



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

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

Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad	610
Nithe i dtosach suíonna - Commencement Matters.	611
Tax Reliefs	611
Foreign Birth Registration	614
Farm Costs	617
Hospice Services.	619
An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business	622
Horse and Greyhound Racing Fund Regulations 2021: Referral to Joint Committee	640
Sectoral Employment Order (Construction Sector) 2021: Referral to Joint Committee.	640
EU Legislative Proposals: Motion	640
Energy Security: Statements.	671

SEANAD ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 2 Samhain 2021

Tuesday, 2 November 2021

Chuaigh an Leas-Chathaoirleach i gceannas ar 2.30 p.m.

*Machnamh agus Paidir.
Reflection and Prayer.*

Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Fáilte romhaibh ar ais a chomhghleacaithe, tar éis na saoire agus ar ndóigh tá fuinneamh nua agaibh go léir anois. Welcome back everybody.

I have received notice from Senator Marie Sherlock that, on the motion for the Commencement of the House today, she proposes to raise the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Finance to make a statement on tax reliefs and supports available to apartment owner-occupiers affected by fire defects.

I have also received notice from Senator Gerard Craughwell of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Foreign Affairs to outline when the processing of foreign birth registration applications will resume.

I have also received notice from Senator Garret Ahearn of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to introduce a new scheme for farmers to offset rising fertiliser prices.

I have also received notice from Senator Micheál Carrigy of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on the provision of a second palliative care bed in St. Joseph's care centre, Longford.

I have also received notice from Senator Rebecca Moynihan of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Social Protection to make a statement on the tendering for local enterprise services.

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

2 November 2021

The need for the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to make a statement on his plans to establish separate offices of the Office of the Chief Scientific Advisor and the Scientific Advisory Council, and to outline progress on the development of a national research strategy.

I have also received notice from Senator Fiona O'Loughlin of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on plans for the development of a hospice in the midlands.

I have also received notice from Senator Barry Ward of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Education to address the lack of parity between traditional and simplified Chinese characters in leaving certificate Mandarin Chinese.

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

The need for the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to make a statement on the number of vacancies in district veterinary posts with responsibility for the TB eradication programme, in particular in the Waterford and Cork areas.

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

The need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on the disbursement of funding to address waiting lists, particularly at University Hospital Limerick.

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 proposed extension to the Sacred Heart School, Clonakilty, County Cork.

I have also received notice from Senator Erin McGreehan of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Transport to provide an update on the accessibility action proposals outlined in the Transport Access for All plan.

Of the matters raised by the Senators that are suitable for discussion, I have selected those raised by Senators Sherlock, Carrigy, Craughwell and Ahearn and they will be taken now. I regret that I had to rule out of order the matter raised by Senator Moynihan on the ground that it is a repeat of a Commencement matter raised on 21 October 2021. The other Senators may give notice on another day of the matters they wish to raise.

Nithe i dtosach suíonna - Commencement Matters

Tax Reliefs

Senator Marie Sherlock: The matter I raise relates to owner-occupiers who find them-

selves in what can only be termed desperately distressing circumstances where they face bills of up to €50,000 to address fire safety defects in their apartments. These problems are not of their own making. Many landlords are also facing these costs but they are able to offset the cost of maintenance, repairs, insurance and, crucially, management charges against their rental income. Those reliefs are not available to owner-occupiers. When Deputy Nash asked about the ability of local authorities and approved housing bodies to offset these costs, particularly the cost of remediating fire defects, it emerged that they are also excluded.

What tax reliefs and financial supports are available to owner-occupiers to help them defray the cost of remediation? Do we think it just and fair that a landlord can offset these massive costs but a homeowner, local authority or approved housing body cannot do so? What message does this send about who the Government is looking after?

I am conscious that the Government failed to do anything in this budget regarding this matter. It argued that it was premature to act in advance of the working group recommendations, which we hope to see next year. I believe there is a very clear responsibility to ensure in the Finance Bill that owner-occupiers and landlords have access to the same tax reliefs.

I am conscious that this issue is emerging at a time when we have a massive housing crisis and there are thousands across this city and country who can only dream of owning an apartment or house. Those who own apartments would say they feel very fortunate to have bought during the 2000s but they are now living in a nightmare where the apartments they call home have become a source of such stress and cost. In my constituency, Dublin Central, I know of at least six blocks with over 1,000 units that are affected by these fire defects. In some ways, this is a drop in the ocean compared with what is happening in south Dublin and other places across this country. While the issue of defects came to light in the past three or four years, it was really only this year that management companies have had to ramp up management charges to an enormous degree simply because they will have no access to insurance or will face a colossal increase in insurance. They are being forced to deal with those potentially life-threatening construction defects that exist in the apartment block. I know of one block where the owners' management company, OMC, has had to ask owners to stump up almost €50,000 over the next year. In another block, the demand has been to stump up €15,000 between now and the end of the year. Think about that. How many of us would be able to write a cheque in the morning or do a bank transfer for €15,000, between now and Christmas? Another OMC has demanded a 16-fold increase in management charges. Tax relief in itself will not help defray the totality of the costs and we know the State will have to step in. We also know that the construction industry will have to foot some of that bill, because many of its members are responsible for what is going on, but we need to see action now. The clock is ticking. People are facing these bills. They cannot let these costs and bills go into next year or the year afterwards. They need support now. I look forward to the Minister of State's response.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Thomas Byrne): Táim buíoch as an deis an freagra seo a thabhairt don Seanadóir.

As the Senator has said, there are currently no specific tax-based measures targeted at the owner-occupiers of apartments with defects. However, the programme for Government does commit to examining the issue of defective housing in general. The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, who generally deals with these matters, has established an independent working group to examine the issue of defects in housing. Officials from the Department of Finance participate in the working group. The objectives of the group are to identify

the scope of relevant significant defects in housing, to evaluate the scale of housing affected including what the Senator has spoken about, to propose a means of prioritising defects, to evaluate the cost of remediation, to recommend appropriate mechanisms for resolving defects and to consider financing options in line with the programme for Government commitment to identifying options for those impacted by defects to access low-cost, long-term finance.

I understand that the working group has already agreed in its terms of reference to establish the nature of significant, widespread fire safety, structural safety and water ingress defects in purpose-built apartment buildings, including duplexes, constructed between 1991 and 2013. It will consider the wide-ranging and complex issues involved, including the scale of the issue, the nature of the issues, the methodology for characterisation of defects and the prioritisation of remedial action.

As the Senator has noted, these issues, of course, must be considered in the context of the legal rights, duties and obligations of all parties, including developers, builders and owners. This is a complex matter and deliberations of the group will be informed by consultation with a range of interested parties, homeowners, public representatives, local authorities, product manufacturers, building professionals, among others. It is likely that if there is any role for the tax system, as envisaged by the Senator, that this will fall to be considered by the Minister for Finance.

Any proposals in relation to tax expenditure measures directed at owner-occupiers of affected apartments that may arise from the working group's work would be assessed by the Department of Finance in accordance with its tax expenditure guidelines, which make clear that these should occur in limited circumstances and where it would be more efficient than a direct expenditure intervention. Under the guidelines, the introduction of new tax incentive measures should only be considered in circumstances where there is demonstrable market failure and where a tax-based incentive is more efficient than a direct expenditure intervention. Furthermore, the Minister for Finance must be mindful of the public finances and the many demands on the Exchequer. Tax reliefs lead to a narrowing of the tax base.

Finally, and again the Senator has mentioned this, any consideration of tax expenditure measures would have to occur in the context of the annual budget and Finance Bill process at the appropriate time in the coming weeks.

Senator Marie Sherlock: I thank the Minister of State for his response. I am conscious that he is here today having to read out a pre-prepared script from the Department of Finance on behalf of the Minister of Finance. To be honest, in the response, there is a lack of urgency and of recognition that there are real families and individuals facing enormous bills between now and the end of this year. This is alarming. I invite the Minister of State or any other member of the Government to come and meet these families. My big fear stems from what we know about Priory Hall. It only came to public attention and was dealt with when a man took his life. There are people here facing incredible bills. They need something urgently. Of course the Minister for Finance must be mindful of the public finances and of course any tax expenditure needs to be taken into consideration. However, it cannot just be the case that a landlord can avail of a tax relief and an owner-occupier cannot.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: As I mentioned, this is possibly the first Government to have a comprehensive approach to the issue of defective housing. The working group is examining all options, including tax. Famously, with the issue of mica, it is direct expenditure which is

being looked at and not tax relief because the latter would not be sufficient for the campaigners. The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, including when he was a Member of this House, has been a champion for people affected by pyrite. We have a Minister who has huge experience in trying to address the difficulties that arise in this regard. Indeed, this is a huge issue in my constituency. The matter the Senator has raised is an issue in certain areas. Pyrite in general has been a significant issue for the past number of years. As such, we are well aware of all of this and we really want to see what can be done across Government in respect of the matter. I am sorry the Minister for Finance cannot be here today but the Senator will also understand there is a range of different Ministers here who will be giving consideration to all these matters, especially the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage. We are concerned about the position people find themselves in through no fault of their own. This really is a matter of concern to everybody across this House. The entire Government supports the process the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage has put in place through the working group.

Tax expenditures are one thing, and consideration should be given to them, but other ways of dealing with this are also being examined. Fiscal decisions will be taken in a budgetary context, but this is something the Government is very committed to and is working on. I hear what the Senator is saying. I know families in my constituency that have been affected by these issues. When the shelter a family has suddenly turns out to not be fit to shelter them, which is the basic requirement we have, it is possibly the worst thing that can happen to a particular family. I will take that back to the Minister for Finance and will continue to advocate, as I think all of us will, for families in these situations.

Foreign Birth Registration

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I welcome the Minister of State. This is the first time I have had the opportunity to address him since his elevation, so I would like to congratulate him in that regard. He was a very decent colleague when I first came to this House. I wish him well as he goes forward in this ministerial role.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I gave the Senator a stroke on the ballot paper in his first election.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: The Department paused the processing of foreign birth registration applications last year when level 5 restrictions under the national framework for living with Covid-19 were in place. The Minister indicated last year that applications were being held securely and would be processed when normal services resumed at level 3 of the framework. It is now 2021. Restaurants, pubs and restaurants are open but foreign birth registrations remain paused and new and existing applicants have no indication when theirs will be processed. At a conservative estimate, the current backlog of applications stands at 32,000. Even before the pandemic, the waiting period for a foreign birth registration was up to two years. The Covid-19 pandemic resulted in two periods in 2020 when processing of foreign birth registration was paused in order to assist other essential work, such as providing consular assistance to Irish citizens overseas. This resulted in the processing of foreign birth registration applications being suspended for 26 weeks. Given the importance of foreign birth registration to people's lives, surely other staff could or should have been deployed in this role and the processing of applications should have continued, especially when the Department was aware of the high volume of applications due to Brexit. I fully understand that the foreign birth registra-

tion process is complex and complicated, involving documents over several generations and multiple jurisdictions but applicants invest considerable time in gathering, authenticating and submitting legal documents and then are left in legal limbo due to the service being suspended.

The Minister stated in the Dáil earlier this year that additional resources would be introduced in order to facilitate the processing of applications. How many new staff are working in the foreign birth registration office and what progress has been made in expediting the significant backlog? Many citizens have contacted my office about foreign birth registrations. Some need to get Irish passports to travel throughout Europe to work and visit sick family members. Others cannot leave the country with their newborn children as their own situation has not been legalised. I know of retirees whose parents and grandparents were Irish and now wish to spend the remainder of their lives in their home country - people for whom time is of the essence. I am aware of children stuck in war-torn countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria who are prevented from travelling to Ireland until the applications of foreign birth registration are processed and they can apply for an Irish passport.

The closure of the service has seriously impacted family reunification and causes trauma to many families. This is not just a matter of inconvenience, it is a matter of citizens' rights and they are being denied access to the service to which they are legally entitled. It is only a matter of time before a legal challenge is mounted. The year 2021 is drawing to a close and the service is still paused. I hope the Minister of State will have some good news for the thousands of people whose lives are regrettably paused as a consequence. I look forward to his reply.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Gabhaim mo bhuíochas leis an Seanadóir Ó Creachmhaoil. The Minister for Foreign Affairs is in Israel today and has asked me to speak on his behalf. The Department of Foreign Affairs is responsible for citizenship by descent through the foreign birth register under the Irish Nationality and Citizenship Act 2004. As the Senator will be aware, people may apply for Irish citizenship through foreign birth registration if one of their grandparents was born in Ireland or one of their parents was an Irish citizen at the time of their birth, even if the parent was not born in Ireland. Once a person is entered on the foreign birth register, he or she is an Irish citizen and as the Senator has said, entitled to apply for an Irish passport. To protect the integrity of this process, foreign birth registrations require careful processing to validate the identity of the applicant and the entitlement to citizenship. The applications undergo rigorous and detailed checking by experienced staff at the passport service.

Demand for foreign birth registration reached unprecedented levels following the Brexit referendum in the UK. Prior to that, we had approximately 5,000 to 6,000 applications for foreign birth registrations every year. After the referendum, we had a peak in 2019, of 32,000 online applications received. Prior to the pandemic, the processing time stood at 18 months, due to the huge increase post-Brexit. Of course, that peak coincided with Covid-19. Operations at the Passport Office were severely disrupted. During this period, it was necessary to pause the foreign birth registration process to focus on urgent passport services.

When passport services were scaled up in May 2021 to more normal operational levels, foreign birth registration staff were redeployed to help with the delivery of essential passport services and have continued to do so in light of continuing strong demand for passport services. They are not the only people in the Department redeployed to what we might call normal passport services. A huge number of staff have been redeployed from various quarters of the Department to deal with that.

The foreign birth registration service continues to consider urgent requests to expedite applications on a case-by-case basis, such as expectant parents or stateless persons. A number of them are processed in Afghanistan, but if there are any particular cases, the Senator can let me know. Some 5,000 emergency cases have been processed in 2021. Expectant parents and other emergency applicants should make contact with the passport service customer service hub to advise of the circumstances.

The passport service is actively preparing to resume processing foreign birth registration applications as soon as possible. I can assure the Cathaoirleach, the Department is fully committed to allocating the necessary resources to this service to help with the high volume of applications with a focus on reducing that backlog the Senator has rightly described. In the medium term, changes to the foreign birth registration process to increase efficiencies and improve the customer experience will be delivered under the next phase of the Department's ongoing passport reform and under which huge work is ongoing to generally reform the process and make it much more efficient.

This is not directly related to what the Senator spoke about, but online renewal of passports is taking place quickly. There is certainly a major backlog in paper applications so I encourage people to apply online for passports insofar as they can. I outlined earlier the situation regarding foreign birth registration.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I thank the Minister of State. I appreciate he is here representing the Minister for Foreign Affairs. He might bring my message back to the Department. Some of the stories arriving on my desk are about families being split; one parent who has a passport can travel back to Ireland but because his or her child was born overseas the child cannot travel. There are also the retirees I mentioned who want to live here, and it is financially viable for them to do so, in addition to those in various other family circumstances. The Minister of State is in the game of politics a long time and he knows none of these families finds this easy. It is very difficult. I ask that the Minister do something to get the foreign birth registration office up and running again. There are about 32,000 applications outstanding, which is a large number, although the processing system is more complex than the ordinary one. I again thank the Minister of State for his time and I ask him to bring that message back.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I will certainly discuss this matter with the Minister and officials in the Department. It is one that comes across my desk from time to time. The passport service is working very closely with the human resources division in the Department of Foreign Affairs, and the Public Appointments Service, on an ongoing basis to get more staff in. That is the bottom line for the entire system of passport applications and especially foreign birth registrations. There is major forecasted demand for foreign birth registrations and passports in general. The Government is making large investments in the future of the Passport Office. Over the next couple of years, the Department will replace the technology underpinning the service, which will deliver efficiencies not just to passport services but to foreign birth registration. An additional €10 million from the budget is being invested to help deal with passports.

What will help the situation is for people to apply early for passports, apply online as best they can and, if they can avoid putting in paper applications, to do so as early as possible. There will be a large number of passport applications between now and next summer because we know the number of passports that have now expired. It will help with the process the Senator talked about, and everything in the Passport Office, if everybody could get their applications in early and do so online insofar as they can. We are looking to recruit much more staff to deal

with all these issues.

Farm Costs

Senator Garret Ahearn: I welcome the Minister of State to the Chamber and thank him for taking this Commencement matter. Agriculture has been in the news for the past number of days, or even weeks at this stage. I welcome the climate change COP26 meeting that is taking place in Glasgow, Scotland. I know the Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy Martin Heydon, is there today.

There has also been talk in recent weeks about the ongoing CAP negotiations. In fairness, I acknowledge that the Minister, Deputy McConalogue, was in Tipperary last week and spent four hours talking to farmers at Thurles mart. They do not agree with everything he says, but they cannot say he does not give them time. He has been doing that throughout the country and I acknowledge that engagement. The CAP negotiations are hugely important. For a county like mine, Tipperary, it is about how we can support productive farmers. I have said to the Minister that one thing we can do on that is to have more variety in the eco-schemes for productive farmers. In respect of tillage, for example, the only eco-scheme it is possible to go into is one on fertiliser spreaders.

The matter I raise today concerns costs for farmers, which are rising in a range of areas, including wood, steel, oil and diesel. The cost of diesel has gone up dramatically. Everyone speaks about it in terms of their daily lives but, for farmers, there is no alternative to diesel. We do not have an electric combine harvester as an alternative. While we acknowledge carbon budgets and the need to shift our usage in areas of life, in farming there are certain areas where that is just not possible.

One of the biggest costs coming down the line for farmers, and in fairness Pat O'Toole in the *Irish Farmers' Journal* did a whole article on this last week, is that of fertiliser. In the space of 12 months, the cost of fertiliser has gone up threefold.

3 o'clock

We are tillage farmers at home. Buying calcium ammonium nitrate fertiliser in January cost €220 per tonne. We got a price this week of €650, and the expectation is that the price will go up before we need it in December and January. This is a massive issue for tillage and dairy farmers. The price of urea is €850 per tonne. These prices are not viable and will have a major impact on farmers. I know people who say that they will be forced into suckler farming because they cannot afford the price of fertiliser.

I ask that we as a Government recognise that farmers cannot put this cost on anyone else. They have to take the hit. They will be given a price for their material, be it grain, milk or whatever, so they cannot put the cost on anyone else. If any other business had its costs increase by threefold in less than a year, it would not be sustainable. I ask that the Government, in particular the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, introduce a scheme to support the farming sector during this time. It will be a tough six months. Something like this has been done before. The Minister of State will remember the Beef Plan Movement in 2019 when the price of beef was very low. There were protests and long negotiations between the Government and all farming bodies before there was an agreement that the Government would support farm-

ers through bonus payments if they worked with meat factories. As such, what I am asking for is not something that has not been done before. We need to support farmers during the coming months. I call on the Minister of State and his colleagues to do so.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I thank the Senator for raising this important issue. Notwithstanding what he said about farmers taking the hit, which they often do, there is no doubt that this would have a knock-on effect on food prices and is of general concern around the country. I come from a fertile county and this is no less an issue in Meath than it is in Tipperary, and I am concerned about it as well.

There are no fertilisers manufactured in Ireland. Rather, fertiliser companies blend a number of imported fertiliser products into different compositions suitable for agricultural use in Ireland. Therefore, indigenous fertiliser companies are dependent on global supply and demand and subject to exchange rate fluctuations.

It is clear that there has been a sharp increase in fertiliser prices over the past year, particularly in recent months. The Senator may be aware of the global supply and demand issues. There are several factors, but the driving forces are the increased demand for fertilisers, rising production costs and certain supply chain issues. An exacerbating factor is the increased demand for fertiliser from large grain-producing countries, which is being fuelled by strong global grain markets. This increased global demand has impacted on supplies and added to upward pressure on prices. Gas is a key input in nitrogen fertiliser production and the increase in its price is contributing further to the upward trend. With the current high cost of natural gas, some nitrogen producers are scaling back production or halting operations. Therefore, it is clear that there has been a confluence of issues over the past 12 months or so, all of which have had an upward effect on global fertiliser prices. I assume that this is the case across a range of industries. Demand decreased a little during the pandemic but has now bounced back everywhere, causing a large number of supply issues and, therefore, price issues. This is having an effect on a wide range of sectors, including farming, as the Senator rightly described.

The Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy McConalogue, tells me that there are a number of initiatives under way to support farmers in reducing their dependence on fertiliser use. I understand that he is at COP26 today. His attendance there is important in terms of representing the country and, in particular, agriculture. The Minister has asked Teagasc to put forward a roadmap for farmers to reduce the use of chemical fertilisers. This will assist farmers in responding to the climate challenge of reducing the environmental footprint of the agriculture sector. It also makes sense.

The recent budget announced a new €1 million initiative to support the planting of multispecies swards in order to reduce dependence on fertilisers. There is considerable science around this area. For example, some research is being done in my constituency. This scheme will support farmers in using multispecies grass when reseeding. It will mean a mixture of complementary species being sown, including clover, which will enable farmers to reduce their use of nitrogen.

The Minister has also announced a pilot soil sampling programme. This substantial programme is aimed at putting soil carbon, soil health and fertility at the centre of our moves to increase sustainability. Our soils will play an important role in meeting our water, air, climate and biodiversity targets under CAP and the green deal. The sampling programme will provide the farmer with the critical information to make farm management decisions, such as improv-

ing nutrient use efficiency and soil carbon levels in our soils. Advisers will be upskilled to help farmers in translating the results of the programme into meaningful guidance. In this way, the pilot programme will realise the potential of managing soils on Irish farms. The Senator will also be aware that the European Commission has been working on a toolbox of measures to deal with rising energy prices. If that is successful, it will have a beneficial knock-on effect on fertiliser prices.

Senator Garret Ahearn: I thank the Minister of State for his response. He is right that there are a number of initiatives under way. The multispecies grass will make a difference and there will definitely be buy-in from farmers on this. Farmers recognise that they need to change many of their ways and they are totally in favour of that but what I am talking about needs to be done immediately. It will take time for some of these initiatives to come in and to get farmers on board. There will be an immediate crisis in the next four or five months, although farmers will not realise it fully until they go to buy fertiliser. We have given supports to businesses right across this country for the past 18 months, whether in the hospitality industry, sport, the entertainment sector or airlines. Every sector except farming has been given supports. Fertiliser costs have been indirectly affected by Covid. All I am asking is that we support farmers with this cost this year. No other sector would accept a threefold increase in costs. The Minister of State understands that from his county. Let us support farmers through this very difficult period.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I appreciate the Senator raising this issue. We hope that for fertiliser prices, as we hope for a range of commodity prices, there will be a levelling off of some of the contributing price factors next year. Huge challenges still remain. The initiatives the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine has outlined will support farmers in reducing their overall dependence on fertiliser use.

The Senator mentioned multispecies grass swards. I fully agree with what he said about farmers being very interested in this. There is a research facility in my constituency, run by Devenish, and over 1,000 farmers have visited it to see the research that is ongoing on this matter. Not only will it make the soil more fertile but there is potential to trap carbon as well, which is something farmers would like to see because that is a challenge facing us all. The Minister and the Department, as well as the Ministers of State, Deputy Heydon and Senator Hackett, will continue to keep a very close eye on this situation and will listen carefully to the proposals the Senator has made.

Hospice Services

Senator Micheál Carrigy: The Minister of State is very welcome to the Chamber. There is just one hospice bed for the whole of County Longford. I am raising this matter on behalf of all the people in our county and all the families who have been affected. I compliment Longford Hospice Homecare, a voluntary organisation that has been operating throughout my lifetime. People have done tremendous work in volunteering their time and fundraising for hospices. I also compliment the fantastic hospice nurses on the job they do.

I raised this issue on the Order of Business in March, May and, most recently, October. In 2019, I, a number of my colleagues and members of the Longford hospice met the then Minister for Health, Deputy Simon Harris, at St. Joseph's care centre. We received agreement that two beds would be incorporated into the €5 million redevelopment plans being proposed at the time and which are being followed through. However, the HSE has not been prepared to follow

through on that agreement. According to the most recent correspondence I received from the HSE, which can only be described as outrageous, it is now putting a price on providing an extra palliative bed. It is putting a cost on people and families who just want their loved ones close to them before they pass away.

I would like to read a couple of sentences from the letter I received a number of months ago. It states:

Any decision to re-designate one or more beds in St Joseph's, Longford will have to be made by the HSE at national level. The decision to re-designate any beds in St Joseph's Care Centre will reduce the number of beds available to clients requiring the level of care provided by long stay units. Such a decision will also have a financial impact on the unit, reducing the income to the unit through the Fair Deal scheme and increasing the cost of care.

Any commitment to increasing the number of Palliative Care Support Beds at the expense of a long stay bed would have to be accompanied by an appropriate budget allocation to compensate for the fair deal income reduction in order to maintain services for the current and future residents in St Joseph's Care Centre.

That is a ridiculous reply, to be honest. However, it is the reply that was given, through me, to a voluntary committee that has fundraised hundreds of thousands of euro over the past number of years. The bed occupancy rate since 1 January is 85%.

I will now outline some of the figures relating to deaths in Longford. There were a total of 92 deaths, 60 of which occurred at home, seven in the level 2 bed in St. Joseph's and the remaining 25 deaths occurred in nursing homes and acute hospital settings. In 2021, 11 patients were placed on a waiting list for level 2 beds in Longford, but were unable to avail of them. Four patients received beds in Athlone, three were discharged from hospital to home and four died in nursing home and acute hospital settings. The number of hospital palliative care home visits in Longford is much higher than in any other county. The number of deaths in the Midland Regional Hospital, Mullingar, is higher than in other hospitals. Many of these patients at end-of-life have no other choice but to die in an acute hospital. This is not acceptable and cannot continue.

The availability of a second bed in Longford would allow hospital discharges for people who do not wish to die in the Midland Regional Hospital and who want to be closer to home. Unfortunately, clinical nurse specialists need to hold the bed vacant to ensure that a particular patient with the highest level of need can access it. The availability of a second bed in Longford would mean this would not happen. It would also allow for respite for the families who need that extra support and the opportunity of having a break while looking after a loved one. In Westmeath, there are seven palliative care beds, which includes two community beds in Mullingar, for a population of 80,000. In Longford, we have one bed and a population of 40,000. The following is the Longford Hospice Homecare mission statement: "To provide appropriate physical, emotional and spiritual support to palliative care patients and their families enabling them to manage life-limiting illness and bereavement with fortitude and dignity."

