportunity to reward those who spend, on average, 19 hours each day taking care of loved ones. Increasing the carer's allowance and changing the means test for carers, which has not changed since 2008, would have meant 30,000 carers would receive a payment for their work, which saves this State billions of euro.

Unfortunately, the opportunity was not taken. Granted, as has been said, the carer's support grant was increased by €2.88 per week. While an increase is always welcome, the budget was an opportunity to change the system and ensure that those who save us so much were finally recognised for what they do for us all. It was surely time in the budget, given that the Government had €17 billion to spend, to raise all social welfare recipients' core payments, knowing that the vast majority of this money would go back into the local economy but also acknowledging the terrific sacrifice that our pensioners in particular, who were asked to cocoon, have lived through in recent months.

As I travelled through south County Kildare prior to the previous election, one of the main quality of life issues raised with me related to childcare. In towns such as Newbridge and Kildare town, the issue arose on many doors. Once again, there was a lost opportunity yesterday to implement a national childcare scheme. I am sure the Government, like me, receives correspondence from young commuting families in south County Kildare, as well as from families throughout the State, outlining the problems that childcare causes them daily, such as having to rise at times at 6 a.m. and take young children from their sleep to drive to centres miles from where they live. As my colleague Senator Bacik noted yesterday, the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, needs to clarify whether he has an intention to move towards a system of universal public childcare. Covid crisis or not, childcare fees in Ireland are among the highest in the EU and the OECD, while wages for early years professionals and levels of State investment in childcare remain among the lowest in Europe. Childcare is a quality of life issue for many, and if we are spending €17 billion, we need to urgently address it.

I welcome, as my party has done, the supports for business and in particular for the tourism sector. There is no doubt this sector needed help. An email I received from my local hotel last Sunday morning stating that it had to lay off 50 people is a case in point of why we have to protect 260,000 jobs. However beautiful our country is, it is the workers in this industry who are our assets. They are on the front line of the céad míle fáilte and it is they who will deal with visitors when that time once again arises in what, I hope, will be the near future. We needed to give stability to those workers, not add to the worry of getting to Christmas and then what might happen at the end of January. As my colleague, Deputy Nash, stated yesterday, if €350 was the floor of decency in March, it should be the floor of decency now, and the pandemic unemployment payment should have been restored.

I have spoken previously in the Chamber about youth unemployment, a subject mentioned by a number of Senators during this debate. I listened to the Taoiseach acknowledge last night on "RTÉ News: Nine O'Clock" that the figure for youth unemployment was more than 34%. It may, in fact, be closer to 40%, a totally unacceptable figure. I listened to the Taoiseach state that thousands of jobs will be created in healthcare, education, defence and even the Naval Service. I look forward to this becoming a reality. If we are to be serious about how we spend this money, investing in our youth and their futures must take up the maximum effort.

Yesterday saw the largest budget in our history. It contains many fine aspirations that I welcome, but it failed to address many quality of life issues. Of course we will support many of the measures announced but the proof of making a difference will be their delivery. It will be how these measures affect working families, those who no longer work or cannot work, and our wonderful communities. I look forward to seeing many of these measures rolled out quickly but also to holding the Government to account on the aspirations contained within.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly: I welcome the Minister and thank him for joining us today. We

are in the grip of a global pandemic and are facing into Brexit. We have never been in more uncertain times. We need to ensure that the country is prepared and people are supported and, as we recover, that it will be a green recovery, putting our economy on a sustainable footing for future generations. While we support families through this difficult time and protect the most vulnerable, we also need to think about the kind of country we want to live in when we are through all of this. We need to ensure we seize the moment to prepare for a green recovery. This country has been most successful when we work hard to get ahead of international trends, invest in our young people and take on challenges. We can do that again.

It is difficult to sit here and listen to Sinn Féin pick holes in a budget, given that its alternative proposal would have increased current expenditure by €3.8 billion, much of it recurring annually. No importance was attached to the climate and biodiversity. In fact, the only mention of the climate and environment are in the title of a Department. There is no mention of a biodiversity crisis and no funding for retrofitting. There is only €25 million for walking and cycling, versus the €360 million committed to in our budget. The Green Party has sought a number of measures to deliver change to a carbon-neutral society because climate change is the existential threat facing us. It is also an economic threat as we move forward.

I was phoned earlier by local business owners in Galway who see opportunities for their businesses in the future in the funding announced. For retrofitting homes, there is close to €300 million to build warm, healthy and energy-efficient houses. The budget will deliver 9,500 social housing units and 400 cost-rental units, which are key to the Green Party's housing policy. There are 1,500 places on retrofitting courses, part of a package of 10,000 upskilling and reskilling opportunities. We also needed to change the way our businesses and farms operate in order that they can reduce their emissions and continue to operate. Helping people to work near where they live will be crucial to the green recovery. We are supporting the development of Wi-Fi hubs in our towns and villages. There is a new environmental scheme for farmers worth €20 million and an extension of tax relief for energy-efficient equipment for farmers.

Carbon tax is an essential part of preparing our economy for a carbon-neutral future. To achieve this, the Government commissioned the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, to outline the best way to use the money raised to reduce poverty. The Green Party insisted on the Government implementing the measures outlined in the ESRI report, which will improve the conditions of the lowest earning 30% of households. The ESRI described these measures as "unambiguously progressive" and the Government has gone even further with these social protection measures than the ESRI had suggested was needed. The measures include an increase in the qualified child allowance of €5 per child aged 12 and over and €2 for children under 12, an increase in the fuel allowance of €3.50 a week and an increase in the living alone allowance of €5 a week.

There has been much talk of disability services during the debate, which are targeted to help our most vulnerable. An increase of €100 is the largest ever, while there is the largest ever funding package for our health service. There is €9 billion for education, as has been mentioned, and class sizes will be reduced. The Irish National Teachers Organisation has welcomed all these measures. It is quite cynical for parties to suggest that more could have been achieved when their own submissions did not outline how that could be done.

I again thank the Minister for his attendance and look forward to working to implement all the measures in the budget.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I am sharing time.

The Minister is most welcome to the Chamber. This is my first opportunity to congratulate him publicly on attaining high office and I wish him well. He has certainly started in the manner in which he means to go on. I have always considered him very positive, pragmatic and practical, and that is stamped throughout the budget. It is the first time in a decade that Fianna Fáil has had an opportunity to put its stamp on a budget and that is very important. I very much welcome the historic investment in our society, and in the infrastructures that constitute it, that has been provided for in the budget. These are measures for our time that, as was described in *The Irish Times*, are an emergency response in an unprecedented package. With this budget, the coalition Government is doing its utmost to protect lives and livelihoods at a time of extraordinary uncertainty. Covid and Brexit are the two giant unknowns facing our economy and this budget is probably the most important in the history of the State. The key social housing, health, green and education agendas all have much to be pleased about in this budget. Moreover, supporting our business community and keeping and creating jobs where possible is of key importance. We certainly hope the spending people make because of this budget will help to limit the damage caused to the economy by business closures, unfortunately, and the numbers of people slipping into long-term unemployment. We have to protect the most vulnerable in our society with concrete measures and this budget goes a long way. To have over €1 billion invested in mental health supports is unprecedented and the significant increase in funding for the disability sector is to be recommended. The extra funding, which amounts to more than doubling the funding for direct provision, to help support the end of direct provision is very important.

I am a believer in local democracy and empowering our local authorities and councils is hugely important. In terms of the extra money available for infrastructure, I hope to see some of that in south Kildare in the form of a new bridge in Newbridge and the completion of the relief road in Athy. I am glad the Minister recognises the childcare sector is in need of significant reform and three reviews on funding, operating and workforce development are ongoing, which will provide the basis for a new vision for childcare next year. I have always been to the forefront of defence issues and I welcome the extra €32 million investment, of which €10.5 million will go towards paying allowances, while the rest is for infrastructure.

The reduction in class size ratios to 25:1 is significant and positive and will lead to extra teaching jobs, as well as reducing the ratio in the classes. I welcome the €120 million package for reskilling and retraining and the extra money in special education. The significant increase in funding of €13 million for dementia services is a breakthrough in that area. I thank the Minister for his support and his consultation with the full parliamentary party on the issues we felt needed investment.

Senator Eugene Murphy: I extend céad míle fáilte to the Minister. He has been in the Oireachtas since 2007 and since I came into the Oireachtas in 2016 until now, the Minister always gave time to people in our party to discuss the issues we wanted to discuss with him. In this budget, we see many of those policies, though not all of them as it is not possible to put everything in at the same time. We see them clearly in the budget despite the difficulties we are in.

I wish to rebut the arguments that have gone on over the past 24 hours or so that this budget is anti-rural. Nothing could be further from the truth. I have strong opinions about this because such false and misleading statements being made to media should be rebutted. I will provide some instances to illustrate the budget is not anti-rural. A sum of €10 million is being provided

for IDA Ireland to develop advanced factories and industrial estates for companies seeking to invest in Ireland, especially outside Dublin. A sum of €30 million has been ring-fenced for a call for regional enterprise centres for initiatives to create jobs in every region in the country, while €3 million has been allocated for networks in digital hubs. There will be €100 million to help businesses adapt to Brexit. As Brexit is catastrophic for rural Ireland, this is very important.

There are many other measures and I do not have time to go through them all because time is limited. A sum of €11 million has been made available for local enterprise offices and many measures the farming community requested, such as the food ombudsman; a new rural environment protection scheme, REPS, and the rollover of the targeted agricultural modernisation schemes, TAMS; have been included in this budget.

The Chair wants me to finish and I will have a better chance to expand on this again but I want to send a clear message that this is the proper budget. I compliment the Ministers, Deputies Michael McGrath, Donohoe and Eamon Ryan, on coming together in a calm way and putting in place what is necessary for the crisis we are in. Let us row in behind it. There were not and could not be missed opportunities here. We are in uncertain and different times and, hopefully, this budget will work out and this time next year, we will have a far better outlook on the economy.

Senator Emer Currie: I congratulate the Minister on yesterday's budget. The purpose of it was clear to me, namely, to save lives and livelihoods and I think it will be successful in that regard. I have a couple of specific points that were not the Minister's primary focus yesterday but I will take the opportunity to keep them on the agenda.

There is an issue affecting the north west and the Border area and people's ability to work remotely, which is obviously important and relevant at the moment. Residents in the Republic who work in the North are faced with double taxation liability by Revenue when they work at home or remotely south of the Border. If they want to log on to do any work, even just check their emails, they have to travel into the North to do so. This has a major effect on their work flexibility. This has been addressed for the pandemic because in both jurisdictions the advice is to work from home but for normal or new normal times, this should be addressed.

Some 86% of companies now say they are in favour of giving their employees flexibility like working from home. From a work-life balance perspective, I hope we see more long-term choice in how and where they work. It is important that the north west is not left behind and that the region offers the same opportunities as everywhere else for both employees who want a better work-life balance and employers who want to attract the best talent. We need to take account of the thankfully fluid nature of the Border and our commitment to an all-island economy under the Good Friday Agreement. Northern Ireland has a 60-day allowance for their workers who have jobs in the South but, hopefully, we can go further than this. Even better, could we agree a new reciprocal agreement of 180 days, perhaps through the work of the North-South Ministerial Council?

