



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

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

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SEANAD ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 19 Bealtaine 2022

Thursday, 19 May 2022

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

*Machnamh agus Paidir.
Reflection and Prayer.*

Teachtaireacht ón Dáil - Message from Dáil

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Dáil Éireann has passed the Defence Forces (Evidence) Bill 2019 on 18 May 2022, to which the agreement of Seanad Éireann is desired.

Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I have received notice from the Senator Fiona O'Loughlin that, on the motion for the Commencement of the House today, she proposes to raise the following matter:

The need for the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment to make a statement on progress in determining terms and conditions of employment for childcare workers.

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

The need for the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment to make a statement on the inclusion of pharmacy and other dispensing assistants and pharmaceutical technicians on the ineligible list of occupations for employment permits.

I have also received notice from Senator Sharon Keogan of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on a post-Covid return to in-person consultations for women seeking access to termination of pregnancy services.

I have also received notice from Senator Seán Kyne of the following matter:

The need for the Minister for the Transport to make a statement on the roll-out of electric vehicle charging points in Galway city and county.

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

The need for the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to ensure Cork is a designated port for the importation of non-EU fresh produce.

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

The need for the Minister for Justice to make a statement on the regulation of jet-skis.

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

The need for the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to make a statement on the programme for redevelopment of regional laboratories and the implementation of a new laboratory information management system.

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

The need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on the HPV vaccination programme, having regard to recent advice received from the national immunisation advisory committee.

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

The need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on the industrial action taken by the Medical Laboratory Scientists Association.

The matters raised by the Senators are suitable for discussion. I have selected those raised by Senators Fiona O'Loughlin, Maria Byrne, Sharon Keogan and Seán Kyne and they will be taken now. The other Senators may give notice on another day of the matters they wish to raise.

Nithe i dtosach suíonna - Commencement Matters

Childcare Services

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: It is my pleasure to welcome my neighbour and colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy English, to the Seanad.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I thank the Leas-Chathaoirleach for accepting this Commencement matter on the terms and conditions of employment for childcare workers. I thank the Minister of State for coming to the House to reply to this Commencement matter. I appreciate that it is within his brief and I hope he will have something substantial to tell us on the matter.

Many of us who work in these Houses would not be here without having childcare workers looking after our children. Schools, hospitals, local authority offices and the Garda could not function without having effective childcare. The conditions for the professionals in the childcare sector must be improved. I use the word "professional" very intentionally. These people are educated, many to degree level. They are experienced and are operating in a much more

regulated and professional environment than ever before. It is about time this reality was recognised and pay and conditions were improved. We all know the pivotal service that childcare professionals provide to parents, families and our wider society. Without their hard work and dedication, our economy and society simply would not function.

The latest childcare study from SIPTU has concluded that low pay is driving workers out of the industry. The annual early years professionals survey for 2021-22 found that 41% of personnel were seeking roles outside the sector, a factor which SIPTU has said is “undermining the sustainability and quality of services for children”. According to the same report, 94% of managers found it difficult or very difficult to recruit staff in the past 12 months. There is a clear and distinct issue here. The majority of early childhood professionals I speak to in south Kildare see no future for themselves in the industry. They fear for their long-term financial security. Most of them who love their job and want to remain in the industry simply cannot afford to do so. Something must be done to retain the talent and experience in the childcare industry.

I acknowledge and commend the significant funding provided in budget 2022 to tackle these issues. That is most welcome, but it is my strong view that the rate of pay must reflect the value of these staff to society. The most recent available data indicate that the average wage in the sector in 2021 was just €12.60 per hour, which is below the living wage. I appreciate that this is a somewhat complex issue to tackle, because the State is not the direct employer. The joint labour committee, JLC, has been ongoing since December 2021, and I understand it is examining a wide array of issues facing the sector, with the ultimate aim of providing an employment regulation order, ERO, to improve standards, pay and conditions within the industry.

In December 2021, Nurturing Skills, the workforce plan for early learning and care and school-age childcare was launched. It included commitments to deliver career pathways, promote careers in the sector, and strengthen supports for continuing professional development. We need to see real and meaningful progress on these goals. Staff, managers and many parents simply cannot wait. Will the Minister of State please provide an update and an overview of the progress made by the Government on the working conditions in the sector? When can staff and operators expect to get certainty about the future of the sector? When can we expect to see workers being paid the wage they and their families deserve?

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English): I thank Senator O’Loughlin for raising this Commencement matter on this very important area. She has outlined very clearly the importance of the Government focusing its work on this space, in conjunction with the private sector. I am pleased she indicated that in the most recent budget, and preceding ones, funding was increased to the sector, which was very important. The focus was on quality, policy and so on but, as the Senator correctly stated, we need to address career paths and terms and conditions and also give certainty to the many highly-qualified staff who work in the sector and provide significant assistance and service to all of us. Childcare is a very important area and I am pleased we have such professional people working in the sector.

On the process, I am pleased that a commitment was made in the programme for Government to support the establishment of a joint labour committee in the childcare sector and the drawing up of an employment regulation order, which will determine minimum rates of pay for childcare workers, as well as terms and conditions of employment. The reason it was set up was to address the issues Senator O’Loughlin raises, but also to recognise that it is a complex area because the sector receives a combination of public and private funding. The JLC

model has worked extremely well in other areas such as agriculture, catering, contract cleaning, hairdressing, security and so on. It is a good way of doing business in other sectors, including hotels, among others, to bring the parties together to have a conversation around a table and get everybody's agreement.

The Minister of State, Deputy Troy, updated the House in February on the process. Since then I understand the joint labour committee for the early learning and care and school-age childcare sector, which is independently chaired, has met a number of times and is progressing its work. I can confirm that the JLC has published its draft proposals and issued an invitation to any interested persons to submit written submissions to it by not later than the close of business on 31 May 2022. These proposals are available on the Labour Court's website. I encourage all interested parties to have a read the proposals and to make their submissions in the next two weeks.

Proposals for an employment regulation order are formulated in the first instance by a JLC where it is satisfied that such proposals would promote harmonious relations between workers and employers. The Labour Court then considers whether to adopt the proposals. In doing so, it will also need to invite submissions from the public. If the Labour Court, having complied with its statutory functions, is satisfied that the proposals are in a suitable form for adoption, it will adopt and submit them to me as the Minister of State with responsibility for this area. My role is to consider the recommendations against the statutory process. If I am satisfied that the process has been complied with and it is appropriate to make an order, I will give effect to an employment regulation order, which would bring a solution to the sector. The timeline for this is approximately six to seven weeks. I see no reason that this cannot be dealt with in the next two months. That is where the process is at currently.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I thank the Minister of State for his comprehensive response. It is good to hear the progress that has been made. We need to emphasise that it is important for members of the public to get involved in the public consultation process. There is still an opportunity to submit proposals by 31 May. I understand from the Minister of State's response that there is to be a second opportunity to invite submissions from the Labour Court. Those two elements of the consultation are very important.

In terms of the proposals that may be adopted, I welcome the statement that we may have this done within two months. We are now nearing the end of May, so we are looking at an order being ready for the end of July. If that is the case, there could be extra supports and funding available in time for the budget for 2023. I would welcome clarification in that regard from the Minister of State. I appreciate that the process is ongoing.

Deputy Damien English: The Senator raised a couple of issues. I will address the funding. Public funding has increased significantly in the past seven or eight years, and rightly so. There is also significant private funding in this area as well as funding from families. It is not all Government funding, but it is certainly Government assisted. As I said, I think it is possible for the process to be completed in the next couple of months in time for budget negotiations and completion of the budget. However, I am not convinced it will be July. I do not want to pre-empt the work the Labour Court has to do, but a key part of this is that the JLC's public submissions will be finished by the end of May and it will bring its work to the Labour Court. It is possible that this process will be completed in July and I see no reason for it not to be completed in time to feed into the budget negotiations. That would be useful because an agreement on the employment regulations would be very beneficial to the sector as it would mean employees and

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employers are in agreement on bringing this matter forward and all the relevant stakeholders are at one. That would certainly help to drive on the development of the sector as one with career choice and a roadmap for career development.

The establishment of the JLC for the sector, following a programme for Government commitment, is a significant and welcome development. I am pleased that it was in the programme for Government and also that there is a commitment from the three parties in government to continue funding in this sector and increase benefits. I am very pleased that bodies representing employers and employees have engaged with the JLC process, as there can be significant positive benefits for both parties. An agreement on a new set of terms and conditions of employment will help maintain and grow the talented pool of people working in the sector, as well as providing security and opportunity for career development in the early learning and care and school-age childcare sector.

Pharmacy Services

Senator Maria Byrne: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy English, for coming to the House today to discuss the all-important matter of the shortage of pharmacists and pharmaceutical technicians. I have been contacted by a number of pharmacists who are very concerned about the skills shortage in the sector. I have communicated with the Minister of State's Department in regard to it. A pharmacist Limerick, who has a number of pharmacies, simply cannot get pharmacists. The person concerned is afraid that the pharmacy will have to close down because it cannot function without having a qualified pharmacist working in it. One or two members of staff came from Brazil, but their qualification is not recognised in this country. They are working with the Irish Pharmacy Union, IPU, to have their qualifications recognised. It is impossible to get staff. Pharmacists I have spoken to say it is taking between six and 12 months from the time they advertise a position until they get people into the role. The sector has reached crisis point. The IPU conference was held last weekend in Dublin. As part of his speech, the president, Mr. Dermot Twomey, highlighted the fact that he had been in communication with the Department in terms of getting pharmacists and pharmaceutical technicians listed on the critical skills list. He highlighted what I outlined a minute ago, which is that the IPU fears there will not be enough pharmacists to actually open the pharmacies. That really is frightening.

We only have to look back at what we went through in terms of Covid-19 and the number of people who relied on pharmacists. While doctors, we will say, were predominantly online, some pharmacists were open 24-7, and most were open five or six days per week and provided in-person consultation. We are so reliant on pharmacies for anything from a little minor bite to something serious. Certainly, there is a shortage and it needs to be addressed.

Deputy Damien English: I thank Senator Byrne for raising this issue and giving me the chance to address the Seanad on the matter. It is timely with regard to the process.

Ireland operates a managed employment permits system, maximising the benefits of economic migration and minimising the risk of disrupting Ireland's labour market. The regime is designed to facilitate the entry of appropriately skilled non-EEA nationals to fill skills or labour shortages in the State required to develop and support enterprise for the benefit of our economy. This objective must be balanced by the need to ensure there are no suitably qualified EEA nationals available to undertake the work and that the shortage is genuine.

The system is managed through the operation of the critical skills and ineligible occupations lists, which, respectively, prioritise specified in-demand skills and identify occupations for which a labour supply should be available in the EEA. The lists are subject to regular, evidenced-based review incorporating consideration of available research and a public consultation, providing an opportunity for stakeholders to submit information and perspectives on the extent of skills or labour shortages. Account is taken of education outputs, sectoral upskilling and training initiatives and known contextual factors such as the ending of the pandemic unemployment payment scheme or the Ukrainian humanitarian crisis and their impact on the labour market.

Submissions to the review are considered by the interdepartmental group on economic migration policy, with membership drawn from senior officials of key Departments, including the Department of Health, which will be relevant in the Senator's case, who may provide their observations on the occupation under consideration. The occupations of pharmacy technician and pharmacy assistant are currently included on the ineligible occupations list. Occupations on the ineligible occupations list are occupations in respect of which evidence suggests there are sufficient EEA workers available to fill such vacancies and, therefore, an employment permit shall not be granted. No submissions were received with regard to these occupations in recent reviews.

The next review of the occupational lists is due to take place in quarter 2 of this year, so it will be open shortly. When open, submissions will be invited from sector representative bodies and interested parties via the public consultation form accessible on my Department's website throughout the consultation period.

In the case of the area the Senator is representing, I would urge the IPU to come forward. It made recommendations in the past in other areas and they were listened to. It must be based on evidence, however, and has to be in conjunction with the Department of Health and other relevant Departments. We are happy to engage with the IPU around that process. Again, if the evidence is there, we can adjust to be able to deal with its concerns around the ineligible occupations list.