I appeal to the Minister of State and the Department of Health to meet with this committee locally, reverse the decision in question immediately and make sure that we have that second bed for families in County Longford.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I thank Senator

Carrigy for raising this important issue and for outlining the position in such a comprehensive manner. Palliative care can be highly emotive for people because it is end-of-life care. We all accept that.

The Government is strongly committed to providing high-quality, evidence-based palliative care in Ireland. The Department of Health, in line with the national palliative care policy introduced in 2001, is committed to ensuring that the hospice sector is sustainable and that specialist palliative care services are provided in every region of the country.

As stated by Senator Carrigy, St. Joseph's Care Centre, Longford, provides 24-hour nursing care for up to 68 residents. It is an invaluable service that is imbedded within the community. These beds can be used to provide care to a range of needs, including dementia care and cognitive impairment, acquired brain injury, palliative and palliative respite care. A newly refurbished lodge at St. Joseph's Care Centre includes one bedroom allocated for palliative care use, as stated by the Senator. The nub of the issue is the occupancy rate for this palliative care bed, which was 54% for 2020. I understand that in 2020 the numbers relating to palliative care were down everywhere. We were in the middle of Covid and there were situations whereby a person might be admitted but could not have a visitor for two weeks, until the 14 days passed and that was following by a restriction under which no visitation was allowed. As I said, all over the country numbers decreased as people preferred to receive palliative services at home because they were surrounded by their families. Current plans do not include an increase in the number of beds available for palliative services and any decision to redesignate one or more beds in St. Joseph's, Longford, will be made by the HSE based on local need. This Government will continue to work with the HSE and hospice organisations to ensure people with life-limiting conditions receive the level of palliative care they require.

I know the Senator will be disappointed with the response. As he said, it is one bed for 40,000 people. The Minister would have looked at the 54% capacity in 2020, which was an unusual year, and the 64% capacity in 2021 to date. Those figures would determine that one bed seems to be sufficient.

Senator Micheál Carrigy: I am disappointed. The response stated "based on local need". The facts are there about the local need and the numbers. This year alone, until the end of October, 11 patients and their families looked for the palliative bed but it was not available. In some cases, the bed was being used and in others it was being held for someone who might have had a higher need. It is not the case that there was not a need there. The figures I have got for this year differ on the percentages in the response. I believe it is higher. The facts are there of the number of patients and their families where it was not available. As I mentioned earlier, it is important to note there is a large number of families looking after elderly people at end-of-life in their homes and they need a break too, if it is for a prolonged time. The opportunity for a break is not there. I appeal to the Minister of State's better judgment. We are not dealing with people who have not been prepared or have not invested into this service. There has been a huge contribution from the people of Longford through Longford Hospice to support this service.

Deputy Mary Butler: St. Joseph's care centre provides 24-hour nursing care. The newly refurbished room allows palliative and palliative-respite care to be provided. The HSE is committed to a continued review of the occupancy of the palliative-care supported bed with the option to increase the number of designated beds required, which is welcome. I imagine it will examine the statistics at the end of the year.

The programme for Government aims to improve access to specialist palliative inpatient services through the development of a hospice to serve every region in the country. The midlands has been identified as a region for the development of a new specialist inpatient palliative care service. The Department of Health is actively engaging with the HSE to progress plans for this development. The development of this unit will ensure that those with palliative care needs and their families living in the midlands counties, including Longford, can access the services they need to improve their quality of life. The Government's commitment to improving palliative and end-of-life services is laid out in its programme for Government.

From my perspective, we have a new unit in Waterford, the Dunmore wing, in University Hospital Waterford. It was completed two years ago but was used for Covid. It opened recently for palliative care. It is led by a consultant for people at end-of-life. It is a fantastic facility. Other beds were closed in different areas. This is acute care for end-of-life. I take comfort from the statement that there is commitment to a review of the occupancy of the palliative care supported bed with the option to increase the number of designated beds if required.

That is probably the best the Senator is going to get at the moment. The statistics say 54% and 64%. I am happy to talk to him again because I know how important these beds are.

Sitting suspended at 3.15 p.m. and resumed at 3.30 p.m.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Fearaim fíorfháilte romhaibh go léir ar ais tar éis na saoire agus is cosúil go bhfuil fuinneamh nua ag gach duine anois. Anois iarrfaidh mé ar an Ceannaire an tOrd Gnó a chur os comhair an Tí. Gabhaim buíochas mór libh.

Senator Regina Doherty: The Order of Business is No. 1, motion regarding the Horse and Greyhound Racing Fund Regulations 2021, referral to committee, to be taken on the conclusion of the Order of Business, without debate; No. 2, motion regarding the Sectoral Employment Order (Construction Sector) 2021, referral to committee, to be taken on the conclusion of No. 1, without debate; No. 3, motion regarding a reasoned opinion of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Transport and Communications regarding the EU legislative proposals, COM (2021) 552, 556, 559, 561, 562 and 567, to be taken on the conclusion of No. 1, without debate; No. 4, address to Seanad Éireann by MEPs representing the European Parliament Dublin constituency, to be taken at 5 p.m. in accordance with the arrangements set out in the motion agreed by the House on Thursday, 21 October 2021; and No. 5, statements on energy security, to be taken on the conclusion of No. 4 and to conclude after 90 minutes, with the time allocated to the opening remarks of the Minister not to exceed ten minutes, all Senators not to exceed five minutes and the Minister to be given not less than ten minutes to reply to the debate.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Anois iarrfaidh mé ar an Leas Ceannaire, an Seanadóir Chambers.

Senator Lisa Chambers: I agree to the Order of Business as outlined by the Leader of the House.

Last Thursday, we had some very welcome news for the north west when we had the official announcement of a technological university for the north west, comprising a multi-campus structure across eight campuses at Castlebar, Galway city, Killybegs, Letterfrack, Letterkenny, Mountbellew and Sligo. To say it was a significant day for the region is an understatement. This technological university marks a significant change in how we offer third level education across the north-west region to students in the area. It also means that my home town of Castlebar will now become a university town, which is a big deal for Castlebar and County Mayo.

It is fantastic to see the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, our local campus, get an extra level of status and become part of a bigger campus across the north west. This development means students in County Mayo and other counties will have the option to travel across the region to the various campuses to pursue third level education. They will be able to start a course in one campus and finish their studies in another campus. This offers them a wide range of opportunities and exciting access to multi-campus structures. I commend all the colleges that came together to make this happen. It has been a long time in the making, but it is a fantastic day for Mayo and the north-west region to have the technological university announced last Thursday. I wish it all the very best.

I also wish to raise the forestry sector. As Senators will be aware, the sector is hosting an information briefing in Buswells Hotel between 2 p.m. and 7 p.m. today to inform us about the ongoing crisis in the issuing of afforestation and felling licences. There are in excess of 1,000 applications for afforestation licences awaiting a decision and many more felling licences also. We have the bizarre situation where nurseries are exporting seeds just to survive and sawmills are importing timber and logs for the same reason and to serve the Irish market. This is having a direct impact on timber supply in the country which, in turn, is having an impact on the cost of construction and building homes. It is well accepted that this is a crisis and it is having a serious impact, in particular on rural communities where forestry is a significant industry and employer. I urge all Members to meet the forestry sector today in Buswells Hotel. I ask the Leader to arrange statements in the House and questions and answers with the Minister of State, Senator Hackett, who has responsibility for this area, to see if we can move this issue along and find a resolution for the sector.

I acknowledge the ongoing COP26 conference in Glasgow. I commend the Taoiseach on his attendance at the conference and his comments on climate change to the effect that Ireland will meet its targets and will be counted among global world leaders in meeting the climate challenge. The facts emerging from the conference about where we are and the challenges that lie ahead are very stark. There is no doubt that the climate challenge is the biggest one we will face in our generation. We owe it to the children of this country and future generations to hand over this country and planet in a good state and to make the changes now needed to reverse the climate challenge. I join with other colleagues in accepting that there is a big challenge ahead. However, it is one on which this Chamber should be to the fore in have ongoing dialogue and discussion with all Ministers on their carbon budgets and how we intend to meet the targets.

Senator Aisling Dolan: I welcome the Minister's approval for the new Connacht-Ulster technological university for the west. This is an incredible achievement by the presidents, staff and students of the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, Letterkenny IT and IT Sligo. The new university will have eight campuses located in Killybegs, Letterkenny, Sligo, Castlebar, two locations in Galway city, Letterfrack and the agricultural college in Mountbellew. These towns will now become university campus towns. Students will be able to study courses locally and these will range from post-leaving certificate courses, PLCs, and diplomas to master's

degrees, and to PhD level if they choose.

The technological university will also attract investment to the region. I also welcome the engagement it will have with industry in the area. It is important that we develop courses from PLC level all the way to diploma certification but that we link in with the education and training boards and apprenticeship programmes and also that we link in with the technological universities.

It is the season of club championships. I congratulate the Padraig Pearses GAA Club, which is based in Woodmount, Creagh, just outside Ballinasloe. It covers the areas of Taughmaconnell and Moore in south Roscommon. The club won its second ever Roscommon senior football championship in the pouring rain playing against Clann na nGael. Players from both teams gave it their all. It is a phenomenal and historic win. Great goals were scored by some of the local heroes, Paul Carey and Jack Tumulty. I wish all the team well. It was a wonderful celebration for the players, managers and volunteers.

There is something in the water around Ballinasloe because the ladies team also won on the same day. I congratulate the Ballinasloe GAA team, which sailed high last Sunday and won the Galway junior C ladies football county final. It means so much to all the teams involved in the club games played recently. It involves years of training and commitment. There has been a lockdown and great hardship recently, but these wins are magic and they bring real joy and pride. I congratulate all the teams. I hope we, too, might get fit as well.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I thank Senator Dolan. On a human interest level, my brother-in-law, Michael, was training the defeated reigning champions, Kilbride, on Sunday. It is good for sport that it should rotate somewhat.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: A couple of weeks ago in the House I spoke about the crisis in the Coast Guard. Some days after that, I attended the inaugural meeting of the Irish Coast Guard Volunteers Representative Association in Kilkee. I must say that things have deteriorated to a point where, maybe this evening, we will have no volunteers in Doolin in County Clare. It looks very much like we will have no Coast Guard volunteers right along the west coast, from Clare to Kerry, at the rate things are going.

There have been a number of damning reports into the Coast Guard through the Comptroller and Auditor General, particularly regarding the procurement of night vision for a private company paid for by the taxpayer in the helicopter service and the procurement of vehicles for the Coast Guard service for towing the rigid inflatable boats, RIBs, out to sea or for bringing rescue equipment to cliffs or wherever. The vehicles that were purchased are totally unsuitable. One of the questions that I need to raise with the Coast Guard straightaway is how many tractors have we bought because I understand it has had to buy tractors to drag the equipment out to sea.

We are in a situation where the Coast Guard service is largely voluntary. The allegations that are being made - they are allegations at this stage - are that there is severe bullying and harassment going on within the service. The allegations are that if one raises an issue of concern one will be greeted with thanks for one's interest and concern. Some days later a senior officer will arrive at one's house and tell one one's services are no longer required. This is dividing communities. Most of us here come from rural areas and we know how closely knit communities are. In particular, coastal communities are extremely closely knit, and where one gets an organisation that is starting to split down the middle, there are the insiders and the outsiders. It

is dividing coastal communities. It is really serious.

I am bringing the matter up today because the Joint Committee on Transport and Communications will look at this issue but the Minister must act immediately in order to save the service. There will not be a service at the rate things are going in a couple of weeks' time. This is frightening for the people in western coastal areas who depend on this service. We have many cliffs and some dangerous seas. Something that came to light when we attended that meeting was that a couple of weeks before Caitríona Lucas lost her life in west Clare, the Coast Guard was warned that the way things were going the next time it visited there it would be for a funeral. Sure enough, a few weeks later it was a funeral.

First and foremost, we have to commend the volunteers who give of their time all of the time to deliver these services but if there is a problem there, it needs to be rooted out straightaway from the top down. I would ask the Leader, on behalf of the Seanad, to write to the Minister for Transport, Deputy Ryan, and ask him to immediately instigate an investigation. I have written to him today.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Thank you very much.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: The north-west technological university is in my own home heartland.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: It has already been welcomed.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I welcome it too. I am delighted to see Castlebar, my mother's town, getting university status and, of course, Galway. I represented all of those colleges once and I am delighted.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: There was always an intellectual and academic ambience there anyway. We will move on.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly: These two weeks are critical for our future. In advance of COP26, it was made clear from the IPCC report that every single thing we do matters. All over this country our citizens and our inhabitants are calling for action to reverse climate breakdown. Children have been calling for action for many years, taking to the streets and pleading with politicians. Small farmers who I speak to know that the future is a future based on a greener product and a resilient food system. They have felt powerless. What of the business sector? This week Chambers Ireland called for a dramatic change - a change that is not incremental but hits the fast forward button. It says our economy needs it, and it is right. Let us be honest. We also need it for our health and for the many species on this earth that depend on us to do the right thing not least for the survival of our own species but for peace on this planet because, make no mistake, war, migration and famine will escalate without it.

I returned from pre-COP in Rome a couple of weeks ago and felt some despair. I spoke to delegates from some of the countries most impacted by climate chaos and which have done little to bring about this collapse. There was message after message of solidarity but I wondered whether all trust had broken down. The developed world failed to live up to its climate finance obligations under the sustainable development goals and the Paris Agreement of giving €100 billion a year to developing nations. There was also that feeling that trust had broken down because the developed world even failed to follow through on a TRIPS waiver when it came to the pandemic.

Over the past few days, as I and other parliamentarians prepare to go to COP26 in Glasgow, I have felt hope, and we have to feel hope. That is what the IPCC report calls for. The very fact that today I heard the Taoiseach give an unequivocal commitment in an interview on “Morning Ireland” gives me that hope. The actions of politicians will in large part define what happens next for the future of our species. Today the Taoiseach is telling the world that Ireland will double its climate finance to developing nations by 2025 but the biggest contribution we will make as a country will be to reduce our emissions. As one of the highest emitting nations in the EU, how we will do this will be laid down in the climate action plan.

In light of all this I find it alarming that today, of all days, is the day Sinn Féin called for more consultation on the climate action plan. There will of course be consultation, but we have to see all politicians stepping up to the mark for the sake of our country and our world, and demonstrating leadership. Not only does Sinn Féin throw shade on the climate action plan but again this week, of all weeks, it wants to put a Bill before the Dáil that would effectively stop wind energy turbines from being built on land in Ireland. It withdrew it, no doubt because of the push-back. I do not like saying this but it is incumbent on all of us who care about the environment to call out this lack of commitment and this populism. We have done it when it comes to the media and we will do it when it comes to the Opposition. It too must play its part.

Senator Lynn Boylan: On today’s Order of Business, there is a motion on the horse and greyhound racing fund, to be taken without debate. Regardless of people’s views on greyhound and horse racing, I find it incredible that we would have no discussion in this House on the allocation of €70.4 million of public funding. It is not good enough simply to say we are going to refer this to the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine. Greyhound Racing Ireland’s chair, Frank Nyhan, said in response to the budget allocation this year that GRI has invested significantly in its care and welfare policy during 2021 and that this year’s budget increase will assist with the expansion of a range of care and welfare initiatives in 2022. Yet Greyhound Racing Ireland is still only selectively collecting data on injuries and deaths of greyhounds at the race tracks.

On the back of a member of the public coming forward to me, GRI has confirmed that there are no vets present at either the public or the private trials that take place throughout this country. The eyewitness I spoke to told me of how he has witnessed howling dogs that are in pain being put into trailers due to the lack of a vet being present at the track. Surely if GRI is in receipt of €17 million of public money, it can put in place a permanent vet at every racecourse as is the case in Britain. This would also allow for proper independent data on the number of injuries and deaths that actually take place at race tracks. It is also worth noting that dogs injured at the private trials are not even eligible for the injury scheme that GRI has. Given that it is mostly young, inexperienced greyhounds that race at these unofficial trials, surely it makes even more sense to have vets present there, so that those dogs would be eligible for the injury scheme. It is convenient that no data is collected and no vet is present to verify how many injuries and fatalities take place at the trials, particularly at the unofficial trials when it is young and inexperienced dogs, because of course that would push the figures downwards. I will call a vote on the Order of Business because I think it shocking that we would allow a motion for the allocation of €17 million in public funding proceed without any debate in this House.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I would just point out to the Senator that the motion in question involves referring the matter to the relevant committee.

Senator Marie Sherlock: I joined the parents of babies born via surrogacy standing out-

side Leinster House this morning - as did other Members - in calling for the Government to progress the assisted human reproduction Bill, which people have been speaking about since 2015. There has been promise after promise but we have yet to see any progress. Of course, the issues are complex and there are no easy answers but we cannot allow a situation to continue where the mothers of these babies have no legal recognition in this country.

I again ask for a debate with the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, Deputy Catherine Martin, on arts and culture and all that has happened and that needs to happen in that space. We have been asking for such a debate for a number of months. I do not know if the debate in question took place. If not, it needs to take place as soon as possible because there are serious issues with regard to the reopening of the night-time economy. There is massive frustration on the part of those who have been beating on the door in that regard for a long period regarding what needs to happen for a safe reopening. There is also frustration among many nightclub and late-night bar owners in respect of the shambles of the regulations that are currently in place

It is important to say that a meeting was organised by Theatre Forum Ireland in mid-October and that it was attended by more than 70 theatre workers from across the country - actors, actresses, theatre directors and producers. This happened on foot of very important research published by Theatre Forum Ireland in August about pay and conditions in the performing arts. The results of the survey to which that research relates were stark. The survey was conducted among more than 90 arts organisations, venues, production companies and festivals and 139 artists. As a result of that important research, we know that: 22 respondents said they earned less than the national minimum wage; the median income was about €21,000, which is just over half of average earnings in this country; and more than one third had to rely on work outside the sector in order to get by. When we talk about treasuring and supporting the arts, we need to talk about the participative arts and those who make the arts their livelihood. Many of those who go into the arts do not do so to make a fortune. If we are in a situation whereby people cannot afford to live in our cities and are being obliged to undervalue their own work in order to get other work and have to live a precarious lives, we need to ask serious questions about how we support those working in the sector. To its credit, the Arts Council has its Paying the Artist policy, which was launched in February 2020, but we need to see much greater action and recognition by the Government and across the economy of the fact that we need to pay artists better. I would like to have a debate with the Minister on the matter.

Senator Lynn Ruane: I wish to call attention to the report on the Traveller community and homelessness that was finally released last week. The report makes for difficult reading. I wish I could say it comes as a surprise but we have seen too many reports like this before. My colleague in the Civil Engagement Group, Senator Flynn, has spoken passionately in this House about the unacceptable conditions our Traveller neighbours are still forced to live in. It is a deeply emotional subject for generations of Travellers who have lived in these conditions. How many more reports will it take before we see effective, transparent and comprehensive Government action? Senator Flynn said that an advocacy paper was also released alongside the report, which she thinks highlights the severity of the situation. There are such aims as reducing Traveller accommodation deprivation by one third by 2030, cutting overcrowding by half by 2030, and assuring access to clean tap water for 95% of Travellers by 2030. Senator Flynn said the Government must act immediately, as the aspirations towards a delivery for 2030 are simply not enough. She said that after nearly another decade of hard work this should not be the best the Traveller community could expect.

Travellers continue to be terribly over-represented in our homeless population. The report notes - and we know this - that all homelessness has severe, negative consequences on physical and mental health and for children's education. The cost of these Government failures is measured in Traveller lives. The costs are the physical, mental, emotional and communal health of people that have been decimated over years. We cannot allow it continue. Traveller children and families are worth exactly the same as all our family members. They must be valued in the same way. Would any Member here, who has a duty towards our collective society, honestly accept such a neglectful approach to the needs of their own family? We have a roadmap to address to this, if the political will is there. This report comes with very strong recommendations. These recommendations do not just outline what Travellers want, but they detail what Travellers need and deserve. This is not a Traveller issue, however. This is a societal issue and a collective call for a true, honest and transparent response. We have to learn from our mistakes, mistakes that generations of Travellers have had to pay for. We are talking about the most basic needs, such as access to clean water, heating, safe accommodation, access to potential private accommodation providers, and the elimination of overcrowding. Our aims, targets and time-lines must be clear and it is on all of us to make this happen.

Senator Denis O'Donovan: I rise today to ask the Leader, or implore her for assistance with a particular matter. I have a neighbour and constituent who, in May 2021, got a Pfizer first jab for Covid-19. Unfortunately, she had a serious reaction and ended up in the accident and emergency department and eventually recovered. Since then, she has been endeavouring to get her second vaccination, if not Pfizer, then maybe Moderna or AstraZeneca. I will read a small bit of what she sent to me in handwriting.

She is a highly educated research scientist, who is currently working as a global project manager for Janssen with more than 20 years' experience working in the pharma sector as well as in academic lecturing. She says:

I am not a crackpot anti-vaxxer. I want to do my part in reducing the risk. But right now, the only way I can have a normal life like the rest of my family is to get Covid-19 myself and recover in order to get a Covid-19 certificate.

It is an awful situation to be in.

This woman has an 81-year-old mother. That is creating difficulty. She was to appear in RTÉ six weeks ago on a particular issue. It was nothing to do with her problem, but she had to refuse. She contacted the Taoiseach's office, and he referred the matter to the Minister of Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly. The Minister for Health kicked it down the road. The National Immunisation Advisory Committee, NIAC, is not interested. I cannot understand. It is five months later. This woman badly needs help for her family, her work, or even to go out for a meal - not that she is a big socialiser - but nobody is prepared to help her. Every night I put on the television and there are people from the HSE, NIAC and officials from the Government and Ministers saying we must get everybody vaccinated to prevent this crisis. Here is an example. I hope the Leader will take this up with the appropriate persons. I did not raise this here lightly. I think that is the second matter I have raised in 18 months. However, I really feel for this lady. I think she has been badly wronged and we need to find a solution.

Senator Sharon Keogan: Hear, hear.

Senator Maria Byrne: I rise today to speak about an issue that was brought to my attention

yesterday. It is do with an eleven-year-olds and basketball. I have been led to believe that the decision was made by Basketball Ireland that children can go to their basketball training, but they cannot play a match because they are not vaccinated. We have not started vaccinating that age group. This 11-year-old and friends have been training.

4 o'clock

They were getting ready for their match only to be told they can no longer have matches. Children have been through so much with Covid. They were so excited about upcoming matches and now they cannot have them. If Basketball Ireland has made this decision, I believe it is wrong. We have not given 11-year-olds the opportunity to be vaccinated yet.

I saw today in the news that it is envisaged people aged under 60 years who have underlying health conditions will be offered the vaccine next. This is very welcome along with the healthcare workers. As healthcare workers especially are working with people daily, it is important to welcome the news they are being vaccinated and that people with underlying health conditions are to be provided for too.

Senator Sharon Keogan: I seek a debate on the Government's approach to tackling homelessness in the capital. A recent article in *The Sunday Times* reported on the number of voluntary groups involved in the provision of food services in Dublin, which was approximately 27. This has even led to argument among the organisations over prime locations. Were these all self-funded ventures, the duplication of service would not be any of our business. However, it is the remit of the Dublin Region Homeless Executive, DRHE, to co-ordinate the efforts of the four Dublin councils to combat homelessness. The DRHE spent roughly €159 million last year and the Government has spent close to €1 billion on homeless services from 2013 to 2020. Homelessness is clearly not an issue that will be resolved by throwing money at it. The largest of these charities took in over €56 million last year with €30 million of that coming directly from the State. The State has a duty to ensure such money is being spent in rehousing homeless persons in a sustainable manner rather than enabling individuals to remain on the street.

Is there something to be said for the centralisation of homeless services either in the DRHE or another statutory body established with the goal of eliminating homelessness? The sheer volume of volunteers we have who are willing to work in this area is testament to their hearts being in the right place but the system in which they work may not be right. Yesterday, Mr. Justice O'Moore gave an order to wind up Inner City Helping Homeless and appointed Mr. Kieran Wallace as permanent liquidator. While the circumstances which led to this outcome do not reflect on other charities working in the area of homelessness, perhaps it should give us cause to think about the structure through which the Government seeks to operate. Perhaps it is not a lack of funding which has lengthened Dublin's homelessness crisis but a refusal to go back to the drawing board in regard to how we set about tackling the issue as a whole.

On a separate issue, I spoke a couple of weeks ago about my home parish of Denn. This weekend, they actually won the junior championship in County Cavan. It was lovely to see the brother of one of the people who committed suicide taking the cup on behalf of the team. It was a lovely, joyous occasion for the parish.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I am very happy to join the Senator in congratulating Denn, which a very fine club and a fine team.

Senator Shane Cassells: Today, the members of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Tour-

ism, Culture, Arts, Sport and Media launched our report on the proposed online safety and media regulation Bill. It is hugely important legislation that it is to be hoped will be coming before us in the House in the winter. After nearly a year of intensive work, where we dealt with a huge spectrum of witnesses from across Irish life, the joint committee made 33 recommendations to the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, Deputy Catherine Martin, in respect of the Bill because it must be got right. We are dealing now with a medium that is highly influential on the manner in which society itself is conducted. We heard from our witnesses about the impact it is having, especially on young people. Some of the key recommendations we have made today include an individual complaints scheme available to people, that provisions be responsive to the need to, in particular, protect children and vulnerable groups and the provision of an online safety commissioner. We had as a witness the Australian eSafety Commissioner. She has done amazing work in bringing to heel the social media companies which talk about self-regulation and the need for community standards, but whose standards fall very short when it comes to certain people. Other key recommendations include a ban on advertising to children online and that disinformation and financial harm, including gambling, be included as categories of harmful content and the need for a content levy on the major streaming companies in order that we can invest in original Irish content again. I look forward to the Minister taking on board the cross-party recommendations we made today on the online media safety Bill and to the Bill coming before this House before Christmas in order that it can be debated thoroughly and implemented.

Senator Micheál Carrigy: I concur with Senator Cassells's comments. I was on that committee, along with Senators Byrne and Hoey. It is among the most important legislation we will see over the coming years. I am delighted and look forward to seeing the 33 recommendations we put forward implemented.

I also concur with the proposal from Senator Cassells on a discussion on forestry. It is a major issue and I welcome the recent acquisition by Glennon Brothers of Longford of Balcas, another large timber company, to turn it into one of the biggest timber-producing companies in the country. We need to address the issues in the forestry industry. It is having a knock-on effect on our house building.

I mentioned sports capital funding at the time of the budget. My understanding is allocations were to come out at some stage this month, but we had a small funding budget set aside for a large number of applications and there was only an extra €5 million in the budget for sports capital. I ask that we look again at that and the amount of funding available to make sure that all these sporting organisations, which have played such a pivotal part throughout Covid-19, get the funding they need to deliver their projects.