I noted yesterday the reference to the e-working tax relief and that the Minister did not want to pre-empt the work of the interdepartmental group looking at developing a remote work strategy. I thank the Minister for that update and for the inclusion of broadband. However, it would be a lost opportunity if I did not point out that I think the e-working tax relief should be fundamentally changed as part of that review. It is cumbersome, it does not offer enough

value for money and it is only the bill payer who can avail of it. If one is renting a room in a house, for instance, one is not entitled to anything. In the UK, they have a flat rate tax relief of £4 during normal times and £6 during the pandemic but that is targeted at people who have no choice but to work from home, whereas we, hopefully, will embrace remote work as a lifestyle choice. Other countries offer a vouched approach based on the percentage of home-working space compared with the rest of their house. There are different examples to look at. We could offer an unvouched and a vouched option, particularly for people who invest in a home office. Trends are changing in that regard.

According to Dublin Bus and Irish Rail, employers can achieve PRSI savings of up to 10.75% and employees can save between 31% and 52% of travel costs as a result of tax, PRSI and USC savings by participating in tax saver commuter schemes. In 2019, the tax saver tickets were worth €88.6 million gross and they were issued on Leap cards. Can we offer reciprocal tax benefits to remote workers? Grow Remote, based on its own experience, tells us that work preferences level out to a third, a third and a third. A third of people have absolutely no interest in working remotely. They want to work in the office and they want to commute to work. Another third want to work from home or remotely and the final third want a mix of both. We are seeing in the media at the moment how different people react to different circumstances. It is a fantastic opportunity for us in terms of work-life balance, regional balance, environmental benefits and to breathe new life into local communities, which are not as active economically as our European counterparts and where we also have a higher level of vacant properties. The opportunity was recognised yesterday with €5 million being provided by the Department of Rural and Community Development to develop digital hubs for employment opportunities, €3 million for the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation and €30 million ring-fenced for regional enterprise centres to call for initiatives to create jobs in every region of the country. This is brilliant news, and it follows on from the programme for Government and the consultation on remote work, but what we need now is a joined-up strategy from company to community if we really want transformative change.

I recognise the supports for businesses affected by Covid and Brexit. In the limited time since yesterday I have had very positive feedback from the businesses in Dublin West on the Covid restrictions support scheme, the decrease in VAT, the extension of the commercial rates waiver and €100 million to help businesses adapt to Brexit and, very importantly, the €500 million for the shared island unit and cross-Border opportunities. In addition, there was a commitment by the Department of Finance to change how we measure success, not just by economic measures but by well-being measures. That is really important to recognise. It was a good budget for challenging times, one that I hope we can all get behind.

Acting Chairman (Senator Victor Boyhan): I am conscious of time. We have six more speakers indicating but I have to call the Minister at 4.07 p.m. to reply. I ask Members to be conscious of the time and if they could shorten their contributions or share time that would help.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: The Minister is welcome to the House. It is my first opportunity to welcome him here since he was elected. I thank him for his availability when we were looking for him. That is appreciated.

By and large, the budget has been a good one for the situation we find ourselves in. He is to be congratulated, with his colleague, for putting the budget together. Many people have been watching VAT and housing, and all of these things are important to the business world.

The Minister has plenty of colleagues over there to congratulate him so I will find one or two points to hit him with. First and foremost, I will start with his own backyard and the Naval Service. Currently, two ships are tied up. Our ships are there to protect €2.23 billion worth of assets. Since I mentioned that to the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, earlier today, I am told that there are \$10 trillion worth of trade going through the information superhighway that travels under the sea and we do not have sufficient deep-sea divers to keep an eye on that and maintain its security. The refurbishment and reinvigoration of the Naval Service is something the Minister will have to tackle very quickly. I know the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Coveney, is already working with the Minister on that issue. It is an absolute outrage to have ships worth more than €10 million tied up.

The air search and rescue service is about to go to tender. In the next year €107 million has been allocated to that and some other areas. I think €60 million of it is for search and rescue. We have an Air Corps. Why are we using private companies? Could the Minister provide some assurance that the Air Corps will be invited to tender and make sure that it will have the resources it needs to tender for search and rescue? It is a ten-year contract. One cannot imagine what it will do to the morale of the Air Corps to find itself back again, front and centre, where it is needed.

My colleague in the Lower House, Deputy Berry, mentioned the elevation of the Military College to a proper third level establishment given its links with Maynooth university and Carlow-Waterford technological university, which is not yet established but will be fairly soon. Some 129 houses owned by the Department of Defence, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, and the Minister's Department owns a couple of them, are boarded up, apart from the ones where there are overstayers, and being allowed to fall into an outrageous level of disrepair when we have homeless people in the country. I would like to see a commitment from the Minister to pull together the other Departments to put some of the 12,000 houses we are going to build into military barracks for military families. The refurbishment of barracks is a very important issue. We have Brexit coming down the line and we may finish up needing a border. We also have a pandemic where the conditions in the North of Ireland are now getting drastically out of hand. We may need to close the Border for health purposes, so the Defence Forces will be crucial.

I will finish on this point about looking after public servants. I refer to people in this House, the Lower House and those who lost their seats in the last election, who are on class K PRSI. There is no benefit whatsoever. That is outrageous, having served their country for four years. We are all waiting for the implementation of the Moorhead report. I hope we will see it in the Finance Bill.

Senator Shane Cassells: The Minister is very welcome to the House. I congratulate him and pay tribute to him on his budget yesterday. I will start by referring to the contribution of a colleague of mine in the Lower House, Deputy Lahart, who in his contribution to the Dáil a few weeks ago pleaded with the Government to provide a sense of hope to the people of the country in the months ahead as we face into the winter. His words rang in my ears yesterday as I listened to the speech of the Minister because the budget gave us all hope. That really came home to me when a small business person in my home town of Navan texted me late last night and said, "The support for a closed business like mine is very welcome...it's definitely released some of the stress and there's light at the end of the tunnel." They are real words from a real man employing a small staff, but contributing in a real way to the economic life of my town and his reference to seeing light at the end of the tunnel rang true.

I contrasted that small business owner and his feelings of having the stress lifted off his shoulders to the way that Oliver Callan, filling in for Ryan Tubridy on the radio this morning, characterised the budget by shrugging it off and saying it means nothing, all those billions of euro they are talking about. I thought he must not have spoken to any of the real business people on the ground back in his home county of Monaghan who are going to survive this winter because of the budget. Yesterday was real - in fact it does not get any more real - and all those billions of euro and record amounts mean that real people are helped in real ways.

Senator Casey referred to the money for healthcare, housing and other areas. It was regrettable to hear the way some of the Labour Party Senators earlier today derided the investment in housing. One would wonder if they are living in the real world and how this mammoth task is going to be handled at all. It is fairly pathetic to see them drifting into the same world as the Shinners but I know that the measures announced yesterday are going to make a real difference.

I have just come from a meeting of the Joint Committee on Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht. There was a €50 million increase in arts spending up to €130 million and a €50 million increase in the spend in the live entertainment sector. A €36 million increase to Sport Ireland was announced by the Minister of State, Deputy Chambers. They are real improvements in society and I pay tribute to the Minister, Deputy Michael McGrath.

Senator Elisha McCallion: We all know the name of the biggest party in the country is Sinn Féin.

Senator Malcolm Byrne: I thank the Minister, Deputy Michael McGrath, for coming in here. I echo the comments of Senator Cassells on the budget, in particular in terms of how it sets out the direction that this Government wants to travel. It was a very clear budget about investing in public services. It was also a very clear budget when it came to supporting small business and for the State to play its role in doing that, but also in tackling the big challenges. Those big challenges include housing and health, dealing with Covid and facing up to the challenges of Brexit. It was interesting that yesterday Sinn Féin did not make any reference to Brexit in its contributions on the budget speech. It is clear that this Government, in particular in terms of the investment through the shared island unit, is about action rather than loud slogans and words.

I wish to speak about some specific measures. My colleague mentioned the investment in arts, sports and community organisations, which will play a really important role in rebuilding communities, and that has to be welcomed. However, I wish to refer to two areas,
4 o'clock one is education. There is a very clear investment in the future and in setting out our direction. I refer to the talk about reducing the pupil-teacher ratio and the investment in special needs, but I welcome in particular the improvement in the postgraduate grants.

This was something that was cut by the Labour Party. However, in government, we believe that we need to invest in research. This is essential.

Another important issue is the priority we have placed on disability services. We are spending €100 million extra a year on such services. In addition, there is €20 million in funding for voluntary disability services providers. I wish to pay tribute to the Minister of State at the Department of Health, Deputy Rabbitte, because she has worked damned hard to ensure that money is available, that there is support for school leavers and that respite services are available. When she visited Wexford, she spoke to the people at St. Aidan's Day Care Centre in

Gorey and met other service providers. I am happy with the direction this Government has set out and that it will look after those with a disability - the most vulnerable in our society.

Acting Chairman (Senator Victor Boyhan): Next is Senator Aisling Dolan. Is the Senator agreeable to sharing some time with Senator Cummins?

Senator Aisling Dolan: I will try to divide it.

Acting Chairman (Senator Victor Boyhan): We have seven minutes left and four people offering.

Senator Aisling Dolan: I will speak carefully and quickly. I welcome the Minister. This is an incredible budget for one of the most challenging times Ireland has faced. We are dealing with the loss of life and with the loss of our loved ones every day. We are fighting a battle against Covid-19 that will take all of our stamina, determination and resolve. As a country, our first priority is to protect and save lives. We are in the eye of the storm again. There are 32 people in intensive care, 22 of whom were admitted in the past 24 hours. That was the data from yesterday alone, when there were over 800 new cases.

This budget will save lives. It will provide for people in need. It will also protect the most vulnerable. There is a commitment to increase bed capacity by means of the allocation of an additional €4 billion. Our hospitals have been crying out for extra funding for decades. Portiuncula University Hospital is part of the Saolta University Health Care Group in the west. It has only 13 beds. However, the hospital, the general manager and the healthcare team took the initiative. They moved patients out to a prefab building in the car park. They are now looking to develop rooms into single rooms. These will be available so that the hospital can have capacity during the winter months. Will the Minister provide detail regarding timelines for Department decisions on capital investment in locations such as Portiuncula University Hospital?

There is also a commitment to recruit 16,000 healthcare professionals across the primary care sector and in our hospitals, in addition to 67,000 directly employed by the HSE. That is a phenomenal increase. It is almost a quarter above the number in place already. However, there are challenges in attracting people, especially young people, to healthcare settings and hospitals in regional towns. How do we ensure that those vacancies will be filled in the regional towns? I call on the Minister to consider specific incentives for regional locations within the HSE to attract and retain talent. Is this something that we could look at?

I note the plan for 5 million additional hours for home help. That is most welcome especially in an area with older people and an independent population. There is €100 million for disability services.

I wish to quickly talk about those in need. We will come through this together as a country. When we do, we will need jobs. We will need to ensure our businesses and the vital sectors of our economy have survived. The Government is supporting over 750,000 jobs in Ireland through the pandemic unemployment payment, the jobseeker's benefit and the temporary wage subsidy scheme. All these jobs keep families going. We welcome the VAT rate. We welcome everything that is being done in investment in our rural towns and villages, especially under the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, Deputy Humphreys.

I welcome the reduction in the rate relating to the transfer of farms within families from 6% to 1%.

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Finally, the previous Fine Gael Government delivered a budget surplus and an economy that is allowing us to borrow at low rates. The current Government has a plan in place to save lives, provide for those in need and protect the most vulnerable. I am proud to see these measures being put into place by this Government to fight Covid-19 and prepare our country for Brexit.

Acting Chairman (Senator Victor Boyhan): We have one minute each for Senators Buttimer, Cummins and Burke. I am conscious that we have agreed to allow the Minister to reply at 4.07 p.m. I have no wish to short-change him.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I will make one quick point. In the allocation of the biggest budget spending ever, it is imperative to do one thing. I mean what I am about to say in a non-political manner. The Minister was Opposition spokesperson for almost a decade. It is imperative that the moneys allocated in respect of health, disability and the hospice sector are not given to the HSE to administer. The moneys must be given to organisations like COPE and Marymount University Hospital. I will challenge the Minister and the Minister for Finance to sit down with those of us who are practitioners in order to ensure that the money goes to the organisations. We have had a decade of supplementary budgets in health. That is my only point. It will be the Minister's legacy if he gets that right.

