



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE  
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

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

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## SEANAD ÉIREANN

*Dé Luain, 8 Márta 2021*

*Monday, 8 March 2021*

Chuaigh an Acting Chairperson i gceannas ar 10.30 a.m.

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*Machnamh agus Paidir.  
Reflection and Prayer.*

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### Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Emer Currie):** I wish everybody a happy International Women's Day. Lá fhéile na mban sona daoibh.

I have received notice from Senators Aisling Dolan and Sharon Keogan that, on the motion for the Commencement of the House today, they propose to raise the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Higher Education, Innovation and Science to make a statement on the measures proposed to incentivise gender-balanced representation within academia and research posts at third level institutions.

I have also received notice from Senator Lynn Boylan of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Finance to make a statement on the reduction of the VAT rate on sustainable period products.

I have also received notice from Senator Alice-Mary Higgins of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on the new National Maternity Hospital; and the steps being taken to ensure full public ownership and accountability.

I have also received notice from Senators Lisa Chambers and Erin McGreehan of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Health to outline the steps he is taking to improve the diagnosis time and care pathway for women and girls with endometriosis.

I have also received notice from Senators Ivana Bacik and Marie Sherlock of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to make a statement on the proposed timeline for the introduction of gender pay gap legisla-

tion.

I have also received notice from Senators Mary Seery Kearney and Pauline O'Reilly of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to make a statement on the measures being proposed to address domestic violence in Ireland.

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

The need for the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to make a statement on the timeframe for the establishment of the office of food ombudsman as set out in the programme for Government.

I have also received notice from Senator Rónán Mullen of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on the conditions applied by his Department and by the Health Service Executive on the provision of funding to charitable, voluntary and community organisations, whether such conditions include compliance with company law requirements, including the filing of audited accounts, with reference to the case of a particular organisation (details supplied) that has continued to receive funding despite allegedly not being in compliance with company law filing requirements.

I have also received notice from Senator Malcolm Byrne of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to make a statement on the full economic cost of a higher education student in full-time education; and if he will provide an update on the implementation of the Cassells report on higher education funding.

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

The need for the Minister for Transport to make a statement on the need to reintegrate Shannon Airport into a new national airport authority as proposed by the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Transport and Communications Networks.

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

The need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on the status of the public health consultants' contract and his plans to resource regional public health services into the future.

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

The need for the Minister for Education to provide an update on the delivery of a permanent extension for the Sacred Heart Secondary School, Clonakilty, County Cork.

I have also received notice from Senator Emer Currie of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment to develop a remote-first communications campaign to prepare businesses and workers for a new work culture post Covid-19.

The matters raised by the Senators are suitable for discussion. The Cathaoirleach has

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selected Senators Dolan and Keogan, who are sharing time, Boylan, Higgins, and Chambers and McGreehan, who are sharing time, Bacik and Sherlock, who are sharing time, and Seery Kearney and O'Reilly, who are sharing time, and they will be taken now. The other Senators may give notice on another day of the matters that they wish to raise.

## **Nithe i dtosach suíonna - Commencement Matters**

### **Gender Equality**

**Senator Aisling Dolan:** I welcome the Acting Chairman, Senator Currie, who has taken the Chair on this auspicious day - International Women's Day. Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit Collins and I thank him for joining us here today.

Today, in Ireland, the actual amount of female representation in senior positions at third level is shocking to many. We need change and this has been proven by: the Equality Tribunal in 2014; the 2016 Higher Education Authority, HEA, review of gender and equality; the Gender Action Plan 2018-2020; and the gender equality task force. Across our seven universities only one out of all is a woman because, in September 2020, Professor Kerstin Mey was appointed as interim president for the University of Limerick.

Many of our institutes of technology are on their way to technological university status. Two out of nine presidents or provosts are women: Dr. Orla Flynn is the president of Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology; and Dr. Patricia Mulcahy is president of the Institute of Technology Carlow.

I am also happy to note that all three institutes under the Connacht-Ulster Alliance technological university have applied for the bronze Athena SWAN award and the results are due at the end of March. The Athena SWAN committee is an international body for gender equality, particularly in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, STEM, areas in higher education institutes. There is also a recent publication by Professor Pat O'Connor, University of Limerick, and Dr. Gemma Irvine, vice-president for equality and diversity at Maynooth University. Their publication points to the fact that an Athena SWAN award, particularly at silver level, is bound to be associated with a higher ranking on the Quacquarelli Symonds, QS, world university rankings system. However, an Athena SWAN award alone will not increase the number of women in professorships. The former Minister, Mary Mitchell-O'Connor, was proactive and set up the senior academic leadership initiative, SALI, that has 45 new female professorships, of which 20 were allocated in 2019 and 15 more are due to be announced in May with two being allocated to the National University of Ireland, Galway, NUIG, and one to the Athlone Institute of Technology. GMIT has applied for two posts in this year's round. How on earth are we to reach the target of 40% of professorships being held by females by 2024 when only 26% are so held right now? We have the women, the talent and the leadership; we now need the change. I request that higher education institutions' performance in equality be linked to and noted in the Higher Education Authority block grant and that there be recruitment and support for funding agencies targeted at women in leadership.

**Senator Sharon Keogan:** I dtús báire, cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit. I welcome the Minister of State to the House again. We have previously had very constructive engagements with the Minister, Deputy Harris, and I appreciate the Minister giving me a hearing on those occasions. I am glad to have the opportunity to address the Minister of State on International Women's Day and thank Senator Dolan for her gracious gesture in sharing time with me. It is good to see acts of collegiality and solidarity between female Members of the Oireachtas who are, after all, a minority.

Regarding the Commencement matter, it is important to allow everybody to flourish and to give people the opportunity to flourish in their fields, regardless of their sex or gender. I support the principles of equality of opportunity and egalitarianism. If women aspire to pursue a career in academia or research, they should be encouraged and supported in doing so. There should be no barriers to women entering the world of academia and research and no glass ceilings. I would, however, voice a note of caution about going too far down the road of social engineering, positive discrimination, gender quotas and equality of outcome. Surely, we want talent to be selected on merit. It would be awful to have people regarded as a mere token, as simply being there to fill a quota or as having been hired to allow an employer to signal virtue or for a person to be given a post because there is a financial incentive for the employer or institution in question. I acknowledge the brilliant work of women in teaching and research at every level in every setting.

**Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins):** I thank Senators Dolan and Keogan for raising this important issue on International Women's Day. While we have made significant progress in recent years, we have a lot more to do. Higher education legislation requires institutions to promote gender balance among students and staff and the Higher Education Authority, HEA, to promote the attainment of equality of opportunity.

The 2016 report of the expert group on gender equality and the 2018 gender equality task force report encompass a suite of initiatives to bring about sustainable organisational change and to empower a culture of gender equality at all levels in all our institutions among all staff, including academic and professional staff, management and support staff. These initiatives would lead to a more equal system in which a person's gender was not a barrier to career progression. The HEA monitors institutional performance and is included as a key focus in the performance framework.

One of the recommendations in the 2018 gender equality task force's action plan was that a Centre of Excellence for Gender Equality be established. This was established in the HEA in 2019 and now also covers diversity and inclusion. The centre ensures an acceleration towards gender equality and is a key enabler in ensuring sustainable change by providing centralised support for the institutions, facilitating the sharing of good practice and funding innovative organisational and cultural change initiatives nationally.

In 2019, the senior academic leadership initiative was launched by the Department to assist in accelerating gender balance at senior levels through the award of 45 gender-targeted senior academic leadership posts over three years.

In 2020, an annual gender equality enhancement fund was established by the HEA centre of excellence to encourage cross-sectoral collaboration as a means to achieve national transformation. The centre uses this fund to encourage innovative approaches to addressing gender

inequality across the institutions.

The Athena SWAN charter is a framework used across the globe to support and transform gender equality in higher education and research. Engagement with the charter is a key pillar of our national strategy for gender equality in higher education. The charter was launched in Ireland in 2015 with a specific remit to encourage and recognise commitment to advancing the careers of women in higher education. As of the end of 2020, a total of 56 Athena SWAN bronze awards were held by Irish higher education institutions including 14 awards for institutions and 42 for departments. The Athena SWAN award achievement is a requirement for research funding eligibility from the three main research funding agencies, the Irish Research Council, IRC, the Health Research Board, HRB, and Science Foundation Ireland, SFI. The HEA sets and monitors timelines within which higher education institutes, HEIs, should apply for and attain Athena SWAN accreditation. In light of these requirements, HEIs stand to lose access to research funding from the IRC, HRB and SFI if they do not achieve Athena SWAN awards within the set timeframe.

The IRC is working with the HEA and other research funders on issues of gender equality and the implementation of the gender action plan 2018 to 2020. The council was among the first research funders globally to gender-blind applicants to its research funding programmes. For assessment panels, the IRC targets gender parity in the composition of such panels, at minimum of no less than 40% of each gender. The council monitors gender balance in applications and awards annually. For awards made in 2019 there was gender parity on applications, with female awardees comprising close to 55% of the total.

**Senator Aisling Dolan:** The Athena SWAN charter is one thing but it is not enough. We need to ensure that women come through. Although there is 26% of professorships, only 30% of applications came from women. In other words, we need to ensure there is funding available for starting investigators, PhDs, post doctorates and increasing funding at IRC and SFI level. We need to make sure that the centres of excellence being funded bring through women principal investigators, PIs, as well and not solely excellence. We know excellence exists. Look, for example, at the Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University, Professor Louise Richardson. She is in the top five in the world. Is the Minister of State saying that we cannot have the same number of professorships in Ireland? I do not think so. The excellence is there and we need to support it.

We need to make sure there is a targeted plan of teaching buy out to allow women to focus on research. We need to make sure we support them in terms their peer review publications, their h-index and their participation in EU funding programmes such as Horizon 2020. To become a professor, one needs to ensure one can drawdown on Exchequer and non-Exchequer funding. We need to make sure that we support those women to achieve that target. Science Foundation Ireland recently stated in its statement of strategy that 35% of its award holders would be female. That is a target we need to achieve.

**Deputy Niall Collins:** In 2016, Science Foundation Ireland launched the SFI gender strategy which provided a comprehensive framework to streamline gender initiatives across all SFIs funding programmes, with the overarching aim of improving the gender balance among its award holders. SFI sets a target for gender representation in its portfolio. The original target was 25% female award holders. This target was revised upwards to 30% in 2017 after the original target was reached. As a result, SFI has seen an increase in female award holders in its portfolio of awards from 21% in 2015 to 29% in 2019.

I thank the Senators for raising the issues. The Minister, Deputy Harris, and I take them on board and take them very seriously. We have, of course, much done in this area but there is more to do. I also take on board the points raised by both Senators in that we want to avoid tokenism and that people achieve progression by virtue of ability. We should not get into a gender balancing exercise purely for that purpose alone. People should get there on merit also.

**Senator Aisling Dolan:** It may take another 20 years to do it.

### **Value Added Tax**

**Senator Lynn Boylan:** Everyone of us became more aware of the issue of plastic pollution over the last number of years. This is not just because of the unsightly nature of it but because we are now very aware of the knock-on impacts plastics have on all manner of wildlife. When I worked on the EU single use plastic directive, we were told that period products are the fifth most common item found in marine litter and that on average a person who menstruates will use on average 150 kg of tampons, pads and applicators in their lifetime. However, the approach favoured by the EU was not to regulate the manufacturers. It was not to insist that as a bare minimum they print on the packet the amount of plastic contained in their products, which is on average 90% of the contents. Instead the EU wanted to impose an environmental tax on period products. I strongly resisted this. Why should women be made pay the cost of cleaning up what is an essential product to their everyday lives, while manufacturers make huge profits? The disposable period product industry is worth £265 million per year in Britain alone. The period product industry deliberately chose to push women into purchasing disposable products as it is a far better business model to have women come back every month rather than every couple of years, or in the case of menstrual cups, every five to ten years.

It is estimated that only 5% of the population are using reusable products. This is down to many factors, including a lack of awareness of their existence, which can be addressed through public awareness campaigns. A second factor in the lack of use of sustainable products is their low visibility. Supermarket shelves are dominated with disposables because it suits the manufacturers' business model and many have preferential contracts with supermarkets.

However, the biggest barrier to widespread uptake of sustainable period products is their cost. Reusables are not appropriate in many circumstances, especially for vulnerable groups such as women who are homeless or living in precarious situations without access to their own bathrooms. However, cost is preventing a large proportion of the menstruating population from accessing sustainable products. One simple measure that could be taken would be to reduce the VAT rate on those products.

Currently, standard period products are 0% VAT while reusable products such as period underwear and menstrual cups are 13.5%. I am aware that EU rules prevent us reducing the VAT to 0%. However, it is interesting that products relating to a normal bodily function that affects women are on a higher VAT rate than going to a restaurant or pub and a rate almost three times that of trading a greyhound. It shows a bizarre set of priorities when it comes to women's health and protection of the environment.

Even more disturbing is that incontinence pads are taxed at the highest rate of VAT, which has increased to 23% as of 1 March. The rate of VAT on incontinence products is yet another example of regressive tax that disproportionately affects women. Incontinence is not a luxury.

It affects women far more than men. It is estimated that as many as one in five women over 40 is affected by some level of incontinence and up to 70% of expectant and new mothers are affected.

I ask for a commitment that incontinence pads and sustainable period products have their VAT levels reduced to the minimum level possible. What measures have been taken to change EU rules to provide for 0% VAT on all period and incontinence products? Can the Minister of State give me a commitment that the Government will consider rolling out a similar scheme to that in Scotland where free samples of reusable products were offered alongside a public awareness campaign.

**Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Sean Fleming):** I thank the Senator for raising this important issue this morning. I listened carefully to everything she said. The Senator seems to be knowledgeable of VAT regulations in Ireland and the UK and I want to thank her for the excellent presentation of the case. However, as the Senator may be aware, Ireland is the only country in the EU that applies a 0% VAT rate to period products such as tampons and sanitary towels. This rate was applied in 1991 and we have been able to maintain this rate under the provisions of the VAT directive that allow for a 0% rate to be maintained if it applied in 1991. I am sure the Senator is aware of that.

A number of new products have come on the market since then, which have attracted a standard rate of VAT. The period poverty working group lead by the Department of Health as part of the national strategy for women and girls published a report on period poverty on 8 February 2021. It recommended a reduced VAT rate be applied to certain newer period products in circumstances in which a 0% VAT rate cannot be applied. It also recommended that Ireland continue negotiations at EU level to allow for a 0% VAT rate to apply to all period products.

I am pleased to say that following the passage of the Finance Bill, new period products in question have had a reduced VAT rate applied to them as of 1 January 2021. The VAT rate directive provides for the application of a reduced VAT to such products in paragraph 3 of annexe 1. I understand that before introducing the change officials ensured that the reduced rate applying to newer period products would not risk the 0% VAT rate on tampons and sanitary towels, which are far more common, and have attracted the 0% rate because it applied in 1991 and that still holds.

I can confirm that Ireland and a number of other EU member states are looking for greater flexibility in the VAT directive to allow a zero rate to be applied to these new period products. That is essentially where we are. These discussions are connected to a wider VAT rate debate. Any agreement on VAT rates must be agreed by every member state because it is a taxation issue. We are seeking greater flexibility on this. A number of other states are assisting but it will have to be agreed by every member state.

**Senator Lynn Boylan:** I thank the Minister of State for his response. I welcome that he has confirmed Ireland is pushing at an EU level to change the VAT rules. However, there needs to be urgency on it given the level of plastic pollution and the fact that cost is a real barrier to accessing these products. I welcome the VAT rate was reduced but it is still higher than the 9% VAT rate on restaurants, pubs and the hospitality sector and three times higher than the rate for trading animals. Our priorities need to be reflected.

Regarding incontinence pads, it must be an oversight the fact they are in the luxury category.

That should be addressed. Based on equivalent UK figures, there could be as many as 255,000 women affected by incontinence issues in this country. I imagine they do not see incontinence pads as a luxury on which a 23% VAT rate should be paid.

**Deputy Sean Fleming:** I again thank the Senator. I will take on board, and take back to the Department of Finance, the issue of the luxury rate on incontinence pads. I know they can be a very heavy cost for many families. We all know, through our work as local public representatives, community nurses regularly provide substantial amounts of incontinence pads, through the HSE, to patients in their areas that require them. However, we all hear locally they can sometimes be rationed. Some people are provided with incontinence pads through the HSE.

Period products such as menstrual cups, pants and sponges, previously at the standard VAT rate, were reduced to 13.5% on 1 January 2021. The Senator rightly asked why they were not reduced to the 9% applied to the hospitality sector. People understand that the VAT reduction from 13.5% to 9% in the hospitality sector was a temporary response to support those facing serious economic difficulties due to Covid-19. It is only a temporary measure and the plan is that the rate will go back to 13.5%. It was strictly a Covid measure for those particular businesses.

It is important to note that the rate of VAT applied relates to the type of product rather than whether it is sustainable. That is a broad issue we will all have to raise at European level. This means that sustainable sanitary towels and more environmentally friendly tampons still have a zero rate applied to them. It is very important to say that. I reiterate that sustainable sanitary towels and more environmentally friendly tampons still have a zero rate applied to them.

### **National Maternity Hospital**

**Senator Alice-Mary Higgins:** I welcome the Minister of State at the Department of Health, Deputy Anne Rabbitte, to the House on International Women's Day. Later today, the Seanad will honour nurse Elizabeth O'Farrell who served much of her life in the national maternity hospital. It is perhaps fitting that I now ask the Minister of State and the Minister for Health to review plans for the national maternity hospital, take steps to ensure the hospital has full public ownership and accountability, and ensure the land it is built on is owned by the State and not subject to a limited period lease, which could compromise the provision of maternity and reproductive healthcare for future generations.

This State has a sad history of failing women when it comes to maternal and reproductive health, from symphysiotomy to CervicalCheck, and transferring power to religious charities when it comes to pregnant women.

*11 o'clock*

We were painfully reminded of the consequences of that abdication of responsibility by the recent appalling report on mother and baby homes.

This power has been tightly held. When Dr. Noël Browne attempted to introduce the mother and child scheme, it was blocked by religious pressure. Just last year, the State was in the unacceptable position of waiting to hear if the Vatican would give permission to the Sisters of Charity regarding a proposed site for a new national maternity hospital. When that permission came, it had conditions. Despite headlines about gifting the land to the people of Ireland,

it emerged that it had not been given to the State, but transferred to a trust, St. Vincent's Holdings, from which the State would lease the land for a period of just 99 years. Dr. Peter Boylan has spoken about how the board of the national maternity hospital has been told that the deal is complex and not a regular deal, the documents will not be regular and there will be a plethora of different structures and ownerships. Religious orders have become proficient in the shifting of assets and accountability through complex company structures, but this does not mean that they lose sight of long-term ownership and control. The new charitable trust's constitution, lodged with the Companies Registration Office last August, is similar to the constitution of the St. Vincent's Healthcare Group. Clause 5.11 specifies that the directors may hold, sell, manage, lease or mortgage any or all of the parts of the company's property. This is a major hostage to fortune.

Why would any trust, charitable or not, have control of any kind over our national maternity hospital? Why is this trust allowed to lease the land to the State instead of selling or giving it? Why is the State diluting its responsibilities again? The Sisters of Charity, whose documented role in illegal adoptions has been a subject of recent public outrage, last week called for an investigation into that matter dating back to 1922. If they can ask us to investigate mistakes made 99 years ago, I will ask the Minister of State to look forward 99 years, which is the proposed length of the lease. That is not very long. We are talking about our children's children's children. We will spend millions of euro on a hospital, then the lease will expire and maternal and reproductive healthcare will suddenly be up for negotiation again. We are in a different Ireland. It is even different than it was for the 2016 Mulvey report. The people of our country have broken their silence and taken back control of women's reproductive rights. The State has had to apologise time and again for how it failed women in the past. Let it learn from that and not make bad compromises that will fail the women of the future.

At a time when EU fiscal rules are suspended and 0% loans are available, there is no financial justification for giving our national maternity hospital to a charitable trust. I call on the Minister of State to deliver something better. Commit to a review of the plans and take steps, including a compulsory purchase order if necessary, to ensure full public control, public accountability and public ownership of our national maternity hospital.

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** I wish everyone a happy International Women's Day. I am taking this matter on behalf of the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly.

I welcome the opportunity to address the House on this issue and to confirm that the Government is firmly committed to the development of a new national maternity hospital on the St. Vincent's University Hospital campus at Elm Park. It should be acknowledged that the national maternity hospital project is unprecedented and inherently complex, given that we are relocating one voluntary hospital onto the campus of another voluntary hospital to a hospital building owned by the State. Therefore, a legal framework is being developed to protect the State's investment in the new national maternity hospital and to ensure that the hospital remains in State ownership.

The hospital will be built on the site leased from the St. Vincent's Healthcare Group. I am satisfied that its development on a site with a leasehold interest of 99 years and rights of renewal will not in any way compromise the provision of maternity care for future generations. On the contrary, by building the new hospital, we will secure maternity care for future generations of women.

The corporate and clinical governance arrangements for the new maternity hospital at Elm Park are encompassed in the Mulvey agreement, which was finalised following an extensive mediation process between the National Maternity Hospital and the St. Vincent's Healthcare Group. The Mulvey agreement provides for the establishment of a new company, the national maternity hospital at Elm Park DAC, which will have clinical and operational as well as financial and budgetary independence in the provision of maternity, gynaecological and neonatal services. It ensures a full range of services will be available at the hospital without religious, ethnic or other distinction. It is important to emphasise that those overriding objectives will be copper-fastened through the legal framework. I acknowledge that the development of the legal framework has proved to be more difficult and deliberations more protracted than originally anticipated, but I understand there has been good ongoing engagement between the key stakeholders. I am advised it is anticipated that discussions will be concluded and the drafting of the legal documents finalised in the coming weeks. It should be noted that once finalised, the legal framework will be brought to the Government for approval.

I am conscious the buildings in Holles Street are no longer fit for purpose. The national maternity strategy sets out a vision for future maternity services where women are treated with dignity and respect in an appropriate physical environment. We must now move forward with building the new national maternity hospital and providing the necessary infrastructure to facilitate the delivery of modern, safe, high-quality maternity services for women and infants.

**Senator Alice-Mary Higgins:** The Mulvey agreement is outdated and precedes a number of significant changes. Protracted negotiations should not be needed because the only stakeholders who matter, whom the State should have to accommodate or please, are the women of Ireland. It should not have to negotiate with others. A stronger approach is needed. Ninety-nine years is not a long time in the context of the generations to come. The structures are clear. It could be the case that a company with its own motivations could have mortgaged properties, could have created debt attached to properties and could create a long and more protracted negotiation in 99 years' time. Let us not bequest that to the women of the future. We are in a different fiscal situation now and the State can access funds in a way that it perhaps could not have a few years ago. I ask the Minister of State to reconsider our approach on this issue without delay.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** I will note all the Senator's comments and relay them to the Minister. I take on board what she said about the Mulvey report being outdated and about Ireland having moved on a great deal since it was commissioned and finalised. I also take on board the point about the 99-year lease, although I am sure the State is examining all the legal frameworks. I will take on board everything the Senator said. Given that the matter will come before the Houses again, I am sure that further discussions will give everyone the opportunity to contribute.

## **Disease Management**

**Senator Lisa Chambers:** I am sharing time with Senator McGreehan. I wish a happy International Women's Day to everyone, not least to all the women in Ireland who suffer with endometriosis, which is what this Commencement matter concerns. The Minister of State will be aware this chronic condition affects one in ten Irish women and girls. It is incurable. Some of the main symptoms include chronic pain and fatigue, heavy bleeding, and infertility or men-

tal health issues, to name but a few. There are still no clear clinical guidelines for GPs and no clear care pathway through our health service. On average, it takes women seven years to get a diagnosis, with many saying it can take them in excess of ten years. That is important because the longer the disease is left unchecked to wreak havoc internally, the more damage it does. It is so important, like in many aspects of healthcare, that there is early intervention.

Because GPs are not properly educated and trained to spot the symptoms and because of the absence of clinical guidelines for GPs, this condition often goes undiagnosed or misdiagnosed, with many women reporting having been prescribed antidepressant medication and having been told it was all in their heads, it was all part of being a woman and they needed to buckle up and deal with the pain because it is just their lot. That this story is reported by so many women shows it is prevalent throughout our health service, with many women reporting of the trauma of being gaslit by their GP and of being told what they are feeling is not really happening and it is all in their heads.

We need urgent action on this. With every week and month that go by, another woman or young girl is suffering and in pain, bedridden and missing weeks of school. These women are unable to have a good quality of life and are missing out on work and education opportunities. The damage being done to a significant cohort of the population is immense. One in ten women have this condition. I ask the Minister of State to please take back to the Minister for Health, Deputy Donnelly, the need for urgent action, clear clinical guidelines, a care pathway for treatment and education among GPs to spot the symptoms early on.

**Senator Erin McGreehan:** As a sufferer of endometriosis, I know it is a tremendous disease. It takes over one's body and mind. One deals with pain several times each month. It is incredible. I am one of the lucky ones because I know what is wrong with me. There are thousands of women who do not know what the problem is. They are told by their doctors that it is a normal pain. It is not normal. As Senator Chambers stated, they are told to buck up and get on with it and that this is part of being a woman. Pain is not part of being a woman. That said, we have seen time and again that pain is synonymous with being a woman in this country and we have seen the bruises and suffering associated with that.

The current waiting lists for gynaecological outpatients' appointments are incredible. More than 30,000 women are awaiting treatment and a doctor's appointment. That is absolutely horrendous. Given that one in ten women has endometriosis, how many of those women awaiting an outpatient's appointment have endometriosis but are not getting treatment? We need quick action on getting those ambulatory clinical services open sooner rather than later because this is about quality of life for young women and girls who are suffering but do not know what is wrong with them. They are told it is all in their heads. I ask the Minister of State to please bring that back to the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, because action needs to be taken.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** I thank the Senators for bringing this issue to the floor of the Seanad and giving me an opportunity to address it. My speech is on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, but both he and I are acutely aware that the Senators have long been advocates on this issue. I wish to begin by emphasising that the Government is committed to promoting and improving women's health outcomes. That commitment is spelled out very clearly in the programme for Government and has been underpinned by a provision of €12 million in budget 2021 for new developments in maternity and gynaecology services.

As Senator Chambers stated with regard to the current treatment of endometriosis, a general

practitioner referral to a gynaecologist is the standard pathway of care for the management of this condition. This is similar to the pathway in place for the management of other gynaecological conditions. I am advised that all obstetricians and gynaecologists are trained in the diagnosis and treatment of endometriosis.

The HSE national women and infants health programme has advised that the best way to help the majority of patients with endometriosis is to improve access to gynaecology services generally. I think all present would agree on that. The programme has developed a plan to increase capacity and reduce waiting times for women for gynaecology appointments. The plan aims to reorient general gynaecology services to an ambulatory or see-and-treat model, rather than the traditional outpatients referral model. The new model of care involves the establishment of one-stop ambulatory gynaecology clinics. These clinics will help to ensure that gynaecology patients receive safe and appropriate treatment, reduce the need for multiple appointments, ensure a more effective use of public funds and, ultimately, improve clinical outcomes. The roll-out of phase 1 of the new model of care commenced last year and I am delighted to confirm that the ambulatory gynaecology clinics in Cork and Galway are now providing services, while it is anticipated that the clinics in the Rotunda Hospital and Waterford will be operational this year. It is important to state that although I have mentioned four hospitals, that is not nearly enough by any manner or means. With the new funding provided in budget 2021, the roll-out of the model of care will be accelerated and additional ambulatory gynaecology clinics will be established this year.

Last year, the women's health task force identified several priority areas for action. In that context, the need to improve services for women with endometriosis was recognised and included as part of a priority work stream to improve gynaecological health for women and girls. The endometriosis work stream identified a number of potential actions in this area, including enhanced services and supports, and the potential establishment of a centre of excellence for endometriosis surgery.

Budget 2021 has also provided a dedicated €5 million health fund to progress a programme of actions arising from the work of the health task force. The Department of Health has engaged with the HSE to identify proposals which could be implemented in 2021 and funded through the women's health fund. A number of proposals are being finalised with stakeholders and it is anticipated that announcements will be made in the coming weeks on the actions which will be supported by the fund. The developments I have outlined underscore this Government's commitment to improving services for endometriosis and gynaecology more broadly.

However, as Senator Chambers says, one in ten is the figure, there are 30,000 on a waiting list, two hospitals are providing the service and two more are due to come on stream in 2021. That is clearly not good enough. It is about education and providing support to our GPs as well. We must get rid of the idea that it is in one's head. There is an issue with that. We need to be able to call that out and give people their lives back.

**Senator Lisa Chambers:** I know the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, is aware of this and I have spoken to him about it on a number of occasions. The female members of Fianna Fáil will be meeting the women's task force in the coming days to discuss this and other women's health issues. Can we imagine any other area of healthcare where one in ten men would be this impacted and where there would be no care pathway, no proper referral system and no education? I cannot imagine that. There have to be wrap-around services, including mental health services, pain management and education for young girls so they can identify what is not

a normal pain and when to seek help.

**Senator Erin McGreehan:** I want the Minister of State to bring the issue of the €2.5 million in funding for the critical care unit in the Rotunda Hospital back to the Minister. It is the world's oldest maternity hospital and that is all that is needed for it to move forward to the next stage and to get its standard of care up to a modern level. Some 3,000 people are on the waiting list for care in the Rotunda Hospital and I would ask the Minister of State to move on funding for the critical care unit.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** I will bring everything the Senators have said back to the Minister. The women's task force is meeting later on this week and I will be 100% supportive of it. For far too long, young ladies did not really know what they were presenting with. They all thought this was normal but it is far from normal. No man in the country would accept this. It is mainly ladies who are present in the Chamber for this conversation on International Women's Day and there is no way a man would put up with what the Senators have described this morning. We all know what bad period pain is like and one would hope it would go away with two Panadol's but it should not continue without a diagnosis being sought and it should not reoccur every month along with other pains. This pain is debilitating and we have to stop that happening.

We have to give women back their lives, and the only way we can do so is by having a proper ambulatory service throughout the country. It should not just be available in four hospitals or in certain geographic areas. We have to look at everybody. We must also provide education for our GPs so that when these young people go back and talk to their mams, there will no longer be any talk from GPs about this all being in their heads. We need to stop that approach.

## Gender Equality

**Senator Ivana Bacik:** I welcome the Minister to the House and I wish him a happy International Women's Day. On this day, the Labour Party Senators have asked the Minister to give us a proposed timeline for the introduction of gender pay gap legislation. We are all only too well aware of how urgent this is. Every year, 9 November marks Equal Pay Day, which recognises that Ireland's gender pay gap of 14.4% effectively means women work for free for the rest of the year. To put it another way, women stop getting paid at around 4 p.m. every day.

In other jurisdictions, gender pay gap legislation requires employers to publish disaggregated data illustrating whether a gender pay gap exists and requires them to take action where it does. This sort of legislation has been effective in addressing the gender pay gap. The Labour Party introduced a Bill in the previous term, namely, the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (Gender Pay Gap Information) Bill 2017, which would have applied to all organisations with more than 50 employees. It passed all Stages in the Seanad by 3 October 2018 and was referred to the Dáil, passing Second Stage there in November 2018. We are asking the Minister to contemplate taking on that Bill. I am conscious that the previous Government also introduced the Gender Pay Gap Information Bill 2019 in that term but that Bill remains languishing before the Dáil. Does this Government propose to introduce a new Bill, for which there is a commitment in the programme for Government, or will it take on our Bill or the previous Government's Bill? Either way we want to ensure there is progress on this issue.

A piece by Mark Tighe in *The Sunday Times* yesterday gave a very strong indication of why this is necessary. The publication of the pay gap figures from RTÉ showed that a significant pay

gap on grounds of gender still exists in RTÉ three years after the initial publication of figures in 2016. According to 2019 data, one in five women working in RTÉ earns less than €40,000, compared to almost one in ten men, and 63% of women there earn less than €60,000, compared to just 46% of men.

**Senator Marie Sherlock:** It is great to have the Minister in the Chamber today. It is difficult to convey the enormity of the challenge of trying to close the gender pay gap in this country. Senator Bacik spoke about the hourly wage gap but we all relate to weekly or monthly earnings and the average weekly earnings for women in this country are 25.05% less than the average weekly earnings of men. That is because of the gap in hourly pay but also because more women are trapped in part-time employment. Some 11% of men were in part-time employment in this country last year, compared to 28% of women. When it comes to retirement, that gap gets even bigger. We know from EUROSTAT figures that there is a 28.6% gap between the pensions of men and women.

Such is the scale of the gap that not one single legislative measure will be a magic bullet. We need a series of measures. The legislation Senator Bacik put forward three years ago will only shine a spotlight into recruitment and progression practices within firms. That is an important starting point and an important spotlight but it cannot be the finish line. The game-changer in closing the gender pay gap is the right to be recognised for collective bargaining. One might ask how that relates to women. There is a growing body of international evidence that shows that where there are higher levels of co-ordinated bargaining within workplaces there is lower wage dispersion, and when there is lower wage dispersion there is less of an earnings gap between men and women. The EU adequate minimum wages directive will also be hugely instrumental in allowing a framework for the right to collective bargaining in this country. The Tánaiste, along with fellow EU employment ministers, is actively trying to hobble this directive. As a first step, we are asking the Government to get on with the legislation and then allow this directive to pass.

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** I thank Senators Bacik and Sherlock for raising this important issue today. I wish them and the House a happy International Women’s Day. I share the Senators’ concerns regarding measures to increase pay transparency as a means to tackle the gender pay gap, although Senator Sherlock is right that it is just one of the means. As the Minister with responsibility for gender equality, I am very conscious of the importance of the gender pay gap as a metric of women’s economic empowerment relative to men’s. It illustrates the degree to which women’s hourly pay, on average, is lower than men’s during their working lives, with implications for their risk of poverty, including in later life. Senator Sherlock outlined the enormity of the problem pre-Covid but I am also conscious that, in the emerging women’s labour market, participation is being impacted differently and to a greater degree than that of men as a result of Covid-19. Women are over-represented in the sectors that have been badly affected. Women are experiencing greater conflict between working and their family lives. Women are more likely to have reduced working hours, suffer job loss or leave the labour market. After earlier periods of lockdown, the female labour market has recovered at a slower pace than that of men. If this pattern persists, it could have long-term implications for female participation and employment rates, women’s career progression and women’s pay in general. These are all factors that are already known to impact on the existence and size of gender pay gaps.

Addressing the factors behind the gender pay gap is a key commitment in the national strategy for women and girls. It is a multifaceted task involving a number of Departments and

agencies. Initiatives to address the gender pay gap can be expected to have a positive impact on disparities in income for women across and after their working lives. This is why, in the programme for Government, we have committed to legislate to require publication of the gender pay gap in companies and the public service. The aim of the Government's Gender Pay Gap Information Bill is to provide transparency on the gender pay gap and incentivise employers to take measures to address the issue insofar as they can.

The Bill was published on 8 April 2019, completed Dáil Committee Stage in June 2019 and was restored to the Order Paper in July 2020. I intend to bring legislative amendments to Cabinet in the next fortnight which will allow the Bill to progress to Report Stage. I am committed to enabling the enactment of this Bill as early as possible and I will seek to do so after the Easter recess. I assure Senators that I view the Bill as a priority so it will languish no more.

Senators may also be aware that, last week, on 4 March, the European Commission published proposals for the introduction by member states of binding pay transparency measures. This proposal meets a commitment of the EU gender equality strategy and reflects one of the political priorities of the European Commission. The legislative proposal focuses on two core elements of equal pay, namely, measures to ensure pay transparency for workers and employers and strengthened access to justice for victims of pay discrimination on the grounds of gender. In particular, it would require the introduction of statutory obligations on large employers to publish information on the gender pay gap and provide for internal reporting on pay differences among female and male workers in the same category. Employers would also be required to assess the pay of a category of workers where the gender pay gap exceeded a given threshold - 5% is proposed - and is not justifiable on objective gender-neutral factors.

It is envisaged that the proposal will now go to the European Parliament and Council for approval and that, once adopted, the Commission proposes that member states will have two years to transpose the directive into national law and communicate the relevant texts to the Commission. These proposals are an important development at an EU level and will be reviewed in the context of the provisions of existing employment obligations and entitlements and the Gender Pay Gap Information Bill once that has been legislated for.

**Senator Ivana Bacik:** I thank the Minister for setting out so clearly the proposed timeframe. I am glad to hear that he proposes to bring legislative amendments to the existing Government Bill from 2019 and that he plans to do so in the next fortnight. We will work constructively with the Minister to ensure the legislation is swiftly enacted and that, as the Minister said, it languishes no more. In particular, we will ask him to adopt some of the principles that were in the Labour Party's gender pay gap Bill which made it a stronger Bill than the original Government Bill from 2019. The Minister's colleagues in the Green Party supported our Bill when in opposition in the Seanad. I hope we will see stronger legislation and that, in particular, it will apply not only to larger employers but also to those with 50 or more employees. I also hope it will include significant remedies and penalties for employers which do not take remedial action to meet their obligations under the legislation.

**Deputy Roderic O'Gorman:** I will consider all amendments proposed in the legislative process, as I always try to do. We are bringing a number of changes to the Bill and having examined the original draft, I believe, they will strengthen it. In particular, we intend to introduce a mechanism for an earlier review. I understand the review period in the current draft is after five years and I intend to shorten that. There is always a balance to be struck between giving legislation some time to demonstrate its strengths and potential weaknesses and not leaving it

too long. Five years is probably a little bit on the long side for a review period so that is certainly one element I am looking at. I am also looking at the role and powers of remedy of the IHREC, which are important as well. Obviously I do not want to go into huge detail until I have discussed this with Cabinet colleagues but I will look at amendments from across the House on that as well.

## **Domestic Violence**

**Senator Mary Seery Kearney:** Guím Lá Idirnáisiúnta na mBan sona do chách. I thank the Minister for coming to the House and wish everyone a happy International Women's Day.

The most recent report to the Dublin city joint policing committee shows a marked increase in cases involving domestic violence. On the one hand, I am pleased that if the figures to the Garda are increasing, it shows more people are reporting domestic violence. What I believe is happening, however, is an overall increase in people suffering domestic violence and, consequently, we have an increase in the numbers supplied by the Garda.

Despite it being International Women's Day, I acknowledge that domestic violence is not only a female issue. Men, trans and non-binary people also suffer domestic violence. While I do not know the specific statistics for Ireland, I have been privy to a number of conversations and representations that would demonstrate that a trans or non-binary person in a relationship is disproportionately vulnerable to domestic violence or intimate partner violence.

Based on the figures I do know, women are statistically more likely to be attacked and abused repeatedly in their own home, more likely to be subjected to abuse and coercive control, and more likely to be killed by their partner or former partner. This is not news and I welcome the steady increase in funding we have seen over recent years. The response, certainly during Covid, has been very impressive and welcome, and the most recent budget has been fantastic as well. However, no matter how good we are doing and how much our funding is being increased, if it is not being targeted and is not being monitored, reviewed and constantly assessed, we are not doing enough to ensure it is going where it should be and that it is being targeted at the right groups. Do we look into our souls and believe we are doing enough? I congratulate the Minister on all that has been done, but until we start seeing figures drop, there is always much more to do and we will never have done enough.

**Senator Pauline O'Reilly:** I welcome the Minister to the House. The pandemic has had devastating consequences for women and children living in fear within their own homes. Across our State, the silence from homes where abuse is taking place is deafening. We know that connection to community and visibility helps to prevent incidents of domestic violence, and the environment created by this pandemic has been a breeding ground for an escalation in domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. Homes should be places of refuge and instead they are frequently places of fear. On International Women's Day I think of all of those women who we cannot see who live in daily fear.

The programme for government was the first to call out domestic violence as an epidemic. Little did we know that things would only get worse over the last year. In Galway domestic disputes for which no cause is noted in the joint policing committee report went up by 40%. Breaches of barring orders went up by 25%. An increase of €4.7 million to €30 million was committed to in Budget 2021 to deal with this epidemic, with €2 million to help support ser-

vices during the Covid crisis. I am aware the Minister has also committed to domestic abuse leave. An audit of the segmentation of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence responsibilities across the Departments was also committed to, along with the development of the third national strategy on domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. I would like the Minister to outline the progress of these to date and how it aligns with our commitments under the Istanbul Convention. I also want to hear about progress of the implementation of the O'Malley report in addressing the fact that many feel retraumatised by our court system.