The Senator raised the timelines involved in processing permits at this time. While no one can stand over the lengthy waiting times for last year, which was far too long for the second half of last year, we came into 2022 with a backlog of more than 10,000 applications. That is because there was a 70% increase in the number of permits that were applied for last year, which was on top of a 50% increase in the years before that as well. There was, therefore, a massive increase in the permits option. We have trebled the staff in the division to try to deal with this and with the backlog, and they are having an impact. The backlog is now back down to under 6,000 permits as of today. We have trebled the outcome per week, which would have been approximately 300 permits on average this time last year. That is now more than 1,000 most weeks and in the week just gone, 1,200 permits were processed. Much work has been done, therefore, to try to speed up the delivery of these. We have now got the critical skills timeline back down to six weeks, which is very competitive compared with the rest of Europe.

The difficulty is on the general work permit. For trusted partners, we have got it back down to 16 weeks now. It was as high as 24 or 25 weeks at one stage. For non-trusted partners, it is still approximately 21 weeks. All our efforts in the weeks ahead will be to drive that back down and to get all permits down to approximately six or seven weeks, if we possibly can.

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A big impact on that will be an issue we discussed here quite a lot, that is, the changes we made to the system last October allowing for an extra 3,000 work permits in the horticulture and meat industry sectors. They would all have been applied for quite quickly as they are after October. It put a lot of pressure on the system but most of those 3,000 are nearly completed and being processed now, which will free up our staffing timetable to be able to focus on other key areas like hospitality, chefs and so on. The Senator identified the pharmacy sector, with which I think we can also engage during this review process.

Senator Maria Byrne: I thank the Minister of State very much. I was of the understanding the IPU had been in consultation, but obviously it has not. I will go back to the pharmaceutical union and inform it of the process. I appreciate this will be opening shortly because, certainly, it is not just affecting my area; it is affecting areas throughout the country. Their union was actually calling for pharmacists to be added to the critical skills list. While I know a couple of hundred people are qualified every year in the role of pharmacist, the industry cannot get people to apply for the jobs. That is the big problem. I think a lot of people are in employment, to be honest about it. A recent report that came out shows that unemployment in my region is down to just over 4%, which is ahead of what it was prior to Covid-19. It is quite a low figure, which is great, certainly in terms of the mid-west. We are all so reliant on our pharmacists, however, so it is critical. I will tell them about the process, and I am sure the Department's website probably lays out the different things they must do to qualify. I thank the Minister of State.

Deputy Damien English: Again, I thank Senator Byrne for raising this issue. It is a very important area because we know the service our pharmacists provide to all of us. Certainly, they have been extremely busy in helping with the response to Covid-19 over the past couple of years. They do great work and it is important they can access the level of staff they need.

Again, to clarify for the record, the IPU does engage quite a lot with our Department. It also feeds into our retail forum quite successfully and engages quite a lot. What is important on these processes is the evidence. From memory, I think the IPU had submissions for certain categories of workers. When we are doing the Department's review, however, each area of concern must be specified. A formal response was not sent in for the previous two reviews. There might have been on the ones before that. It is important, therefore, we have that formal piece of evidence as well. There was engagement, and some progress has been made in other job categories, but the specific ones the Senator mentioned are probably the focus of this year's involvement. The IPU will no doubt be involved. I am happy to meet with it because it provides a great service.

Abortion Services

Acting Chairperson (Senator Fiona O'Loughlin): I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, to the Chamber.

Senator Sharon Keogan: I thank the Minister of State for being here today. I would have like to have seen the Minister, Deputy Donnelly, here to discuss this very important matter and answer the questions I put down.

I raised the issue in March in this House about the state of telemedicine provisions for abortion in Ireland and the risk surrounding its operation. Telemedicine abortion was introduced in March 2020 as a temporary Covid-19 emergency measure. While virtually all emergency

measures have been pulled back, telemedicine abortion remains in place, with no signs of the Minister for Health seriously committing to pulling it back. This is regrettable as there are serious acknowledged risks associated with telemedicine that must urgently be addressed. I raised some of these in my contribution on 1 March.

I am aware the Minister for Health ordered a review of the revised model of care for termination of pregnancy in quarter 4 of 2021, which took a largely positive view of telemedicine abortion and valued its convenience for women having an abortion.

11 o'clock

However, I must stress that there are considerations more important than convenience and ease of access, such as the physical and mental safety of women and girls in this country. As such, how can the Government stand over the acknowledgement from the HSE, in reply to a parliamentary question, that meeting the woman in person increases the likelihood of the provider identifying any coercion or domestic abuse, yet it continues to operate a policy that facilitates the abuse of vulnerable women? I understand the Minister is considering a blended approach for telemedicine, which would allow operational in-person consultations. Under this proposal, the most vulnerable women would inevitably fall through the cracks. Women suffering from domestic abuse, coercion and those trapped in human trafficking would not benefit from a blended approach. It cannot be seriously argued that abusers would permit their victims to opt for an in-person consultation over a remote, impersonal phone call. Moreover, a phone call is an inadequate substitute for an in-person consultation and examination. There is no way to guarantee a woman's privacy in a phone call scenario.

Recent findings from a BBC Four poll reveal that 15% of women between the ages of 18 and 44 in the UK have experienced pressure to go through with an abortion they did not want to have. Allowing telemedicine at-home abortions to continue without the requirement of a face-to-face consultation for such an important decision leaves open an extremely likely probability of women being coerced into having abortions by the malign influence of a partner or third party. How does the Minister for Health intend to address this alarming probability? Clearly his "whatever you are having yourself" attitude to a blended approach fails to adequately redress this alarming issue.

I fail to see how telemedicine abortion, including even a blended approach, could accurately verify a woman's gestational stage. If a pregnant woman were beyond nine weeks and six days and had inaccurately self-assessed her last menstrual period, she could receive and self-administer abortion pills, which could impose immense health risks. Moreover, there is no way to guarantee a woman would take the pills at home as soon as they are received. Situations like these could lead to complications like haemorrhaging, infection, incomplete abortions and ongoing pregnancy. I cannot see how telemedicine, either in full or in a blended approach, would adequately address these risks. I am calling on the Minister for Health to acknowledge the realities of the situation. People's lives are in danger here. Women in abusive situations are being utterly failed by telemedicine abortion. The Minister cannot continue to live in a bubble where the only issues around abortion relate to how easy and convenient it is to have one. The argument that this measure is a temporary Covid response is increasingly losing its relevance. The Minister needs to address these very serious matters and ensure a full return to mandatory in-person consultations for women seeking abortions.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): I thank the

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Senator for raising this issue, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister for Health. The model of care for the termination of pregnancy service became operational in January 2019, following the enactment and commencement of the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018. Termination up to nine weeks' gestation is carried out in the community by GPs or doctors working in family planning and women's health clinics, providing clinical supervision and supporting women's self-management. Women with a pregnancy between nine and 12 weeks' gestation are referred for hospital-based care.

The arrival of Covid-19 in 2020 required a substantial shift in how care is provided across the health service, including the adoption of measures to facilitate social distancing and reduce personal contacts and footfall within medical facilities, as appropriate. As part of the health system response, a temporary revised model of care for the termination of pregnancy service was agreed to facilitate remote consultation with a medical practitioner for the purposes of accessing termination in early pregnancy. The revised model of care stated that face-to-face consultations could be held if clinically necessary but that such consultations should be kept to a minimum. It is recognised that the current public health guidance, including guidance on managing risk of transmission of respiratory viruses including Covid-19 in general practice, continues to apply and advises limiting footfall through the practice by discouraging unnecessary attendance at the practice by people who can be dealt with equally well by telephone.

As wider public health restrictions began to ease in 2021, the Department requested the HSE's national women and infants health programme to undertake a review of the operation of the revised model of care for termination of pregnancy services from a clinical and patient safety perspective. The purpose of the review was to consider whether the revised model of care should be retained going forward. This review was completed and submitted to the Department. Having regard to the experiences during Covid-19 and the review work undertaken, consideration of the model of care is ongoing.

Senator Sharon Keogan: I was not expecting anything else from the Department, to tell the truth. I am very disappointed. I understand the review is ongoing. I am unfamiliar with how long it will take to conclude the review or when the results will be published. There are safeguarding issues here, specifically with regard to coercive control and domestic violence, and there are also difficulties in identifying the gestational age with telemedicine. There are side-effects to these drugs and pills. Healthcare for abortion is not something that should be given through telemedicine. It is not something that can be ordered online like Amazon or fast food. That is not what abortions and healthcare for women are about. The sooner we get back to in-person consultations the better. It does not serve women well to have abortions available through telemedicine, particularly women who are in vulnerable or coercive relationships and subject to domestic abuse. I look forward to seeing that review. When will it be published? I will be back in September on this issue and hopefully the Minister will be free the next time. I thank the Minister of State for coming in this morning.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: I again thank the Senator. I do not have a date for when the review will be announced but I will follow that up in the Department. Timely access to care, as close to home or the community as possible, is a key principle of the vision of Sláintecare. The review of the changes to the termination of pregnancy model of care adopted during the pandemic is an appropriate and timely initiative. The Department is continuing its engagements with the HSE regarding the final considerations related to this review and the next steps. The outcome of the review will be made available once this deliberative process concludes. In the meantime, it is important to reflect that the temporary model of care, along with the relevant

public health advice, remains in place. The Senator has raised a few issues regarding her views. I will bring them to the Minister and the Department.

Electric Vehicles

Acting Chairperson (Senator Fiona O'Loughlin): I welcome our visitors to the Gallery. It is great to see young people coming back in and having the opportunity to listen to the debates, in both the Dáil and the Seanad, on issues that impact on their lives. I hope they have an enjoyable day in Leinster House today. If there are any follow-up questions they would like to ask us about afterwards, I will be very happy to respond.

Senator Seán Kyne: I thank the Cathaoirleach's office for choosing this Commencement debate and welcome the Minister of State to the Chamber. I tabled this matter to Deputy Eamon Ryan as the Minister for Transport but also as the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, given that the issue of electric vehicle, EV, charging points is one that is covered by both of his ministerial responsibilities in ensuring an adequate network of charging points across the country.

The roll-out of electric cars is running apace, which is to be welcomed, and the car manufacturing industry is increasing production of electric cars in light of fossil fuels being phased out across Europe by 2030 or 2035. EV charging point access will become increasingly important. While it is estimated that home charging will be responsible for more than 80% of EV charging, there will still be a need for an adequate network of charging points across the country. People are on the road, tourists are going to and from various parts of the country and people have anxieties about electric cars' ranges. While ranges and battery lives are improving, there will be a need to reach a point eventually where every town has at least one public charging point.

Local authorities should be central to the siting and placing of charging points. The then Minister, Deputy Bruton, established a grant scheme for local authorities in 2019 with €5,000 payable per point to support the development of on-street public chargers. The uptake of the public charging points scheme is low so far. I do not know whether there is an inadequate level of funding or local authorities are too short-staffed for the design, acquisition and installation of facilities. Perhaps there needs to be an investigation into why there has not been a greater roll-out. I understand that some local authorities are ramping up delivery now, which is to be welcomed, but the reality is that private businesses are leading the way. For example, some exclusive hotels have facilities that are out of the reach of the ordinary person who is not staying there. Understandably, it is an important offering that such hotels provide to people who stay with them.

I contacted the ESB this year and a number of years ago about its policy. Its policy is to start with motorways and national primary routes, which are the most travelled routes. The ESB is supported through the climate action fund. Everyone who pays the carbon tax pays into this fund. There is an attempt to look at destination points, for example, national parks, visitor centres, Office of Public Works properties, etc. This is to be welcomed, but there is a need for public charging points in towns in my area - Moycullen, Oughterard, Barna, Claregalway and Oranmore – as well as in Galway city. There needs to be increased visibility of public charging points to allow people to grab a cup of coffee or tea nearby, relax and wait for their cars to charge.

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I look forward to the Minister of State's response on the roll-out across Galway county and city.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: I thank the Senator for raising this important issue, which is worthy of many local authorities and towns across the country. I am taking this debate on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan.