Senator Paddy Burke: I congratulate the Minister and wish him well with his portfolio. I worked with the Minister on the finance committee and I have no doubt that he will do a fantastic job in his new position.

This is a fantastic budget. I congratulate the Minister and his colleague, the Minister for Finance. I have one issue relating to Ireland West Airport. Money has been given to Cork and Shannon airports. That is welcome for those airports. I urge the Minister to look at Ireland West Airport as well because we have people commuting on a weekly basis from the west of Ireland to London, Scotland and Germany. It has been a great outlet for the people of the west of Ireland to seek work on a weekly basis in those countries. They are commuting. It is as easy to go from Ireland West Airport to London as it is to go from the west to Dublin. The airport is in a position whereby it could need funding. I appeal to the Minister to have a look at it.

Senator John Cummins: In the brief time I have I wish to focus on the capital investment programme that the Minister rightly pointed out as being the largest in the history of the State at €10.1 billion. It is right and proper that we are investing in capital infrastructure now. It would be remiss of me not to mention a significant capital project in my county of Waterford - I know the Minister has been briefed on this. I am referring the North Quays project. This will deliver significant accelerated growth in line with Project Ireland 2040. It is important that the infrastructure funding is signed off without delay. The Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy O'Brien, committed to his Government colleagues that this would be done in September. It is now October and there is a time sensitivity attaching to the matter. I am keen to stress the urgency of that to the Minister.

Acting Chairman (Senator Victor Boyhan): I thank all the Senators for their co-operation. It was a tight timeframe, unfortunately, but we agreed that we would call the Minister at 4.07 p.m. I am happy to say that it is now 4.07 p.m.

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I have until 4.15 p.m. Is that correct?

Acting Chairman (Senator Victor Boyhan): The Minister has eight minutes.

Deputy Michael McGrath: I thank all the Senators for their contributions. I listened to them carefully. Many issues have been raised and different perspectives have been shared. It is important to say that this budget is from a coalition Government of three parties, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party. All have had significant input. We have worked well collaboratively in the preparation of this budget. It is important for the country that it was be done in that spirit.

There are some over-arching themes in the budget that all Senators have touched on in many different ways. These include the protection of public services and the improvement of these services, where we can, with particular emphasis on health, housing, education, climate and so many other areas. Reference was made to the whole area of investment in our economy for the future and investment in infrastructure, which is critical.

We must meet the twin challenges of Covid-19 and Brexit. The truth is that matters are developing rapidly. There will be a Cabinet meeting in less than an hour. The situation in the North is very serious. We are aware of the decisions made by the Northern Ireland Executive. We have serious problems here too. As the first priority, we have to do all that we can to protect the public, protect public health and protect lives. The framing of this budget has been a complex process given the unprecedented level of uncertainty that we face. That is why we have tried to retain as much flexibility as possible in respect of having a recovery fund and a contingency fund for measures that we will need to implement to respond to Covid-19, while at the same time having as certain a pathway for the public finances as we can given all these challenges.

Many issues were raised. In the few minutes available to me I will focus on several of them. The supports provided for business by the previous Government and by the new Government in this budget are particularly significant. The continuation of wage subsidy scheme into next year is of huge comfort and a source of confidence to employers, many of whom are really struggling. That the State is willing to pay a share of the wages of their employees is a demonstration of our commitment to helping them to get through this period. We have provided a rates waiver of €900 million, given local authorities that full allocation back, provided approximately €600 million in restart grants, reduced the two key VAT rates, the standard and the lower rate, and introduced a range of liquidity measures, including a €2 billion credit guarantee scheme, even though the appetite among businesses to take on additional debt is weak at the moment, perhaps for understandable reasons given the level of uncertainty and the anxiety that all of them have to deal with day to day. We have introduced a suite of tax measures that I know the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, will have spoken about earlier, including tax warehousing which is of very significant benefit to businesses.

The new scheme that the Minister for Finance announced yesterday is hugely beneficial for businesses that have to close or whose trading opportunities are significantly impacted by Government-imposed restrictions on health grounds. The Government is willing to pay to keep these businesses alive. We have that duty to businesses that were viable in 2019, pre-Covid. We know they are inherently good businesses. It is not their fault that they cannot trade so this is an innovative scheme through which the Government will help them to meet their fixed costs to get through this period and give them every possible chance of surviving.

A number of Senators touched on the tourism and hospitality area. A range of measures has been in place in that regard. The Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, Deputy Catherine Martin, has a €55 million envelope for a tourism business support

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scheme, which will be of real benefit. What we achieved yesterday in the funding allocation for the arts, culture and sport is remarkable. All of this will be delivered. The overall test of the budget is how we deliver it on the ground to the people who need those supports. This will be our focus now. The budget gives us the opportunity to do it in terms of the provision of the resources, and we now must deliver.

Of all the issues that were dealt with yesterday, we can take some pride in the additional funding provision for disability services, which was raised today by many Senators. In addition to the funding for existing services, there is €100 million for new measures, school-leavers, day services, respite services, personal assistant hours and assessments of need for children, which the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, and I are determined to tackle. It is not acceptable that young children are waiting a number of years for an assessment and on the other side of that assessment find there are no services for them. We are determined to address this issue. The funding allocation for mental health is the funding sought. Sharing the Vision is being funded and will be implemented in full.

What we are doing in education is transformative. Over 2,000 posts have been created, in the main in the special education area. I welcome this. The bereavement grant and social welfare payments were mentioned. My mum was widowed at a young age. Increasing the widow's grant from €6,000 to €8,000 is the right thing to do despite the real constraints we are operating under. The heritage and biodiversity area was touched on. We have managed to provide significant increases in funding. On the current side, €16 million is provided to protect biodiversity and fund the National Parks and Wildlife Service and on the capital side, there is an increase of €8 million.

Senator Craughwell, as he always does, raised issues relating to the Defence Forces. I have had a number of discussions with the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Coveney. I am conscious of the recruitment and retention issues in the Naval Service, particularly around specialist posts. I visited Haulbowline in August, where I received a very detailed briefing. We are keen to address those issues but we need to do it in a manner that is consistent with wider public pay policy because as a Government, it is our objective to negotiate a new public service pay deal in the weeks ahead, if it is possible to do so.

I again thank Senators for their contributions. I will always engage with people directly if they want to come to me on individual issues. It has not been possible to respond to every issue raised, although I would have liked to do so. The budget we brought forward will make a real difference. I have no doubt about that. It is an unprecedented budget for an unprecedented set of circumstances. We will now go about the work of translating that immediately, including the €50 million in immediate funding for hospices, voluntary disability service providers and community organisations. This is 2020 money. All of these measures will make a real difference. I look forward to working with Senators in the future and I hope to come back to this House on many occasions.

Acting Chairman (Senator Victor Boyhan): I thank the Minister for his time for the House and Members. In accordance with the order of the Seanad of 7 October, the House will suspend now until 4.30 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 4.16 p.m. and resumed at 4.30 p.m.

Shannon Group: Motion

Senator Paul Gavan: I move:

“That Seanad Éireann: acknowledges that:

- the Shannon Group supports over 46,000 jobs and contributes €1.1 billion in tax revenue to the exchequer;
- the importance of the Shannon Group to the Midwest region to maintain jobs and to continue economic development of the region, as well as to the national economy;
- the need to ensure the continued survival of international air travel from the Midwest region;
- that regional balanced economic development must be central to Government planning;

and calls on the Government to:

- commit fully to the survival and development of the Shannon Group and maintain its many international travel routes; and
- commit to the re-integration of Shannon Group under the remit of State control within the DAA in order to ensure collective leverage is attained in order to secure vital routes to London Heathrow and the East Coast of the United States of America”

Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach Gníomhach. It is nice to see the Minister of State back again and she is very welcome. It is important to start by acknowledging that the whole aviation sector is in deep crisis as a result of Covid-19. Indeed it is a topic that has been regularly and rightly raised from every side of this House. It is essential that the Government responds to ensure that connectivity, so crucial to this island nation, is protected as far as possible now and also for the post Covid-19 future. Since the onset of this pandemic Sinn Féin has been advocating for testing facilities to be installed in our ports of entry, and additional measures to be introduced such as temperature screening of arriving passengers. Unfortunately, neither has been put in place to date by the Government.

At the beginning of June, speaking at the Oireachtas Covid-19 committee, our spokesperson on transport, Deputy Darren O’Rourke, floated the idea of Ireland developing a traffic light system for international travel. Regrettably, the Government did not proceed down this avenue and instead introduced a green list system which did not help the aviation sector and was mired in mixed messaging from the get go. As the House is aware, there are now moves towards a standardised approach across the EU but at the Committee on Transport and Communications Networks last week we again highlighted that due to Government inaction on testing in our airports, we may not be able to fully participate in this new system.

We are very anxious to see the Government respond very positively not just to the new EU system but to ensure that we have adequate testing facilities ready to roll as soon as that system, hopefully, is ready in the coming week or so. We will continue to press the Government on these issues in a constructive manner.

This motion, as the Minister of State is aware, is specific to Shannon Airport but I also want

to give a nod to Cork Airport before I get into the meat of this motion.

Senator Róisín Garvey: What about Ireland West Airport Knock?

Senator Paul Gavan: The Senator makes a fair point----

Senator Rónán Mullen: What about all of the airports that are not listed?

Senator Paul Gavan: The fact of the matter is that all of the airports outside of Dublin have great challenges right now. The current model, and this is something we have alluded to in the past, of competing airports is fundamentally flawed. In that respect I welcome the additional funding in yesterday's budget both for Shannon and Cork airports which is a positive measure and needs to be acknowledged. The problem, as the manager of Cork Airport said yesterday, is that it is just a start. Much more is needed.

We then have the issue of Shannon Airport itself. My relationship with Shannon goes back to 1983 when I went to NIHE, as it was then, in Limerick. I am fairly certain that every year since 1987 I have flown in and out of that airport. I know it very well and like so many others of my middle age, I can see the changes over the years and how it has fallen back quite drastically from the times when we had approximately 3.6 million passengers at its peak. The last few months have definitely been the most challenging for Shannon Airport. Here is the point. The Covid crisis is absolutely awful but there was a crisis in Shannon Airport long before it. I want to talk about the people who have not been heard in the debate to date and these are the employees. Over the past week, I have spoken to employees and their union representatives. The story they tell me is one of having lost confidence in the management of Shannon Group. There is no other way to put it. They have lost confidence and have suffered. We have had 55 job losses to date, on top of 14 other people laid off and 70 people put on shorter time. They have been on short time for six months or more at this point. Then, in September, the few remaining full-time staff had a 20% pay cut imposed on them. Something that is quite challenging, that I did not realise until I investigated this, is that since separation a differential of 15% arose between the pay of Cork Airport workers and Shannon Airport workers. On top of this, there is now a further 20% cut. There is now a differential of between 30% and 35% for a worker doing the same job in Shannon Airport as in Cork Airport. This in itself shows the depth of the crisis people are enduring.