I thank all of those services which have continued to operate, including Cope Galway, Galway Rape Crisis Centre and Domestic Violence Response. This is an epidemic that affects women and children more than men, although men should not be forgotten. I am reminded of a lecture once given by Margaret Atwood in which, and I paraphrase, she said that perhaps the source of men's fear of women is a fear of being embarrassed, but women fear men because they fear being killed. For too many women in our country this second part of her comment rings true. I thank Senators Pauline O'Reilly and Seery Kearney for raising this issue and I welcome the opportunity to respond. Again, it is particularly apposite that we are discussing this issue on International Women's Day.

As the Senators noted, domestic, sexual and gender-based violence can occur in many different forms and can be experienced by any one of us but it is indisputable that girls and women are disproportionately affected by such acts. The Minister for Justice has lead responsibility for co-ordinating policy on domestic, sexual and gender-based violence but ensuring an effective infrastructure to respond to it is also a very significant priority for my Department. I am actively working with the Minister for Justice to fulfil the commitment in the programme for Government to conduct an audit of the segmentation of responsibility for domestic, sexual and gender-based violence across Departments and agencies. This audit is under way and I am hopeful that it will shortly provide us with proposals on the required infrastructure to ensure all issues with domestic, sexual and gender-based violence are dealt with in the most effective and holistic manner possible. We really need to provide the best service to those who need this type of support.

Tusla, which falls within the remit of my Department, has statutory responsibility for the care and protection of victims of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. It provides funding for about 60 organisations across the country, including those providing emergency refuge for adults and children fleeing domestic violence, 16 rape crisis centres and a range of community-based domestic violence supports. In 2021, I increased Tusla's allocation for domestic, sexual and gender-based violence by €4.7 million to a total of €30 million, €28 million of which is core funding for the services, while a further €2 million is Covid contingency funding to help address the increased demand referred to by both Senators with regard to the pandemic. This is a very significant increase in core funding and indicates the real importance that this Government places on this issue.

Investments in recent years have seen the roll-out of child-centred services for younger victims of domestic and sexual violence. Senator Pauline O'Reilly will know about the Barnahus pilot project in Galway for child and adolescent victims of sexual violence. It is a very positive development and we plan to expand this service to locations in Dublin and Cork as well.

Last December, I got Cabinet agreement to commence a process to introduce paid domestic violence leave and benefit. Consultations on this proposal are ongoing. I spoke with trade unions and employers' groups about this issue last week and I will bring forward proposals to

Cabinet by the end of the year.

Senator Seery Kearney raises a particular report with regard to Garda statistics in the Dublin South Central area. Tusla has advised me that almost €1.5 million of the €4.7 million additional funding is being directed to services in the greater Dublin area - Dublin, Wicklow and Kildare. Tusla has also advised me that additional domestic violence outreach services are being rolled out in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown and County Wicklow to enhance supports for both women and children experiencing domestic violence, with additional outreach planned to come on stream in the Dublin South Central area. The number of Safe Home accommodation units with support services in Dublin will reach 20 in 2021, which is an increase of 13 from last year. Tusla has provided additional resources to the national 24-7 domestic violence and sexual violence helplines, which are operated by Women's Aid and the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre. Senator Pauline O'Reilly referred to COPE Galway. It opened a new and improved domestic violence refuge in the city supported by Tusla. Saoirse Women's Refuge also opened a new refuge in the south Dublin area in early 2020.

Both Senators will be aware that Tusla is currently undertaking a review of emergency accommodation, which will consider the current level of provision and the configuration of accommodation that may be needed. It is the intention that this review will inform decisions around future investment in refuge accommodation for victims of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence.

**Senator Mary Seery Kearney:** I thank the Minister. I really welcome the increase in funding. In particular, the Safe Ireland initiative has been a very successful one. I am particularly grateful for the work of Saoirse and the Inchicore women's support service, which provide fantastic services in the Dublin South Central area. I really welcome the report. We need to know what is and is not working to ensure we are funding correctly into the future.

**Senator Pauline O'Reilly:** I thank the Minister for all the commitments. I look forward to more updates from him in the future. We must recognise that beyond the kind of measures outlined by him, it is a deep-rooted problem within our society and the causes need to be tackled. It concerns awareness about consent and coercive control, which has been tolerated for generations. These also have to be part of what we now do as a society and as a government. I am hopeful that, with some of the recent sentences handed down by the courts and the commitments in our education system, we are turning a corner. However, I believe we have a long way to go before many of us will be fully convinced.

**Deputy Roderic O'Gorman:** As we called it out in the programme for Government, domestic, sexual and gender-based violence is an epidemic in our country. We are ever more conscious of this during Covid-19. The high reporting figures are good because they represent a sign that primarily women are coming forward to say what is happening. The Government has identified this epidemic and is going to address it. There are four major areas besides all the other items that Senator O'Reilly mentioned, including the additional funding - we are going to continue that through each budget - and the audit of responsibility. We need to design our structures better because they are not working fully as they currently are. We are going to redesign them. The audit response should be with us in the next number of months.

We will be one of the first countries in Europe to adopt domestic violence paid leave and that will be essential in recognising the poverty that so many people fleeing domestic violence fear. Finally, we have the accommodation review. We are aware of the desperate need for more

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accommodation throughout the country. We are taking a step back and looking to see where it is. Is it emergency accommodation? Is it step-down accommodation? We are asking what is needed so we can better plan and put in resources, especially capital resources to initiate a refuge or supported accommodation. This is a commitment for the Government. It is a job between myself, the Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee, and other Ministers and we are absolutely committed to addressing this issue.

*Sitting suspended at 11.40 a.m. and resumed at 12.05 p.m.*

### **Unveiling of Portrait of Elizabeth O'Farrell**

**An Cathaoirleach:** Today is International Women's Day, Lá Idirnáisiúnta na mBan, a celebration of the social, cultural, economic and political achievements of women. The day also marks a call to action for accelerated gender parity. We all know all too well that that parity and gender equality eludes us still. The painting being unveiled in the Seanad today is entitled *Her Surrender* by Leitrim artist, Sinead Guckian. It symbolises the all too frequent airbrushing of the contribution of women from Irish history. Nurse Elizabeth O'Farrell was the woman who carried Pádraig Pearse's message seeking the end to hostilities during the 1916 Rising. She was airbrushed out of the photograph of Pearse surrendering to Brigadier General Lowe. As stated by the artist, she is remembered for being forgotten. The unveiling of the painting in the Seanad rectifies in a very small way that historic wrong done to Elizabeth O'Farrell.

I invite the Leader to unveil the painting on behalf of Seanad Éireann.

I thank the Leader for unveiling the painting on behalf of the House. I take this opportunity to point out that she is just the third woman to lead Seanad Éireann in its 99-year history and this is only the second time in the history of the proceedings of the Houses that a piece of art has been unveiled in the Houses. On the previous occasion, John F. Kennedy unveiled the painting of the flag of the 69th regiment during his address in 1963. I thank the Leader for unveiling the painting, in a small way marking International Women's Day.

I invite the Leader to outline the Order of Business.

**Senator Regina Doherty:** It was an honour to unveil the piece of beautiful art and to accept on it on behalf of all here this morning. I thank the artist, Sinead Guckian, who depicted the scene of the message being delivered at the end of the hostilities of Easter week. She has done a beautiful job. The task now is to find a fitting and suitable place to hang it in the halls of the Oireachtas.

### **An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business**

**Senator Regina Doherty:** Happy International Women's Day to all. The Order of Business is No. 1, statements to mark International Women's Day, to be taken at 2.30 p.m. and to conclude at 4.30 p.m., with the opening contribution of the Minister not to exceed ten minutes,

those of group spokespersons not to exceed eight minutes, and those of all other Senators not to exceed five minutes, with a Minister to be given not less than six minutes to reply to the debate; No. 2, statements to mark Seachtain na Gaeilge, to be taken at 4.45 p.m. and to conclude at 6.15 p.m., with the opening contribution of the Minister not to exceed ten minutes, those of group spokespersons not to exceed eight minutes, and those of all other Senators not to exceed five minutes, with a Minister to be given not less than six minutes to reply to the debate; and Private Members' business, No. 41, motion 9, to be taken at 6.30 p.m., with the time allocated to this debate not to exceed two hours.

**Senator Lisa Chambers:** I join the Leader in congratulating the artist, Sinead Guckian, on the beautiful piece of art she has gifted to the Oireachtas. It is a proud day to be in the Chamber to see the unveiling of such a beautiful piece of art. It is incredible to think that someone like Nurse O'Farrell was effectively airbrushed out of our history. As stated by the Cathaoirleach, the painting goes a small way towards rectifying that action.

I also join the Leader in wishing everyone a happy International Women's Day. I thank the Cathaoirleach for facilitating a number of Commencement matters this morning on issues pertinent to female members of our society. It was good to have such strong debate in the Seanad this morning.

The first issue I wish to raise is that of women's healthcare in this country. We have touched upon certain aspects of it over the course of the past two weeks in particular and, this morning, Senator McGreehan again raised the issue of endometriosis. There are many areas of women's healthcare that are far behind where they need to be, including maternity care, incontinence services, menopause, endometriosis and many other areas of women's healthcare that need additional support and direct funding. Those areas need additional support and direct funding and, in that line, I ask the Leader to facilitate a debate with the Minister for Health specifically around the area of the new women's health task force. We should hear from the Minister what he and the task force plan to do to address the clear deficiencies in the provision of women's healthcare in this country. We have a long way to go in that regard.

I will raise another matter on which a debate would be pertinent. The Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications today announced a consultation with EirGrid on the future of Ireland's electricity system. That exciting public consultation will take place over a 14-week period. I particularly like the idea that we might look to rebalance things across the regions and that, for example, data centres would be asked or encouraged by the Government to locate in areas where the grid is not under pressure. That would mean such centres not locating in the east of the country, as they have been doing, but coming to, for example, the west of Ireland. My county of Mayo would be happy to welcome new investment in energy. There is plenty of space and that would be a welcome initiative in rebalancing investment and growth across the regions. It would be interesting to hear directly from the Minister about that consultation process and what plans he has for the future of our country's electricity system as we aim to achieve 70% renewable electricity by 2030. It is an ambitious, high but achievable target. The House would welcome a debate on the matter.

I listened to one of Ireland's favourite professors, Luke O'Neill, on "The Pat Kenny Show" this morning, discussing the roll-out of vaccines. There have been challenges, difficulties and delays in the roll-out. The people of the country appreciate that our difficulty is supply. We have, in some respects, little control when companies do not meet the levels of delivery they said they would. The professor suggested that we should be exploring the Sputnik V vaccine,

towards which there was a little snobbery initially. The findings have been good in over 30 countries that have administered that vaccine. I know that the European Medicines Agency, EMA, is looking at it. We, as a country, should be open to all vaccines that are effective, working well and safe to use. The priority for the Government must be to vaccinate as many people as possible as quickly as possible.

**Senator Rónán Mullen:** Replying for the other side of the House, as it were, I wish all the women here, all the women of the world and, indeed, all of us a happy International Women's Day. I add my few words of thanks to the women of the world and the women I know for all that they are and do.

I raise the so-called zero Covid proposal for even harsher lockdown measures for the remainder of the year. A report was published recently of the international correspondence and workings of the so-called Independent Scientific Advisory Group which has been pushing for a zero Covid approach. Many of the members of the group are virtually household names, such is the regularity of their appearances in the media. Its internal correspondence suggests that the group is not basing its positions on strict science but, in fact, has been massaging the facts to try to entice politicians into adopting a zero Covid strategy. Four weeks ago, the head of the group wrote to its members asking them to "look for ways to increase insecurity, anxiety and uncertainty" and to "go after people and not institutions" because "people hurt faster than institutions". He stated that ridicule "is man's most powerful weapon" and that "the threat of a thing is usually more terrifying than the thing itself". In other words, people should be scared into accepting zero Covid.

That correspondence reads like something out of Saul Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals*. Perhaps it is something from that book. The Social Democrats appear to have bought into the proposals. The correspondence suggests that the group has been deliberately adjusting its targets for zero Covid in order to convince that party's leadership to subscribe to the strategy. All of this information is in the public domain and yet, incredibly, it has not been reported by RTÉ or in the print media. Why is such a group allowed to scaremonger without at least being challenged by politicians or the media on its internal conversations about which we now know? When a medical doctor advocates hurting people because "people hurt faster than institutions", should that person's views be supported by Oireachtas Members and reported uncritically in the media?

I welcome the fact that University College Cork, UCC, has decided not to pursue the joint college arrangement with Minzu University in China. The arrangement would have seen courses across a number of disciplines being delivered jointly. Minzu University has been the focus of concern since one of its teaching staff and a member of the Uyghur community, Mr. Ilham Tohti, and several of his students were arrested and jailed on the basis of alleged separatist activity on its campus. It concerns me that UCC seems to be afraid to say that it has taken this latest decision on ethical grounds. The fear seems to be, according to one international consultant's report, that it had about the need for tact and the danger of leading the Chinese authorities to consider that they had lost face. Does this not show what a dangerous player we are dealing with in China when it comes to transparency and respect for human dignity? That is why I have been calling on the Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to examine existing and planned relationships between Irish colleges and universities and Chinese counterparts. There is much more that needs to be examined and said but UCC's decision to freeze the joint college arrangement is at least a welcome first development.

**Senator Mark Wall:** I join with the Leader and previous speakers in thanking Sinead,

the artist, for the magnificent portrait in front of us. Let the message be that we will no longer stand for the airbrushing of women out of history. This is a message that needs to go out loud and clear. I wish the Leader and all my female colleagues in the Oireachtas, and all the female officials and staff who assist us so professionally every day, mná na hÉireann indeed, a happy International Women's Day.

I raise a number of ongoing matters with the Leader. The first relates to childcare. I continue to receive representations from families who continue to struggle with the cost of childcare. As I have said before in this House, too many families rise early each morning to ferry their children to childcare facilities, which most of the time is part of a commute for the parents to attend work. This childcare costs families the equivalent of a second mortgage but they are left with no option but to pay it in the absence of a national childcare scheme. As a result, family life and community life in the so-called commuter counties around the capital are affected daily. We must take a more holistic approach to community life. We must address the cost of childcare and, most importantly, we must address the obstacles that such costs put in front of young families. I ask the Leader to invite the Minister to the House so that we can debate the childcare issue again.

I raise again the urgent need to review the means test for carer's allowance. I am currently dealing with two cases out of a number I have been presented with where both applicants are above the current limits. These limits have not changed since 2008. I think we can all agree that Ireland has changed much in those 13 years. In both those cases, women have given up their careers to look after loved ones. I have no doubt, and in both cases medical professionals have said, that those they are caring for would be in State care were it not for the 24-7 care provided by those involved. In replies to parliamentary questions by Labour Party colleagues, we were informed that almost 50% of carer's allowance applications have been refused. There is no question that both these young women never gave a second thought to putting their careers on hold to provide 24-7 care for their loved ones. I ask the Leader to bring my concerns to the attention of the Minister. I am sure that there are many more in this House with similar stories of the sacrifice that many are making, which effectively saves the State billions of euro.

In the time that I have left, I want to reflect on International Women's Day again. It is important that we all acknowledge how all our lives are influenced and shaped by the women who are most important to us. I wish to acknowledge that here today. I thank them all. I also want to remember those special women who shaped my life and gave me a love of community and place who are unfortunately no longer with us today.

**Senator Pauline O'Reilly:** I thank everyone for their contributions. It is lovely to hear contributions from across the genders on International Women's Day. It is important and I join with my colleagues in congratulating Sinead Guckian. It is a wonderful piece of art. Not only does it remind us of the airbrushing but it also reminds us of how few pictures of women there are on these walls. We need to change that. The Cathaoirleach is involved in that and I thank him for that.

We had a number of wonderful Commencement matters this morning. This over-dependence on women when it comes to the climate crisis has to be recognised. It is called the eco-gender divide. It is well recognised. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and Oxfam have stated that women are bearing the brunt of climate collapse all around the world. In times of drought, they walk farther and farther for water. They have the domestic chores laid at their feet and they do not have economic independence, including in Ireland, so when it

comes to making decisions on sustainability in consumer affairs and domestic chores, it usually does fall to women as well to make them. Advertisers have often taken advantage of that and they have advertised so-called eco or green products directly to women. That is alienating men more and more from the sustainability and greening that we need to see as we move forward. It is the job of all of us to do this now.

I welcome the consultation on EirGrid. When we look at all of the commitments in the programme for Government, they are very much dependent on a secure and stable electricity grid in order to make that happen. I urge everybody to get involved in the consultation. As Senator Chambers said, it is an opportunity to spread things out around the country but it is also an opportunity to look at the significant job ahead of us and to make sure that we have the infrastructure in place to deliver.

Last, but very much not least, I remind the House of the task force on non-pay matters relating to the work of councillors that was examined in the Moorhead report. I urge the Leader to continue to apply pressure to make sure that we get results on that, especially on maternity leave. A Green Party councillor, Clare O'Byrne, having had a baby in December, announced today that she can no longer continue with public representation. That is the only reason she is giving up her seat. The fact that one cannot take a break and there is no proxy voting or administrative help adds to the lack of maternity leave.

**Senator Lynn Boylan:** I apologise for arriving late and for trying to do two jobs.

**An Cathaoirleach:** The Senator arrived just on time.

**Senator Lynn Boylan:** Women are familiar with that situation. I am on a committee as well as in the Seanad Chamber.

Today, I wish to raise access to justice, in particular for women. We have good laws, but they are not enforced or people do not have the resources to access justice to see them enforced. I wish to raise two barriers that prevent women accessing justice. The first relates to the housing assistance payment, HAP, and accessing free legal aid. The problem is that HAP counts towards income when calculating eligibility for civil legal aid. That does not make sense because HAP and homeless HAP are never paid to the tenant, they are paid directly to the landlord. This is especially an issue for women accessing justice since the majority of people in receipt of HAP are women, as are the majority of single-parent households. It is especially relevant for those who have fled from domestic violence situations who are unable to take proceedings for maintenance or to defend applications for access to children. People, mostly women, are being denied access to the courts every day as a result of this discriminatory interpretation of the law. At present, two individuals with the same income are treated differently when it comes to applying for civil legal aid.

Another issue is that women are not able to access free legal aid when they take equality cases to the Workplace Relations Commission. Speaking in today's edition of *The Irish Times*, Eilis Barry, chief executive of the Free Legal Advice Centres, FLAC, said that fact almost certainly meant many employment discrimination or sexual harassment cases were simply not being taken, although there could be a raft of cases out there. It is not because there has not been a breach of law or because the case is not strong enough, rather, it is because the victims do not have the resources to get representation. Technically, victims have the opportunity to represent themselves but here too there is more systemic injustice because in addition to being

less well-off in monetary terms, people on lower incomes face greater levels of time poverty. This is especially true for women who take on more care work, so even if they wanted to represent themselves, women are at a disadvantage. This puts workers in the lowest-paid jobs in a vulnerable position. During the pandemic we saw displays of solidarity with front-line workers such as retail staff and delivery drivers, but it is time we back up the clap with tangible action that will make a difference. It is time for tangible change. While I welcome the commitment in the programme for Government to examine this issue, it would be good to get clarity from the Minister for Justice on whether that will be an independent investigation or one that will be carried out by the Department. We will hear a lot today about how far we have come but these two issues are just the tip of the iceberg and show how far we have left to go to achieve gender equality in Ireland.

**Senator Alice-Mary Higgins:** I propose an amendment to the Order of Business, that No. 7 be taken before No. 1.

On International Women's Day, we are looking at the portrait of nurse Elizabeth O'Farrell. It is very important to note not just the contribution she made in the shaping of Ireland but also that she continued to serve for the rest of her life in the National Maternity Hospital. An issue I highlighted in the Commencement debate this morning, one which I hope the House will debate, is the importance of ensuring the National Maternity Hospital is in public ownership, under public control and subject to public accountability.

We talk about how far we have to go but one of the things about going further is that we also need to change course. For too long, Ireland has not lived up to its responsibilities to women and has found ways to outsource those responsibilities, such as the delivery of essential services, especially to pregnant women. It is important that we now have the kind of State that Elizabeth O'Farrell fought for, one that takes responsibility for women and has real equality for women and men.

To move from the national to the international, given that it is International Women's Day, I will highlight two issues that I hope we will have a chance to discuss further over the coming weeks. One is the very worrying rollback on reproductive rights for women in Poland. Today, parliamentarians across Europe are taking a stand in support of women because we know the impact those cruel laws can have in terms of issues like fatal foetal anomaly and we know the very real experiences. Ireland is one of the few countries that knows what that can mean. I send solidarity on that today.

I also send solidarity to front-line health workers across the world - nurses like Elizabeth O'Farrell - so many of whom are women and so many of whom are balancing work for society with the work of care. I am concerned that we are still not facing up to our responsibilities to show solidarity in providing access to vaccination for front-line health workers who are women. Nurses all over the world are still awaiting vaccination. I hope we will have a specific debate on COVAX and the coronavirus treatment acceleration program, CTAP, and how Ireland can step up its support, including by applying pressure on intellectual property sharing, if necessary through the World Health Organization, to ensure that front-line workers, the new generation of Elizabeth O'Farrells, are given support and care, as they have given care to their societies.

I wish a happy International Women's Day to all of my wonderful colleagues across the House and to the women of Ireland more widely.

**Senator Robbie Gallagher:** Ireland, like many other countries in the European Union, has been let down by the vaccination roll-out. Delays in vaccine deliveries have resulted in some people, unfortunately, having to wait longer than they should have waited to get the vaccine. While it is always important to have a plan A, it is also important to have a plan B and plan C when it comes to the uncertainty of vaccination roll-out. I propose that we call Boris Johnson and have a conversation on the potential to source a supply of vaccine from the UK.

Everyone knows that the level of vaccination in Northern Ireland is far ahead of the level here in the South. We also know that, unfortunately, the level of infection in the Border counties, from County Donegal to County Louth, has been higher throughout the pandemic than in other parts of the country. Unfortunately, County Monaghan, where I live, has topped the charts in respect of the incidence rate. While restrictions on both sides of the Border are currently aligned, the success of the vaccination roll-out in the North means that society will open up more quickly in the North than it will in the South. I welcome the comments of the First Minister, Arlene Foster, who yesterday suggested that the two Governments should have a conversation about the roll-out of vaccination, with particular regard to citizens of the Border counties. I ask that we communicate to the Taoiseach, the Minister for Health and the Government that such a conversation should take place because increased movement of people along the Border will have repercussions for Border counties, which will be at a different level from counties in Northern Ireland.

**Senator Mary Seery Kearney:** I thank the Cathaoirleach very much for his intentionality, his specific desire to see the visibility of women increased and the initiative regarding the painting today. The painting is truly lovely and is symbolic of a carer who was airbrushed out of the story. I will spend my remaining time this morning speaking about carers, who tend to be forgotten. In recent conversations we have had with Family Carers Ireland, we have been told that no one ever asks carers how they are. People ask how whomever they care for is but no one ever asks how they are doing. Today, I want us to remember that more than 60% of the carers in Ireland are women. I want to reach out and ask how they are today and to encourage them to take five minutes, to have a cup of coffee and to think of themselves.

I am very grateful that the programme for Government builds on the national carers strategy, launched by a Government of which my party was part, and that we have a refreshed impetus to provide supports for family carers. I call for us to step that up and make sure that we deliver on the GP card and on the other additional supports promised to such carers.

Another key matter at which we need to look is how emergency respite care is provided. If a carer has to go to hospital for an emergency appointment or if an appointment is cancelled and he or she has an opportunity to be seen early, he or she does not have access to immediate respite care. Care for carers themselves is left at the bottom of the list because there is no emergency respite care. I would like the House to have an opportunity to present those views or to have them communicated to the Minister. I have done so myself, as have others. It is important that carers are remembered on this particular day.

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** Guím Lá Idirnáisiúnta na mBan sona ar an gCeannaire agus ar gach bean sa Teach agus sa tír. At the outset, I compliment the Leader. I listened to her speaking about women in politics on RTÉ a few days ago. She is a powerful leader for women and a powerful example for them to follow. I want to put that on record today.

It breaks my heart to come in here today and find myself again speaking about the Defence

Forces. I read in *The Irish Times* this morning that the recommendations of the Chief of Staff on the return and recommissioning of officers was rejected by the Minister on the advice of the Department. The most senior military officer in the country made a recommendation only for it to be whipped away by some civilian. The Defence Forces are falling apart. Some 800 people sought to rejoin but only 62 were accepted. These 800 veterans came forward to stand up for the cause. If we have learned nothing else from Covid-19, we have learned that a properly resourced and staffed Defence Forces would have been there to provide the national surge capacity required over the past year. Over the last number of years, we have watched the destruction of the Defence Forces. There have been issues with the medical corps, the absence of technical pay and the closing of the Army apprenticeship school. This school was closed with six weeks' notice while the teachers were paid for the rest of the year. Civil instructors, when they were there, were paid. The Army Ranger Wing is falling apart. With regard to the Naval Service, we have deep-sea cables coming into the country but have nobody to watch them. There are also issues with the Air Corps and air traffic controllers. We did something for the pilots but did nothing for the air traffic controllers or the technicians.

All developed democracies nest their national emergency management contingent capabilities in their military. In times of non-emergencies, these mature democracies use their reserve national surge capacity for soft power projection internationally, chiefly in the medical engineering and logistic humanitarian response base. Ireland is losing out nationally and internationally in this space by not having an additional surge capacity. We have lost our Reserve Defence Force. I am running out of time so I will leave it at that. This is beyond funny. The Minister stated in *The Sun* today that we need to recruit more than we are losing. One cannot recruit oneself out of a crisis.

**Senator Denis O'Donovan:** I congratulate the people involved. It is a great day for mná na hÉireann. As the youngest of a big family and having seven sisters, I wonder whether I was henpecked or whether I was subject to the petticoat government. It is a mixed view but I think neither, to be honest.

I ask the Leader to provide a debate on the future of rural Ireland. This stems from the closure of post offices and the recent announcement by Bank of Ireland to close many of its branches, which are spread primarily around rural Ireland such as west Cork, west Kerry, Connemara, Clare, and Donegal. I live in a beautiful village called Schull. It is likely that in the next three to four years the three post offices in the peninsula, Goleen, Schull and Ballydehob, will close. For a person living in the village of Goleen, the former home of the great P.J. Sheehan, the nearest Bank of Ireland is 28 miles away. I had to laugh about a report I read the other day - I sent an email to the bank and it came back to me stating the same - that in most instances there will be a post office within 500 meters of a Bank of Ireland or an AIB bank. What a joke. I am sure the same would apply to the Beara Peninsula, Dingle, Connemara, Clare and such places.

I would like to see a debate on the future of rural Ireland. If one considers the closures of the post office, which are imminent, and the way Bank of Ireland is treating the people of rural Ireland, it is a very serious situation. I would like a debate to be held on these related issues for the future of the already suffering people in the peninsulas of west Cork and west Kerry and places like Connemara and west Clare. If we do not have such a debate and raise our voices, further erosion of services will occur in rural Ireland.

**Senator Aisling Dolan:** I wish the Leader of the House a happy International Women's Day. I thank Sinead Guckian for such a wonderful work of art. It is absolutely beautiful.

Today, we celebrate hard-won achievements by both men and women for equality and gender diversity. However, unless women are sitting at the table, then we do not have equality and we are not making the decisions. Angela Merkel spoke about the EU gender equality report and the impact of Covid-19 on equality. All of the lower income jobs lost in the hospitality, travel and retail sectors were women's jobs. The majority of those working on the front line are women. Over three quarters of our healthcare and social care workers are women. There are Covid-19 task forces in 87 countries and, guess what, 85% are made up of males. Only one third of EU health ministers are women. According to Central Statistics Office, CSO, data, 12% of leaders across all of our businesses are women. Guess how many are the chairs of boards. A total of 7.4% are chairs of boards in Ireland. We need to see women in leadership roles. Look at this Chamber: 40% female. It shows the hunger for our voices to be heard. In 2019, 24% of councillors were women, and I was one of those. I am delighted to see the announcement by the Minister of State, Deputy Burke, of more than €126,159 being given to support Women for Election.

I say "thank you" to the women who have forged a path, to President Mary Robinson, who broke the mould and gave us hope, and to President Mary McAleese. I pay tribute to my own mother, Teresa Dolan née Caulfield, who showed me that I could put my hand to anything, who gave me my strength of character and is my voice of reason. I pay tribute to both my grandmothers, Mary Ellen - Ma Dolan - and Margaret Caulfield - strong women, and my father and brothers, all the women and men who supported me on this journey in public life. I also pay tribute to the women from my area, such as Joan Burke. There is a book coming out today, *Proud to Serve*, which refers to Joan Burke, the first female TD from Roscommon, who topped the polls in 1965 and opposed the marriage ban. In 1957 Ms Brigid Hogan Higgins from Kilrickle in Galway was the first female Deputy in more than 20 years. There were only four female Deputies at the time. I wish Ms Hogan Higgins, who turns 88 years young this week, a happy birthday. The stories of more than 28 women are in that book and it is wonderful to pay tribute to those women who represented us here. We need diversity and gender balance in all walks of life to make our world richer with such innovation and creativity. The call for women's day is "choose to challenge". Now is the chance for Seanadóirí, both men and women, to do it. Let us do it every single day.

**An Cathaoirleach:** I thank the Senator for paying tribute to those people who contributed to life in Ireland.

**Senator Marie Sherlock:** I wish my fellow Senators and all those who are watching a happy International Women's Day. I second the proposed amendment to the Order of Business that the Quality in Public Procurement (Contract Preparation and Award Criteria) Bill 2021 be introduced.

Most of us, as public representatives, are familiar with the appalling waiting list for speech and language therapy services, the absence and huge under-supply of child psychologists in our public health system and the long waiting list for early intervention assessments. In some instances families in north Dublin city are waiting up to four years. I understand the HSE is trying to reconfigure and centralise its services for children with complex needs and that it is trying to bring those individual services together into area based network teams. For the most part, I hope it will bring about a better service and will be successful in the reconfiguration.

However, I am deeply alarmed and concerned by what is about to happen to the Holy Family School for the Deaf Cabra, an area in which I am based. The school is about to lose its on-

site specialist speech and language therapy service as a result of the changes to the progressing disability strategy. The service is integral to the delivery of education and the development of children in this school. Some 54% of the school's 140 pupils rely on speech and language therapy service.

What will happen when that specialised speech and language therapy service is lost? There will be increased cost for the HSE because of additional interpretive services every time a child from that school has to get speech and language therapy services. School days will be lost because children must travel from as far as counties Longford and Meath and other areas across the greater Dublin area to attend this school. I want the Leader to ask the Government if it is acceptable this school and another school for the deaf will be forced to lose their on-site specialist speech and language therapy service. What message does it send to a system already creaking at the seams in trying to provide services to children with additional educational needs?

I ask that the Minister with responsibility for disability be brought to the House and, more particularly, that the Leader conveys the concern to Government. It is not just about health; it is about education.

**An Cathaoirleach:** In accordance with the order of the House on Friday, 5 March 2021, the House will stand suspended for 15 minutes and will resume in the Dáil Chamber.

*Sitting suspended at 12.43 p.m. and resumed at 1.02 p.m.*

**Senator Diarmuid Wilson:** I congratulate the Cathaoirleach, the Leader and everybody involved in putting together the commemoration to mark International Women's Day, particularly the unveiling by the Leader of the painting by Sinéad Guckian, a former councillor. I hope we find a prominent position for it in this House. I again congratulate everybody involved.

I call for a debate on defending democracy around the world. The threat posed to democracy as a form of government comes in many guises and from many sources. It is both external, as is happening in Hong Kong, and internal, as we see in Myanmar. However, it also comes from complacency and the idea that democracy is so perfect and so fair a system it does not require constant work and attention to ensure its continuance. It requires constant and active attention. As one of the oldest continuous democracies, we have a duty to advocate for democracy by standing unashamedly with other democracies.

Our deep respect and affection for the Chinese people and their great culture should not prevent us from speaking out loudly and clearly against China's cruel and totalitarian regime. It is not in our ethical or commercial interest to continue to speak softly about the atrocities committed for, and by, the Chinese Communist Party. We must stand firmly with those in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan who stand up for democracy. Our Government must recognise there are other emerging markets in the region, that value and defend democracy, with which we can stand and should do business. Colleagues have raised the issue of China in this House, as I have, on many occasions. However, we need to extend that debate to address democracy across the entire world. Democratic states should stand up for other democratic states. I look forward to that debate.

**Senator Emer Currie:** Happy International Women's Day 2021, or is it 2017? According to a PricewaterhouseCoopers women in work index, progress for women in work could be back to 2017 levels by the end of this year. Some are rightly calling the effect of Covid-19 a global "shecession". The index measures 33 OECD countries across the gender pay gap, labour

force participation, women's unemployment and full-time employment. Ireland has mixed results. The gender pay gap has lessened, but the female unemployment rate in 2020 increased at double the rate of men's. For example, that women hold 76% of the jobs in healthcare means they are not only more vulnerable to contracting Covid-19, but also to becoming unemployed because of it. Traditionally, women are more likely to be in temporary, part-time and precarious employment at 26.5% versus 15.1% of males across the EU. Central Statistics Office, CSO, figures tell us that just over 9% of women compared with 0.4% of men took unpaid leave during the pandemic. Women are more vulnerable to redundancies right now and to the long-term economic effect of Covid-19 because of pressures on their time and their Internet bandwidths as well as structural inequalities.

I hope that today is not an exercise in women talking to themselves. We have glaring problems with the gender pay gap, the gender care gap and the lack of investment in public services in care. There are plenty of men and women in the House to have a genuine discussion on the barriers to sharing care work in houses across the country. We need a review of care at every stage of life and investment in our care economy as part of a gender-sensitive recovery. We cannot afford not to. If the statistics around employment do not convince Members, then what about this? Persistent disparities in employment participation cost Europe more than €335 billion per year, or 2.41% of EU GDP in 2019.

**Senator Paul Gavan:** I congratulate the Leader and the Cathaoirleach on the unveiling this afternoon. It was great to see.

Since it is International Women's Day, I will begin by paying a personal tribute to a hero of mine, Margaretta D'Arcy. She is a tremendous peace campaigner, activist, socialist, actor and writer whom I have regularly met for many years on the peace trail at Shannon Airport. I salute her among all other colleagues on this important day.

I wish to highlight a fantastic report on inequality by Unite the Union, entitled "Hungry Bellies are not Equal to Full Bellies: Exploring inequality and deprivation in Ireland". It is a devastating analysis of inequality and puts to bed some nonsensical statements that were made a few months ago in this Chamber about inequality decreasing. The statistics and analysis are all there, but I was struck by the personal testimonies of front-line workers like those in Cork Penny Dinners who told us that poverty was growing constantly and there was no equality where poverty was concerned. Inner City Helping Homeless cites an increase of more than 400% in the number of homeless children between 2015 and 2019. As such, it is timely for us to debate inequality. We could flesh out all of these details.

This weekend marked the anniversary of a dark day in the history of Limerick. One hundred years ago, a mayor and former mayor - Seoirse Clancy and Michael O'Callaghan - were murdered. In the early hours of 7 March, crown forces, including the RIC and the Black and Tans, burst into their homes and shot them dead in front of their families. At the same time on the south side of the city, Joseph O'Donoghue from County Westmeath, which is my home county, was removed from his house. His body was found the next morning with 18 bullet holes in it. This was a significant weekend for Limerick and one that we wanted to mark in many ways. Unfortunately, Covid has prevented us from doing so thus far. I hope that we will get the chance to do so later in the year, but the House should be sure of this - Limerick remembers its murdered martyrs.

**An Cathaoirleach:** Ar dheis Dé go raibh a n-anamacha dílse.

**Senator Shane Cassells:** Broad-ranging issues have been discussed in the Chamber to mark International Women's Day, but one matter that is of particular importance to me from my previous job as a sports journalist is that of inequality in funding for women's sport. The disparity between women's and men's sport remains as large as ever and the efforts to address it are painfully slow. I pay tribute to Mary O'Connor, CEO of the Federation of Irish Sport, for her work in this regard. I pay tribute also to the various sporting organisations that are responsible for the various codes in soccer, GAA, rugby and track and field. They have not just sat around waiting for something to happen; they are making change happen for themselves. This is best epitomised by the Ladies Gaelic Football Association, LGFA, which, through a great commercial partnership with TG4 and Lidl as its main sponsors, has upped the ante on this issue. Both businesses are to be commended on their advertising campaigns, namely, Real Fans and Levelling the Playing Field.

Are we anywhere near levelling the playing field? Last week, at a meeting of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture Sport and the Gaeltacht, we discussed a letter we had received from Maria Kinsella, the chairperson of the Women's Gaelic Players Association. She sent extensive documentation to us on the funding allocation for women's sport and on the progress made in increasing sport participation. It made for stark reading. She stated that Government grants for a male player stand at €1,363, while for female players, the sum is €424. On gym access, there is no cost for male players whereas 70% of female players pay their own costs, and injury expenses are not much better. My 11-year-old girl, CJ, is passionate about athletics and her favourite book is *Girls Play Too* by Jacqui Hurley from RTÉ, a book of inspiring stories of Irish sportswomen. It is a fantastic book. Jackie designed it to show girls like CJ that Irish girls and women can achieve the highest accolades in sport and, by writing and illustrating the book, to show them the role models who exist in various codes and disciplines. If that book is to mean anything, we Senators, Deputies and the Cabinet need to ensure that funding towards women's sport is equalised and that the Levelling the Playing Field advertisement becomes a reality.

**Senator Vincent P. Martin:** I congratulate all concerned on the unveiling of that stunningly beautiful piece of art this morning, which is so appropriate on International Women's Day. I wish a happy International Women's Day to one and all.

This morning, there was the latest big-time announcement in the battle against Covid. The good news reads:

[T]his week will see the first Covid-19 vaccinations among medically vulnerable people aged between 16 and 69 who are at a very high risk of severe disease and death. ... It is estimated there could be up to 160,000 people aged between 16 and 69 who are deemed to be at a high risk from Covid-19 because of serious illness.

That is all very good. My question is how. These headlines put GPs into a tailspin, and there is great expectation, but there is no commensurate communication and consultation. The respected medical commentator and GP, Dr. Ilona Duffy, stated yesterday that GPs bear the brunt of these big-time announcements. Two practices in her home town were left behind, with no vaccinations. This causes tension because there is such a strong expectation and then people are let down, which heightens and intensifies anxiety. Of that wonderful announcement from earlier, which I warmly welcome, I ask how. Can we please communicate and bring people with us, rather than running to the airwaves with a big-time announcement unless the pieces of the complicated jigsaw are in order?

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I welcome the offer of Ulster unionism's leader at the weekend to give us some vaccines. I was proud that she would care about the entire island of Ireland but embarrassed that this had not been done already. Can we reach out to our brothers and sisters in Great Britain and Northern Ireland, our closest neighbours? This should have happened a long time ago. It should not take prompts, although they are welcome, from the leader of Ulster unionism to put this into our minds.

**Senator Garret Ahearn:** I wish everyone a happy International Women's Day. I have said previously in the Chamber that I am very proud to be a son of a former Deputy, but I am even more proud that it was my mother, because of the obstacles and challenges she had. She was once told that because she had four young boys, she could not possibly be a Deputy. In 1989, however, she became a Deputy, and the first thing we did was reconfigure the garage into a constituency office so that she could rebalance her work life and her home life. I do not think any man would ever consider that option.

Tomorrow night, a book entitled *Proud to Serve* will be unveiled. It is about 28 female politicians who served as Deputies, Senators or MEPs. A section of it contains comments made by a woman 30 years ago about life for women, particularly women in politics. Her remarks still ring true today.

For far too long women have laboured, and sadly continue to labour, under an abundance of discriminatory attitudes, practices and even laws. It has taken the tenacity, valour and obstinate determination of many women over the years to reverse the blatant discrimination against them in the laws. ...

The Constitution is the guiding light for all our laws. It is the soil in which the plant of our law is rooted. Yet, viewed from a woman's point of view, it is an unbalanced document. Women, wherever they get a mention, are by and large relegated exclusively to domestic spheres. No other role is readily seen for women. The language and thinking of the Constitution are male dominated. Yet is it not an ironic twist that remedies for some of the injustices against women have been arrived at by recourse to the Constitution? ... As matters stand, the recognition of equality of women can be won or lost by the attitude to the Constitution by the courts.