The Government's policy regarding the increased usage of EVs is primarily driven by the climate action plan, which sets a target of having 936,000 EVs on Ireland's roads by 2030. To support these EVs, Ireland has a comprehensive charging network available to EV owners to charge their vehicles. A number of operators provide these charge points, with the majority being rolled out by EasyGo and by the ESB through its ecars programme. Each provider has a map outlining the availability of these charge points, which is updated in real time.

Charge point operators in Ireland mainly provide charge points that are standard 22 kWh or higher 50 kWh and 150 kWh. Standard charge points are located on streets and in strategic destinations, such as train stations, hotels, shopping centres, etc. The fast and high-powered charge points are mainly focused along the motorways. In addition to the main network, charge points are provided at locations such as places of employment and private car parks. Currently, there are circa 2,000 charge points in Ireland, with this number continuing to grow.

Some €10 million was committed from the climate action fund to support ESB investment in the charging network. This has leveraged a further €10 million investment from ESB.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Frankie Feighan: This intervention alone will result in 90 additional high-power chargers, each capable of charging two vehicles; 52 additional fast chargers, which may replace existing standard chargers; and 264 replacement standard chargers with more modern technology and each consisting of two charge points. The project is due to be completed in 2022.

In March, the Department of Transport published a draft EV charging infrastructure strategy, which is currently out for public consultation. Once finalised, the strategy will provide a key framework for ensuring that we continue to have sufficient infrastructure in place to keep ahead of demand as we move towards the climate action plan goal of almost 1 million vehicles on the road by 2030.

Regarding Galway city and county, the Department of Transport has been informed by ESB ecars that its charging network in Galway has 12 standard charge points, nine fast chargers and four high-powered charge points, with all 12 of the standard charge points featuring two connections for a total of 24 individual points where an EV can be charged.

In addition to the existing network, the public charge point scheme has been in place since September 2019, providing local authorities with a grant of up to €5,000 per charger to support the development of on-street public chargers. It is intended that this scheme will be expanded significantly to coincide with the launch of Zero Emission Vehicles Ireland, ZEVI, in the coming months. The primary focus of the scheme is to provide support for the installation of infrastructure that will facilitate owners of EVs who do not have access to private parking spaces but rely on parking their vehicles in public places near their homes to charge their vehicles. The

Department is making significant funding available this year and next through ZEFI to support the installation of destination charge points in locations such as hotels and parks.

Senator Seán Kyne: I thank the Minister of State for that response on behalf of the Department. I welcome the information in it, according to which County Galway has 12 standard charge points, nine fast chargers and four high-powered charge points. County Galway is the second largest county in the country and has a large tourist destination in the form of Connemara, where public charge points are non-existent. Work is needed if there is to be a proper roll-out of facilities in towns in such areas, for example, Moycullen, Oughterard, Barna, An Spidéal, An Cara Rua and Clifden, and if we are to ensure adequate facilities so that tourists or people who are on the road travelling for business, weekend vacations or the like have certainty that there are electric charging points in those areas. I urge the Department to engage proactively with local authorities to ensure that the level of ambition and delivery is ramped up across County Galway.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Fiona O'Loughlin): I apologise for the disturbance caused by my phone during that exchange.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: Senator Kyne has raised an important issue. I would have expected there to have been more than 12 standard charge points in County Galway. More needs to be done. We continue to expand the national charging network through support for on-street chargers. A report was published by the County and City Management Association giving guidance to local authorities on the provision of charging infrastructure. The document may be viewed online.

To support home-charging, the SEAI, on behalf of the Department of Transport, administers an EV home charger grant of up to €600 towards the purchase and installation of an EV home-charger unit. As regards existing apartment buildings, work is currently being progressed to expand the EV home-charger grant to include shared parking in apartment blocks and similar developments. The Department of Transport is working closely with the SEAI and expects a scheme for apartments to open shortly.

On new builds, there are charging points. The Senator has highlighted an issue. We probably need more chargers in County Galway and in many other counties and cities around the country. I look forward to all of the stakeholders working together to achieve that.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 11.21 a.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar meán lae.

Sitting suspended at 11.21 a.m. and resumed at 12 noon.

12 o'clock

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

Senator Regina Doherty: The Order of Business is No. 1, motion regarding the arrangements for the sitting of the House on Tuesday 24 May, 2022, to be taken on conclusion of the Order of Business, without debate; and No. 97(1), Private Members' business, motion on carbon policy, to be taken at 2 p.m. and to adjourn after two hours if not previously concluded.

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Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: The first issue I raise is that tomorrow Ireland will be taking the presidency of the Council of Europe for the first time in 24 years. It is an important time. Ireland was of course one of the ten founding members of the council. When we think about how the world and indeed Europe have changed over the past 24 years, we see that the commitment and values of the Council of Europe to the promotion and protection of human rights, democracy and the rule of law are more vital than ever. It is important to wish our Minister for Foreign Affairs and Minister of State with responsibility for EU affairs well. I will lead the parliamentary delegation, which includes the Leas-Chathaoirleach, Members of the House and also Members of the Dáil. We will have a very busy six months ahead. I hope it will be an exciting time. Ireland will be pursuing three clear and complementary priorities. The first will be affirming our founding freedoms, that is, refocusing on human rights protection for civilians right across Europe, especially through the European Court of Human Rights. Second, we will be promoting participatory democracy and engagement with young people through Hear our Voices! by drawing on our experiences with citizens' assemblies that many countries want to learn about. Third, we will be working to foster a Europe of welcome, inclusion and diversity. It would be worthwhile during the six months to have a two-hour debate here, possibly with some of the guests we will have coming from the Council of Europe.

I raise also the July provision. While it is wonderful that very significant funding is being made available for the programme, and that is really important, we all know the importance of consistency and routine for those who are availing of special education. However, a real problem for so many parents of children with special needs is that they cannot get a July provision place and this is especially the case for children who attend special schools. It must be looked at and examined again. One of the very significant issues is the low rate of pay that special needs assistants, SNAs, receive for providing July provision. Last year this was not paid until January. We must look at that again.

I raise the recent evaluation of the World Meteorological Organization, which claims that alarming new records for sea level rise, ocean heating and acidification, and greenhouse gases in the atmosphere were set in 2021. We have seen a distinct change in climate policy and that is really good. However, we should have a debate in the House on the efforts that are being made to look at incredibly innovative solutions by companies such as Green Generation in Kildare. Senator McGreehan has been working with EnergyCloud. We need to look at how we can support such endeavours.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I thank the Senator. I of course support and echo her words on our important presidency of the Council of Europe.

I invite Senator Craughwell of the Independent Group to address us.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I thank the Leas-Chathaoirleach. In recent times capital projects have been questioned. People ask how the national children's hospital went from €600 million to possibly €2 billion, or more. It is no secret that I have had a huge interest in search and rescue. I have been spending a considerable amount of my time and that of the House trying to get to the bottom of what goes on in that area. I had been pursuing the business case that led to the pre-qualification questionnaire being delivered. At that time I was not aware that a 415-page document was the submission put forward by the Air Corps to take its one base out of the system. There are 415 pages of detailed work on how they would meet the criteria for search and rescue. That document was sent to be evaluated by an independent evaluator. I am holding the independent evaluator's report. It is three pages. There is not one statistical,

technological or empirical reason given for the recommendation that the Air Corps submission be rejected - nothing. The Leader will have the report in her mailbox later on today. The Air Corps was asked to submit a rebuttal. It produced 18 pages of detailed analysis of the consultant's report.

In 1998, PricewaterhouseCoopers spoke about the search and rescue contracts. It made the point in paragraph 136 of the Air Corps presentation that, "SAR contracts on the West and East coasts would continue on a contract basis on a recurring contract equivalent, at a cost of €4.5 m per annum, with no asset transfer to the State over the contract period". It goes on to price the cost per hour of flying search and rescue using the contractor. On the west coast, when a helicopter takes off in a search and rescue role, it is costing taxpayers €81,000 per hour. On the east coast, when a helicopter takes off on a search and rescue mission, it is costing €145,000 per hour. Based on questions to the Minister, the cost per hour of flying for the Air Corps is €4,000; that is €141,000 cheaper than the private contractor. More importantly, the consultant condemns the Leonardo AgustaWestland 139 helicopter as not being suitable for search and rescue. That helicopter is in use in 14 countries in Europe, including Italy, Spain and Portugal, all of which have coastal areas. I am asking today, by way of a letter to the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and the Minister for Transport, Deputy Ryan, the Minister for Defence, Deputy Coveney, the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath, and the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Transport, that this process be stopped right now until we establish exactly what has led to the Air Corps being removed. The Air Corps could have saved the economy several million euro over the lifetime of this contract. This is outrageous. When one talks about getting access to the business case, if one cannot see who was eliminated from the business case then one has no idea what took place. This has to be stopped now. I do not want to see this country spending €1.5 billion to €2 billion on something when we will have nothing to show for it at the end.

Senator John McGahon: I want to follow up on a comment made by Deputy Richmond yesterday about the concept of a special Oireachtas committee on Irish unity. It is an excellent idea and one that the Government should strongly consider and implement, for a number of reasons. I am a member of the Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement, which is a really excellent committee but its focus is very wide. It deals with a really wide variety of issues both in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland.

In contrast, a special committee on Irish unity would have a laser-like focus on Irish unity and could really home in on some of the key issues that need to be discussed. The Good Friday Agreement committee is a useful vehicle for making sure that the agreement is upheld and implemented and that is its main focus. Deputy Richmond has called for a special committee to deal specifically with the issue of Irish unity, which is a call that I support. It is a really good idea. The special committee on Brexit in the previous Seanad worked quite well. A committee like that, with a very specific focus, that can bring in a wide variety of stakeholders is very important because it is a conversation that is happening right across this island.

I do not believe a border poll at this point in time would be useful because it would not be won, to be frank, and the results in the recent Northern Ireland Assembly elections bear that out. However, there is no reason we should not be having that conversation, preparing for it and talking about the likely pros and cons of a united Ireland. It would be useful to tease out what those cons could be and to offer reassurance to people in both the nationalist and unionist communities that this is a good thing to do and that we are all working together. This is a level of responsibility that the Government should be taking on.

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Deputy Richmond said yesterday that “Brexit has shown us what happens when you ask a question with no clear outline of what the answer looks like”. The important thing about the proposed committee is that it would provide very clear answers. It will enable us to avoid a situation where a border poll is held, the result goes one way or the other and then we spend six or seven years trying to cobble together a response. It would give us a clear outline of what a united Ireland could look like and what the benefits might be. It is something the Government should strongly consider. I totally support Deputy Richmond’s call for such a committee and believe the Government should consider establishing it this year.

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: Inné, bhailíomar taobh amuigh de gheataí Theach Laighean chun tacú le feachtas An Dream Dearg ar son Acht na Gaeilge ó Thuaidh. Beidh lá dearg i mBéal Feirste ar an Satharn beag seo ar 1 p.m. agus tá súil agam go mbeidh comhghleacaithe ón Oireachtas ar fad in ann a bheith i láthair linn ar an mórshiúl bríomhar dearfach agus dearg le fearg sin.

Yesterday we gathered outside the gates of Leinster House to support An Dream Dearg and Conradh na Gaeilge’s call for an Irish language Act to be implemented in the North. This is a long-standing demand and one that the Irish Government has supported steadfastly since 2006 when it was first committed to by the British Government during the St. Andrews negotiations. On Saturday, thousands of Gaels will descend on Belfast and I hope colleagues from right across the Oireachtas can join us on what will no doubt be a very colourful and vibrant but also very demanding and focused parade and campaign. It is time that an Irish language Act was delivered in the North.

Like Senator McGahon, I note the remarks of Deputy Richmond in Westminster last night. It says something when the Palace at Westminster can host a discussion about Ireland’s future and preparing for constitutional change without any great rancour or controversy. In the first instance, in supporting the call for the establishment of such a committee on preparing for constitutional change, it would be healthy if we too could create the space for civic voices and varying political voices who do not have a permanent presence in this institution to come in and take part. That is something I will engage colleagues on and I am sure it will be well received.