I hear stories of people who had to apply for a break from their mortgage and then apply for an extension to that break and a further extension. They understand they have to make sacrifices because we are in this huge crisis but they do not see Shannon Airport as it is currently constituted being able to pull itself out of the crisis without a fundamental change. This change has to be about the thing some of us have been reluctant to speak about at times. In fairness, others have not been reluctant. It is the mistake that was made in 2013 in separating Shannon Airport from Dublin Airport and Cork Airport. Sinn Féin has always been consistent in this regard. There was a narrative, and the Minister of State referred to it when she was here a couple of weeks ago, that everyone was in favour of it at the time. In fairness, that was not the case. We have been consistently against it. Since 2013, the three unions involved, SIPTU, Fórsa and Connect, have been saying it was a huge mistake.

I acknowledge Senator Dooley who expressed his own concerns at the time. Only two weeks ago, he said that even before the pandemic the vast bulk of international aviation was going through Dublin Airport and Shannon Airport was not even keeping pace with the growth in

tourism and was on the back foot anyway. He is absolutely right about that. My good colleague and friend, Senator Conway, said he could not see how Shannon Airport could compete against Dublin Airport as an independent entity and that there could have been a sensible realignment of the airport's position within the DAA group. This is exactly what should have happened but it did not happen.

At the end of the day, we have to look at the facts. It is particularly useful to compare Cork Airport with Shannon Airport. A decade ago, Cork Airport had 100,000 passengers per year more than Shannon Airport. As of last year, it had 900,000 more passengers. It is an airport not without its challenges, as I am sure my colleague, Senator Buttimer, will allude to but it had streaked ahead and was the fastest growing airport in the country within an integrated network. At the same time, we had Shannon Airport having to compete with Dublin Airport and Cork Airport and, frankly, not being able to do so. Its performance in the past four years in particular has been very poor.

The best way to demonstrate how ludicrous a decision it was to separate Shannon Airport from Cork Airport and Dublin Airport is to ask the Minister of State, who is from Galway if I am not mistaken, how she would feel about us proposing to separate Galway railway station and set it up as an independent company so it can compete against the rest of the CIÉ group and the Irish Rail group and run its own trains? We would all agree it would be a non-runner. This is the equivalent of what has happened here with Shannon Airport. It was a tragic mistake.

I know it is difficult because that mistake was made by Deputy Leo Varadkar, which makes life a little bit difficult, but he got it wrong. It sets up Shannon Airport as a direct competitor against the monolith that is Dublin Airport and the results have been stark for all to see. When we speak to workers in the airport they will tell us consistently that separation has been a failure. In years of massive growth in aviation traffic, Shannon Airport has not only been dwarfed by Dublin Airport but has been consistently outperformed by Cork Airport which, as I said, remained within the structures of the DAA.

Another example of how ludicrous it is to pit one airport against another can be seen in what happened to the DAA shared services business, which was based in Shannon. It contributed €400,000 a year in rent to the Shannon Group. In 2017, after separation, the DAA management in Dublin moved the company out of Shannon to a private landlord in Limerick instead. We had one State company actively trying to undo another because the DAA was set up as a competitor to Shannon Airport. It did not see any point in contributing any income to a competitor in Shannon. It did not want to be subsidising a competitor so it moved its business. I hope everyone here can see how ludicrous a decision that was.

Until this year, as we know, business was booming in Dublin Airport, so much so that it was beginning to run out of room to fit all of the airlines that wanted to fly out of Dublin. I have this from a very good source. It would have made sound sense from a policy point of view for Dublin Airport to distribute some of the business, particularly transatlantic business, to Shannon Airport but it was impossible because Shannon Airport was now a competitor. Here we get to the nub of the issue. The current structures do not work for Shannon Airport or the west of Ireland in general. In a competition between the east and the west we know who will win.

We have to tackle this issue. It is important to recognise the broad nature of people throughout politics in the mid-west who have declared that the separation has been a failure. Yes, Sinn Féin has been leading on this but there are important voices in Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil who

have alluded to the very same thing. Let me be clear. Sinn Féin is not calling for Shannon Airport to be passed by Dublin Airport. We are calling for a new policy that integrates Shannon Airport, Cork Airport and Dublin Airport into one shared national airport authority that has a clear direction from the Government to achieve regional balance. The only way this regional balance can be achieved is to work in an integrated way. If airports are competing against each other how can it possibly work? It would take in airports such as Ireland West Airport Knock, Donegal Airport and Kerry Airport. This is the only way we can achieve regional balance. The idea that they would compete against each other is crazy. On an island the size of the one we have it makes no sense. We need an authority that would have leverage over airlines with joined-up thinking that could insist if airlines want to come into Dublin Airport, which is where they all want to go and let us make no bones about it, they must also come into Shannon Airport and Cork Airport. This is the only model that will be sustainable in the long term for Shannon Airport.

Now is the opportune time to act on this. The Minister, Deputy Ryan, gave us as an excuse for not taking action that it would take too long. This is what he said in the Dáil a couple of weeks ago. I have to recall that the Minister, Deputy Ryan, as part of a previous Government, was able to bail out the banks to the tune of €64 billion in a matter of hours so I really do not buy that line. What is lacking is political will. If it does take time then all the more reason to start now. After all, most airports predict it will take two to three years to get back to previous business levels.

The review is under way. The power of the motion is that all of us can unite to send a clear message to the Minister, Deputy Ryan, that the *status quo* cannot hold and we need to reintegrate Shannon Airport into a new national airport authority that ensures regional balance and the long-term future for Shannon Airport, Limerick, the mid-west and the 46,000 jobs. Shannon Airport is an international brand. It is something of which we have all been very proud for decades but it has never been so low. It will not fix itself. Funding it from time to time with emergency funding is welcome but it will not fix it. The fundamental model is broken. We need fresh thinking and new thinking. I call on all Senators to back the motion and back a secure future for Shannon Airport.

Acting Chairman (Senator Eugene Murphy): I thank Senator Gavan for a very thought-provoking contribution.

Senator Elisha McCallion: I thank my colleague for bringing forward the motion to the House. For us, the motion is not solely about Shannon Airport. It is not even only about Limerick or, indeed, the mid-west region or the west of Ireland. It is about a policy to create prosperity for all of the regions throughout the entire island. The motion is about planning so the entire island develops economically with a long-term strategy of balance rather than what we have had, which is short-term and shortsighted imbalance. If Shannon Airport fails and continues down the path of relegation from an international airport to a regional airport the implications go far beyond the mid-west. Shannon Airport has long been a beacon for the west and an alternative to Dublin Airport for long haul and short haul destinations. This motion is a mark of intent for a balanced island economy, not an economy solely based in the capital which does not in itself have sufficient housing and transport infrastructure. We have a capital city currently surviving more and more with workers who depend on long commutes and with infrastructure creaking at the edges. As with any island nation, transport links by both sea and air are key to the economic lifeblood of our island. However, our economic links to the world have been developed through blurred lenses for far too many generations. Brexit has given us the opportunity to look at this

island and we have been forced to diversify our trade and develop an economic strategy with a broader vision. An island nation must plan infrastructure looking out to the world of trade but the whole island nation must look outward in a balanced regional development.

It is long past time for an all-Ireland transport strategy. In the past, our transport links have been used to haemorrhage people from our nation in a one-way trade with very little coming back in return. We now have a chance to grasp an opportunity to see balanced economic growth and prosperity not just in this area but in all the regions of the island. Balanced regional development in County Kerry, County Derry, County Limerick or County Longford will have the potential for people to find a job where they live and find a home they can afford in the places they like to call home. This gives greater quality of life, family life, climate benefits, community benefits and health benefits for all. Generation after generation of infrastructural planning has closed the door on regional development and treated Dublin not only as the capital of Ireland but as Ireland itself, with all policies and people focused on Dublin.

Five counties on this island have no rail link. Others, such as counties Derry and Meath, have very limited rail connections. The western rail corridor and a high speed train from Cork to Derry are projects that could show enormous advantages. They would help to spread economic activity, relieving Dublin while helping the rest of the island. Infrastructural policy is the foundation for wider economic policy and the societal change and need we must see in the future. Renewable energy, tourism, housing, manufacturing and agricultural changes will all be reliant on what transport policies we adopt now. This is true for both indigenous and international travel. Aviation policy has been shown to be a driver of economic success throughout the years. A report by the Northern and Western Regional Assembly has found that these two regions are lagging well behind other parts of the country across a range of sectors, including health, education, infrastructure and transport. A report by Limerick Chamber of Commerce finds that the establishment of a post-Brexit hub access from Shannon Airport to Frankfurt Airport could add an additional €412 million in GDP to the mid-west region. How can this Government hope for any economic development in the regions if a major and established transport hub is allowed to die, as we are seeing happen with Shannon?

Economic recovery has never been balanced across this country. Dublin and, to a lesser extent, the wider eastern and midlands area have recently experienced an over-concentration of population and jobs. As an island nation with a small, local economy, aviation plays a fundamental role in connecting Ireland to the global economy. The ability of firms located in Ireland to do business internationally and the attractiveness of Ireland for foreign direct investment, FDI, labour and tourism depend on aviation. Air links to hubs in the US and Europe are critical for regional development and necessary if the Government's ambition to drive 75% of growth outside the capital by 2040 are to be realised. A recent survey of 16 FDI announcements in the mid-west in 2016 found that each company involved cited Shannon Airport as a factor in its investment location decision.

Planning, investment and long-term infrastructural strategy are even more vital post-Brexit. Economically we need to do something so we have a generation which is not failed by our policies as the generations before were. Government does not need to turn plans going out for many decades. It can start a balanced regional development plan to sustain jobs and see economic growth by accepting this motion. We need coherent, integrated thinking in our transport infrastructure across the island. Linking our regional airports to improve transport infrastructure such as rail is absolutely essential. Supporting this Sinn Féin motion will have near-term benefits in saving jobs but this is fundamentally about the long-term benefits for the

entire island. A balanced regional economy gives workers a balanced life, greater community spirit and better amenities. This is about planning and building for the future now. We are an island nation and the House should not let this opportunity slip from our grasp. I look forward to hearing support from Senators.

Acting Chairman (Senator Eugene Murphy): The Minister of State is anxious to speak but she is rushing to a Cabinet meeting. With Members' permission, I will allow her to speak once the Government amendment has been moved. She has a particular interest in airports, specifically Ireland West Airport Knock and Shannon Airport.