I will finish by welcoming back my party colleague, the Minister, Deputy McEntee. I happened to come in the gate of Leinster House today along with her. It is fantastic to see what she has done and highlights the need for permanent reform. I am glad there seems to be overtures in that direction. It is not before time.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: Tá mé píosá mall as beannachtaí breithlae a sheoladh le TG4 a bhí 25 bliain ar an saol ag an deireadh seachtaine. The leader may have seen at the weekend Oíche Shamhna marked the 25th birthday of TG4, one of our greatest cultural, entertainment and information outlets in Ireland and globally, given the new media that exists. It is available to and taken up by a global audience. TG4 reflects the best of us. It shows our rich cultural heritage and history, but also the vibrancy and dynamism of the Irish language community, es-

pecially the creative sector and the arts and music in the Irish language community, in particular. It was a timely reminder for us of just how much TG4 has made a difference to the life of the Irish language community and broader Irish life over the past 25 years and of how when we enable the Irish language sector to flourish and grow, it does so impressively. TG4 is in many ways the jewel in the crown for the Irish language community and plays such a big part in Irish life. I wish it a breithlá sona. Go maireadh siad an céad. I also wanted to take the opportunity to again call for a debate on the protocol and its roll-out. At today's Brexit committee, representatives from the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, put quite impressive statistics to us, including a statistic that really resonated with me regarding a 90% increase in trade from the North into the South post-Brexit, which was enabled by the protocol. I again make the call for that debate. I also call on the Irish Government to develop a communication and marketing strategy that tells businesses, in particular, how to avail of the benefits of the protocol and that clearly and coherently outlines how it is protecting business.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Aontaím leis an Seanadóir faoi TnaG. Gabhaim mo chomhghairdeas féin, agus breithlá sona, dóibh. Tá siad ag déanamh sár-jab agus tá jab iontach déanta acu ar feadh na mblianta.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: There is a lot of excitement and debate about the COP26 summit, and that debate is very important. However, I want to register my disappointment and anger at the fact that the Israeli energy minister could not access the debate yesterday because she was in a wheelchair and there was no accessible transport for her to enter the summit. It was rectified today, but it sends a very bad message. Let it be a lesson to all of us that, anywhere we are organising anything, there has to be an absolutely accessible place for people to enter and to participate in the debate.

In talking about the debate at COP26, the area of climate change is hugely important to all of us. In the debate that has taken place over the past few weeks, there has been a lot of demonisation of the agriculture sector. In fact, the biggest contributors to emissions are fast fashion and food waste. Some of the statistics are quite shocking. The average household in Ireland wastes 3 kg of food every week. Globally, 25% of food that is produced is wasted. That represents 10% of the emissions.

About two weeks ago I requested that we ask the Minister for agriculture to come to the Seanad to have a debate on CAP. Coincidentally, that was the day the announcement was made on where Ireland is going regarding CAP. We need to have a wider debate on how we support, in particular, progressive commercial farmers, many of whom are in my county of Kildare. I met with them again yesterday and listened to their concerns. In 2016, Kildare alone had €256 million worth of exports. When one looks at the industries we have, such as Glanbia and Kerry Group, chilling, for example, provides a lot of employment. As a county and a country we need to be very proud of what is produced here.

In terms of what is facing us, we have accepted there has to be 85% convergence but there are only five eco-schemes in this country, while there are 20 in France. We need to have a debate about how these schemes can be opened up to help support the very important industry we have.

Senator Barry Ward: In recent weeks we have heard a lot about spiking - the Leader has made public statements on it - whether it is by needles or putting something into the drinks of people who are out in public socialising and doing their thing, having been allowed to be out in

public again after such a long time. I have looked at this issue. Some of the early messaging that came out on it from the HSE and other groups was to tell young women that they needed to be careful and they needed to watch their drinks.

As the Leader said in a public statement a week or so ago, that has been the case for a very long time but it is the wrong approach. We need to look at the perpetrators rather than the victims of this kind of behaviour. In the past number of days I have spoken to a number of young people, and I was quite struck by those, young women in particular, who told me they are not now going out because they are afraid of what might happen to them if they do. It is an intolerable position for us to be in that in a developed modern country, young women in particular feel they cannot go out and enjoy themselves the same as their male counterparts because of this kind of thing. It is important that we send out the message to people who are thinking about doing this, particularly any men who are thinking about doing this, and who believe they might get away with it that it is against the law. We do not need new legislation because legislation was passed almost 25 years ago by the then Minister for Justice, Ms Nora Owen. Section 2 of the Non-Fatal Offences against the Person Act 1997 makes provisions in respect of assault, which is a minor offence. More importantly, though, section 6 deals specifically with syringes being used to injure someone. It is clearly an offence. On indictment, it carries a penalty of up to ten years imprisonment. The House should be sending out the clear message that not only is this activity not acceptable and grossly unreasonable, but it is seriously criminal and carries serious penalties. I am not sure that some of the people involved in this activity understand the criminal liability to which they are exposing themselves. I wonder whether we can consider having a debate on the matter.

Senator Annie Hoey: I wish to reference the student nurses and midwives who are outside Leinster House with the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, INMO, supported by the Psychiatric Nurses Association of Ireland, PNA, SIPTU and Fórsa, about student nurses and midwives' pay, which is an issue that I ever so briefly mentioned in the House previously. We are back at it again. There have been hints in the media that some of this will be resolved and that students in their fourth year internships are to receive an increase in their payments, but those are just media reports and there is no clarity. My understanding is that the report has been with the Minister since 12 August. By any measure of industrial relations issues, that is a long time for a report to be sitting when there is an outstanding dispute. The Leader wrote to the Minister previously on behalf of the Seanad. Will she engage with him again to ask for the report to be released and for unions to have access to it so that they can have a reasonable amount of time to assess it?

There have been other media reports today to the effect that there may be an extension of the €100 per week pandemic placement grant. Given that this payment ceased last September, first, second and third year students who are still working in pandemic conditions are not receiving any recognition of or pay for their work. Given that 3,000 healthcare staff are out at the moment, there is no doubt that what student nurses and midwives are doing on hospital wards is work. It is disappointing that that payment was ceased. Whether it will be reintroduced is one matter, but it should not have been cut off.

Last February, I proposed a Bill on this matter. There was no opposition to it and everyone stood up and said that he or she supported our student nurses and midwives. It is frustrating that student nurses and midwives who have been working on the front line are once again outside Leinster House calling for a resolution to this issue and for a bit of respect, decency and fairness. That is not too much to ask for. Will the Leader please write to the Minister?

Senator Malcolm Byrne: Aontaím leis an Seanadóir Ó Donnghaile agus leis an Leas-Chathaoirleach faoi TG4 agus an ról tábhachtach atá aige. Guím breithlá sona dó.

I welcome this afternoon's positive announcement by the Minister, Deputy Harris, on the designation of a technological university for the south east. This is something that our region has been seeking for a long time and it will be transformative for the region. When it opens on 1 May, it will become the fourth or fifth largest university by student number in the country. It will be a considerable achievement and will play a role not just in regional economic and social development, but in dealing with national and global challenges. We should put on the record of the House our thanks to all of the team in Institute of Technology Carlow, Waterford Institute of Technology and others for ensuring that this has finally come to pass.

The House will recall how I raised a problem that arose in Gorey in August at the Creagh water treatment plant when E. coli was found in our water supply. In an unrelated incident, a boil water notice is currently in place in Gorey and Wexford town. There is also a boil water notice in place in Enniscorthy. This means that the three largest towns in County Wexford are facing boil water notices. I accept that this is part of the major review of all our water treatment plants that is going on to make sure they are up to scratch but there is also a problem with regard to housing. We have discussed in this House previously that a lot of our failure to reach some of our targets will be because Irish Water will not supply enough connections to have an adequate water supply. As we are moving towards a single utility, I ask for a specific debate on the role of Irish Water in the housing area, as well as in ensuring that all our citizens have access to a good, reliable and clean water supply.

Senator Emer Currie: I wish to raise the issue of antigen tests and five to 12-year-olds, who are without the protection of vaccines. Cases are rising at a worrying rate for parents and teachers. This is affecting teachers and the need for substitute teachers in schools as well. As we read in the newspapers today, there is concern about people at home who are vulnerable who have children at school. Parents are not reassured by the Chief Medical Officer's comments at the weekend that international evidence tells us that in the vast majority of cases, children who become infected with Covid-19 experience mild symptoms or are asymptomatic. They are still worried. They are worried about long Covid, just as they were about teenagers, and they are worried about paediatric inflammatory multisystem syndrome, PIMS. This is not to say there is widespread support for going back to the way things were with the previous test and trace system but it is clear as day that primary schools and teachers need an extra line of defence. The Tánaiste talked about mandatory antigen testing for asymptomatic close contacts in schools, and of course we all know that if someone has symptoms they should get a PCR test, but what about voluntary antigen screening for five to 12-year-olds and school staff? We know it can be done. It has been done in the UK, where tests are much more accessible. It is being piloted at present in third level. In the UK there are videos on how to do the antigen tests with children. We have to acknowledge that identifying symptoms in children is not black and white. We can lean into the doubt parents have about a runny nose or when a child says they are not feeling well but the parents do not feel there is enough concern to go for a PCR test. This is something we should consider seriously.

Senator Gerry Horkan: I welcome the COP26 statement. I just read the remarks of the Taoiseach, who was speaking as we started the Order of Business. It is very important, as a number of people have said, that we all play our part in every way we can, be that through a small thing or a big thing. That might be not buying as much food when we do not really need it, which Senator O'Loughlin referred to, or something like cycling. I cycled in today. I am

lucky enough to live relatively close so I can do that but the route I take is one on which a cyclist unfortunately had a fatality yesterday. I pay sympathy and give my condolences to his friends and family for that fatality.

We are entering into the wintertime. The clocks have gone back and we will all notice in the next few minutes how dark it is going to be so early. I am a motorist more often than I am a cyclist, although I still cycle a fair bit, and motorists in particular must pay attention to cyclists and pedestrians. It is of course helpful if cyclists are well lit up or are wearing high-vis jackets and helmets and so on but if there is a confrontation between a motorist and a cyclist, or a motorist and a pedestrian, it is fairly certain that the cyclist or the pedestrian is going to be the worse off in the collision. I ask that we have a debate on road safety but at the same time, all of us here, from both urban and rural Ireland, should get out there and tell motorists to take that little bit of extra care. As part of COP26 we are trying to get more people to cycle, engage in active travel and walk but we need to make sure it is safe because fatalities and injuries are what frighten people away from those modes of transport. It might be useful for us to have a debate with the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, on road safety. Now that the clocks have gone back, let all of us, motorists, cyclists and pedestrians, be vigilant all of the time to make sure we all stay safe.

Senator Martin Conway: I join with others in commending and congratulating TG4 and our former colleague, Trevor Ó Clochartaigh, who is one of the key people in TG4 making it the success it is.

What happened to the Israeli energy minister, in terms of her being left outside of the climate summit for a couple of hours, does not surprise me one bit. It is symptomatic of an attitude towards people with disabilities throughout the world. To the best of my knowledge, I am the only Member of this House with a declared disability. Two weeks ago, I was in a situation where I could not access material at a very important committee. The reason for that is, perhaps, that I do not shout loud enough or not make enough noise and I just work away with people. I could give countless examples in this House of situations in which I found myself in terms of not being able to access information to facilitate me to do my job. It is nobody's fault, but it is everybody's fault. A better effort needs to be made across the board, certainly within this House and within the Houses of the Oireachtas, but throughout society in general. It is great to promote climate justice. That is extremely important but so too are the basic issues of equality and being able to access a venue. To think that that happened at an event about which we all espouse, namely, climate justice and climate action, is appalling. It should never happen. We, and the institutions, always should be mindful of whether there is a person on a committee or within the Houses of the Oireachtas that might need some extra attention or accommodation in order that he or she can have the same level playing pitch as everybody else.

I would like to raise one other issue. Today, I heard that Doolin Coast Guard has been stood down. That is very regrettable. Doolin Coast Guard is one of the busiest Coast Guard units in this country, carrying out 60 to 70 recovery and rescue missions every year. I want answers as to why that happened. I want to know the reason it is being stood down.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I thank Senator Conway.

Senator Martin Conway: I also want to know what provisions are being made to ensure that if there is an accident off the Clare coast tomorrow or over the weekend, there are measures and appropriate equipment in place to deal with it.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: I commend Irish Families Through Surrogacy, members of which were outside Leinster House today to raise awareness among Members of the Seanad and the Dáil in regard to their simple demand that the Government legislate in order that their children can be afforded the same rights as every other child in Ireland. It is not an extravagant demand; it is a very basic human request. England legislated for this in the 1980s. These families feel failed by previous Governments. They welcome that this Government has given a commitment to legislate to create a legal and ethical framework that will protect everybody, children and parents. I ask the Leader to write to the Ministers for Health, Justice and Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to draw their attention to the demonstration today, to urge them to deliver on the Government's commitment and to ensure that the legislation brought forward commits not only to giving them the basic human right of affording them the same rights as every other child in Ireland, but includes provisions for international surrogacy.

The second issue I wish to raise today is that of vaccines. We are all very proud of the vaccine roll-out in Ireland and of how Ireland has been a huge success globally in terms of vaccine roll-out. We commend everybody involved in that process. However, there is growing concern among people who received the Janssen single-dose Covid-19 vaccine. There is concern about the waning efficacy of that vaccine. Will the Leader write to the National Immunisation Advisory Committee to seek clarity on its intention regarding those who received the Janssen vaccine. Is its intention to recommend a Pfizer second dose, a booster, for those people?

I want to commend everyone involved in the roll-out of booster vaccinations to those over 65 years and those in our nursing homes. It is welcome that all those front-line healthcare workers have also been approved for the booster vaccines. However, the Janssen vaccine cohort is concerned and needs reassurance. It would be most welcome if the Leader could seek that assurance.

Senator Garret Ahearn: The HSE has published a new list of locations around the country served by BreastCheck vans. The service provided by the vans stopped during Covid for the last 18 months. Before Covid, it generally did a yearly visit to Tipperary and did all its checks in one visit. However, the new list which was published has no location in Tipperary. The Irish Cancer Society has said higher numbers of late-stage cancers are being diagnosed as a result of the screening delays caused by Covid-19. The longer we leave these services lapse, the more advanced cancer will spread. Early intervention is key. The HSE says the cyberattack has had a huge impact on cancer screening services, which is understandable, but patients in Tipperary should have been contacted months ago to attend screening services.

Women aged between 50 and 69 years are offered a mammogram every two years so women who were almost due their assessment when the pandemic began are waiting almost four years at this stage. The number of mammograms carried out by the HSE BreastCheck services fell by more than two thirds in 2020, leading to a detection of 600 fewer breast cancers. Some 56,000 women had a full mammogram last year compared with 170,000 in 2019. I ask the Leader to contact the HSE and ask that Tipperary be included in the schedule. Tipperary has two Covid vaccination centres, one in Clonmel and one in Nenagh. There used to be a BreastCheck van in Nenagh, but I would ask that it also come to Clonmel. It is very important. It is very significant. It is close to my heart. My mother passed away at a very young age from breast cancer, so it means a lot. The BreastCheck van detects about 1,050 cases of breast cancer every year, saving lives. It is very important that it be a relatively close distance from where people live. Tipperary is a massive county.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Leaving the good wine until last, I call Senator Boyhan.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I do not know about that, a Leas-Chathaoirleach. I want to speak in favour of Senator Conway's remarks on extra support for disabilities. I made some inquiries, and it was my understanding from the Houses of the Oireachtas that there was additional funding, resources and staff for people with a disability, and rightly so. I speak as someone with a lot of knowledge of local councils. I am a director of Irish Guide Dogs for the Blind for many years and have advocated really strongly for it. Many of the service users of Irish guide dogs are working as telephonists in various local authorities. One thing that is really good about our local authorities is that these users are supported with additional assistance around accessing the building, the utilities and also accessing open spaces for the dogs, etc. It is really important and I would be quite disappointed, as we all would be, if people did not have that extra support. What Senator Conway outlined warrants some further inquiries, because we should support people with disabilities. I have come across three or four people who have started employment here in recent weeks who have disabilities. That is really important. We might say hello to them when we encounter them in the corridor. The conversations I had was that people tend to back off when someone has a visual impairment or a long cane, not because people are indifferent but because sometimes they feel awkward. We need to have a conversation with everyone.

I welcome the good news that ten-year-old Adam Terry has had his operation. His parents issued a statement to RTÉ and that is really positive. However, 170 other children are still languishing on waiting lists. They are still in pain as they await surgery. I know the Leader and her office made strenuous efforts to arrange a debate with the Minister but I am disappointed with the date of Tuesday, 23 November. It is simply not good enough. I do not want to come in here to roar, shout and fight with people. None of us wants to do that. We all have a job to do but, quite frankly, Tuesday, 23 November, which is in three weeks, is not good enough, considering I first requested a debate two weeks ago. I am not prepared to accept that and I do not believe the Members of this House are prepared to accept it either.

I know the Leader's office has gone back to the Minister's office to make inquiries. I wrote to the Minister today and I look forward to his response. I must acknowledge that when one writes to the Minister for Health, one gets a detailed response. I wanted to share my own concerns with him. It is important when one is getting a message out that it is one's own message and not spin or someone else's version of the message. My message to the Leader, respectfully, is that I will make a proposal on tomorrow's Order of Business if we cannot negotiate an earlier debate. I do not want to put too much pressure on people. I am prepared to give the Minister another week but I am not prepared, on behalf of those in scoliosis advocacy groups to whom I have spoken, to wait for three more weeks for the Minister to come to this House for five or ten minutes to set out his timeline. I respect that the Leader has a difficult job and is dealing with the Minister's office but I hope we can have some movement on this before tomorrow.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: The Senator's patience was rewarded with a bit of bonus time, which was reasonable given that he had a very long wait.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I appreciate that. The advantage of being last is that one is first to get a response.

Senator Regina Doherty: That is true. I appreciate that Senator Boyhan has a job to do but he knows that I have done my best. I will try again. I never say never. The Senator will ask and I will ask and we will see if we can get a better date than 23 November. That said, at least

2 November 2021

we have a date, even if we are not happy with it. We will try to bring it forward. I will do my best and I am sure Senator Boyhan will do his best too.

Senator Ahearn raised the quite bizarre situation whereby in one of the largest counties in the country there is no BreastCheck venue for an annual analysis of the women of the age that the screening service looks after. I am happy to write to Mr. Paul Reid of the HSE today on that matter and will send Senator Ahearn a copy of my letter. It is incumbent on the HSE to catch up on the backlogs in its BreastCheck, CervicalCheck, prostate cancer and other screening programmes to make sure we can keep people healthy. It does not make any sense to exclude Tipperary and I will write to Mr. Reid about that today.

Senator Fitzpatrick and several other Senators raised the surrogacy protest outside Leinster House this morning. Several Ministers for Justice, as far back as when Alan Shatter was Minister for Justice and Equality in 2011, have been working on this. I know how complex an issue it is but it is not satisfactory that ten years on, we are still saying it is complex. I am happy to write to the Ministers for Health, Justice and Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to ask them what their plans are in this regard.

I am not sure that NIAC would appreciate a letter from me but I will try. I will send it on and see what happens. I was not aware that people were concerned and had not read anything about the efficacy of the Janssen vaccine. I will write to NIAC on that. Senator Conway and others raised the fact that an Israeli Minister was left waiting for three hours yesterday at the periphery of COP26, one of the most spoken about international events that probably took years to organise. She was left outside in her wheelchair and then driven 50 km to her hotel, which seems really bizarre given the context of the conference. Senator Boyhan also spoke about the issue that Senator Conway raised in terms of his interactions and difficulties he experienced at a committee meeting the other day. It is not acceptable and I will raise it on behalf of all Members of this House in order to ensure that people get the supports they need. As well as speaking about the Israeli Minister, Senator Conway also congratulated TG4, as did Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile. It was wonderful to see that and to see the international event in Derry and the international visitors to Derry for what is a world-renowned presentation and festival.

Senator Conway also spoke about Doolin coastguard, which was also raised by Senator Craughwell. The coastguard has been stood down which is a very concerning issue, not least in terms of any rescue that may be required in the coming weeks but also in terms of the overall culture and ethos. I will write to the Minister about that and come back to the Senator.

Senator Horkan looked for a debate on road safety, not least because the clocks went back and the evenings are getting darker earlier. We all need to be conscious of that and I will try to arrange that as soon as I can. He also welcomed the strong statement from An Taoiseach this afternoon on COP26, as we all do.

Senator Currie talked about introducing antigen tests for our schoolgoing children and the teaching population. We all know parents are concerned and worried and as parents we know it is our job to do so. We need to recognise that we need to employ any and all measures we can. We have been talking about antigen testing in this House for well over a year and some of our health providers are only catching up now but I welcome the Minister for Health's introduction this week of antigen testing for common public usage in instances of close contacts. I have no doubt that we will start to use them in a much wider setting in the coming weeks.

Senator Malcolm Byrne asked for a debate on the role of Irish Water in the provision of housing and he also welcomed the technological university for the south-east that was announced earlier this afternoon by the Minister, Deputy Harris.

As she has done so many times in recent months, Senator Hoey raised the student nurses who are protesting outside Leinster House today. I suggest to the Senator from my previous experience as a Minister that when one reads something in *The Irish Times* of a morning, even if one does not have confirmation from the Minister, it tends to be true. I welcome the fact that our fourth-year student nurses will be given 80% of a nurse's starting salary and a training allowance for their fourth year. That is welcome and the reintroduction of the Covid payment is something that is long overdue and should be welcomed by our student nurses who are not learning when they are working in our hospitals. They are working their socks off and all credit to them but they need to be rewarded for it.

Senator Ward raised spiking, which I raised last week because a young lady I happen to know well reported that she had been spiked. It is interesting that in the past week, I have spent a lot of time arguing with men over whether we are scaremongering and whether women have nothing to worry about. I have to question why some men would protest as much as they do about trying to make women aware of the daily and nightly ailments they have to prepare for. We have to try to speak to the fellows who are doing it and tell them it is not on, we will not accept it and there will be zero tolerance. I have to wonder about some of the responses to this issue. Senator Ward has asked for a debate and I will try to organise that with the Minister for Justice, who only returned yesterday, and she is very welcome back from her maternity leave. We will give her a couple of weeks to get back up to speed.

Senator O'Loughlin raised COP26 and the Israeli minister being unable to access the debate but also she spoke about the effects of the decisions that will be made at COP26 this week. Demonising any sector from any country will not do any of us any good because collectively we will not reach our 2030 or 2050 targets and whatever targets come thereafter unless we all take responsibility and work inclusively together. We must also compensate those who may have to do more of the heavy lifting than those in other industries. It must not be a case that it is tally-ho and they are left on their own. We will not do this without everybody working together and recognising that there are some industries that will have to compensate a little more than others. The State needs to recognise that and work with those industries.

Senator Ó Donnghaile again asked for a debate on the Northern Ireland protocol. The Taoiseach is here on 18 November but I recognise that a further proper, stand-alone debate on the Northern Ireland protocol is required and I will ask for that.

Senator Carrigy talked about forestry, as did the Fianna Fáil leader, Senator Chambers, earlier. A real debate on this is required because far too many people are waiting for licences for far too long and it is causing a backlog so I will try to organise that as quickly as I can.

Senator Cassells talked about the report of the Joint Committee on Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sport and Media and I heard the Chairperson of the committee on the "News at One". The 33 recommendations from the pre-legislative scrutiny of the online safety and media regulation Bill were welcome. It is a prime example of how pre-legislative scrutiny can help facilitate a much broader debate and bring things to the table that a Minister and his or her advisers might not have thought about. That is why it is so important that we have pre-legislative scrutiny of all Bills.

2 November 2021

Senator Keogan asked for a debate on homelessness. In a lot of ways I feel for the DRHE because it tries to find a fine balance between recognising that there are an enormous number of volunteers who want to help and who come from a good place in trying to help but that there also have to be minimum standards in the provision of services. One is caught between a rock and a hard place of not insulting somebody but making sure that we give the best services that we can to some of the most vulnerable people. A debate would be very welcome and I will organise it as quickly as I can.

Senator Maria Byrne spoke about an anomaly that was raised with me the other day with regard to junior basketball. Basketball Ireland has issued statements that junior basketball cannot be held at a competitive level because no children under the age of 12 are vaccinated. Sport Ireland has disagreed saying that is nonsense and should not happen so there is an anomaly. Both of the organisations need to work things out. I have written to the Minister responsible for sport and asked the Minister of State, Deputy Chambers, to see if he can be of help and intervene.

Senator O'Donovan raised a case today in the Chamber that he raised privately with me the other day. The lady involved has done absolutely everything that she can potentially do to get the vaccine that she has sought but to no reward. This morning, I wrote to both Dr. Colm Henry and Professor Brian MacCraith asking them to alleviate the situation. I will revert back to the Senator to make sure this matter is resolved.

Senator Ruane talked about the Traveller community and homelessness report. She also talked about the incredibly strong recommendations, even though some of them are as obvious as the nose on one's face and should not need to have had discussions and reports. I refer to the basic fundamental rights of having access to clean water, electricity and energy supplies, and not being alienated in one's own community. We need a debate to highlight to people who take for granted an awful lot of the things that they have on a daily basis. A tremendous amount of citizens do not have these things as a basic right.

Senator Sherlock spoke about the surrogacy Bill and sought a debate with the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, Deputy Catherine Martin. The debate has been requested and I await a date from the Minister. I assure the Senator that I will let her know as soon as I have a date.

Senator Boylan spoke about the motion on greyhounds, as she has often done here before. I totally appreciate and understand why she might call a vote. Genuinely, the debate will happen at the committee but I appreciate why she would want to have the debate here.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly talked about COP. She made one of the most eloquent contributions today because she underlined that it is all our responsibility to make sure that we hit the targets and not just the few.

Senator Craughwell spoke about the crisis in the Coast Guard and the Comptroller and Auditor General's reports and the feeling that there are certain anomalies in Government spending around the provision of services. More important are the allegations of bullying and harassment that have led to volunteers in Doolin standing down. That is not a tenable situation and I will contact the Minister to see where we will go with that.

Senator Dolan talked about the university in the north west. She also talked with great pride about the fact that both ladies and gentlemen football teams from Ballinasloe won last weekend. There must be something in the water down there.

Senator Chambers, the Fianna Fáil Seanad leader, opened the Order of Business by again welcoming the technological university in the north west because it will have a major impact on her home county of Mayo. She also sought a debate on the forestry sector, which I will organise. She also talked about the very significant statement that the Taoiseach made today, on all our behalf, at COP26, which is very welcome.