In terms of the committee itself, Senator McGahon makes a very important point. The Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement has a very wide remit of work. It deals with a huge breadth of issues and, unfortunately, it still has a lot of work to do in terms of seeing the full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement, in terms of things like Acht na Gaeilge, human rights and equality and a whole range of other issues. It would probably be a bit short-sighted to locate that kind of discussion on Irish unity in that committee because it would take away from the rest of its work. As Senator McGahon said, it needs that focused discussion. It is a very responsible call and is one I have made previously, on occasion. In the context of preparation and planning, it is the right thing to do and the leaderly thing to do. It is also the responsible thing to do in terms of party political and constitutional obligations and fulfilling those. I hope we can see the establishment of that committee and that we will all bring positivity, determination and focus to it going forward.

Senator Rebecca Moynihan: I want to raise the issue of the unequal allocation of cycling resources within Dublin city on National Bike Week. Dublin City Council has drawn down funding for active travel measures. We all know that in order to facilitate a move away from the car towards active travel methods such as cycling and walking, we must invest in these measures but my constituency has received 13 times less funding than the neighbouring con-

stituency of Dublin Bay South, which is the Minister for Transport's own constituency. To put that in context, Dublin South-Central gets 1% of the active travel measures while Dublin Bay South gets 15%. It is a very unfair allocation of resources.

Dublin South-Central has an enormous problem with bad roads and poor cycling and pedestrian infrastructure. We have, for example, been pushing for pedestrian infrastructure along Herberton Road to allow school children to cross the road safely but are constantly told that it would be subject to funding from the National Transport Authority, NTA, for the Grand Canal cycle route. As soon as one crosses the constituency boundary, one notes that the Grand Canal cycle route is very pleasant but, unfortunately, on my side of the canal, cyclists are squeezed, forced to compete with traffic and do not have the same cycling infrastructure at all. During National Bike Week we must make sure that poorer and more disadvantaged constituencies such as mine get an equal allocation of cycling infrastructure.

We know that 59% of journeys are less than 2 km but we have to make it safe for people to cycle. I cycled in to Leinster House today and in a bus lane I was squeezed by many, many cars. I had to point out that they should not have been in the bus lane until much further up. That is a daily occurrence and is difficult to deal with every day. I say that as a long-term cyclist who has cycled to school since the age of six. I would like to see equal allocation of active travel measures within the Dublin South-Central area.

I also want to flag and raise an issue that is going to become bigger over the summer months, that is, the report of the Construction Defects Alliance, which is due to be published in November. I am afraid that the clock will be allowed to tick down on this when the report is handed over to the Minister. There are many people living in apartment complexes in my area who are dealing with huge individual bills for fire defects that were caused through no fault of their own. While we have a redress scheme for mica, what seems to be emerging for construction defects are low-cost loans. That unequal treatment of people who live in urban centres and apartments is unacceptable. I ask that we keep an eye on this and, when the report is published, provision be immediately made for redress for potentially up to 100,000 apartment owners throughout the State, not just in Dublin, who will face huge bills. It should not be a low-cost loan, a loan or a tax rebate but exactly the same redress as that for the mica families, which is full redress for the construction defects that happened through no fault of their own.

Senator Malcolm Byrne: I join my colleague, Senator O'Loughlin, in calling for a debate on the World Meteorological Organization's annual report on the state of the climate. Yesterday evening, I had the opportunity to read elements of the report. In many ways, it does not tell us anything new other than clearly emphasising the seriousness of the threats we continue to face. It is important that in these Houses we are prepared to face up to some of the challenges and to talk about the serious impacts they have on our communities. Where I live, in a coastal community, one of the particular challenges we face is around flooding and coastal erosion. It is particularly important we look at what will be the long-term implications for insurance, housing and the other costs we all have.

I am proud to be part of a Government that is taking this issue seriously but, frankly, it is also important to start to call out parties and Independents who speak out of both sides of their mouths on the climate issue. We are either serious about tackling climate change, and taking some of the tough measures, or we are only paying lip service to it. That is why a full, frank and honest debate around those issues will be important.

Senator Rónán Mullen: That includes nuclear. We will put the Senator to the test on that very point today.

Senator Malcolm Byrne: I am open to all opportunities.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Please allow Senator Malcolm Byrne to continue without interruption.

Senator Malcolm Byrne: I am perfectly open to all energy opportunities, including hydrogen and fusion. Let us explore whatever is coming down the line, but it should be an open debate.

One of those coastal communities I will mention is Courtown-Riverchapel. I pay tribute to the local Riverchapel Community Complex group. It has worked very hard, its chair Mr. Craig Lang in particular, and in the context of responding to some of the challenges for our coastal communities, has now opened a new community complex. If we are talking about vibrant coastal communities, we need to recognise what is already being done.

Senator John Cummins: One of the best value-for-money examples the State has is the roll-out of the disabled person's grant and housing adaptation grants, which are administered through local authorities. There are mobility aid grants of up to €6,000, housing aid for the elderly grants of up to €8,000 and housing adaptation grants of up to €30,000. There are discrepancies, however, between what can be allocated to local authority-owned stock and privately-owned stock. In light of inflation, we need to increase the funding envelope available for schemes for council-owned properties and privately-owned properties. It is probably now time those grant levels were reviewed because what is happening, and I have examples from my constituents, is people are approved for low-cost grants of up to €6,000 in order to get a wet room in their house for somebody who is getting older and frailer, and €6,000 is just not stretching to cover the cost of the works, even if they can get a contractor to price them.

It is now an opportune time to have a debate on the overall scheme. Are there changes we need to make to the local authority funding stream for this area? Is there merit in increasing the grant levels? Do we need to include other elements that are not already included in the schemes? I would appreciate it if the Leader could arrange for a debate on this topic, and perhaps a wider topic, in the coming weeks because this is now a pinch point for families who want to keep people in their own homes, which is, ultimately, a saving for the State. They need to be supported in doing so by having those grants available to them.

Senator Rónán Mullen: When one looks at debates in Britain on Brexit and the protocol, and the behaviour of the British Government around those things, or the behaviour of leading politicians during lockdown and the ongoing craziness in the United States around many issues, we in Ireland might be tempted to think that somehow we have a more objective way of doing politics and looking at issues of public controversy, but I do not think that is true at all. If we look at the debate on the national maternity hospital, the amount of fake news to which we have been subjected for so long now is hard to believe. It has been clear to me for a long time, and it is the only sane read of the situation, that the Sisters of Charity lost any power to influence future events at the hospital a long time ago. The Government will get its abortions and these will happen in an institution called after St. Vincent. That is a scandalous and painful situation not just for Christians but other people who saw and valued the tradition of church-run hospitals as places that provided high-quality, ethical healthcare that protected everybody equally.

I do not understand why there has been no scrutiny of how and why it was allowed to happen that the nuns gave away or lost their capacity to protect their ethos. I do not understand why there is no debate about the lack of ethical diversity now planned for our maternity hospital system. If somebody wants to have a baby in a hospital that does not deliberately end unborn children's lives, why should that not be available to that person? A third of the voting population voted for healthcare that protects mothers and babies equally. Are they entitled to no representation or presence in our system? Why is there no scrutiny of the arguments coming from critics of the Government's arrangements?

I wondered in these days whether it suited people to foment controversy about the contribution of religious institutions and personnel to Irish social life. It is too easy to cover that conflict without asking any hard questions about abortion and the lack of mandated pain relief during late-term abortions and so on. I wonder why it is okay to trash faith-based hospitals, given their impressive record compared with other institutions, all things considered. The disaster of a wrongly diagnosed unborn child being aborted at Holles Street would not have happened in a Catholic hospital. People should reflect on that. We need ethical diversity at the very least. A referendum does not change that.

Senator Paul Daly: I will raise one simple issue. As the weather gets a little finer and our lands dry up, each year we seem to have an increasing number of wildfires and forest fires. I would like the relevant Department to start an early awareness campaign on this. I warmly welcome the statement from the Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Noonan, in which he knocked the fact that Irish farmers are often hammered online for being the cause of these fires. While I do not want to get into the blame game, farmers are the big losers through the loss of acres of forestry, animals and biodiversity. In addition, in the year following a fire, if it is proved their land has been burned, even by a fire they did not start, farmers will lose payments from their schemes. While I am not getting into a blame game, this is important.

Our firefighters and first responders are the people who will be most at risk. It is the first year in three where Irish people will get out to enjoy their countryside, and have their barbecues, parties and so on, but we need awareness and people need to be very conscious of the situation. Without getting into a debate about climate change, we seem to have a drier, harsher wind blowing. Ground conditions are much drier at present and fires will start much more easily. As I said, the big losers are not only farmers but the people putting their lives at risk when such fires start. We are losing an enormous amount of biodiversity every year, including forestry and animals. Accidents will happen but awareness can prevent many of them. It is vitally important the campaign starts early and people are made aware that while they are welcome in rural Ireland, and we hope they can enjoy a good summer from a climate point of view, they should be careful and please try to avoid the dangers that go with fires that are started inadvertently.

Senator Seán Kyne: Cuirim fáilte roimh an gCeannaire. Bhí an Príomh-Aoire agus an tAire Stáit ar a bhfuil freagracht as an nGaeltacht, an Teachta Chambers, ar cuairt go Corr na Móna i gConamara le déanaí agus é ag seoladh plean teanga do cheantar Dhúiche Sheoigheach agus Tuar Mhic Éadaigh. Ba ócáid álainn é agus bhí oíche álainn againn san ionad pobail i gCorr na Móna. Chuaigh an Teachta ar cuairt go dtí seid na bhfear i gCorr na Móna. Chas sé leis an muintir áitiúil a thagann le chéile gach seachtain, agus, uaireanta, níos minice ná sin, chun tacú lena chéile agus chun obair le chéile go háitiúil. Is rud deas é sin. The men's sheds are a very important social outlet for men of many ages. Although predominantly used by elderly and retired men, they are open to all men who have an interest in taking part. It is

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important that men of all ages take part if we are to ensure the future of the sheds. There are 360 men's sheds across the country. Like many voluntary and small community groups, they always struggle for funding.

Last week, I met with representatives of the men's sheds and I also met the group in Cor na Móna when the Minister of State, Deputy Chambers, visited last week. They are looking for sustainable funding. I ask that the Leader write to the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, to see what can be done in the upcoming budget. They have talked about an annual shed sustainability grant of €2,500 per shed and support for start-up sheds of up to €10,000. With regard to other supports, shed maintenance grants could be placed at the disposal of sheds nationwide.

It is clear that there is a need for a sustainable level of funding for men's sheds across the country. They are very important for mental health, coming together and social gathering. They have great potential not just for men in rural areas, but for men in urban areas as well. I ask the Leader to contact the Minister regarding the possibility of sustained funding for the sheds.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Senator Warfield is the next speaker but I understand he wants to swap his place with Senator Sherlock for reasons that will become obvious in a minute.

Senator Marie Sherlock: I wish to propose an amendment to the Order of Business. I must apologise that I did not provide advance notice. I seek leave to introduce No. 17 on the Order Paper, the National Minimum Wage (Payment of Interns) Bill 2022. I propose that this be taken before No. 1, if at all possible. Our Bill is effectively to ensure that all work is paid and that there is a level playing field for all workers, and young workers in particular, regardless of their background at the start of their working lives. In quite a number of sectors, it is now nearly impossible to get employment unless one takes on an unpaid internship. That reinforces privilege and the lack of diversity that exists in certain sectors. We believe this Bill is very important.

The main call I will make today is for a debate with the Minister for Health on the national women and infants health programme. This is a very good programme, of course, although it has yet to be fully implemented. It involves a great deal of ambition but we are still a long way from seeing its full implementation. Yesterday, we saw the launch of the national standards for infant feeding, which are very much to be welcomed. It is interesting that, on the same day, I raised a Commencement matter with the Minister of State at the Department of Health who confirmed that, of the 24 lactation posts announced last year, none have yet been filled. Of the 10.5 posts announced in 2020, just over eight have been filled. The result is that, across the whole country, we only have 8.3 publicly funded lactation consultant posts to work within communities. I ask that we have a debate with the Minister for Health on this issue and the very many issues associated with women's health in this country.