I am not at all impressed by the Government's recital of all they are supposed to have done to improve the lot of women. Is it not scarcely a matter for self-congratulation that they have set about righting injustices against half the population? The fact that we still need an Oireachtas Joint Committee on Women's Rights serves to show that women do not yet enjoy full equality in all spheres. The very existence of this committee, and indeed the lack of a men's rights committee, speaks volumes of the position of women in Irish society in 1991.

I think much of what she stated back then still rings true.

**Senator Mary Fitzpatrick:** I commend all my colleagues who have spoken on International Women's Day today. I wish everybody well on the day. I wish to particularly commend our male colleagues who have joined in the celebration with such enthusiasm and sincere interest and commitment to raising the issue of equality. I look forward to speaking on International Women's Day later today.

I wish to draw attention to the fact that the period for public consultation on the report com-

missioned by the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donovan, on the Phoenix Park transport and mobility options is drawing to a close. The deadline is this coming Friday. The Phoenix Park is almost 360 years old. I was lucky enough to grow up beside it. It is an amazing public resource in the heart of our city, comprising more than 1,700 acres. One can walk, cycle, skate, picnic or play Gaelic games, polo or cricket or do whatever one wishes to do there. One can enjoy the biodiversity, including the wild fallow deer. It is an amazing amenity.

A steering committee was set up by the Minister of State, involving the National Transport Authority, Dublin City Council, the Office of Public Works, OPW, and Fingal County Council. I was really disappointed by, and quite critical of, the fact that it did not include local residents. There has now been almost six weeks of public consultation. It has been particularly difficult for residents to engage in that process as a result of Covid which, to be fair to the OPW, has also prevented it from holding public meetings. The deadline is this coming Friday and there are important proposals and suggestions being made, including prioritising pedestrians, prioritising space for cyclists, reducing commuter traffic, restricting access through the Cabra, Ashtown and Knockmaroon gates and introducing a public bus service for the first time to connect Heuston Station with Dublin Zoo, the Ashtown visitor centre and all the way to Broombridge Station in Cabra. There is a lot in the proposals. The deadline is this Friday. I encourage everybody to have their say, particularly as this is a park not just of local importance or importance to the city, but for the whole country and, indeed, for international visitors.

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** Guím Lá Idirnáisiúnta na mBan sona do mo dheirfiúracha. Táim ag lorg díospóireachta leis an Aire Tithíochta, Rialtais Áitiúil agus Oidhreacht, an Teachta Darragh O'Brien, maidir leis an gciste athghiniúna agus forbartha uirbeach. I congratulate all our sisters today on International Women's Day. It is important that we do not just celebrate it today but that we do so every day.

I call on the Leader to have the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, come to the House to have a joined-up debate on the urban regeneration fund and the national development plan, which is in the final stages of its consultative process. The urban regeneration fund was announced last week and it has the potential to unlock the real majesty that is Cork city. There is a fear in Cork that the island of the city, including St. Patrick's Street, is dying a death. We must breathe new life into it. We must regenerate, reimagine and reconfigure the island of Cork city. I understand that Bishop Lucey Park is part of a new urban regeneration fund and we are seeing movement in Grand Parade and the docklands. My concern is that we will not see the island of Cork city being developed and I am asking the Minister to come to the House because I have a fear that Cork city is being left behind. We cannot allow that to happen. Our second city pulls people from Dublin. It is the pivotal city in the southern region of our country and it is important that the Minister comes to the House to debate the urban regeneration fund and the national development plan.

**Senator Regina Doherty:** A wide variety of topics was raised by colleagues. I accept the amendment to the Order of Business; to take No. 7 before No. 1.

Senator Buttimer has requested a debate with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage and I will put that request in for him today. I have no doubt that in the minds of the people who live in Cork, and also of the rest of us because of the contributions people from Cork make about their much-loved city, it will not be allowed to become anywhere close to being second best in Ireland.

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Senator Fitzpatrick spoke with immense pride of her love for the Phoenix Park and that is shared among all of us. We all have fond and happy memories from there, particularly as children going to Dublin Zoo or to see the deer. I look forward to the consultation coming together with recommendations on how we will cherish it in the future.

Senator Ahearn spoke with love, fondness and great pride about his mother's contribution to public life, as he should do. She was one of our pioneering female elected representatives on a national stage and she did the Ahearn family proud. Senator Ahearn's brother, Scott, wrote a beautiful tribute to her over the weekend and it was my privilege to be able to share it. It was really lovely and I congratulate the Ahearn family.

Senator Martin spoke about some of the discomfort that is being shared on our airwaves about the vaccination roll-out. I shared his concerns last week and I welcome that my Daddy, who is one of the over 85-year olds, is finally getting his vaccination today. That is a huge weight off all of our minds. We all received a copy of a communication this morning that was sent to all of our GPs yesterday on the proposed roll-out to the next 160,000 critical people to receive their vaccinations. I take on board the Senator's comments. Communication is key and it needs to be clear, consistent and constant. I will pass that message back on.

Senator Cassells talked about equality of opportunity for women in sport. What he said this morning about equality of opportunity in every aspect of life is true. We must positively discriminate. I know that sometimes we talk about positively discriminating on behalf of women in politics or education and the usual cohorts come out and mention tokenism. We have positively discriminated for men from time immemorial and from the foundation of the State and nobody ever batted an eyelid. The only way we will ever equal the stages of every platform that women and men should have equal access to is if men help us. I do not say that flippantly because one cannot be what one cannot see. Our young women must be able to see leadership in sport, education, politics and every walk of life. It is equally true that men must be able to see men leading in caring professions. Otherwise, they will not want to be what they cannot see. The only way we will change that is in a collective manner. The disparity of the funding between men and women in sport is an absolute crime. However, the only people responsible for that are the 60 Members of this House, the 160 Members of the other House and our Cabinet. We need to shout loudly to make sure the issues about which Theresa Ahearn was speaking in the 1980s and 1990s, which are still so disparate today, are fixed by us and us alone. I thank the Senator for bringing that to the attention of the House.

Senator Gavan spoke about the Unite report. It would be timely to have a debate on the inequality that exists for so many in Ireland and I will make that representation today.

Senator Currie talked about the global "shecession". It is an absolute crime how much Covid has had an impact not just on Irish society but on every society. It has put women back 20 or 30 years. We were so close to having full employment. Senator Currie and I were working last year or the year before on returnships for women to try to get the massive resource of women who are not working back into Irish society. Women have been disproportionately affected in unemployment figures over the past 12 months, which means we will have to redouble our efforts. When the vaccination programme takes hold and allows us to reopen our society, our communities and our economy, we must make sure those women who have been disproportionately affected through their care duties over the past 12 months are encouraged back into the workforce.

Senator Wilson asked for a debate on democracy. I will certainly arrange that in the next few days and the request will go to the Minister.

Senator Sherlock spoke about something that would be a tremendous pity if it were to go ahead. With the advent of the inclusion model, whereby we are trying to put therapies for children into the schools they are in, we might be taking a therapist out of a school that already serves 140 children in Cabra. I will write a letter today on the Senator's behalf to the Minister of State with responsibility for special education and the Minister of State responsible for disability to seek a resolution to that issue.

Senator Dolan spoke about the need to support women and spoke so eloquently about the ladies in her life, that is, her two nannies and her mammy, and how they have propelled her into Irish life.

Senator O'Donovan spoke about the future of rural Ireland and requested a debate on it. I will send that request to the Ministers today.

Senator Craughwell brought up his much loved Defence Forces, as he does nearly every week, and how some of the actions he sees at the moment pain him. That request for a debate has gone to the Minister for Defence and I will give a date for it as soon as one is agreed.

Senator Seery Kearney talked about the need for supports for family carers. That has been more evident than ever during the last 12 months, if it needed to be more evident, and I will request a debate on that too.

Senator Gallagher talked about the delays in the vaccination roll-out, the need for a plan B as well as a plan C and for co-operation North and South. It is nearly 12 months nearly to the day since I sat at the first Cabinet Covid special committee. Its anniversary is tomorrow and it is a tremendous pity that we are still talking about co-operation between the North and the South. At this stage, talk is cheap. We should be doing things. That responsibility lies on everybody North and South, not just the people who are speaking the loudest.

Senator Higgins talked about the need for the National Maternity Hospital to be maintained. I do not think she is alone in her views. We have a long way to go but we have come so far that it would be retrograde for us to be stepping backwards. I note the letter from our eminent obstetrician in *The Irish Times* last week and agree wholeheartedly with him.

Senator Boylan talked about inequality in accessing justice and free legal aid because of HAP, which she has mentioned before. I have written to the Minister but I will follow up again today.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly spoke about the eco gender divide, how, like most issues it falls disproportionately on women and the need for a debate on it.

Senator Wall spoke about childcare costs and the need for a debate on that issue. I will make that request today.

Senator Mullen spoke about the disinformation and dishonesty that has become evident with regard to the zero Covid campaigners. He reflected on certain politicians believing this information, which is a pity. The old saying that goes with us is that when the information changes, our opinions should too. I welcome the fact that people now realise that what we have been doing is in the public's best interests.

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Senator Chambers started off the day by welcoming the beautiful piece of art from Sinead Guckian, as did I. She also spoke about the long way we have to go in the provision of equality in women's healthcare. I will request a debate on that today.

**An Cathaoirleach:** Senator Higgins has moved an amendment to the Order of Business: "That No. 7 be taken before No. 1." The Leader has indicated she is prepared to accept this amendment. Is the amendment agreed? Agreed.

Order of Business, as amended, agreed to.

### **Quality in Public Procurement (Contract Preparation and Award Criteria) Bill 2021: First Stage**

**Senator Alice-Mary Higgins:** I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to give further effect to Directive 2014/24/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 February 2014 and for that purpose to provide for contract award criteria in public contracts, to promote the use of social considerations and the best price-quality ratio and to establish a procedure for departing from best price-quality ratio, to ensure that section 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights Act 2003 applies to every contracting authority to which the said Directive relates in respect of a contract equal to or greater than a determinable monetary threshold, to provide for the issuing of guidelines concerning social considerations, to require annual reporting to each House of the Oireachtas concerning certain matters and to provide for matters connected therewith.

**Senator Paul Gavan:** I second the proposal.

Question put and agreed to.

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

**Senator Alice-Mary Higgins:** Next Friday.

**An Cathaoirleach:** Is that agreed? Agreed.

Second Stage ordered for Friday, 12 March 2021.

*Sitting suspended at 1.31 p.m. until 2.33 p.m.*

### **International Women's Day: Statements**

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Fiona O'Loughlin):** I thank the Cathaoirleach for giving us this opportunity to mark International Women's Day in the Chamber, and thank the Leader and the leaders of the different groups in the House for agreeing with that. I also thank the Cathaoirleach for inviting me, as chair of the Oireachtas Women's Caucus, to chair this session.

As we gather in this Chamber to mark International Women's Day, we must thank all those who have gone before us and upon whose shoulders we stand. We remember Countess Constance Markievicz, the first woman ever elected and of course the very first female Minister. To think that over 100 years later we have had just over 100 women elected is quite simply incredible. I am sure it is not what she anticipated at that time. We must think also of the number of firsts we have had with women in Leinster House and outside it, including: the first woman Minister for Justice, Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, who went on to become the first female European Commissioner; Mary Harney, who was the first female Tánaiste; and Mary Robinson, formerly a Member of this House and the first female President. I had a very engaging session earlier with the Association of Irish Local Government. Councillor Mary Hoade is the first female president of the association.

When we look back to the start of International Women's Day, we see that 15,000 women marched through New York city in 1908 demanding voting rights, better pay and shorter working hours. One year later, on 28 February 1909, the first national women's day was observed in the US. In 1910, a German woman, Clara Zetkin, called for an international women's day to be observed. A conference of over 100 women from 17 countries agreed and International Women's Day was created. In 1913, it was decided to transfer International Women's Day to 8 March and it has been celebrated on that day ever since.

The original aim of that day was to achieve full gender equality. More than 100 years later, this has not been realised in any field. This year's theme, therefore, of choose to challenge is very appropriate and more important than ever. In 2019, women essentially worked for free for 51 days of the year because of the gender pay gap. The World Economic Forum has stated that this pay gap would not be closed until 2186, a truly frightening prospect. I suspect that this is far worse because of the year we have just endured. According to research published two years ago, over one-third of women in the Irish workforce considered leaving or have left professional positions due to opportunity inequalities in their own company. The Duff and Phelps study revealed that 39% of female employees felt that there was a lack of equal opportunities in comparison with their male colleagues. Almost half of those who took part in the study thought the Government should improve shared parental leave options, 77% believed we should work on incentivising flexitime and remote working and 54% said we should force organisations to disclose their gender pay gaps. Two years later, we have learned so much more about remote working and how we can support that. I know the Minister will provide some information about legislation concerning the disclosure of gender pay gaps later.

It is very clear that Ireland needs equal opportunities for both genders to ensure we have a diverse and effective workforce. Today is also a day to reflect on progress we have made, celebrate and encourage the determination of ordinary women doing extraordinary things in our communities and press for change. It is also a time to think of our sisters in other countries with fewer rights than those enjoyed by us and to stand in solidarity with their struggle for equality.

I often think there is a huge responsibility on us as elected females to improve female participation in politics and improve the lives of women in this country. We need women at all levels to change the dynamic, reshape the conversation and make sure women's voices are heard and heeded, not overlooked and ignored. We know that women's voices make a difference. We know that 62% of local councils in India that were female-led had more water than those in male-led councils, while in Norway, there was a direct relationship between women on municipal councils and childcare provisions. Following the motion on period poverty from the women's caucus during the previous mandate, the programme for Government ensured that

this was included.

As to the business of the day, there is no doubt that Covid has severely impacted women in many different ways, from the 78% of our front-line healthcare workers who are female to the women working in essential retail. All the time these women are trying to balance childcare and home schooling. Of course, it has equally impacted on women who do not have employment opportunities because other retail and hospitality have been closed as well. That further widens the gender pay gap and one can see that at present, 4% more women than men are unemployed.

At this stage I will ask the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Deputy O’Gorman, to make a contribution of ten minutes. He is very welcome.

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** I thank Members for the opportunity to speak today about equal opportunities and access for women in all spheres of life, whether it be economic, social, cultural or political. It is important that we have these debates to keep the issue of gender equality live in mainstream politics. I welcome the initiative of the Irish Women’s Parliamentary Caucus to raise the matter. I note the appropriateness of Senator O’Loughlin chairing this session given her role as chairperson of the women’s caucus. I believe the caucus has been an important and significant development in how, as an Oireachtas, we come together to tackle the issues and barriers towards women’s participation in politics and all spheres of life in a co-operative and cross-party manner.

As Senators will be aware, the theme chosen this year for International Women’s Day by UN Women is “Women in leadership: Achieving an equal future in a COVID-19 world.” This theme encourages us to celebrate the tremendous efforts made by women and girls around the world in shaping a more equal future and recovery from the pandemic.

I will speak about the work that is under way across Government to support these principles. Before I do that I would like to reflect for a few moments on the impact the Covid-19 pandemic and all events that surround it have had on women and girls in Ireland and worldwide.

Since February last year, almost 215,000 people in Ireland are confirmed as having contracted Covid-19. We have lost over 4,000 family members, neighbours and friends to this disease. Women are a majority, 52.5%, of confirmed cases and a little under half, 49.8%, of those who have lost their lives. The pandemic has exposed and exacerbated many existing inequalities in society, including inequality that disadvantages women. Healthcare workers are among the occupations most at risk of contracting Covid-19 and make up approximately 26,500, or 12% of the cases. Women are over-represented in the sectors with greater exposure to infection and the sectors with greatest exposure to job losses. Women have carried an unequal share of the unpaid work of keeping families going. Across the population, women’s days involve longer hours and increased stress with implications for their physical and mental health and well-being. The Central Statistics Office surveys have highlighted that women’s well-being is being more adversely affected by the Covid-19 crisis. Women are disproportionately victims of domestic and gender-based violence and at greater risk. An Garda Síochána has reported a 17% rise in calls relating to domestic abuse in 2020, and the response of the Garda through Operation Faoiseamh has been crucial in ensuring that victims can access the supports they need throughout the pandemic.

In addition, my Department has increased funding for domestic, sexual and gender-based

violence services through Tusla by €4.7 million to a total of €30 million in 2021. Domestic violence is not a product of the crisis, however. Sadly, it will remain with us into the future. In keeping with the commitment in the programme for Government, my Department is examining the introduction of paid leave for victims of domestic and intimate partner violence. I note that Sinn Féin brought forward legislation dealing with this issue last year.

As part of the process of addressing the issue of paid domestic violence leave, I have already begun engaging in consultations with service providers, victims' groups, trade unions and employer representative groups. Following these consultations I will be bringing forward legislative proposals.

As I said earlier in the Seanad today, the Government is also advancing an audit of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence services and responsibility across Departments and State agencies. Tusla is undertaking an accommodation review to ascertain the degree of accommodation present for victims. These actions together represent the action the Government is taking against the epidemic of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence in our society.

Covid-19 presented to us as a health crisis, but also as an economic crisis and a social crisis. In our response to the Covid-19 crisis we are afforded an opportunity to re-examine old certainties, to call out and challenge gender stereotypes and attitudes that have restricted opportunities for women and men for so long and to reshape society for the better. A patriarchal society still exists, sexism still exists and women must still face misogyny in everyday life. The world we live in has been transformed entirely by the pandemic. We need to make sure that as we emerge from these difficult times, equality and gender equality are at the forefront of our minds. We have the opportunity to change the world for the better and we must seize that opportunity.

One of my early decisions on taking on this ministerial portfolio has been to chair the strategy committee overseeing the implementation of the national strategy for women and girls and to extend the strategy to the end of 2021. As we look forward to renewed effort to draw the current strategy to a close, it is important that we acknowledge the achievements realised in advancing women's leadership since the strategy was launched in 2017. I have set an ambitious work programme to be achieved by my Department under the strategy this year that will involve expanding the family leave available, including the Government's commitment for a Bill to extend parental leave, which we will address in the Seanad on Friday. If we are to better support women in employment, we need to improve how women are treated throughout the whole pregnancy and improve the supports provided to women after the birth of a child.

The First 5 strategy includes a commitment to undertake a review of the relevant provisions of the Maternity Protection (Amendment) Act 2004 on the issue of extending the current entitlement to paid breastfeeding breaks or paid reduction in working hours for breastfeeding mothers in the workforce from 26 to 104 weeks after the baby's birth. It is proposed to take forward legislative proposals in this regard late in 2021. We also intend to take forward the Gender Pay Gap Information Bill 2019 in the coming weeks. I will be seeking Cabinet approval for an amended Bill in the next fortnight and I hope to see this legislation resumed in the Dáil after Easter and subsequently rapidly passed and enacted.

Childcare, one of the "5-C" barriers named in Senator Bacik's report for this House as potential barriers to women's engagement in political leadership, is an issue we are determined to tackle. In particular, my Department continues to invest in the national childcare scheme and has begun to look at the potential for family leave for Members of the Oireachtas and its legal

and practical implications.

Reflecting on this year's theme of equal access and opportunities for women, it is important that we commend those sectors where progress has been made in increasing women's representation. Sectors in which the greatest gains are being made include those where we have begun to measure and track systematically the representation of women in leadership. In business leadership, the balance for better business initiative has shone a spotlight on gender balance in the governance of our largest companies and the benefits to be accrued by greater diversity. Following a proactive focus, the representation of women among directors of the largest publicly listed companies in Ireland has increased by over nine percentage points, from 18.1% in 2018 to 27.4% in September 2020.

In higher education and research, the measures set out in a national review in 2016 and a task force in 2017 are accelerating progress towards gender equality. To support and ensure sustainable change, a centre for excellence in gender equality is established in the Higher Education Authority and institutions have adopted the Athena SWAN charter. The Government is also investing in the senior academic leadership Initiative, creating additional posts to accelerate gender balance. In 2015, 81% of professorial positions were held by men; by 2019 this was 74%. Leadership and governance is one of the four key strategic areas on which the Sport Ireland policy on women in sport is based. In line with this policy, Sport Ireland now publishes biannual updates of female representation on the boards of sports national governing bodies funded by the State. Female representation, at 24% in 2019, increased to 29% in the first update. This monitoring has grounded Sport Ireland's investment in female leadership capacity and guides governance best practice that supports gender equity.

These are just some examples of the achievements of recent years under the existing strategy. As we move to looking at what will follow the strategy, I want to identify the key areas in which we can make a difference in the coming years. I thank the Acting Chairperson for facilitating the debate and look forward to the contributions from Senators across the House. My colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, will conclude for the Government so I will take this opportunity to wish all Senators a happy International Women's Day.

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Fiona O'Loughlin):** I thank the Minister. In the spirit of true co-operation and solidarity among female representatives, I thank Senator McGreehan for agreeing to swap her time allocation with Senator Chambers before the Brexit committee begins.

**Senator Lisa Chambers:** I thank Senator McGreehan for facilitating me to make a contribution to today's important debate. I wish all of my colleagues a happy International Women's Day. The women leaders in my life are my mum, Mary, my grannies, Phyllis and Bridie, and my three sisters, Ciara, Michelle and Karen. They are my inspiration for the work that I do, the people who surround me every day and drive me to do the work that I do to make this a better country for the women and girls coming up behind us. We all know the statistics and are very much familiar with the gaps and imbalance that still persists for women in Irish life. While we have come a long way, the biggest impediment now to achieving true equality is the notion that we have already got there, that equality is done and dusted and already achieved. We have not achieved equality and there is a long way to go.

Some of the pushback that I often get is that others ask why I am still discussing the matter because I am in politics, got elected and can do whatever I want. It is not as simple and obvi-

ous as that but those barriers are real, ever present and there to be taken down. It is incumbent on us, as public representatives, to lead and be role models for young girls coming behind us, and to young boys who are coming along the way. Those boys should see that this is a country that values equality and wants to reach a point where we can truly say that men and women are equal in all aspects of Irish life.

When we look at our Parliament, less than 23% of Deputies are female and 40% of Senators are female. The percentage of Senators is an example of what can be achieved with determination to achieve balance. Only 25% of councillors are female and there is a considerable imbalance across the regions. Mayo County Council has 30 councillors, only two of whom are female. There is a huge imbalance between rural and urban Ireland at local government level and that needs to be addressed.

We know that Equal Pay Day falls on 9 November. That is the day on which women in this country stop getting paid, effectively, because of the 14.4% gap in gender pay. We think that happens in other countries but not here. It does happen here. Women get paid less and that has a knock-on effect on pensions in later life. Women are at greater risk of being in poverty in later years.

We also know that female representation on boards is not where it needs to be. Only 10% of women comprise corporate boards in this country. The figure is slightly better for State boards where women represent 36% of the total but there is still a bit to go before equality is achieved. Only 7% of women lead those boards. We have a long way to go yet.

It is important that we ask why there is such low representation of women in, for example, political life. Why are women not attracted to entering politics, running for election and staying in politics? What are the challenges that persist? There are times when I get quite frustrated that the debate always seems to centre around caregiving and childcare, as if those things are only the responsibility of women. We know that those issues are significant barriers for women because, time and time again, they are identified as the key reasons women feel they cannot enter public life. They also leave public life for those reasons because they find the balance hard to strike. That is because women are still the primary caregivers in many families and that pressure still falls to them. That is why we, as legislators, need to do an awful lot more to address parental leave to give fathers that opportunity to take time off to be at home so that the women who want and choose to go back to work earlier, or whenever they choose to go back, have the option to do so. As it stands, the high cost of childcare is a financial barrier to some women getting back to work and some families would be worse off if the women went back to work.

We need to challenge some of the stereotypes that persist about women in leadership positions, not only in political life, but in business and every aspect of Irish life. We often hear a man described as ambitious, a great negotiator or a strong advocate for X, Y or Z. A woman who adopts a similar stance is often seen as aggressive, not very nice or a little bit cold. That is the terminology, the language we use to describe women who are just doing their jobs well, want to be ambitious and to succeed in their careers. The words we use to describe women who follow those pathways are always negative while positive wording is used to describe men in similar positions. Sometimes women can be as difficult when criticising each other. It is as important that we do not pull the ladder up after ourselves and that we encourage women to enter politics, public life and business. We should be there to facilitate others coming through and make that as easy as we can. That is why the work of organisations such as Women For Election is fantastic. I have been involved with that organisation since its inception. I have

been through all of its training programmes. The training was top class and I learned so much in those programmes, and the collegiality was also fantastic. I met women from all different parties and none. Some of us entered the Oireachtas together, at the same time. It was fantastic to have access to people who came from different walks of life and wanted to enter into politics, and maybe had different perspectives, but that was okay. I thank the Acting Chairperson for facilitating me. I appreciate Senator McGreehan letting me in. I thank the Minister for being here and wish everybody a happy International Women's Day.

**Senator Sharon Keogan:** Today is a day for women to celebrate but also a day for raising awareness about socioeconomic issues that affect women. It is no exaggeration to say that women in today's society face multiple disparities, from unequal pay in their workplaces to housewife values being imposed upon them in their home life through discrepancies in the system that governs them. All women in Ireland, irrespective of background, face sexism. It is a systemic issue that is present in all facets of society.

In the history of the Seanad, there has only been one female Cathaoirleach, Tras Honan, who was elected in 1982. In 2018, Ireland was ranked the tenth lowest in the EU by the Central Statistics Office for representation of women in the national Parliament, with 22.2% of Deputies being women. In the current Dáil, this percentage has increased by less than 5%. Ten counties have not elected any female independents into local government. There are only four elected female Independent Deputies, who are Deputies Catherine Connolly, Carol Nolan, Marian Harkin and Verona Murphy, along with the five Independent Senators here.

Only three women of colour are currently elected into local government, namely, Hazel Chu in Dublin, Yemi Adenuga in Meath and Uruemu Adejinmi in Longford. No woman of colour has been elected into these Houses. The upcoming by-election for the vacant Seanad positions was a groundbreaking opportunity for political parties to rectify the lack of representation in this House. There is no doubt that women of colour face double the barriers that white women do. This by-election could have been an ideal time in our history to promote our diverse political talent.

I want to shed light on the problems that young women face when growing up. My 16-year-old foster daughter wrote about her experience as a young teenage girl, stating that her experience of sexism has been covert. Since primary school, she has noted differences in the way girls are treated as opposed to boys. She wrote that when studying traditionally male-dominated subjects, such as technical graphics and mathematics, she finds herself being patronised by her male classmates or receiving unsolicited explanations from them. She states that in projects, it is always easier to talk over a girl than a boy and that even in social life, girls are expected to laugh at every joke a boy makes or else be labelled stuck-up, and to brush off sexist behaviour because that is how boys are. She writes that the pressure to crave male validation is ingrained in our culture.

The next paragraph is from my 27-year-old daughter, Aoise, about her experience as a young woman in business. She writes that she co-founded her business with two other women. The business delivers procurement services for businesses and public sector organisations. She states that the procurement space is not an easy one for women. It is often led and made up of white, grey men. She states that having spent the last number of years building the business, they have endured countless sexist encounters, been ignored at networking events, been paid less for speaking slots and have been congratulated for being a lady in business. Would one believe that is possible? She states that it represents a change in the way things are being done

and the way business is done. That is something to be celebrated.

*3 o'clock*

Today is also about celebrating women, and in that spirit I would like to herald all the independent elected women of Ireland. Some of them have been fighting the system for years. Some got into politics in order to create a better future for children. I think especially today of Councillor Ann Norton in County Clare and Councillor Maeve Yore in County Louth. Councillor Miriam Murphy in Wicklow has been a trailblazer for women with disabilities. I also think of strong independent women like Councillor Niamh Kennedy in Donegal, Councillor Marie Casserly in Sligo, Councillor Mary Roche in Waterford and Councillor Mary Farrell in County Wexford have been elected and re-elected by their communities. Some elected independent women found that party politics did not believe in them. I think today of Councillor Mary Linehan Foley from Cork. One could not find a better, hard-working councillor. Under the guidance of Councillor Marcia D'Alton, who is passionate about the environment and protecting nature, the people of Passage West are in safe hands. Councillor Lorna Bogue recently joined the independent ranks when she found her policies were different from those of her political party. Nevertheless, Lorna is out there working for the people daily.

I want to highlight the work of the Dublin councillors – Councillors Gráinne Maguire, Tania Doyle, Deirdre Donnelly, Anne Colgan, Noeleen Reilly and Liona O'Toole and the newly co-opted Councillor Patricia Kinsella. Given the large population growth and the diverse needs of the people they represent, these women never stop.

Great women like Councillor Terry O'Flaherty from Galway and Councillor Brigid Teefy have all given decades of their lives to public life and they must be commended. Councillors Geraldine Donohoe, Kara McHugh, Colette Connolly and Evelyn Parsons from Galway continue to be brilliant examples of politicians in the west.

I watch in envy daily our independent women changing communities and making a difference. I mention Councillors Mary Kavanagh, Mags Crean and Peir Leonard in County Wicklow. I commend the dedicated efforts of women like Councillor Anne Marie Ryan Shiner and the young Máirín McGrath in Tipperary for showing leadership in their municipal areas. The people of Kerry are equally blessed with Councillor Maura Healy-Rae. No one would ever doubt the commitment the Healy-Raes give to their people. I have no doubt Councillors Maura Healy-Rae and Máirín McGrath will have a place in these Houses one day.

Independent Councillor Fiona McLoughlin Healy in Kildare is a strong force within local government for corporate governance. Councillor Ida Cousins in Kildare is another tireless worker for her community. Councillors Kathleen Shanagher and Valerie Byrne are two formidable and driving forces in County Roscommon. It is great to see young women like Councillor Elisa O'Donovan in Limerick not being afraid to simply get out and do what needs to be done. Last but by no means least, Councillors Amanda Smith, Gillian Toole and Geraldine Keogan are all strong public representatives for County Meath.

I want all the elected women of Ireland to know that I see them and I will continue to support them to deliver better for their communities. We must now look at ways to move forward and create a more equal society. I believe the key to this is to support women in their socio-economic pursuits, dismantling toxic beliefs towards women and empowering female youth to recognise their talent. In a world that oftentimes pushes women to the sidelines, we must step

up and fight for the rights that we deserve and create our own platform to uplift each other. We must take the initiative, observe the problems around us and take action to solve them. We must work as a collective in order to ensure gender equality for future generations. Contrary to what society has taught us, it is not a competition, it is a collaboration. That said, I do not want today to be taken as a token and for the Minister to sympathise with us now and to forget about it tomorrow. We are worthy of much more. Personally, I thank all the women who have made me the person I am today and stuck with me and by me to reach my goals.

**Senator Pippa Hackett:** It is great to be here on International Women's Day. The theme of this year's International Women's Day is choosing to challenge. That is something that can resonate with all of us, men or women. We must challenge the *status quo*, policy, gender balance, inequality, sexism and misogyny. Yet, as a woman, I do not want to focus on those gendered issues, and I do not want to be defined by my ability to challenge them. I do not want that for my daughters, Poppy and Heidi, nor do I want it for my sons, Charlie and George, to grow up believing that women and girls have continually to prove themselves and keep challenging those glass ceilings and walls that restrict them.

Recently I did an interview for International Women's Day with one of my local newspapers, the *Tullamore Tribune*. The interview went through my childhood, early life, education and my life in politics. I was asked if I had ever felt any of it was especially challenging as a woman and I had to think. I could not say I particularly felt challenged because of my gender during many of the different things I have done throughout my life, from studying, working in all sorts of jobs or even life in academia. I could easily say, however, that politics has been the most challenging thing I have done because of my gender, and entering Government seems to have opened up a whole new level of challenge. It is not just the demands of the job, the public-facing aspect of it and managing the expectations; that is all doable. The most challenging element is probably learning to deal with the nastiness that now seems endemic among some in our society. While all of this applies to both male and female politicians, the personalisation towards females, in particular, is concerning, and my Government colleague, Senator Lisa Chambers, has spoken eloquently about this in the past.

In some respects, we have to become less human as we grow that thick skin deemed necessary to be a politician. We become desensitised to the spite and, essentially, normalise this malevolent behaviour towards politicians. To me, that is a really sad state of affairs because of all the traits we should have in our politicians, humanity should be right up there. Someone said to me once that it goes with the territory and no one forced me to enter politics, which basically means we all have to put with it and politicians are fair game. Should that be acceptable? Should anyone have to put up with such abuse as part of their job? I think not.

For me, at the moment, however, I feel I am strong enough to put with it but the same cannot be said for others. There are also ramifications, for example, for my children and for my elderly parents, who get upset when they see abuse aimed at their daughter. I am sure that may well be the same for other politicians, too, and their families, and that is upsetting. What perhaps is most damaging of all is that it can be so off-putting for women, in particular, to consider entering politics in the first place. This is besides all the other barriers we all know exist to female participation in politics.

It is well accepted now that every organisation, political or otherwise, functions better with more gender balance and more gender equality. Political parties now have quotas for female candidates in general elections, and there have been calls for the same in local elections. Quite

simply, despite what anyone might think of this, if we do not have sufficient numbers of female candidates actually running in elections, then we will never have sufficient numbers in office, because women in politics are amazing. There are some incredible female voices here in the Seanad across all parties and Independents, not least my own Green Party colleagues, Senators Pauline O'Reilly and Róisín Garvey - two formidable women indeed. The importance of female leadership contributions cannot be overstated. Every parliament and organisation will fail to reap the benefits by not having a gender-balanced membership.

I was pleasantly surprised to see the gender balance in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine when I joined last summer. Of the 3,800 or so people working in the Department, nearly 1,800 are female, which is not far short of 50%. More to the point, they are excellent colleagues working, as I have discovered, at all levels from senior management to clerical and across all areas such as administrative, inspectorate, veterinary, laboratory and professional services. These people are really talented women.

However, beyond my Department, the agriculture sector is still heavily dominated by men. One only has to look at the membership of the executive committees of the main farming organisations to see just how gross an imbalance there is in them. In fact, it was a pleasure for me to meet recently with a relatively new farming organisation called Talamh Beo and it was so refreshing to see more women than men on the Zoom call, and that is important. When I think about the many wonderful female farmers I know, they are innovative, have made changes to their farms, have taken risks and have diversified. They have challenged the *status quo*, and those are exactly the characteristics we need in the farmers of the future. The most challenging aspect of being a politician for me, and for other women I know, is being a mother. My decision to enter politics five years ago has taken a toll on my family life. Of that, there is no doubt. There are sacrifices to be made and precious moments must be missed but, for me, the support of my husband, Mark, and my mother, Jeannie, has allowed me to pursue this path. It simply could not have happened without their help.

I greatly admire any woman who has managed to have a successful political career while at the same time rearing a family and, it is to be hoped, managing to have some spare time along the way. The current President of the European Commission, Dr. Ursula von der Leyen, comes to mind as a woman who is very much in charge of her brief, yet she is also a mother of seven and has juggled a prolific political career with family life, particularly when her children were young. Who has not admired Mary O'Rourke, a five-time Minister, a Deputy for nearly 25 years and also a Senator? Mary always speaks fondly of the essential support she received from her late husband, Enda, during her political career.

Yes, sisters are doing it for themselves but, behind every great woman lies what is perhaps the single greatest ingredient for success: a great man, a great partner, a great family or great friends. On this International Women's Day, I want to celebrate that and to thank those who make it possible for women to be the best they can be because that best can simply be better than all the rest.

**Senator Mary Seery Kearney:** I thank the Minister for being here today and for taking these statements on International Women's Day. The Minister of State has stolen my line. We had the same first sentence. The theme for this year's International Women's Day is "choose to challenge". This indicates that a challenged world is an alert world and that from challenge comes change. My challenge relates to who is making the decisions and who has a seat at the table.

I will begin by quoting the late US Supreme Court judge, Associate Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who said “Women belong in all places where decisions are being made.” To be fair, I believe that does not only apply to women. I believe that all those affected by decisions should have a seat at the table where they are made and that we should have diversity and inclusion across all of Parliament, the Legislature.

I was introduced to speaking out for women when I was a very little girl when a new church was opened in Clondalkin, where we then lived. The priest announced from the altar on the first Sunday that he was looking for men to volunteer to be readers at mass and for women to volunteer to clean the church. My mother was the sole objecting voice to find that announcement offensive and to challenge it. It took the voice of a woman to point out the blatant stereotyping and discrimination. It took a pregnant woman sitting at the Cabinet table for the blatant discrimination of the lack of maternity provision for politicians to get a proper debate and resolution. Let us remind ourselves that this is 2021. We will shortly celebrate the 100-year anniversary of the foundation of the State but, with regard to the function of the reproduction of our population, maternity leave for legislators is still not an entitlement. The case for councillors is similar. Arrangements need to be put in place to address their needs in respect of having children and childcare, an issue I urgently want addressed.

Throughout the crisis, women have been disproportionately affected in terms of their sexual and reproductive health. For example, it is difficult to get a determination from the Department of Health on whether travelling abroad for IVF treatment is deemed essential. For a couple desperate to have a baby, as time is ticking and against them, this journey is, without doubt, absolutely essential. The review of the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018 has commenced. We are now three years on and still women have to travel. This needs to be addressed with the review. Who will be at that table and who will conduct that review? There are matters still outstanding including access to contraception, ensuring that sex education is universally and uniformly delivered, and ensuring a woman’s safe passage to a doctor’s clinic when seeking abortion services. We need to make sure that no one is left behind in this review.

There are similar issues with regard to assisted human reproduction. Without ensuring that the right voices are at the table, we may well walk into passing an impotent law that disenfranchises most of those who need it. The Oireachtas is preparing to introduce the assisted human reproduction, AHR, Bill. The current commentary by the AHR coalition is that the legislation is not fit for purpose and ignores the calls from groups most affected by its provisions, including Equality for Children, LGBTQ groups, Surrogacy Ireland, Families for Surrogacy, 221 Plus, cystic fibrosis service advocates, the National Infertility Support and Information Group and many more. The proposed scope for surrogacy under the Bill is limited and does not have significant cognisance of the plight of families wrestling with infertility that is medically or socially caused. Pre-approval, altruistic, domestic provision and a raft of other models are covered, but what about the survivors of cervical cancer who are excluded from bearing their own children, those who were born without a uterus and those who are wrestling with infertility where the cause is undiagnosed and who have been abandoned to unregulated private medicine? What about single women who want to access IVF services or all those longing to be parents? They will be left behind by this Bill, which proposes a regime that has been in operation in Canada and the UK for some years but which is now under review because it has been shown to be not fit for purpose in how it has played out.

What of the mothers of surrogate-born children who are not recognised as mothers by the State? They were given some comfort and status by the Children and Family Relations Act

2015, in which they were designated as custodians and guardians, but they remain susceptible to the precarious whim of their spouses for even that unsatisfactory legal status relationship with their much-longed for and loved children, the children whom they have nurtured since before conception and, through no fault of their own, could not carry in their own wombs. What of the children already born via surrogacy, citizens of this State who are in a precarious position in terms of their entitlement to those mothers and to their inheritance rights from same? We are leaving them behind.

We are at a juncture where the proposed legislation is drafted by those who, by the stroke of fate, have no need of it and is set to ignore the voices of those who are most crying out for it. That is because the most affected are not at the decision-making table and the discourse about them is sometimes only short of branding them as child abusers. Today, I welcome and embrace the theme of International Women's Day. Today, I am choosing to challenge. If we are to live in a truly inclusive and just society that legislates for ethics rather than morals, we must ensure that the voices not at the table are heard and acted on.

I will end with a poem written by the mother of a surrogate-born child who was unable to carry her own. It reads:

Not flesh of my flesh,  
nor bone of my bone,  
but still miraculously my own.  
Never forget for a single minute,  
you didn't grow under my heart,  
but in it.

To those women who have wrestled with their fertility, I dedicate this day and my speech.

**Senator Ivana Bacik:** I welcome the Minister and thank him for attending this morning to deal with the Labour Party's Commencement matter on the gender pay gap. I wish colleagues a happy International Women's Day. Today has a long and proud history. We started International Women's Day as a day of protest, struggle and socialist and feminist campaigning for women's rights. It was only in 1977 that the United Nations recognised 8 March as an international day for women everywhere. Only in recent years in Ireland has it become a day of celebration more than just a day of protest. As a student in Trinity College Dublin in the 1980s, it was a day of protest and for pointing out so much that was wrong for women and so much law that needed to change, in particular laws on reproductive rights, healthcare, abortion rights and contraception.

I am struck by the personal stories that Senators have told the House, how much resonance there still is and how much remains to be done. While we are now celebrating the repeal of the eighth amendment in 2018 and the reform of much of the law that was so problematic for women in the 1980s, we still face very significant burdens and obstacles.