Order of Business agreed to.

Horse and Greyhound Racing Fund Regulations 2021: Referral to Joint Committee

Senator Regina Doherty: I move:

That the proposal that Seanad Éireann approves the following Regulations in draft:

Horse and Greyhound Racing Fund Regulations 2021,

copies of which were laid in draft form before Seanad Éireann on 20th October, 2021, be referred to the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine in accordance with Standing Order 71(2)(b), which, not later than 7th December, 2021, shall send a message to the Seanad in the manner prescribed in Standing Order 75, and Standing Order 77(2) shall accordingly apply.

Question put and agreed to.

Sectoral Employment Order (Construction Sector) 2021: Referral to Joint Committee

Senator Regina Doherty: I move:

That the proposal that Seanad Éireann approves the following Regulations in draft:

Sectoral Employment Order (Construction Sector) 2021,

a copy of which has been laid in draft form before Seanad Éireann on 20th October, 2021, be referred to the Joint Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment, in accordance with Standing Order 71(2)(b), which, not later than 11th November, 2021, shall send a message to the Seanad in the manner prescribed in Standing Order 75, and Standing Order 77(2) shall accordingly apply.

Question put and agreed to.

EU Legislative Proposals: Motion

Senator Regina Doherty: I move:

That Seanad Éireann:

(1) notes the agreed Report of the Joint Committee on Transport and Communications under Standing Order 116 on the following six proposals:

- Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Directive 2003/87/EC as regards aviation's contribution to the Union's economy-wide emission reduction target and appropriately implementing a global market-based measure, COM(2021)552;

- Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Regulation (EU) 2019/631 as regards strengthening the CO2 emission performance standards for new passenger cars and new light commercial vehicles in line with the Union's increased climate ambition, COM(2021)556;

- Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the deployment of alternative fuels infrastructure, and repealing Directive 2014/94/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council, COM(2021)559;

- Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on ensuring a level playing field for sustainable air transport, COM(2021)561;

- Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the use of renewable and low-carbon fuels in maritime transport and amending Directive 2009/16/EC, COM(2021)562; and

- Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Directive 2003/87/EC as regards the notification of offsetting in respect of a global market-based measure for aircraft operators based in the Union, COM(2021)567;

which was laid before Seanad Éireann on 26th October, 2021, in accordance with Standing Order 116(3)(b);

(2) having regard to the aforementioned Report, and in exercise of its functions under section 7(3) of the European Union Act 2009, is of the opinion that the proposals COM(2021)552, 556, 559, 561, 562 and 567 do not comply with the principle of subsidiarity for the reasons set out in section 3 of the Report; and

(3) notes that, pursuant to Standing Order 116(4), a copy of this Resolution together with the Reasoned Opinion and the aforementioned Report shall be sent to the Presidents of the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission.

Question put and agreed to.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I thank all colleagues for their co-operation in getting through the Order of Business in a way that we can now take on the next crucial session with our MEPs. I appeal to people to stay here and for those who are in their offices to come to this session, which very much reflects our concern to link to Europe and to Seanad reform.

Sitting suspended at 4.50 p.m. and resumed at 5 p.m.

Address to Seanad Éireann by Members of the European Parliament

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I welcome my colleagues and our MEPs to the Chamber for this important session. I consider this an extremely important session in that the linkage between the Seanad and the European Parliament is a vital one given that so many European directives and regulations impact on Irish law and life. It has been quantified in the past - I do not know by what methodology - that the impact is about 70%. The impact of European law in this country is significant and the European Court of Justice takes precedence. The link between the European Parliament and this Chamber is a vital one. It is a central plank of Seanad reform and maintaining Ireland's link with Europe. It is something that the people who put us here, in all our respective capacities, would want. There is a very high satisfaction rate and support for Europe in Ireland and there is a great will among the populace that we would have these linkages and this connection, and that MEPs would be central to our activities here and not as some distant component. For that reason, this is a very important session. I welcome the MEPs and I thank them all for being here.

I will start with the address by the MEPs. We are doing it in alphabetical order. We are going to ask each MEP to speak for not more than six minutes. I appreciate the good number of colleagues who have come here and who are on their way here. That is very impressive and it is a testimony to how seriously they take this issue. It is my great pleasure to call on Barry Andrews, MEP, former Minister of State and Member of the Dáil. He is a member of the Committee on International Trade, the delegation to the EU-UK Parliamentary Partnership Assembly, the Delegation for Relations with South Africa, a substitute member of the Committee on Development, the Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation, and the delegation to the EU-Turkey Joint Parliamentary Committee, among others. He has had a very distinguished career to date and that continues. He has a very impressive CV. It is my great pleasure to ask him to address the Chamber.

Mr. Barry Andrews: Thank you very much for the invitation, a Leas-Chathaoirligh. It is really great to be back in the Seanad ten years on from when I was a Minister of State and dealing with various bits of legislation here. It is a great initiative. As you have just explained it, a Leas-Chathaoirligh, the need for connection between Dublin and Brussels has increased exponentially since Brexit and anything we do to try to increase those links will be richly rewarded, including today's exercise. We are the second constituency to be brought in before the Seanad.

I have written to the Chair of the Joint Committee on European Union Affairs, Deputy McHugh, to express my view that the scrutiny of EU legislation in the Oireachtas generally, not just in the Seanad, but in the committees of the Oireachtas should be substantially increased and reformed. Not to change the method of scrutiny after Brexit is something that we will regret. When I was in the Dáil there was a sub-committee of the Joint Committee on European Union Affairs which dealt exclusively with scrutiny of EU legislation. That is no longer the case and I think it should be built back in. For example, the Finnish Parliament's Upper House is exclusively responsible for the scrutiny of European affairs, so I think there is more that we can do under that heading.

I will briefly share with the House the main items that I am dealing with as an MEP. I am a member of the European Parliament's delegation to the UK, so part of the EU-UK Parliamentary Partnership Assembly under the trade and co-operation agreement with the UK. That has not kicked into action yet, but tomorrow I will be in Belfast meeting with various interlocu-

tors, including a representative of the unionist parties, the SDLP, the Alliance Party and Sinn Féin. I will be meeting with representatives of the business community and civil society. On Thursday, I will be in London meeting with representatives in Westminster as well as academics and people who are interested in Brexit. Brexit is a main part of my job, but I am also on the joint committee with other Members of the European Parliament that has dealings directly with Maroš Šefčovič under the withdrawal agreement, so it does occupy a lot of my time.

My main committee as a full member is the Committee on International Trade. International trade is one of the key competences of the European Union, where it has exclusive competence over member states. The trade agenda is something I am sure Members will wish to pose questions about.

I am a substitute member of the Committee on Development, which is an area of great interest to me given my background as a former CEO of GOAL. That has led me to be chair of the European Parliament's informal group called the SDG, Alliance, which tries to assess the implementation of the sustainable development goals, SDGs, at a European framework. I took up that role earlier this year. The sustainable development goals are a perfect roadmap for post-Covid pandemic recovery. It is an informal group. We are trying to incorporate the SDGs into the European semester. We are also trying to get a key debate and annual report on the SDGs at some point early next year as part of the European Parliament's annual calendar.

The final area I will mention is that I will be rapporteur on the Committee on International Trade's opinion on due diligence. This is a piece of legislation which is aimed at ensuring that supply chains are cleaned up from the point of view of environmental degradation but also human rights. It will have a huge impact on the way the European Union's businesses deal with their supply chains from third countries, where there have been many instances of child labour and deforestation. We are suffering carbon leakage in the context of environmental degradation, but we are also facilitating human rights abuses in various parts of the world. The due diligence legislation is designed to provide a European framework so that we can have confidence that our supply chains are appropriate for European values. I will leave it at that, a Leas-Chathaoirligh. I look forward to the question-and-answer session.

An Leas-Chathaoirligh: I thank Barry Andrews, MEP, for raising an interesting range of questions around the SDGs and for his reference to the protocol.

I now invite Ciarán Cuffe, MEP, to address us. When he told us a little about himself, he modestly omitted that he has an extraordinarily gifted academic career, which I came across. It is worthy of merit. It includes a masters degree of science in cities, a masters degree in regional and urban planning, a research scholarship and a bachelor's degree in architecture from UCD. He has had a distinguished academic career. He is a Member of the European Parliament for Dublin for the Green Party. He sits on the energy and transport committees of the Parliament, and he serves as president of EUFORES, a European NGO that promotes the deployment of renewable energy sources and energy efficiency. He is an architect and planner. He graduated in 1989. He has served as a Dublin city councillor, as a Deputy for Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown, and as Minister for State with responsibility for sustainable transport and climate change. He lives with his family in Stoneybatter in Dublin's north inner city. We look forward to his address.

Mr. Ciarán Cuffe: Dia daoibh agus go raibh míle maith agaibh as an gcuireadh bheith anseo libh inniu. Is mór an onóir dom a bheith os bhur gcomhair. On my last visit to the Seanad, a decade ago, I was a Minister for State with responsibility for climate action. It is good to be

back with you today and to see some familiar faces.

The European Parliament, as the Senators will know, is a co-legislating assembly. Unlike the Seanad, we do not have the power to initiate legislation. This is an important issue that informs our work. We share equal legislative and budgetary powers with the Council of the European Union. The European Commission initiates legislation in the form of proposed directives. These are then amended by the European Parliament and by the Council of the European Union. The Council's discussions are led by the six-month rotating Presidency of the European Union. It is currently led by Slovenia. That will pass over to France at the end of December 2021.

In our day-to-day work, we have 20 standing committees in the European Parliament, which examine and amend legislation. I serve on the transportation committee and on the industry, research, telecommunications and energy, ITRE, committee. That is where much of the climate action is happening at a European level. The final drafting of legislation is undertaken at trilogues, using a four-column document, with the text from the Parliament, from the Council and from the European Commission. Sometimes we burn the midnight oil to fill the fourth column, to finally give birth to the legislation that is then put to the member states by way of directive. It is a fascinating process. We learn that we have to work with colleagues from the other 26 member states in order to progress things along. We tend to move big things slowly. I have served as a councillor, as a Deputy and as a Minister of State. These have different approaches and ways of making things happen. I certainly enjoy the activity at a European level. We also approve the nomination of Commissioners. Fairly recently, we had the rather unusual task of filling a vacancy in the European Commission. I am glad to say that our former colleague, Mairead McGuinness, was successfully nominated to her current job as a European Commissioner.

The current Parliament has many challenges, not least of which is the departure of our friends and colleagues from across the water as a result of Brexit. We have had to deal with the response to the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as the challenges to the rule of law in Poland and issues around migration. We also engage in discussions around the entry of new member states to the Union. Quite often in Ireland, we think that Brexit is the only game in town. However, it is important that we show a pathway forward to the western Balkans, to states such as Albania. In that region, there are tens of millions of people who want to be part and who want to share that European dream. With all the other rows going on, we have got to give a pathway forward to those states that want to be part of the European project.

In addition, the Conference of the Future of Europe is trying hard to enthuse the 450 million citizens of Europe over the future of governance and powers of European institutions. There is an online platform, *futureu.europa.eu*, which contains more information on this.

We have to ask ourselves the question: do we want more Europe or less Europe? At the outset of the pandemic, it became clear that our healthcare is managed at a regional and at a member state level. There is a compelling case for granting more powers to the European Union, certainly to co-ordinate the delivery of healthcare. Much more can continue to be achieved without treaty changes. There is certainly an appetite in Ireland for Europe to do more. We constantly rank among the most Europhilic nations on the continent and it is no wonder. The contribution of the European Union to Dublin alone has been remarkable. Access to the Single Market has driven the success of Europe as a financial centre but concrete investment has made a difference too. The extension of the Luas cross city received hundreds of millions of euro from the European Investment Bank, EIB. The national children's hospital will receive at least

that sum over the years ahead. Quite often, we say that we are not getting contributions from Europe any more but actually, the projects that have cranes over them in Dublin quite often have European money coming in. We should not forget about that and this investment is dispensable.

For many, the debate around the European Green Deal has been the main event in the current European Parliament. The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, indicated that this would be a major focus of her presidency. As MEPs, we are now charged with progressing 16 separate items of legislation that comprise the Fit for 55 package, which is about reducing our greenhouse gas emissions by 55% between the years 1990 and 2030. That quite strongly mirrors the actions that we will follow here in Ireland under the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021, with the 7% reductions in greenhouse emissions per year.

While these measures are radical, they do not enough to address the climate crisis. We are on our way to a catastrophic 2.7°C of warming unless we increase our ambition and unless other countries do so as well. We will be busy with the updating of the renewable energy directive and the energy efficiency directive. We also will provide new laws, such as the carbon border adjustment mechanism.

Before I conclude, I want to say that the climate action will change the way we build, the way we travel, the energy we use and the way we farm. It can be a good news story. These measures can improve our air quality, make our streets safer, allow us to live healthier lives and live in warmer homes with lower fuel bills. It is crucial in Ireland that we prioritise the retrofitting or the energy upgrades of social housing, both public and voluntary, and start by protecting the vulnerable from energy poverty. This is achievable, it is doable, and the financial institutions are willing to provide that money.

In conclusion, it is worth remembering that there are many nations and tens of millions of people who want to share the European dream in the western Balkans and beyond. Accession states deserve a roadmap and a timetable for progress on that score. I come here from Glasgow yesterday, where I was at the opening of the Conference of the Parties, COP, that is, the UN climate conference. In Glasgow, I met Rahima Kazal from Bangladesh. She told me 20 million people will be displaced by climate change in Bangladesh by 2050. The EU and Ireland can and must increase our ambition to help her and her fellow citizens in the years ahead.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Mr. Cuffe finished the great contemporary challenge and presented it in positive terms, in that it can affect a good and new lifestyle for us all. It is now my great pleasure to move on to Clare Daly, MEP, who is a distinguished former Member of the Dáil here. Ms Daly is a former airport worker and shop steward. She was a county councillor for many years, and all of us in this assembly know county councillors very well. She was twice elected to the Dáil from the Dublin Fingal constituency where she had a high profile on issues such as Garda reform, repeal the eighth and workers' rights.

Ms Daly has been an Independents 4 Change MEP since 2019 and sits in the Left group in the European Parliament. She is a member of a number of vital committees. I was given their acronyms - LIBE, SEDE, TRAN, INGE and INTA - and had great fun with Google identifying them as the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs, the Subcommittee on Security and Defence, the Committee on Transport and Tourism and the Committee on International Trade. It is my great pleasure to invite Clare Daly, MEP, to address the House.

Ms Clare Daly: Thank you, a Leas-Chathaoirleach. I thank the Seanad for inviting us here.

Against a backdrop where we normally only have one minute to speak, six minutes can seem like loads of time but it is very difficult to cover the work of two years in that time. It is particularly difficult when there is a lack of knowledge of what actually goes on inside the European Parliament. Unlike the Oireachtas, a lot of our detailed work, where we can make change, takes place in committees and there is no coverage of that by the Irish media. That is unfortunate and does not happen in other member states. For this reason, it is really good that the Seanad has organised this engagement which I hope will be the first of many such engagements. It can make a positive contribution to bridging that huge gap.

We have an idea for a European Parliament television channel on which we have done detailed work. The initiative could be accommodated under the existing legislation with relatively little finance. We will bring that proposal to the Houses of the Oireachtas in the coming weeks and seek the assistance of Members with it because the lack of knowledge is stark.

As the Leas-Chathaoirleach said, I am a member of five committees. Rather than discuss them all, I will briefly address the committee that Mr. Cuffe discussed, namely, the transport committee. As an island nation, aviation is particularly important to us. The sector was decimated by Covid but we are seeing a recovery taking place. Billions of euro in public money have been pumped into the airlines and airports. This is an opportunity lost because we could have attached to that money a condition that we have a socially and environmentally responsible recovery. We have blown it a bit. Ireland was in the bold camp as it was one of the countries that not too enthusiastic about attaching a condition to those payments on protecting workers' rights and so on. That is a key area for us. This year is the European year of rail and rail is an important area for us as well.

I will now deal with the two most important committees of which I am a member. LIBE, the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs, is similar to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Justice. It deals with the bulk of legislation from the European Parliament. We have dealt with issues such as prison reform. I have a number of former prisoners working with me at the moment and members of the committee visited a lot of prisons across Europe. The committee has also dealt with huge files, which are being upgraded and will affect European citizens. For example, the European arrest warrant legislation and Europol legislation dealing with police co-operation across Europe are being updated. These are two very important files and I was the shadow on both of them.

I am on the scrutiny group of Europol. All of the member states have an oversight role on that group but Ireland has not been represented at its most recent meetings. When I was a Member of the Dáil and Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin was Chair of the justice committee, Ireland was always represented at scrutiny group meetings. The current Committee on Justice may wish to address that issue because Europol has been found wanting in terms of violating civil rights and on data protection issues, which it is now retrofitting. This will have a big impact.

Data protection is a topical issue. The Data Protection Commission has come in for a lot of criticism in Europe. I think this criticism is unfounded and I am not just saying that because I am Irish. We gave the DPC a hard time when it was before Oireachtas committees but it has become a scapegoat for the deficiencies in the legislation. That lets big tech off the hook and is not productive.

Migration is also a major issue for the LIBE. I am a member of the Schengen scrutiny group. The Schengen Agreement is a jewel of Europe as it grants citizens the ability to freely move across boundaries. However, it has become the arena for some of the most appalling violations of human rights. Senators may have seen the coverage by *Der Spiegel*, a German media outlet, which exposed the complicity of Croatian and Greek border guards in the most appalling violence meted out to migrants on the borders there. Migrants were set out to sea on dinghies that were burst and shipped back to Turkey. On the Croatian border, roads were built to literally drive people to the border. Their possessions were burned and they were pushed across the border to Bosnia. This is all being done with EU money. The scrutiny group was very good at exposing some of this. We have worked with NGOs and citizens' groups in those countries to expose many of these activities. Finally, we now have an independent monitoring mechanism for fundamental rights. It is not great but at least it is heading in the right direction.

The rule of law is another major issue for us. We have produced a publication on the rule of law, which is timely. There will be one for everybody in the audience in the next few days. I will send copies to the House. The rule of law is a topical issue because of Poland. The way in which the EU deals with Poland is a real test now for Europe's future. Obviously, like everyone else, I was horrified at the antics of Poland, including attacks on its judiciary, women, the LGBTIQ community and so on. However, we must be careful and not hand ammunition to those who violate those rights. The Commission has implemented its mechanism in a highly partisan way. Our study highlights what has gone on in France, Spain and Bulgaria and critiques the rule of law mechanism on that basis. Colleagues will find it useful in that regard.

I do not have much time to discuss security and defence, which is unfortunate. Maybe we can discuss the issue when summing up. Historic steps are being taken to an ever-closer defence union, which is utterly frightening. Senators may have seen the comments made by President Biden backing Europe in taking a stronger military role in NATO.

We have seen the unprecedented step of €8 billion being allocated for arms expenditure in the European Defence Fund. We have PESCO, or permanent structured co-operation, the European Peace Facility, another pocket of money that allows African nations to buy European arms and destabilise their areas, the Strategic Compass, and the European Military Planning and Conduct Capability, MPCC. The list goes on. Senators will have heard the state of the Union address by Ursula von der Leyen this year. It was very strong on defence commitments, which is pretty scary to any country that says it is neutral. If Senators want the hair to stand up their heads, I suggest they tune into any meeting of the Subcommittee on Security and Defence where they will see all of the action.

The same companies that came up with the idea of spending money from a public budget on defence are also profiting from that historic change. They are also profiting from the securitisation of the border. When those who have become refugees because of wars and destabilisation seek refuge the same companies block them. It is shocking that this has happened when no money is being spent on more important matters.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I thank Ms Daly for her remarks. We share her concerns about Poland, Hungary, etc., as will emerge later in questions.

Our next speaker is Frances Fitzgerald, MEP. She is familiar with this Chamber as a former Leader of the Seanad. I had the great pleasure of serving with Ms Fitzgerald in the Seanad some years ago. She is now an MEP for Dublin city and county and the vice-president of the EPP

group in the European Parliament. Prior to her election to the European Parliament, she served as a Fine Gael parliamentarian for 20 years as a Senator and a Deputy. She served as Tánaiste, as one of four women to ever hold that post, and as Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation, Justice and Equality and Children and Youth Affairs. She is a member of a number of prestigious committees. If I were to read out Ms Fitzgerald's entire CV and the CVs of all four MEPs, it would take me until 7 p.m. I invite Ms Fitzgerald to address the House.

Ms Frances Fitzgerald: I thank the Leas-Chathaoirleach, Senators and MEP colleagues. I thank the Seanad for the invitation. It is a pleasure to be back in the House representing the citizens of Dublin city and county and to have an opportunity to give Senators a sense of the work we do in the European Parliament. The range of activities every day in the Parliament is quite extraordinary. Members get a feel of it from some of my colleagues. It is quite difficult to keep up with the amount of material and the number of votes and resolutions, opinions and reports that arise every day. I find the quality of the work there extraordinarily high. I find it very co-operative. Obviously, there is much consensus building in the Parliament and the amount of work that can be done and agreed upon is amazing despite the very different backgrounds, experiences and cultures people bring to the European Parliament.

Speaking earlier in the year at the annual State of the Union speech, Ursula von der Leyen said many are the people who feel their lives have been on pause while the world has been on fast forward. That summarises the feeling of isolation people have sometimes had from Covid-19 but also the feeling that the world is changing very fast. In regard to the European Parliament and European work, I often say that the kind of lens through which everything is seen now is Covid-19, green and digital. I also add in that it is equality and care and inclusiveness and diversity. Those are the sorts of criteria around which much of the work is done in the Parliament.

I will say a few words about the Covid-19 recovery. This has preoccupied the Parliament as indeed has the development of the vaccines, on which there was a slow start but fantastic co-operation after that, particularly between public and private. It has been great to see that. There has been huge, unprecedented and timely economic support from the European Parliament to all member states. This was very impressive. As we know, this has enabled individuals and businesses to continue and survive as much as possible. The point I would make about that €750 billion recovery fund, even though Ireland is getting just about €1 billion in grants under the recovery and resilience facility, RRF, and a further €7 billion for 2022 and 2023, is that it is about solidarity. It is really about making sure the countries that need this money to transition in the areas I have talked about have it. It is very strictly controlled. The criteria around it, green, digital and so on, are very important. We have been working quite hard in the Parliament to ensure that it is well spent and there will be a careful watch on it in the months and years ahead. One of the things I have been watching in particular is to ensure that the RRF is gender-proofed. I did a report for the Parliament on the differential impact of Covid-19 on women and men and it is very important that we spend the money appropriately to ensure the recovery meets everybody.

A second area I have been working on is the question of the care economy. This is very important. We had a very particular lens on care during Covid-19. We clapped the carers and so on but I have been trying to get the EU to have a care strategy. I am delighted to say that Ursula von der Leyen in her State of the Union speech announced that the Commission would be working on a care strategy next year. I can go into some details on what that will encompass. Care is a national competence but we can do much work at European level to co-operate, to share data

and to look at best practice. Best practice networks have targets such as the Barcelona targets for childcare. That is very important and it is great that the Commission is now taking a more serious role in regard to care.

A number of my colleagues spoke about the European Green Deal and that is huge in the Parliament. There is commitment from all the political parties. There is much discussion about the implementation, as there is in Ireland. How will it be implemented? What committees will have responsibilities for what part of the European Green Deal? What committees will have competence around it? The Commission published its Fit for 55 package, but much remains to be worked out in the detail still. There is much concern, particularly among colleagues from countries in eastern Europe which are dependent on fossil fuels and coal and have big industries such as car manufacturing and so on. It is very important that we have what I would call a just transition for individuals and communities. I have been rapporteur on two reports - two just transition legislative files for my group. This involves a huge amount of funding - €100 billion - for Europe to make sure there is a just transition for all countries and for communities. When we say communities, it is not just for the coal miners but it is for their families and their communities. There is much to be done in that regard.

Finally, I have two small points. One relates to Europe's place in the world and geopolitics at the moment with the USA and China. There is much tension with China. There are hopes of rebuilding the relationship with the USA because that had really broken down in the past few years. We are having many discussions and debates on what Europe's position will be and on how Europe will defend itself. Ms Daly touched on some of her attitudes and beliefs around that. That is quite an interesting discussion in terms of defence and security and, of course, Brexit. I will finish by saying that the support for Ireland and the understanding in the European Parliament in regard to the protocol and Brexit is quite extraordinary. There is huge interest and support and a real wish to see the TCA fully implemented.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I thank Ms Frances Fitzgerald, MEP. That will give rise to a number of themes, very notably the degree to which Covid-19 has set back women's rights in a big way internationally, and that question needs addressing. It has had a huge impact on the education of women in a number of areas of the world, and on a number of other factors.

The first part of the dialogue was our MEPs speaking, and that was certainly very engaging and worth hearing. A huge number of very real themes and important linkages emerged. The next part of the dialogue is the response from the leaders of each of the groups here. The part that was most fascinating and worked best the last day was the question and answer session.

For the first part of the session, we had to be slightly deferential and welcoming to our guests, but I am ruthlessly going to impose time limits from now on. We did not do that in phase one. All our leaders have five minutes. On behalf of the Fianna Fáil group, I call Senator Gerry Horkan.

Senator Gerry Horkan: I thank the Leas-Cathaoirleach. Maybe I will use the minute and a half Mr. Andrews did not use end of my speech. This is a very important day. Ireland is a member of the European Union since 1973. I do not believe this process has happened before, namely, MEPs coming into the Seanad Chamber and addressing the Senators. It is very worthwhile. The MEPs might not realise it but they are approximately half way through their five-year term as this month is two and a half years into the term of 2019 to 2024. Probably none of us got to see, or to engage with, the MEPs as much as we might normally have because

MEPs have been in Brussels or cocooned. Everybody else has been cocooned as well. That engagement has been missing. In the last Seanad, when we were in the temporary Chamber, I asked for a debate not on the future of the European Union, but on the benefits of the European Union. We sometimes tend to use the European Union as a stick, in the sense that it introduced noise regulations, fertiliser rules or emissions rules. It is used as the body to blame. We say that we did not impose this on people and that somebody else did. Even though Ireland is one of the most pro-European Union nations in Europe, we need to be always cognisant of all of the benefits, including the Erasmus programme. My mother was Erasmus co-ordinator in UCD many years ago. People who participated benefitted from travelling abroad to universities in The Netherlands, France and Germany at the time because the EU was smaller back in the 1990s.