Senator Maria Byrne: I welcome two good news stories for Limerick and the mid-west. One relates to the €10 million investment by Ryanair in hangar 5 at the airport, where 200 high-end jobs are to be created. This investment relates to servicing Ryanair's aircraft. By 2026, the airline will have many more aircraft in the air so there will be a significant increase in the number of jobs created, these being based at Shannon.

The other good news story relates to yesterday's announcement by the Minister, Deputy Foley, of a €19 million school project for Limerick Educate Together Secondary School. This school will be based in Castletroy. I welcome that and wish the principal, the staff, the students

and the families associated with the school all the best because I know they have been waiting for a while. I hope they will be entering their new school in 2023.

I ask for the Leader's intervention with the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth in respect of a group of Ukrainians. Recently, 15 Ukrainians were moved from the Castle Oaks House Hotel in Castleconnell, Limerick, with one day's notice. Four of these had taken up employment locally, two had jobs pending and a number of them had children enrolled or started in local schools. They had settled into the community well. A number of the residents, including Emer O'Donnell, had been co-ordinating with them and helping them to settle into the community. They were given a day's notice that they were leaving and are now living in four cramped apartments in Temple Bar. It is fine to be moved from Castleconnell to Dublin but some of these people are now sleeping on couches when they had a bed where they were.

I understand the hotel was willing to keep them so I really do not know what has happened. Contact was made with the Department, which says that it cannot comment on individual cases. It just does not seem right that they were moved so quickly and moved away from fine accommodation and a settled community. They are now really at sea and, as it will take a couple of weeks for their social welfare payments to be transferred to Dublin, they will have to continue to come to Limerick to collect their payments.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I call on the patient, co-operative and facilitative Senator Warfield.

Senator Fintan Warfield: As ever.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Good man.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: It is the first time the Senator was ever called that.

Senator Fintan Warfield: As are you, Senator Buttimer. I second Senator Sherlock's amendment to the Order of Business. As the Leader of the Seanad will know, the Joint Committee on Gender Equality met this morning to discuss the recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality relating to norms and stereotypes and education.

The Minister, Deputy Foley, addressed the committee and, while her opening remarks painted a very positive picture and while she spoke about catering for all learners and about relationships and sexuality education being a right, as the Minister knows, the reality is that one in three students have not received any form of relationships and sexuality education at senior cycle. That statistic comes from a recently published Irish Second-Level Students' Union, ISSU, survey. As ever, I commend the union's work.

As everyone here will know, people have been crying out for action and change in this area for many years. People, including me, have grown tired of asking. It is particularly upsetting to know that whether gender-diverse students or students with same-sex attraction get the education they need about health relationships is a lottery, although it is important to note that this very much applies to all students.

As the ISSU says, the curriculum focuses more on biology than on consent. The Minister referenced the reviews taking place and those that are in the pipeline and committed to writing to the committee to detail them. We need clear dates for the reviews and for their implementa-

tion. However, as I have pointed out, all the reform in the world may still not be enough to ensure equality of opportunity across the board for students. I welcome the fact that the Minister is prepared to use the programme for Government commitment to legislate for inclusive sex education down the line, if necessary. I hope it will not be necessary and that we can do this without legislation.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: The amendment the Senator has seconded is that No. 17 be taken before No. 1.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I ask that we have a debate with the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the Minister for Transport on our ports policy regarding the designation of ports for the importation of non-EU fresh produce. I ask this in the context of Cork Port, which should be designated as one of those ports that allows for the importation of non-EU fresh produce. Second, I ask that the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine extend the provision of clearance personnel for fresh produce to Cork Port. Currently, they are only provided to Dublin and Rosslare ports. I will give an example. Senator Boyhan, as an agriculturalist and horticulturist, and Senator Lombard from Cork will be aware of this. Israeli carrots come into Cork Port and are brought up to Dublin Port. They are then brought back down the road again in a lorry, adding cost and doing nothing for the environment and climate action. There is a need for real reform in our ports, which fall under the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the Department of Transport. I ask that Cork Port be classified as a designated port for the importation of non-EU fresh produce. It is coming into the country already. It is leaving Cork, going to Dublin and coming back down again. It makes no sense whatsoever from an economic, climate change or sustainability point of view. I ask that we have this debate. I requested a Commencement debate on this matter this morning. Unfortunately it was not selected, which is fair enough because I got one already this week but I will submit it again next week. We need a holistic debate on our ports policy because it makes no sense that Cork Port is not a designated port for the importation of non-EU fresh produce.

Senator Victor Boyhan: Yesterday, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform launched an update of Project Ireland 2040 and the national development plan. It was really an update of the tracker with the interactive maps and profiles of the various projects across the country. I would recommend that everyone look at it. They can click on a town, local authority area or a region. It is very impressive. I acknowledge the work of the Government on Project Ireland 2040 and the national development plan. It is very beneficial for all of us, as national, local or European politicians, to know what is going on in our areas. It is a great tool and I acknowledge that it was yet again updated yesterday and formally launched by the Minister.

This has been a recurring theme here but I am concerned about the rising cost of construction and how that will impact on the national development plan. Issues around procurement are becoming more and more challenging and there are now huge costs involved. The Minister has already flagged that there may be some impact on the national development plan because of these matters. It is important that we have an update on it in the House because Members are interested in this issue. I liked the Minister's statement that he has now established an external assurance process, EAP, which will provide independent scrutiny of major public capital projects that cost in excess of €100 million. That is the sort of scale we are talking about. It is an enormous plan and represents enormous ambition, which is great. I particularly like this EAP scheme the Minister has talked about because €100 million is a lot of money. I would have thought it would apply to projects of a lot less. The nature of this is that it is a multi-billion euro programme and it is a bigger vision to 2040. At an appropriate time when there is a slot

available, not necessarily in the next few weeks, it would be very interesting to have statements and an update on these plans.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Now, after a long wait, Senator Lombard.

Senator Tim Lombard: We need to have a real and comprehensive debate with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage about his vision for what local government will be. We are just over 100 weeks away from local elections and there are huge issues around what powers members of local authorities have. There has been an erosion of those powers over the last decade.

This evening I am going to a meeting in the GAA complex in Minane Bridge, where we will be discussing a road traffic issue. A section 38 application was made by the local authority. Some 98% of the public were against it but because of the way section 38 procedures work, the management executive has full control and is now proceeding with the works. The democratic process has been washed away by the executive function of the local authority. Every member of the community is against this one-way system but the management of Cork County Council wants it to happen.

Next Sunday at 3 p.m. I am going to a protest in Kinsale. Over 2,000 people have signed a petition regarding the relocation of Piper's caravan from the scenic area where it has been since 1932. It is an issue of huge concern for the people of Kinsale but again, the council management has made a decision and decided it is going to happen.

We have to have a real debate about what powers to give our local democracy and local councillors. In many ways, the executive is walking all over them. We have to blame ourselves because over the last two decades Ministers with responsibility for local government have continuously given powers to the executives of local authorities and undermined the functions of the members. Unless we change that, nobody is going to run for local government. Nobody is going to get involved in politics because there will not be any local governments but dictatorships by the executives. That is what we have at the moment. We need the Minister to come to this Chamber and give us his vision of how he believes the system can be changed. In two years, nobody will be putting their hand up to run for local government. What is the point of getting involved if they have no say and no powers and the executive controls everything?

Senator Micheál Carrigy: I rise today to concur with the comments of Senator Malcolm Byrne yesterday on the Irish Athletic Boxing Association, IABA. We need an independent review into that organisation. This issue has been brought to this floor on numerous occasions and has been spoken about at committees. A review was conducted by the same person who did the previous review a number of years ago. It was asked for at short notice by the IABA because it was being brought before the Oireachtas joint committee to query its governance. Despite the organisation telling us there was nothing wrong with what it was doing, none of the 64 recommendations in that review was referred to the organisation itself or the management. We need a new review, or, as has happened in other organisations, we need to put a new management structure in place in the organisation and those who are there should be removed. We have had issues with insurance, sports equipment, grass and procurement. Nearly 30 people with hundreds of years of service were suspended by this organisation and had to go to Sport Dispute Solutions Ireland to defend themselves, at a cost of tens of thousands of euro. They won that case but all the costs were awarded against them because it came into the public domain that they had won. I do not think that is the right way for anyone to appeal anything. The

people who suspended them in the first place have no costs because they are being paid out of the coffers of the IABA. That is not acceptable. This organisation has been constantly in the headlines over the last 20 years for the way it is being run, yet the same people seem to be there. I am very disappointed in the Minister of State, Deputy Chambers, and his comments when the review came out. Within 24 hours he was on the national airwaves basically threatening funding to clubs if they did not accept the recommendations. Recommendations should only be taken on board if they are made independently and that is what needs to be done.

Senator Aisling Dolan: This week, the Minister of State at the Department of Education, Deputy Madigan, made an announcement about the importance of ensuring children with special needs have access to school places. We are now seeing mainstreaming and our schools are embracing that. We are seeing the special needs educational teachers who are being rolled out. There are over 19,000 SNAs, which is a huge number. However, in my area I am getting many schools that are still crying out for more supports in order to have more special classes. It is crucial boards of management within our schools are looking at what the need is from families within their catchment areas. That must be reflected. In my own area around Athlone there are students in the Westmeath and Roscommon areas who are in challenging circumstances. Senator Carrigy also raised this last week as a Commencement matter. We have a wonderful new school in Roscommon, Coláiste Chiaráin, that already has special classes. However, again it is the case that within our catchment areas our schools really must acknowledge and recognise the need within those areas and the Department of Education must also fund and support those schools to be able to offer that service.

I highlight the summer schools programme is again being rolled out. This covers over one in four schools. We have 4,000 schools. Over 1,000 schools and nearly 245,000 students now have access to Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools, DEIS, funding. It is so crucial the summer schools programme is being rolled out in these schools so these children can access that support, and that it is available to those DEIS schools.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I thank the Senator. I ask the Leader to respond to the Order of Business.

Senator Regina Doherty: Senator Dolan raised the announcement during the week by the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan, who has responsibility for special education and inclusion, on her intention to impose or invoke certain schools to take on special classes. It probably pained her to have to do that because it is a terrible indictment of the relationship between schools and the Department. Both say they want the same things yet they use certain circumstances to their own advantage. We should all be more attuned to the needs of children and their families. As the Senator said, it is a wider societal issue with regard to services and I thank her for raising it.

Senator Carrigy looked for an independent review into the IABA. The announcement this week might bring everything to a head. I acknowledge the Senator's concerns the Senator. A new structure, as we have with sports, may similarly be required.

Senator Lombard looked for a debate on the powers we perceive and intend to give our local authorities in the future. We had the Minister of State, Deputy Peter Burke, in last week talking about local government but it is probably something we could talk a lot more about, so I will certainly make the request.

Senator Boyhan talked about the new NDP tracker announced by the Minister, Deputy Michael McGrath, this week. Just so the Senator knows, there is a standing request in with the Minister to come in and discuss the NDP with us. A number of other colleagues have raised this over the last number of weeks. Perhaps this good news event might encourage him to come and have a conversation with us but I will resubmit the request today. It is something we would all value. I also acknowledge the Senator's commending the EAP. It goes to show how seriously the Minister takes his responsibilities and the usage of public funds.

Senator Buttimer looked for a debate on ports with the Minister for both Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the Minister for Transport. I will try to arrange that as soon as I can.

Senator Warfield talked about the frustration at the pace of change in education. He is right we all share the frustration, especially given we all know what needs to be done there that will have an impact on society years later. The shocking reports that one in three students who have gone through secondary school have no formal education on relationships and civil engagement is absolutely an indictment of the provision of quality education around this issue that has an impact on changing society.

Senator Maria Byrne spoke about the 15 Ukrainians who have been moved from Limerick to Dublin. I will certainly make inquiries with the Minister's office and come back to her. The Senator also spoke about two significant local investments in Limerick that she is obviously very proud of.

I am happy to accept Senator Sherlock's amendment and wish her good luck with her Bill. She is also looking for a debate on the national women's health programme and I will ask the Minister for a date as soon as I possibly can.

Senator Kyne asked me to write a letter to the Minister, Deputy Humphreys, on the need for sustainable funding for our men's sheds. I will certainly do that and send him a copy.