I thank the Minister for acknowledging the report I compiled for the justice committee in 2019, on women's participation in politics, in which we produced a clear outline of the evidence as to the barriers women face, not just in political careers but in all careers and professions. We

named those barriers in respect of politics the five Cs but four of those Cs apply in every walk of life for women. They are a lack of cash, a lack of confidence, an old boys' culture and a lack of access to childcare. At every forum at which I have spoken and from any woman I know in any job or profession, I have found that those four Cs hold us back as women in our career progression.

In politics, as we all know, there is a fifth C, candidate selection procedures in political parties. We sought to address that through the gender quota legislation in 2012. That is very welcome and there has been some improvement for women in politics but, as others have said, a great deal more still needs to be done. When the 30% quota was first introduced in the 2016 election, the proportion of elected female Deputies jumped from its previous high of 14% to 22%. Unfortunately, however, in last year's election, there was a stagnation, with just 22.5% of Deputies being women, or 36 of 160. In the Seanad, we are all aware of how much better we are, with 24 women of 60 Senators, or 40%, the highest we have ever had. It makes a difference in our collegiate working, in our collaborative practices in the House and in the sort of legislation we debate.

I speak as someone who, when I was first elected in 2007, saw how pale, male and stale Irish politics was. It has changed and is changing, and given that there will be a 40% gender quota for the next general election, we can all anticipate that there will be an improvement in the numbers of women not only put forward in the election as candidates but also elected. It is not inevitable that that will happen, however, and we must keep pushing for it. It was depressing for me to look today at the International Parliamentary Union, IPU, table and to see we have slipped again. A year ago, we were 92nd in the world classification table for women's representation, and while that was not a cause for celebration, we are 101st today. We have slipped down further.

It is not that our numbers have disimproved but that we have stood still while all around us other countries are improving, taking positive action measures and addressing those five Cs. I refer not just to the candidate selection procedure. Laws are being put in place in other countries that address women's lack of cash and the gender pay gap, and I am glad the Minister is moving swiftly on that. They are addressing childcare by putting in place longer paternity leave and proper accessible childcare for women. They are addressing all the other issues of culture and confidence through measures like those we in the Labour Party have proposed.

We have proposed that, for example, reproductive healthcare leave should be brought in so that women who have to take time off work for early miscarriage or IVF treatment will be enabled to do so. That is a very important step forward for women, along with so many issues that need to be improved on. We have today produced a manifesto called Working for Women and put forward some of the measures we think need to be taken on board by the Government. I look forward to sending the Minister a copy and to working collaboratively with him to ensure that Ireland is a better place for women in the years and decades to come. I hope we will not have to wait much longer to address those five Cs.

**Senator Rebecca Moynihan:** I thank the Minister for appearing before the House and for giving us the opportunity to make statements on International Women's Day. Over the past few years, I have grown uncomfortable with the way in which the day is celebrated because for me, the day was borne out of the struggle of the labour movement. In 1911, New York garment workers, mainly immigrants, marched and struck for decent, safe jobs after a fire killed 146 women in this low-paid, exploitative job. Their battle cry was not "lean in", "girl power"

or “who runs the world?” but that basic guttural slogan “bread and roses”. Today, social media platforms operated by rich tech companies profit from the online abuse of women, giving a platform to fast-fashion companies that profit from the sweat and labour of poor women, and offer discount codes to women in the name of girl power and female empowerment based on a notion that they come through purchasing power. For me, International Women’s Day is not a day about women in leadership or the corporate board, but it is a very real basic fight for safe working conditions and equality. That is its historical context.

This morning, fast fashion companies all over the world posted messages for International Women’s Day, but how does their lip service to International Women’s Day stack up? This year, Boohoo.com was exposed by *The Sunday Times* for poor pay and working conditions at its UK factories. It paid an undercover reporter as little as £3.50 per hour. Many people turned to Amazon during the pandemic, but we know its workers are under so much pressure to make Jeff Bezos richer that they are not allowed to take toilet breaks. More than a century after New York garment workers died in a devastating fire, 1,134 women died when a factory in Bangladesh collapsed. According to the Clean Clothes Campaign, garment workers in countries such as Cambodia, Bangladesh and India work 14 to 16 hours a day, seven days a week. That adds up to 96 hours per week. They work in conditions where they breathe in toxic substances and accidents and fires are frequent. Worldwide, 168 million children work in the fast fashion industry, earning as little as 22 p per day to satisfy our insatiable demand for girl boss clothing.

This International Women’s Day, which is my first as a Member of this House, I want to remember the origins of the day. I stand in solidarity with the women who are in service to the fast fashion consumer industry from which we consume. The fight for bread and roses and the historical context of this day goes on through the fight for good quality jobs and workers’ rights.

**Senator Lynn Boylan:** Guím Lá Idirnáisiúnta na mBan sona do gach éinne sa Teach. I used to love International Women’s Day. It was a day to celebrate one’s feminist heroes such as Kathleen Lynn - I am wearing a brooch commemorating her. She was a proud republican woman who fought for the freedom of her State, but she also played a significant role in addressing inequalities in mothers’ and children’s health and in the roll-out of the vaccination for tuberculosis. I hope the Government will review its decision not to name the national children’s hospital after Dr Kathleen Lynn.

International Women’s Day was also a day on which we had an opportunity to protest for real and radical reform. It may be that I am just tired now that I am in my forties, but I fear that in recent years International Women’s Day has become a day when we talk a lot. We talk about the issues that affect women, the need for change and what the changes should be, but that is it. We talk and then the box is ticked for another year. The email inboxes of every Member of this House will today be flooded with messages of solidarity from corporations for International Women’s Day, but tomorrow those corporations will go back to exploiting their workers, predominantly women, and perpetuating the gender pay gap.

On International Women’s Day two years ago, the then Government ratified the Istanbul Convention on combating violence against women. That move was welcomed by everyone in the political stream, but also by everybody who has worked on the front line of domestic violence services. However, two years have passed and there are still nine counties in this country without a single refuge space, while the Government continues to peddle a definition of providing one refuge space per 10,000 women rather than one per 10,000 of the population. Its choosing to use that definition makes Ireland an outlier in the EU. What is even more dis-

turbing is that we are not even reaching that target. Under that definition, there should be 490 refuge spaces per head of population but currently there are only 141. This is at a time when the incidence of domestic violence has increased by 16% since the convention was ratified, but especially in the past year with the pandemic and the impact of lockdowns.

The requirement for self-isolation facilities has also reduced capacity. Saoirse women's refuge in Tallaght has two emergency accommodation shelters but it has had to use one of those shelters for self-isolation, which has reduced the number of families it has been able to help. It is not just in a refuge capacity that we are still failing women who are coming out of situations of domestic violence. While legal aid for barring orders is covered under the Istanbul Convention, once a woman tries to rebuild her life after coming out of a violent situation; she can face further barriers in accessing the courts.

I mention the current discriminatory system of treating tenants who are eligible for local authority housing but who find themselves in the private rental sector due to the chronic shortage of public housing differently to local authority tenants. This effectively means that women are being blocked from accessing the courts. Treating the housing assistance payment, HAP, as income is preventing women from pursuing maintenance and from defending applications for access to children. It is a deeply unfair interpretation of the law. Every Member of this House knows that HAP is paid directly to the landlord and that it never passes the account of a tenant. It is almost definitely a contravention of *Airey v. Ireland*, where it was found to be unreasonable to expect one to have to defend oneself in the courts. By counting HAP as income, that is what this State is effectively doing and this is happening on a weekly basis, as will be confirmed by any of the domestic violence organisations.

It appears that it is not just in the case of civil legal aid where access to justice is problematic. The lack of free legal aid for the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, is also disproportionately impacting women. In today's edition of *The Irish Times*, Eilis Barry, the chief executive of the Free Legal Advice Centres, FLAC, said that it is almost certain that many employment discrimination or sexual harassment cases are simply not being taken. This is not because those breaches of the law are not happening. Rather, it is because the victims do not have the resources to get representation. While the opportunity is technically there for victims to represent themselves at the WRC, this provision does not take into account that people on lower incomes face greater levels of time poverty. This is especially true for women who take on more care work. Therefore, even if they wanted to represent themselves, women are at a disadvantage again. Workers in the lowest-paid jobs are being put in a vulnerable position. I know there is a commitment in the programme for Government to examine the issue of access to justice but it would be good to have clarity as to whether this will be an independent investigation or one that will be carried out internally within the Department of Justice.

I would like to express my solidarity with the ex-Debenhams workers who are predominantly female. They have been on the picket line for a total of 333 days. They have campaigned with bravery and dignity in pursuit of a fair redundancy package. They chose to challenge the unfairness of their situation. On International Women's Day, I call on the Government to listen to the demands of the ex-Debenhams workers. Their first ask is to make the €3 million training fund available as a cash payment and their second ask is to pass the legislation to prevent this from ever happening to workers in the future. That would be a true acknowledgement of International Women's Day.

**Senator Lynn Ruane:** I thank the Minister for being here. I am going to heavily focus my

contribution on women who have been impacted by Covid. Before I do so, I want to acknowledge that when one talks about gender quotas, gender balance on boards, and the gender pay gap, for example, it sometimes feels like those issues are far away from me, my life and where I have come from. These are conversations that we definitely do not have in my community. If we really want to look at the intersectionality of life, women and International Women's Day, we also need to look at housing, access to child maintenance, lone parent family payments and women being able to live a life free of suffering. These women may never have an interest in boards or decision making. They just want to live a life free of suffering with access to health-care and a decent standard of life and they want to be able to parent and to bring their children up in a community where they can flourish.

We have mentioned gender quotas and the theme of "choose to challenge". We have an opportunity to challenge in the upcoming by-election. We can talk about women entering politics and gender quotas but we have to move away from saying we care about female representation and actually act. There is one black woman councillor from Longford and another woman of colour from Dublin who want to be on the ticket, but they are being blocked. If we want to use International Women's Day to challenge and to protest, I ask those in other parties to refuse to put their names beside the other candidates running and give the nomination to women. There is no point in just having gender quotas. We also need to use every other opportunity to make sure women are on the ticket instead of only being forced to have them with quotas. We have an opportunity to have two new female colleagues in here with us next month. I ask members of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party to have a think about that. They should choose to challenge and choose to put their names beside somebody else on the ticket. That would be a huge move for us in the Seanad this year, to make sure we give an opportunity for two women of colour to join us here next month.

Regarding Covid and women, we are 12 months into a global pandemic and I am spending today thinking about how the virus, its public health impacts and our policy responses to it have specifically and disproportionately affected women. Covid-19 has hit society at all levels, including health, economics and education, and has been at the heart of our political discussions. As we emerge from these measures, we must ensure we address the unequal and unfair impact this pandemic and its resulting restrictions have had on Ireland's women. A recent report from the OECD, which measures female economic empowerment, has shown that the Covid-19 pandemic and resulting Government responses have disproportionately affected women. At the end of 2021, the number of women at work will have regressed to 2017 levels, with a 2.1% drop predicted. While Ireland has improved in reducing the pay divide between men and women, despite a lack of progression by the Government of the gender pay gap legislation, the rise in the unemployment rate here has been larger for women than males during the pandemic, as is the case in many countries.

When considering the health and well-being of women who have remained in work, research from the US and the UK found that working women reported chronic stress levels 40% higher than the average person. This steadily increased with the extended restrictions. I hope we will consider and try to understand why women are dropping out of the workforce and explore what we can do to support these women to return to work. It is on us now to find ways to reduce the stress women are feeling across Ireland. One key reason for job losses is the high proportion of females employed in the industries most impacted by the pandemic. These include low-paid professions, service roles and care professions. Further to this, the closure of schools and childcare services has increased the in-home caregiving obligations for women. Research has

often shown that women assume more care responsibilities than men and Covid-19 restrictions have added to women's burdens. They have created a tipping point for some women in their work and home life balance that I am concerned we might not be able to rescue if we do not take radical action to rebalance the care responsibilities.

Dr. Katriona O'Sullivan of the ALL Institute in Maynooth University has been interviewing women and children across Ireland and examining their experiences of the pandemic. The findings of this work to date are stark. The research observed that fathers were less likely to reduce work hours than mothers in light of Covid-19 restrictions. The distribution of homeschooling and childcare responsibilities was uneven. Mothers are unfairly expected to manage work, home and education. A survey of families undertaken by Dr. O'Sullivan revealed that 10% of mothers surveyed had lost their jobs due to the added pressure of homeschooling. These were women in positions such as pharmacists, legal workers and many others who felt they could not manage this situation well. A further 25% of women had reduced their working hours and over 65% reported underperforming in their work life. Many stated that they went to bed feeling they had failed their families and their employers. This is not breaking news. In 2020, the United Nations stated that families' inability to access institutional and community childcare during the lockdown placed a heavier burden on women, restricting their work capacity. One parent described her experience as "extremely stressful to the point of causing depression. Inadequate. Children falling behind and suffering despite my enormous efforts", while another stated, "It is torture. There are tears every day. I hate how it affects our relationship." Another says there are tears every day and every minute, "either mine or theirs". Parents report being tired and pressurised. Home schooling causes tension with the children and makes them feel inadequate. They describe the impact on their mental health and that of their children and how being home all day is affecting the whole family.

When we look at Ireland's response to Covid-19, we must consider whether the problems that have arisen have been born of the structure of the governance processes themselves. Female representation in the Oireachtas still lags behind European levels despite the excellent work of organisations such as Women for Election, and I am lucky to sit on its board. Even the specific institutions managing Covid-19 responses such as NPHET and the Cabinet Covid subcommittees are scandalously male. Suppose all the decisions around schooling, employment supports and the language we use are made by men? How can we be sure our policies are not directly affecting women? Suppose a mother trying to manage three different children with three different home schooling scenarios has been sitting at the decision table, would we have done things differently?

As we enter the week of the woman and prepare to celebrate Mother's Day, we must consider the inequalities facing women and how Covid-19 has shone a light on the imbalance in home-work-life structures and the physical and emotional burdens women carry. Public discussion around Covid-19 needs to consider its long-term impact on women and, in turn, their families. We know the burdens of Covid-19 are causing adverse psychological outcomes and higher rates of severe psychological distress for mothers compared with men. Some 32% of fathers and 57% of mothers reported a deterioration in mental health since the beginning of the pandemic, suggesting mothers take on a significant proportion. With that in mind, we should rethink the support systems we have put in place and begin to use language that acknowledges the incredible sacrifices women and mothers are making to ensure our families survive.

Ní saoirse go saoirse na mban.

**Senator Erin McGreehan:** I stand here as a very proud member of mná na hÉireann, a descendant of our ancient warriors and modern rebels, from Queen Maeve, who battled in the mountains above my home to secure ownership of the Brown Bull of Cooley, to Granuaile the pirate queen, who proved her might on sea and was a formidable force in politics, to the more recent day heroes of my party, Fianna Fáil, such as one of our founders, Constance Markievicz. When I first learned of this woman and the other women of the early 1900s, who fearlessly fought to create a free, independent country, I could not believe there were such creatures who, amidst all the inequity, believed in something so fiercely, they went against the grain to create a new republic where equality of opportunity and equal rights were promised. For a wee girl, who from about seven years old dreamt one day of being a Member of one of these Houses, Constance had me at “hello”. One of the first female Cabinet Ministers and the first woman in the world to be appointed Minister for Labour in 1919, she was elected to the Dáil to sit as a Fianna Fáil TD. At the time she passed away, she was an officeholder and a representative of Fianna Fáil. It makes me so immensely proud that, in some way, we all carry on her legacy.

However, women were erased from history, their involvement in our fight for the for the Republic was ignored. They were put back in the home to give birth, to become caregivers so that the men carry on with the work they believed they were destined to do. Ireland, in many ways, has been no country for women. The actions of State and church have proven this over and over again. We can look time and again at women’s status, mother and baby homes, Magdalen laundries, and inadequate healthcare for women. The treatment of Noël Browne back in the day, when he tried to change things and make them a little bit better for women in this country, highlights where women were on the hierarchy of our society.

Today is about celebrating the many social, economic and cultural, political achievements of women. We all have our favourites. My mother, Carmel, my sister, Lorna, Marian Finucane, Mary O’Rourke, Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, Katie Taylor, Catherina McKiernan, Justice Catherine McGuinness, and Sinéad Burke are some of the many women who I look up to.

Today is a day of celebration, but it must be a day that acts as a catalyst for change. We need to use today to ask questions. Why is there still so much inequity? What can we all do, men and women? We know change needs everyone and is not for one gender to walk alone. Gender equality does not mean the differences between males and females disappear - far from it. We must create equity. Equity means recognising the glorious differences by creating fairness and a new normal so we can all achieve the same outcome. The gender pay gap is part of this inequity. In general, women in Ireland earn 14.4% less than their male counterparts. This is a critical issue and the pandemic has highlighted pay inequalities harshly. For example, in the earlier waves of job losses, female workers accounted for more than half of all pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, claims. As of 2 March 2021, the majority of women who were in receipt of the PUP were on rates below the top rate of €350 per week and accounted for the majority on the lower payment rates. The Government is progressing initiatives to address such inequalities and the Gender Pay Gap Information Bill 2019, which will be progressed, will assist in continuing to highlight and rectify the pay gap but it cannot come fast enough.

We also will never be able to say that gender inequality is gone until prejudice is overcome and we have eliminated the irrational bias people can have against somebody just because they are female. Equal rights are not enough. This inequality also exists in our minds, our biases and prejudices and remains to be fixed. We must tackle this unconscious bias. For example, when I was running in the 2019 local elections, I cannot count how many times I was asked who was going to look after my children. Imagine asking a man that question. It is something that sim-

ply would not come up. Moreover, the lack of inadequate childcare provision in this country is part of that unconscious bias. Part of our bias comes from our laws, our Constitution. We must mature as a country and realise that in cases where our Constitution, the basis for our laws, is outdated and innately biased against women, it must be changed. Article 41.2 effectively states a woman's place is in the home. This article refers to the State recognising the support women give in our country but it is just a platitude and platitudes do not pay the bills. Article 41.2 must be amended to be gender-neutral and to acknowledge the role of care in Irish society and there is a reason we are catching up on providing that adequate care for our most vulnerable. Why would the State choose to provide childcare or elder care when women were banned from the workplace? Their place was in the home, to look after their children and when that was done, to look after their aging parents. A woman's place is where she chooses to be. A man's place is where he chooses to be. It is the job of the State to recognise this. The Constitution is an important document and it should be respected and protected but it must protect all of us.

This brings me to the value of our care economy. Millions of euro are provided to the State every year by men and women. However, there is a real inconsistency: care is mostly done by women, making possible much of the paid work which drives our market economy. Care work is also essential for advancing human capabilities, yet it tends to be unpaid. It is undervalued and often taken for granted. We must be radical, ambitious and willing to change. We must establish a working group to fully examine the value of care in our economy. It must highlight the critical contribution care workers make and help to ensure policies which recognise it. The division of paid and unpaid work is strongly gendered. We all know the supports for caring are at a low level and I can attest to the fact that combining paid work and caring is difficult.

There is so much I wish to say today but I simply do not have time. Gender-based violence, domestic violence and abuse, be it virtual or real, must be urgently addressed. However, today I choose to challenge. I choose to challenge those who stand in our way and those who do not put value on diversity and difference. I challenge us all to not leave any woman behind, to not make it an equality of privilege. We must hear the female voices and their stories. We need to be empowered by what women have done before us and what they have achieved in much harder times. It means an incredible amount to me to stand here as a daughter of Carmel O'Reilly, a granddaughter of Brigid O'Neill and of MaryRose McCann, who worked the land, created life, shaped the world and created a legacy today. I thank them and thank the woman who made all this possible. Seo é lá na mban. Éirigh suas agus bí láidir.

**Senator Regina Doherty:** I start by wishing all my colleagues here and all those who work in the Houses of the Oireachtas a very happy International Women's Day because too often in our line of business, it is seen as a man's world. I want to mark my appreciation of the work of women at all levels and of all political colours who keep this place ticking over.

We are all aware that public representation in Ireland has never come close to being representative of the actual public. Less than a quarter of Deputies are women. This House is performing a little better but we all know that is because most of my party's females were appointed. I am very grateful for this but it is a real shame. We have a real problem with the electoral system. Of the women who have made it to these Houses, not just today but over the years, we were genuinely spoiled for talent. The leaders of four parties in this House are led by women. The Leader and Deputy Leader of the Seanad are female. However, we all know we have an awfully long way to go.

Fine Gael introduced gender quotas for general elections and they have been a major driver

of increased female representation in the Dáil but they are not enough. Political parties must meet a 40% target for female candidates in respect of the general elections in 2023 to secure funding. We all know this will ruffle feathers and that it is a blunt and cruel way for us to try to increase representation of women in politics and political life. We do not like it, nor do we like the consistent references to us being token candidates or token women on the ticket. The very least we need to do is create a space for women to be able to put themselves forward and create the environment. The next step for all of us to make sure we continue to encourage women to be able to do that. A lot of the time, female politicians speak mostly in frustration about the barriers that face us in terms of helping to increase the number of women in politics at local and national level. While we are right to talk about the barriers - Senator Bacik spoke eloquently about them earlier on - and it is an awful pity that they are increasing rather than decreasing, when we talk about female representation, we must also talk about the balance in our arguments and the positives that female representation brings to the table. We bring balance to the debate. We bring an entirely different perspective based on our unique lived experience. It might seem like a soppy thing to say but we bring empathy and a caring approach that have sometimes been lacking in political decision-making throughout the country's history.

The equal involvement of women does and will provide better legislation, better outcomes and a better Ireland. I must be honest; I am proud to be a member of Fine Gael, the party that probably has had the most female Cabinet Ministers in the history of the State but I am not proud of the fact that there has only ever been 20. We have had our own instructive governance in this country for over 100 years but there have only been 20 females sitting around a Cabinet table during those 100 years - women like Gemma Hussey, Nora Owen and Frances Fitzgerald. They paved the way and smashed the ceiling before us but is it not awful that when we stand here to reflect on the women we are proud of, it is the same names that keep coming up because there were so few of them? We are proud of them but we need to be talking about the next generation. Twenty-two women in 100 years is an absolute joke.

While we are talking about women we are all incredibly proud of, I would like to be selfish for a moment and talk about the woman who has been completely instructive in my role in political life. Maria Dalton is my mother. She was the person who first introduced me to politics when I probably was not even out of nappies. She brought me everywhere with her. She brought me to meetings. She brought me to Ard-Fheiseanna in my communion frock. She brought me leafletting. I was canvassing when I was big enough to walk. My first election memory was when she ran in 1979 when I was only eight years of age. She involved us completely in the campaign. She is my best friend, confidante and biggest cheerleader. She is probably my most constructive critic but I would never have made it this far without her love and support and I wanted to put that on the record of the House today.

We are choosing to challenge. While this day is one to celebrate and reflect, women are still not treated equally in the workplace, education and sport. The list goes on. While Senator McGreehan is right, if we do not have a real conversation about care - children's care, elder care and self-care - we will find ourselves here in ten or 20 years' time marking International Women's Day with the same arguments like Groundhog Day. The only way we will ever achieve equality of opportunity for women in every sphere is if men want it for us as much as we want it for ourselves. I am making the call-out today to all of our male counterparts and all our males in leading industry, medicine, education, science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Every section of life needs to want for our women what we want for ourselves. We choose to challenge. The road ahead of us looms. We will get there but I hope to God we are

not standing here in 100 years' time with only another handful of women in charge of political leadership in this country.

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire inniu agus guím Lá Idirnáisiúnta na mBan sona air agus ar gach duine eile anseo. Tá faitíos orm anois toisc gurb iad an tAire agus mé féin the only men in the room today.

We say we choose to challenge. I want to talk about a woman called Maureen Quigley, who chose to challenge. She was born in 1924. Senators can search all the history books they wish, but they will not find her. She raised eight wonderful daughters to be strong courageous women who set about challenging life every day of their lives. She was a woman who showed her daughters how to turn a 1 lb can of Heinz beans into 1.5 lbs of beans by pouring in half a can of water. She was a woman who showed her charity when five Traveller children turned up at her door one evening. As they were waiting for her to get some bread for them, they looked through the door and saw the television. They said, "Can we see the moving pictures, Missus?" She brought them in, sat them down and gave them their tea. She did that every day so that they could watch "Seoirse Agus Bartley" and "Dáithí Lacha". When the news came on they knew they had to go home.

Maureen Quigley was my mother. I grew up in a family of 11. All of us idolised my father. My mother was the engine room. We took it that she was there.

She never missed one occasion in my life. She turned up for my instigation as an altar boy. She was there when I went into the boy scouts and the FCA. When I joined the British Army, she came to my passing out. When I passed out in the Army, she was there. When I got my degree, she was there. She was never missing at any time in my life, and I never put any thought into it.

Shortly before she died I had the privilege of arriving in the nursing home on my own one day. She was sitting on the bed. She sat up with a big smile. She asked me what I was doing there. I said I came down to visit her. I said that on the way down I had thought about something and she asked what it was. I said I thought about the extraordinary influence she had had on my life. I said I would never have done anything but for the strong silent motivation that she provided for me and my brothers and sisters. She said, "Stop that now, stop that". Yet, she did. She drove all of us on to do wonderful things. If my father or mother had known I would be standing here today, I am unsure what they would have made of it.

The second woman I want to talk about is a girl called Rebecca. Rebecca is my daughter. I am so in awe of her that I cannot begin to tell Senators. That is not forgetting my wife. My wife of course was the strong woman behind my daughter. My daughter, Rebecca, was struck with cancer of the tongue at 19 years of age. What should have been a wonderful career path for her has been damaged by constant setbacks with health. She could have had a setback one day when I would go to meet her in a hospital or wherever she would be. She could be in tears. I would then go in the following day and she would be sitting up in the bed determined to get back to life. She has lived that way every day since she was 19 years of age. She is now in her 40s. Good God, I love and respect her courage and strength.

We may talk about choosing to challenge but not everyone is going to be able to challenge for equal pay or equal rights. I want to talk to the mothers who chose to give up a career and stay at home to make their children the best they could be. I want to respect them. I wish to

God the State would respect them and treat them properly, because we do not treat them properly.

I want to remember the women who had children on their own. This will come up here soon. I am referring to the right of children to have their birth certificate. I have to say that I know some women who had children when they were young and single. They were castigated by society and left that behind them.

*4 o'clock*

Of all the Ministers, the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Deputy O’Gorman, has a huge challenge ahead of him because some of those women do not want to be known; they do not want their private lives ever to be opened again. My heart goes out to them today and, equally, to the children they brought into the world.

In this House we have a huge responsibility. We should not be discussing equal pay; that should have been resolved years ago. I admire all of the women in this House. I do not like all of them, but I admire all of them. They are wonderful, strong people. I hope that the Leader of the House is correct and we will see a huge increase in the number of female Members of this House. As a teacher, I worked in a women-dominated society for over 20 years. I never really found one that I could not get along with. Great women deserve great support. I thank the Acting Chairperson, Senator O’Loughlin, for allowing me some latitude on time.

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Fiona O’Loughlin):** I thank Senator Craughwell, who was honest as always.

**Senator Mary Fitzpatrick:** I welcome the Minister, Deputy O’Gorman. Truly blessed is he among women today. We are delighted to have him. I also welcome my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, and thank her for joining us for this discussion on International Women’s Day.

I am very proud and delighted to stand here today. It is a huge honour for me. As I have often said, I live closest to Leinster House, but it has probably taken me the longest to get elected. Every day when I get here I take great pride in taking my place among all of the women and men. It is a huge honour. On my way here, I pass the Countess Markievicz plaque on North Frederick Street and there is a bust of Countess Markievicz in Leinster House. She is an iconic woman in Fianna Fáil history and in our country’s history. We can all own her. It is in her shadow that we all try to aspire to make some small contribution.

On a personal level, I thank all of the women in my life. I come from a long line of very strong women who faced very significant challenges but did so always with great courage, resilience and heart. I am so privileged and I never forget that. I thank all of the women I have met in my life outside of my family who have been a friend, be that in New York when I was starting out and had nothing or in Dublin, in politics and in my professional life. I have always operated in male-dominated environments. We live in a male-dominated world; it is a fact of life. Many men have been a friend to me too and I acknowledge that. I also acknowledge the support of my husband and sons and my dad as well.

International Women’s Day has been celebrated since the early 1900s. It started with women in New York city demanding better pay, better working conditions and the right to vote. We have come a long way, but we still have a long road ahead of us. It is great that the first citizen

of Dublin city is a woman, Hazel Chu, that the Leader of this House is a woman and also that the leader of the Fianna Fáil group in the Seanad is a woman. There is still so much we need to do to achieve equality.

Today, I think also of all of the women with whom I come into contact as a public representative. As public representatives constituents often come to us at a moment of crisis. There are many women - I accept there are also men in this situation but it is largely women - who are victims of the housing crisis that still grips our country. For all of those women, I challenge all of us and the Government to use our time in office to tackle the housing crisis. The Government has an ambitious and radical plan, but we need to work collectively to deliver a radical change in terms of the State's role in the provision of housing so that there is a sustainable supply of social and affordable housing provided such that every person in our country will have a place to call home. It is only when one has looked into the eyes of a mother, a father or an individual who does not know where he or she, or his or her family, is going to spend the night that one can see and experience the anxiety and fear that nobody living in our society should have to endure. I ask the Minister, as the Government representative here today, to remind the members of the Cabinet that women need to believe and will support this Government when it is ambitious and radical in its efforts to tackle the housing crisis. I do not only mean using public lands to deliver social and affordable housing, but also championing the right to housing and taking forward the proposal for a constitutional referendum to insert the right to housing for all of our citizens in our Constitution.

I thank the Minister for the work he has done so far in trying to provide some justice to the survivors of mother and baby homes. I ask him to redouble his efforts. I know he is moving forward by giving the survivors justice through access to their birth certificates and an opportunity to reclaim their identities. He needs to continue his efforts, as I know he knows, because all of those women and survivors are depending on him. I wish him courage. He has all of our support in his work.

**Senator Aisling Dolan:** I have enjoyed the past half an hour, listening to everyone's statements and the stories that have been told. There has been a richness to the stories about our families and the strong women in our lives, including our mums and grandmothers. It hits me that we are very fortunate. All of those women lived through hard times such as the war-torn years in the 1940s, and we know the infant mortality rates in that time. They lived through times of recession and emigration. I sometimes wonder how we are here today at all, when I hear the stories. My mum always paid tribute to a woman in our village, Mrs. Hall, the midwife, who came around and delivered the babies safely. I remember thinking that if it were not for women like her in villages and towns all around Ireland, I do not know what would have happened.

We have talked about many things today. International Women's Day is about equality for women. I heard Senator Chambers state that only 24% of councillors are women. What we are going to do about that? We have had positive quotas for general elections but we also need to have those quotas at local election level. I was a councillor. It has been a whirlwind for me; I do not know how I am here, sitting in this House. It has only been two years since I got involved in a community action group. I was then elected in the 2019 local elections and now have the wonderful opportunity of being here, representing the place from which I come. Sometimes being a representative of one's local area is about speaking for that area and the men, women and children who live there. We must bring people forward and encourage women to run for office. We have such strong women. I was involved in a recent campaign for a cycle way and

dealt with different towns and villages about different routes. The women who got involved were amazing. They were all managing development groups or Tidy Towns groups. They were the organisers. Why are we not seeing more of those women coming through in local elections? Why are they not the ones who we are bringing forward? That would be positive and we need something like quotas for local elections.

I will speak to some of the points that the Minister made in his speech. I am a spokesperson for further and higher education. I spoke earlier about the fact that women comprise only 26% of professorship roles. I understand that it is about equality at every level but I believe that unless women are at the decision-making table, we are not going to change what it is like for women in the rest of society. It is not going to happen. We need to see women on television, speaking as experts, and professors in all areas. We need more women as experts, leaders and CEOs in all our organisations. At the moment, only 12% of our organisations have a female CEO. We need more women acting as chairpersons and appointees of boards. It is not enough to sit back and say that it will happen because it will not. It has not happened in the past ten, 20, 30 or 40 years. When I thought about equality when I was in college, I thought I had the same rights as everybody else. Did I? Do I? When I say that, I am talking a little about recruitment because when it comes to recruiting for positions in education, businesses, workplaces or the Oireachtas, who is doing the recruiting? We need to make sure that our assessment and recruitment panels are balanced. We need to make sure that what we are being judged for in the qualifications for the role is balanced and that when advertisements for different roles and positions are placed, they take into account qualities and criteria that favour both men and women. They should be gender-balanced criteria. Recruitment is a key issue for me because unless we have fair recruitment practices, balance will not happen. I am a strong believer that unconscious bias is a problem and that we need to have something to tackle it. It has been proven through Nobel Prize winners and yet unconscious bias training is somehow seen as not being effective and that we should do away with it without having anything in its place. We need to have unconscious bias training and we need people to acknowledge that there is unconscious bias that we do not realise. That has to be part of this.

Some people mentioned our public representatives. It is important that we have representation of men and women in this House from many different backgrounds. Councillor Yemi Adenuga has been mentioned. She is one of our councillors of colour and she will be launching *Proud to Serve*, with stories of 28 women who have been in this House. I know Mary O'Rourke who lives near me in Athlone. Mary Harney is originally from Ahascragh in east Galway. There is a hotbed of activity by political and public representatives in that area. I will ask the Minister, in his role relating to children and families, to address family resource centres and how, with Covid, we will support children in areas covered by DEIS and Pobal. Women are feeling the impact of Covid-19, especially single parents. I will be asking the Minister about how we provide family resource centres for some of these areas and would appreciate his support for that.

**Senator Annie Hoey:** On International Women's Day, there tends to be much reflection on the women who have gone before and the firsts. I am grateful to those women who have laid the path for many of us but I find myself thinking of the women who are yet to come and not just those who have been. I ask myself who is not in this room. There are not nearly enough women, even though this is the most women that we have had in a Seanad, and there never have been. This goes for the Dáil too. There has never been a woman of colour in the Seanad or a woman who has lived through direct provision. Senator Eileen Flynn is the only woman from

the Traveller community to be a Member and this place is richer and better for Senator Flynn being here. How many more would wish to be here, in the Dáil and on local county councils, who simply cannot get there? No trans woman has ever been elected to the Oireachtas and as long as this House, which is here to represent all the people of Ireland, does not have these women in it, it is incomplete. As Senators, we all have a say on who will be here in the future, in our votes and in our influence in political groupings, and we all have work to do in our own parties.

I also think of the women of Ireland who, in this most unusual and challenging year, have, as always, stepped up to the plate. We have all heard the statistics before about women taking on a far larger share of domestic work, childcare and care for elderly family members than their male counterparts. We have seen that workload skyrocket this year. It includes full-time child carers and teachers. Early indicators suggest that women are, as per usual, being left to carry the burden of this extra work. Women are paid less at work and expected to do more work in the home for no pay.

A tweet by my Labour Party friend, Hannah Deasy, over the weekend really struck a chord with me, stating:

I used to love #InternationalWomensDay but a year into the pandemic I feel hollow looking at many #IWD2021 events. Where is paid sick leave? Where is paid maternity & parental leave? Where is publicly funded childcare? These are the things that create #genderequality

For International Women's Day, I want to remind people not only of the women who are in this room. Electoral politics is only a small part of effecting societal change, and thinking about the women who are in this room is all well and good. It is a little bit lean in feminism for me. We need to reflect on the women who are truly carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders for little or no recognition and even more insultingly, little to no pay. I hope that this time next year, we will have made great strides in addressing some of those issues.

**Senator Marie Sherlock:** It is good to see the Minister in the Chamber. In the short time available to me, I want to address the profound impact that the pandemic has had on women workers in particular and on their position in the world of work. We already know that between the end of 2019 and the end of 2020, approximately 13,600 women left the labour force. These are women who had to retire early, who were forced to leave their work because of caring responsibilities or who have lost their job and are not seeking work any longer. I think today of the women who have been in contact with me who have children with intellectual disabilities who have had no services available to them on and off for nearly 12 months at this stage. They were forced to leave their job. I also think of the couple who were both essential front-line workers who made a decision in September for the woman to leave her job because they felt they would not be able to provide cover for their children if one of the children had to leave school due to being a close contact. There are plenty more like those women. There are other women who have had to take unpaid leave because they simply could not find childcare for their children under the age of one year. I am pleased to see the Bill to extend parental leave will be debated in the House this Friday, but it is nearly eight months since the Government announced the extension of parental leave. Eight months is too long for women who have been hanging on, with no option but to stay at home from work because they could not get childcare.

While the pandemic has not been great for women in the workplace, it is not all bad. Some

45,000 women lost their part-time jobs last year or moved out of part-time employment, but there was an increase of 15,000 women in full-time employment. The ability to work from home has provided opportunities for some women who previously could not work full time to do so now.

I will conclude on a positive note. I welcome the Minister's commitment to bring forward the legislation to deal with the gender-pay gap legislation in the next fortnight. I very much welcome the EU directive on pay transparency introduced by the European Commission last week. I hope the Government will support that. If we are serious about improving the lot of low-paid women in this country it is important that the Government would support the EU directive on adequate minimum wages. We know that approximately 29% of all women are in low-paid work and two thirds of all those on the minimum wage are women, so it is vital that the Government supports the directive.

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Fiona O'Loughlin):** We are running very tight on time. I am very conscious that the Minister has to come in at 4.24 p.m. We are bound by the rules of the House. We have three remaining speakers and I am keen to let them in, but the only way for it to work is if speakers can shorten their contributions. Senator Ardagh is next. I ask her to shorten her contribution to two and a half minutes and then we will take Senators Currie and Clifford-Lee.

**Senator Catherine Ardagh:** It is great to see Senator O'Loughlin in the Chair today. I have been sitting in on this debate since it started and I have been so moved by the contributions from my friends on both sides of the House. The debate has been enjoyable. There have been so many different perspectives on International Women's Day and I have dwelled on them. I thank my wonderful, beautiful colleagues for their contributions.

We have all heard the statistics on the gender-pay gap and women working two months for free every year but we do very little about it. As Senator Dolan outlined, in the state of Ontario in Canada they have brought in significant legislation on recruitment such as pay-transparency legislation. It increases the transparency in hiring practices, so when a company advertises for a position, it must clearly state the salary. It is illegal not to do so. There is also a bar on asking candidates what their previous salary was. They also have a framework for tracking and reporting the wages of both men and women, in the same way that we do. The pay-transparency measure is a huge step.

We all clapped when we heard there would be special legislation that would allow us to work at home, but we must be cautious when we consider legislation for working at home because of what was described in an article in *The Irish Times* as women's invisible jobs, which is generally caring for children and managing the household. We will probably flock towards the idea of working from home but sometimes it might be to the detriment of younger women who are not already established in their career. We must be careful and put proper safeguards in place to ensure that women are not taking a step backwards by working at home. We all know in large companies, and even around Leinster House, that if one is not in every day making connections and building a network then one will fall behind. It is imperative that we do something and ensure that this does not happen.

I pay tribute to all the women who participated in the Repeal campaign, the women in the mother and baby homes, and the women involved in campaigning for assisted human reproduction. I thank them for being a strong voice, for campaigning and we have so much to do.

8 March 2021

As lots of colleagues around here have said, and I am a mother of two children, the Seanad will sit for an hour later today so I must change plans and every minute of my day is planned. So one must be mindful in this House and in every house of childcare, and the State needs to provide childcare for free. In March, we gave a little hat tip to free child care because the State paid childcare for month but then cut it off completely. We need to revisit providing free childcare and the issue should come within the ambit of the Department of Education. The Government must listen to women and take childcare very seriously.

**Senator Emer Currie:** It will be hard for me to squeeze my five-minute speech into two and half minutes.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Fiona O'Loughlin):** I am sorry, Senator.

**Senator Emer Currie:** We cannot help but focus on Covid today and the inequitable effect that it has had on women. What are we going to do about it? We cannot allow for these experiences and insights to merely become ink on reports or for us to sleepwalk into a global she-session going back on progress that we have made in women's economic participation. The structural inequalities that exist are staring us in the face right now more than ever and we need to see action, investment and long-term change.