We also need to remember that it is the world's most successful peace project. We do not reflect on that. We take all the good stuff for granted, like in all politics. Dublin is very lucky, and this is before I throw any rocks at anybody, to have four parliamentarians who are so experienced and who bring so much knowledge to their portfolios and to their committees from Ireland. I just spotted that all four of the MEPs were elected in the local elections in 1999. I think Mr. Cuffe might have been on a local authority prior to that, but all of them were elected successfully and are still around. Some of them, like myself recently, had little gaps in their political career but have come back. That in itself shows great resilience.

I was on the finance committee in the last Oireachtas and the EU finance committees used to meet twice a year, once in Brussels in February and once in the country holding the Presidency around late October or early November. It was useful that we met each other. The finance committees used to meet twice a year, once in Brussels in February and once in the country that held the Presidency in late October or early November. That was useful but has not happened in the past while. I am not sure many other committees do that.

We debated a reasoned opinion in the House today on the Fit for 55 package. I am on the Joint Committee on Transport and Communications. As an island nation, transport is important, as Ms Daly noted. The transport connectivity that other countries take for granted is not available in Ireland. One can jump on a train in the Czech Republic and go to Germany, Denmark or France. Even though the UK has left the EU, one can still get a train the whole way from Brussels to Glasgow, as I saw Mr. Cuffe post on Twitter. We do not have that kind of connectivity. Ms Daly referred to aviation, which has been a major issue for our committee. It is important that the EU appreciates just how disconnected we are from Europe. France, our nearest EU neighbour, will assume the Presidency in January, as the French embassy on Merrion Square has indicated. That will be positive for us.

We also need to acknowledge the success of the Covid digital certificate. It has been implemented really quickly, despite the fact that many people thought it would not be. All of a sudden, it arrived in everyone's inbox. It saddens me that vaccines have gone unused in countries in eastern Europe such as Romania, but 700,000 vaccines destined for Romania were not wasted as they were reallocated to Ireland where we have the highest vaccine take-up rate in the EU.

The question and answer session will be later. Not every MEP was able to attend our previous session on the Midlands-North-West constituency. It is brilliant that all four Dublin MEPs are here. Long may this engagement continue. Do they put on not just the green jersey but also the blue Dublin jersey? Do they work together as much as they can on behalf of Dublin?

There is a one China policy. In a vote on Taiwan recently, nine Irish MEPs voted one way, a

couple went the other way and a couple abstained. I would be interested in hearing the thoughts of the MEPs present on what happened and why any of them voted in particular ways.

I thank the Leas-Chathaoirleach for the opportunity to speak. On behalf of Fianna Fáil, I thank all of the MEPs for being here.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Senator Horkan's reference to this important, radical and vital departure gives me a cue. It would be remiss of me to let the evening pass without acknowledging that the Cathaoirleach, who is away on business today, has been very proactive and has led in creating this initiative, working it up and taking it right through. He has been in touch with MEPs and has played a vital role in this. Without him, this would not be the success it is. It would be churlish to allow the day to pass and not acknowledge that. I am glad Senator Horkan gave me the cue for that.

Senator Emer Currie: It is great to see the MEPs here. As a Senator based in Dublin, I welcome this access, especially after the past couple of years. Ms Daly mentioned how difficult it is to get what they are doing into the media. That is true. The media here are absolutely dominated by Brexit. It is good, therefore, to hear about everything else. At the same time, I am Fine Gael Seanad spokesperson on Northern Ireland so I will focus most of my remarks on Brexit and Dublin.

This is a very sensitive time in EU-UK politics and of course the island of Ireland is in the middle of that, even though we sit on the edge of Europe. Without a doubt, it is the North of Ireland that is most affected. I want the MEPs to leave today with the importance of the all-island economy and dual market access for the North foremost in their minds.

The protocol is a solution to a problem, but the language is all very negative. I lived in Tyrone and consider myself a Northerner. The protocol is an opportunity for an area that has not had many opportunities. It is to be hoped this could be an opportunity to help our island move beyond identity politics and focus much more on prosperity politics. When I talk about the all-island economy, I talk about developing clusters of industry. This is especially important in regard to COP26 and the advantages of working as an island.

Representatives of the All-Island Cancer Research Institute appeared before the Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement a couple of weeks ago. Great work has been done since the Good Friday Agreement was signed with the Ireland-Northern Ireland-NCI Cancer Consortium. There are massive opportunities there. We are already working with the National Cancer Institute in the US, and there is an opportunity there.

We have the Dublin to Belfast economic corridor and the Border area. The Irish Central Border Area Network, ICBAN, wants to develop the Border area as an economic area. The north west is crying out for infrastructure, skills and tourism. I was lucky enough to visit the area with my Fine Gael colleagues last week. There is also the need to protect the all-Ireland supply chains in respect of rules around mixed origins, in particular in the whiskey and dairy sectors.

Stability sets us up for foreign direct investment, FDI. The MEPs may say they are Dublin based, but we are all part of the all-Ireland economy and they have a voice when others do not. We have seen interest in FDI in the North and we want that to come to fruition. That does not happen whenever there is instability. I welcome the efforts of Commission Vice-President Maroš Šefčovič and engagement with the people who really matter - those on the ground - for

coming up with solutions around customs checks and medicines and giving people in civic groups and the Assembly a voice.

At all times, the EU has acted honestly. It has been united and has acted in good faith. It has pushed an international agreement, and the ink is not yet dry on its boundaries. The Government has been very honest and not aggressive about the potential of Brexit in Ireland. The fears of a hard border in Ireland remain. The third edition of a report from ICBAN and Queen's University Belfast, *The Border after Brexit*, written by Professor Katy Hayward, was published recently. Fears of a hard border are increasing. I wanted the MEPs to take away the fact that this fear remains and we need them to be champions for the all-Ireland economy and opportunities for the North.

ALMA, the Aim, Learn, Master, Achieve initiative, will feature as part of the European Social Fund Plus. It would be good to see the North involved in that in terms of work experience. I am particularly interested in the European care strategy and what MEPs expect from the European Commission regarding that. I am an advocate for remote and flexible work, and I want to know how that will feature.

Dublin seemed to undergo something of an identity crisis in the pandemic. The perception was that the rest of the country would benefit from regional balance and Dublin would be left behind. I would like to hear the thoughts of the MEPs on that and where they think we and the county councils should go as a city.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I warmly welcome Mr. Barry Andrews, Mr. Ciarán Cuffe, Ms Clare Daly and Ms Frances Fitzgerald. I also welcome a former MEP, Senator Lynn Boylan, who is sitting on my right. She has a wealth of experience in Europe and I want to acknowledge that. The four MEPs present are diverse and a good choice for Dublin. Everyone who is an MEP representing the constituency of Dublin is exceptionally experienced, as previous speakers have said. That is worth acknowledging.

It is nice to be here, but let us not fool ourselves. We have talked about Seanad reform for long enough. Everyone here on my left and right is conscious of what we have been talking about. The Tánaiste, when he addressed the Seanad last year, talked about EU legislative scrutiny, which he saw as an important role for a bicameral parliament and the Taoiseach is also on record in that regard. I thank the Cathaoirleach of the Seanad, Senator Mark Daly, who proposed a Bill in 2013. The then Senator Mark MacSharry made a very elegant speech in which he talked about the need for scrutiny and reform. We can either be radical or redundant in this House. Are we going to be just a talking shop? Are we here to just listen to what the MEPs, who are exceptional, have to say? We need to do more. How can MEPs assist Senators in this House in giving legislative scrutiny real teeth?

I took the time recently to read a document prepared by the UK's Institute for Government entitled "Parliamentary scrutiny of European Union legislation". Ireland was one of the ten countries on which the report focused. The report is really interesting. On the German Bundestag, the report says that the scrutiny process is supported by a very large European affairs directorate within the Bundestag. Regarding Sweden, the report finds that significant scrutiny took place after the Lisbon treaty and that the position has radically improved. In the Netherlands, the authors find:

... debates in advance of Council of the EU meetings create 'de facto mandating' by the

legislature of the government's position. Once a committee or the plenary has made clear its position on a particular proposal, it is unthinkable' that the government would take a different position in negotiations.

That is very restrictive. On Ireland, the authors say that the "Oireachtas has no legal or political mandate over EU matters: the government is merely obliged to take the Oireachtas' opinion into account." That is the challenge for us and we have to do something really different. That is what is important for us in this House. Asking people to come in here to talk to us is all very well and while it is great to see our MEPs, two of whom were former Deputies in my constituency whose political careers have moved forward greatly, we need to go further. We must reform Seanad Éireann to make it more meaningful and more supportive of MEPs in their work.

Ms Fitzgerald touched on the European Green Deal. As a member of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine, I am anxious that we get the message out about the green deal. It is the responsible thing to do but we must underline the importance of a just transition. That is going to be the challenge. We cannot simply engage in greenwashing or talking about what is great. We must convince people and bring them along. Ireland is unique in Europe in the sense that our citizens strongly support the European Parliament and engage with it. In the past our citizens, me included, looked out across the water to the UK and Europe to vindicate our rights, lift us up and hear what we had to say on having a more liberal, open and inclusive agenda. We turned to Europe and its institutions to defend our rights and we owe those institutions a great deal. It is important that Members of this House work closely on that.

I invite our guests to elaborate on their views regarding the Horizon Europe programme which started this year and runs until 2027. Innovation, technology and the logistics of the future are where it is at now and we have a real opportunity to tap into that. Again, I thank our guests for coming to the House. We must collaborate more. We cannot leave this Chamber today and claim to have had a successful meeting unless this is the beginning of a process and of a relationship that will make the work of our MEPs and our work more meaningful for the people we represent.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly: I welcome our four MEPs to the Chamber. While Dublin is not my constituency, I am delighted to speak to them. I will leave the issues of agriculture and CAP to one side as we spoke about them with some of their colleagues previously. On the issue of connectivity, Ireland is more connected than we think. I know that Mr. Cuffe took the train but a couple of us here will be taking the train and the boat to COP26 on Saturday and Sunday. It leaves in the morning and arrives in the afternoon. There is a lot more connectivity than just airports and it is important that we invest in that. An important part of that connectivity picture is Northern Ireland because we are travelling via the North to Scotland.

Today is a hugely important day. Most of what I am going to say involves questioning our MEPs on the work of the EU and their own work. That is what they are here for and that kind of engagement is important. There is no point in me standing up here and giving a fine speech because our guests have the answers. We hear people saying constantly that they do not know what MEPs do. In every one of their addresses today, they have laid out what they do, which is quite telling. We do not stand up here every day and say what it is that we do. That highlights the fact that there is a lack of connection. It is important because it is people in Ireland who vote for MEPs. Mr. Cuffe mentioned all of the things around Dublin that European funding has paid for and Ms Fitzgerald did likewise. Money talks and we forget that a lot of the infrastructure around our island was developed with European funding.

Senator Horkan commented that the EU is a peace project and we need to talk about that. I would like to hear our guests' thoughts on the rule of law and how that is, or is not, operating at the moment. In the context of Poland, I ask them to speak on the delays and perceived lack of action by the Commission. It is important to get that piece right. Otherwise, we are living as neighbours with people whom we fundamentally know are not buying into the same peace project that we have all signed up to and for which we all voted.

Trade, which is an area of specific interest to Mr. Andrews, can be very opaque when it comes to the EU. It is absolutely essential that Irish people understand what they are signing up to and that MEPs understand that too. I would love to hear the MEPs' views on Mercosur in particular and on trade in general. A lot of the early stages of trade negotiations seem to happen behind closed doors before they even reach the European Parliament. I ask our guests to comment on that. Are reforms needed at this stage?

I would like to touch on an issue that is very close to my heart, namely, the European care strategy which was raised by Ms. Fitzgerald. The last couple of years have changed the narrative on care and community. Who would have thought that a citizens' assembly a couple of years ago would decide that we do not need to remove care from our Constitution but amend references to it? We need to take out the gender bias but we need to reflect the fact that, fundamentally, the Irish people are a people who care. We have huge levels of volunteerism and community activism. It has been recognised now that when it comes to the care of children, every form of care matters. I look forward to having further conversations with our MEPs on that issue. I appeared before an Oireachtas justice and equality committee, of which Ms Daly was a member, before I was elected as a politician, to discuss this very issue. At that time, it was almost a new idea that care is not just about childcare but about the care we all give each other, old and young.

Finally, in terms of our international obligations around climate, it is fair to say that the EU and all developed countries have failed when it comes to climate justice. We have not even reached the bare minimum of €100 billion in climate finance for developing nations. I attended the pre-COP26 meeting in Rome and it was heartbreaking to listen to the stories of developing nations. There is a loss of trust. Where do our MEPs stand in relation to the TRIPS waiver? That was a key opportunity for developed nations to show developing nations that they can trust us and that we really are all in this together, both in terms of the pandemic and climate action.

6 o'clock

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Senator Boylan, a distinguished former MEP, will speak on behalf of Sinn Féin.

Senator Lynn Boylan: I will share my time with Senator Warfield. Is that agreed?

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Of course. That is acceptable.

Senator Lynn Boylan: I welcome the Dublin MEPs. As the Leas-Chathaoirleach said, I am a former MEP-----

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Senator Warfield is on the list for later. Does he still wish to speak now?

Senator Lynn Boylan: Yes. We will do it now. We can start the clock again.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: This is not part of the Senator's time; do not worry.

Senator Lynn Boylan: I welcome the MEPs to the House. I know from my experience that it is incredibly hard to get anybody to pay any attention to the work they do. It often feels like being a hamster on a wheel. One problem is that although MEPs can attend the Joint Committee on European Union Affairs, which allows better scrutiny of European legislation, the timings never worked. If we have learned anything from Covid, we now know that we can do things remotely. We should certainly look at bringing MEPs to the European affairs committee on a more regular basis to feed into the legislative process before it is too late.

We know it is very convenient for governments to blame the EU when they do not want to do something. They very often say the EU will not let them. When something does happen, the excuse is often used that it was not because of governments but the EU. If we had proper scrutiny in advance of legislation and directives, it would remove that from the conversation. We are certainly seeing that now in the case of the ban on liquefied natural gas, LNG, terminals. The Attorney General says we cannot ban them because of EU law, when I have it in writing from the EU that they absolutely can be banned and that it is entirely up to a member state what energy mix it wants to have. As someone who is unapologetically critical of the EU, it is right to criticise it when it is wrong and to praise it when it is right. We owe it a lot in terms of the habitats and wildlife directives because our biodiversity is in a dire state in Ireland and it would be much worse if we did not have the protection of that legislation.

I will focus particularly on climate change. It is welcome that the EU is showing some leadership on this issue. While the EU is not ambitious enough, it is at least showing leadership in setting binding targets and increasing its ambition going into COP26. It is mind-blowing, however, that the EU continues to think it can modernise the Energy Charter Treaty. I would like to hear the MEPs' opinions on that modernisation process because the Energy Charter Treaty cannot be fit for a Paris-compliant future. It is not fit for purpose. It is a dinosaur agreement that was founded at a time when fossil fuels were the way to go and it now deserves to be buried alongside the fossil fuels it protects. Ireland ratified the treaty in 1994 without debate, which is interesting given that the Government tried to rush the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement, CETA, through with a very short debate. Ireland is on the hook for investor-state dispute settlement, ISDS, challenges under this treaty and the Dutch are already being sued for billions of euro for phasing out coal power plants in their country. I would like to know the opinion of all the MEPs. Do they support the EU leaving the Energy Charter Treaty? What are their views on the fact that the EU is now trying to carve out a dispute so it cannot be sued inter-EU, but the Energy Charter Treaty is being used to protect European fossil fuel companies when they go into the global south by expanding that treaty into those countries?

Senator Fintan Warfield: I welcome the MEPs to the Chamber. The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights is the only international instrument that prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation. While an increasing percentage of Europeans support equal rights for LGBT people, they are facing increased discrimination in the EU. There are obvious moves in some EU member states to exclude and discriminate against LGBT people. I do not need to talk about Poland or Hungary, where a new law means that only married heterosexual couples can adopt children. The list goes on for all of those matters so I will not spend my time on them.

Most EU member states do not allow for legal recognition based on self-determination for trans people but, rather, based on mental health diagnoses. I will not talk about LGBT zones either, but I know that as part of the MEPs' work in the European Parliament, a resolution was

passed that declared the EU a LGBT freedom zone. While that is a symbolic move, it shows that MEPs will continue to protect and promote LGBT rights as a key European value even when some national governments fail to do so. The EU LGBTIQ equality strategy 2020-2025 seeks to tackle discrimination against, and increase the inclusion of, LGBT people, for example, by respecting cross-border situations, strengthening legal protections against hate crimes, hate speech and online abuse, improving recognition of trans, non-binary and inter-sex people and upholding the rights and promoting attention to the specific needs of people claiming asylum for reasons based on sexual orientation or gender identity.

I would like the MEPs' views on all these matters and on whether the European Commission and Europe have been too tame in response to national governments. As a defender of the treaties, should the Commission move much more decisively to champion the freedom of citizens to live and love who they wish and to promote sexual and reproductive rights?

Senator Marie Sherlock: I thank the four Dublin MEPs for being here today. As has been said, it is very important to have this interaction and to better understand the work they are doing on behalf of this city and county. I was struck by Mr. Cuffe's statement that the Green New Deal forms a major part of the focus of the work of the Parliament at the moment, which is very true. The equality agenda has also been a major part of that work; Ms Fitzgerald touched on that.

My comments will focus on the Parliament's workers' rights agenda and work in that area. Any of us who are familiar with the history of workers' rights in this country will know that the EU has been the genesis and impetus for many of the rights in respect of equal pay, equal status, working conditions, health and safety, posted workers, temporary agency workers and so forth. While many of us with a real interest in workers' rights over the past decade may have despaired at the lack of progress in this country over many years, we have taken some heart from the very clear direction taken by the Commission, especially over the past two to three years.

I want to hear the MEPs' views, as representatives of the city and county, and the views of their respective parties within the Parliament, on their position on the proposed adequate minimum wage directive and their stance on the gender pay transparency directive. The updated European pillar of social rights action plan was published in May. We also know the Commission is signalling its intention to publish a draft directive to protect platform workers. We need to hear from the MEPs on how they intend to vote and support those initiatives, especially in respect of the adequate minimum wage draft directive. That, in truth, has the potential to be a game changer for workers in this country in terms of their ability to exercise some say on their terms and conditions. As we know, that directive does not force Ireland to introduce the right to collective bargaining, but it would potentially force us to put in place a framework to ensure that workers have that right or ability to negotiate, collectively, their terms and conditions. Ireland stands apart from most other EU member states in not having the right to be recognised for collective bargaining purposes.

Let us be clear about why that directive is so important for this country. An estimated 370,000 workers, or just under one fifth of our workforce, earn 66% of the median wage. Nearly 23% of all women are low paid. The message is to get a good education in order to get a good job and be well paid, but 13% of all graduates are classified as low paid. Across this Chamber and, no doubt, in the European Parliament, there is a lot of talk about needing to close the gender pay gap. Of course, there is no single silver bullet. While the proposals within the gender pay transparency directive are really important, the directive will only be effective if it is

complemented by giving women workers that right to be able to negotiate and bargain on a collective basis because there is a growing body of research across Europe showing that the greater the levels of collective bargaining coverage, the less is the wage dispersion within companies and the less is the wage gap between men and women within those workplaces.

When we talk about the wage gap here in Ireland, all too often the figure of 14.4% is trotted out. The wage gap is actually much bigger in this country. It is 25%, in terms of the average weekly wages between men and women in this country because we have to take into account that women are discriminated against, in particular, by being trapped in low-paid part-time jobs. Of course, the pensions gap is even larger, at 28.6%.

I am conscious that the European Parliament's Committee on Employment and Social Affairs is due to meet next week. I understand that the co-rapporteurs from the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats, S&D, and the European People's Party, EPP, have done excellent work. I am concerned about some of the reports about the Renew Europe representative on that committee and that representative's position and I would like to hear, across all the parties here, what their own individual positions are and what they will do within their own party groupings in the Parliament to ensure that this important directive is passed.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I am glad to welcome all the MEPs, and some of them back to the Seanad. We are here at a key moment for Europe. Much of the connection that Ireland has - much of the pride that people have for the European Union - is in its history in driving forward workers' rights, women's rights, environmental progress and disability rights. However, much ground and trust was lost during austerity because it seemed that those social solidarity principles and that idea of progressing rights and progressing bigger, better ideas of how we live together, was put aside. The smart sustainable inclusive growth of Europe 2020 was pressed aside in favour of short-term fiscal targets. Some of that lesson has been learned because we see in the response to Covid that there is recognition of the need to suspend fiscal rules and to focus on stimulus and on solidarity funding. I believe it is a great disgrace, however, to the European Union that a TRIPS waiver is still being blocked, almost only by Europe. Even the United States of America is now supporting it, together with 100 other countries. This is probably one of the greatest moral and, indeed, diplomatic failings that Europe will ever have made.

Within Europe, there was a response on solidarity. I note the recovery and resilience funding was mentioned. Unfortunately, Ireland was one of the only countries that did not have parliamentary scrutiny or debate on that recovery and resilience funding. I hope that, on just transition funding, we will have that. I would encourage my MEP, Ms Fitzgerald, who is active in these areas, to press the Government to ensure that it engages at national level in proper debate on these fundings. They are important decisions on a European Green Deal, on digitalisation and, crucially, how they overlap because one of the issues that does not get discussed is the energy footprint and the environmental footprint in relation to digitalisation and how we do that right and in an ethically and environmentally sound way.

Another aspect, of course, is what comes next. We are in the debate about the future of Europe. I am lucky enough to be one of the national parliamentarians taking part in that. There are some very fundamental questions. It is about priorities. The questions will be, for example, whether we will strengthen the Charter of Fundamental Rights because it was Ireland and the UK that blocked legal force for the Charter of Fundamental Rights in the past. Ireland withdrew its objection and the UK has now left the EU. Can we strengthen the Charter of Fundamental Rights? What are the MEPs' views on a social progress protocol? The issue of

collective bargaining has been mentioned and that is something where the EU has competence. In terms of workers' rights within care, the EU has strong competence. The European women's lobby has been active in working on a new care deal with the European Trade Union Confederation, ETUC.

These are really important choices and they will be fundamental as to whether trust is rebuilt in the long term. Alongside that, there is a question of how we avoid rushing back to business as usual. I would like the MEPs' views on the replacement for the semester process and recovery and resilience. Do we continue to suspend the fiscal rules to re-imagine them? There is a review of European economic governance under way and I seek the MEPs' thoughts on key issues for that EU economic governance.

I will move to the wider question on trade because two of the MEPs are members of the Committee on International Trade. Indeed, the Energy Charter Treaty is, of course, related to the Committee on Industry, Research and Energy where the MEP, Mr. Cuffe, also sits. We have seen, as has been outlined, the tension that is there. The European Court of Justice has adjudicated that there is a tension with those cases but we know that the arbitration panels choose to disregard the ruling of the European Court of Justice as they have done in the Achmea ruling. I believe we are looking at a rule of law tension here whereby we have a situation where the European Court of Justice is saying that things do not apply and yet we have arbitration panels. Is the only option in that context to leave the Energy Charter Treaty and to move into our next era? What are the MEPs' views on that?

In relation to due diligence and the question of human rights in trade and the supply chain, the Control of Economic Activities (Occupied Territories) Bill 2018, which the MEPs will be aware of, explicitly tried to address that because, of course, it was a supply chain that went outside EU trade competency and into an occupied territory not covered by EU trade. I would like the MEPs' views on whether this issue might be addressed by that.

In terms of the TRIPS waiver public-public research, what can we learn around technology transfer and public-public research on climate because we have seen the dangers that intellectual property protectionism may cause in terms of bringing solutions to scale? Does that mean we need to reimagine how we do research?

In terms of the social cohesion funding and its re-routing into defence, social cohesion is what protects us as the EU. Peace-building is something that is different from security. What are the MEPs' thoughts on that? I will not comment further on migration but I am sure the debate will come forward. I thank the MEP, Ms Clare Daly, for her comments on that matter.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I thank Senator Higgins. The third phase of our dialogue is a two-minute response from each MEP. I would appeal to the MEPs, who are used to this in the Parliament anyway, to stick to the two minutes so that we can move into questions. I call on the MEP, Mr. Barry Andrews, to respond. It is not easy to respond to all that in two minutes.

Mr. Barry Andrews: In that case, I will only touch on trade and a little on Brexit. On trade, I agree that the Energy Charter Treaty dispute settlement mechanism is completely inappropriate and we need to move into a new phase, which is reflected in the plans around a multilateral investment court and the investor-state dispute settlement, ISDS, that was attached to Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, TTIP. In my view, it brought trade completely into disrepute. There was a lack of public confidence in trade delivering prosperity across the world

and that must be corrected. I am delighted that Members in this House are so engaged on that issue. It is very much involved in the House's discussions on the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement, CETA, which is now a national competence to decide on what the House wants to do about ratifying the investment elements of CETA

Senator Higgins asked about due diligence and whether it touches on the Control of Economic Activities (Occupied Territories) Bill 2018 and the issues contained therein. It definitely does. I had a discussion with the ambassador of Palestine only last week on the very same subject. I am excited to see what the European framework for supply chain due diligence will do, not only for the occupied territories but also for Uighurs in Xinjiang in China.

On Brexit, Senator Currie asked if we will remember the importance of Northern Ireland. I take it very seriously, as part of my job as an MEP, to try - we all do this - to fill the gap left behind by the Northern Ireland MEPs because much of the EU *acquis* that is contained in the protocol impacts Northern Ireland and yet there is this big democratic deficit. As a result, we must play our role. There are other things that can happen. For example, building out the Parliamentary Partnership Assembly and having Northern Ireland civil society involved in a joint working group. There are many other things we can do to fill the void resulting from the democratic deficit. I will leave it at that.

Mr. Ciarán Cuffe: I made the somewhat fatal mistake of not bringing my peann luaidhe with me, but I will try to respond to some of the many questions that were put to me. There were questions about scrutiny, trade, social equality and social rights.

On scrutiny, it is really valuable that we are in the Seanad today. Looking ahead, there is the committee on European scrutiny and that is very important. It is vital that we appear there regularly and also in the Houses. Within most of the political groups within the European Parliament, we tend to sit in sectoral groups and look at economic issues, social issues, environmental issues and, more recently, issues relating to human rights and the digital world. If we were to adopt a theme, it could be how to address the economic or social issues in Europe. Given that we are trying to cover a wide area in a very short period, it might be useful to look at that.