Senator Barry Ward: I move amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after "That Seanad Éireann:" and substitute the following:

"notes that:

- Shannon Group, a commercial semi-state body, is a driver of economic growth in the Midwest;

- Shannon Group, which operates in both the aviation and tourism sectors, has been particularly severely impacted by Covid-19;

- the aviation and tourism sectors are major contributors to Ireland's economy;

- successive Government policies have recognised and supported this contribution and pointed to Ireland's reliance, in particular, on international connectivity to secure its competitive position internationally;

- Shannon Airport is an important player in delivering high quality international connectivity, particularly for the Midwest region;

- the Government is committed to balanced regional development; Project Ireland 2040 is a clear manifestation of this commitment and the Government recognises the valuable role that all our State and non-State regional airports play in this regard;

- the Programme for Government 'Our Shared Future' recognises the huge value of our aviation sector in supporting economic development, international connectivity and tourism via our airports;

- the Government is committed to enhancing connectivity by ensuring safe, sustainable and competitive air access responsive to the needs of business, tourism and consumers;

recognises:

- prior to the onset of Covid-19, Shannon Group was on a growth trajectory with significant progress made in pursuit of its mandated objectives;

- since its formation in 2014, the Shannon Group has achieved a number of successes including:

- growing passenger numbers at Shannon Airport by 23 per cent (since separation);

Seanad Éireann

- increasing commercial occupancy in the Shannon Free Zone from 40 to 90 per cent and adding almost 1 million square feet of space to the market;
 - increasing Shannon Heritage visitor numbers to 963,000 in 2019 from 377,000 in 2013;
 - delivery of an €18 million aircraft hangar, the first built in the State in almost 20 years; this investment has enabled the creation of in excess of 1,000 additional jobs in Shannon Free Zone;
 - Shannon Group supports four in ten tourism jobs in Midwest;
 - that in regard to the devastating impacts of Covid-19, in addition to supports announced in the Budget, the Government has put in place a comprehensive suite of cross-sectoral supports for companies of all sizes, including those in the aviation sector, which includes a wage subsidy scheme, grants, low-cost loans, commercial rates waiver (concluded on 27th September, 2020) and deferred tax liabilities; liquidity funding is also available through the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund (ISIF) Pandemic Stabilisation & Recovery Fund;
 - the difficult decisions Shannon Group has had to take in recent months to reduce its costs and the impacts of these measures on the employees of the company which are deemed necessary to enable Shannon Group to secure the future of the airport so that it is well placed when the sector recovers from this crisis;
 - the critical importance of national and regional connectivity both socially and economically;
- the Government commits to:
- undertake an examination of the future viability and sustainability of Shannon Group, and is considering financial supports and any other measures that may be necessary and appropriate as part of a wider review of Shannon Group;
 - ensure that Shannon Group is well positioned for the future particularly given the importance of Shannon Airport to the economy of the Midwest region and nationally;
 - maintain Ireland's core strategic connectivity as it is essential for us as an island, for export businesses and for foreign direct investment;
 - create conditions to encourage the development of new air routes, particularly to new and emerging markets, when conditions allow;
 - ensure a high level of competition among airlines operating in the Irish market;
 - ensure the regulatory framework for aviation reflects best international practice;
- and
- consider further targeted financial supports to help reinstate connectivity, promote regional development and sustainability in the aviation sector; this will feed into the Government's further plans to aid broader economic recovery at the appropriate time cognisant of prevailing public health advice."

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): I apologise for having to leave the session early, as the Acting Chairman said I must attend a Cabinet meeting. While I have had the opportunity in recent weeks to update the House on aviation matters in general and what the Government is doing to support Irish aviation during this unprecedented crisis, I welcome the opportunity to discuss how the pandemic has affected Shannon Group.

Shannon Group is more than just Shannon Airport. The airport is the core of Shannon Group plc which was incorporated in August 2014 following enactment of the State Airports (Shannon Group) Act 2014. Shannon Group is a commercial State company and comprises two wholly owned subsidiaries, Shannon Airport Authority designated activity company, DAC, and Shannon Commercial Enterprises DAC trading as Shannon Commercial Properties. Shannon Heritage DAC is a subsidiary of Shannon Commercial Enterprises. A fourth business unit of the group is the International Aviation Services Centre, which is focused on further development of the aviation business cluster in Shannon.

Prior to the separation of Shannon Airport from the Dublin Airport Authority, DAA, group in December 2012, both the airport and Shannon Development, now Shannon Commercial Enterprises, had been in decline for many years. While the loss-making operations at Shannon Airport were supported by the DAA group, control by the DAA was also seen as an obstacle to Shannon's potential for growth. Restructuring at the time was also intended to make better use of State assets to promote high levels of specialist employment in aviation-related services in a new centre of excellence in and around Shannon; to rationalise and consolidate the delivery of enterprise and tourism functions, which would eliminate duplication of work by public bodies in the region around Shannon; and to provide a more streamlined and focused role for the restructured Shannon Development in the new entity. Importantly, there was also a strong desire at the time from stakeholders in the Shannon region to separate from the DAA and be given the opportunity to independently manage the airport. I am pleased to inform the House there is plenty of evidence to show that Shannon Group project is a success. Prior to the onset of Covid-19, Shannon Group was on a growth trajectory with significant progress made in pursuit of its mandated objectives. Since its formation in 2014, the group has achieved a number of successes, including: growing passenger numbers at the airport by 23% since separation from the DAA; increasing commercial occupancy in the Shannon free zone from 40% to 90%, adding almost 1 million sq. ft of space to the market; increasing Shannon Heritage visitor numbers to 963,000 people in 2019 from 377,000 in 2013; and delivering an €18 million new wide-body aircraft painting hangar at Shannon Airport capable of accommodating some of the world's largest aircraft. This was the first hangar built in the State in almost 20 years. Before Covid, Shannon Group employed more than 600 people across its businesses and supported four in ten tourism jobs in the mid-west region.

At the start of this year, it was projecting growth across each of its businesses. Shannon Airport had secured new routes and expanded capacity on existing services. The group's strong investment strategy at Shannon Commercial Properties was ongoing and marginal growth at Shannon Heritage visitor sites was anticipated. Unfortunately, as was the case for so many other businesses, Covid-19 changed all of this. The group's CEO, Ms Mary Considine, best described the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in her address to the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response last week when she said that it has been catastrophic.

5 o'clock

The impact on Shannon Airport and Shannon Heritage, in particular, has been devastating. Like other airports in Ireland and, indeed, globally, Shannon has witnessed an almost total collapse of traffic, connectivity and revenues. I am aware of the enormous efforts that have been made by Shannon Group over the past six to seven months to, first and foremost, keep staff and passengers at the airport safe and, second, keep the airport open in order to facilitate cargo operations, essential passenger travel, emergency flights, repatriation flights and diversions. I wish to put on the record my appreciation of all the management and staff of the entire Shannon Group for the commitment and the dedication shown as the country navigates its way through these unprecedented times.

I wish to mention Ms Rose Hynes, whose term as chair of Shannon Group recently concluded. I thank Rose for her many years of dedicated service to the company. A competition to fill the position of chair of Shannon Group is under way via the Public Appointments Service and I hope this key position will be filled shortly.

In the difficult circumstances relating to Covid-19, the decisions taken by management to reduce costs have been all the more difficult. Such decisions, including those relating to temporary lay-offs, reduced working hours and the temporary closure of Shannon Heritage tourist attractions, cannot have been easy to make. Shannon Group is rightly availing of the unprecedented Government supports put in place to help mitigate the effects of the crisis on our citizens and businesses.

Airports throughout the country, including Shannon, have been able to avail of some of those measures, particularly the Covid-19 wage subsidy scheme, the Covid-19 unemployment payment, the commercial rates waiver and the deferred tax liabilities. The measures were further enhanced by yesterday's budget announcements where, for the first time and in recognition of the devastating effects of Covid-19, Shannon and Cork airports will have access to capital funding under an Exchequer-funded programme. Some €10 million in capital support has been made available for safety and security projects at these airports. This funding will be provided through a one-year Covid-19 regional State airports programme in line with state aid rules.

For smaller regional airports which handle scheduled services and have fewer than 1 million passengers annually, €21.3 million will also be provided next year under the regional airports programme. The programme will provide €10 million in capital funding and €11.3 million in current funding in 2021, ensuring ongoing regional connectivity through our public service obligation, PSO, services between Dublin and the two regional airports of Donegal and Kerry and will also support critical operational activities in the areas of safety and security. Like Donegal and Kerry airports, Ireland West Airport will also be eligible to apply for capital and current supports under this programme.

Senators will be aware that towards the end of the summer, Shannon Heritage had indicated that it intended to close Bunratty and King John's castles from the beginning of September. I understood this was a difficult decision, particularly in light of the importance of these site to the people of the mid-west. Arising from this, I made a commitment to support the continued opening of these sites over the winter season. I did so to safeguard jobs and secure ongoing access to these sites by local people. Unfortunately, the situation with regard to Covid-19 has since deteriorated and, in line with level 3 requirements, King John's castle is now closed. In addition, all indoor spaces in Bunratty are closed with limited outdoor access. While I remain absolutely committed to supporting companies like Shannon Heritage, it is unclear whether these sites will be able to remain fully open during the winter season given the current trajectory

of the virus. With that in mind, and working in conjunction with my colleagues in Government, I believe that Shannon Heritage needs a more robust level of support to ensure its ongoing viability. That is why the Government announced a €50 million recovery and resilience scheme yesterday for strategically important tourism enterprises. It is important to note that while Government recognises that tourism is depressed at the moment, it was in the past and can again be a driver of economic recovery. I am confident that this scheme will provide the right level of supports for the many companies like Shannon Heritage to sustain core capacity in the industry and position our tourism sites for recovery.

Senator Ó Donnghaile called on the Government to commit fully to the survival and development of the Shannon Group. I can confirm that the Government is fully committed to ensuring that Shannon Group is well positioned for the future, particularly, given the importance of Shannon Airport to the economy and the mid-west region and, indeed, nationally. In this regard, I have already committed to undertaking an examination of the future viability and sustainability of Shannon Group. In this context, in addition to those I have already outlined, I will consider any further supports Shannon Group may need and will bring a memo to Government on the matter shortly.

Senator Ó Donnghaile's motion mentions that regional balanced economic development must be central to Government planning. I can assure the House that the Government is committed to balanced regional development. Project Ireland 2040 is a clear manifestation of this commitment and the Government recognises the valuable role all our State and non-State regional airports play in this regard. Again, I will refer to yesterday's budget announcement of €21.3 million in funding for our regional airports which provides further evidence that regional connectivity and development remains a critical priority for this Government. Also, the programme for Government, Our Shared Future, recognises the value of our aviation sector in supporting economic development, international connectivity and tourism via our airports. Again, I can assure the House that the Government is committed to enhancing connectivity by ensuring safe, sustainable and competitive air access responsive to the needs of business, tourism and consumers.

Every one of us here knows that Ireland, as an island nation, is particularly dependent on air connectivity both socially and economically and aviation plays a critical role in our economy. It is essential for tourism, export business and foreign direct investment. Shannon Airport is an important player in delivering high-quality international connectivity, particularly, in the mid-west region.

The policies of successive Governments have recognised the importance of air connectivity and pointed, in particular, to Ireland's reliance on international connectivity to secure its competitive position internationally. There are no plans to change this policy. The Government has committed to maintaining Ireland's core strategic connectivity. I am also particularly aware of the need to restore connectivity for the two most important international markets for the mid-west region, that is, London Heathrow and the east coast of the US. In that context, it is encouraging to note that the airport slots associated with these key routes have been protected for future use by the airlines concerned as soon as normal market conditions resume. Moreover, Aer Lingus confirmed to my Department that the connectivity commitments concerning the Heathrow slots which were secured when the State sold its shareholding to International Airlines Group, IAG, in 2015 remain in place until September 2022. Aer Lingus has also confirmed to the Department its intention to resume the specified level of services to London Heathrow as soon as circumstances allow. Given the current trajectory of the virus, we are not yet at a point

where it is possible to permit a large return to air travel. For this reason, it is intended that the national economic plan to be concluded later this year will provide for appropriate measures to safeguard strategic connectivity and the resilience of the aviation sector.

I thank Sinn Féin for tabling this motion and providing me with the opportunity to discuss these important issues. There is much in this motion that I and the Government agree with wholeheartedly. I agree with the motion's positive sentiments towards the importance of the Shannon Group to the mid-west region to maintain jobs and continue economic development of the region as well as to the national economy. I agree with the need to ensure the continued survival of international air travel from the mid-west region. I agree that regional balanced economic development must be central to Government planning and I confirm that this is so.

I can also confirm that the Government is fully committed to the survival and development of Shannon Group, creating conditions to encourage the development of new air routes, particularly, to new and emerging markets when conditions allow, to ensuring a high level of competition among airlines operating in the Irish market, to ensuring the regulatory framework for aviation reflects best international practice and to considering further targeted financial supports to help reinstate connectivity, support regional development and sustainability in the aviation sector.