I hope to touch on three things, the first of which is remote working. Employers faced major upheaval when, overnight, they moved their employees to their homes but the next stage of upheaval will be whenever employees return to their offices. These people need to be managed fairly and I am specifically talking about office workers. Despite the fact that only 40% of home workers at the moment are women, we cannot allow remote work to be gendered or for those to opt to work from home or remotely to be viewed, or treated, as any less ambitious than people present in the office. If offices return to a culture based on physical presenteeism then there will inequality, so the Government must be proactive in helping to establish a new work culture based on equal opportunities. The Government can do so by encouraging the use of technology first, which is basically what companies are doing now but merged and integrated into the office environment. We need a communications campaign on best practice for how to do that and how to bring companies through the hybrid transition. I am worried that not enough companies are talking about the hows of the hyper transition.

The national remote working strategy is fantastic. It is committed to introducing the right to request to work remotely. It will enhance our commitments under the EU work-life balance directive which requires EU member states to introduce the right to request flexible working arrangements for carers and working parents of children aged from zero up to eight years. I believe that we can go further than that. Not everyone works in roles that can be done remotely, has access to adequate remote work spaces or wants to work remotely even if they could. If we do not want flexible work to be gendered or stereotyped then we need to go beyond parents and carers and offer it to everybody. Let us look to Finland where, in 2017, Finnish fathers spent as much time with their children as mothers, and the gender employment gap was less than 2% in 2020.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Fiona O'Loughlin):** I must cut the Senator off because the debate is already over time, and Senators Crowe and Martin did express a wish to speak but I told them that they could not. I call Senator Clifford-Lee and she has two minutes.

**Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee:** I will be super quick because I want to give my colleague,

the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, a very good period to discuss this very important topic. I am also delighted that the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Deputy O’Gorman, is also here.

I want to touch on two very important issues that I am very passionate about. One is the free contraception scheme for women aged 17 to 25 years that was promised in the programme for Government. Personally, I would prefer universal access to free contraception as recommended by the Oireachtas Joint Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution but this limited scheme is a good start. I would like the Minister for Health and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to put structures in place so that we can begin the scheme and have it rolled out by the time we meet here this time next year. The second issue on which I want to touch is the outrageous situation whereby those in receipt of the housing assistance payment, HAP, primarily women, are being discriminated against when applying for legal aid. I know a lot about the legal aid system and the family law matters discussed in the District Court such as maintenance, custody, access and guardianship. These payments are taken into account when assessing income, which rules many people out. This is an absolutely outrageous situation. Vulnerable women and their children are those primarily being left behind by this. Going to court on one’s own because the State has failed to provide one with a council house and one has to rely on the HAP system is a scary prospect and absolutely outrageous.

There is a lot more I could say on International Women’s Day. Many of my colleagues here in the Chamber have touched on issues. I hope that next year, when Covid has receded, we will be able to have a debate over a full day to allow us to tease out all of these issues rather than rushing through them in a very short session. I hope everyone enjoys the day. I thank everyone for their contributions. It was really interesting to listen to everyone’s thoughts. It is a great honour for me to be a Member of this House alongside so many brilliant women.

**Minister of State at the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** I have enjoyed the conversation. One could not call it a debate. It was a really engaging conversation from the very beginning and all the way through. Everyone brought up really poignant topics in their contributions across the whole two hours.

It is amazing when one sits down and reflects on one’s own time and how one ended up in politics. For me personally, it goes back to my mother. There was a pothole down the road from where we lived so she drove into the council office one day. The pothole had been there for quite a length of time. She went in and told PJ in the office that the pothole was back again. PJ told her not to worry and that council workers would be out later. She told him that she would sit in the car and follow them out. That shows a little bit about us. If women want to do things, they just get into it and do it. That tells us a little bit about us. That is how we got here. We persevered. We broke our own personal glass ceilings to get here. Whether we got here in an independent capacity or through a party, we have all faced challenges. Of that, there is no doubt. Some of us are single women, some have had to deal with childcare and some have had to deal with health issues. I do not remember who mentioned it but someone pointed out that one gets asked questions like “How will you cope?”, “How will the family manage?” and “Who will mind the kids?” The guilt starts straight away before one even puts one’s name on a ballot paper. Senator Dolan spoke about subconscious and unconscious biases. That was a valuable contribution. We need to start challenging unconscious biases and wondering what they mean.

I need to share another experience with the ladies in the House. They may know that I ran for election to the European Parliament back in the day. One day, I found myself in Dunboyne

or Ashbourne. The car was pulled in and I was eating a little bit of lunch. There was a knock at the window. I looked out and saw the Leader of the Seanad, Senator Doherty. When she came over I pointed out that I was in her neck of the woods. She asked me to get out of the car and take a photograph. I said that she was with the other side but she said that strong women should support strong women. That tells us a little bit about us. We need to be able to support each other. For far too long, we did not.

One of the wonderful things that happened in the Thirty-second Dáil was the founding of the women's caucus. I extend my reverence to the chair of the current women's caucus, Senator O'Loughlin. The caucus gives us opportunities to have conversations that are always left on the periphery and which never make their way through those magical brown doors. There are many issues that need to be the focus of conversation, some of which Senator Clifford-Lee mentioned. Time and again, they fail to make their way in here. Period poverty was one such issue knocking on the door of the Thirty-second Dáil and which is now being addressed in the Thirty-third Dáil. The Senator also talked about maintenance. That is a very significant issue in all of our council areas. It is a barrier to women's existence. Senator Fitzpatrick talked about having to look into the eyes of a person who does not know where they will sleep that night, where the front door is or where their children can crawl about. She also spoke about the ambitious housing plan. These are really concrete issues that need to be discussed.

I had a speech prepared, but I took down notes as the debate progressed. We talk about women in sport, the 20x20 campaign and so on. Women do not need to make it into the Oireachtas to be a positive influence on young girls. It is all down to the nice teacher they meet in national school or the woman on the sports pitch who shows young girls how to pick up or kick a ball. The same goes for gymnastics. It gives girls a bit of extra time and coaching. As they say in the mental health field, all you need is one. It is the same for women who want to make their way through - we just need one sounding board, one to push us through, one to say we can do it, one to reinforce us.

While that would be wonderful, we also need to go back to where it starts, namely, at the council and, before that, the Tidy Towns committees in which we were all involved. We can consider the numbers on councils currently. It is fantastic to listen to the National Women's Council and to hear that the Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke, and local government are supporting initiatives to develop the outreach model of the caucus system of councils regionally, as we do not have enough women. We do not have that diverse voice. It sometimes pains me to hear that local councils cannot get enough women onto education and training boards, ETBs. While legislation requires a proper board composition, women cannot get onto them because it might disturb who sits in what chair on some strategic policy committee.

**Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee:** Jobs for the boys.

**Deputy Anne Rabbitte:** That is what goes on and we have to call it out. There is no point in us talking about percentages. They are only as good as what follows on from them. Without mentioning specifics, I have experience on a county council where females could not make their way onto an ETB because the boys would not leave even though that meant the board was not meeting its structural requirements.

There is so much more to do, but I feel empowered because there are such strong women inside the gates of Leinster House and there are great jobs to be done. The Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, and I are passionate about our roles and doing what we can from within the Depart-

ment of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. For example, as long as I am also in the Department of Health, I will raise the issue of contraception. Two Senators mentioned endometriosis. We will do our work and I look forward to working with everyone.

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Fiona O'Loughlin):** I thank everyone. We had to shave a little time off contributions during the past 20 minutes.

*Sitting suspended at 4.33 p.m. and resumed at 4.45 p.m.*

### **Seachtain na Gaeilge: Ráitis**

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers):** Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach Gníomhach agus leis na Seanadóirí. Tosóidh mé an díospóireacht agus críochnóidh an tAire, an Teachta Catherine Martin, í. Ó ceapadh mé mar Aire Stáit le freagracht i leith na Gaeltachta agus Spóirt i lár na bliana seo caite, in ainneoin na srianta a bhaineann leis an bpaindéim táim tar éis iarracht a dhéanamh casadh leis an oiread eagraíochtaí agus pobal Gaeilge agus Gaeltachta agus is féidir. Cé go mb'éigean dom é a dhéanamh go fíorúil den chuid is mó, d'éirigh liom casadh le réimse leathan d'eagraíochtaí atá ag feidhmiú in earnáil na Gaeilge agus na Gaeltachta. Dar ndóigh, tá réimse leathan tacaíochtaí á gcur ar fáil chun an teanga a fhorbairt i measc an phobail. Díreoidh mé inniu ar dhá earnáil - earnáil na teicneolaíochta agus earnáil an spóirt. Tá iarrachtaí ar bun ag mo Roinn earnáil na teicneolaíochta Gaeilge a fhorbairt ar mhaithe le pleanáil don todhchaí agus le léiriú d'aos óg na tíre gur teanga nuálach comhaimseartha í.

Is tionscadal de chuid Camara Education Ireland é TechSpace a fheidhmíonn mar ghréasán náisiúnta de spásanna meáin dhigiteacha atá Ionannithe in ionaid óige agus scoileanna. Cabhraíonn sé le hógánaigh a bheith gníomhach-----

**Senator Rónán Mullen:** Gabh mo leithscéal, ach an mbeadh aon seans cóip a fháil d'aitheasc an Aire Stáit?

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** Tá sé lasmuigh den doras.

**Senator Rónán Mullen:** Táim buíoch den Aire Stáit agus beidh fáilte agus fiche roimhe nuair a thagann sé.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** Cabhraíonn sé le hógánaigh a bheith gníomhach i gcruthú ábhair dhigitigh agus theicneolaíochta. Foghlaimíonn daoine óga conas scannáin dhigiteacha, dearadh gréasáin, forbairt aipeanna soghluaiste agus róbataic i measc nithe eile a dhéanamh agus déantar ó seo ar fad trí Ghaeilge. Tá an clár TechSpace curtha i bhfeidhm go náisiúnta i scoileanna agus ionaid óige le os cionn 60 scoil agus eagraíocht ag glacadh páirt san tionscadal Gaeilge. Tá an oiread sin spéise á cur san tionscadal go bhfuiltear ag cur tús leis an gclár sna bunscoileanna i mbliana.

Reáchtáiltear an ócáid Tech Féile gach bliain le léiriú de cheardlanna agus taispeántais le haoichainteoirí agus le taibheoirí. Tugann sé seo an deis do na scoileanna agus do na hionaid óige a gcuid ábhair a chur ar thaispeántas agus ceiliúradh a dhéanamh ar an sáróbair atá á baint amach ag an aos óg sa teicneolaíocht cruthaitheach. Toisc srianta Covid-19, is ar-líne a bheidh

Tech Féile na bliana seo ar siúl. Tá áthas orm go mbeidh deis ag an oiread sin daoine óga páirt a ghlacadh ann, tar éis an bhliain crua atá curtha isteach acu.

Tá mo Roinn ag tacú le Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath, chun an tionscadal ABAIR a fhorbairt chomh maith. Tá obair cheannródaíoch ar siúl ag ABAIR le blianta beaga anuas chun teicneolaíocht na hurlabhra a sholáthar don Ghaeilge. Ón tús, mar gheall ar an gcúlra láidir teangeolaíochta, teicneolaíochta agus Gaeilge a bhí acu, bhí an fhís ag foireann ABAIR uirlisí urlabhra a chur ar fáil ionas go mbeadh pobal na Gaeilge ábalta feidhmiú i saol digiteach an lae inniu. Cé gur ar sintéis na Gaeilge a bhí ABAIR dírithe sa chéad áit, tá an réimse taighde leathnaithe go mór le blianta beaga anuas. Tá tús curtha le haithint cainte, agus tá borradh tagtha ar shraith leathan fothionscadal chun áiseanna a fhorbairt a bhfuil teicneolaíocht na hurlabhra mar bhunchloch acu. Cruthaíodh léitheoir scáileáin chomh maith dóibh siúd le míchumas radhairc a léann gach a bhfuil ar an ríomhaire os ard. Tá an léitheoir seo ar fáil le rogha canúintí Ghaeilge agus le haschur Braille. Tá sé mar mhórfhís ag ABAIR an Ghaeilge labhartha a thabhairt go croílár an tsaoil dhigitigh, trí réimse iomlán teicneolaíochtaí urlabhra agus áiseanna don 21ú aois a chur ar fáil atá ar ardchaighdeán idirnáisiúnta. Tá sé seo ag freagairt go díreach d'aidhmeanna na Stráitéise 20 Bliain don Ghaeilge 2010-2030 agus ag croílár na pleanála teanga. Tá sé ríthábhachtach don Ghaeilge a bheith páirteach sa réabhlóid dhigiteach mar, mura bhfuil sí, fágfar ar gcúl í i dtodhchaí digiteach na linne seo.

Is chuige sin a bhfuil mo Roinn ag tacú le tionscadal digiteach eile in Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath; is é sin an tionscadal GaelTech. Is tionscadal í seo de chuid an ionad ADAPT, a bhfuil maoiniú ceadaithe dó chun clár taighde maidir le próiseáil teanga nádúrtha na Gaeilge a chur i gcrích sa tréimhse 2017 go 2021. Is obair an-teicniúil atá i gceist, atá ríthábhachtach le déanamh cinnte de nach mbeidh an teanga fágtha taobh thiar ó thaobh na teicneolaíochta de.

Mar go bhfuilim freagrach do chúrsaí spóirt agus do Ghaeilge, tá spéis ar leith agam i dtograí ina ndéantar nasc idir an péire acu. Ar mhaithe le deiseanna breise sealbhaithe agus saibhrithe teanga a chur ar fáil tríd an spórt, tá clár ar leith á mhaoiniú ag mo Roinn ar a n-áirítear clár na gcluichí Gaelacha, an clár aclaíochta agus scéim na gcampaí samhraidh. Is bearta praiticiúla iad seo, atá ag tacú leis an bpróiseas pleanála teanga agus leis an bpolasaí don oideachas Gaeltachta araon. In ainneoin na srianta atá i bhfeidhm, tá áthas ar leith orm go bhfuil na heagrais atá ag riar chlár na gcluichí Gaelacha agus an chlár aclaíochta ag cur físeáin tarraingteacha agus taitneamhacha i scileanna peile, iománaíochta agus aclaíochta le chéile. Tá na físeáin seo á gcur ar fáil do na scoláirí fad atá siad ag obair go cianda agus á gcur suas ar na meán shóisialta. Ar mhaithe le deiseanna breise sealbhaithe agus saibhrithe teanga a chur ar fáil tríd na spóirt Ghaelacha i mbunscoileanna agus in iarbhunscoileanna faoi leith i nGaeltacht Chonnacht agus i nGaeltacht na Mumhan, cuirtear cúnamh airgid ar fáil trí chlár na gcluichí Gaelacha chun clár oibre comhaontaithe a fheidhmiú.

Cheadaigh mo Roinn beagnach €500,000 thar tréimhse trí bliana don chlár in 2019. De thoradh seo, tá an clár á reáchtáil i 73 scoil Ghaeltachta i gCúige Mumhan agus i gCúige Chonnacht. Tá 15 duine fostaithe mar thraenálaíthe faoin scéim. Faoi gclár aclaíochta agus spóirt atá á riar ag Muintearas Teoranta le tacaíocht mo Roinne, tugtar cuidiú breise do scoileanna chun deiseanna sealbhaithe agus saibhrithe teanga a chruthú do pháistí tríd deiseanna breise oideachais fhisiceach agus aclaíochta a chur ar fáil. Cheadaigh mo Roinn deontas d'os cionn €200,000 in 2019 thar tréimhse trí bliana chun an clár a riar in 18 bunscoil i nGaeltacht Chonamara.

5 o'clock

Tugann scéim na gcampaí samhraidh de chuid mo Roinne deis iontach d'aos óg na Gaeltachta chun tabhairt faoi imeachtaí taitneamhacha i gcomhlúadar a chéile gach samhradh i dtimpeallacht Ghaeilge, rud atá ar leas an aosa óig agus na Gaeilge araon. Tá an cheist maidir le reáchtáil na gcampaí i mbliana á cíoradh ag mo Roinn faoi láthair. Mar thaca breise don aos óg anuraidh le linn na paindéime, ceadaíodh maoiniú, i gcomhar le Foras na Gaeilge, do TG4 chun dhá shraith theilifíse de Campaí Cúla4 a chraoladh go laethúil thar thréimhse an tsamhraidh.

Tagann lucht na Gaeltachta agus lucht na Gaeilge le chéile ó cheann ceann na tíre gach samhradh de ghnáth le féile mhór peile a bheith acu ag Comórtas Peile na Gaeltachta. Faraor, cuireadh an comórtas a bhí beartaithe i Leitir Móir i nGaeltacht na Gaillimhe in 2020 siar mar gheall ar na srianta Covid-19 agus is cosúil go mbeidh an rud céanna ag tarlú i mbliana. Táimid uile ag súil le comórtas 2022 anois nuair a bheidh srianta na paindéime thart agus deis ag pobail na nGaeltachtaí éagsúla bailiú le chéile arís don cheiliúradh mór spóirt seo. Mar go bhfuil sé aitheanta ar feadh i bhfad go bhfuil tábhacht faoi leith ag baint le timpeallacht chuí a chruthú inar féidir le daoine an Ghaeilge a labhairt go nádúrtha, tá iarrachtaí suntasacha á ndéanamh ag cumainn sa Ghaeltacht chun an timpeallacht sin a chruthú. Mar aitheantas ar an obair fóna atá déanta ag na cumainn ar fud na Gaeltachta, cuireann mo Roinn cuidiú ar fáil chun páirceanna a chur in oiriúint don líon ard cuairteoirí ó Ghaeltachtaí na tíre ar fad a thugann aghaidh ar an gcomórtas gach bliain. Cheadaigh mo Roinn beagnach €300,000 in 2020 chun na háiseanna ag Páirc an Mháimín i Leitir Móir a fheabhsú agus, an bhliain roimhe sin, ceadaíodh os cionn €120,000 chun na háiseanna ag Baile na nGall i gCiarraí a fheabhsú don chomórtas.

Is scéim tacaíochta de chuid Ghlór na nGael agus de chuid an Chumainn Lúthchleas Gael í Fondúireacht Sheosaimh Mhic Dhonncha le haghaidh clubanna CLG ar mian leo an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn. Is é cuspóir na fondúireachta seo cúnamh a chur ar fáil do na clubanna i bhfoirm comhairle, tacaíocht agus smaointe le pleananna a fhorbairt agus a chur i bhfeidhm ar bhonn tomhaiste agus céimnithe. Is féidir deontas a lorg ón bhfondúireacht chun cuidiú leis na pleananna sin a chur i gcrích agus bronnar boinn ar na clubanna le haitheantas a thabhairt as méid áirithe a bhaint amach ar son na teanga. Tá mo Roinn ag cur maoiniú ar fáil don scéim seo ó 2019 i leith agus tá sé á maoiniú ag Foras na Gaeilge chomh maith. Go dáta, tá 109 bonn cré-umha, 43 bonn airgid agus ocht mbonn óir bronnata ar chlubanna agus é de sprioc ag Glór na nGael an líon sin a ardú de réir a chéile.

Is am dúshlánach é seo don tír i gcoitinne, an Ghaeltacht agus an Ghaeilge san áireamh. Tá mise dóchasach agus muiníneach ón méid atá feicthe agam de spiorad agus de chur chuige ceannródaíoch i bpobail ó cheann ceann na tíre go bhfuil muid ag dul i ngleic leis na dúshláin ar bhealach dearfach agus spreagúil. Is údar misnigh dúinn ar fad gur éirigh le Seachtain na Gaeilge dul ar aghaidh san aeráid dhúshlánach seo agus níl aon amhras orm ach go mbeidh tairbhe ar leith dóibh siúd a ghlacann páirt.

Mar fhocal scoir, ba mhaith liom a chur in iúl don Teach go bhfuil mé féin agus an tAire Turasóireachta, Cultúir, Ealaíon, Gaeltachta, Spóirt agus Meán, an Teachta Catherine Martin, tar éis Gobnait Ní Mhuineacháin, atá ainmnithe ag Comhairle Contae Chorcaí, a cheapadh ar bhord Údarás na Gaeltachta inniu. Ciallaíonn sé seo go mbeidh cúigear ban ar bhord an údaráis anois, an líon is mó ban riamh ar an mbord agus rud thar a bheith tráthúil agus Lá Idirnáisiúnta na mBan á cheiliúradh againn inniu. Gabhaim buíochas leis na Seanadóirí as an gcuireadh a thabhairt dom labhairt anseo inniu agus guím gach rath ar na himeachtaí ar fad le linn na seachtaine. Tá súil agam nach mbeidh sé i bhfad eile sula mbeidh mé ar ais os bhur gcomhair

arís le Bille na dTeangacha Oifigiúla (Leasú), 2019 atá ar Chéim an Choiste sa Dáil faoi láthair, Bille atá ríthábhachtach do phobal na Gaeilge agus na Gaeltachta.

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Aisling Dolan):** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit. Táimid an-bhródúil as a bheith ag caint sa Teach seo. Tá ráiteas an Aire Stáit ar fáil lasmuigh den Seomra. Tá ocht nóiméad ag gach urlabhraí. Glaoim ar an Seanadóir Mullen.

**Senator Rónán Mullen:** Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire agus roimh an Aire Stáit. Is mór an tábhacht a thugann muid sa Teach seo don Ghaeilge agus do stádas na Gaeilge inár sochaí. Is coicís na Gaeilge atá i gceist anois, agus de réir a chéile tá na hócáidí seo ag dul níos mó, ach guím Seachtain na Gaeilge shona ar gach duine. Déanaimís uilig iarracht an Ghaeilge a labhairt sna laethanta seo, an méid agus is féidir linn, chun cur le tábhacht na Gaeilge inár dtír agus chun borradh agus tacaíocht a thabhairt do lucht labhartha na Gaeilge, bíodh siad sa Ghalltacht nó sa Ghaeltacht.

Aithníim an méid a dúirt an tAire Stáit faoi na himeachtaí éagsúla uilig, na rudaí atá ar siúl ar leibhéal an chultúir, ar leibhéal na teicneolaíochta, ar leibhéal na meáin sóisialta agus ar leibhéal spóirt, agus tá suim agus ról áirithe ag an Aire Stáit i gcúrsaí spóirt. Muna bhfuil struchtúr faoin méid sin ar fad, ina bhfuil tábhacht á léiriú ag an Stát agus ag struchtúir an Stáit ar leibhéal na reachtaíochta agus ar leibhéal na gcearta, beidh sé an-deacair dul chun cinn a dhéanamh sa mheántearma, gan a bheith ag caint faoin bhfadtearma. Caithimid a bheith dearfach faoi na rudaí maithe ar fad atá ag dul ar aghaidh agus tréaslú leis na daoine sin, bíodh siad sna meáin cumarsáide nó sna hearnálacha spóirt nó cultúir.

Ag an am céanna, caithimid an cheist a chur anseo i dTeach na Parlaiminte: an bhfuilimid dáiríre faoin nGaeilge? Is maith an rud é go mbíonn an díospóireacht seo againn go bliantúil, ach mar atá ráite agam cheana, tá géarghá go mbeadh dearcadh níos dearfaí ag an Stát agus ag an Rialtas maidir leis an nGaeilge. Nach aisteach an rud é, mar shampla, go bhfuil Bille na dTeangacha Oifigiúla (Leasú), 2019 ag dul tríd an Dáil ach is beag cainte atá ann faoi sin sna meáin cumarsáide nó sa chóras polaitíochta féin fiú?

Ceann de na rudaí is tábhachtaí a chaithimid díriú isteach air i gcónaí ná an céatadán sa stát-seirbhís, i measc oibrithe Stáit, atá in ann agus atá sásta déileáil leis an bpobal trí Ghaeilge. In ainneoin an méid atá sa reachtaíocht agus in ainneoin na gealltanais ar fad, tá an fhadhb ansin i gcónaí ó a athraíodh an struchtúr agus an dlí san 1970idí. Sa lá atá inniu ann, níl daoine le Gaeilge in ann seirbhís sásúil a fháil trí Ghaeilge agus ba chóir go dtosnódh an Stát mar tá stádas na Gaeilge sa Bhunreacht. Ba chóir go mbeadh an Stát dáiríre faoi go dtí go bhfuil sé riachtanach ar státseirbhísigh a earcófar go bhfuil Gaeilge acu ag an tús nó ar a laghad go bhfuil scála ama ina gcaithfidh siad leibhéal áirithe feabhas sa Ghaeilge a bhaint amach, ar nós tréimhse promhadh. Ní féidir a rá go bhfuil an córas dílis don Ghaeilge agus dáiríre faoin Ghaeilge.

Tá sé an-tábhachtach go mbeadh an Ghaeilge le feiceáil ar chomharthaí bóithre, i siopaí gnó agus mar sin. Sin an tábhacht a bhaineann leis na scéimeanna teanga. Má amharcaimid ar an gcuraclam, tá sárobair á déanamh ag na scoileanna Gaeilge, ag na Gaelscoileanna agus ag na múinteoirí uilig. Smaoiním, mar shampla, ar an gcúrsa ábhar oide i Marino agus an baitsiléir san oideachas trí mheán na Gaeilge. Tá an-dóchas le feiceáil ansin sa chóras oideachais, agus ba chóir dom a rá go bhfuil sé sin ó Thuaidh agus ó Dheas.

Ag an am céanna, bhí mé ag léamh rud suimiúil inniu a scríobh Éanna Ó Caollaí i *The Irish Times* agus é ag caint faoin athbhreithniú ar an sraith sinsearach. Luann sé an dá shiollabas nua

atá molta don chúrsa Gaeilge don ardteistiméireacht ag an gComhairle Náisiúnta Curaclaim agus Measúnachta, NCCA. Tá idirdhealú molta idir shonraíocht T1, a bheadh oiriúnach do dhaoine a fhreastalaíonn ar scoileanna Gaeilge agus Gaeltachta agus a bheadh ardchaighdeán acu, agus sonraíocht T2, a bheadh ann dóibh siúd a fhreastalaíonn ar scoileanna lán-Bhéarla. Fiafraíonn Éanna Ó Caollaí an mbeidh sé de dhualgas ar scoileanna an rogha a thabhairt do mhic léinn T1 nó T2 a dhéanamh. Más rud é go mbeidh ábhar nó caighdeán níos lú inghlactha ag an gcuid is mó de scoileanna, an bhfuil an contúirt ann go mbeadh go leor scoileanna ann nach mbeidh ag tabhairt deis do na mic léinn ardchaighdeán a bhaint amach trí Ghaeilge? Sin rud a chuirfeadh isteach orm. Luann sé freisin an chaoi ina mbronntar 25 pointe bónais don mhataimaitic ag an ardleibhéal. Cén fáth nach mbeadh a leithéid de rud ar fáil chun spreagadh a thabhairt do mhic léinn ardchaighdeán a bhaint amach trí Ghaeilge freisin? Luaigh sé freisin an laghdú atá sa mhéid marcanna a thugtar don scrúdú béil, rud a chuir iontas orm mar shílfinn go bhfuil an scrúdú béil i measc na rudaí is tábhachtaí maidir le cur chun cinn na Gaeilge. Mura bhfuil daoine in ann an teanga a labhairt, níl aon todhchaí ag an teanga sin.

Luaigh mé níos luaithe an méid atá á dhéanamh ar leibhéal an chultúir. Tréaslaim le TG4 agus le Raidió na Gaeltachta agus le leithéidí *The Irish Times*. Léim Alan Titley agus gabhaim ann go rialta agus luaigh mé Éanna Ó Caollaí. Tá daoine ann ag treabhadh an fhóid maidir le cur chun cinn na Gaeilge ar leibhéal ardchaighdeán. Bhí mé an-tógtha an oíche cheana, agus mé ag éisteacht agus ag breathnú ar “Glór Tíre”, leis an méid Gaeilge a raibh á fí isteach acu leis an mBéarla. Shíl mé gur bealach é sin chun an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn i measc iad siúd a bhfuil ar bheagán Gaeilge, b’fhéidir, nó nach bhfuil an Ghaeilge 100% ar a dtoil acu, díreach mar nach bhfuil sé 100% ar mo thoil agam féin ach an oiread.

Mholfainn cúpla rud eile sa mhéid ama atá fágtha agam. Mar a dúirt mé cheana, mura bhfuil saoránach in ann a chuid gnó a dhéanamh trí Ghaeilge leis an Stát nó le Roinn an Rialtais, ní fiú reachtaíocht a bheith ann. Tá gá le hathrú meoin ansin lena chinntiú go bhfuil na cearta ag lucht labhartha na Gaeilge. Shílfeá in amanna gur beag suim ná cumhacht atá ag na polaiteoirí ach is iad na státseirbhísigh atá ag cur bac ar dhul chun cinn anseo. Tá súil agam nach bhfuil sé sin fíor. Tá go leor státseirbhíseach a bhfuil meas acu ar an nGaeilge ach tá gá anois le fianaise go bhfuil dul cinn á dhéanamh agus le déanamh.

Sa deireadh, bíodh dul chun cinn sa Tuaisceart maidir le hAcht na Teanga. Táimid ag fanacht leis ó Chomhaontú Aoine an Chéasta agus ansin ó Chomhaontú Chill Rìmhinn in 2006. Gealladh reachtaíocht maidir leis an teanga ó shin. Caithfidh dul i dteagmháil leis na haontachtaí agus a rá leo nach aon chailleadh é cead cultúrtha a thabhairt do lucht na Gaeilge. Caithfidh tabhairt faoi bhealach nua. Mar a dúradh i gcomhaontú na bliana seo caite, Ré Nua, Cur Chuige Nua, ba cheart go mbeadh a leithéid in ann dúinn. Tá sé de dhíth orainn ó Thuaidh agus ó Dheas.

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Aisling Dolan):** Glaoim ar an Seanadóir Clifford-Lee anois.

**Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee:** Ba mhaith liom mo chuid ama a roinnt leis an Seanadóir O’Loughlin, más féidir, cúig nóiméad agus trí nóiméad an duine.

Tá súil agam go bhfuil an Teach go léir ag baint taitneamh as Seachtain na Gaeilge, nó coicís na Gaeilge faoi mar a dúirt an Seanadóir Mullen. Dar ndóigh, is é inniu Lá Idirnáisiúnta na mBan agus bhí seans againn díriú isteach ar chúrsaí feimineacha inniu agus iad a phlé. Tá cúrsaí Gaeilge á bplé againn faoi láthair agus tá ionannas i gceist freisin.

Tá fáilte roimh an Aire, an Teachta Catherine Martin, agus roimh an Aire Stáit, an Teachta Chambers, go dtí an Seanad. Caithfidh mé a rá go bhfuilim fíorbhródúil as a bheith i mo Sheanadóir de chuid Fhianna Fáil ag déanamh plé ar ár dteanga dhúchais inniu le hAire Stáit as mo pháirtí féin atá freagrach as an nGaeltacht. Tá forbairt na teanga agus cur chun cinn na Gaeilge mar ghnáth-theanga bheo bhríomhar na tíre ina phríomhaidhm de chuid Fhianna Fáil. Tá na Gaeltachtaí mar chroílár an chothaithe sin agus is tobair iad le saibhreas teanga agus cultúir don chuid eile den tír agus ba chóir dúinn gach tacaíocht a thabhairt dóibh.

Mar is eol dúinn, tá Bille na dTeangacha Oifigiúla (Leasú), 2019 ar Chéim an Choiste sa Dáil faoi láthair. Is dul chun cinn suntasach é seo ó thaobh cearta teanga do mhuintir na Gaeltachta agus do phobal labhartha na Gaeilge. Tá sé fíorthábhachtach mar bíonn go leor deacrachtaí ag daoine atá ag iarraidh a saol a chaitheamh trí Ghaeilge. Molaim an tAire Stáit as an aird a thug sé don reachtaíocht seo a luaite is a chuaigh sé i mbun oifige. Cuirfear deireadh le go leor constaicí atá ann faoi láthair nuair a achtaítear an reachtaíocht seo. Mar shampla bíonn fadhbanna go rialta ag daoine maidir leis an síneadh fada á úsáid acu agus iad ag déileáil le comhlachtaí Stáit. Léiríonn sé sin drochmheas iomlán. Baineann an síneadh fada le féiniúlacht. Tá sé dochreidte go bhfuil a leithéid fós ag tarlú ach táimid ag tnúth leis an lá nach mbeidh sé ina fhadhb. Is ceart bunúsach é a bheith in ann d'ainm ceart a úsáid. Tá tionscal na baincéireachta sa tír seo ag ligean phobal labhartha na Gaeilge síos arís agus arís eile. Nílím in ann ár gcuid gnó a dhéanamh trí Ghaeilge fiú ar líne. Léiríonn sé sin drochmheas.

Impím ar na bainc atá ag feidhmiú sa tír seo na seirbhísí a sholáthar do líon mór daoine ar mian leo a gcuid baincéireachta a dhéanamh trí Ghaeilge. Impím ar an Aire Stáit, an Teachta Chambers, agus ar an Aire, an Teachta Martin, dul i dteagmháil leo maidir leis an ábhar sin. Níl sé inghlactha a thuilleadh. B'fhéidir go bhfuil deis ann anois, leis an tsamhail baincéireachta pobail atá á phlé faoi láthair, bainc poiblí áitiúla nua a fhorbairt atá sásta seirbhísí trí Ghaeilge a chur ar fáil do phobal labhartha na Gaeilge.

Tá díomá orm nach bhfuil faisnéis shláinte tábhachtaí maidir leis na srianta agus vacsaíní Covid-19 ar fáil ag an am céanna leis an leagan Béarla nó ar chor ar bith fiú. Tá sé seo luaite agam cúpla uair cheana féin. Tá súil agam go luafaidh an tAire é sin leis an Taoiseach agus leis an Aire Stáit mar go bhfuil sé scanrúil. Caithfidh freastal ar mhuintir na Gaeltachta agus ar phobal labhartha na Gaeilge ar bhealach dáiríre. Níl aon leithscéal ann i lár paindéime gan a bheith ag cur faisnéise shláinte in iúl go leordhóthanach.

Tá baol faoi leith ann do na Gaeltachtaí ar fud na tíre de bharr Covid-19. Is cuid lárnach de gheilleagar na Gaeltachta iad na coláistí samhraidh. Téann breis agus 27,000 scoláire go dtí na coláistí samhraidh gach bliain agus is fiú €50 milliún iad don gheilleagar áitiúil. Dar ndóigh, ní raibh aon scoláirí ann anuraidh agus níl dearcadh dearfach ann don samhradh seo chugainn ach an oiread. Braitheann na ceantair sin ar thurasóireacht freisin. Tugann Údarás na Gaeltachta tacaíocht iontach do chomhlachtaí atá lonnaithe sa Ghaeltacht. Tá a fhios agam gur thug an Rialtas maoiniú breise d'Údarás na Gaeltachta anuraidh agus thug an Rialtas tacaíocht do na coláistí samhraidh agus na mná tí chomh maith, ach tá gá le plan fadtéarmach le haghaidh níos mó infheistíochta chun cosaint a thabhairt dóibh don todhchaí.

Ba chóir dúinn go léir iarracht a dhéanamh táirgí ó chomhlachtaí Gaeltachta a cheannach freisin. Cheannaigh mé buidéal vodca an tseachtain seo caite ó Dhrioglann Loch Measc atá lonnaithe i nGaeltacht Mhaigh Eo agus bhí sé go hálainn. Bhí gloine nó dhó agam ag an deireadh seachtaine chun seachtain na Gaeilge a cheiliúradh.

Críochnóidh mé leis sin. Tá níos mó le rá agam maidir le toghcháin dhíreacha le haghaidh bhord Údarás na Gaeltachta, earcaíocht, ranganna Gaeilge saor in aisce a chur ar fáil, meadú líon na nGaelcholáistí dara leibhéal, stádas na teanga sna Sé Chontae agus mar sin de. Tá mo chuid ama críochnaithe, áfach, agus mar sin fágfaidh mé anseo é.

**Senator Fiona O'Loughlin:** Ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur roimh an Aire go dtí an Teach. Is mór an onóir domsa a bheith ag caint i nGaeilge don chéad uair sa Teach seo mar gheall ar Sheachtain na Gaeilge.

Ba mhaith liom cúpla focal a rá faoi Ghaelscoil Chill Dara agus Gaelcholáiste Chill Dara. Tá aithne agam ar na múinteoirí sna scoileanna sin agus molaim iad as a tiomantas agus grá dár dteanga dhúchais. Ba mhór liom cloisteáil na daoine óga ag caint faoin nGaeilge.

D'fhoghlaim mé mo bheagán Gaeilge i nDaingean Uí Chúis sa teach tábhairne agus siopa McCarthy. Bhí mé ag smaoineamh go minic ar na fir agus na mná a bhíodh ag bualadh liom an samhradh sin nuair a bhí mé ag obair sa teach tábhairne. Bhí mé ag cleachtadh mo chúpla focal an samhradh sin. Is iad na hagallaimh sin a chur suim ionam sa Ghaeilge. Tá cuimhne bhreá agam ar bhean an tí, Ita McCarthy, agus an céad míle fáilte a chur sí romham agus roimh gach duine a thug cuairt ar theach McCarthy.

Is mór an náire orm nach mbím ag caint as Gaeilge go minic. Ba mhaith liom comhghairdeas a dhéanamh le Daithí de Faoite, cathaoirleach Chill Dara le Gaeilge, agus a fhoireann mar gheall ar Mheitheal Chill Dara 2021 an Satharn seo caite. B'shin an dara meitheal faoi phleanáil teanga i gContae Chill Dara. Eagrófar imeacht gach bliain as seo amach. Tugann an meitheal deis iontach do phobal na Gaeilge, do ghníomhaithe teanga, do sholáthraí seirbhíse agus d'éinne a bhfuil spéis acu i ndul chun cinn na Gaeilge casadh le daoine eile atá ag obair ar son na teanga i gContae Chill Dara. Chuala mé go raibh sé an-mhaith ar fad.

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Aisling Dolan):** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Seanadóir as an ráiteas sin, inar luaigh sí an bean an tí a bhí aici agus í sa Ghaeltacht.

**Senator Barry Ward:** Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire agus roimh an Aire Stáit. Ní minic go mbíonn Aire agus Aire Stáit againn sa Seanad. B'fhéidir go bhfuil sé ceart agus cóir i gcomhair Seachtain na Gaeilge. Is cúis áthais dom í a bheith anseo le linn Seachtain na Gaeilge chun cothú agus fás ár dteanga dúchais a phlé. Tugann an féile teanga seo deis do dhaoine an Ghaeilge atá acu a úsáid agus daoine a spreagadh chun na Gaeilge. Úsáidim an focal "spreagadh" toisc nach féile do lucht líofachta na teanga amháin atá inti ach is féile do lucht an chúpla focal agus do thosaitheoirí freisin í.

Is as Dún Laoghaire mise. Níl Gaeltacht againn ansin ach ag an am céanna tá a fhios agam go bhfuil níos mó daoine a labhraíonn an Ghaeilge gach lá ina gcónaí i nDún Laoghaire ná in aon áit eile sa tír taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht. Tá an ceangal agus an líon sin idir Dhún Laoghaire agus an Ghaeilge an-tábhachtach ar fad dúinn.

D'fhoghlaim mise mo chuid Ghaeilge nuair a bhí mé ar scoil i nGaeltacht Phort Láirge sa Rinn. Chaith mé bliain i gColáiste na Rinne thíos ansin. Bhí seans agam an Ghaeilge a fhoghlaim i dtús báire ach nuair a tháinig mé ar ais go dtí Dún Laoghaire bhí seans agam é a chleachtadh freisin. Bhí mé páirteach sna 8ú Calafort Gasóga Mara i gCuan Dhún Laoghaire a labhraíonn Gaeilge an t-am ar fad. Bhí a lán daoine ann, ina measc mo chairde i gColáiste Eoin, i gColáiste Íosagáin agus i Scoil Lorcáin, agus bhí seans againn Gaeilge a labhairt. Tá na rudaí mar sin an-tábhachtach ar fad do dhaoine nach bhfuil Gaeilge líofa acu nó nach bhfuil

Gaeilge acu sa bhaile. Tá sé tábhachtach go mbeadh seans acu an Ghaeilge sin a chleachtadh agus a labhairt.

Tá Scoil Lorcáin i nDún Laoghaire anois freisin. Tá sé ar an gcéad Gaelscoil i nDún Laoghaire ar aon nós agus b'fhéidir taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht. Tá sé ann ó na 1970idí ar aon nós. Tá Gaelscoil nua againn i nGráinseach an Déin freisin, Gaelscoil Laighin. Tá saghas trend ansin le Gaelscoileanna nua. Ag an am céanna, tá eagraíochtaí againn cosúil le Cuala i nDeilginis. Is club Cumann Lúthchleas Gael atá ansin. Léiríonn imreoirí na chumainn sin cé chomh láidir is atá an Ghaeilge i nDeilginis agus Gaeilge á labhairt acu ar GAA Beo ar TG4 srl. tar éis gach cluiche a chraoltar. Tuigim gur fhreastal cuid mór de na himreoirí ar Choláiste Eoin, ar Choláiste Íosagáin agus ar na Gaelscoileanna atá lonnaithe i nDún Laoghaire.