Senator Paul Daly asked for an awareness campaign, earlier rather than later, around wild-fires. I absolutely agree with him. The campaign would detail how people unfortunately contribute to them and teach us how we might avoid doing so. He is right it is sometimes far too easy to blame one particular cohort. We seem to blame them for everything, which is really unfortunate, but they are ultimately the biggest losers, notwithstanding the first responders who must deal with the fires. I will make contact with the Minister today.

Senator Mullen gave us his views of the recent debate around the national maternity hospital, so they are now on record.

Senator Cummins asked for a debate around the disability housing grants and the proposed changes he feels need to reflect increasing costs and who can access them, because it makes far more financial sense for the State to ensure people can stay in their homes for longer rather than engaging with nursing homes.

Senator Malcolm Byrne asked for a debate on climate, especially the World Meteorological Organization annual report. We will organise that as quickly as we can.

Senator Moynihan spoke about the difficulties that exist regarding cycling. She also wants a report on construction defects published sooner rather than later and for us to have a debate on it once it is published.

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Senator Ó Donnghaile spoke about the Irish language Act protest that took place yesterday morning and the parade that will take place on Saturday. He also supported Senator McGahon's supporting of Deputy Richmond's call yesterday for a special Oireachtas joint committee on Irish unity so we can prepare for a border poll he feels will happen sooner rather than later. Failure to prepare is preparing for failure is, I think, what he said yesterday.

Senator Craughwell spoke about another event in the long-running saga and inquiries he has been talking about for many moons concerning search and rescue services. The 415-page report the Air Corps submitted, the three-page report the consultant submitted in response and the 18-page rebuttal certainly do need a little more scrutiny. I look forward to a response from the Minister and the Oireachtas committee to his letter requesting a debate and further scrutiny.

Senator O'Loughlin opened by congratulating Ireland on taking over the presidency of the Council of Europe next Monday. She is looking for a debate on July provision, which I will organise sooner rather than later, given July is looming. Like Senator Malcolm Byrne, she is also looking for a debate on the stark climate statistics announced yesterday in the World Meteorological Organization report. We can try to arrange that for the week after next.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Senator Sherlock has proposed an amendment to the Order of Business: "That No. 17 be taken before No. 1." It is seconded by Senator Warfield. The Leader has indicated she is prepared to accept this amendment. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Order of Business, as amended, agreed to.

National Minimum Wage (Payment of Interns) Bill 2022: First Stage

Senator Marie Sherlock: I move:

That leave be given to introduce the National Minimum Wage (Payment of Interns) Bill 2022.

Question put and agreed to.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: When is it proposed to take Second Stage?

Senator Marie Sherlock: Next Tuesday.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Second Stage ordered for Tuesday, 24 May 2022.

Sitting Arrangements: Motion

Senator Regina Doherty: I move:

That Seanad Éireann agrees with the recommendation of the Committee on Parliamentary Privileges and Oversight that, in accordance with the provisions for the address to Seanad Éireann by Distinguished Persons, Congressman Richard Neal be invited to address Seanad

Seanad Éireann

Éireann on Tuesday, 24th May, 2022, and, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, unless otherwise ordered, the following arrangements shall apply:

- (i) The Seanad shall meet at 12 noon on Tuesday, 24th May, 2022;
- (ii) Commencement matters shall be taken in accordance with Standing Order 29;
- (iii) Standing Order 30 shall stand suspended;
- (iv) The Order of Business shall be proposed at 1 p.m.;
- (v) The proceedings in respect of the address by Congressman Richard Neal shall commence at 4.45 p.m. and shall conclude no later than 5.45 p.m. and shall consist of:
 - (a) a speech of welcome by the Cathaoirleach,
 - (b) an address by Congressman Richard Neal which shall not exceed 20 minutes,
 - (c) a contribution not exceeding four minutes by the Leader of each Group (or a Senator nominated in his or her stead); time may not be shared;
 - (d) a response by Congressman Richard Neal which shall not exceed five minutes,
 - (e) a speech of thanks by the Leas-Chathaoirleach;
- (vi) On the conclusion of the proceedings in respect of the address by Congressman Richard Neal, the sitting shall stand adjourned until 10.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 25th May, 2022.”

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 12.59 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.03 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 12.59 p.m. and resumed at 2.03 p.m.

2 o'clock

Carbon Policy: Motion

Senator Sharon Keogan: I move:

That Seanad Éireann:

acknowledges that:

- to meet our demands for energy and the targets set out in carbon budgets, Ireland needs to generate more electricity while also reducing carbon emissions;

- while the Climate Action Plan 2021 does not list individual targets for each sector, it details emission reductions that are needed from each sector of the economy; emis-

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sions from electricity will have to be reduced by 62 to 81 per cent;

- Ireland is very heavily reliant on fossil fuels; approximately 85 per cent of Ireland's energy needs come from fossil fuels;

- Ireland's import dependency for energy was 67 per cent in 2018, down from an average of 89 per cent between 2001 and 2015; this was largely due to the production of gas from the Corrib field, 52 per cent of Ireland's energy is generated from gas, while wind generated 28 per cent, electricity obtained from other renewables was 5 per cent;

- 70 per cent of Ireland's electricity is supposed to come from renewables by 2030, it is expected that most of Ireland's energy will come from onshore and offshore wind fields as well as solar energy;

- data centres currently consume up to 11 per cent of Ireland's electricity;

- the building of data centres will increase Ireland's demand for electricity by at least 40 per cent; some estimates suggest that data centres could consume up to 70 per cent of Ireland's electricity by 2030;

- following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and current sanctions, gas and other natural resources will be more expensive; while Ireland does not import much gas from Russia, the price will go up due to an increase demand from countries implementing sanctions against Russia;

- energy prices were increasing before Russia's invasion of Ukraine;

- according to the Consumer Price Index, since March 2021, the price of housing, water, electricity, gas and other fuels has increased by +20.9 per cent;

- research conducted by the Economic and Social Research Institute found that 17.5% of households were in energy poverty in 2019;

- St. Vincent de Paul, in collaboration with RED C Research & Marketing Ltd, in March 2021, found that 19 per cent of people had cut back on heating and electricity due to cost, including 42 per cent of families of those with an illness or disability; 36 per cent of lone parents also found themselves in a similar situation;

- Ireland is pursuing irreconcilable goals by increasing demand for electricity by up to 40 per cent while hoping it can be done with the current renewable energy capacity;

- nuclear power produces virtually zero carbon emissions; it is a more environmentally friendly source of energy than fossil fuels;

- while Ireland should continue investing in renewable sources of energy, electricity generated from nuclear power could help Ireland to meet its long-term energy needs;

notes that:

- carbon taxes exist as a disincentive, but they can only be effective if members of the public are using more energy than they need; many people across all sectors of the economy who are trying to reduce their energy use and are still struggling to pay the existing charges;

- the fuel allowance is only paid to a relatively small number of households, meaning that many people are not protected from increases;
- the production of electricity for EirGrid by nuclear fission is prohibited under section 18 of the Electricity Regulation Act 1999;
- despite this prohibition, Ireland is importing electricity generated from nuclear energy; at least 0.93 per cent of Ireland's electricity in 2020 was generated by nuclear power plants in Britain;
- Ireland currently imports electricity from the United Kingdom (UK) through the East West Interconnector and a lot of Ireland's gas is also imported directly from the UK; Brexit also threatens Ireland's energy security as its full effects are still not clear;
- if section 18 of the Electricity Regulation Act 1999 was amended, it would be easier for Ireland to import electricity generated from nuclear power even if it was not possible to build nuclear power stations immediately;
- Ireland could import electricity generated from nuclear power from France through the Celtic Interconnector cable after 2026, if section 18 of the Electricity Regulation Act 1999 was amended;
- Ireland was predicted to become more reliant on non-EU oil and gas as EU supplies decline; Russia is the world's largest exporter of gas and Ireland will be unable to import much gas from Russia due to sanctions following the invasion of Ukraine;
- there will also be higher importation costs associated with gas from non-EU countries; before the invasion of Ukraine, Ireland faced difficulties meeting its energy needs;
- developments in nuclear technology over the last three decades now mean that nuclear power produces virtually zero carbon emissions;
- according to the U.S. Department of Energy:
 - nuclear power plants had an average capacity factor of 92.3 per cent, meaning that they operated at full power on 336 out of 365 days a year;
 - wind turbines by contrast operated 34.5 per cent of the time;
 - by comparison, coal and other fossil fuel power stations operate approximately 50 per cent of the time;
- compared with other sources of energy, nuclear power plants require less maintenance; renewable energy sources often require a back-up energy supply; it would be preferable if the energy for the growing number of wind fields came from a source that generated virtually zero carbon emissions such as nuclear power;
- the average nuclear reactor produces 1 gigawatt (GW) of electricity; based on the capacity factors listed above, 431 wind turbines are required to generate the same level of energy, the average small modular reaction has an output of 300 megawatts by comparison;
- there are not enough renewable sources of energy being developed in Ireland in

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order to meet our current demands for energy; it is unclear how the current plans are to be achieved as much of the planning around this is being left to the energy sector;

- it is also unclear how or where the extra electricity will come from to sustain the new data centres that will be built in Ireland;

- if Ireland is to adhere to the current targets, a very large amount of space will have to be allocated for wind farms and other renewable forms of energy; where these wind farms will be is unclear;

calls on:

- the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications to submit, within six months, a report to the Houses of the Oireachtas on the following options:

- amending section 18 of the Energy Regulation 1999 in order that EirGrid could use electricity generated from nuclear fission;

- assessing the feasibility of building small modular nuclear reactors to address Ireland's energy needs;

- the evaluation of revised targets set out in the Climate Action Plan and the Carbon Budgets to reflect these options;

- publishing a ten-year plan for a nuclear programme for energy which will aim to reflect targets set out in the Climate Action Plan;

- assessing the feasibility of freezing carbon tax on households for the next three years (this freeze would not apply to heavy industry, landfills, incineration of waste or similar industries);

- the Minister to make a clear statement regarding the turf cutting rights of homeowners;

- the Minister to make a clear statement about the role of gas in Ireland's energy needs over the next 10 years and to reconsider plans to discontinue offshore gas exploration in Irish waters;

- the Minister to reconsider opposition to the establishment of any new liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminal in Ireland.

The Minister, Deputy Ryan, is very welcome. I was not expecting to see him here this afternoon. I thank him for coming in. It is often said that failing to plan is a plan to fail. What we have at the moment is not so much a plan to fail but a plan for disaster. The plan is to phase out our use of fossil fuels while simultaneously increasing our demand for energy by 2030. At the moment, the bulk of this decision-making is being left to the energy sector. The aim of this motion is to put a stop to this disaster now. After all, we cannot write legislation while sitting in the dark.

The main thrust of today's motion is to address the current hypocrisy regarding our approach to nuclear power. As outlined in the motion, EirGrid is not allowed to use energy generated from nuclear fission, but the reality is that Ireland is already using nuclear energy. Approximately 0.93% of Ireland's electricity in 2020 was generated by nuclear power plants in

Britain. This was revealed by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI.

I am sure any response today will discuss the dangers of nuclear power, but it is important we establish some facts. The reluctance to embrace nuclear energy seems to be based on an outdated understanding of what nuclear power is currently. It is no longer the 1980s. Concerns which were once valid are now only dead dogma clung to by green activists. It would be remiss of me today to fail to highlight the leaps and bounds that clean nuclear energy has made since the disasters of Three Mile Island or Chernobyl. In part, Chernobyl occurred due to the use of graphite in the nuclear reactor. Today's reactors no longer use this material. At the time, there was also no provision for containment. This has since become the norm for nuclear power plants. Nuclear power produces less radiation than other sources of fuel. In fact, coal plants produce more radiation. Nuclear power produces virtually no carbon emissions. Small nuclear fission reactors such as this Bill advocates for are very efficient. Nuclear power also produces little waste. It is a safe and highly efficient form of energy. Nuclear power plants operate more than 90% of the time, while wind turbines only operate 35% of the time. By comparison, coal and other fossil fuel power stations operate approximately 50% of the time.