In terms of trade, I echo much of what Mr. Andrews said. Many trade agreements are up in the air, including TTIP, CETA, Mercosur and the Energy Charter Treaty. Many of these date from or their origins lie in the last century. Most international trade treaties take five, ten, 15 or 20 years to progress. The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade is evidence of this. None of them reflects the science relating to crisis that we are experiencing in terms of environmental changes in the world. There is a need to rethink them all but I do not think that we should throw the baby out with the bathwater. For a young child growing up in favelas of Rio de Janeiro, her future depends on trade. Her future depends on her mother and father being able to find jobs. Many of those jobs will depend on trade links between South America and Europe, so we must be careful that we do not completely negate trade.

Finally, the issue of social progress is imbedded in all of our work. Ms Daly and I are members of the Committee on Transport and Tourism, TRAN, and social issues arise all of the time whether it be an airline worker or truck driver trying to find his or her way from central Europe to western Europe and back. So social issues are imbedded in many of the matters with which we deal.

Ms Clare Daly: I am experiencing brain freeze because it is impossible to respond to the

debate. I will first respond to the point made by Senator Boyhan, and I think this should be the start. It is literally impossible for us to even answer one of the questions properly. It would be an idea to come back to themed discussions whereby we dig deep into some of the things such as the rule of law, trade, climate change or whatever, because that would be the only way we could do justice to these issues.

There are a huge number of positives about the European Union, but we must be honest and say that it has reached crisis point. It is at a crisis point in terms of climate because the truth is that Europe's goals are not even compliant with the Paris Agreement. They just are not, and that is the truth. Military carbon emissions are not counted. When we table motions in the European Parliament on the matter, they are defeated.

We now have an energy crisis across Europe. One of the reasons for this is that we have paid lip service to the idea of renewables and opted for the idea that gas is a transition fuel. It is not. We have a major problem now because of that reliance because it has delayed the implementation of renewables and we are paying the price for that. The response in Europe is not a realisation that we need to cop on and deal with that. Many member states are saying that the targets we have set are too ambitious and that we need to row back and keep producing fossil fuels. One can see that division as well in rule-of-law issues in terms of fundamental rights. I refer to the violation of fundamental rights not just in Hungary and Poland but also in Bulgaria. There has been vicious treatment meted out to the LGBTQI community in Bulgaria but nobody mentions that because the ruling party in Bulgaria is quite well in with the ruling elite Europe. There are many issues. We would all like to see a co-operative Europe so we need to put a bit more meat on this. I am not even going to mention the topics because I cannot do them justice. I suggest, however, that we come back and deal with them in more depth.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Yes. We will wait until the very end to address the challenge outlined by Senator Boyhan that was referenced by Ms Daly.

Ms Frances Fitzgerald: The commentary from all of the Senators has been fascinating. A discussion in the Seanad differs from a discussion in the European Parliament because we can hear the points of view of Senators. Like my colleagues, I obviously cannot do justice to all of the points that have been raised. I will, however, discuss three areas beginning with that of the European care strategy referred to by Senator Currie and a number of other Senators. I imagine that the following will come out of the European care strategy. First, we will look at who has access to care. We will consider the affordability, sustainability and quality of care. We will consider who provides the care and the gender aspect. What we can do is gather data. We can look at the EU funding that will be made available. We can look at the gender questions of work-life balance, a matter to which quite a number of Senators referred. I think it will be very comprehensive in terms of making recommendations based on all of those points and I could say a whole lot more. Europe can be a leader in this area. Across Europe, it is amazing how little data there is on who is doing the caring. Sometimes it is so informal - it is done by migrant workers and so on. There are a lot of workers' rights issues as well, which Senator Higgins and others mentioned.

Second, the rule of law is a very current issue. I spoke directly to the Polish President at our meeting just a week or so ago. I thought the hearing was chilling in terms of his reactions and challenges to Europe. We are at the cutting edge with the rule of law and how we are going to deal with the €38 billion budget that Poland could get. Hungary and Poland have both at the centre of the whole question of whether the EU can have conditionality when it comes to the

budget. That is going to be a really serious issue. There is increasing determination within the European Parliament not just to speak about but to take action, not least because of what has happened in respect of women's rights and the rights of the LGBTQI community in Poland. It is disgraceful what has gone on there. However, elections are due to be held in 2023 and tens of thousands of Poles have taken to the streets saying that they want to stay in the European Union. As a result, I do not think it is the same as Brexit.

The third and final area is equality in general. Europe has been a leader in so many areas, including equality. I would say that Europe has been a leader in climate although Ms Daly has commented to the contrary. However, when one looks around the world, one will see that Europe leads in many arenas.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I thank Ms Fitzgerald. Now we move to questions. I will try to get everyone in. We have a very tight window, unfortunately, as per the decision of the House on the Order of Business, so I cannot alter the allocations. There are only 15 or 17 minutes to get the questions done. As a result, I ask Senators to please ask very succinct questions. If they ask their questions in a minute or as little as 30 seconds then all the better. Equally, I appeal to the MEPs to give succinct answers. I call Senator Mary Fitzpatrick.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: I urge the Leas-Chathaoirleach to keep his finger on the buzzer for the other side of the House. My questions are really simple. I thank all of the MEPs for the work that they do on behalf of Dublin and for representing the voices of Dublin within the European context.

There are three big issues: climate action, which has been spoken about; the energy crisis, which is really affecting households in Dublin and other European cities; and sustainable energy. On the latter, I am interested in the UN sustainable development goals and, in particular, No. 11 which refers to sustainable cities and communities. I ask all four MEPs to respond and indicate to us how they will work with us to progress action. The State is committed to significant climate action but we need Europe to act as one, not just in terms of a just transition but also helping us make a just transition here.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I call Mr. Andrews, MEP. To try to get everyone in, maybe one or two MEPs could answer each question and then we could move on.

Mr. Barry Andrews: Referring to an issue which arose earlier and touching on what Senator Fitzpatrick said, I have made a proposal on having a Dublin office in Brussels. I realise this only impacts those who represent Dublin areas but we represent Dublin and almost every large city of the EU has its own trade and representative office in Brussels. Dublin does not, yet we have four local authorities which do not speak to each other properly and do not align on the key issues of transport and housing about which all of us have been talking about today. I would like to get support from everybody to push this issue, to have a place within Brussels where we can X-ray and find out what proposals are going to impact us, as a city and county, in the future and what legislation is coming, whether directives or regulations.

On the question of the energy crisis, there are some things the EU can do contrary to the Government opposing ideas that came from other Council member states, for example, a strategic gas reserve is something the EU should and will support in my opinion. However, I am not able to comment on whether suspending the current wholesale electricity market in the way that is proposed would be beneficial or not. My main concern is energy poverty which impacts

so many families throughout Dublin. With a sixfold increase in energy prices, this is very dangerous.

Finally, on the SDGs, I am glad they were thought of because that space has been almost completely cannibalised by climate policy. There are so many other SDGs touching on the things Senator Sherlock talked about, so we need to put that at the centre of debate, particularly as we consider how we recover from the pandemic.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I thank Mr. Andrews. I will rotate the questions. If somebody has a specific objection to an answer given by a colleague, it can be taken the next time. Otherwise we will not get the questioners in. I call Senator Mary Seery Kearney.

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: I thank all the MEPs for being here. I say a special thank you to Ms Fitzgerald for the work she did with me when I was trying to get the waiver on VAT on period products to alleviate period poverty. Last week the gender equality index was published by the European Institute for Gender Equality. Ireland fared quite badly in that, particularly women in decision-making positions. We saw 58.4% out of 100 regarding the representation in the Dáil. I imagine we would fare a lot better if it was based on the Seanad. There are other sectors such as business, media and sport. Deputy Emer Higgins brought forward a Private Members' Bill looking at gender balance on company boards. The European Commission has put forward a similar women on boards directive, but the results are painfully slow. What do our MEPs think the EU can do to improve gender equality?

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I call Ms Fitzgerald. If anyone objects to a colleague's answer, he or she can give an answer later.

Mr. Ciarán Cuffe: Watch your back.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: That is to ensure there is a balance.

Ms Frances Fitzgerald: There is much work being done on equality in the European Parliament. It has always been a leader on equality. I am on the women's rights committee and there is a very full agenda there at present. On the women on boards directive, the Germans did not do anything on it during their Presidency but it would make a difference in terms of business, women's voices, representation and so on. There is very good work being done on pay transparency, which I think Senator Sherlock raised. There is a new directive on pay transparency. That is very important and it will go through. That will make quite a difference, about which I have no doubt, because currently we have a variation of between 14% and 19% in the pay gap, with a 39% gender variation in pensions throughout Europe. It is incredible when you think about it and what it means for women, particularly for older women living in poverty. It is very serious. It is urgent that we deal with those issues nationally and throughout Europe.

Last week we had a very interesting week in the European Parliament. It was gender equality week. Every committee had to do some work on equality, which was the first time I had seen that. For example, the economic committee had a session on women and the economy, which I do not think it has had before. The development committee is doing a new EU-Africa strategy and we discussed the particular issues in regard to development. Europe can continue to lead on equality. There is much work still to be done.

We need to look at women's rights across the globe. FGM, for example, increased hugely during the pandemic. This is hard to believe but it was because of the lack of community lead-

ers, education classes and with opportunities being reduced. Young, early marriages increased. We have to take a broad perspective around the world on gender equality.

Senator Róisín Garvey: The MEPs are amazing being MEPs, as being a Senator is mind-blowing. I do not know how they do it for the whole of Europe. I do it for County Clare and the country, but hats off to them. I hope people appreciate that it is not that easy.

The meeting happening in Scotland this week is the single most important meeting that has ever happened on this planet and that will ever happen on this planet. I want to talk about farmers in Ireland in regard to climate because I have deep concerns. We all know a massive percentage of CAP goes to a very small percentage of farmers, so they are not the farmers I am talking about or the farmers I am concerned about. I am sick of hearing from that small percentage of farmers who huge lobby groups and representation and do not represent the small farmers who I want to speak and ask about today. I have deep concerns about them not getting the money they need to survive and thrive. I listen to Macra na Feirme and to my neighbours and they are not getting the guidance they need nationally, from Teagasc and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, and from Europe. We talk about Mercosur and exporting pigs to China. I want to hear what the MEPs are doing for small farmers in Europe.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: A succinctly made point. I call Mr. Cuffe.

Mr. Ciarán Cuffe: I am on thin ice talking about farming as a Dublin MEP but my first job was snagging fodder beet on John Leeson's farm in south Dublin so I have had a little bit of involvement in that area. A third of the European Union budget goes to farmers but it has to go to the right farmers. We need leadership. I see that leadership from Macra na Feirme. We need that leadership from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and from Teagasc, particularly in regard to climate action. Today at COP26 it is all about the methane strategy. Much of that methane comes from farm animals. We need more science coming from Teagasc and more understanding of the radical changes needed in farming.

To go back briefly to Senator Fitzpatrick's question and Mr. Andrew's response, we need a Dublin office in Brussels. Vienna has an extraordinary office there. It is a bigger city, but a presence is needed. Dublin also needs a mayor. The permanent government runs Dublin and by that I mean the four chief executives, the four county managers. I have rows all the time with those people. At a personal level, I get on with them but we need a political voice, and a Dublin voice. Ireland and the cities in Ireland are outliers compared to elsewhere in Europe. If I can make one plea today, particularly to Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, it is to support the proposals for mayors for Limerick, Dublin, Waterford and Cork. That is the only way cities will get the voice they need. Yesterday I sat down with a senior European Commission official to talk about carbon neutral cities. He said he wants to get Dublin on board but there is nobody he can talk to and convince of this. That is why we need somebody. Henry Kissinger who asked, "Who do I call if I want to speak to Europe?" but who do you talk to when you talk to Dublin? There are four local authorities and four mayors. In the space of five years, there will be 20 mayors for Dublin. That is not the way to run a city region. We need a stronger voice. I am sorry for taking up the time on that.

On the sustainable development goals, tomorrow COP26 will devote one day to cities and regions because a huge amount of climate action comes from cities and we need a voice there.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I thank Mr. Cuffe. The point well taken. I ask that MEPs ref-

erence a question that they did not get to comment on as Mr. Cuffe did there. I call Senator Warfield.

Senator Fintan Warfield: Can I offer my minute to Senator Ruane?

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I call Senator Ruane.

Senator Lynn Ruane: I will add it to my minute at the end, or else I will not get two minutes. I was getting a donation.

Ms Clare Daly: Your minute is up now.

Senator Lynn Ruane: I thank the MEPs for joining us today. As they may be aware, next Monday marks equal pay day in Ireland, the day when women in Ireland effectively stop earning relative to men, given the current gender pay gap of 14.4%. Despite this ongoing inequality, Ireland remains perhaps the only country that has not yet signed up to the Council of European Municipalities and Regions, CEMR, European charter for equality of women and men in local life. The charter seeks to promote gender equality at local and regional levels across Europe by proposing concrete methods through which equality of women and men can be pursued in areas such as political participation, employment, public service and urban planning. While I understand that this charter may be better suited to Irish European Committee of the Regions colleagues, I wonder if anyone can offer any explanation or insight as to why this charter has yet to be signed. Will their offices encourage and pursue this matter with their region colleagues?

Ms Clare Daly: I do not know the answer to that. That is the short answer. It strikes me that is a bigger problem for Ireland rather than the EU if it is dragging its heels. The issue of gender equality and equal pay is key and links into the other question raised earlier, which Ms Fitzgerald dealt with. She did not get a chance to mention the area of tackling poverty because how can someone have any equal rights at all if they do not have a roof over their head or they have no stability? That is why the points made by Senator Higgins earlier about fiscal rules and so on are so important. You never hear the word “austerity” in the EU, not because there are no austerity policies, but because the word invokes such hostility because of what happened after the banking crash that they do not like to use it. They have taken it on board with the recovery plan. There are measures there that will soften the blow but it might come back full circle when they ask for the money to be repaid.

The short answer is that I do not know about the directive, but we can find out. However, if we want equality, tackling poverty at all levels has to be the first starting point. That means having social rights enshrined, and not only fundamental rights. That might not really answer that question.

Senator Lisa Chambers: I extend a welcome to all our MEPs. It is fantastic to have them here this afternoon and we welcome the engagement. My question is probably best directed to Mr. Andrews. He said at the outset that they do much work on the Brexit area. The Seanad has a special committee, which I chair, on Brexit. One issue that we are grappling with, for which we are yet to find a solution we can recommend, is around the democratic deficit in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland now comes under the customs union and Single Market rules but it does not have a seat at the table at the European Parliament. We have been tasked with answering the question of how we give the people of Northern Ireland a voice at that table in the absence of an MEP.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: It occurs to me that maybe we could take two questions at a time and see if we can get through some questions and then rotate the responses among the MEPs, if the MEPs are agreed.

Senator Martin Conway: I welcome the MEPs. It is great to see Ms Fitzgerald in particular, a former colleague, and Ms Daly, who I served with on the justice committee, one of the best committees this House has ever had in terms of what we achieved.

I want to talk about Covid. We have not seen the MEPs and they have not seen us in person for the last two years because of Covid. While I think we in Europe did very well in co-ordinating the vaccines, we were not really prepared for a health crisis in the way that we should have been. What are the MEPs thoughts on how Europe should prepare for a future health emergency, whether a pandemic like Covid-19, or even a step down from a pandemic which is a health emergency? What lessons has Europe learned from Covid-19?

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I will ask Mr. Andrews to answer that and the others can comment in their own time later.

Mr. Barry Andrews: I am in the House of Lords tomorrow where the Lords will ask exactly the same question. There is a three-hour slot to hear people talk about how the UK Government and UK Parliament can address the democratic deficit. They want to fill in the deficit. There are so many ways it can be done. There are mechanisms in the Good Friday Agreement, particularly under Strand 2, articles 16 and 17, that describe work that can be done to make sure that Northern Ireland MLAs and the Executive have the furthest upstream visibility of what is coming from the European Union. We have been talking here about what the Oireachtas can do that but that is what is sought to be addressed. A mechanism was mentioned earlier in terms of having a subcommittee of the Parliamentary Partnership Assembly dedicated exclusively to Northern Ireland affairs. If you read Lord Frost's command paper from July 2021, he decries the democratic deficit as well. Everyone seems to be aiming towards addressing it. Hopefully the vast amount of suggestions out there can be successful.

On Covid, I see the European Union not as a regulatory monster but as deregulatory in its nature. It sweeps away checks at borders, and various restrictions on the movement of goods and services across the 27 member states. We have seen this very successfully in Covid with the procurement of vaccines for our own member states and the digital Covid certificate. On Senator Conway's exact question, we have to recognise that post-pandemic, there must be a better system globally of governance of the procurement and distribution of vaccines. I voted consistently in favour of the TRIPS waiver. We need a system where the wealthy countries are not at the top of the queue all the time. It is disastrous for developing countries.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: We have two questions of one-minute each.

Senator Niall Blaney: Leading on from Senator Chambers's question, I will follow in the same vein. We have spoken about representation and disparity around human rights in different parts of Union. Many of those rights are visible on a daily basis in Northern Ireland. Mr. Cuffe mentioned earlier the mayoral positions in Galway, Dublin, Limerick, Cork and Waterford. There is a major disparity in this country, north and south. I do not refer to the Border but to the Dublin-Galway line. It is key in relation to Northern Ireland. What do the MEPs think they can do to help the shared island Unit in the Department of the Taoiseach to close the gap that exists? It applies not only to the Six Counties. There are five Border counties as well which are

equally effected. There is a major disparity. This exists in Northern Ireland around education attainability and economically between there and the South.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: On this round, we may take three questions and have three responses for each. The next question is Senator Ahearn.

Senator Garret Ahearn: I welcome the four MEPs, and particularly my colleague, Ms Fitzgerald. The EU recovery and resilience facility, RRF, is a huge funding programme all about building back better. It took a serious amount of negotiation. Everyone will recall the five days of the European Council summit back in July 2020 where EU leaders agreed on its broad outlines and a seven-year EU budget. How was the Parliament involved and what level of parliamentary scrutiny will there be over the RRF in future?

Senator Eugene Murphy: I welcome the four MEPs. Their performance has been excellent. Mine is a different type of question. Richard O'Halloran is held against his will in a Chinese jail. His wife and family are going through torture. Robert Pether from Elphin in Roscommon, originally from Australia, is jailed in Iraq. His wife and family are going through absolute torture. I know the Pether family well. I have been representing them. Mr. Pether's wife, Desree McCarthy, is originally from Dublin. I ask all four MEPs to think of those families this evening and to do everything they can to ensure that something is done for them at EU level. Their situation is so sad and desperate and I am hugely concerned for both families.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Each MEP will have four minutes to respond. I ask them to make note of the questions posed and to respond to them within their four-minute slot. That is the only way we will be able to allow everyone to contribute this evening.

Senator John McGahon: I will direct my comments to Ms Fitzgerald. How will the recent surge in energy prices right across Europe, including in Ireland, affect the European Green Deal? What is the EU doing to protect ordinary citizens and households in the context of that surge in energy prices? The just transition fund in the European Union is worth €1.75 billion. Does Ms Fitzgerald believe that is enough to achieve the type of just transition we need, not just in Ireland but across the Continent?

Senator Maria Byrne: While my question is for Ms Fitzgerald, I welcome all of the MEPs to the House. I admire the work they do in representing Ireland in Europe. Ms Fitzgerald has been involved in work on gender-based crime and I ask her to elaborate on that. She has been involved in trying to make this an EU-wide crime, particularly in the context of sexual violence against females.

Senator Barry Ward: The recent decision of the Polish constitutional tribunal to essentially upend the rule of law in Europe is creating a flashpoint. What are the next steps, particularly for the European Parliament as opposed to governments or the Commission? I mention the rule of law like-minded group which I understand involves a lot of the Nordic and Scandinavian countries but not Ireland. Should Ireland be in that group? I ask about China, specifically its actions against Lithuania and the pile-on that is happening there. There seems to be a serious lack of solidarity from Europe. Finally, I ask Ms Daly to justify her vote on the motion on Taiwan.

Senator Erin McGreehan: I welcome the MEPs to the Seanad Chamber. The Mercosur deal has huge ramifications for Irish farmers, who produce high-quality food and engage in the best agricultural practices. We could potentially be importing a lot of food from outside Europe

as a result of that deal. This is abhorrent to me and to Irish farmers and I would like to hear our MEPs' views on that.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I will reverse the order now and invite Ms Daly to respond first. Each MEP has four minutes to respond.

Ms Clare Daly: I will start with my good friend, Senator Martin Conway, whose presence at the Europol meetings is sadly missed. We look forward to his return. To respond to his questions on health, he is right that post Covid we are going to see a scenario where there is a drive for Europe to take over a health competency. That is currently a member state competency but the truth is that big pharma is there in the wings. While we can say at one level that the EU played a very good role in eventually getting vaccines out to member states, it also played a very counteractive role in blocking the dispersal of vaccines on a global scale, even though nobody can be safe unless everybody is safe, and that is down to big pharma. We know that the EU has interfered with health budgets in other scenarios. Going forward, how do we deal with that? The European Medicines Agency has done quite a good job. It has been beefed up and more work is being done in that area. However, we must be very careful about possible privatisation and moving in on the health portfolio. I would be a little wary in that regard.

On the disparity between the regions, it strikes me that this is a consequence of years of successive government policies which focused too much development around Dublin. Uneven development in Ireland is a question for the Irish Government rather than the European Parliament. We do not have a stick with which to beat Ireland on that but there are plenty of resources there with which to insist on more even-handed development.

The two cases raised by Senator Murphy are very important. We have raised them with the authorities in Iraq and China and with our own diplomatic forces here. It is a bit like the Ibrahim Halawa case which we raised when we were in the Dáil. These are complex diplomatic issues which need to go through a process but the more they are spoken about and dealt with, the better.

On the rule of law, there is no doubt that what happened in Poland is a game changer. We saw the government of a member state actively going to its national constitutional court, a court it created, seeking an opinion that EU law is of lesser importance than its own national law. The court the Polish Government set up said that the government was right. This is a huge crisis for the EU. It has been decided to impose fines, the Commission has taken Article 7 proceedings and the Parliament is looking to take action. There must be a strong response but it must be an even-handed one. Chancellor Merkel was right when she said at the recent European Council meeting that we need dialogue. We cannot start putting people into camps or the whole thing will unravel. That said, there is no doubt that we should not be paying any money to people who violate fundamental rights.

I am not aware of what China is supposedly doing in Lithuania but in terms of Taiwan, as Senator Horkan said, Ireland like all EU countries has a One-China policy. It is not a matter of choice for me but a matter of international law and UN relations. It was very unhelpful for the European Parliament to introduce a motion on Taiwan. What would we say if the Chinese Government passed a motion seeking diplomatic relations with Catalonia, for example, against a backdrop of Russia arming the Catalans? I do not think the Spanish would stand for that. I am very concerned about the build-up of militarism in Taiwan and the fact that the US has been arming the Taiwanese military. I do not think aggression is helpful. Dialogue and diplomatic

relations are what is needed. I remember that there was murder here when some colleagues went to Taiwan but I believe that people can go to Taiwan if they want to. It is not my business-----

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Ms Daly would win the Guinness world record for the number of questions answered in four minutes. I now invite Mr. Cuffe to replicate Ms Daly's performance.

Mr. Ciarán Cuffe: I thank Senator Conway for his question on what we do about the next pandemic or health crisis. As I said in my introductory remarks, we need to have greater co-ordination on health at an EU level but when it comes to pounds, shillings and pence, the European Centre for Disease Control has one hundredth of the budget of its US equivalent. We need to beef up our health competency at a European level so that we are ready with clear data on what is going on, whether it is the spread of Covid in central Europe or the next known unknown that may occur.

On the issue of the shared island raised by Senator Blaney, I was in Belfast yesterday and a bus was set alight, allegedly as a result of the Northern Ireland protocol. I have also sat on the board of a charity based in Belfast and believe that we need more common projects across the Border. We need more common projects that involve both Governments working together. When it comes to regional disparities, we need to devolve more powers to the regions rather than have Dublin controlling the purse strings. That is very important.

On the issue of China, I have spoken with Mr. O'Halloran's family. I have worked in China and believe that it is difficult to find a common dialogue that will work. In recent months, some of my MEP colleagues have been banned from entering China, including Mr. Reinhard Bütikofer, who has been very outspoken about Chinese foreign policy. We need to speak truth to power about the Uygher people and unfair and unlawful detentions. I have written to the Chinese ambassador to Ireland and have received lacklustre responses, to say the least.

On the issue of the rule of law, financial penalties concentrate the mind. Some anti-LGBTQI+ declarations in Poland have been rescinded because of the withdrawal of EU funding for tourism. The €1 million per day fines against Poland will concentrate the mind but I agree with Ms Daly and Chancellor Merkel that we must be careful here.

7 o'clock

We also need to ensure that our own house is in order. Up until very recently, we had a Minister who was preoccupied with ensuring that the appointment of judges was not politicised. We need to be quite careful in that regard. Dialogue is how we overcome this. As always, there is a danger that we will polarise Europe and that is unhealthy for the approach we take to the big issues of the day. We have to work together on the big issues to be addressed in a Europe of 450 million people, such as inequalities, immigration, the Covid response and the issues being debated over the next two weeks in Glasgow. The only way forward is through co-operation, listening and sitting down with each other, even those with whom we might not share a common language or common ground. For all the bureaucracy and challenges of working in the European Parliament, it is the globe's second biggest democratic assembly and it is a place where we can achieve progress on the huge economic, social and environmental issues of the day. I want to keep this dialogue with the Seanad going in order to feed its views into the work we do for Dublin, for Ireland and for Europe.

Ms Frances Fitzgerald: Senator Murphy made a point about the individual cases where rights are being completely disregarded. An earlier question was on how much we work together. All Irish MEPs are working on those cases, both formally and informally, and trying to highlight the terrible injustices and appalling personal situations that people who have been detained unlawfully are facing.

Senator Conway's question on health is interesting. While health is not an EU competence, there is still a lot of scope for co-operation and improving health systems by action at European level. I am working with a number of groups on breast cancer, lung cancer and so on. I will take the issue of access to drugs as an example. There is a huge amount we could do across Europe as regards procurement to make sure there is better access to drugs. There is so much innovation in the drugs sector at present that that is something we are going to have to do because they are unaffordable otherwise. That is just one example. I agree with Mr. Cuffe about developing the competencies of the EU health agencies, as well as their budgets, because they can do an awful lot. We saw how much could be done with Covid. It was a slow start, as I have said already, but there was incredible support there. We have exported 50% of all the vaccines produced in the EU. People forget this. We have exported more than 700 million doses to outside the EU. There is a great deal of work being done to share the vaccines from Europe, more than anywhere else in the world.