Áit a bhíodh pobal beag Gaelach ann tá pobal mór ann anois a imríonn spóirt as Gaeilge, a labhraíonn Gaeilge agus atá in ann an teanga a úsáid mar theanga beo. Sin rud an-tábhachtach ar fad freisin. Níor chreid an glúin deireanach, a raibh cónaí orthu i nDún Laoghaire, go mbeadh an Ghaeilge chomh láidir ann agus atá sí anois. Táim dóchasach go mbeidh an Ghaeilge níos láidre fós don chéad glúin eile. Cuireann sé gliondar croí orm an méadú a fheiceáil i líon na scoláirí atá ag freastal ar Ghaelscoileanna agus an méadú i líon na Gaelscoileanna féin. Is féidir leis na Gaelscoileanna a bheith mar bhunchlocha chun pobal Gaeilge a chruthú.

Ba chóir dúinn go léir a bheith uailmhianach faoinár gcomhphobail. Cé acu a bhfuil siad taobh istigh nó taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht, is féidir pobal Gaeilge láidir a chruthú iontu. Ritheadh rún ag ardfheis Chonradh na Gaeilge coicís ó shin ag iarraidh go mbeadh coiste Ghaeilge ag gach comhairle chontae agus go mbeadh oifigeach Gaeilge acu freisin. Is maith an uailmhi-an é sin daoine ar fud na tíre a bhfuil Gaeilge acu a thabhairt le chéile sna pobail ina bhfuil siad.

Bhí seans agam freastal ar Chomhairle Contae Dhún Laoghaire-Ráth an Dúin leis an Aire nuair a rabhamar ann. Nuair a toghadh mise mar chomhairleoir den chéad uair in 2009, bhí fear suite i seomra in aice le seomra na comhairle a rinne aistriúchán beo ar aon rud a dúradh i nGaeilge. Bhí seans ag daoine Gaeilge a labhairt agus bhí aistriúchán beo ann d'aon chomhairleoir nach raibh in ann Gaeilge a thuiscint. Nuair a d'éirigh an fear sin as, ní raibh éinne ann chun a áit a ghlacadh agus, mar sin, níl an t-aistriúchán ann a thuilleadh. Mar Rialtas, ba cheart dúinn airgead a chur ar fáil do chomhairleoirí agus do chomhairlí ar fud na tíre chun seirbhís mar sin a chur ar fáil.

Nuair a labhraímid faoin nGaeilge, labhraímid faoin nGaeilge in Éirinn, ach is pobal domhanda é pobal labhartha na Gaeilge. Tá sé sin go mór le feiceáil sna deiseanna fostaíochta leis an Aontas Eorpach atá ann sa Bhruiséil. Is teanga oifigiúil de chuid an Aontais í an Ghaeilge anois agus tá éileamh an-mhór ann d'aistritheoirí chun dlíthe na hEorpa a aistriú go Gaeilge. Tá an Rialtas tiomanta don Ghaeilge a bheith mar theanga oibre iomlán in institiúidí an Aontais Eorpaigh. Is fúinn féin atá sé an sprioc a bhaint amach an Ghaeilge a bheith ar chomhchéim le gach teanga eile san Aontas Eorpach. Bhí mise mar chomhalta de Choiste na Réigiún sa Bhruiséil agus bhí seans agam dul ann ar son na tíre seo. Tá an-seans againn ansin an Ghaeilge a labhairt toisc go bhfuil an t-aistriúchán beo ar fáil againn. Cuireann sé sin in intinn dom fear darb ainm Micheál Ó Conchúir, atá ina ard-rúnaí den ghrúpa, Comhghuaillíocht Eorpach, EA. Déanann sé an-iarracht na daoine a thagann chuig Coiste na Réigiún a spreagadh chun a nGaeilge a úsáid. Ba mhaith liom é sin a lua toisc go bhfuil sé an-tábhachtach ar fad do na daoine atá ag obair ar son na hÉireann sa Bhruiséil an Ghaeilge a úsáid nuair atá an seans acu. Mar a dúirt mé, is fúinn é sin a dhéanamh.

Ba mhaith liom moladh a thabhairt don Aire, an Teachta Catherine Martin, as ucht an obair dhian atá déanta aici le dul chun cinn a dhéanamh ar Bhille na dTeangacha Oifigiúla (Leasú), 2019. Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil a lán oibre déanta ag an Aire Stáit, an Teachta Chambers, i rith Chéim an Choiste sa Dáil freisin. Beidh an obair atá á déanamh ag na hAíreí ina céim mhór chun méid na seirbhísí poiblí a chuirtear ar fáil trí Ghaeilge agus líon na gcainteoirí Gaeilge a earcófar chuig an tseirbhís phoiblí a mhéadú. Bunófar coiste comhairleach i leith seirbhísí i nGaeilge freisin.

Ba mhaith liom aird a dhíriú ar pholasaí maidir le hÚdarás na Gaeltachta atá sa chlár Rialtas. Tá sé mar aidhm den Rialtas athbhreithniú a dhéanamh ar struchtúir fheidhmiúcháin agus rialachais Údarás na Gaeltachta agus ar an bpróiseas roghnúcháin agus toghcháin i ndáil le bord an údaráis. Fáiltím roimh ráiteas an Taoisigh sa Dáil an tseachtain seo caite inar dhearbhaigh sé go bhfuil obair á déanamh ag an Aire, an Teachta Catherine Martin, agus ag an Aire Stáit, an Teachta Chambers, chun an gealltanais sin a chur i bhfeidhm.

Ba mhaith liom díriú ar an nGaeilge lasmuigh den Ghaeltacht freisin mar is pobal an-oscailte agus an-leathan é pobal na Gaeilge nach bhfuil teoranta d'aon áit amháin sa tír ná ar dhomhan. Is pobal domhanda é pobal na Gaeilge, mar a dúirt mé níos luaithe. Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach Gníomhach as an am. Go n-éirí le gach éinne i rith Sheachtain na Gaeilge.

**Senator Rónán Mullen:** Is ceann de na fadhbanna atá againn sna laethanta seo ná déileáil le Covid. De réir mar a thuigim, tá ráiteas an Aire, an Teachta Catherine Martin, lasmuigh ach ní féidir é a dháileadh go dtí go dtosaíonn sí ag labhairt. Ag an am céanna, níl daoine ag teacht isteach chun scrípteanna a dháileadh a thuilleadh. Chiallóidh sé sin go mbeidh orainn uilig dul amach chun a ráiteas a fháil agus teacht isteach arís leis an script le linn í a bheith ag caint. Níl a fhios agam an bhfuil aon bhealach timpeall air sin. Tá sé saghas craiceáilte. An féidir leis an Aire cead a thabhairt a ráiteas a dháileadh in am?

**Senator Marie Sherlock:** Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire agus roimh an Aire Stáit. Tá áthas an domhain orm nach bhfuil ceiliúradh amháin againn inniu ach dhá cheiliúradh - Seachtain na Gaeilge agus Lá Idirnáisiúnta na mBan. Tá áthas orm, mar urlabhraí na Gaeilge Pháirtí an Lucht Oibre, go bhfuilim anseo chun páirt a ghlacadh sa díospóireacht inniu. Is ceiliúradh antábachtach é Seachtain na Gaeilge chun comhrá a bheith againn maidir leis an teanga agus an cultúr agus chun buíochas a ghabháil do na mílte daoine trasna na tíre atá ag obair chun an teanga a fhorbairt agus a choimeád beo. Tógfaidh mé cúpla nóiméad chun na mná atá ag forbairt na teanga trasna na tíre a lua. Tá siad i lár an teaghligh agus ag cur chun cinn an teanga sna naíonraí lán-Ghaelacha, sna ranganna scoile agus go háirithe sna Gaelscoileanna trasna na tíre. Tá siad ag obair mar aistritheoirí anseo i dTeach Laighin agus i bParlaimint na hEorpa chomh maith. Tá siad ag obair mar iriseoirí agus i bpoist eile ina bhfuil mná ag obair trí Ghaeilge agus ar son na teanga.

Luaim go háirithe na soláthróirí lóistín atá ceangailte le Coláiste Lurgan i nGaillimh. Tá inní orthu maidir le todhchaí an choláiste. Tá a lán frustrachas ann de bharr an mhoill ag seoladh amach an iarratas pleanála. Tá feachtas mór ar siúl anois agus fuaras beagnach 30 litir ó na soláthróirí lóistín nó na mná agus fir thí. Braitheann siad go mór ar na scoláirí a choinníonn siad gach samhradh ar son an choláiste agus tá siad ag iarraidh míniú anois.

Níl aon amhras ach go mbeidh tír nua an-difríocht againn i ndiaidh Covid. Ní chóir go gcaillfeadh muid na deiseanna chun comhrá agus athnuachan a fháil don teanga, don chultúr agus do na Gaeltachtaí. Inár gcóras oideachais is léir go bhfuil gá mór do na polasaithe

tacaíochta don Ghaeilge a bheith ag croí an chomhrá seo. Ba bhreá liom polasaí nua don Ghaeilge, ó naíonra go tríú leibhéal, a fheiceáil ón Roinn Oideachais. Níl aon amhras ach go raibh drochthionchar ar pháistí de bharr an lockdown. Samhlaítear domsa go rinneadh damáiste ar chur chun cinn na Gaeilge sna scoileanna. Deir múinteoirí liom go raibh tionchar mór aige ar scoláirí agus mar sin iarraim ar an Aire Oideachais, an Aire Turasóireachta, Cultúir, Ealaíon, Gaeltachta, Spóirt agus Meán agus an Aire Stáit na hachmhainní a chur ann chun an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn i measc scoláirí bunscoile an samhradh seo. Ba cheart níos mó campaí spóirt trí Ghaeilge nó ranganna eile trí Ghaeilge a bheith ann agus go mbeadh na ranganna nó campaí sin saor in aisce.

Maidir le fostaíocht, tá claochlú mór ar siúl i ndomhan na hoibrithe oideachais seo. Táimid an-chíocrach go mbeadh níos mó deiseanna don obair iargúlta ar fáil agus de bharr sin, bheadh seans níos fearr ann go gcoinneofaí níos mó fostaíochta sna Gaeltachtaí. Bhí ionadh orm nár luadh na Gaeltachtaí sa straitéis maidir le hobair iargúlta a bhí á chraoladh ag an Rialtas cúpla seachtain ó shin. Ba chóir níos mó infheistíochta a dhéanamh in Údarás na Gaeltachta chun obair iargúlta a chur chun cinn.

Tacaím agus gabhaim buíochas leis na grúpaí atá eagraithe trasna na tíre mar Chonradh na Gaeilge, Gael Linn, Oireachtas na Gaeilge, Glór na nGael, Cumann Lúthchleas Gael, agus na grúpaí eile atá ag obair go dian ar son na teanga agus ar son na Gaeilge.

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Aisling Dolan):** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Seanadóir. Tá na grúpaí atá ag obair ar son na Gaeilge an-tábhachtach. Beidh ráiteas an Aire ar fáil nuair atá sí ag caint. Ní bheidh sé ar fáil before then. Glaoim ar an Seanadóir Ó Donnghaile.

**Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire agus an Aire Stáit agus cuirim fáilte rompu. Tá seanfhocal ann i mBéarla faoi bheith ag fanacht ar an mbus agus ansin tagann dhá cheann. Níl a fhios agam an bhfuil a leithéid de sheanfocal againn sa Ghaeilge. Beidh orm ceist a chur ar mo shean-mhúinteoir Brendy Ó Fiaich fá dtaobh de sin. É sin ráite agam, agus cé go dtuigim an ghéarchéim Covid, caithfidh mé a rá gur mór an trua atá ann gur ghlac sé chomh fada seo dúinn cúrsaí Gaeilge a phlé anseo sa Seanad. Mar atá ráite ag comhghleacaithe ar fud an Tí, tá a lán de na hábhair seo fá choinne Ghaeilgeoirí agus pobal labhartha na Gaeilge agus na Gaeltachtaí, chomh maith. Ba mhaith liom fosta tréaslú leis an méid oibre atá déanta ag Conradh na Gaeilge fá choinne Seachtain na Gaeilge agus mar a dhéanann siad achan uile bhliain. Is cúis cheiliúradh den chéad scoth é agus is é seal dúinn cuimhniú ar an tábhacht a bhaineann leis an Ghaeilge agus an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn. Dár ndóigh, is é seal fá choinne foghlaimeoirí agus daoine eile atá ag iarraidh snas a chur ar a gcuid Gaeilge úsáid a bhaint as an teanga le linn na tréimhse sin, ach go háirithe.

Caithfidh mé an cheist reachtaíochta Gaeilge ó Thuaidh a ardú. An tseachtain seo caite sa seomra seo, chuala an Coiste um Fhorfheidhmiú Chomhaontú Aoine an Chéasta ó Chonradh na Gaeilge faoin easpa reachtaíochta a bhí geallta ní amháin ag Comhaontú Aoine an Chéasta, Comhaontú Chill Rímhinn, ach b'fhéidir an ceann is práinní ná an ceann a bhí aontaithe ag New Decade, New Approach. Dár ndóigh, mar chomhshínitheoir don chomhaontú sin, tá ról tábhachtach agus ról lárnach ag an Rialtas anseo i mBaile Átha Cliath chun cinntiú go bhfuil an reachtaíocht sin curtha i bhfeidhm gan mhoill. Tugadh gealltanais go mbeadh sí curtha i bhfeidhm i gceann an chéad céad lá den Fheidhmeannas nua. Aithníonn an pobal, dár ndóigh mar gheall ar na srianta Covid, go mbeadh moill ar an reachtaíocht sin a bheith curtha i bhfeidhm. Fosta, caithimid ár n-aird agus ár n-obair a dhíriú ar an obair sin atá os ár gcomhair. An fhadhb agus an chodarsnacht atá ann ná go bhfuil cearta agamsa, agus againne atá inár suí anseo, i

mBaile Átha Cliath nach mbíonn agam nuair a théim abhaile suas an bóthar abhaile go Béal Feirste arís. Caithfimid an fhadhb sin a réiteach fa choinne gach duine ar fud an oileáin.

Leis sin ráite agam, ba mhian liom cúpla bomaite a chaitheamh ag labhairt faoin chathair dhúchais agam féin, Béal Feirste Cois Cuain. Is é Béal Feirste, ní amháin i mo thuairimse ach déarfainn go cinnte, cúis leis an athbheochan. Tá an Ghaeilge ag fás agus ag dul ó neart go neart an t-am ar fad, fiú in easpa na reachtaíochta atá luaite agam. Tá fás suntasach ann maidir le Gaelscoileanna, grúpaí agus gnóthaí Gaeilge, foireann spóirt trí mheán na Gaeilge, stáisiún raidió agus achan cineál gné de shaol na Gaeilge chomh maith.

Tá ceachtanna le foghlaim ag an Aire agus an Aire Stáit, agus ag an Rialtas anseo óna a bhfuil ag tarlú sna Sé Chontae fosta. Ba mhaith liom cuireadh a thabhairt don Aire agus don Aire Stáit, an Teachta Chambers, go háirithe, agus freagracht ar leith aige as cúrsaí Gaeilge. Tugaim cuireadh don bheirt acu cuairt a thabhairt ar an Cheathrú Ghaeltachta i mBéal Feirste leis an fhuinneamh agus an ghníomhaíocht a bhaineann leis an Ghaeilge ansin a fheiceáil dóibh féin.

Cé go bhfuilimid i lár fíoraithe na físe i mBéal Feirste, tá fadhbanna ann fós. Ar na ballaí, chonaic muid ionsaithe ar chomharthaí dátheangacha i gceantar an mhargaidh, áit atá cóngarach do lár na cathrach. Bhí bagairtí scríofa ar bhallaí in oirthear Bhéal Feirste, áit atá cóngarach ina bhfuil mise i mo chónaí, faoin pholasaí nua dátheangach atá glactha ag Comhairle Cathrach Bhéal Feirste. Caithfimid cuimhneamh go bhfuil an bhiogóideacht sin ann fós agus tugann a leithéid de Sheachtain na Gaeilge agus an dearfach a bhaineann léi an seal dúinn a thaispeáint cé chomh maith, cé chomh dearfach agus cé chomh fáiltiúil is atá ár dteanga dhúchais anseo.

Aithním go bhfuil an Bille teanga ag dul tríd an Dáil faoi láthair. Táim ag súil, mar atá mo chomhghleacaithe, é a fheiceáil anseo gan mhoill nuair a bheidh críoch leis sa Dáil. Mholfainn don Aire Stáit, an Teachta Chambers, go háirithe arís, gan fanacht go dtí go mbeadh an Bille tagtha anseo chun teacht ar ais chugainne le cúrsaí Gaeilge a phlé. Mar atá ráite agam cheana, ní chaitheann muid an saol seo againne trí mheán na Gaeilge le linn Seachtain na Gaeilge amháin. Is ábhar é fá choinne achan lá den bhliain. Baineann sé leis an méid sin daoine ó Thuaidh agus ó Theas. Tá sé tábhachtach nach bhfuil muidne srianta anseo i dtaca le cúrsaí Gaeilge a phlé agus nach ndéirimid linn féin gurb í an tréimhse idir 1 Márta agus 17 Márta an t-aon fhuinneog atá againn. Caithfimid a bheith i bhfad níos cruthaithí agus tiomanta don Ghaeilge ná é sin.

Mar atá ráite, is ábhar pobail é ábhar na Gaeilge agus Gaeltachta. Mar a dúirt an Seanadóir Clifford-Lee, tá a lán rudaí gur féidir linn a phlé le linn na ráitis seo. Is é sin an fáth go bhfuilimid ag impí ar an Aire agus ar an Aire Stáit, agus dar ndóigh orainn mar Sheanadóirí, a dhéanamh cinnte de go bhfuil níos mó sealanna againn cúrsaí Gaeilge a phlé san áit seo agus glór an phobail amuigh ansin a ardú don Aire agus don Aire Stáit, sa dóigh gur féidir linn uilig a bheith ag obair ar son leas na Gaeilge agus iad siúd a labhraíonn agus a chaitheann a saol trí mheán na Gaeilge.

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Aisling Dolan):** Glaoim ar an Seanadóir Catherine Ardagh anois.

**Senator Catherine Ardagh:** Roinnfidh mé mo chuid ama le mo chara, an Seanadóir Murphy. Tá an-áthas orm go bhfuil an tAire agus an Aire Stáit anseo inniu agus fearaim fáilte rompu arís go dtí an Seanad. Táimid ag ceiliúradh Sheachtain na Gaeilge agus Lá Idirnáisiúnta na mBan freisin. Bhí díospóireacht iontach againn níos luaithe maidir leis an mbearna pá inscne agus lena lán téamaí eile a bhaineann le mná.

Maidir le Seachtain na Gaeilge, tá a fhios againn go léir go bhfuil sé mar choincheap ag Fianna Fáil an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn. Is féidir a fheiceáil inniu go bhfuil lion mór de bhaill Fhianna Fáil sa Seanad anseo ag caint maidir le cur chun cinn na Gaeilge agus an méid atáimid ábalta a dhéanamh chun cabhair a thabhairt don chultúr agus don teanga. Caithfidh mé a rá go n-aontaím le mo chara, an Seanadóir Clifford-Lee, maidir leis na Gaelscoileanna agus na co-láistí samhraidh. Nuair a bhí mé i mo chailín óg, d'fhreastail mé ar an nGaeltacht i Ráth Chairn agus i Ros Muc agus timpeall na tíre le Coláiste na bhFiann. D'fhreastail mé ar Ghaelscoil i mBaile an tSaoir. Is iontach agus is aoibhinn liom na gasúir go léir a chloisteáil ag labhairt Gaeilge ar na bóithre i rith na paindéime. Tá a lán breac-Ghaeltachtaí ag méadú sa chathair seo, mar shampla timpeall Scoil Mobhí, Scoil Bhríde agus Gaelscoil Lios na nÓg. Chuaigh mé go dtí Scoil Naithí i mBaile an tSaoir. Tá sé iontach an Ghaeilge a chloisteáil, idir ghasúir agus tuismitheoirí.

Aontaím go huile leis an Seanadóir Ward maidir leis na coistí Gaeilge sna comhairlí contae. Ceapaim gur ceart don Aire agus don Roinn tógáil ar an gcoincheap iontach sin.

**Senator Eugene Murphy:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach Gníomhach agus leis an Seanadóir Ardagh. Táim ábalta cúpla focal Gaeilge a labhairt. Is deas an rud go bhfuilimid ábalta díospóireacht a bheith againn anseo sa Teach le linn Sheachtain na Gaeilge, nó b'fhéidir coicís na Gaeilge mar bhí an tseachtain seo caite san áireamh freisin. Gabhaim mo bhuíochas leis an Aire agus leis an Aire Stáit mar tá na daoine atá anseo ábalta an Ghaeilge a labhairt go flúirseach agus is deas an rud é.

Uaireanta bím ag éisteacht le Raidió na Gaeltachta nó le TG4 agus it is wonderful to see both our Minister and Minister of State having such a good command of that language when speaking. We should acknowledge and recognise that the Taoiseach called for Irish to be placed at the heart of Government business. It is a very strong statement. The Government has increased funding. I know from talking to Julian de Spáinn and others in Conradh na Gaeilge, who do a wonderful job, that they are happy with that.

It may be important to say that fadó fadó - 30, 40 nó 50 bliain ó shin - nuair a bhí múinteoirí ag múineadh na Gaeilge go raibh eagla ar chuid de na daltaí mar go raibh an method mícheart. Ní raibh na múinteoirí mícheart, ach bhí an method mícheart. Ceapaim go bhfuil an method i gceart anois. People are happier with it. Young people are happier to discuss it. Ba mhaith liom cúpla focal a rá faoi fhear amháin, Mícheál Ó Muircheartaigh. Ba mhaith liom ómós a thabhairt dó. He has a wonderful way with the cúpla focal Béarla and the cúpla focal Gaeilge. It means so much to people. Tá múinteoirí anseo. We must admit that some students went through sheer hell down through the years because of Irish. It was a pity and it badly damaged our language. Is cinnte go bhfuil an situation better anois. Tá bealach iontach ag Mícheál Ó Muircheartaigh chun an Ghaeilge a theagasc.

**Senator Jerry Buttimer:** Cuirim fáilte mhór roimh an Aire, an Teachta Catherine Martin, agus an Aire Stáit, an Teachta Chambers. Cuirim fáilte roimh an bplé ar an nGaeilge agus an teanga atá ar bun inniu. Tréaslaím le coiste Ghaeilge an Oireachtais as an sár-obair atá ar siúl faoi stiúir an Teachta Calleary. Leagann mo chomhghleacaí, an Seanadóir Ward, béim ar an teanga leis an nGaeilge atá a úsáid aige sa Teach agus go laethúil. Tá bród orm mar gheall ar an obair atá á déanamh ag an Seanadóir Ward. Is linn ar fad an Ghaeilge agus is deis atá ann dúinn ár dteanga, gcultúr agus n-oidhreacht a thaispeáint go náisiúnta agus go hidirnáisiúnta.

Táimid ag plé na Gaeilge inniu. Mar a dúirt an Seanadóir Murphy, úsáideann Mícheál Ó

Muircheartaigh an Béarla agus an Ghaeilge ar bhealach an-simplí, mar shampla le cúpla focal maidir le duine atá páirteach i gcluiche Chumann Lúthchleas Gael nó duine sa slua. Tá aithne ag gach duine ar Mhícheál Ó Muircheartaigh agus na focail a úsáideann sé.

Molaim an infheistíocht sa teanga agus molaim go gcuirfí leis an infheistíocht i gcás na Gaeltachta. Tugtar dún daingean na Gaeilge uirthi agus caithfimid gach tacaíocht a chur ar fáil di.

Molaim an obair sa Ghaeilge agus san oideachas. Tugaim faoi deara gur féidir oideachas trí Ghaeilge a fháil sa réamhscoil, sa bhunscoil, san iárbhunscoil agus sna coláistí. Le blianta beaga anuas, faoi stiúir an Dr. T.J. Ó Ceallaigh agus an Dr. Karen Ní Chlochasaigh, is féidir obair iarchéime trí Ghaeilge a dhéanamh i gColáiste Mhuire gan Smál. Bail ó Dhia orthu as an obair go léir.

Is am an-tábhachtach é Seachtain na Gaeilge don teanga agus don chultúr. Is fiú smaoineamh ar an obair atá á déanamh ag an iar-Sheanadóir, Labhrás Ó Murchú, ag Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann agus ag Gael Linn. Bhí John Creedon ar an teilifís aréir ag déanamh cur síos ar áiteanna an-stairiúla, ar logainmneacha agus, go mór mór, ar an teanga agus an gceol. It is important that those like Senator Murphy and I, whose Irish is up and down, or it is in my case at least, use their Irish not only during this week but at all times. Bhí an ceart ag an Seanadóir Murphy. Bhí na ranganna sa scoil an-deacair do a lán daoine. Tá brón orm mar gheall air sin ach, mar a dúirt mé, tá ár nGaelcholáistí agus ár gcúrsaí samhraidh inniu lán le daoine óga agus le daoine cosúil liom féin atá ag foghlaim na Gaeilge athuair. Déanaim comhghairdeas leis an iarAire, an Teachta McHugh, as ucht an obair a rinne sé mar gheall ar an nGaeilge. Déanaim comhghairdeas leis an iarAire, Dinny McGinley, freisin. Gabhaim buíochas leis na hAirí as a bheith anseo inniu. Tá an Ghaeilge an-tábhachtach do gach éinne sa tír. Tá onus ar gach éinne an Ghaeilge a úsáid.

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Aisling Dolan):** Tá an ceart ag an Seanadóir. Tá beagáinín Gaeilge agus Béarla ag gach duine agus is tábhachtach iad a úsáid gach lá.

**Senator Joe O'Reilly:** Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire, an Teachta Catherine Martin, a d'fhás aníos i mo chomharsanacht féin, agus roimh an Aire Stáit, an Teachta Chambers, a dtagann as Dáilcheantar ina bhfuil mionlach mór ó Chontae an Chabháin. Is cúis áthais faoi leith dom Seachtain na Gaeilge a ceiliúradh agus páirt a ghlacadh sa díospóireacht agus sna ráitis thábhachtacha seo. Molaim na scoileanna lán-Ghaelacha agus Conradh na Gaeilge, atá lárnach i Seachtain na Gaeilge. Is cuid bhunúsach dár gcultúr agus dár n-oidhreacht í ár dteanga. Tá ár litríocht, ár mbéaloideas, ár stair agus ár mothúcháin saite inár dteanga stairiúil shaibhir. Ba chóir dúinn a bheith bródúil aisti agus gach iarracht a dhéanamh í a úsáid agus a athfhoghlaim. Rinne an Cathaoirleach agus mo chomhghleacaithe anseo an-iarracht giotaí beaga Gaeilge a úsáid le linn na seachtaine seo caite. Tréaslaím go mór leis sin agus molaim do na Seanadóirí an Ghaeilge a úsáid go poiblí agus go rialta ar ócáidí poiblí agus eadrainn féin. Is é sin an rud is bunúsaí. Tá dualgas orainn iarracht a dhéanamh an Ghaeilge a úsáid aon uair gur féidir linn. Ní gá caighdeán ard a bheith againn. Beidh aon duine dea-bhéasach agus oilte tuisceanach linn. Níl aon rud níos tábhachtaí ná an teanga a labhairt, go háirithe dúinn féin atá san Oireachtas.

Tá moltaí eile pearsanta do na hAirí agam agus ba mhaith liom freagraí orthu. Tá sé thar a bheith tábhachtach níos mó daoine óga, agus déagóirí ach go háirithe, a mhealladh go dtí na Gaeltachtaí ar feadh tréimhse. Fuair mise mo ghrá don teanga agus don chultúr Gaelach i ngleanntáin ghlas Ghaoth Dobhair mar dhéagóir a bhí ag freastal ar an gcoláiste samhraidh. Ba

chóir deontais níos fearr a chur ar fáil. Ba chóir go mbeadh an seans ag gach uile dhuine óg seal a chaitheamh sa Ghaeltacht. Tá iarracht níos fearr an Ghaeltacht a fhógairt sna scoileanna agus béim láidir a chur uirthi riachtanach. Táim lán-chinnteach nach bhfuil go leor déanta ag an mbomaite. Tá dul chun cinn agus chun feabhais riachtanach. Tá a fhios againn go bhfaigheann na mná tí deontais agus tacaíocht. An féidir é sin a mhéadú chun go mbeadh sé níos saoire do dhaoine óga dul ann? Ba chóir go mbeadh an tástáil don Ghaeltacht saor in aisce chomh maith.

Is é an dara moladh atá agam ná go mbeadh an-bhéim ar an teanga labhartha i ranganna Gaeilge sna bunscoileanna agus sna meánscoileanna. Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil feabhas tagtha air ach caithfear béim a choimeád air sin. Is cabhair mhór í an 40% sa bhéalscrúdú san ardteistiméireacht. Ba mhaith liom freagraí ón Aire agus ón Aire Stáit ar stádas agus úsáid na Gaeilge sna ranganna agus sna scoileanna.

Cé go bhfuil meath ar úsáid na teanga sa Ghaeltacht agus gur trua sin, tá níos mó measa uirthi taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht. Níl éinne náireach fúithi anois, cosúil leis an 19ú aois agus tús an 20ú aois. Mar sin, tá seans againn ciorcail chomhrá a bhunú ar fud na tíre. Is féidir leis an Roinn, an tAire agus an tAire Stáit níos mó tacaíocht agus spreagadh a thabhairt do na ciorcail theanga. Molaim dóibh staidéar a dhéanamh air sin. Tá feabhas tagtha ar an méid comhlachtaí agus logainmneacha as Gaeilge ar fud na tíre ach ba chóir níos mó a dhéanamh. Molaim don Aire é sin a dhéanamh.

Is fiú agus tá sé riachtanach an méid státseirbhísigh le Gaeilge a mhéadú agus an tseirbhís trí mheán na Gaeilge a fhorbairt agus a fheabhsú. Tá mo mhac is óige sa dara bliain in Institiúid Oideachais Marino. Cé nach bhfuil sé páirteach, is iontach an rud é go bhfuil an chéim ar fáil trí mheán na Gaeilge anois. Sa choláiste iontach sin, tá an-bhéim ar an nGaeilge. Tá se sin riachtanach i ngach institiúid oideachais.

**Senator Martin Conway:** Tá fáilte roimh an Aire sa Teach. Sadly, I am one of those people who does not have a fluency in the Irish language but that does not in any way mean I do not have the respect, love and ambition to some day be fluent or at least have a couple of words as Gaeilge. I always had an admiration and love for the language but that was compounded by a former colleague of ours in this House, a great person, former Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh from Connemara. He grew up in London and moved to Connemara in his teenage years. He had the most beautiful Irish and it was a joy and a pleasure to sit here for seven years and listen to former Senator Ó Clochartaigh's bilingual tones and the manner in which he delivered his speeches. I used periodically to go for coffee with him in the coffee dock in the days when we could do those things and we would be ag caint a little bit. It was something that did not continue but I know the Houses of the Oireachtas are doing their best to try to improve the Irish language and the spoken word in this House. More could be done. If Members and staff wished to have private tuition, that should be facilitated because it is incredibly important we have the ambition in this House to use Irish.

I am a product of a traditional way of teaching in the schools. Some people were fortunate enough to embrace Irish and learn. Sadly, I was one of those who did not do so and I regretted I did not do so. I would certainly like to have done so. We have seen the evolution of Gaelscoileanna throughout the country. They are wonderful because they are teaching people through the native tongue and teaching young people to love the language in a different way than it would have been done 30 or 40 years ago when the likes of me would have been going to school. The support and funding provided to Gaelscoileanna is right and appropriate but I would like to see as many schools as possible at least embracing the ethos of Gaelscoileanna, and perhaps even a

hybrid approach could be taken whereby some classes would be taught completely as Gaeilge and others possibly not.

There is so much more we can do to promote the language. Why should we not do that work? We should do so because it is what distinguishes us, the same way as our traditional Irish music, culture, and dancing are all wonderful parts of us as Irish people and what we are.

*6 o'clock*

The most important element of that, what knits it all together and what makes us truly unique and beautiful as a nation and a people, is our Irish. I embrace Seachtain na Gaeilge and what it is trying to achieve by making Irish more accessible and more used by the general population. Hopefully, as the years go by we will see more and more people at least attempting to converse as Gaeilge. It is a healthy and useful debate and we should not just have it once a year. We should be discussing this at least twice and maybe three times a year.

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Aisling Dolan):** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Seanadóir. Tá Gaelscoil, Scoil Uí Cheithearnaigh, i mo bhaile i mBéal Átha na Sluaighe ach ní raibh sí ann nuair a bhí mé ar scoil.

**Senator Róisín Garvey:** Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire agus roimh an Aire Stáit. Tá sé go deas iad a fheiceáil sa Seomra seo. Is seachtain iontach í seo. Gach bliain cuireann sí in iúl dom cé chomh i ngrá atá mé le mo theanga. Déanaim dearmad uaireanta í a úsáid chuile lá ach le cúpla seachtain anuas táim ag baint triail as níos mó Gaeilge a úsáid gach lá. Mar shampla, bhí mé sa mhargadh in Inis ar an Aoine agus tá fear ann as Cill Chisín, Keith, a bhíonn glasraí órgánacha á dhíol aige. Táim ag ceannach uaidh chuile Aoine le trí bliana anuas. Fuair mé amach an Aoine seo caite go bhfuil an-Ghaeilge aige mar bhí mé ag labhairt Gaeilge le duine eile agus thosaigh seisean ag caint Gaeilge. Tá Gaeilge ag a lán daoine ach tá sí saghas faoi bhfolach. Chuir sé smaoineamh i m'aigne faoin fháinne a athbheochan nó rud éigin. Tá an fáinne airgid agus an ceann óir ann. Má tá an ceann airgid ag duine ní chaithfidh siad a bheith flúirseach, just deir sé go bhfuil grá ag an duine don teanga agus go bhfuil sé nó sí sásta cúpla focal a úsáid. B'fhéidir gur féidir linn rud éigin cosúil leis sin a athbheochan nó smaoineamh air sin mar tá daoine le Gaeilge i ngach áit ach ní bhíonn a fhios ag daoine eile go bhfuil Gaeilge acu. Tá siad sásta Gaeilge briste a úsáid agus deirtear gur fearr Gaeilge briste ná Béarla cliste. Aontaím go hiomlán leis an abairt sin. Sin an rud a tháinig i m'aigne ar an Aoine. B'fhéidir go bhféadfaimid rud éigin simplí cosúil leis an bhfáinne óir agus an fáinne airgid a athbheochan.

Is sean teanga í ár dteanga. Tá an t-ádh linn go bhfuil sí anseo le 2,500 bliain. Thosaigh sí mar theanga labhartha amháin agus níor scríobhamar í ar feadh cúpla céad bliain. Ar dtús bhí sí labhartha agus ansin tháinig an teanga scríofa ón ogham. Bhí mise ag múineadh Gaeilge uair i meánscoil agus thosaigh mé leis an ogham agus thaispeáin mé do na daltaí nach bhfuil ach 18 litir inár dteanga. Níl sí cosúil leis an aibítir Béarla ar chor ar bith. Sin botún a dhéantar uaireanta. Ceapann daoine go bhfuil an Ghaeilge cosúil leis an mBéarla ar shlí éigin agus bíonn siad ag iarraidh í a léamh nó í a labhairt cosúil leis an mBéarla. Caithfimid a bheith an-chruinn gur teanga í bhfad níos deise í, atá an-difriúil ón mBéarla. Caithfimid é sin a aithint. Bíonn daoine ag iarraidh í a fhoghlaim ach roimhe sin caithfidh siad aitheantas a thabhairt don teanga gur teanga an-difriúil í. Is teanga í bhfad níos deise í.

*Thirty-Two Words for Field* an teideal atá ar an leabhar nua atá ag Manchán Magan. Tá 30 focal i nGaeilge i gcomhair grá agus tá 50 focal i gcomhair báisteach ach ní aon ionadh é sin.

Tá ár dteanga chomh ildaite. Uaireanta, ó fuair mé mo Ghaeilge ó mo chluas, bím ag rá rudaí i nGaeilge agus ansin bíonn orm iad a aistriú go Béarla. Níl sé éasca iad a aistriú mar tá siad chomh hálainn i nGaeilge i slí áirithe. Mar shampla, is saghas term of endearment atá i “mo chuisle”. Literally “my pulse” atá ann ach ní hé sin atá i gceist. Ciallaíonn “mo chuisle” go bhfuil mé chomh i ngrá leis an duine, gur saghas good vibration nó rud éigin atá i gceist. Tá a lán focal álainn cosúil le “mo chuisle” nach bhfuilimid in ann a rá trí Bhéarla. Is é sin sampla an-bheag amháin. Tháinig sé ón 18 litir agus tháinig na litreacha sin ónár gcrainn, cosúil leis an litir “C” a tháinig ó “coll”, an hazel tree, cosúil le Dromcolliher, Droim Collchaille, the back of the hazel wood. Tháinig Cill Dara ó the church of the oak. Dara is ea oak ón litir “D” sa tSean-Ghaeilge. Tá an-saibhreas ann nach bhfuil i mBéarla agus tá sé saghas caillte agus b’fhéidir nuair atáimid ag caint faoin nGaeilge a mhúineadh ba chóir an saibhreas seo a thabhairt léi mar gheall ar na scéalta a bhaineann leis na crainn agus leis na sean-litreacha agus ainmneacha.

Déarfadh mé le gach duine go gcaithfidh siad an dráma sin, *Translations*, a scríobh Brian Friel a léamh nó a fheiceáil mar is ceann de na drámaí is fearr riamh é má tá duine ag iarraidh a thuiscint cé chomh tábhachtach is ata an Ghaeilge ó thaobh ainmneacha áite. Tá an scéal ann nuair a tháinig na Sasanaigh chun an colonisation a dhéanamh orainn, agus is píosa tábhachtach den colonisation é mar má tá daoine ag iarraidh nó má bhfuil sé ar intinn acu daoine a tharraingt ón a gceantair, caithfí an-obair a dhéanamh ar na hainmneacha a athrú mar tá an méid sin bainte acu le daoine agus le háit. Mura dtuigeann duine ainm as Gaeilge, níl aon mheas ag an duine sin ar an áit. Mar shampla, má fhéachtar ar Portarlinton, is é sin as Gaeilge ná Cúil an tSúdaire, the back of the tannery ach ní bhaineann Portarlinton le faic.

**Senator Rónán Mullen:** An dtuigeann Seanadóir an pointe nuair a chuirtear an kibosh ar rud, nó an caipín bán?

**Senator Róisín Garvey:** Tuigim an caipín bán nó dul ar lúbán, when someone goes on a bender, ach tá áit i gContae an Chláir darb ainm Bodyke agus tá Lúbán 90 degrees sa bhaile sin. Tá an méid saibhris ann má thuigeann an duine an Ghaeilge. Má tá duine ag taisteal ina cheantar féin nó i gcontaetha eile, tá an duine snaidhmthe isteach ansin leis an áit má thuigeann an duine na hainmneacha. Ceapaim gur rud an-suimiúil é sin atá caillte, b’fhéidir.

Caithfidh mé moladh a thabhairt do na Gaelcholáistí agus do na coláistí samhraidh. Ba bhreá liom go mbeadh an caighdeán ard i ngach ceann acu agus deontas a thabhairt do gach duine i rang a sé chun dul ann mar tá sé costasach. De ghnáth ní bheadh deis ach ag na páistí saibhre dul ann. Tá deontais le fáil i ngach coláiste samhraidh ach ní bhíonn a fhios ag tuismitheoirí faoi sin. Má fhéachaimid ar an mBreatain Bheag nó ar an Eabhrais san Iosrael, is é an rud a rinne siad ann ná daoine a shá isteach i dteanga ar feadh trí seachtaine. Gheobhaidh duine an teanga as sin. Ba bhreá liom deontas a thabhairt do rang a sé agus do chuile pháiste dul ann saor in aisce.