There is no doubt my speech today would be longer if we were to list all the reasons nuclear power is safe. Nuclear technology has come on a great deal over the past 30 years. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the attitude towards it by many members of the Green Party. If we do not adapt to nuclear power, data centres are due to consume at least 40% of Ireland's energy by 2030. Some estimates suggest that this could be as high as 70%. In 2018, our energy-import dependency was 70%. The Government has made promises it cannot keep to multinationals and other nations. We need to act sooner rather than later to find a solution.

Deriding nuclear energy at home while importing almost 1% of it from Britain and refusing to amend the current legislation is, as a great man once put it, an Irish solution to an Irish problem. However, it is a solution that plays dice with the well-being and livelihood of most of our citizens, especially those in the private sector who are working from home and whose livelihoods may be threatened by even occasional power cuts. The east-west interconnector is fantastic for Ireland, but Brexit threatens the UK's status as an exporter of energy to Ireland. All going according to plan, the Celtic interconnector cable could provide us with energy from France in 2026 if the Energy Regulation Act 1999 is amended. France might be able to provide us with energy generated from nuclear fission to help meet our needs. After all, France has relied on nuclear power as its main source of energy for years. Simultaneously weaning ourselves off gas while lacking sufficient plans to make up for the shortfall in the energy supply is unconscionable.

The current plan is both insufficient and unfeasible, a point that my colleague, Senator Mullen, will discuss in his contribution later. What is also unconscionable is the pain and suffering Ireland's current energy insecurity is causing and will continue to cause. If an abrupt change of direction in energy policy is beyond us, I ask the Minister at least to consider the human cost of the Government's current approach. Carbon taxes exist as a disincentive, but can only be effective if members of the public are using more energy than they need. Many people across all sectors of the economy are trying to reduce their energy use and they are still struggling to pay their existing charges. St. Vincent de Paul, in collaboration with RedC Research and Marketing, found in March 2021 that 19% of people cut back on heating and electricity due to cost. This included 42% of families of those with an illness or disability and 36% of lone parents also found themselves in a similar situation. It is as if the Government is trying to get blood from a stone by squeezing the most vulnerable in our society. Since March 2021, the price of housing,

water, electricity, gas and other fuels has increased by over 20.9%.

Granted, the Government has tried to address these problems by introducing fuel allowance but this only applies to a few households. The Minister, Deputy Ryan, has advised people to take shorter showers and to slow down their driving, quips which sound more like something out of a “Father Ted” quote than political oratory. Yet, while these statements might be funny in a different context, what is not funny is that every year elderly people die during the winter because they are unable to heat their homes. This is something we have known for years, even as the cost of energy has been ratcheting up and, yes, even as Dublin-based politicians sought to ban one of the most common fuel sources for tens of thousands of people in rural Ireland. When we know that approximately 100 companies are responsible for producing 70% of emissions, the approach by the Government in foisting the burden on ordinary citizens seems almost cruel, in order to achieve what will, on a global scale, be such a small outcome. Large multinationals and businesses almost never seem to be the focus. It is always normal people who are paying the price, perpetuating the myth that the issue of climate change can be solved by individualist consumer choices.

The Minister has already said that nuclear energy is part of our future. Despite my criticism of him today, I hope he does consider that to be part of our future. I agree with him. Whether we like it or not, our use of nuclear power is inevitable. Let us not kick the can down the road and leave a worsening situation for future generations but, instead, conduct the review outlined in today’s motion and make this happen.

Senator Rónán Mullen: I second the motion and commend Senator Keogan for bringing it forward. Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire. The Minister is welcome. We all want the same thing in the sense that we want to protect our environment and reduce our carbon emissions, and we want to do right by the world and by future generations and the less fortunate and more vulnerable people of our world. However, it is vital that, in doing this, we do not dismiss the dangers of Ireland’s energy insecurity. That is why I am supporting this motion today. It has the aim of working towards ensuring energy security in order to stop people from suffering.

The motion asks the hard question of the Government in asking whether it is considering all of the options. Senator Keogan has argued in favour of nuclear power. I asked the Minister on a previous occasion in the Seanad whether we needed to consider this, and he said it is something we would have to talk about, to paraphrase him. That seems to me abundantly clear in the light of the situation in the world we are now living in, given the increased demand for electricity in our country, which is going to go up and up, with the demand coming from data centres and pressure on sources of energy internationally, not least caused by the war in Ukraine and the impact that is going to have on gas prices, the moral problem of importing gas from destructive regimes, and so on. We have to try to square the circle.

The question that will arise is whether we are being realistic in the way we talk about relying on wind as our main energy source, especially given what I have said about the capacity of data centres to consume up to 40% of our energy. Wind energy, let it be said, is an important source. Every bit of progress we hear about wind energy is good news and we are all emotionally and intellectually attracted to it. However, relying on it to meet most of our energy needs, or carrying on as though that is what we are doing, is not acceptable. At the moment, it seems Ireland is pursuing irreconcilable goals because we are increasing demand and we are facing into an increased demand for electricity, on the one hand, while hoping it can be done with the current energy supply, on the other. We are not in a position to guarantee an electricity supply

from renewable sources.

The Irish Academy of Engineering, in its note entitled “Europe’s Energy Crisis – Implications for Ireland”, states that Ireland is in a far more precarious situation regarding its reliance on gas as Europe is moving away from Russian imports. It points out that sometimes wind generates no electricity at all. It gives the example of 25 March 2022 at 10.15 a.m., when the demand for electricity on this island was 5,124 MW and wind generation for more than 5,000 MW of installed wind generation capacity came to 10 MW, or less than 0.2% of total electricity. During a 24-hour period on that same day, prior to 7 p.m., renewables provided less than 3% of Ireland’s energy. Therefore, when we talk about expanding our wind generation by 5,000 MW, it does not matter from the point of view of system adequacy because, under any scenario, there will be times in 2030 when wind generation, regardless of installed wind generation capacity, will meet less than 1% of instantaneous electricity demand, and there will be days when it meets less than 5% of demand over a period of 24 hours.

Of course, the conclusion from all of this is not that we should scrap wind entirely. It is that we face full on the facts as they are, not as we would like them to be. How can the Government expect to generate 80% from renewable energy sources when the wind is not blowing? We will be subject to the whims of the weather. It is not just in Ireland, but this place is full of politicians who never express a view on anything until they find out what way the wind is blowing. On this occasion, it is a case of recognising that, very often, the wind is not blowing at all. That is what we have to take seriously and that is what has to drive our thinking at least some of the time.

The Irish Academy of Engineering points out that Government policy seeks the development of 5,000 MW of offshore wind generation by 2030 but the development of such wind generation is slow. Investors are being cautious. Building the wind fields offshore has a higher cost compared to building onshore, as we know. This high cost is another issue which will lead to escalating energy prices and is already doing so, squeezing the most vulnerable members of our population, as mentioned by Senator Keogan.

Let us focus for a moment on that suffering. St. Vincent de Paul, in collaboration with RedC, found that 19% of people had cut back on heating and electricity due to cost, including 42% of families of those with an illness or disability, and with 36% of lone parents finding themselves in a similar situation. I am not telling the Minister anything he does not know or anything with which he does not sympathise. However, it is important, as we look at and talk about our solutions to our energy crisis, that we take seriously the impact of the choices that we make.

I am aware the Minister may be thinking about the nuclear option and the possibility of nuclear power, at least from what he said previously in the Seanad. Yet, in its proposed amendment to the motion today, the Government’s side states clearly: “nuclear powered electricity generation plants are prohibited in Ireland; the Government has no plans to revisit the prohibition on, or explore the development of, nuclear powered electricity generation in Ireland”. I sometimes wonder whether the Government afraid to show the public it is willing to think about controversial things or does it have to wait until there is an editorial from *The Irish Times* before it dares to say the obvious to people, which is that we must talk about this. I am not suggesting automatically that the solution is nuclear. However, I am saying that we need to talk about the fact great progress has been made in terms of relative safety and we need to talk about the potential of small modular nuclear reactors, one of which is the equivalent of 100 wind turbines. We need to, by all means, talk about other options, such as hydrogen and so on, but to say we

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have no plans to revisit it suggests we are not even thinking of the subject. I do not think that is serious given the problems we face, and the increased problems we will face because of the war in Ukraine with instability in the world, the reality of energy shortages and consequences for the poor. Yes, let us work on renewables but let us face the reality, which is that we cannot get there on renewables in the short term. We need to rethink and hit the reset button on our opposition to liquified natural gas terminals. We need to press the reset button on our silence.

I will finish by saying that up to the time she retired, Angela Merkel had a fantastic reputation but in light of what has happened in Ukraine, her reputation is suffering. The knee-jerk way in which Germany turned its back on nuclear power will affect her reputation as a wise head into the future as well. Therefore, let us have courage about opening up the discussion that needs to be had.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I thank Senator Mullen very much; I appreciate his courtesy. The Minister is under pressure to leave.

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I very much appreciate the opportunity to consider and think about controversial things or look at different options, particularly when it comes to meeting the energy challenge we have before us, which is to remove ourselves from our dependence on imported fossil fuels and create a sustainable, secure and competitive energy supply for our people.

Having considered and looked at that question over many years now, I have always said that we should consider a whole variety of different options. Following on fairly quickly from that, however, is the fact that any independent analysis of the potential for the nuclear option being used in Ireland to generate electricity would show that it is not going to be one to which we will turn. The reality behind that is the very well-understood and relatively easy to explain physics and economic issues or concerns regarding the technology.

Most new nuclear power plants being built, or those just recently concluded or commissioned in the likes of Finland, France or elsewhere, come of a size of about 1.5 GW, which makes it incredibly expensive should we use the Irish grid. On a grid in Ireland, we are currently probably using approximately 5 GW. We always have to have back-up power to complement the risk. Nuclear power plants have to be turned off on a very regular basis for safety, maintenance or other reasons. We must have an equivalent amount of power available at all times should a nuclear power plant have to be switched off instantaneously. We must be running a spinning reserve of 1.5 GW of running power as well. In a system the size of Ireland, that makes it totally uneconomic.

In any case, as we have seen, the UK is equivalent to us and has 60 or 70 years' experience of building nuclear plants. We do not have any experience or any waste issue problems with it but it does. It has much experience and history and a similar modern economy to us. Not only would we have to pay for the 1.5 GW of additional spinning reserve, the cost of that plant is likely to be equivalent to what the UK is currently paying, which is a multiple of the alternative power supplies we have available to us. We have no expertise. We would end up having a waste and disposal problem that we do not currently have.

Yes, nuclear power generates low-carbon electricity, but it is not always as secure as some people think. It is interesting; I have met my French counterpart a lot in the last six months. The French hold the Presidency of the European Council at present. She tells me that they have

a really tight situation in France because many of their nuclear plants are out of action. They are finding that they have a series of issues around some of the boilers or other technical aspects and they are really close to not having enough power, as are we, for different reasons. It is not a magic easy-fix solution, however. We have to be upfront and honest about that. It is incredibly expensive and brings waste and other issues that would be long-term expensive. Had we built at Carnsore Point in the first place 40 years ago, we would be now decommissioning it. I also meet on a regular basis my Belgian counterpart, the Belgian energy minister, who is decommissioning some of its power plants because they have come to the end of their lifetime. It is phenomenally expensive, complex and difficult; it is not easy. We do not have that problem, and we have alternatives we can switch to.

Senator Keogan made the case for modular nuclear reactors, which would overcome some of those size difficulties. Again, however, when I talk to experts and others involved in the industry and elsewhere and ask whether they can show me these operating or ask where I could buy and put them, the answers are on a design table in a university or in some distant location where someone is thinking about how it might work. It is not deployable. In my sense, it will not be deployable for decades to come. I do not, therefore, believe it is a viable alternative solution.

We will be importing nuclear power; we already are. Some of the electrons that are being used to light this room at this moment are probably coming from the UK. I have not checked the grid system but it is likely that is imported from the UK. Some of those electrons will be generated by nuclear power. We are going to develop further interconnection, particularly with the UK in 2024 and France a couple of years later with the Celtic interconnector, which will be connecting a French nuclear system to an Irish renewable system. That can balance and work well for us, in my mind. That is a very economical way of distributing or selling our surplus, when we have it, and of importing power at times of shortfall. Therefore, there will be nuclear power in our system but it will not be generated here. The economics will work much better when it is done as part of an interconnected European system.