Senator Ward spoke about the rule of law. There are a number of options possible at the moment, as he knows. One is conditionality and taking some of the funding away. The other is infringement proceedings against Poland, which I think will happen. The third is taking away voting rights and so on. I do not see that happening right now but some of the other initiatives will happen and they will be taken very seriously.

Senator Maria Byrne asked about violence against women. That went up hugely - by more than one third - during Covid, across all member states and the world. The Istanbul Convention has not been signed, much to my surprise, by seven EU member states, primarily because they feel it is some sort a Trojan horse for LGBTQI rights. That is quite extraordinary. We are going to make violence against women a crime in the EU. A directive on that will be coming through in the next year or so and that will be very important in dealing with it more effectively across the Union.

Senator Ahearn asked about the resilience fund and the role of the Parliament. We have seen a lot of activity in the Parliament in respect of this fund, more than we have ever seen from a supervisory point of view as regards funding. We have changed many of the criteria and done a lot of good work on it. I expect that that will go on right through the implementation phase. It is important that the Parliament continues with that. We are not getting great data back from the member states yet, however, and there is a bit of disappointment about that. We are going to have to push to make sure we get the information on how the money will be spent, and is being spent, and monitor it very carefully in the period ahead.

Senator McGahon asked about the energy crisis and what can be done from a European perspective. There are many recommendations coming from the Commission at the moment around energy procurement being done across Europe, which could make it more affordable and accessible. We are going to have to watch the transition in terms of what energy uses we allow because people will literally be out in the cold if we do not take a range of initiatives across Europe to make energy more affordable in the near future.

Mr. Barry Andrews: I thank everyone for their questions and the opportunity to be here today. I am happy to share with Senators the letter I wrote to Deputy McHugh in which I suggested ideas on how we can improve scrutiny on EU legislation here in the Oireachtas. One example is that a member state parliament can give a recommendation to a government ahead of a European Council meeting. That is a right that is almost never exercised across the European Union but it is something that can be done. The Lisbon treaty also gave further rights to national parliaments and it is important that this House is aware of those rights.

On the rule of law and Poland, the Polish Government is captured by an even more right-wing coalition partner. It is a bit like what happened with the Conservative Party in the UK, with a very extreme right-wing agenda that grabbed the party. In this case that the PIS Party has been grabbed by the United Poland Party, particularly the justice minister. This situation carries the danger of escalating and I agree with my colleagues that this must be dealt with carefully. It is possible to feed into a mythology in Poland that Brussels is the cause of all its ailments and we have to be very careful to avoid that.

I do not agree with Ms Daly on Taiwan, although she will not be surprised to know that. The analogy with Spain is not appropriate because Spain is not responsible for a genocide of people within its country. The Department of Foreign Affairs warns our citizens not to travel to China if they are involved in investments of any sort, in case a dispute arises in China and they are subject to arbitrary detention. That is the way our Government views China. Ms Daly is correct to say that the People's Republic of China is singly entitled to representation of China in the UN but that does not mean we cannot defend the rights of Taiwan as an independent state with a sovereign Government. Lithuania is being persecuted because it recognises that fact. We should never resile from that.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I thank all the MEPs for the way they have been focused and engaged, and for the comprehensive nature of their answers. I ask colleagues to wait for the concluding remarks from Senator Ward, who will say some words of thanks on behalf of all of us. We have had excellent participation. The MEPs have shown how seriously they take these issues and that has been reciprocated here. We will take up the challenge of further development of this engagement and I will discuss it with the Cathaoirleach.

Senator Barry Ward: I will not take too much time, but it is important to recognise the value of this session. It is a very good idea and is the first time we have seen genuine interaction at this level between our representatives in Europe and Members of the Oireachtas. In this case, all the MEPs are also former Members of the Oireachtas and the fact that two of them previously represented Dún Laoghaire endears them hugely to me. We are blessed in Dublin to have such a strong team at European level. They are clearly on top of their brief, are working extremely hard and are engaged at all kinds of different levels working for us. It is tremendously important that we get an opportunity to engage with them. As some of them have said themselves, it is something we should repeat on a more frequent basis in order to properly tease out the issues that we are facing, through them, in the European Parliament. I thank them all for coming and for giving of their time.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I thank Senator Ward for saying what we would all wish to say individually. We would be here until 9 o'clock tonight if we did that. I thank the MEPs collectively. Go raibh míle maith agaibh uilig. Táim iontach buíoch daoibh.

Energy Security: Statements

Acting Chairperson (Senator Fiona O'Loughlin): The Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Eamon Ryan, is very welcome to the House. I invite him to make his opening statement.

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I thank the Cathaoirleach and Senators for this opportunity to update the House on the security of energy supply. I will address the challenge related to security of electricity supply. There are currently no similar short or medium concerns about oil and natural gas security of supply, which continue to be traded normally, albeit at high prices. For this reason, I will focus my comments on the security of electricity supply.

Ensuring a continued secure supply of electricity is vital for the proper functioning of society and the economy. It is also necessary to ensure people and businesses have confidence in switching to electrified solutions such as heat pumps and electric vehicles. The Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, has statutory responsibility, under SI 60 of 2005, to monitor and take measures necessary to ensure the security of electricity supply in Ireland. The CRU is assisted in its statutory role by EirGrid, the electricity transmission system operator. The CRU is an independent statutory body and solely accountable to a committee of the Oireachtas for the performance of its functions. I, as Minister, have overall policy responsibility for the sector, including policy matters impacting on security of energy supply.

The CRU has advised that it has identified specific challenges to ensuring continued electricity security of supply. These challenges include lower than expected availability from some existing power stations; anticipated new power stations not being developed as planned; expected growth in demand for electricity, including due to the growth of data centres; and the expected closure in the coming years of power stations that make up approximately 25% of conventional electricity generation capacity.

The short-term immediate risk to electricity security of supply has been caused by lower than expected availability of existing power stations. This has resulted in a number of system alerts, which indicate an elevated risk level, on the electricity system but has not impacted the electricity supply to any customers. This risk has reduced with the recent return of gas-fired Huntstown power station and will reduce further with the return of another gas-fired power station, Whitegate in Cork, due later this month. Notwithstanding this, there is no place for complacency as there are continuing issues with reliability, as evidenced by another recent forced outage at the oil-fired Tarbert power station.

EirGrid's winter outlook, published on Monday, 11 October, sets out that there is an expectation that the electricity system will enter an alert state at times over the coming winter, most likely at periods of low wind and low interconnector imports. It also sets out that there is an elevated risk, compared with previous winters, of the system entering the emergency state due to insufficient generation being available to meet the demand. This does not mean that electricity consumers will be without supply for any period. It does, however, indicate a higher than planned level of risk.

While it is not possible to guarantee that there will always be sufficient power to meet demand, the CRU and EirGrid are working to ensure secure supplies of electricity for all consumers. EirGrid and ESB Networks have put in place procedures to ensure that in the event

that demand curtailment is needed, large energy users will be requested, in the first instance, to reduce demand where possible. This includes requiring data centres to switch to available on-site backup generation.

The medium-term risk to security of electricity supply is set out in EirGrid's generation capacity statement, which was published on Wednesday, 29 September and covers the period from 2021 to 2030. EirGrid has identified a medium-term need to develop 1,850 MW of generation capacity by 2025. On the same day, the CRU published an information note setting out the programme of actions being progressed to deliver the required generation capacity. The actions include increasing the availability of existing generators; developing of new generation capacity, including temporary generation capacity in advance of winter 2022; extending the operational life of some existing generators; a new policy for the grid connection of data centres; and actions to enhance demand-side response, including large consumers reducing demand when the system margin is low.

The national development plan sets out that around 2,000 MW of new conventional electricity generation capacity will need to be delivered over the coming decade, with much of this needed by mid-decade. This generation, most of which will be gas-fired, is needed to support the operation of the electricity system and provide security of supply.

My Department is working closely with the CRU and EirGrid to ensure continued secure supplies of electricity. My Department is developing a policy statement on security of electricity supply in support of the CRU programme of work. It is envisaged that the policy statement will emphasise the importance of maintaining security of supply in meeting renewable electricity targets by 2030 and net zero emissions by 2050. In that context, it will provide certainty for investors in the appropriateness of developing new conventional electricity generation capacity and new grid, interconnection and storage infrastructure.

For the longer term, my Department is also carrying out a review of the security of energy supply of Ireland's electricity and natural gas systems. This review is focusing on the period to 2030 in the context of ensuring a sustainable pathway to net zero emissions by 2050. The review will consider options that will address the key longer-term risks to our electricity and natural gas security of supply. These risks are likely to include the increasing dependence on imported natural gas from a single UK source, via two interconnector pipelines to the Moffat terminal in Scotland, for that majority of Ireland's natural gas supplies. By 2030, it is expected that over 90% of all of Ireland's natural gas needs will be supplied via Moffat in Scotland. The review will consider a wide range of potential options to mitigate identified risks, including the use of individual renewable energy technologies such as green hydrogen, biomethane, battery storage, pumped hydro, or a combination of these.

Again, I am grateful for the opportunity to address the Seanad this evening. I look forward to listening to Senators' contributions and responding to the issues they raise.

Senator Róisín Garvey: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire. He has a busy week ahead of him.

I thank the Minister for the work he has done to date. For the past 30 years, he has been one of the few people talking about energy conservation and the need for the country to become sustainable and independent energy-wise. Were it not for the Green Party, we would be trying to figure all of this out. It is great to see all the parties now echoing what the Green Party has been saying for 30 years about becoming energy self-sufficient.

The Minister's goal is to have 80% renewable energy by 2030, which is a great and positive target to have. We have a lot of work to do. I appreciate the funding provided to enable people on a personal level to reduce their energy demands. The issue is not only energy supply. For years, as a country, we have wasted a lot of energy in the way we heat our homes, travel and source our food. The two Departments which the Minister heads have done great work since last July on supporting homeowners and giving them opportunities and choices to reduce their energy demands. We had a great presentation from the National Transport Authority, NTA, on improvements to rural transport. We also had a very good one from the SEAI, which has done great work and is offering lots of free retrofits and infrastructural improvements to people on low incomes and social welfare. To that end, as I want to bring it back to the personal, I have three short questions for the Minister. Hopefully, there will be low-rate green loans coming in so that middle income earners and people on low incomes will have opportunities to get loans that they can cover. Once they get a photovoltaic system or their house retrofitted, it will reduce their energy bills and they can then use the savings to pay back the loans. How are we progressing with that? I know that the Minister, more than anybody else in the country, has been working on the three things I will ask him about. Apart from the low-rate green loans, there is also the renewable energy feed-in tariff, which I know the Minister has been seeking for a long time. Thanks to him, it is coming back. When can we expect it and does the Minister have any idea of how much it will be?

How is the solar Bill that we brought to Second Stage progressing? It is a great opportunity for schools, community groups and farmers. Coming from rural north Clare I see it is a potential positive for farmers who have lots of sheds and a big amount of roof space. They are more than willing to get involved in the green revolution when given the choice. I would love to get an update on those three issues. I wish the Minister the best of luck with his great task and most important work in Glasgow in the coming weeks on behalf of the country.

Senator Sharon Keogan: The Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, is welcome to the House to discuss the most important topic of energy security. While there is much to be said about the coming winter and the rising cost of electricity in Ireland and across Europe, I trust my colleagues to bring these issues to the fore and will instead take the opportunity to look forward to the future. Prevention is the best remedy. Now is the time to tackle the problems of the future.

When we debated the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill this summer, the Minister stated:

The advantage we have in that is that offshore wind is the cheaper fuel now. I agree, we should look at nuclear options [...] I would not rule out anything because the climate crisis is so severe. We must look at every option. In truth, I do not see [...] nuclear energy developing in the way solar and wind energy is developing, with the costs coming down. It will never be competitive now - nuclear versus renewable - in our country because we have such a wind resource.

When we discuss costs, we speak of the euro per megawatt hour, €/MWh, the levelised cost of energy, LCOE, which is a measure of the average net present cost of electricity generation for a source over its lifetime. It is used for investment planning and to compare different methods of electricity generation on a consistent basis. Herein lies one of the most overused and flawed misconceptions when it comes to decarbonising the energy sector. I accept that solar and wind have lower levelised costs than nuclear, but this is a gross over-simplification. The US Energy Information Administration, which publishes its official LCOE figures, even says that not so

directly when it compares the LCOE of wind and solar to other technology. It even goes so far as to show them in separate charts to discourage comparison. Why is that? I gave the Minister a copy of the diagrams before the start of the debate.

Let us start with solar power. It is all explained in this chart, which outlines negative wholesale energy prices. The light and dark coloured gold is solar power and all of the other colours put together is the demand. The chart is the value of electricity over the course of the day, the gross profit of an energy operator or producer per megawatt hour. In a traditional energy grid, without a lot of wind and solar, this value would go a little higher in a day when there is more demand for electricity. It is basic economics: where there is a higher demand, there is a higher price but when one floods a market with one's commodity, its value will go down. That is exactly what is happening in places like California, which has installed large amounts of solar and wind. Not only does the value of electricity become depressed, it actually goes negative during peak production hours. The more intermittent sources of energy that one adds to this depresses the value even more, to the point whereby energy providers have zero incentive to continue producing, unless one adds subsidies, which are a drain on the taxpayer and do not reflect value for money. Either this, or the systems get shut off, to artificially constrain supply and inflate costs, which likewise is a poor return on an investment in renewable energy infrastructure. The amount of solar energy on the market compared with the value, as more is added, gives a steady downward trend. The same issue applies to wind power also. These value drops jeopardise profitability, phased-out support schemes, the decarbonisation of the power system and the reaching of renewable targets, all of which is bad news for the Minister, as well as the Minister for Finance and, not least of all, climate.

The usual response is why we cannot just add batteries in long-range transmission to smooth out the grid. After all, it is windy in some cases and sunny in others. Data shows that helps a little but not much. Storage can help renewable profitability, but it also experiences diminishing returns. Modelling has shown that even doubling hydro pump capacity has a positive but minor impact on the value of wind power. The key to decarbonising the energy sector is adding constant, firm sources of energy such as hydro or geothermal, which are heavily limited by location, or nuclear power. Wind and solar will be of great benefit, but pure renewables will not be enough to get us to net zero.

I understand the allure of 100% renewables, but surely the Minister will agree that sustainable decarbonisation must be prioritised above ideology, be it renewable only, anti-nuclear or any other belief which places dogma over that which best serves the Irish people. The road to zero emissions in the energy sector is being unnecessarily lengthened by the continued existence of section 18(6) of the Electricity Regulation Act 1999, which prohibits the use of nuclear fission for the generation of electricity. The section owes its existence to the Minister's former party colleague, the then Minister, Trevor Sargent. I believe the banning of nuclear fission in Ireland was a mistake, born out of anti-nuclear sentiments in the 1990s, which were popularised by the fossil fuel industry and tapped into the passive Anglophobia in this country, as it was the UK that was accepting nuclear as a tool with which to combat climate change. If it is energy security that the Minister is after, a fixed output, reliable, safe and sustainable solution can be found in clean energy provided by fission reactors. If that is not recognised by the Government, then the public will pay the price down the line.

Senator Timmy Dooley: I welcome the Minister to the House for the debate on this important issue. He rightly concentrated his remarks on energy security on the electricity market. There is not an issue with oil and gas, other than the price of them at the moment, which is

clearly as a result of what has happened during the pandemic. A lot of supply lines across a range of commodities are impacted by that.

The recent media reports that we were facing a potential series of blackouts was a considerable shock to many. I do not want to be alarmist, but the language suggested that we were getting very close to that. As the Minister put it, the risk of potential outages had increased. Even though I have followed the issue in the committee in recent years and I have raised it with different stakeholders in that time, nobody ever seemed to raise any real concern. I am somewhat surprised about that and I wonder if the Minister is too. The stated intention of decarbonising the electricity network as part of decarbonising the economy was aimed at a much greater usage of electricity and the various projections that had been made around that, such as moving away from fossil fuels to power cars and trying to get up to 1 million electric vehicles on the road by a certain date. We have targets for the retrofitting of homes and the installation of heat pumps. The ambition and targets were there. What I am surprised about is that it became an issue all of a sudden for those that have a responsibility in this regard. It was not necessarily overnight, but it had not been brought to the attention of the wider public. I wonder if it had been brought to the attention of the Government at an earlier stage to try to find a policy response. There are two issues in respect of electricity, which are the capacity to generate electricity to meet peak demand and the very considerable constraints on the grid. I remember I raised this with Eir-Grid a number of years ago at a committee meeting, because I was hearing of companies that, based on where they were located and where demand had increased, had to effectively supply their own electricity behind the meter. I raised that as an issue at the time because I thought it was rather bizarre that large companies were effectively generating electricity on site to meet their needs. It did not seem to be good overall policy for a country that was ultimately going to transfer much of its energy needs to electricity to have this patchwork quilt of a grid that, quite frankly, was not fit for purpose.

I know there are issues. It is a bit like trying to generate wind onshore. Nobody wants wind turbines in their backyard any more and it seems nobody wants grid infrastructure either. Notwithstanding all the developments that are in place, I do not know of anyone, or have heard anybody talk about, delivering electricity by Wi-Fi. We are going to need wires and poles for quite some time. Our cell phones are now powered by leaving them on chargers without a direct wire connection. It is a stated ambition of some of the car companies that, ultimately, as cars pass over certain strips on the road an induction current will, hopefully, recharge the batteries, but that is a long way off. The grid is an issue, which I am sure the Minister is well aware of and which he may speak about later.

On the supply side, the ESB has a very considerable ambition to develop offshore wind generation capacity off the Clare coast and into the Atlantic. That has very real potential for a positive impact on the economy, but we are looking at that ten years hence. There are certain impediments to foreshore licensing and legislation has to change, but if the Government was to take a very proactive approach, what more could we do to bring on that kind of renewable energy from that source more quickly? If an ambition and target was set to do it within five years, is it possible? Some of the technology is nascent and in development, especially the very large floating pontoons that are required. This is technology that is in development, but people glaze over when they hear that it is ten years away. It is potentially two or, at worst, three electoral cycles away and who knows who will be in power by then? Can we bring some of these proposals to fruition more quickly to benefit the economy as is necessary?

Senator John McGahon: There has been a substantial impact on international wholesale

energy prices. We have seen a substantial impact on gas prices, especially in Ireland, which has had a knock-on impact on energy prices. That is clear for everybody to see. Gas prices have been rising steadily since March 2020 for a variety of international reasons. They are currently unseasonably high, which puts upward pressure on wholesale electricity prices. That is not just affecting this country but many European states across the Continent. We have to ask ourselves what the best approach is to protect the Irish consumer in the face of rising energy costs. The best long-term approach to doing that, and what is our primary response as a Government towards a potential energy crisis, is to insulate Irish consumers from volatility in international wholesale energy markets by substantial investment in energy efficiency and, most important, renewable energy.

In recent months, that investment has come in many guises, shapes and forms. For example, building on our existing large capital budget for home energy upgrades of low-income homes ensures that lessening and alleviating energy poverty is a key consideration of the national retrofit programme, which is due to be published in the coming weeks. It also ensures that finances raised by increases in the carbon tax are ring-fenced to protect those who are most vulnerable against fuel poverty and higher fuel and energy costs. It supports a just transition for displaced workers and investment in a range of climate-related actions. It utilises the tax and social welfare aspects used by the Government, which we have seen in budget 2022, to increase the living alone allowance, the qualified child payment and the income threshold for the working family payment. These measures are in addition to adjustments to basic welfare and pension rates we have implemented that go a long way towards protecting Irish consumers.

Ireland is transitioning from the use of fossil fuels for generating electricity to using a majority of wind, solar and solar renewables. As was said at a recent meeting of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Climate Action, natural gas will be used as a backup. Natural gas is deemed to be low carbon. However, it is still a fossil fuel. We have seen this year how fluctuations in gas prices can affect wholesale electricity costs and threaten Irish consumers with very high energy costs. I met a friend this morning, Ultan Murphy in Dundalk, who I have been meeting for the past year and who is a proponent of nuclear energy, an issue Senator Keogan has discussed. We should be able to have a conversation about nuclear energy. That is all I am asking for. The 1999 Act that outlaws nuclear power in this country has been mentioned. Nuclear power is completely carbon free. It is used in developed countries all over the world, such as the United Kingdom, France, Germany and the United States. I accept people might be opposed to nuclear power for whatever reason. They may think it is impossible to build a nuclear power station in the next ten or 20 years. If we had seen 20 years ago that we would be moving towards a renewable source of energy in this country, and around the world, people would have thought that was unlikely.

Ireland already consumes nuclear energy via our interconnector with the UK. It should at least be discussed and we should have a conversation about it as a viable option compared to all other possible scenarios. We have recently seen Ursula von der Leyen join ten EU countries in calling for nuclear power to be included in the EU's taxonomy for clean energy. It already generates 26% of the EU's energy consumption. Ursula von der Leyen stated that:

We need more renewables. They are cheaper, carbon-free and homegrown. We also need a stable source [of energy], nuclear, and during the transition, gas [also].

After I spoke to Ultan this morning, I read an article about a group of ten EU countries, led by France, that have asked the European Commission to recognise nuclear energy as a low-

carbon energy source that should be part of the block's decades-long transition towards climate neutrality. Indeed, more than 90% of the EU's natural gas comes from foreign imports, with Russia as the main producer. This great dependency has been credited as one of the main factors behind the rise in energy prices. Supply tensions will be more frequent and we have no choice but to diversify our supply.

In 100 years' time, Ireland and other developed countries will be using nuclear power. We should not be bogged down by short-term thinking over the next ten or 20 years. We should have an open and honest discussion. I am simply asking that we have that conversation and that is all. We are at our best as a society when we challenge ideas, pit arguments against each other and get the best overall solution. We should be having a conversation about nuclear energy. If it turns out to be an idea that will not be useful in Ireland, or suit it, that is fair enough, but let us have the conversation and the debate in the first instance.

Senator Lynn Boylan: I welcome the Minister. It is fair to say Ireland faces a perfect storm, if Senators will excuse the pun, in respect of energy security issues, with low winds, pandemic delays and two power plants going down. That said, it is critical we reduce the overall demand for energy. Current Government policies have been likened to trying to go down an escalator that is going up.

We are an outlier when it comes to data centres. The EU average for data centres is 2% of energy demand whereas in Ireland they now account for 15% of our energy mix, with the potential to reach 30% by 2030. We need a moratorium on data centres until we can, at least, get our grid and renewable energy on track. Nobody is denying that we need data centres. People like to say that "you are using social media and you are happy to work from home", but it is very clear that Ireland has a disproportionate number of these data centres. They are not all providing essential services. In fact, *The Business Post* reported this week that the biggest energy consumer of data centres in Ireland is Amazon Web Services, which aids fossil fuel companies to identify, extract and transport oil and gas faster through its cloud logistics. It is part of the problem. We deserve transparency when it comes to how much we are paying these companies, if we have to ask them to turn down their energy demand or to use their on-site gas terminals. That information is not in the public domain and the public deserve to have information on how much it is costing us. It is not as simple as just asking data centres to power down and them saying okay.

We face medium-term supply issues as Corrib winds down and our renewables ramp up. Now is the time for us to make prudent decisions about our energy mix and not look at locking us into a fossil fuel future or leaving us on the hook for stranded assets.

I absolutely disagree on the nuclear question. Nuclear energy might not have carbon emissions but we have a huge problem with the pollution that comes with it. It is a distraction from the very ambitious goals we have around renewable energy targets. We should focus on them. Nor is building LNG terminals the answer, as they would lock us into importing fossil fuels for decades. They are infrastructural projects with a 30-year lifespan whereas we only have a short-term energy problem over the next decade until we get our renewable energy and storage up to speed. If we go down the road of putting out contracts for the likes of terminals and allow them to go ahead then we are locked in, as a signatory of the Energy Charter Treaty, if we try to phase those out. We have seen what happened to the Dutch. In 2009 when gas prices were very high they decided to encourage coal plants to open up. They then tried to close those coal plants down faster and they are now on the hook for billions of euro.

We know the answer to energy security is more renewable energy. One of the stumbling blocks we have is of course the marine planning framework, which is very detailed legislation needed to pave the way for those very ambitious targets but we cannot sacrifice biodiversity on the altar of emissions reductions. That is why I am keen to see the marine protected zones being designated simultaneously, or at least being pencilled in, so we know where we should not put the offshore wind farms. Not only is that good for biodiversity but it is also protecting our marine environment and our wildlife out there, which is the largest carbon sink, though many people are not aware of that. It is also vital we learn from the many mistakes of onshore wind, that we work with communities, that the communities where that wind is going to be brought ashore feel that benefit and that the small fishing communities feel the benefit of the offshore wind terminals.

The second stumbling block to our becoming energy secure is the lack of a hydrogen strategy. We are one of only two EU countries that does not have such a strategy. There is definitely a place for green hydrogen. When I refer to hydrogen I obviously do not mean blue, grey or pink. Green hydrogen storage is an essential part of the move to fully renewable energy and will close the gap from intermittency. I would also like to ensure we can stand up to the vested interests that oppose our reaching of our renewable energy targets. It was deeply concerning to hear Phillip Boucher-Hayes's podcast talking about the impact horse breeders from outside the country were having on the planning systems in County Kildare and their resistance to battery storage in that area. It is important we stand up to those interests as well.

Senator Rebecca Moynihan: I thank the Minister for coming to the Chamber. It is particularly pertinent and important to be having a debate on energy security this winter. We cannot talk about energy security without talking about energy poverty. The cost of energy is rising at a shocking rate. Electric Ireland has announced average prices of electricity are going to rise by almost 10% this month. It was 9% in August. I am aware other Senators have referred to delays in supply caused by the pandemic but it is also notable it took four speakers before we got to Senator Boylan, who mentioned the impact of data centres on the national grid. It is not sustainable for households to have the rises that are coming up this winter and into the future. We need to ensure we are energy secure but also that people are protected from energy poverty.

Not planning for the impact of data centres on the national grid was unacceptable. The IDA and its foreign direct investment at all costs approach had an impact on that and it is something we need to be able to learn from. As Senator Boylan said, we are an outlier in Europe. Whereas other countries supply about 2% of their energy to data centres we are looking at up to 15% and the that figure is likely to grow. The overwhelming of the grid due to data energy needs to be highlighted. We need to diversify our energy by pushing for more renewable energy which will enhance our energy security and also bring down bills. That transition is not going to be easy and will present challenges.