Caithfidh mé moladh a thabhairt freisin do TG4 mar go bhfuil an-jab á dhéanamh aige agus caithfidh mé níos mó tacaíochta a thabhairt dó. Fiú amháin, maidir liom féin a bhfuil Gaeilge ceart go leor agam, tá na dialects ar fad ann agus níor chóir go gcuirfeadh é sin isteach ar dhuine. Bhí mé ag roinnt tí le cúpla scoláire eile as Dún na nGall, agus bhí siad ag labhairt Ghaeilge Dhún na nGall. Bhí sí go hálainn ach níor thuig mé focal ar bith ar dtús. Tabhair deis duit féin mar má tá duine ag féachaint ar TG4 nó ag éisteacht le Raidió na Gaeltachta agus mura dtuigeann an duine gach rud atá ann, caithfidh an duine tógáil go bog agus go réidh air nó uirthi féin, mar tá a lán blasanna áille ann.

Is é an rud deireanach a luafaidh mé ná ba chóir b'fhéidir níos mó ábhar a mhúineadh trí Ghaeilge sa bhunscoil agus níos mó tacaíochta a thabhairt do na múinteoirí atá ag traenáil chun níos mó féinmhuiníne a bheith acu chun an Ghaeilge a labhairt mar, go huile is go hiomlán, is teanga labhartha í. Gabhaim buíochas agus bain taitneamh as Seachtain na Gaeilge.

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Aisling Dolan):** Is lá na mná é, a Sheanadóir Garvey. Tá an teanga an-saibhir agus tá an-suim agam in etymology na mbailte freisin. Glaoim ar an Aire labhairt anois.

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** Táim thar a bheith sásta a bheith leis na Comhaltaí inniu mar Aire Turasóireachta, Cultúir, Ealaíon, Gaeltachta, Spóirt agus Meán chun clabhsúr a chur leis an díospóireacht seo. Ba mhaith liom an deis seo a thapú chun labhairt faoi Lá Idirnáisiúnta na mBan inniu. Tá sé mar phríomhsprioc agam, mar bhall den Rialtas, comhionannas inscne a chur chun cinn i ngach réimse faoi mo chúramsa. Táim tiomanta do chumasú na mban. Tuigim gur féidir liom cabhrú le glórtha na mban a ardú agus tacú le comhionannas in earnálacha cosúil leis an spórt, leis an gcráoltóireacht, leis na healaíona, leis an scannánaíocht agus ar ndóigh, sa Ghaeltacht. Agus muid ag ceiliúradh Lá Idirnáisiúnta na mBan i mbliana, ba mhaith liom gealltanais a thabhairt arís go nglacfaidh mé go fonnmhar le mná i ról cheannaireachta i ngach réimse, agus go dtabharfaidh mé tacaíocht dóibh sna ról sin.

Tá sraith thionscnaimh ghníomhacha ar siúl ag mo Roinn agus a cuid gníomhaireachtaí, lena n-áirítear comhpháirtíochtaí sa cheol, sa spórt, sa scannánaíocht, sa chraoltóireacht agus sa Ghaeltacht. Le déanaí, d'ainmnigh mé féin agus an tAire Stáit, an Teachta Chambers, ceathrar ban do bhord Fhoras na Gaeilge, mar shampla. Bhí beirt cheapaithe nua, Neasa Ní Chiaráin agus Ola Majekodunmi, i measc na gcheapaithe seo. Níos déanaí an mhí seo, labhróidh mé ag ceardlann a réachtálfaidh an tSeirbhís um Cheapacháin Phoiblí. Tá sé mar aidhm ag an imeacht seo pobal imirceach na hÉireann a spreagadh chun cur isteach ar cheapacháin bhoird.

Táimid tar éis dul chun cinn suntasach a dhéanamh i mo Roinn maidir le comhionannas inscne a chinntiú ar bhoird i réimse an chultúir. Ba mhaith liom go mbeadh an comhionannas seo ar fud na Roinne agus ina cuid gníomhaireachtaí. Go deimhin, is í an Ghaeilge ceann de na rudaí is sainiúla faoinár gcultúr. Táim ag obair leis an Roinn chun saibhreas na Gaeilge a léiriú inár gcuid gníomhaíochtaí cultúrtha go léir. Sa chomhthéacs sin, ba mhaith liom an deis a thapú labhairt leis na Baill faoi chuid de na forbairtí spreagúla atá ag tarlú faoi láthair i saol na n-ealaíon Gaeilge a bhfuil baint ag mo Roinn leo.

Léiríonn pobalbhreith i ndiaidh pobalbhreithe sa tír seo go bhfuil grá ag tromlach phobal na hÉireann, agus mise ina measc, don Ghaeilge. Le linn m'óige, chaith mé bliain i gColáiste na Rinne agus tréimhse eile i Ros Muc ag foghlaim na teanga, agus ag titim i ngrá léi. Thug sé seo léargas agus tuiscint dom ar an nGaeilge mar theanga bheo i measc na bpobal Gaeltachta seo. Cuireann sé díomá orm nár éirigh liom dul ar ais go dtí an Ghaeltacht i mo ról mar Aire fós de bharr na paindéime ach tá sé i gceist agam é sin a chur ina cheart a luaithe is a bheidh an dianghlaisíocht thart. Is linne uile an teanga agus tá an spéis atá ag pobal na tíre inti ag fás an t-am ar fad. Tá sé seo le feiceáil san éileamh atá ar an oideachas lán-Ghaeilge faoi láthair. Tá sé le feiceáil chomh maith sa mhéadú ar líon na seirbhíseach poiblí atá ag tabhairt faoi ranganna Gaeilge leis an gcomhlacht Gaelchultúr le cúpla bliain anuas.

Ar ndóigh, ní leor dea-mhéin chun caomhnú na teanga a chinntiú. Tá gníomh ag teastáil agus, mar Aire, tá mise tar éis cúpla gníomh simplí a thógáil le haitheantas a thabhairt don

bhorradh atá faoin teanga faoi láthair. D'iarr mé ar oifigigh mo Roinne an Ghaeilge a chur san áireamh mar inniúlacht inmhianaithe agus ceapacháin do gach bord Stáit faoi chúram na Roinne á mbreithniú. Anuas air sin, agus muid ag ullmhú ráiteas straitéise nua na Roinne faoi láthair, d'iarr mé go mbeidh forbairt na Gaeilge sa státchóras mar chuspóir trasghearrtha sa cháipéis.

Is soiléir go bhfuil borradh tagtha ar an bpleanáil teanga le roinnt blianta anuas agus tá na healaíona lárnach sa phróiseas sin. Is í Ealaín na Gaeltachta an eagraíocht is mó a luaitear le cúrsaí ealaíon sa Ghaeltacht. Aithníonn siad na healaíona traidisiúnta, go háirithe an drámaíocht, an scríbhneoireacht, an ceol agus na healaíona béil, mar bhealaí chun an Ghaeilge a spreagadh agus a chur chun cinn. Tá láithreachta náisiúnta agus idirnáisiúnta ag an eagraíocht agus naisc aici le heagraíochtaí ealaíon ar fud na tíre agus le heagraíochtaí atá ag feidhmiú i dtíortha eile ina bhfuil mionteangacha á labhairt. Is comhpháirtíocht í Ealaín na Gaeltachta idir Údarás na Gaeltachta agus an Chomhairle Ealaíon agus déanann an dá eagraíocht an comhlacht a cómhaoiniú.

Tá áthas orm go bhfuair mo Roinn deis tacaíocht a chur ar fáil don togra Fighting Words a bhunaigh Roddy Doyle chun leagan Gaeilge de a chur ar bun. Is tionscadal teagaisc agus meantóireachta don scríbhneoireacht chruthaitheach saor in aisce é atá á fhorbairt ar fud na tíre do dhaoine óga. Bunaíodh Fighting Words trí Ghaeilge i gConamara in 2019 agus tá sé lonnaithe in Ionad Cultúrtha an Phiarsaigh i Ros Muc. Cuireann an tacaíocht bhreise atá curtha ar fáil ag mo Roinn ar chumas na heagraíochta ceardlanna agus cláir Gaeilge a fhorbairt atá tairbheach do dhaltáí na Gaeltachta.

Mar cheanneagraíocht de chuid Fhoras na Gaeilge, tá Oireachtas na Gaeilge freagrach as deiseanna a fhorbairt a thacaíonn le húsáid na Gaeilge. Is é Oireachtas na Samhna mórfhéile na heagraíochta, agus mar is eol dúinn, ar an drochuair, níor tionóladh Oireachtas na Samhna i nGaillimh anuraidh de bharr na pandéime. Ba mhór an trua é nach raibh deis againn teacht le chéile agus ár dteanga, ár gceol, ár ndamhsa agus ár siamsaíocht a chleachtadh agus a cheiliúradh ach rinneadh sárobair chun clár leathan imeachtaí a eagrú go fíorúil. Tá súil agam nach fada go mbeidh an fhéile spraiúil seo ar ais ar an bhfód arís mar is é is mó a spreagann muintir na Gaeltachta agus na Gaeilge le teacht le chéile gach uile bhliain ar mhaithe leis na healaíona teangabhunaithe a léiriú don tír uile.

Tá obair na gcapall déanta ag an gCumann Scoildrámaíochta thar na blianta le páistí a spreagadh ar fud na tíre agus iad ag glacadh páirte sa drámaíocht trí Ghaeilge. Eagraíonn an cumann féilte drámaíochta ar fud na tíre agus tugtar cuireadh do bhunscoileanna, d'iar-bhunscoileanna agus do chlubanna óige ar fud an oileáin, Thuaidh agus Theas, páirt a ghlacadh iontu.

Mar a fheictear, tá céimeanna dearfacha tógtha chun saol na Gaeilge a neartú agus a shaibhriú ó thaobh na n-ealaíon de. Tá acmhainní suntasacha á gcur ar fáil ag an Rialtas don Ghaeilge ar bhonn leanúnach tríd mo Roinn agus trí Ranna agus comhlachtaí poiblí eile agus tá pobail ó cheann ceann na tíre ag obair go dian dícheallach leis an nGaeilge a chur chun cinn ina gceantair féin. De bharr brú ama inniu, níl luaite anseo agam ach roinnt de na bearta atá ar bun. Níor cheart dom dearmad a dhéanamh, mar shampla, ar an obair iontach atá á déanamh ag Foras na Gaeilge chun léamh na Gaeilge a spreagadh agus a fhorbairt. Ní nach ionadh go mbeadh léamh na Gaeilge chomh tarraingteach sin leis an móroidhreacht litríochta atá fágtha ag a leithéid de Mháirtín Ó Cadhain, Máirtín Ó Direáin, Johnny Chóil Mhaidhc Ó Coistealbha, Seosamh Mac Grianna agus Joe Steve Ó Neachtain, a d'imigh ar shlí na fírinne díreach breis agus bliain ó shin.

Tá obair ar bun ag mo Roinn le tamall anois i dtreo straitéis do na healaíona teangabhunaithe a fhoilsiú, straitéis atá á hullmhú ag mo Roinn i gcomhar le páirtithe leasmhara. Táimid ag tabhairt faoin obair seo chun go mbeifear in ann pleanáil níos fearr a dhéanamh chun tús a chur leis na bealaí a d'fhéadfaí breis tacaíochta a thabhairt do na healaíona teangabhunaithe amach anseo.

Cé go bhfuil an Rialtas tiomanta a bhfuil ar ár gcumas a dhéanamh chun an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn, tá todhchaí na teanga ag brath go mór ar an bpobal. Tá a fhios againn go bhfuil dearcadh dearfach ag tromlach an phobail i leith na teanga. Tá orainn timpeallacht a chothú ina mbraitheann daoine muiníneach as a gcuid Gaeilge a úsáid, is cuma cén leibhéal cumais atá acu inti. Is de réir a chéile a thógtar na caisleáin ach tá mé cinnte de go bhfuilimid ag dul sa treo ceart.

Níl ansin ach blaiseadh d'obair mo Roinne agus eagraíochtaí eile chun an teanga a fhorbairt agus a chur chun cinn in earnáil na n-ealaíon. Ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil leis an Teach arís as an deis a thabhairt dom labhairt anseo agus leis na Seanadóirí uile a ghlac páirt sa díospóireacht inniu: na Seanadóirí Mullen, Clifford-Lee, O'Loughlin, Ward, Sherlock, Ó Donnghaile, Ardagh, Murphy, Buttimer, O'Reilly, Conway agus Garvey. Ardaíodh an iliomad cásanna le linn na díospóireachta, ina measc cúrsaí oideachais, an Ghaeilge sa Tuaisceart, cúrsaí craolacháin, na coláistí samhraidh, Údarás na Gaeltachta, cúrsaí baincéireachta, Bille na dTeangacha Oifigiúla (Leasú), 2019 agus ceisteanna eile nach iad. Pléifidh mé iad le mo chuid oifigeach agus tiocfaidh mé ar ais chuig na Seanadóirí áit gur cuí.

*Sitting suspended at 6.19 p.m. and resumed at 6.32 p.m.*

### **Private Rental Sector: Motion**

**Senator Fintan Warfield:** I move:

That Seanad Éireann:

notes that:

- the private rental sector is dysfunctional with ever increasing rents and decreasing standards;
- the average State-wide rent now stands at €1,414 per month and the average new rent in Dublin city is €1,951, €1,370 in Galway city, €1,452 in Cork city, €1,265 in Limerick city and €1,067 in Waterford city - an annual increase of 0.9% State-wide;
- too many working people cannot access secure or affordable accommodation, and too many young people are forced to reside with parents and relatives;
- renters do not have the same protections as those who can afford to own their own home;
- Government policy favours subsidy to big developers and institutional landlords over local authorities and approved housing bodies;

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- investment funds pay virtually no tax but charge sky-high rents;
- despite being banned, there are still planning applications lodged for over 2,000 co-living spaces;
- co-living remains an entirely unsuitable housing model and is a threat to the fight against Covid-19;
- public health experts have warned that sub-standard and overcrowded private rental accommodation poses a significant risk to the continued spread of Covid-19;
- sub-standard and overcrowded properties continue to be advertised on letting sites such as daft.ie and rent.ie, with floorspace well below 29 metres squared - the minimum area recommended by the Co-Living/Shared Accommodation Report, published by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage in October 2020;
- short term lets without adequate planning permission continue to be advertised on platforms such as Airbnb;
- local authorities do not have the capacity or resources to fully assess and inspect private rental properties and therefore cannot be effective in ensuring compliance with standards;
- in the first nine months of 2020, 87 per cent of properties in Dublin city were deemed on a first inspection to be non-compliant with the standards;

calls on the Government to:

- enact legislation to immediately ban rent increases for three years;
- give renters a break by allowing renters to claim up to one month's rent back in tax credits;
- state clearly what is meant by affordable rent and who will be eligible for the proposed cost rental housing scheme;
- resource local authorities and approved housing bodies to deliver affordable cost rental homes at a scale that would cost between €700 and €900 per month depending on the size of a property;
- urgently legislate for tenancies of indefinite duration, as promised in the Programme for Government, to provide tenants with more security;
- publish a plan to deal with the disorderly exit of accidental and semi-professional landlords from the rental market;
- adequately fund local authorities to ensure that 25 per cent of all private rental properties are inspected once a year so that renters can be sure that their accommodation is safe;
- immediately enact the Property Services (Advertisement of Unfit Lettings) (Amendment) Bill 2019, debated in the Seanad in April 2019;
- publish the results of the six-month survey of issues surrounding the advertisement

of unfit rental lettings as promised in 2019; and

- immediately amend and update the minimum standards as set out in section 65 of the Housing Act, 1966, and provide for robust penalties for breaches relating to overcrowding.

I am sharing time with Senator Boylan. I will have nine minutes, she will have seven.

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Sharon Keogan):** That is fine.

**Senator Fintan Warfield:** The private rental market is broken. It is dysfunctional, and everybody knows it. People are paying extortionate, sky-high rents and getting no protection in return. They have no protection if the home is sold, if the landlord decides to move in or if the landlord decides to move in a family member. They have no protection for their deposit. They have no protection from people whose name does not even go on the lease. Crucially, they have no certainty in terms of the level of rent people are being asked and forced to pay.

For its part, Sinn Féin has consistently outlined alternative policies for the private rental market time and again. We have called for one month's rent to be put back in the pocket of every renter in this State through a refundable tax credit to the value of €1,500 because rents are too high and they need to come down. To stop any future rent increases, Sinn Féin has also been calling for a three-year ban on rent increases at the current level for existing tenants and, for any future tenants, at a Residential Tenancies Board, RTB, rent index level, depending on the size, location and type of dwelling.

People are paying one quarter, one third or sometimes half of their salaries for half decent accommodation and a roof over their heads. Something needs to give. We need to offer people hope. The Government has the opportunity to offer something to renters tonight. It has the opportunity to offer something to people who believe that this city is actively working against them. Those individuals are right. Dublin is a hostile place for renters and it is actively working against them. People see all of the wrong things happening. They see luxury student accommodation changing the face and the fabric of inner-city communities. They see co-living developments continue to be approved despite apparently being banned. They see office blocks and hotels where they should be seeing affordable accommodation, cultural spaces, community spaces and, for that matter, offices that may well be the ghost estates of tomorrow.

I want to share the stories of the people I know; some of my friends. Friend A lives in Dublin city between Stoneybatter and Phibsborough and pays €500 per month for a single-bed box room. This person's name has never gone on the lease because they are afraid the rent will go up. They do not call the landlord about anything whatsoever because they would rather be invisible.

Friend B works on the front line. They went to view a three-bed newly-built apartment near Harold's Cross that costs €3,000 per month and thought, maybe, they could do it. However, one of the bedrooms was not even big enough for a wardrobe, which was in the hall. Who, therefore, was going to pay less than €1,000 for a €3,000 per month apartment? Unsurprisingly, this person did not pursue the apartment.

Friend C, like many others, lives at home with family and does not expect to be moving out into the rental market any time soon. Friends D and E admit that they got lucky because they are paying mates' rates for places in which they are staying that are owned by family, friends

or friends of family. Ultimately, all this comes down to luck. Nobody can deny this is what it comes down to. These are privileged stories. We have not even started in terms of the other end of the market. Why can we not give people certainty and security considering they are paying almost half of their salary to put a roof over their heads?

We need to build affordable cost rental accommodation on a scale far beyond what the Government is currently proposing, where rents are only charged based on what it costs to build, manage and maintain those properties. The Government has put €35 million on the table for approximately 400 units this year. We have no idea what is planned next year or the year after. We need to increase the supply of cost rental to the point that we are buying and building 4,000 units every year for the next ten years. Sinn Féin's fully costed budget alternative in 2021 outlined and allocated more than €900 million to achieve that aim.

We all saw the report by Louise Byrne on "Prime Time" last week. During the Covid-19 pandemic, rents across the State have gone up. In Dublin, although one would not think it, rents have come down by 3%. I believe the market is actively resisting a shift in rent because big investors and big landlords have big pockets. Some new apartment blocks are half full, such as Clancy Quay in Islandbridge. Some tenants have come to informal agreements with their residential landlords but are worried sick about the rent arrears post pandemic. That is why a ban on rent increases, evictions and notices to quit and putting one month's rent back in the pockets of renters, is so important. It is why it is important that we ensure the banks work with landlords on mortgage repayments.

In conclusion, I have mentioned Covid-19 and its effect on the private rental market. More than that, I believe Covid-19 is affecting people's priorities for the future. People want the Government to adopt bold policies that defend their interests and those of their loved ones. A demand for change exists that goes way beyond this current pandemic. We need to reduce people's rents and ban rent increases until we have sufficient supply. We need for the State to drive that supply with affordable cost rental accommodation every year for a decade.

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Sharon Keogan):** I call on Senator Boylan to second the motion.

**Senator Lynn Boylan:** I second the motion. I am delighted to be able to be in the position to do so because as my colleague, Senator Warfield, said, the housing crisis is definitely out of control. This motion could not be timelier. It addresses many of the problems faced by renters such as short-term letting, prices being driven up, people being forced to move home and rents that are too high and insecure. Our motion also draws attention to the poor standards in the private rental market. This is the aspect on which I want to focus in the time available.

We carried out a survey over the weekend which captured a glimpse of the poor quality of some available rentals. One respondent from the Tallaght area pointed to the nature of the problem: "I am afraid to ask the landlord to do anything in the house in case it upsets the appletart." People are in no position to stand up for themselves and ask for better standards because their tenancy rights are weak and they live in fear of eviction. Several respondents in the survey talked about there being black mould in their rental properties and nothing being done about it. One person had to call Bord Gáis when the landlord did nothing about the carbon monoxide alarm ringing in the rental property.

There is a need to tackle standards of living accommodation that are unsafe. In the first nine

months of 2020, 87% of properties in Dublin city were deemed, on first inspection, to be non-compliant with the standards. This motion calls for local authorities to be adequately funded to carry out absolutely essential inspections. Several of the properties advertised on *daft.ie* are not up to standard, including some in Tallaght for which no building energy ratings, BERs, are displayed, despite there being no apparent reason for an exemption. South Dublin has some of the highest rents in the country, with the average amount charged standing at €1,814.

The standards I would particularly like to focus on today are those relating to energy efficiency. Again, our survey gave an insight into how bad things really are. One person said:

My box bedroom has been freezing all winter and there's nothing that can be done according to the landlord. I can barely afford to live here. If the rent goes up any higher I'll have to leave.

Another said: "Over winter all the oil in the kitchen turned to wax overnight and for a solid 3 months we could see our breath even with the heating on full blast." These stories are backed up by academic studies. We know from research conducted by John Curtis that rental properties are likely to have poor insulation. A total of 55% of rental properties have a BER of D or lower. Lower-cost rental properties are more likely to be in the E, F or G categories on the BER scale.

People are paying sky-high rents and, in return, they often get substandard accommodation that leaves them paying sky-high heating bills. One woman told us that she spends 70% of her wages on rent and bills. Every month she has to worry about affording to eat healthily. Energy poverty is a serious problem in the rental sector but the Government has not done much about it. The major change in respect of energy efficiency in rental properties came in 2009 when the Government introduced the mandatory BER system for properties offered for rent. The idea was that increased transparency would mean people could shop around in order to get more efficient homes and landlords would be incentivised to make more profit by increasing efficiency standards. That all sounds lovely in an ideal market where people can shop around. However, in a rental market where so many people are constantly on the precipice of homelessness, renters do not have the luxury of shopping around. They have to take whatever they can get.

The owners of some properties, including small dwellings with a useful floor area of less than 50 sq. m, are exempt from providing BER certificates. Presumably, this includes the small garden sheds that have been converted into rental properties. I fail to see why people who are living in glorified garden sheds do not deserve BERs. Surely this is something that should be looked at. Another problem with the BER system is a lack of compliance. One need only take a glance at *daft.ie* to see many homes marked as BER exempt that do not meet the criteria for exemption. Sinn Féin would address this problem with better resourcing of local authorities to carry out inspections.

Making the BER system mandatory was a welcome, albeit tiny, step in the right direction. In the 11 years since, however, the Government has not done much to help improve the energy efficiency of rental properties. It committed to a consultation on rental market energy efficiency in 2016, which was eventually conducted in 2019, but we are still, in 2021, waiting to see the results of it. There are grants available for retrofits but the level of uptake has been extremely underwhelming. There is a strong case for setting minimum energy efficiency standards for rental properties to obligate landlords to make the necessary upgrades and make use of the grants that are available. I accept that landlords need an adequate lead-in time in order to plan,

but this is an urgent matter, especially for people at the lower end of the rental market. We know the issues that lead to excess debt in the winter months due to poor energy efficiency. In the meantime, tenants are left in the precarious position where they are afraid to even ask for improvements to be made to rental properties.

People constantly say that Sinn Féin is attacking landlords and that we are anti-landlord, when that is not the case. We have said repeatedly that we want a private rental sector where tenants have security of tenure and affordability and where landlords provide a good service for a fair return. In fact, under Sinn Féin's proposals, we would have a much more stable rental market that is not just better for tenants but would be better for honest landlords too, rather than the split schemes we have at the moment where the big investors get tax deals and the smaller landlords do not. Right now, we need to give renters a break and that is what this motion will do. I encourage all Members to support it because it is coming from a constructive place. Renters are on their knees. They need a break. They need their rents reduced and they need better security of tenure. They need that support and they need support for our motion tonight.

**Senator Mary Fitzpatrick:** I move amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after "notes that:" and substitute the following:

- the Government remains fully committed to ensuring an increase in the supply of affordable high quality rental accommodation through continued significant capital investment, including cost rental and other means, and in a manner that respects the security of tenure for renters by ensuring equity and fairness for landlords and tenants;
- the recent rental reforms introduced, in particular the development and expansion of Rent Pressure Zones (RPZs), has led to a moderation of the rate of increase of private sector rents whilst ensuring that the supply of private rental property remains unaffected by these price control mechanisms;
- the provisions of the Residential Tenancies Acts relating to RPZs are due to expire at the end of December, 2021, and the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage is considering what balanced measures may be necessary from 2022, taking into account the constitutionally protected property rights of landlords;
- the Government is committed to improving the security of tenure for tenants through legislating for tenancies of indefinite duration, subject to legal advice;
- the sustained funding provided to local authorities to inspect rental properties and the strong legislative framework under which they operate the regime is making a positive contribution to ensuring that standards are maintained and improved as and when appropriate and is sufficient to enable the required level of oversight of rental standards;
- as per the commitment in the Programme for Government, the new whole-of-Government Plan for Housing – 'Housing for All', that the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage intends to publish later this year, will ensure the provision of an adequate supply of high quality affordable rental accommodation remains a cornerstone of Government policy under the plan.

I welcome the Minister. I thank the Senators for bringing forward the motion to the House this evening. I do not know what planet one would have to be living on not to know that there

is a crisis in housing affordability and supply, especially in this city. The motion speaks particularly to the crisis situation of renters. It is a crisis that predates Covid, although Covid has compounded the crisis, but it is not as if the crisis did not exist beforehand. That is the reason housing was the single biggest of the immediate issues in the most recent general election. The three parties in government understand that crisis and they are committed to tackling it, not through sloganeering or motions, but by doing the hard work of legislating and passing budgets to make a difference to people's lives and ensure that they have access to secure, affordable homes that meet their requirements and that will allow them and their children to get on with their lives. Access to secure affordable housing is an essential human requirement. It affects the mental and physical health of individuals, but also their economic and social health and their ability to get on with their lives. It has much broader implications for wider society and for macroeconomics.

There are approximately 300,000 private rental tenancies in the rental market, so it is not as if all of them are bad. There are many good quality tenancies and there are many people living in good quality rental accommodation, but there are significant problems with overcrowding and lack of affordability. That is why the Government is committed to ensuring a sustained supply of social and affordable homes. For the first time there will be affordable homes to rent, not just to purchase. We must legislate for it, as there is not any legislation in place for affordable housing to rent. We are trying to pass the legislation and I hope our colleagues on the other side of the House will facilitate the passing of the legislation to allow the Government to provide affordable housing to rent. We must fund it. I take the point that only 440 cost-rental homes will be delivered this year, but that is because there is no pre-existing legislation for it. The local authorities and approved housing bodies, AHBs, are crying out for it. We intend to pass the legislation and to give them the powers to deliver cost-rental homes. Cost rental and affordable rental options will provide people with secure homes, certainty and affordability. That is what the Government is determined to do. I urge the House to accept the Government amendment, which will be seconded by Senator Cummins. More important, I urge the House to work with the Minister and the Government to tackle once and for all the housing crisis so that all of our citizens can have access to a secure and affordable home, reach their full potential and live their lives as they see fit.

**Senator John Cummins:** I second the amendment. I do not propose to stand here for six minutes and pretend there are no issues in housing; there are. Likewise, I do not propose to say there are sufficient affordable homes available for working families and individuals because there are not. Equally, however, I do not propose to sit here for the next two hours listening to Sinn Féin pontificate about simplistic solutions to what are very complex problems. I have always said that I will work with anybody but, unfortunately, Sinn Féin consistently presents fairytale solutions that take no account of the real world, the real costs involved, the technical expertise required to deliver housing at scale, state aid rules or constitutional rights. Sinn Féin thinks it can shake the magic housing tree, houses will suddenly fall from the sky and, hey presto, everything will be fixed. In the real world, we need to have a proper functioning housing and rental market. To do that, we must attract investment into the country to build mixed tenure housing, including social, affordable and private purchase housing. I accept the State has a role in that regard but to suggest it can do it alone is a fairytale. It will take private sector investment to build houses.

The thrust of the Sinn Féin motion is the introduction of a rent freeze for a period of three years. Sir Isaac Newton's third law states that for every action there is an equal and opposite

reaction. While the slogan of banning rent increases for three years will sound appealing to the electorate, a responsible legislator must look at the consequences of such a move. In Berlin, the left-wing government proclaimed it would solve everything by freezing rents. Eighteen months into what is its five-year rent freeze, it is important to reflect on some of the predictable consequences. While rents have been frozen and have reduced considerably across the regulated pre-2014 build apartments for existing tenants, what about those who currently do not have a tenancy? As of last September, the number of homes available for rent in Berlin was down 42% by comparison with a year earlier, and the number of pre-2014 homes available for rent had dropped by 59%. Why is that? There has been an exodus of landlords, with an increase in the number of units up for sale of 23%. For those who are lucky enough to get new tenancies in the unregulated new apartments, rents have risen by far in excess of those in any other German city. The Berlin legislation is being challenged in the federal court. If it is overturned, all those who have been paying lower rents will face massive increases and, potentially, large bills for back money. Where will the German Government be then? It is to believe in a fairy tale to believe the proposal contained in the motion is anything other than a reckless gimmick that would inevitably end up being challenged in our courts and that would almost certainly deter continued investment in the rental accommodation market at a time when the key requirement is to continue the progress being made to increase housing supply across the State.

The Sinn Féin motion is a further cynical attempt to paint a picture that the Government is doing nothing in this space when, in fact, the opposite is the case. My party introduced rent pressure zones in 2016. At this stage, some 73% of tenancies in the private rental sector are covered by rent pressure zone designation. The year-on-year growth in rents nationally is now below 2%. This is the first time this has been achieved since 2011, and it is a welcome relief for tenants. It points to a welcome moderation of rent increases in the private rental sector as a result of concerted Government action and initiatives. The Minister is very conscious that the legislative measures on residential tenancies are coming to a conclusion at the end of December and he is considering what action, if any, will be taken, bearing in mind the constitutionally protected property rights of landlords, which Sinn Féin seems to selectively ignore and, at worst, does not care about. One must remember that we cannot have a proper, functioning rental market without landlords. The recent RTB report showed that landlords with five tenancies or fewer account for 72% of all registered tenancies. These landlords should not be vilified. That is coming from someone who does not own a property, let alone a rental property. Unfortunately, given the course of things in recent years, it seems that if one says anything positive in favour of a landlord, one is regarded as being in some way against tenants. That is not the case. To pit one against the other is a great shame and deeply unhelpful. It should be said that only 2% of tenancies in this country actually end in dispute.

I am looking forward to the measures the Government is introducing in the Affordable Housing Bill for cost rental tenure, affordable purchase shared equity and an increase in affordable purchase under Part V of the Housing and Development Act. I certainly hope that every party in this House will support the Affordable Housing Bill when it reaches the floors of the Dáil and Seanad.

**Senator Gerard P. Craughwell:** Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire go dtí an Teach. Tá mo chuid Gaeilge uafásach ach is Seachtain na Gaeilge é agus, mar sin, caithfidh mé cúpla focal a labhairt as Gaeilge. Tá an-áthas orm a bheith anseo ag labhairt ar an ábhar seo. Tá fíorfhadh ann leis an earnáil cíosa in Éirinn.

It is clear that the rental sector in Ireland is dysfunctional. Back in the good old days, when

money was flying around this country, we did away with bedsits. Many single elderly people would be very happy to be in a bedsit today rather than sleeping on a cardboard box on one of the streets surrounding this House.

*7 o'clock*

Countless Governments have allowed the housing sector to go mad over the years. I bought my first house when I was 23. I was a corporal in the Army and I was able to buy a house on a corporal's wages. I lost my first house because of a bad business decision. I have bought and sold 13 houses since then as I moved around the country with various changes in career. The interesting thing is that once I got on the ladder, I was able to either get back onto it or stay on it. I now have children. One of those children, in an excellent job and married to a man in an excellent job, will never ever be able to buy a house in this country. Why? It is because they are paying up to twice in rent what they would pay on a mortgage.

When I talk about the housing sector going absolutely mad in this country, the houses in my estate went to €960,000 during the height of the property boom and when the boom collapsed, they went to €360,000, so some poor unfortunates paid €600,000 more than the house was worth. With no disrespect to my colleagues in the House, I have heard that Government after Government was going to fix the housing market. What happened? We stopped building council houses and we started to build housing agencies instead. We are pumping in hundreds of millions of euro and I do not even know how many housing agencies there are in the country. Perhaps the Minister of State will be able to tell me how many housing groups are now providing social housing.

The truth of the matter is that unless we do something drastic and do it very quickly, we will find ourselves in a situation where nobody will be able to live here. An important issue is that some of the big multinationals that were bringing in from abroad employees with specific skills, because of the cost of the rental market in this country, had to provide accommodation for them as well. I remember speaking to a senior executive of one of those companies some months before the Covid crisis hit us. He told me that the days of coming to Ireland because Ireland has English are rapidly going. He said that his company could get employees in Barcelona who speak English every bit as good as those who live in Dublin, and the cost of accommodation in Barcelona is about 50% of the cost here.

Having a crack at Sinn Féin for the hell of it is something I really do not agree with. What we need in this House, in this Government and in this society right now is all of us pulling in the one direction, and there is some merit in what Sinn Féin is saying today. The animal instincts of capitalism are alive and well and living in Ireland. It is a great place if you have money; it is a horrible place if you do not. The Minister of State talked about the pressure zones but when they were introduced, there was no policing of them. I helped to find a local authority house for a couple in Drogheda when the house they were renting was for rent at €1,100 a month. When they said they were leaving, the landlord said they could not leave for four months because they had been there so long. We got into a bit of argy-bargy. The woman of the house was walking down the street and saw the house advertised at €1,400 a month. So much for the 4% increase. I rang the landlord and he said that she could leave in the morning because the landlord could get €1,400 for a house he was getting €1,000-odd for. The bottom line is that we can have all the regulations we want in place but if we do not police them, there is no getting away from it.

We are talking now about taking public land away from county councils and allowing that

public land to be used for building social houses. On the face of it, that looks perfectly good to me. However, the Minister of State will know that local authority representatives - the people elected to local authorities - are outraged by this. The Government is taking whatever few powers they have left away from them. People will make the accusation that I have never sat on a local authority. Amen, I have not. I have been very lucky to come here without going through the tough route of local authority membership. However, at the end of the day, it is simply not good enough to start to write our local authority members out of the provision of housing. I would like to see us getting back to the days when we built local authority houses and made the best houses available for citizens who could not afford to buy their own.

Those who are in rental accommodation are paying the sort of money I am talking about, at one and a half times the mortgage cost. Can we not recognise the rent they paid over three or four years to make a mortgage available? The Cathaoirleach is getting tired of me and I must sit down. I wish the Minister of State and the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, well. I think he is trying to do something but let us not pretend there is a silver bullet.

**Senator Rebecca Moynihan:** I thank the Sinn Féin group for tabling this motion and the Minister of State for being in the House. It is important to discuss the wider issue of housing policy, especially when it relates to the private rental sector. Since I was elected to this House nearly a year ago, there have been Bills to amend the Residential Tenancies Act twice but there has not been a wider discussion about housing policy. This debate is both needed and timely.

First, I want to address the eviction ban and tying it to the 5 km limit. While most of us anticipate the ability to move and to see people beyond the 5 km, some families are dreading the lifting of the ban and the potential flood of evictions that will happen when this pandemic is over. A welcome but unintended consequence of the pandemic was the response of homeless services. The fact that fewer families are entering homelessness is due to the protections contained in the eviction ban. If we lift the 5 km limit, we will lift that ban.

I know of a family, a couple and two kids, who are only in a house at present because the eviction ban is in place. The father has been served notice for substantial renovations but he thinks that is just an excuse. By the time any adjudication is made by the Residential Tenancies Board, that family will not have anywhere to go. On the same road, a single parent who has lived there for eight years is worried about being kicked out. She is in receipt of the housing assistance payment, HAP. Her landlord mentioned that he is thinking of selling up and moving to Spain. When she told me the story, I checked the property price register and the landlord had paid less than €100,000 for the house at the bottom of the market. He has made his money back in rent many times in the eight years she has lived there as a rental tenant with HAP, yet she will face homelessness and he will walk off with the guts of a €300,000 profit compared with what he paid for it. That is the rental market today.

When I listen to Government party Members talk about the balance between landlords and tenants, I note the market and the property rights we are facing. If the property rights of landlords are restricting us from being able to give tenants decency in their own home, let us progress the referendum on the right to housing. The Opposition in this House tried twice to give the Minister the power to implement an eviction ban based on regulations and public health advice but not to have it be tied to the 5 km limit. There is no legal or political reason it has to be the case, despite what has been said. I urge the Government, as we are moving on and vaccines are rolling out, to plan effectively for coming out of restrictions to ensure we will not see an increase in homelessness, including family homelessness, as a result of the lifting of the ban.

This must be priority number one because, as a result of the pandemic, we have fallen behind with the construction of both public and private housing that we desperately need. I am not blaming the Government for that but I am saying we can plan effectively for the lifting of the eviction ban. Let us not leave people to the ravages of the market again.

There is a difference in power between landlords and tenants. One is living in a home he or she does not own while it is an investment for the other. Senator Warfield quite rightly pointed out that the deposit protection scheme has been promised and legislated for by my colleague, Deputy Kelly, for the past five years but no more progress has been made on the scheme. Queries on deposits increased by 43% last year, according to Threshold. People feel vulnerable and people who are living in rental accommodation feel afraid.

I want to discuss the two flagship initiatives of this Government regarding housing. At the moment, the Land Development Agency, LDA, Bill states that a minimum of 50% must be affordable to buy. A proposed change to Part 5 to 20% is very welcome. However, as the LDA Bill is currently drafted, the other 30% could be sold on to private developers. Many members of the Government do not want to see something like that happen, but we have to ensure that public housing and public land is locked in. It is proposed that only the Minister can decide whether or not to make a disposal. As it currently stands, local authority members have power over that. I urge the Government to consider accepting amendments which will ensure there is 100% public housing on public land and drop the proposal to stop local authority members having power over disposals.

The Affordable Housing Bill provides that any housing must be below market rent. However, that is almost €2,000 per month in Dublin, €1,500 in Cork and €1,400 in Galway. That is not affordable; market rent is not affordable. Affordability is considered to be 30% to 35% of net income. I urge the Government to look at defining affordability in both the Affordable Housing Bill and the LDA Bill to try to make sure that the housing we are building is genuinely affordable for people.

**Senator Alice-Mary Higgins:** I am very happy to speak in favour of the Sinn Féin motion today. It highlights, as Senator Moynihan said, that this legislation comes through again and again. It went through the last Oireachtas multiple times. Every time the rental tenancies or any of these Bills come through there is never time to substantively discuss the issues. That is why the debate today is really welcome. We see again and again a new emergency measure, a partial fix or, as we saw in the rental tenancies legislation that went through last autumn, unfortunately, some real steps backwards which I am very concerned about.

Regarding the numbers of evictions, the eviction protection is very welcome. It was good that Ireland acted relatively promptly on that and that it was extended. However, an opportunity was missed, as we highlighted during the debate last autumn. I put forward two amendments, one which would extend the rental protection from evictions to 20 km and another which would give the Minister the discretion to extend and link it to another public health direction if he wished. That was not taken up, which is why we now have this situation whereby if we move from 5 km, we create jeopardy for people. Unfortunately, because of the legislation passed last year, the jeopardy is now greater than it ever was.

I urge the Government to promptly address a measure I am extremely concerned about before the ban on evictions is lifted. We know how quickly action can come from the previous listing of evictions in autumn when we saw 360 eviction notices served almost immediately, as

soon as the ban was lifted. The provisions in the legislation last year meant that if a tenant was just 28 days in arrears, less than one month's paycheck, there would be just 28 days to pay that back. This applied even to Part 4 tenants, who may have lived for ten or 15 years with security of long-term tenure, and may have had one of the most difficult years of their lives.

I am extraordinarily concerned about the jeopardy we will see because of that 28 days arrears provision, to allow evictions, that came into new legislation last year. It has not yet had an impact because of the suspension, but it is an extraordinary jeopardy. I urge the Government to address it as a matter of priority and, while doing so, to address the issue of the 5 km and 20 km. That is a small piece of legislation that could come through these Houses very promptly.