This will feed into the Government's plans to aid broader economic recovery at the appropriate time, cognisant of the prevailing public health advice. However, the Senators' motion asks the Government to commit to the reintegration of Shannon Group, under the remit of State control, with the DAA. I cannot agree to this. In saying this, I am taking it that the Senators are referring to reintegrating Shannon Airport, but not the entire Shannon Group, with the DAA. As outlined, Shannon Group's businesses are many and varied, and many of these were never part of the DAA group. Therefore, reintegration does not arise. Shannon Group is already a State body, and integration with DAA does not change its status.

Prior to 2019, when Shannon Airport was badly affected by the global grounding of the Boeing 737 MAX, passenger numbers had been growing and Shannon Group was projecting growth across each of its business for 2020. However, forecasts across the airline sector do not now anticipate global capacity returning to 2019 levels before the 2023–24 timeframe. The question of when aviation business might be able to resume in a meaningful way is clearly linked to the evolution of the virus, ongoing travel restrictions and advisories, in addition to the more general economic outlook. Our efforts must now be focused on ensuring that Shannon Airport and Shannon Group are well positioned for the future, particularly given the importance of the economy of the mid-west region. This was the Government's thinking when it made its budget announcement yesterday, with the establishment of the Covid-19 regional State airports programme of 2021, which will benefit Cork and Shannon airports.

DAA is also focused on tackling the unprecedented challenges that the global pandemic has brought to its business. It is not helpful or appropriate at this time to contemplate major structural reform of the airport sector. That is entirely apart from the fact that Shannon Group was established as an independent basis for very sound policy reasons. There is no compelling case that the policy rationale was flawed or that the practical implementation was not delivering positive results. I am confident that, with appropriate support, Shannon Group and the wider Irish aviation industry can and will rebound quickly when this crisis passes and help to drive the wider economic recovery. I reject the Sinn Féin motion and, on behalf of the Government, I have proposed a counter-motion. I call on the House to support it.

Senator Barry Ward: I have listened to the speeches of my two Seanad colleagues and the Minister of State. I am concerned by the suggestion that the parties who are seeking to amend the motion do not care about employees in Shannon Group, balanced regional development and sustaining our regional airports. Of course, nothing could be further from the truth. The Minister of State went through this in some detail in her references, not least the references to the provisions in the budget yesterday that have put in place very substantial measures designed to support the industries and businesses in question throughout the country, including Shannon Group. I refer specifically the strategic importance of regional airports, but particularly Shannon Airport, to the development and sustenance of tourism all along the west coast, but particularly in the mid-west. I am not from Clare but my colleagues, Senator Conway and Deputy Carey, have given me chapter and verse on the importance of Shannon. I do not dispute its importance for a moment. Deputy Carey chaired today the first meeting of the new all-party committee dealing with Shannon Airport. I am looking forward to the work it will do in terms of discussing with stakeholders the needs that must be met. One does not have to be from Clare, Limerick or the mid-west to understand the importance of Shannon and the place it has in people's hearts. My family is from east Galway. I remember driving from Tuam down to Shannon along the famous N17 as family members emigrated to America and elsewhere. It has a special place in Irish hearts and the Irish psyche but even saying that is to ignore its major importance to the national economy. One has only to consider the history of Shannon to realise the important role it has played, from the seaplanes in Foynes in the 1930s to the establishment of the airport proper in 1945. It had a role in the establishment of duty free. It was the airport at which US President John F. Kennedy landed when he came to Ireland in 1963. Almost every US President who has visited the State since then has passed through the airport, initially or subsequently. It is a tremendously important access point for the national economy but particularly the economy of the mid-west and west. Nobody can deny that.

I was delighted to hear what the Minister of State said about how well the airport was performing, about the 23% growth in passenger numbers and the fact that 963,000 visitors to the region, or almost 1 million, had come through Shannon in 2019, highlighting its strategic importance regionally and nationally. That is what has grounded the decision in the budget yesterday to put so many resources into regional airports, such as the €31.3 million the Minister of State has mentioned and the Covid-19 regional airports programme. It may well be that some people describe the allocation of €10 million to Shannon and Cork as a stunt but I do not believe for a moment that this is what it is. It is a statement of intent on the part of the Government, a commitment to recognising the importance of the airports at Shannon and Cork and the other regional airports that need to be sustained.

I have a sheaf of emails from members of the Irish Air Line Pilots Association and others who work in the airline industry throughout the country, particularly in Shannon, stating the difficulties they are experiencing. I am sure other Members have received them also. There is no doubt that these days comprise the most difficult period for the aviation industry in the history of the State. Even the difficulties airlines faced in the immediate aftermath of the events of 11 September 2001 did not amount to as sustained an attack on the industry as the one presented by the virus in recent months. Of course the industry is suffering.

The motion that the Senators from Sinn Féin have moved presupposes the answer to the problem. Notwithstanding what they have said about difficulties that may have existed in the past, their answer is to reintegrate Shannon Group, or at least Shannon Airport, with the DAA, which I presume is the primary goal. The reality is that every airline, airport and part of the

aviation industry is suffering greatly. I am not saying we will never have to seriously consider reintegrating Shannon Airport into Dublin Airport or amalgamating the various bodies into a single airport authority as a commercial entity for all our regional airports. That time may come but it is not today. The danger of not accepting the amendment the Government has tabled is to suggest there is some kind of cure-all by putting Shannon Airport back into the DAA when, in fact, it will not solve any problems. It ignores the fact that we need to invest in Shannon, in particular, and those regional airports mentioned by speakers throughout the debate.

In moving the motion, it is important for its sponsors to acknowledge what it states. There is a danger that somebody listening to this debate might believe those proposing the amendment do not care for regional development but the amendment specifically acknowledges the importance of ensuring that Shannon Group is well positioned for the future, particularly given the importance of Shannon Airport to the economy of the mid-west. There is also a commitment to examine the future viability and sustainability of Shannon Group. The Government is not burying its head in the sand; it is stating specifically that we need to consider how we will ensure that, when economic circumstances return to normal, which we all hope will be as soon as possible, Shannon will be in a position to thrive in its own right, go back to where it was and be an independent and viable feature of the mid-west and national economies.

The Minister touched on the point that the aviation sector goes beyond the importance of connectivity to an island nation like Ireland and beyond the importance of transporting cargo as much as people. The aviation leasing sector, which to a large extent had its origins in Shannon through Guinness Peat Aviation, makes a massive contribution annually to the economy of this country. It is a sector that is suffering just as much. The amendment takes on board exactly what the Senators from Sinn Féin have said. It acknowledges the importance and centrality of Shannon Airport to our aviation sector and the role it plays in connecting various parts of the country to the world. It acknowledges that we must, on an ongoing basis, work towards ensuring Shannon Airport and other regional airports are in a position to compete at the highest level they possibly can, that they are viable and that they deliver for the various regions in the country that they serve. It also recognises that now is not the time to make the rash move of simply saying that there is a problem and the answer is reintegration. It is not. I am not saying it never will be but it certainly is not today. This is why the amendment to the motion is so important. It acknowledges all of the issues that have been raised but also recognises that instead of just coming in with a sledgehammer to crack a walnut we are saying we will look at it in a serious way on an ongoing basis, we will invest in viability and in monitoring the situation and we will ensure the viability of our regional airports throughout the country is served by the type of investment we would like to see in them.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Eugene Murphy): As the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, must leave I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, who is from the same county as me. He will sit in for the rest of the debate.

Senator Timmy Dooley: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate and I thank Senator Gavan who has a good understanding of the issues that arise at Shannon Airport. He and I share a lot in common on this particular issue. The facts of the matter are that the separation of Shannon Airport has not worked. There have been ups and downs and it has had some good periods and some bad periods but the reality is if we look at the increase in passenger numbers into Ireland over the period of time since 2013, Shannon Airport has fallen well behind the potential growth that existed at the other airports in Dublin and Cork. This is in percentage terms. It is important that we recognise this. It has had a couple of good years but 2019 was a

really bad year. It dropped by 9% and it was the only airport to show a reduction in passenger numbers.

There are difficulties in terms of what Senator Gavan set out in the motion. I agree with the vast sentiments of the motion. This is not meant to be at all patronising but it is really well meaning. The Minister of State already took up this point. We certainly do not want to make a bad situation worse. Shannon Airport did not fare terribly well under the DAA from the time it was created. What needs to happen, and the motion does not reflect it but Senator Gavan reflected it in his contribution, is that we need a single aviation authority that manages the three State airports. It should not be called the DAA.

Senator Paul Gavan: Hear, hear.

Senator Timmy Dooley: We should go back to the model that existed prior to the DAA, which was Aer Rianta. This would be the way. This is where we need to go in terms of the review talked about in the amendment. This is the outcome I would like to see from the process. We should come to the point that the three airports are together, not named according to one particular airport or another but with an overall authority. This could give us what we need.

The Minister of State is right with regard to the assets of the old Shannon Development in the Shannon Free Zone. Anybody who works there does not want to see it transferred to the Dublin Airport Authority because they do not think it will be well managed or maintained at that distance. Shannon Heritage certainly does not need to be transferred back to the DAA and I am against this. Senator Gavan and I have had numerous discussions with workers at Shannon Heritage. We really need to come up with a solution there. I remain to be convinced on whether the assets should be divided between the two local authorities and managed as part of the other important tourism infrastructure there or whether they should go to the Office of Public Works. Some work has to be done. We know it does not sit well as part of the airport at present. Many workers there need a sense of security and to know where Shannon Heritage is going, what is on offer and where it will be over time.

The airport itself is in a very perilous situation because of Covid. As I have identified, it was already in trouble but now with the Covid pandemic, and no end in sight of when we will get international aviation back, it is deeply worrying for the staff. Senator Gavan is right when he says workers have not been mentioned too often in this regard. I know workers are saying that if they could get back under the DAA it would give them security in the short term. Quite frankly, this can be provided in a different way. The State needs to step in. Workers at Shannon Airport cannot be treated in a lesser fashion than workers at Dublin Airport. When separation took place and they were transferred from one State entity to another there was a legitimate expectation in terms of pay increases, pension entitlements and exit packages. I know people who recently took an exit package and it was not as good as what was available for workers at Dublin Airport. That is wrong.

As has Senator Gavan, I have spoken to quite a few of the workers on temporary short time or temporary lay off who are not able to pay the bills, quite frankly. They are not able to make ends meet. This also happens in other sectors so it is not exclusive to airport workers. They are in a very perilous situation. In recent weeks, I came up with an idea. The HSE needs contact tracers and I have been in touch with the HSE and the airport authorities in this regard. I facilitated a meeting between the HSE and airport authorities and today a letter has been sent from the HR department of Shannon Airport to workers trying to ascertain whether there is an inter-

est in this work among those on temporary lay off or working part-time. If they show interest perhaps we can get them some work with the HSE as a short-term measure. It is terrible to have to do this. They should not have to do it. They should not have to consider it but workers on temporary lay off tell me they would take anything if they could figure out how to pay the bills.

As we go forward we need to chart a way out of this and start developing a new aviation plan. The motion will certainly feed into it but the strategy will have to be more than half a page. There will have to be a new aviation policy that looks at the short, medium and long term. International aviation experts speak about it being 2023 or 2024 when we get back to appreciable levels of travel where there will be confidence among business and leisure travellers. There is also recognition that people may get out of the habit of travelling for leisure or business and with the emergence of technologies we will not, for quite some time, see the same level of activity. It puts the workers who are dependent on it in a very difficult situation.