As the Minister and other members of this Government are aware, a grid based on fossil fuel generators is not suitable for a future where most of our energy will hopefully be coming from renewable sources. The current delay in getting connections is preventing new renewable projects from supplying electricity in Ireland and our electricity supplies are under immense pressure from stretched capacity. The Irish Solar Energy Association states delays of up to two years in connecting new projects to the national electricity grid provided by State company EirGrid and ESB Networks are shutting out potential supplies.

This week COP26 is taking place in Glasgow and there is quite rightly a focus on climate

action. As other Senators mentioned, Ireland has the potential to be a leader in climate action through the wind energy we produce and this is something we need to take seriously. The opportunities we have for renewable energy through wind are immense. I refer to the role of wind power in decarbonisation. Ireland has one of the best such resources in the world and could potentially make enough energy every year to power every home here. A single wind turbine can produce the energy equivalent of 16,000 solar panels. In the last decade Ireland has cut millions of tonnes of CO₂ emissions and has steadily reduced our heavy dependence on fossil fuels through the use of wind energy and we can be a world leader in this area. I was recently in Brighton where you can see wind turbines across the bay working and producing energy. They are not intrusive and do not ruin the view, which are among the concerns people may have about wind turbines being placed along their coasts. However, the transition to wind energy must be based in local communities. It must mean people have quality, well-paid jobs replacing other industries that may have been there, such as fishing. It must mean investment and enhancement of the local areas where they are contained. It must also mean we have a just transition and a local transition. We can be the world leaders in this area.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: On energy and the energy crisis, I will come later to the question of supply and demand but also the question of costs. It is really important we begin by acknowledging fossil fuels have been costing us the Earth, quite literally, already. The fact the costs on fossil fuels are high now is in some ways only a reflection of the fact fossil fuels are literally costing lives and costing billions for the developing world. That has been so for a long, sustained period of time and we have known it for a long period of time and failed to act. That is really important because the fact is the cost of fossil fuel-related energy is going to continue to go up. It is going to have to continue to go up. It will go up because of market advantage being taken but it will also go up as the costs are incorporated into it.

One of the most important things we need to do - in fact there is a motion on this in the House tomorrow to which I have an amendment - is to stop talking about things like carbon pricing as being a lifestyle encourager and be very honest about it being a Pigovian tax which recognises there has been an externalisation of the cost of fossil fuels and there has been massive subsidisation of fossil fuels by governments for many years. When you frame it in that way in an honest discussion, that is to say, we are in a crisis that has been created, then you can have the vital discussion about how to protect people from the worst impacts of this transition. Then you can plan for issues of fuel poverty and issues of retrofitting at a far larger scale than currently proposed. With respect to the low interest loans, it is disappointing our recovery and resilience fund is going into de-risking banks to give loans instead of going directly into retrofitting, for example. That is €40 million Ireland is paying to banks for them to give loans instead of doing it directly.

These are the matters we need to be addressing. Then when we frame it we are not having this narrative of it being about people's habits or demand, because the conversation about demand must be honest and we must talk about data centres. We simply do not have room to parade a set of new elephants into the room and that is what these will be. We are talking about potentially 33% of energy demand.

Probably one of the most chilling Oireachtas committee meetings I have sat in on was a recent session with the CRU and EirGrid where the former seemed to have rowed back on its intention to regulate this area and the latter spoke about the need to cater for the economy and data centres. We need to be clear, just as Professor Barry McMullin, who spoke at that climate committee meeting, was. We need to control and regulate the economy so that it can operate

within our environmental and energy boundaries, thereby allowing us to sustain society. Will the Minister speak about what measures he will take to ensure the prioritisation of society? Frankly, just requesting that data centres move to their own energy sources - it is unclear whether those sources would be renewable or contribute to our emissions - is an insufficient response. Asking them to change their peak hours is an insufficient response. If we cannot say “No” to offering up a brand new hostage to fortune, how will we deal with all of the problems that we already have? We let Corrib go ahead, after which we had a further ten years during which people stopped looking to prioritise renewable energy and we all returned to the old model. Now, EirGrid is talking about wanting to extend coal and oil usage and delay the exit from fossil fuels. There is no scope for us to do that. The space that is left in the world in terms of fossil fuels is for developing countries, which have used only a fraction of what we have and that need that energy now in order to make the transition to renewable energy. They are further behind the curve than us and need our support and our example. If we make excuses for ourselves, we will make it impossible for them.

The European Court of Justice has told us that the Energy Charter Treaty is incompatible with the achievement of the European Green Deal, yet the arbitration panels are choosing to ignore that. What is the strategy for exiting the treaty and how can we ensure that, in doing so, Europe can give an example and free others from the treaty in order that European companies, including Irish ones, do not force countries in the developing world to continue extracting fossil fuels and delay their transition to renewable energy?

Senator Eugene Murphy: The Minister is welcome to the Seanad. I always appreciate how he attends for our debates. This is a difficult time for him, given the major price increases in oil and gas. They do not just affect Ireland, but the world. People are afraid about receiving large electricity and fuel bills. I accept that a number of measures in the budget will be of assistance, for example, an increase in the qualified child payment of €2 per week for children under 12 years of age and €3 per week for children over that age, an increase in the living alone allowance of €3 per week, an increase in the fuel allowance of €5 per week, which most people know about, and an increase in the income threshold of the working family payment of €10 per week. However, we must acknowledge that petrol and diesel prices are at their highest in ten years. The cost of a barrel of crude oil was as low as \$16 in April 2020 but is now \$85. That is the highest it has been in almost four years. Much of this has been caused by the pandemic and is an issue of supply and demand. I hope that, over time, the situation will stabilise and prices will decrease in international markets, which should lead to an easing of fuel prices in Ireland.

I accept the Government is trying to support households with their energy costs through the fuel allowance, the household benefits package and the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, energy poverty retrofit scheme. However, that scheme has not got up and running as such. People are enthused by it and would love to participate, but the cost means that many families will not do so unless we do something in terms of providing low-cost finance and better grant aid. Many middle-income people believe the scheme is a great idea and would love to participate in it but doing so costs €40,000 or €50,000 in many cases. Some people have told me that they would get a grant of €20,000 or €25,000, but will the Minister examine this matter? Retrofitting has to be part of what we do and I am enthused by the idea but I am concerned that we could fall between two stools. Unless we support people in retrofitting, we will not achieve the success we would all like.

I wish to mention the issue of data centres. I am a little concerned that there seems to be a school of thought that data centres are causing all of the problems but that is not true. I appre-

ciate that, the more of them there are, the more electricity they use. That is a challenge for us, but we must consider our planning laws and regulations and new ideas about how data centre companies can create energy of their own on site. I presume that the Minister has a significant interest in this matter.

Data centres play a significant role in Ireland's technology sector and contribute in a major way to Ireland's international reputation as a digital hub. We have extremely valuable information with a gross value of €52 billion to the Irish economy and the sector employs 140,000 people. As such, we must be careful in this debate. Energy efficiencies must form part of the debate, but let us not get into the arena of demonising data centres and blaming them for all of our energy problems. That is not the case.

What is most important is that the Government support families that are in a tight corner financially because of increased fuel and electricity bills and ensure that, if we see the situation deteriorating, we come to their aid without delay.

Senator Seán Kyne: I welcome the Minister. It is important to see senior Ministers in the House and I acknowledge his attendance.

My life experience suggests that power outages are much less common now compared with the 1980s and 1990s. That is testament to the investment and expertise of EirGrid and ESB Networks in terms of their maintenance of the lines. From my recollection, blackouts were much more common back then.

As the Minister of State with responsibility for natural resources in 2016 and 2017, I would have said at the time that oil and gas would remain significant elements of Ireland's energy supply into the future, that Ireland would have to walk a fine line to balance the competing aspects of competitiveness, security of supply and sustainability, and that Ireland was committed to the transformation required to achieve a low-carbon and climate resilient future but that it would not take place over night, with natural gas remaining a significant element of Ireland's energy supply into the transition period as we moved towards an increased use of renewables, including wind and solar. I would also have spoken about the Celtic interconnector, which I hope will be operational by the middle of this decade. It will improve our energy security with another European country, giving us the capacity to power more than 450,000 homes. Subject to planning and so on, it will be built from 2022 onwards. The energy it carries will include some nuclear-generated power coming from France. A number of colleagues mentioned nuclear power. I am not here to advocate for it, but I have received correspondence about small, compact or minor nuclear reactors, depending on what one calls them.

8 o'clock

I had received correspondence regarding small nuclear reactors - compact or minor ones, depending on what you call them. Perhaps the Minister, Deputy Ryan, could comment on that.

In regard to the future of wind energy, I spoke about this in 2016, which is half a decade ago. You do not feel time going. I was delighted to see Fuinneamh Scéirde Teoranta awarded relevant status by the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications in May 2020. This has since been acquired by the Macquarie Green Investment Group to build a 400 MW offshore windfarm off the Connemara coast. What are the timelines for such projects? I am not here to advocate on behalf of this new company, but obviously there is a need for this capacity. In regard to timelines on projects, what sort of consent process will it have to go

through? Will there be the same issues that arise in all planning in this country at the moment? There is an absolute need in regard to energy security. Renewable energies are to be encouraged and are part of where we are at, particularly in relation to COP26 and all that has gone before it.

The strategic reliance on gas when required is prudent. It should not be seen as a failure that we still need gas. It could be argued it is a failure if we have a high number of blackouts. If that happens, we can blame previous Governments but it is always prudent to have that store and that capacity and to have a gas connection through the Moffat terminal in Scotland, which the Minister mentioned in his opening contribution, to ensure that as we transition and as we see more offshore windfarms coming on stream, that security is provided and the threat of blackouts would recede. That is important. The potential in regard to becoming a net exporter of energy is something we aspire to and hopefully will be achieved, whether within a decade or two decades. As I said, it is half a decade since I spoke in regard to these matters as Minister of State at the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment with responsibility for natural resources. I talked about the Celtic interconnector and offshore energy but we still do not have offshore energy. It could be argued it will be another five years. Will some of these windfarms be on stream, besides the Arklow one? Will some of the western high potential generating windfarms be on stream and part of the national grid? Will we be exporting from them?

I thank the Minister, Deputy Ryan, for his attendance and look forward to his reply.

Senator Aisling Dolan: I welcome the Minister, Deputy Ryan, to the Seanad today. It is great to have him here to speak about security of our energy supply, which is so crucial. In his opening statement, the Minister spoke about some of the challenges we face, such as the closure of stations, power stations not coming online and the impact of geopolitics. Energy security is defined as the uninterrupted availability of energy sources at an affordable price.

In Ireland, as the Minister mentioned, the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, manages and monitors our energy and electricity supply, but Ireland is an energy importing economy. We rely on gas and oil imports to meet our energy needs and electricity is mainly from natural gas at the moment. We have increased our renewable energy, particularly wind energy supplies, but on the whole our electricity comes from natural gas. In the past few weeks the number of system alerts and warnings have surged. As the Minister mentioned, EirGrid has confirmed that Huntstown is now operational and that Whitegate in Cork is going to come online but we know that one of the UK-France interconnector cables went on fire. That has a huge impact and the UK has highlighted that it may not have enough energy, and so much of our energy is imported through our interconnector cables.

Last week the *Financial Times* positively said that gas prices have tumbled by more than a fifth but they are still far in excess of prices last January. That has to do with geopolitics and with Russia and Gazprom.

If I bring it from the global and European to the local, the Minister mentioned previously that there may be an opportunity for some stations that have closed to support our energy shortages. I represent Roscommon and Galway and I am talking about Shannonbridge, which is less than 10 km from where I live, and Lanesborough. Can the Minister comment on future plans of the ESB for these stations?

Another question I have relates to the SEAI warmer home scheme, which I have recently

dealt with and which it is excellent. Funding has been increased for SEAI energy retrofit schemes. More than €100 million has been allocated this year in budget 2021. This is an increase of more than €47 million. It is almost half of the total of the residential and community retrofit budget available to people suffering from energy poverty. The challenge we have is that the works are taking between 24 and 36 months. What are the plans? What goals does SEAI have to shorten that period of time for retrofitting?

Just transition is very important. In our area we have benefited from just transition schemes to support remote working but when it comes to retrofitting of homes, how are we going to ensure that our homes can be retrofitted within the next year? Can we reduce that timeline to say 12 months? Considering the budget has increased, what measures need to be taken?

The third question relates to the system amber alerts. IDA Ireland has commented that this is a serious concern, particularly for foreign direct investment coming into the country. In his opening statement, the Minister spoke about procedures relating to demand curtailment, and that would be to industry. In other words, homes, hospitals, public sector and schools are being prioritised for energy supply. How will that work? When the instruction is given to switch to onsite backup, how much advance notice is given? What plans have been put in place on that? Data centres have energy generators, or should have, that they can rely on, but how much of our other industry can do that? What areas is SEAI looking at?

On renewable energy, the climate action plan commits us to 51% reductions. As a spokesperson on research and innovation, I would like to highlight MaREI, the Science Foundation Ireland centre for energy, climate and marine research, headquartered in UCC with more than 200 researchers and 50 industry partners. Its area of research is energy policy and modelling and energy management. How does that feed into the current policies? As Senator Garvey mentioned, in regard to the Planning and Development (Solar Panels for Public Buildings, Schools, Homes and Other Premises) (Amendment) Bill 2021, at what stage is that? One of the key things we would like to see is the ability for individuals and businesses, SMEs and micro, to be able to generate electricity and feed it back into the grid and do so at a profit.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly: I thank the Minister for coming in today at this busy time. He has addressed many of the issues around the causes of the particular situation in which we found ourselves recently, so I will not address those issues. I would like to return to a couple of the issues raised and give my perspective, particularly in regard to data centres. It is very important to get the facts right. Data centres are not a bad thing but it is the energy and the source of the energy used in the data centres which is problematic. Unlike a piece of plastic that is created from fossil fuels, a data centre is as good as the energy that goes into it. The climate action committee heard that no service agreement has been signed with a data centre for a year with EirGrid. That should give people some confidence. There is a narrative that data centres are going in almost every week. Undoubtedly, there are many data centres that were already there. If we get it right, it can help us. That was very clear when EirGrid came before the committee because on the west coast of Ireland in particular, we need to find more industry in order to be able to use the energy, so that the homes around that can also use that energy. If we get it right, it could be a good thing, but we have to get it right and we cannot keep building them unless we get that piece right. I am given some confidence by EirGrid saying that it will come back to us with a plan over the next few weeks and I look forward to seeing that plan. I do not agree that it should involve telling the centres to produce their own energy in whatever way they wish. There should be more terms and conditions regarding it. We questioned EirGrid on that and the company took on board the concerns we expressed.

I regularly hear concerns expressed about the SEAI, some of which are valid. There is a backlog of people waiting to get their homes retrofitted. A lot of public representatives are getting calls about this, particularly in the west of Ireland, which does show that there is an appetite among people to invest because they know there will be a long-term return from doing so in terms of lowering their bills and having a more comfortable home. Again, we have been in government for a relatively short period but there has been huge investment in this area. The Minister, Deputy Harris, attended a meeting of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science today and the discussion was dominated by climate change. Every single Department knows that something needs to be done and understands that this is a crisis. We are all stepping up to the mark. I am given confidence by the Minister's opening remarks this evening. I wanted to put on record some of the things that have happened at the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Environment and Climate Action. The version of events at that committee has been slightly distorted and I wanted to set the record straight.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Róisín Garvey): I thank Senators for their contributions and invite the Minister to respond.

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I will do my best to respond to all of the comments and questions raised in the discussion. I will start with three issues raised by Senator Garvey. She referred to the introduction of green loans for retrofitting, the ability to sell electricity back to the grid and amendments to planning regulations to allow for solar panels. I expect all three to begin within a short number of months. All three should be in place in the next three to four months. All three have a critical role to play and will be of benefit as part of the transition we need to make.

I must beg to differ with Senator Keogan. I am aware of the grid system in California. In fact, I did some work a few years ago on the issue and one of the interesting things in California is the lack of interconnection with neighbouring states. That is a real problem. Optimal grid design in the context of managing variable renewable power requires a level of interconnection and there is a real problem in California in that regard, among other problems. Senator Keogan provided some interesting information on the daily power generation mix in 2017 but even since then, the situation has changed significantly. The cost of battery technology and storage is plummeting, as is the cost of solar and wind generation but the cost of nuclear generation is rising. There are also huge uncertainties around it because it is so expensive and difficult to build. While it is true that we are importing nuclear power from France and Britain in the sense that we cannot differentiate between electrons produced by different generation methods, to go nuclear ourselves would be so expensive and so awkward within our system. I have never had a single person come to me with any serious intent to build a nuclear power plant here. Whatever about our legislation, there has not been a single instance that I can recall in 15 to 20 years working in this area where anyone in this country has seriously proposed that. Anyone making such a proposal would be deemed to be mad. The cost of offshore wind is coming down all the time, with auctions in neighbouring jurisdictions ranging between 40 and 50 cent per kilowatt hour. Bidding for nuclear in Britain, on the other hand, was index-linked at almost three times that level. Why would we go for a power supply that is almost three times more expensive, not to mention the other downsides to it? We differ in our views on this. I always enjoy the debates and conversations around nuclear power but to me it does not make economic sense in our situation.

Senator Dooley also touched on the issue of grid infrastructure. It is critical to bear in mind

that the areas of the country where the grid is strong is where the opportunities for economic development will lie. Parts of our country have very weak grid infrastructure. As we all know, it is not easy to build grid infrastructure but Deputy Dooley's comment in that regard was appropriate. He asked if we could build offshore wind power sooner. All going well, we will set out a new climate action plan this Thursday and we will be aiming for somewhere in the region of 5 GW of offshore wind power by the end of this decade, with the potential for up to 30 GW from offshore renewables. We have been talking about this for quite some time and I believe we can deliver at least 5 GW by 2030 but it will be the latter part of this decade before it arrives. We will start with the first grid auction for offshore next year. It will take up to five years from that auction to construction because it will have to get through planning and get finance, as well as going through actual construction. We are talking about the middle to the end of this decade but it is absolutely doable. I do not think it can be done any quicker because we have to get the planning right, protect biodiversity and deal with some of the other concerns that have been raised.

When Senator McGahon started speaking I was in complete agreement with him. The best protection for consumers in this time of very high fossil fuel prices is, as he said, energy efficiency and renewables. However, I do not think nuclear energy is appropriate in our case because it would put up the price. It would further accentuate the problem because typically nuclear plants are very large and we would have to have significant back-up capacity in the event of a plant being closed down. What we need in an increasingly renewable system is flexible, variable supply but nuclear power is not flexible at all. People refer to small, marginal nuclear power plants but I have never seen one and do not know where they are in operation. Perhaps someone could show me a factory producing them. There is a lot of talk about that but I do not think it actually exists in reality or is likely to arrive within the next decade.

In response to Senator Boylan's contribution, I would tend to agree with Senator Pauline O'Reilly's view. There are real issues with data centres and there is absolutely no doubt about that. The increased demand is very significant and if that were to continue unabated, it would present real difficulties. Everything has to fit within the climate plan and data centres are no exception. They know that. They can help by varying demand depending on the balancing we need to do between supply and demand, by having back-up generation that can kick in when wind levels are low and by locating in areas where we do not have to build so much grid, thereby helping to balance the way in which the grid works. There is a variety of grid standards that we can use that will allow us to retain data centres. I am not in favour of a never-ending stream of data centres but neither am I in favour of a complete *fatwa* or an end to their use because they are a part of the wider economy which we need.

I agree with Senator Moynihan about the need to consider social justice, concern about rising prices as well as energy security and the importance of doing everything we can to make sure that element in the just transition is maintained. She spoke about offshore power coming ashore, with quality, well paid jobs being guaranteed for the supply industries that will service them and so on. I would go back again to the grid and to where the power exists. Where offshore power comes ashore is where the jobs will become available and where the industrial development will occur and accrue. The jobs will be well paid and secure because they will not be dependent on the international gas market or supply chain. We have this renewable resource which gives us a comparative competitive advantage. We live in one of the windiest parts of the planet and wind is one of the main, new, low-cost power sources. A lot of the analysis shows that in the context of where power comes ashore, distance does matter, particularly when we

can create new hydrogen back-up supplies and industrial needs close by. Then the equation will start to work and jobs will follow in the locations where both offshore and onshore renewable energy is generated.

I agree with Senator Higgins about the cost of fossil fuels and the fact that the cost is too high if we lose the world. She spoke about EirGrid wanting to extend the use of fossil fuels. We should be careful on that because I do not think that EirGrid does want to extend the date. EirGrid, I understand, will come out next week with its shaping our electricity future plans, which will be of major historical importance for the direction of the economy. In its statements in the past two months, EirGrid has recognised that we will have to retain certain backup fossil fuel power supplies because we have a short supply. It is not that it wants to do that but to ensure we do not have power cuts. As soon as we get the open cycle gas backup generation that we need, we can balance the system. We will be using less gas in that. We have to have new open cycle gas flexible generation. However, this will only be used on a needs-be basis, when the wind is not blowing. While it will provide 2,000 MW of new power supply, it will not use further gas.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: The date has been extended beyond the scheduled closing date.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: There is no intention to do that. I think 2025 was the closure date target under the emissions directive. Nobody is looking to extend the date. It is purely to get us through to a phase whereby we get a backup variable gas plant to give us cover.

I could not agree more with Senator Murphy on helping families in a tight corner. He referred to the increases to the living alone allowance, the qualified child payment and the fuel allowance. What is significant in the last two budgets is that in each instance we have been able to show, through independent analysis from the ESRI, that despite this environment of higher and increasing fuel prices, the social welfare increases protected those in the bottom four deciles from the increased prices they are experiencing. Every family has different circumstances. However, a large number of those on the lowest income got a net cash benefit. Using the carbon tax revenue to increase social welfare provisions is central strategy. The attractive thing about it is that it is stitched into law that the money will go back. Some 30% of it will go to social welfare increases, 55% will go to improvements in retrofitting and 15% will go to small farmers. That will all help families in a tight corner.

Senator Kyne is right that natural gas still has a role. The backup gas fleet we will need to complement renewable power will be key to having secure supplies in the next two decades. As I said, it will not operate most of the time. If we develop 5 GW of offshore wind, which tends to be more stable, 2.5 GW of solar and further interconnection with France and the UK, we will have more choices. However, we will need backup for that period, as well as for calm periods in the middle of winter. This summer, we saw slow periods of very little wind. We will need that gas, particularly for those periods.

The Senator mentioned the Sceirde Rocks offshore wind farm, one of seven projects we are dealing with because they have legacy consent, foreshore licensing consent and so on. They are in the first phase of offshore rounds. We expect them next year in an auction process. We do not know who will get through that process because it will depend on the auction. They will then have to get through planning and secure all the other consents. That will be first phase. The second phase will follow two or three years later with the next auction and there will then be a third phase.

Senator Boylan mentioned the Maritime Area Planning Bill, which will be critical in that process, particularly in the second phase and beyond the consenting process. The Senator is right that we have to provide biodiversity protection. We are in a biodiversity crisis and not just a climate crisis. We have to protect our marine environment in a co-ordinated way. It is critical that we get the maritime planning legislation through the Oireachtas as soon as we can. Even then, it will take us time to set up the maritime area regulatory authority, MARA, to issue the second phase consents. The first phase will be issued directly by my Department, pending the introduction of MARA.

Senator Dolan spoke about Shannonbridge and Lanesborough. Senator Dooley asked a question which I did not address. I apologise for running slightly over, but I would like to answer this out of respect to Senator Dooley. He asked if people were surprised that nobody had picked up on this shortfall. Yes, everyone was surprised. In the capacity statement two years ago, and in regulator statements, nobody had said this. I recall that ten years ago, EirGrid rightly said at the time that we need a load of backup open cycle gas plants. We have not delivered these since. It was only in the last year that the scale or nature of the problem arose. The auction process did not deliver. We had expected it to deliver for a whole variety of reasons. There was an underlying miscalculation whereby people did not see the need for that 2 GW of backup power. One of the consequences of this is that Shannonbridge, Lanesborough and other power locations with a grid connection, which often also have a platform, infrastructure and industrial expertise and capability, have potential. That is particularly the case in the midlands where there are real skills in areas such as voltage frequencies, stability and providing inertia and battery storage. Part of this energy revolution involves balancing variable supply and variable demand. Doing that and maintaining the frequency and stability of the grid are key. There are companies in the midlands that have real skills in how to provide this. Flywheel energy storage and other synchronistic converter technologies address the technical issue around inertia, voltage and frequency stability. The sites I described may have real potential in that regard.

A number of Senators suggested we need to further enhance or invest in the SEAI warmer homes scheme. It is not surprising that there is a long lead time for the scheme given that it is so attractive. However, we are looking at particular options for potential further funding for it. I hope to come back to the Seanad in the near future if we can get that to full fruition.

I will pick up on one point Senator Pauline O'Reilly said about getting this right. She is correct in what she said about data centres. A balance is needed between creating a stable, prosperous economy for our people and a sustainable low-carbon future. I will take the example of the data centres and the complex different things we could do. If we get this right, it will turn a negative into a positive. We will show we are good at this and become a place in which people will want to invest. We will be able to create stable employment for our people, which we need, because we will be getting it right. We will be decarbonising while still providing essential services.

The climate action plan will, I hope, be published on Friday. It will be an iteration of and will resemble in many ways the original plan from 2019 of the then Minister, Deputy Bruton. That plan was founded on the joint Oireachtas committee recommendations, which were, in turn, founded on the Citizens' Assembly recommendations. We followed a process here. We took a climate approach based on all-party consensus and centred on the Oireachtas committee. The then Minister's plan came out of that and the forthcoming plan will be an evolution from that plan. It will be similar in many ways but more ambitious. There have been more learnings and developments since that can give us confidence that this is where we should go.

The climate action plan must, by law, change next year if we are not meeting our targets. This is the strength of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 we now have. It will continue to evolve and iterate in getting it right in this complex balancing of energy security, environmental considerations and economic interests. The trilemma in energy policy is always how one gets it right. In that trilemma, the environment comes first in getting it right. Whereas one can change security and economic figures, one cannot change the physics of what we have to stop going into the atmosphere. That is a limit that is immutable in the sense that we have to listen to the science. That is the centre of getting it right. As regards the other variables then, we work around the environmental imperative and get it right in that way.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Róisín Garvey): I thank the Minister for his time. I thank all the speakers for their contributions. I wish the Minister the best of luck with his onerous task in Scotland over the next couple of weeks. He has a lot of weight on his shoulders, as have our other leaders. Go n-éirí leat leis sin. When is it proposed to sit again?

Senator Seán Kyne: Tomorrow morning at 10.30 a.m.

The Seanad adjourned at 8.30 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 3 November 2021.