I want to highlight some other loopholes that have affected Part 4 tenancies in Ireland. These are situations where a good thing is being used as a lever for insecurity - for example, retrofitting, which is something we want to see happen. Cén fáth nach mbeadh a leithéid de rud ar fáil chun spreagadh a thabhairt do mhic léinn ardchaighdeán a bhaint amach trí Ghaeilge freisin? Luaigh sé freisin an laghdú atá sa mhéid marcanna a thugtar don scrúdú béil, rud a chuir iontas orm mar shílfinn go bhfuil an scrúdú béil i measc na rudaí is tábhachtaí maidir le cur chun cinn na Gaeilge. Mura bhfuil daoine in ann an teanga a labhairt, níl aon todhchaí ag an teanga sin.

Luaigh mé níos luaithe an méid atá á dhéanamh ar leibhéal an chultúir. Tréaslaim le TG4 agus le Raidió na Gaeltachta agus le leithéidí *The Irish Times*. Léim Alan Titley agus gabhaim ann go rialta agus luaigh mé Éanna Ó Caollaí. Tá daoine ann ag treabhadh an fhóid maidir le cur chun cinn na Gaeilge ar leibhéal ardchaighdeán. Bhí mé an-tógtha an oíche cheana, agus mé ag éisteacht agus ag breathnú ar “Glór Tíre”, leis an méid Gaeilge a raibh á fí isteach acu leis an mBéarla. Shíl mé gur bealach é sin chun an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn i measc iad siúd a bhfuil ar bheagán Gaeilge, b'fhéidir, nó nach bhfuil an Ghaeilge 100% ar a dtoil acu, díreach mar nach bhfuil sé 100% ar mo thoil agam féin ach an oiread.

Mholfainn cúpla rud eile sa mhéid ama atá fágtha agam. Mar a dúirt mé cheana, mura bhfuil saoránach in ann a chuid gnó a dhéanamh trí Ghaeilge leis an Stát nó le Roinn an Rialtais, ní fiú reachtaíocht a bheith ann. Tá gá le hathrú meoin ansin lena chinntiú go bhfuil na cearta ag lucht labhartha na Gaeilge. Shílfeá in amanna gur beag suim ná cumhacht atá ag na polaiteoirí ach is iad na státseirbhísigh atá ag cur bac ar dhul chun cinn anseo. Tá súil agam nach bhfuil sé sin fíor. Tá go leor státseirbhíseach a bhfuil meas acu ar an nGaeilge ach tá gá anois le fianaise go bhfuil dul cinn á dhéanamh agus le déanamh.

Sa deireadh, bíodh dul chun cinn sa Tuaisceart maidir le hAcht na Teanga. Táimid ag fanacht leis ó Chomhaontú Aoine an Chéasta agus ansin ó Chomhaontú Chill Rìmhinn in 2006. Gealladh reachtaíocht maidir leis an teanga ó shin. Caithfimid dul i dteagmháil leis na haontachtaí agus a rá leo nach aon chailleadh é cead cultúrtha a thabhairt do lucht na Gaeilge. Caithfimid tabhairt faoi bhealach nua. Mar a dúradh i gcomhaontú na bliana seo caite, Ré Nua, Cur Chuige Nua, ba cheart go mbeadh a leithéid in ann dúinn. Tá sé de dhíth orainn ó Thuaidh agus ó Dheas.

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Aisling Dolan):** Glaoim ar an Seanadóir Clifford-Lee anois. What we do not want to do is reduce supply while doing the right thing. We do not want to have a negative impact on supply in the sector. What we need to do is increase supply. We know this. We have been speaking about it for years and it just has not happened. Unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic has put a halt to construction. That will have an impact and we may as well acknowledge it. This does not take away from the efforts being made to improve affordability

in the sector and ensure that rent does not eat up 50% of earnings and that people are not left wondering from month to month whether they can pay the rent and meet the bills or whether they will have nothing left over for living and enjoying life. That is the position many people find themselves in.

Senator Warfield referred to the situation in the capital. I lived in Dublin for quite a long time, as did my sister, so I know full well what rents are like in the capital and how it has got worse. I assure the Senator that it is a problem that has filtered out throughout the country. It is not just a city problem now. In County Mayo, the number of rental properties available is quite sparse. Very little is available to rent. That is because we had a decade in which people were unable to save a deposit and buy a house as they would normally do. There has not been that natural changeover of properties, with people moving on to build or purchase a home, freeing up the rental property they had in their 20s and making it available for other younger people coming through. This throughput has not been happening in the past decade and there is pent-up demand. I can see it.

In recent years, the number of representations I have had on housing has increased dramatically. When I was first elected to Dáil Éireann in 2016 it was not the biggest issue I was dealing with. I know it was a massive issue in the cities but that was not the case in Mayo. That changed, and two years later it was becoming the top issue coming through the door. There were people from all walks of life, with everybody finding it difficult to find rental properties, particularly in the bigger towns in Mayo such as Castlebar, Westport and Ballina. People were finding they had to move to the smaller villages and rural areas. This poses a difficulty in a rural county where we do not have public transport. These issues have a domino effect, with one issue feeding into the next.

With regard to the cost of rental properties in my home town of Castlebar, going back five years, a three-bedroom property would have rented for €600 or €700 but now we are looking at €1,100 or €1,200. There has been a huge increase in the cost of rents outside the cities. This has filtered into rural areas. This pressure is being felt by many young couples and single people. Very often we focus on young families, forgetting the large cohort of single people who are also looking for housing. Very often they are not considered. I know from dealing with the local authority that it prioritises families with children, and I understand this, but we need to look at the types of housing we are building. Not everybody wants to live in a three-bedroom semi-detached house. Some people want to have one or two-bedroom apartments. We also need to think about how we cater for older people and their housing needs. Many older people living in very big properties would love to downsize if they had the right place to go in their community. They may not want to downsize and move out of the village or town they have lived in all of their lives but they find there are no alternatives to moving far away.

We need to take a holistic approach to housing. We need to cater for the rental sector for those who want to rent. Senator Higgins is correct with regard to security of tenure. We need to build properties where younger people want to live in the towns and cities where they can access work. We also need to look at housing for older people who may want to downsize that is in a community setting and facilitates independent living. Many older people do not want to go to a nursing home. They want a smaller place to which they can step down to in the heart of the community they have grown up and lived in. This option just is not there.

If we take the approach whereby we are getting people through from rental properties who perhaps want to buy and build we will free up those properties for younger families coming

through. If we allow older people to downsize if they want to, and not everybody does, we will see properties freeing up for those who need them. There is a suggestion that we keep building three-bedroom semi-detached houses with a patch of grass at the front and another at the back that nobody really wants. We are not listening to the public and the demands that are being made. We will be discussing housing as an ongoing issue in the country for decades to come but at least new ideas are coming through as to how we might cater for all demands, rather than keeping supply as narrow as we have been doing in recent years.

**Senator Paddy Burke:** I welcome the Minister of State to the House. I am delighted to have this opportunity to say a few words on housing, which is the most important issue in the country at present. I do not envy the Minister of State or the Minister. Many things have been tried over the past ten years but the housing crisis seems to get worse and worse.

When he served as Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, John Gormley de-zoned a great deal of land. The result of this has been that, in some cases, there is now no land available. It takes a long period to get county development plans in place and that has held up supply in some cases. There are many reasons why housing is so scarce. In my view, it is down to financial matters and zoning. Either people are not earning enough money or houses are too expensive. Building a house costs too much. We have to look at the costs involved. If they are too great, people cannot get the required deposit or loan because of the level of their earnings. It is a chicken-and-egg situation. With the new building regulations, the specifications have been set so high that the resultant costs relating to houses are enormous. While the running costs of houses are much less than they were in the case of older dwellings from the point of view of heating and electricity, the initial cost compared with what people are earning is the stumbling block. If people are renting, they are paying too much out of their incomes and cannot save to get a deposit to buy a house. Again, it is a chicken-and-egg situation. Many schemes have been put forward.

When I was a member of Mayo County Council in the 1980s, there was no housing crisis. There was a recession but the Government of the day took on responsibility for building local authority houses. All of the local authorities built a considerable number of houses with the result that there was no one in Ireland who did not have a house at the end of the 1980s. For some reason, the local authorities seem to have pulled back from building houses. They are building, but not to any great degree in comparison with the 1980s.

Senator Higgins stated that the retrofitting of houses should take place while tenants are *in situ*. This will not happen because people will not retrofit if tenants are still in their homes.

Senator Chambers alluded to the taxation policy. What she said is true. If one pays 50% tax, one is left with only 50% of the money one is paid. One has to pay for maintenance, management fees, in some cases, and for a lot of other things, not to mention mortgage repayments or interest payments. I have mentioned to the Minister for Finance that we need to look at taxation policy. Either we have to reduce the level of VAT relating to building houses or make changes in the context of rental income. Vulture funds are paying limited tax but a person with one or two apartments or a small developer with one or two units for rent is paying 50% tax on the rental income. The system is not equal. This is something the Minister of State should look at and it should be discussed with the Minister for Finance. Our taxation policy should play a major role. In the context of taxation, we know that the Government can provide incentives to get matters up and running. I ask the Minister of State to examine the position in this regard.

**Senator Paul Gavan:** I wish to highlight a simple statement in the Sinn Féin motion, that is, “too many working people cannot access secure or affordable accommodation, and too many young people are forced to reside with parents and relatives”. Is there anyone in this Chamber who disagrees with that? Apparently there is because Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party did not include it in their amendment to the motion. They could not live with it as part of their amendment. I find that quite extraordinary, particularly given the commentary we have heard this evening. That is the fact of the matter, however, and it is what the Government did with this amended motion. I believe we will be voting on it later. The Minister of State might address why he has withdrawn the statement that “too many working people cannot access secure or affordable accommodation, and too many young people are forced to reside with parents and relatives”, when everyone in this Chamber knows it to be true.

Senator Cummins spoke about the real world. I have good news for him. We are not proposing to ban rents. It is not a bad idea but it is not what we are proposing as part of our motion. Perhaps the Senator could look at the motion before he comments. However, I will bring him into the real world of where I live in County Limerick. In my village, a couple with three children had their rent increased at Christmas from €1,200 to €1,400 for a three-bed house. That is a 16% rise. Rent pressure zones, where are you? When that family objected to the increase, the landlord made it clear that if the family did not like it they could be on their way once the pandemic protections ended and that he could have people looking at the house the following month without a problem.

That is the real world that people are facing. The real world in Limerick is €750 for a one-bedroom apartment and that is the cheapest property on Daft.ie today. That is the real world. My question for the Minister of State and my colleagues in Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael is how do they expect working people to afford those rents? How can they possibly afford to pay those rents? Those rents, by the way, have gone up by 45% under the Government’s watch since 2016. There is a word for that, and the word is “greed”. Let us be absolutely clear about that point.

Senator Burke was right about the differential. While rents have increased overall between 2009 and 2019 by 63%, wages have not moved up at all and that is the problem. People who have had no increase in wages are having to pay exorbitantly increased rents, which have gone up by as much as 63% overall and 45% in Limerick over the past five years. People do not have the money. The family in Limerick that I spoke about has no prospect of saving money for a house of their own. The members of this working family have to go to the community welfare officer each month to try to get by. That is the reality. The reality also is that we must do something fundamentally different to change this process because free market solutions are not going to work. Surely the Government should have realised that by now.

That is why Sinn Féin is proposing in this motion that we reduce rents. There is a way to do that and that is via a tax rebate. When I came home in 1993 such a tax rebate was in place, so this is not a fairy tale. It is simple economics that works. A rent freeze can then be introduced to lock in those savings, and following on from that we can legislate for proper contracts of indefinite duration and to give decent protections to renters. Such protections are already in place across Europe but they have never been put in place under a conservative Government. I will finish on an optimistic note, which is that everyone can now see there is not a difference of the width of a cigarette paper between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael on the issue of housing.

**Senator Fiona O’Loughlin:** As somebody who rented for 16 years and who could have

paid a mortgage during that time, I have great sympathy for those renting who do not have security of tenure or the security of knowing what their ongoing payments will be. Many people in this category, including single people, couples and families. To an extent, they are living from month and month until the next rent review. Where challenges and issues exist within the rental sector, that leads to a certain amount of stress within households.

It is also important to note that there is no silver bullet to solving the housing crisis, and a solution needs real resources and real commitment. The last ten years have seen a crisis marked by homelessness that reached unprecedented levels, surging rents at historic heights and home-building numbers that were tens of thousands of units behind where they needed to be. Approximately 140,000 people are in need of a permanent social home with the list growing longer month by month and year by year, and I see that particularly in my area of Kildare. However, all the while another massive problem emerged, which was completely ignored by the previous Government, where ordinary workers could not afford to have a place of their own. We still are in the midst of a national housing emergency that threatens home ownership levels in that an entire generation will be locked out of owning their own home because of unsustainable rent levels. It involves people paying high rent and not being able to have sufficient savings to put down a deposit to secure a house. It is very difficult for vulnerable people. I know of so many people who are only a wage packet or two away from the risk of homelessness.

Watching home ownership slipping away from an entire generation over the past number of years was absolutely soul destroying. That is why I am glad that Fianna Fáil, the party which has always put home ownership at the centre of government when in government, has the opportunity now to make that difference. It is up to my party to deliver with the support of our coalition partners. We absolutely have to deliver on this.

I looked at some research the Oireachtas Library and Research Service did on comparisons with other countries. It was interesting to see what the European courts allow in regard to legislation which regulates rents. Improving standards, security and affordability for renters is a priority for Fianna Fáil. Several commitments have been made in that regard. The obvious solution is to provide more opportunities for people to own their own homes through affordable housing schemes and for rent to be affordable for people. It is regrettable that with the Covid restrictions a certain amount of building has been stopped because that is putting a stop to the numbers. However, a really good start has been made with the legislation brought forward by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to deal with the problems we have.

**Senator Tim Lombard:** I thank the Acting Chairperson, Senator Keogan, for allowing me to contribute to this important debate. Home ownership and the rental issue are probably the biggest issues society faces. How we tackle them will define this Government and society itself. There are issues with regard to rent in which we must engage and talk about. Supply is key and it is the biggest issue in the rental market. The supply of housing and how we stimulate the market will be most important. There are issues and we have spoken about the planning process and its issues. We have had a lockdown for the past three months but we must start to talk about how we get the building industry going again. There are planning permissions that are running very close to their expiry dates, meaning we need to extend those dates. That issue must be looked at by the Cabinet in the near future, otherwise supply will be affected.

We have a huge issue with Airbnb, in particular in my part of the world, and with how it is sucking up the retail market. Airbnb involvement in the retail market in coastal and rural areas is a new phenomenon over the past five years. What it means is that it is cheaper for individuals

to opt for the Airbnb model instead of renting their houses in the normal rental market. That has become a significant issue. If one is outside the rent pressure zone, one is totally unregulated. It means one has a free pass regarding planning permission status. If one is inside the rent pressure zones, there is regulation. However, Cork County Council found, on trying to get a list of active Airbnb properties in rent pressure zones, that it got an incomplete list from the Airbnb company. There are issues regarding regulation and how we can police Airbnb, which is sucking up rental properties at a rapid rate. That needs to be dealt with in the case of Airbnb properties, not only inside rent pressure zones but also outside of them. Without that, one will have the bones of 500 to 600 properties in my local authority area taken out of the market straight away. Those are rental properties traditionally that have now gone to Airbnb. How we tackle that must be by change in legislation.

Supply, as I mentioned, is the key issue. The fiasco of Irish Water is a significant issue in that supply. We are going through a county development plan process at present. Where there are 200 settlements in County Cork, 180 of them cannot get development because of insufficient water and sewerage. We can have development in 20 of those settlements. The other 180 - small villages and towns - cannot develop. Therefore, one will have real pressure on how sustainable growth in these communities will occur. We are fundamentally against rural once-off housing. We have stepped away from that. We are not allowing development in villages because we do not have adequate water and sewerage, and because of that we will be in a dilemma where we will push all our development into the few towns and villages that have sustainable water and sewerage. That will have a significant impact on the rental market. Because we will not have supply, we will not have the appropriate houses built.

There are significant issues here regarding supply. Airbnb has to be tackled. We cannot go down the rent pressure zones route and merely speak of planning permission. It has to be outside of that remit. When it comes to Irish Water, unless we tackle Irish Water's inability to deal with small settlements and small developments, we will not have balanced rural development. We will fundamentally have to change our policy when it comes to once-off rural housing because of the effects we will have on communities which will have no development because of our policies. Rent is the biggest issue. We need to sort out the demand. When we sort out the demand, we will go a long way towards sorting out the rental properties.

**Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile:** Gabhaim buíochas le mo chomhghleacaithe Shinn Féin as an Rún seo a leagadh os ár gcomhair anocht. Ar chuala an tAire Stáit scéalta na ndaoine atá i ndrochstaid agus iad ag streachailt leis an gcíos? Thug mé teachtaireacht láidir do dhaoine bliain ó shin san olltoghchán maidir le cúrsaí tithíochta. Tá athrú plean agus gnímh de dhíth go géar. Ach táimid ag cloisteáil ón Aire an t-am ar fad nach bhfuil aon fhadhb ann agus go bhfuil an córas cíosa ag feidhmiú de réir mar is cóir agus é a rá linn chun leanúint ar aghaidh. Tá na daoine féin tinn tuirseach de seo agus tá muidne i Sinn Féin ag éisteacht leo agus ag socrú réitigh dóibh.

Last week in the Dáil, the leader of Fianna Fáil, the Taoiseach, stated that he wanted to progress the shared equity scheme because he wanted to create opportunities for young people who are caught up in a rip-off rental market. There is the Taoiseach announcing that a rip-off rental market exists. A basic tenet of consumer protection is that where a customer has been ripped off, he or she deserves a refund. Sinn Féin also thinks renters are being ripped off and we will give them one month's rent back into their pockets. This is a tax relief of 8.33%, that is, equivalent to one month's rent paid by all renters not in receipt of other State assistance on a refundable basis. When we have reduced rents, we need to keep them at that lower level.

The earlier speaker from Fine Gael suggested my party's motion sought to ban rents. He spoke about fairy tales. He spoke about magic housing trees. I do not know what the Senator's night-time bedtime reading is but it clearly was not the Sinn Féin motion.

When the legislation for rent pressure zones was introduced, rent reviews were upward-only and limited at 4%. This 4% was taken as a minimum target to be met by most landlords. It says a lot that the former Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, did not even consider rents being reviewed downwards.

Only 7% of rental properties were inspected in 2018, when €2.5 million was allocated. The Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, has said that €10 million will be available for inspections in 2021. Funding is provided on the basis of inspections carried out rather than through advanced allocations. As a result, there is no guarantee that €10 million will mean that four times as many properties will be inspected this year. There needs to be pressure from Government rather than a guessing game as to how many properties will be inspected every year. Sinn Féin has called for a system similar to that relating to the national car test, with certification that would be renewed every five years. A landlord would have to display compliance by certificate in the property. That would ensure that landlords are proactive in getting their properties suitable for renting and maintaining them at that standard. Under our plan, landlords would have to prove their compliance with minimum standards and fire safety standards before a property could be rented out. The landlord certification of compliance is then based on an independent inspection by a suitably qualified professional from the relevant local authority and the certificate must be provided to the RTB as part of the tenancy registration process. Can somebody tell me what is so wrong about that?

As has already been stated, many people feel trapped in the rental market and their biggest worry is receiving a notice to quit or notification of a rent increase. Our motion, if acted upon, would help to give certainty to renters. I noted angry words from the Minister towards Sinn Féin and its housing policy. When people see or hear him in the media desperately defending a discredited, developer-led scheme, is it any wonder that they look to Sinn Féin for real solutions to the problems they, as renters, face? The Minister and the Department should devote more time to offering the types of solutions we are seeking to implement by means of the motion rather than promoting a scheme that gains more critics week by week. We are happy for the Minister to simply copy and paste this motion and to act upon it immediately. Doing nothing, I am sure he will agree, is no longer an option. We desperately need to give renters a break, which this motion does. Simply put, the Government amendment does not give renters a break. It is as simple as that.

This debate is all about choice. Colleagues across the Chamber can tell us about the real problems that exist in their communities. They can tell us about the problems that they experienced as renters themselves. They can either vote for a vacuous, do-nothing amendment or a motion that actually seeks to do something about the crisis. As the old saying goes, the choice is yours.

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

**Senator Niall Blaney:** I thank my colleagues across the floor for raising the important issue of housing. I feel that the body of the motion goes to show just how flawed their policy is. There seems to be a paralysis relating to rent when the difficulties in the housing sector are much wider than that. The motion also goes to show the differences in policy. From Fianna

Fáil's perspective, the people of this country absolutely deserve to be afforded the opportunity to own their homes. That is one of our key policy platforms. A real difference in policy exists. The Government parties have been working urgently and diligently to resolve the issues being discussed here. The affordability and supply of housing are the key issues and wide-ranging measures have already been taken to make homes more affordable and accessible, ensuring that those in need can get effective and affordable housing. The Government has provided rental support through rent caps and pressure zones and has taken a proactive approach to housing, specifically in the context of protections for renters through the ban on evictions. That decision put the safety of tenants first in these uncertain and unprecedented times. I welcome the extension of that ban on evictions into the summer months because Covid-19 is not yet a thing of the past, as we all know. With that in mind, we must be aware and conscious of legal challenges and issues that may arise from more radical measures than those already implemented.

Work to build new housing and to renovate and make existing properties available to the market has been substantially hampered. For existing tenants, strong protections are in place and enforced through the RTB. The Government is committed to further improving these tenancy protections, if and when they are needed. It is crucial to resolve disputes between landlords and tenants and ensure fair and equitable treatment, as outlined in the programme for Government. However, the provision of housing does not end with rental properties. The programme for Government contains ambitious plans to construct housing through local authorities, approved housing bodies and State agencies. The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage's Land Development Agency Bill 2021 is being examined by the Dáil. The Bill aims to increase the amount of public land available to build new housing to alleviate concerns about housing provision. I refute some of the suggestions made earlier that it would take powers away from councillors. It will do nothing of the sort. It will only do so in larger towns and where councillors are not doing their jobs. If councillors vote to build on these lands, they will have nothing to fear from the LDA. That point needs to be made strongly because people do not seem to be getting it.

Housing quality has not been a given in the past. I am well aware of the problem of unsuitable housing. In my own county of Donegal, a Government grant scheme, expected to cost hundreds of millions of euro at least, has been introduced to rebuild houses affected by mica defective concrete blocks. In February, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage and his colleagues also established the independent working group to examine the issue of defective housing and work is under way to address the issue.

The Government has remained fully committed to housing as a priority and great steps have been taken in the right direction to ensure that housing is being provided according to the needs of renters, buyers and existing home owners. Progress will continue to be made with sustainability, legality, ownership issues and affordability in mind.

In the short time those three Ministers have been in the Department, they have made great strides. There is an awful fear that it may work for them and hence there has been a lot of hot air. I look forward to the developments on housing in the Department over the next couple of years.

**Senator Róisín Garvey:** It is very good that the Opposition tabled this motion on housing. We should probably have a motion on housing every day the Seanad sits. After health, it is probably the single biggest issue in the country. However, because it is so important and it is such an emergency, we should probably focus on solutions and the present rather than the past

and all the problems. We know all the problems so people should not waste time talking about problems and things from 2017 and 2018. That is a waste of time.

The Opposition does not own the issue of housing or rental concerns. Everyone on all sides of the House cares just as much. I do not know if Opposition Senators have even read the housing policy in our programme for Government because it is the best one that has ever been seen from a Government. They have spoken about fuel poverty as though they own that issue too. Personally, I lived through fuel poverty with my son where we had to live in the sitting room because we could not afford oil but we could afford a bale of briquettes. They should spare me the narrative where Opposition Members understand what is going on and we have no notion because it is not true and it is disingenuous. The Government will be the first ever to have a mission to retrofit the social housing stock. Yes, people are cold in social houses but we have the solution. The Opposition does not want a carbon tax. What are we doing with carbon tax? We are using its revenue to make social housing warmer. What is it they want? They want everything so long as it sounds good coming out of their own mouths and they do not want it if it is coming out of our mouths. Let us not use housing as a political tool. It is too serious an issue. Let us not dilly-dally and waste time on motions for the sake of trying to undermine the Government's hard work on this issue.

**Senator Garret Ahearn:** It is always lovely to follow Senator Garvey with the passion and commitment she has in her contributions. I echo everything she said, particularly on the motivations behind motions such as this. I always get the sense from contributions from the other side, particularly from Sinn Féin, that it is almost about trying to create a division between renters and home owners or renters and landlords. That is certainly not the case on the Government side.

I rented for a long time, for ten or 12 years, in Cork. I moved from three or four places. I had the experience of getting notice to get out within 28 days and the fear of trying to find somewhere for the exact same price when earning what would not be regarded as even a half decent salary, starting off just out of college. I understand it from both sides. I understand the fear of being a renter and feeling, especially in the last ten years, that it is almost impossible to get out of the rental market to purchase one's own home. It should be recognised that changes have been made in the past number of years by this and previous Governments. Some of the provisions brought forward have been opposed by Sinn Féin, such as the help to buy scheme, which is to essentially promote building of new properties. It would support a group of people who, over the past ten to 15 years, have really struggled to buy a new home and, more important, to save a deposit for a new home. The scheme has been very successful.

One of the biggest obstacles to owning one's home or having enough stock so everyone can have one is the building of houses. More houses need to be built and I am hopeful that next month the construction industry in the private sector will be back up and running. Currently we are losing approximately 800 houses per week. It does not matter if it is a private or social house as if there is one more house on the market, it can improve every section of that market. It is important that the building sector expands its planning applications as we do not want to get into a position after Covid-19 where planning applications have been in place for people to build but there has been no opportunity to start building and the process might have to start again. That would delay the process for everyone and would not be good for the housing market, the rental market or anything else.

If we are really talking about encouraging people to live in certain areas and have invest-

ment in housing, we must also invest in water. I could speak for a long time about how we need to invest in water but we do not have the time to discuss it tonight.

I listened to the contribution from Senator Gavan, who is right across the border from the all-Ireland champions. In fairness to him, even though only 27% of the country is not in a rent pressure zone, he still managed to find an example of a couple who had their rent increased from €1,200 to €1,400. That is not good. I know of certain similar cases in Tipperary as well. In fairness to the Senator, he has recognised that it is true to state that nobody can be evicted from their house during the Covid-19 pandemic. I presume that in the case he mentions the couple have been living in the home for more than a year as the rent could not change in the first year. They would have four months to look for a place after Covid-19. He suggests that somebody could be asked to move out within a month, which is a bit disingenuous. If people are in a place for more than three years, they would have 180 days, or close to six months, to move out. These changes were made and long before all this I was in a position where I only had 28 days to move out of my place. There is much talk from the Opposition trying to take ownership of the housing issue but it is not a true reflection of where we are.

I recognise the challenges for renters and I experienced them for a long time. I was in a position where I felt I would never be able to get out and I have family members who are currently in that same position. It is a challenge but to suggest that Sinn Féin has the solution to these problems when most of its ideas are fanciful-----

**Senator Fintan Warfield:** We are proposing-----

**Senator Garret Ahearn:** Almost everything that has succeeded in solving the problem was rejected by Sinn Féin. Every time Sinn Féin rejects something, it means it is working.

**Senator Paul Gavan:** Fantasy policies. You are-----

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Róisín Garvey):** Members should speak through the Chair, especially on International Women's Day.

**Senator Garret Ahearn:** Sinn Féin cannot take ownership of this. You are trying to do what you do in every sector of society, which is create division.

**Senator Fintan Warfield:** This is fantasy.

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Róisín Garvey):** Members should speak through the Chair or they should leave. There should be some respect for the Chair.

**Senator Sharon Keogan:** I will take a few minutes. I forgot to welcome the Minister of State to the House this afternoon when I was in the Chair. I will relay something that was brought to my attention by Councillor Séamie Morris in Tipperary.

*8 o'clock*

Part of the Local Government Act included a commitment to make a provision for a differential rent scheme, which was to be a reserved function, giving county councillors more power. Since then, it has been claimed that the Department is working on a new differential rent scheme. I welcome the Minister of State investigating the commitment to this provision soon. Perhaps it is something he can look into.

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Róisín Garvey):** Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit as teacht isteach. Is onóir mhór dom é sin a rá ón gcathaoir seo. It is great to have the Minister of State here in the Chamber. I ask the Senators to listen with full respect as the Minister of State responds. The Minister of State has 15 minutes to speak on housing or rent. It is not an easy topic. One would need until the cows come home, so go n-éirí leat leis an bhfreagra.

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan):** Go raibh maith agat a Chathaoirligh, agus guím Lá Idirnáisiúnta na mBan sona do cách. Cosúil leis an Seanadóir Craughwell, níl agam ach beagán Gaeilge ach táim ag déanamh iarrachta gach lá.

I want to start by thanking Senators Warfield, Boylan, Gavan and Ó Donnghaile for tabling this motion. The exchange in the last contribution shows the level of emotion that exists in relation to this issue. I must say that that is welcomed. It is most important that we work together. There have been comments on the need to work together across parties to try and achieve an equitable outcome for everybody, because it is an issue which affects us all and our communities. In my contribution, I want to highlight that this is about collaboration and working together. Certainly, there are merits in the motion. The countermotion is trying to address positively the issues that were raised in the motion. We have an opportunity to bring about equitable solutions for families, couples, children and everybody in this State. I welcome the motion in that regard.

As set out in the programme for Government, Our Shared Future, improving standards, security and affordability for renters is a key priority for this Government. I welcome the opportunity to discuss and debate important issues in the private rental market, which is at the core of this motion. The motion is wide-ranging and all-encompassing when it comes to the various elements that can contribute to a successful rental sector. I am sure the Senators will appreciate that to do justice to the topics raised, it would take much more time than I have available, unfortunately. Instead, I plan on focussing on what I believe is at the heart of the motion and what constitutes the key elements of the Government's amendment, that is, ensuring we put in place the framework, measures and funding that can deliver affordable, high quality private rental accommodation to those who need it.

I turn first to the key issue of affordability. We are all acutely aware that in recent years, rents have begun to reach levels that have put real pressures on individuals, families and households throughout the country, but most especially in our major cities and urban centres. The imposition of a three-year rent freeze, as proposed by the Senators, has been debated numerous times in both Houses of the Oireachtas. On the face of it, there is an instant, easy appeal about it, as a simple but effective measure. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Sometimes, as we all know, simple problems do not have easy answers. As has been said before, a blanket ban on any rent increases, in all likelihood, would face significant legal challenge and would severely impact the supply of rental accommodation in the medium to longer terms. We heard about the Berlin experience in that respect. I am sure Senators would agree that this would be a very unwelcome and unintended consequence of such a measure.

At this point I should point out that the measure taken by the last Government in introducing rent pressure zones, RPZs, has played a key part in moderating rent increases. It was a considered and thoughtful measure that balanced the needs of tenants with the legal rights of landlords and the imperative to ensure that rental housing supply was not adversely affected. It was stated in the debate earlier that 73% of rental properties are now covered by RPZs.

I would like to talk a little about cost rental, which is a key element of the Government's aim to introduce affordability into the sector. My Department is working with local authorities, the Land Development Agency and Approved Housing Bodies to develop a new cost rental housing sector in Ireland. As the Senators will no doubt be aware, the aim will be that rents charged will only cover the cost of delivering, managing and maintaining homes, making them more affordable for households facing pressures in the private rental market. The first purpose-built cost rental homes, 50 new apartments at Enniskerry Road, using serviced sites funding, will be completed later this year. Tenant eligibility and other operational conditions will be finalised in the forthcoming affordable housing Bill, which will place cost rental on a legislative basis for the first time. The LDA is meanwhile progressing with plans for cost rental on a range of projects, both on its own portfolio of public lands and in partnership with local authorities. The first LDA cost rental development is a partnership with Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council at Shanganagh Castle, Shankill, where cost rental will sit alongside social housing and affordable purchase in a mixed-tenure community. Again, that mixed residential approach is something we all aspire to achieving. The Department is currently delivering cost rental homes in the immediate term through the new cost rental equity loan, CREL, scheme, which was allocated €35 million in budget 2021. On 8 February 2021 the Minister announced approval in principle for 390 CREL-funded homes to be acquired and managed by the Clúid, Respond and Tuath approved housing bodies. These developments are spread across Dublin, the greater Dublin area and Cork, with precise locations to be published on completion of commercial and contractual arrangements.

I will focus now on another important element of the motion, namely, the protection of tenants, be it through security of tenure or the quality of accommodation made available to them in the private sector. I am pleased to inform Senators that, following through on commitments in the Programme for Government, the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, will shortly bring to Government a general scheme of a housing and residential tenancies Bill to address, amongst other things, tenancies of indefinite duration, subject to consultation with the Attorney General. Of course, strong tenancy protections are also in place and enforced through the Residential Tenancies Board, RTB, and this Government is committed to further improving them.

I note a call is made for the immediate enactment of the Property Services (Advertisement of Unfit Lettings) (Amendment) Bill 2019. This Bill was introduced by Senator Warfield and others in 2019 but fell at the dissolution of the Thirty-second Dáil. The then Government pointed out that many problematic issues arose with the Bill. These remain and as a result we think it is unworkable in its current form. However, we do acknowledge the importance of the issues raised and they will be considered as part of housing for all.

On housing standards, the motion quite wrongly implies that the Government is not providing appropriate funding to local authorities to monitor and inspect accommodation standards in the sector. The motion also contends the quality of rental stock is very poor and quotes poor compliance rates in Dublin city as evidence of this. However, the statistics are taken out of context. The reality is that local authorities, on a risk assessment basis, target the most problematic properties as part of their inspection programmes, therefore to extrapolate this non-compliance rate to the whole sector is simplistic and wrong. The Department has made an increased budget of €10 million available to local authorities this year to aid increased inspections of properties and ensure greater compliance with the minimum standards. This amounts to a 300% increase in funding in just three years and would in normal times allow councils to inspect up to 25% of all properties in the State each year. That question has been asked by one Senator this evening.

I refer to normal times because Covid has of course had an impact. However, I am happy to say that the sector has been innovative in piloting virtual inspections, which the Department has been quick and happy to back with funding. Again, I take on board the point raised about a change in that type of inspection, based on moving away from the pass or fail approach which has been in place to date. It is certainly worth giving consideration to.

There appears to be a suggestion from the Senators that the Government favours institutional investors and bigger landlords in its policies. Let me be clear that our approach to this sector is not ideologically driven. It is driven simply by the desire to increase the supply of housing available to rent in the right places at the right price and as quickly as possible. The Government believes a more diverse rental sector, which includes institutional investors, provides more stability and less exposure to property market risk and volatility. Institutional investors can also help provide the range of tenancy options that households need across their life cycles. Large-scale investment in property has an important role to play in helping to deliver the professional high standard rental sector tenants deserve. Let us be clear, though. Institutional investors occupy a small share of the residential housing market, with over 96% of landlords having five or fewer tenancies. Historically, the private rented sector has been largely made up of small-scale landlords. They will continue to provide the bulk of private rented accommodation and the Government remains committed to working with them.

The Government is acutely aware of the difficulties faced by people in the private rental sector. We are taking measures that will deliver and make a real difference in terms of affordability and quality of life in the everyday lives of those thousands of households that live there. The clearest demonstration of this commitment is that, this year, record funding of €3.3 billion is available to deliver housing solutions. The focus of this funding is on delivering on the construction of new social homes. However, it is important that local authorities have money available to them to fund a range of accommodation types, and this will be the case. Supports to improve the quality and affordability of the rental sector continuously will remain a cornerstone of Government policy under the new housing strategy, “Housing for All”, which will be published in July.

A number of Senators have raised the issue of energy standards. It will be addressed. Senator Garvey mentioned deep retrofits. We will also address that issue in the private rental sector through supports. I thank the House for allowing me this time and Senators for what has been an engaging and worthwhile debate.

**Acting Chairperson (Senator Sharon Keogan):** I will not take any time off Senator Warfield. I could take 30 seconds off his time like he took off Senator Ahearn’s, but we will go easy on him despite his shouting and ignoring of the Chair.

**Senator Fintan Warfield:** I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Noonan. I mentioned to the Minister, Deputy Darragh O’Brien, during one of the debates on the Residential Tenancies Act that Sinn Féin would introduce proposals in a constructive manner. He welcomed that at the time. I am somewhat disappointed that he is not present but this is a priority area for the Green Party in housing and planning and I hope it will live up to that reputation in government.

Sinn Féin tabled this motion, but not because we wanted to claim ownership of the housing issue. Would Senators propose that we not have a debate on housing whatsoever? Senator Higgins noted that the Seanad had not had statements on housing yet. It has only been talked about during debates on legislation, which offered limited time to discuss the issues. Do Sena-

tors suggest I not move any motion, go home and not work on this issue? I am not claiming ownership of it when all of my mates are paying out the behind in rent to put roofs over their heads. We are also accused of politicising the issue or pursuing an ideology. Everything about housing and housing policy is ideological and political.

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

**Senator Fintan Warfield:** Some Senators say that our proposals would discourage landlords and investment and affect supply. Rent certainty is good for landlords and tenants; the absence of regulation is bad for them. A culture in which friends of mine are afraid to rock the boat and contact their landlords about the landlords' property is a bad one and is bad for landlords and tenants. Even with a rent freeze, surely rental accommodation would remain a good investment. Who is investing in property in Dublin expecting rents to go even higher? That would not be a good investment. I urge the Government to wake up tomorrow with a renewed commitment to renters because we need a culture change. The Government and the Green Party are the people with the power to change the circumstances of thousands of people in this city and across the State who want security and certainty. Good ideas come from these Houses. Many of those ideas have been implemented during Covid. People have a desire for change that stretches way beyond this pandemic. The Government has a chance to implement that change and provide that certainty and security for a quarter of Dublin's population who are renters and the thousands of renters across the State.

**Senator Paul Gavan:** Well done.

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

Amendment put:

The Seanad divided: Tá, 23; Níl, 8.	
Tá	Níl
Ahearn, Garret.	Boylan, Lynn.
Blaney, Niall.	Gavan, Paul.
Burke, Paddy.	Higgins, Alice-Mary.
Buttimer, Jerry.	Moynihan, Rebecca.
Byrne, Malcolm.	Ó Donnghaile, Niall.
Cassells, Shane.	Sherlock, Marie.
Chambers, Lisa.	Wall, Mark.
Clifford-Lee, Lorraine.	Warfield, Fintan.
Conway, Martin.	
Craughwell, Gerard P.	
Cummins, John.	
Currie, Emer.	
Dolan, Aisling.	
Fitzpatrick, Mary.	
Gallagher, Robbie.	
Garvey, Róisín.	
Keogan, Sharon.	

8 March 2021

Lombard, Tim.	
McGreehan, Erin.	
O'Reilly, Joe.	
O'Reilly, Pauline.	
Ward, Barry.	
Wilson, Diarmuid.	

Tellers: Tá, Senators Jerry Buttimer and Robbie Gallagher; Níl, Senators Fintan Warfield and Paul Gavan.

Amendment declared carried.

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

The Seanad divided: Tá, 22; Níl, 5.	
Tá	Níl
Ahearn, Garret.	Boylan, Lynn.
Blaney, Niall.	Gavan, Paul.
Burke, Paddy.	Ó Donnghaile, Niall.
Buttimer, Jerry.	Sherlock, Marie.
Byrne, Malcolm.	Warfield, Fintan.
Cassells, Shane.	
Chambers, Lisa.	
Clifford-Lee, Lorraine.	
Conway, Martin.	
Cummins, John.	
Currie, Emer.	
Dolan, Aisling.	
Fitzpatrick, Mary.	
Gallagher, Robbie.	
Garvey, Róisín.	
Lombard, Tim.	
McGreehan, Erin.	
Murphy, Eugene.	
O'Reilly, Joe.	
O'Reilly, Pauline.	
Ward, Barry.	
Wilson, Diarmuid.	

Tellers: Tá, Senators Jerry Buttimer and Robbie Gallagher; Níl, Senators Fintan Warfield and Paul Gavan.

Question declared carried.

*9 o'clock*

**An Cathaoirleach:** When is it proposed to sit again?

**Senator Robbie Gallagher:** At 10.30 a.m. next Friday.

The Seanad adjourned at 9.04 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Friday, 12 March 2021.