What we do not need during the ramp up period of two, three or four years is the airlines picking off the two airports. Of course the centre of population is in Dublin and it will be easy for airlines to re-establish business there because of the traffic. If Shannon Airport is kept in an isolated fashion away from Dublin Airport it will get precious little. We have a real job to do in developing a policy so it clearly ensures that as growth happens it does so in a balanced way that protects the investment made by tourism operators, foreign direct investment companies that employ so many and the hotel and leisure sector, and so we do not allow the airlines to dictate the state of play. They will do so if Shannon Airport is pitted against Dublin Airport and Cork Airport. They will play one against the other and we will fall foul of it. There is real work to do to make sure this does not happen. We can work collectively. A cross-party group, including Senator Gavan and me, are working on this. We should start to develop the strategy from there and we can also do it in the House. We can try to get some sense of a common approach to resolving what is a real difficulty.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan. It is my first time to meet him in the House since his elevation and I congratulate him. It could not happen to a better guy. I have always been a fan of his. He is a pretty decent guy. The speech that Senator Dooley just made gives me great heart for Shannon. He put much good stuff in there. My first visit to Shannon was in 1963, when I went there with a sister of mine who won a flight around Ireland. I thought it was the most awesome place in the world. My next visit was in 1968 because my father would not let me take the boat when I emigrated to London.

I fully support my Sinn Féin colleague, Senator Gavan, who has made an excellent case for the workers represented by SIPTU and the wider community in counties Clare, Limerick and Galway, and the country at large. If the citizens of these counties are looking for reassurance in the Government's amendment, I regret to say that there is none to be found. It is an insult to the families affected to state the Government recognises "the difficult decisions Shannon Group has had to take in recent months to reduce its costs and the impacts of these measures on the employees of the company which are deemed necessary to enable Shannon Group to secure the future of the airport so that it is well placed when the sector recovers from this crisis".

Senator Dooley has gone out of his way to find alternative employment for staff at Shannon Airport and I am grateful to him for that. I can see he genuinely wants to work with Senator Gavan to protect jobs. The amendment, however, is almost a textbook example of a logical fallacy, as it intimates that the sector will recover from the crisis without the contribution and commitment of a loyal workforce and without specific proactive measures from the Government.

That case was made very clearly by Senator Dooley in his contribution. The Government's commitment is so vague and lacking in substance that is not, in fact, a commitment. It will be no consolation to the employees of the Shannon Group to hear that the Government commits to "undertake an examination of the future viability and sustainability of Shannon Group, and is considering financial supports and any other measures that may be necessary and appropriate as part of a wider review of Shannon Group".

We often refer to time being of the essence in this House. We are in the middle of a global pandemic and we cannot afford the luxury of "considering" and "examining". SIPTU representatives have already been before the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response where they made a sensible and strong case for specific consideration to be given to aviation workers in the Shannon Group. Some of my colleagues referred to aviation workers all over the country. In that regard, I compliment Cork Airport on its work done promoting the airport. It is easy to promote Dublin Airport, but Cork Airport has done a marvellous job. I am sure my colleague, Senator Buttimer, will make that case in the not too distant future.

I fully endorse the recommendation by SIPTU that the temporary wage subsidy scheme for the aviation sector be extended until the summer of 2021 and be conditional on binding commitments from the employers. We need reassurance today that no worker will be compulsorily laid off while the employer is benefiting from the TWSS and that any recovery of the aviation sector will be predicated on strong links between the Shannon Group and its employees. I also fully support the right of workers to make contributions to their pension scheme from the TWSS. Any changes to the terms and conditions of employment should be agreed via a collective bargaining process.

I note with interest that councillors on Clare County Council, including those from the Government parties, have called for the independence of Shannon Airport to be reversed. When the airport was removed from the DAA umbrella, promises were made that 2.5 million passengers would use the airport each year. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic caused the current crisis in aviation, those figures had not been realised, despite the outstanding work of the Shannon Group. Now is the ideal time to restructure the airport sector, so that when the pandemic has abated the sector will be robust and fit for purpose. As the saying goes, a good crisis should never be wasted. I support the county councillors in Clare and my Sinn Féin colleagues in proposing that Shannon Airport be brought back under the auspices of the DAA.

Senator Dooley made specific mention of Aer Rianta International and the DAA perhaps not being the right vehicles. Senators Dooley and Gavan are living in the area and they know more than I do. Perhaps they are correct that we need to have Aer Rianta back or a similar body in place to ensure we do not have the dominance of Dublin Airport in respect of the other two regional airports. Deputy Quinlivan has already raised this matter in the Dáil. The Minister has met the unions and the belief is that a change would take two or three years and would not solve the underlying strategic issues. Senator Dooley also made that point, as did Senator Gavan.

We must make strategic decisions about Shannon Airport. I am not sure that reconnecting to the DAA would immediately assist in allowing us to do that. I am sure we need a governing body for the airports. I ask the Minister of State to explain why Shannon Airport is not being brought back under a national umbrella. In the 1980s, when I lived in Limerick - I lived there until the mid-1990s - Shannon Airport had a proud workforce. For as long as I can remember, however, the airport has struggled. To bring it back on stream, we will need investment and a centralised authority that will manage all our airports. We also need to guarantee the jobs at the

airport. Senator Dooley made the point that the workers expected their terms and conditions to transfer automatically. Senator Gavan has been working on that issue as part of his involvement with SIPTU, but it did not happen.

Shannon Airport has been pushed further and further out, which is something we have to change. My colleagues spoke about Knock airport and its strategic importance to the north-west region. Shannon Airport is vital to the mid-west and Limerick city. One of the great things about moving to Limerick, Shannon and Clare is that the people there are quite cosmopolitan and welcome strangers to their area. The establishment of Shannon Development resulted in foreigners from around the world coming to Shannon Airport, including from South Africa when the De Beers diamonds company set up in the area. That made Shannon a very welcoming place. County Clare, particularly Ennis, benefited from that, as did Limerick. The knock-on effects of Shannon Airport for the region are substantial. We do not need an amendment to Senator Gavan's motion. What we need is for the motion to be accepted. I wish my colleagues the best as they move forward. I hope we can work together on this issue.

Senator Rebecca Moynihan: I thank Senator Gavan and the Sinn Féin group for bringing forward this motion. I also thank the Ministers of State, Deputies Feighan and Hildegarde Naughton, for coming into the House to discuss it. Coming from Dublin, I am struck by the great degree of openness and collaboration among people from the mid-west region regarding Shannon Airport. All of us come to this discussion with the best of intentions to try to find a solution.

During the discussion we had on the wider aviation sector some weeks ago, I said that we were a small island nation in the middle of a perfect storm for the aviation industry. We are faced with Brexit, climate change and a wipe-out of passenger numbers arising from the Covid-19 pandemic. The western seaboard, in particular, is dependent on Shannon and Cork airports and those smaller regional airports are struggling. I commend Senator Gavan on introducing the motion, keeping the issue of Shannon Airport on the agenda during these turbulent times and prioritising and focusing on workers' rights in every statement he makes on this issue.

I noted in yesterday's budget that the small amount of capital funding given to Cork and Shannon airports did little to support the workers who lost their jobs or have taken pay cuts. I hope some conditionality can be attached to the funding in respect of workers when those grants are distributed. As I said in a previous contribution, it is essential that any support given to the industry is conditional on compliance with workers' rights.

In this time of crisis, we need the State and stakeholders in the sector to act together to ensure our airlines and supporting industries are viable in future. From listening to the contributions from both sides in this House, it is clear there is cross-party support for ensuring the future viability of Shannon Airport and widespread agreement on this issue. I know there are mixed feelings about taking Shannon back into the control of the DAA and other possible alternatives have been suggested. There is a feeling among some that the DAA tried to choke Shannon when it came under its control. I think we can all agree that a unified plan for a strategic approach to international connectivity is crucial and challenging, and will require the support of all stakeholders and political parties within the region. Balanced regional development is not just good for the mid-west, it is good for the Dublin region and it is good for the rest of the island.

I cannot support what the Government's amendment states about ensuring competition

among the airlines, which is contained in the last couple of paragraphs, because I do not believe this is the way to go. A wider discussion is required with stakeholders on how the airline will be operated, but as a small island with small airports I do not think we should promote competition among airports. It is crucial for the entire island that we have good connectivity for the wider regions.

Senator Róisín Garvey: I do not support the motion but I support the amendment to the motion. In some ways I find it somewhat ridiculous and I wonder if we are wasting our time on this motion. I am sure Senator Gavan, like everyone else, knows that Shannon Group is not just an airport, it is a large entity that has assets, so this motion is almost a waste of time. If he had said “Shannon Airport” rather than “Shannon Group” it might have made more sense. I would really appreciate it if he put down his phone and listened to me because I listened to him when he was speaking.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Well said.

Senator Róisín Garvey: We cannot be double-jobbing and be on the phone and a politician at the same time. We will get into trouble. It is great that Senator Gavan is talking to employees and union representatives. In case he is in any doubt, we have all been talking to union representatives and employees, so there is nothing really amazing about that. We have attended meetings with them individually and in groups all along. Senator Gavan speaks in such a way as to suggest Sinn Féin is the only party that cares. We will be keeping Shannon on the agenda for everybody. It is great that the Opposition likes to oppose everything, but we must look at solutions here and not throw random motions around the place just to get some attention.

Bringing Shannon Group under the DAA is a ridiculous notion. Does Senator Gavan want the DAA to be in charge of the scruff of grass in Kilrush? Does he want it to be in charge of Bunratty Castle and the Brendan voyage boat in Craggaunowen? Is it the job of the DAA to deal with heritage sites or assets in warehouses in Shannon? That is a ridiculous notion. Could we stop wasting time bringing in motions just for the sake of getting attention when it is not the focus?

All of us in this House, including Senator Gavan, are passionate about Shannon not just surviving but thriving and making it an international airport of the highest standards. We know Covid is here. That is nobody’s fault and everybody is trying to do their best to get the airport back on its feet and shining again. As stated in the amendment, it is very important to have a proper examination of the future viability of Shannon Group. That is something useful that I could support. The viability of Shannon Group must be properly researched. Perhaps it would be better off just dealing with the assets and perhaps the airport should be a separate entity and then we could talk about bringing it under the DAA but until we get to that point this is a ridiculous motion. I rest my case.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I do not know how to follow Senator Garvey because she has said a lot. I understand the sentiment of the motion but the principal and fundamental underpinning is, as Senator Garvey said, that Shannon Group is not just an airport. Therein lies part of the difficulty. Despite what Members think and what I might say, I am not interested in having a Shannon versus Cork debate and rivalry, even though there is competition, which is healthy, because Shannon is to the mid-west what Cork is to the south.

Tonight’s debate is very important in the context of regional airports because there is com-

monality and we agree that regional airports are necessary and fundamental and are economic drivers of the regions where we all come from. As a very proud Cork person, speaking and advocating for Cork Airport, what I want to see happen is that Shannon Airport and Cork Airport would co-exist and be equally successful in acting as a counterbalance to Dublin and the Dublin-Belfast axis, in terms of economic development but also in aviation. That is what we should focus on in the debate and in the future.

To be fair to Senator Dooley, he is a very capable member of the transport committee. We have had the airlines, the aviation sector, the DAA, representatives of Shannon Airport, and we had the Irish Travel Agents Association in today and we understand fully the mammoth task involved in getting people back travelling. The backdrop is that Shannon and Cork have a sword hanging over them in terms of whether Ryanair will continue to use them as bases. That is why tonight's debate is timely. I understand the Minister had to attend a Cabinet meeting. That is regrettable, but I congratulate the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, on his appointment and elevation and wish him well in his new role. What we must be focused on is growing passenger numbers and ensuring support for the aviation sector. Let us have an honest debate about that.

The sum of €31 million has been allocated for regional airports. Yesterday, there was a very welcome €10 million in the Government's budget announcement for Cork and Shannon airports. I believe they will receive €5 million each. If there is to be equality of funding then Shannon has already got €11 million and Cork has got €5 million and there is €31 million to be divided. If we are talking about equivalence then there should be fair treatment for all airports. What we want is the best for our airports and the staff working in them. To be fair, I can speak for the staff in Cork Airport, whom I have met but to be honest I have not met the staff in Shannon. They have made significant changes to work practices and how they do business. It is a testament to the relationship they have with management and to the future they see for the airport that this has happened. There is a need for a level playing field but, equally, it is important that the Government understands the precariousness of the aviation sector. I challenge those following the debate at home, and those interested, to go back to the recent meetings of the Oireachtas transport committee hearings where we have been dealing with this very difficult situation. It is about support and testing and Europe working together to ensure that the traffic light system works for the sector and the travelling public, and that we restore confidence in the aviation sector.

You come from a Border county, a Leas-Chathaoirligh. You have seen what has happened in the past ten days. Monday was a significant day in the European Union for the aviation sector. There are impending announcements on having a green, red and amber system, a testing regime and a decision by Ryanair on its bases in Cork and Shannon, which will have a profound impact on jobs, connectivity and balanced regional development. If we are to stand for balanced regional development, irrespective of our ideology, political philosophy or affiliation, then central to the connectivity is the hub represented by Cork and Shannon airports to their respective regions. That is why I and others - I give Senator Dooley and Deputy Carey credit for this - have repeatedly raised the issue of aviation. I understand the jobs associated with it, both direct and indirect, and the issue of connectivity. What happens if, tomorrow morning, flights to and from these two airports cease completely? Our connectivity would be ended. There is an old saying; when they are gone, they are gone. I believe it was used as an advertisement for Right Price Tiles. Is that the case for the airlines' flights, routes and aeroplanes? Airlines have operated flights in order that they would not have to refund people. That is why this motion is welcome.

I appeal to Senator Gavan not to divide the House on Friday because we all want to see Cork Airport and Shannon Airport survive and for them to get back to where they were as regards growing passenger numbers. I appeal to the Cathaoirleach and to the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, as the Government representative here tonight. We need not only a Private Members' motion tonight but a rolling debate in this House and in the Lower House on testing, routes, route development and the framework of a reasonable airport programme. I welcome the debate. I really hope we will see further targeted supports for our airports because that is what the workers and others involved in our airports deserve and need.

Senator Fintan Warfield: I will speak to the Government amendment. When it came through yesterday, Sinn Féin sent it on to some of the airport workers so that they could have a look at it. The response came back within minutes and told us all we needed to know. One of the workers captured the mood, saying “This isn't an amendment, it's a totally different motion full of words that resemble the guff that was used when rolling out separation.” It is a rambling series of statements that ultimately says nothing about the most important issue facing the long-term future of the airport, that is, the failure of separation.

The Minister of State need not take my word for it, apart from Deputies Wynne and Quinlivan, Deputy Cathal Crowe from County Clare has been quoted as saying “I don't think separation has served Shannon well” before going on to suggest:

we bring it back together with Dublin and Cork operating as a national airport authority. A lot of European countries operate like that.

This amendment tells us all that we need to know. It tells us that the Government is in denial about the failure of separation. It is tragic that, right now, when the Government is reviewing Shannon Airport's operations and when a united voice is needed with regard to the failure of separation, Government Senators, including those from Clare, are opting to vote for this amendment, an empty formula of words which gives no direction to the Minister on this crucial issue.

Let us look at the facts of Shannon Airport's performance. The airport was separated from the authority at the very lowest point of the last worldwide recession. Passenger numbers had fallen from over 3 million to 1.4 million. The airport had to increase passenger numbers but the rate of increase, after a few decent years, effectively ground to a halt in 2015, just two years after separation. Since then, it has been a story of underperformance and failure. The gap between Cork Airport, which is within the DAA group, and Shannon Airport is perhaps the most telling statistic. In 2008, Cork Airport had just 100,000 passengers more than Shannon Airport. By 2019, that gap had grown to nearly 900,000 passengers. That is a measure of the failure of the Shannon Group under the current structures.

The Minister of State should be in no doubt that, if he speaks to workers at the airport, they will tell him that separation has been a disaster. They have no confidence in the current management to act within a stand-alone framework or to deliver a recovery from the Covid crisis. God knows what they must be thinking as they watch this debate and see their local representatives duck for cover on the issue of the failure of separation. I note only one Government Senator remains in the Chamber, namely, Senator Dooley. All of the others have gone home.

The amendment also makes reference to Project Ireland 2040. I am a bit confused by this. It is my understanding that Project Ireland 2040 has yet to be reviewed. It is in the programme for Government that it is to be reviewed. The Green Party did not support Project Ireland 2040

when it was announced in 2017. Deputy Eamon Ryan said that we needed a new national development plan. According to this motion, which the Green Party is happy to support, “the Government is committed to balanced regional development; Project Ireland 2040 is a clear manifestation of this commitment and the Government recognises the valuable role that all our State and non-State regional airports play in this regard”. It is a bit rich for all of this support to suddenly surround Project Ireland 2040 despite the fact that it has not yet been reviewed.

Limerick Chamber has also said that Project Ireland 2040 was a missed opportunity that will be regretted for generations to come. It also said that the plan ignores the mid-west and Shannon Airport’s capacity to rebalance the national economy and that “There are a number of key projects detailed for this region in the National Development Plan but, by and large, these were already announced.”

The Government’s Project Ireland 2040 is a policy aspiration; the motion we are presenting is policy action. At the time of its launch, Fianna Fáil described Project Ireland 2040 as having been filled with hype and buzzwords.

I speak as someone from Dublin who believes that the city is overwhelmed, that appropriate levels of development and activity are needed across the island, and that we need to challenge the way the city is run. Dublin Airport’s hub connectivity has increased by 286% over the past ten years, making Dublin Airport one of four new entrants to the best hub connectivity rankings alongside Düsseldorf, Warsaw and Berlin airports. A transfer hub costing €16 million opened in 2018, with Dublin Airport’s connecting passenger numbers growing from 550,000 in 2013 to almost 1.6 million in 2018.

As has been mentioned by Sinn Féin speakers here tonight, being an island nation with a broad disparity in economic prosperity, planning our infrastructure towards one city on the island whose traffic system cannot cope and which suffers from chronic housing shortages and astronomical rents is creating long-term problems. I live in the city and I know that it is run for an economy rather than for a society. A policy centred on the east is feeding the problem in Dublin and starving the solution in the west. Stories of buses transporting people from Shannon to Dublin Airport for transatlantic flights do not make sense on so many levels. It makes no sense from the perspectives of local employment, the environment or balanced economic development.

A report by Danish consultancy Copenhagen Economics commissioned by Limerick Chamber last year looked at the dominance of Dublin Airport over others. It accounted for 86% of all traffic in 2018, up from 76% a decade before. It was suggested in the report that regional airports should be developed to handle excess capacity from the capital in order to entice further foreign direct investment in the west and mid-west.

Shannon Airport is in difficulty because of Covid but it was in decline long before that because of Government inaction. The airport’s reintegration into a national authority is about the mid-west, the west of Ireland and the intention to establish a balanced economy. The amendment states that this Government wants to examine Shannon Group and to look at the supports that may be necessary. The amendment seeks to “ensure that Shannon Group is well positioned for the future”. How exactly is this to be done? Further financial supports are to be considered but this will not give the people of the mid-west any confidence. It is empty rhetoric designed to dodge the major issue. The issue remains the failure of the separation project. Tonight was an opportunity to send a clear message to the Minister to change direction in respect of Shannon

Airport and to reintegrate it into one national airport authority.

It is disappointing Government Senators have, instead, decided to play party politics and turn their backs on the airport's employees, as well as the many businesses which depend on its key routes to Heathrow and the east coast of the US.

Senator Paul Gavan: I thank all of the contributors to this useful debate. For the most part, contributions on this topic were thoughtful.

We must begin by recognising 90% of flights that leave this island leave from the east coast. When we talk about regional balance, we must start where we actually are and recognise there is no regional balance. It must be recognised that the west has been continuously failed in terms of regional balance and proper perspective in transport policy for decades. It must also be recognised, as so many Members across many parties said, that the separation of Shannon Airport from the Dublin Airport Authority has fundamentally failed. My colleague, Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne, in Clare has been steadfast on this issue. My colleague, Deputy Maurice Quinlivan, both as a councillor and a Deputy, has been steadfast on this issue. Sinn Féin stood with the workers and the unions as far back as 2012 saying that this policy would not work. We take no pleasure in saying that we have been proved correct.

The issues around Shannon Group are quite simple to resolve. The exigencies of how one would reintegrate Shannon into a new airport authority can easily be worked out. For example, Sinn Féin is on record as stating that Shannon Heritage should actually go to the Office of Public Works as we believe that would be a better home for it. That is up for discussion. The property company around the Shannon Free Zone must stay with the airport as it is an integral part of the wider business make-up that we need.

To hear one Senator regard the genuine wishes of the majority of workers in the airport as being ridiculous is frankly insulting. However, as that Senator has not decided to stay for the debate, I will not say anything further on that particular topic.

I hope the Minister of State will pass on to his colleagues that, across all sections of the Chamber, we have heard recognition of the fact that the separation of Shannon has failed. The key point in our motion is that we will not fix this without dealing with that issue. We need investment. The investment yesterday was welcome but it was just the start. We will need much more. Unless we tie that investment into an integrated network of airports, it will fail again.

It might not be popular to say this but the current management of Shannon Group has failed fundamentally. It has to be called out. It has not delivered, in the past few years in particular. The statistics are there for all to see and the workers know it. They are furious that they see much larger director fees. There seems to be no end of wealth for the guys at the top. For the people on the ground, however, whether they work in Shannon Heritage or in the airport, they have to face more hardship.

I hope what will come from this debate is a recognition that something fundamentally has to change. My concern is that right now the Minister is looking at a review of Shannon. If these decisions are not taken now, will we have another review of Shannon next year or the year after? This is the time when the fundamental decision on the future Shannon has to be made. I accept what Senator Dooley said. We can call it a new national airport authority. The name clearly has to change. We need to be at one - many of us - that an integrated network of airports is the future, not just for Shannon but also for Cork and the other airports across the west.

I cannot accept the amendment because as Senator Warfield has pointed out, it is too vague and offers no direction. If the Minister accepts it, it just gives one a whole potpourri of choices that one could pursue. What I wanted to come from this debate was a clear direction of choice. That direction of choice is to reintegrate Shannon into a new airport authority and then give it the regional balance it needs. This will ensure the management of that new airport authority is clear that regional balance must be at its heart. That is what we do not have at the moment. That is why it is failing in terms of regional balance. That is why nine out of ten flights, when they do resume, will still be going from the east coast. That is why we have to make this change now.

There have been constructive contributions. It is important to give Shannon the focus. We must do more, however, and that is why I will be pressing this to a vote on Friday.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Before we move on to the formalities, I want to acknowledge the presence of the Minister of State, Deputy Frankie Feighan, our distinguished former colleague with whom we were all proud to serve.

Senator Paul Gavan: It is great to see him back here. I congratulate him on his appointment.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I speak for the entire Chamber on this matter. We are delighted to have a former Member here. It gives us all a sense of hope that when two of our Members are Ministers we can all be slightly optimistic.

Amendment put.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: In accordance with the order of the Seanad on Wednesday, 7 October 2020, the division is postponed until immediately after the Order of Business on Friday, 16 October 2020. The House stands adjourned until 10.30 a.m. on Friday, 16 October 2020, in the Dáil Chamber, in accordance with the order of the Seanad of Wednesday, 7 October 2020.

The Seanad adjourned at 6.07 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Friday, 16 October 2020.