I will address some of the other elements of what is a very wide-ranging, which is appropriate, motion. We must consider so many different options and aspects in respect of energy. On the issue of gas exploration and further gas infrastructure into Ireland, in Ireland's case, I believe we have gone out more than 150 times. It is very expensive and costs up to €100 million per time to fund the drilling wells in a very harsh environment. We have only found gas three times at Kinsale, Seven Heads and Corrib. We have never found oil in commercial quantities. All the likely sites, and they are diminishing in number, are in very deep, distant waters. It is highly speculative with no real proven track record. We just do not have a lot of oil and gas reserves. I do not believe it would give us any gas security to think that if we just keep on exploring, we might find something. It is highly unlikely and incredibly expensive. Moreover, if the world keeps on exploring for oil and gas in that way, we are going to completely blow the climate targets that are vital for us to maintain a stable, habitable planet for our people. I do not believe oil or gas exploration have a future in Irish energy. I think it was absolutely appropriate for the previous Government to stop oil and then for this Government to stop gas. That was not a contentious point of debate in the programme for Government negotiations because everyone knows that is not really where the investment needs to go or where our energy future lies.

Things have changed; everything has changed. The world has changed even since this time two years ago when we were looking at this issue because of the war in Ukraine. Even leading up to the war, the turning off of the gas tap by the Russian Government and Gazprom in advance

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of the war was what put those energy prices up a year ago, which in turn also put gas prices up, in particular, which then put up the price of electricity. Since the war, we have seen gas prices rise from anything between three to five times what they would have been a year and a half or two years ago. That is an incredible shock to the entire economic system and to all the bills everyone is paying. It has led to a complete review of what Europe, Ireland and every country is doing in terms of energy security.

In that regard, Ireland is in different circumstances to the rest of Europe. One quarter of the gas we use comes from Corrib and three quarters comes from the UK and Norway. The vast majority of that gas interconnection comes directly from the Norwegian or North Sea fields into the UK system and into Ireland. There is a relatively thin gas pipeline from the UK into the Continent, so even if the demand for gas in Germany, Belgium and Holland increases, which it will because they switched away from Russian gas, we are still in a relatively secure place. We do not rely on Russian gas, which typically accounts for only 2% or 3% of needs historically. That Norwegian-UK gas is always going to be there for the UK-Ireland system because it does not have an easy alternative route back into the continental market. Many countries in Europe, particularly those who are looking at switching away from Russian gas, are looking at LNG. They are considering those options in doing contracts. This is understandable, because they have to switch away from Russian gas.

We are in a different position. There are planning applications in for the use of LNG in the likes of the Shannon Estuary. Everyone will know about this. I do not need to recite the history of Government commentary on that, but I would like to make a couple of points on it. First, if we were to introduce LNG, while at the same time introducing demand for the gas that it would bring in, which is needed to make it an economically viable project, that too would burst our climate limits. This is because that huge level of demand emissions would come probably from north American or Canadian gas. It more likely could come from Qatar or from the west. It would be burnt here and all the emissions that would be accounted with it would send us over the limit.

There is also the question that we must consider of the best, most secure options for us. It is likely to be either Cork Harbour or the Shannon Estuary, because they are the two deep water ports that could cater for ships that are carrying any such material. It is interesting to look at what is happening and at the energy investment options that are being considered. In Shannon, the ESB, which has a long, proud and skilled record in energy delivery in this country, wants to go to hydrogen. It wants to connect to power generation at the Moneypoint site. This is because it sees the conversion of our offshore renewable capability into a storable energy source, such as hydrogen. This is where all of the investment, attention, development and interest is going in energy markets.

We have a comparative competitive advantage, particularly in the west of Ireland because we have that wind. We could convert that to hydrogen and use it in a back-up system. That grid connection into Moneypoint is either running on wind or, when wind is not blowing, it is running on stored hydrogen which backs it up. That would be a compelling, sensible, deliverable, achievable, secure, low-carbon, indigenous energy system.

The question we are asking, which we have to ask in our energy security review which we are doing at the moment, is the fundamental question as to whether Shannon Estuary will go to green hydrogen or if it will go to fossil fuels? The Shannon area task force should have the same question on its table in the same timeframes. It will have to consider this by the end of the

autumn. It should ask the same question and listen to all the different views. Every time I go out of the country and meet people who have real experience in this, I ask them what they think we should do; should we go LNG, or should we go hydrogen. The vast majority of experts to whom I have spoken have said that in Ireland's case, there will be a reliable gas supply for the next ten years and it should therefore go hydrogen. In ten years' time, that is where the investment will be.

We will look at all the options and consider all the alternatives and not rule anything out. However, when I ask independent outside experts, that is what I hear a lot. The same is to be said for Cork. Cork has the same capability potential for offshore wind to connect to a deep-water harbour where it could be converted to hydrogen or ammonia. What is happening there? There are energy people, who are in the business and who are investing, such as those at the Whitegate oil refinery. They are very interested. When I meet them, they are talking about and are interested in hydrogen. They are asking if it could be the next investment. There are other indigenous companies that are already down there and are working with the power plants and with the big energy users. For example, in Cork, there is the biopharma and in Shannon there is the aluminium and smelting. When they come to me, they say that they are interested in hydrogen. This is because that is where they see the investment and new technology going. I am just sharing what I see of what is happening and what is going to come. We will have that hydrogen strategy by the end of the year. That will help us.

I wish I had the time to go into the full question around our renewables and energy efficiency future, which I see as the alternative. It is a matter of balancing between the two factors of variable demands and variable supplies. This is the new industrial revolution that is taking place. Storage will be a key component in this, in electric batteries, in hydrogen and in other interconnection and storage and transportation systems.

I read Senator McDowell regularly in *The Irish Times*. He says that this renewable energy efficiency revolution is a cod, that we are being fooled, that this is terrible and that the Association of Energy Engineers, AEE, thinks something different. It may well do. However, yesterday Europe presented its repower policy in response to the need to move away from Russian gas. It is saying that we must fast forward to a green transition. That is the headline of its press release. It is all about efficiency. It is all about promoting renewables. Yes, it says that for certain countries it is best to look at LNG. However, this is the European economic, energy and climate strategy. It is not doing it because of any ideology. It is doing it because this is the more secure way. This is where the jobs will come. This is where Europe has scale, capability and expertise.

Ireland is the same. We have this. Our sea area is seven times the size of our land area. We are good at renewable energy. We are good at integrating it. We are good at efficiency. We have to manage demand. We have not approved a new data centre in almost two years, because we realised that we have to be careful. We have to make sure that they are part of the climate solution and that they are not just operating separate to the limits that we have to live within. This is where the energy investment is going. This is where we have expertise and capability. While I appreciate the motion and I understand the sentiments behind it, I think the renewable, efficient, interconnected, storage and green hydrogen future is the one for us.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I thank the Minister. I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, to the House. The first speaker from the group of the non-proposers is Senator Dooley, who has six minutes.

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Senator Timmy Dooley: I move amendment No. 1:

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

“Seanad Éireann:

notes that:

- the International Energy Agency defines energy security as the uninterrupted availability of energy sources at an affordable price;

- Ireland imports over 70 per cent of the energy we use, compared to a European Union total of almost 60 per cent;

- oil and gas represent around 80 per cent of Ireland’s primary energy requirement; - all of the oil used in Ireland is imported;

- approximately three quarters of the gas used in Ireland is imported via pipelines from the United Kingdom; the remainder of our gas needs are met from the Corrib gas field and the output from this field is declining;

- renewables currently account for 13 per cent of Ireland’s primary energy requirement;

- the recent ‘Sixth Assessment Report’ from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reemphasised the need to decarbonise our society and economy;

- responding to this need, the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 set a national climate goal of carbon neutrality by 2050 and a 51 per cent reduction in carbon emissions by 2030; the Climate Action Plan 2021 sets out a programme of actions to meet these targets, including:

- in transport, increasing the use of public transport and active travel through the National Sustainable Mobility Policy and increased use of electric vehicles;

- in heating, retrofitting our stock of residential and commercial buildings with significantly increased exchequer support under the National Retrofit Plan;

- generating up to 80 per cent of our electricity from renewable generation by the end of the decade with a significant increase in onshore and offshore wind and solar power;

- the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February, 2022, is unprecedented in Europe in modern times; the resulting war has, and will continue to have, significant impacts for the world, for the European Union and for Ireland;

- the war has impacted Europe’s energy system; in particular, the invasion has triggered a decision by the European Union to phase out its dependency on Russian gas, oil and coal imports as soon as possible;

- the immediate impacts of the war include significant increases in the price that we pay for energy;

- in the longer-term, the war will also impact where and how we source that energy

and will change how we design energy policy to ensure the system's long-term resilience;

- the 'National Energy Security Framework', published in April 2022, outlines an integrated whole-of-Government response to this crisis;

- the Framework sets out a set of 31 responses to the crisis with clear timelines and accountability for their implementation;

- these responses cover three themes:

- managing the impact of the crisis on consumers and businesses;

- ensuring security of energy supply in the near-term;

- reducing our dependency on imported fossil fuels in the context of the phasing out of Russian energy imports across the EU;

- nuclear powered electricity generation plants are prohibited in Ireland; the Government has no plans to revisit the prohibition on, or explore the development of, nuclear powered electricity generation in Ireland;

- the Government has committed to increasing the amount that is charged per tonne of CO₂ emissions from fuels to €100 by 2030; this is a key pillar underpinning the Government's Climate Action Plan to halve emissions by 2030 and reach net zero no later than 2050;

- a significant portion of carbon tax revenue is allocated for expenditure on targeted welfare measures and energy efficiency measures, which not only support the most vulnerable households in society but also in the long term, provides support against fuel price impacts by reducing our reliance on fossil fuels;

- changes to carbon tax rates are having a relatively small impact on current energy prices; the Budget 2022 carbon tax increase, which came into effect in October last year, added approximately 2 cents per litre in tax to petrol and diesel;

- the increase in rates for home heating fuels such as kerosene, gas, and solid fuels was delayed until 1 May, 2022, to mitigate against impacts during the winter heating season; the May 2022 increase will add approximately 20 cents (VAT inclusive) to a 12.5kg bale of briquettes;

- a range of other steps have been taken to ameliorate the effect on consumers of higher energy prices and of planned increased in carbon tax:

- the weekly rate of the fuel allowance was increased by €5 to €33 a week in Budget 2022 so that €914 was paid to eligible households over the course of the winter; an additional lump-sum payment of €125 was paid to the 370,000 households receiving the fuel allowance in mid-March 2022;

- all residential electricity customers are receiving an electricity costs emergency benefit payment of €200 (incl. VAT) at a total cost of circa €400 million;

- in March, a €320 million measure was agreed by Government, to temporarily

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reduce excise duties on petrol, diesel and marked gas oil, which cut excise by 20 cent per litre of petrol and 15 cent per litre of diesel until the end of August;

- in April, VAT was reduced from 13.5 per cent to 9 per cent on gas and electricity bills from the start of May until the end of October;

- carbon tax is not the cause of current energy price inflation;

- each year, some 1,300 people die prematurely in Ireland due to air pollution from solid fuel burning; it is estimated that there are over 16,200 life years lost, while many people also experience a poor quality of life due to the associated short-term and long-term health impacts of this form of pollution;

- the Government is preparing regulations on turf harvesting that will ensure that while measures are introduced to enhance air quality, they will not impinge upon traditional local practices associated with sod peat;

calls on the Government to:

- respond to the current crisis in energy markets as set out in the National Energy Security Framework;

- manage, in particular, the impact of the crisis on consumers and businesses by implementing the responses set out in the Framework, by:

- continuing the excise duty reduction on petrol, diesel and marked gas oil until the Budget in October 2022;

- making an additional payment of €100 to all recipients of fuel allowance; - reducing the Public Service Obligation Levy to zero by October 2022;

- undertaking a programme of communications to inform consumers and businesses what actions they can take to reduce their energy demand, how they could lower energy bills and what supports are available to them;

- implementing a targeted package of measures to enhance protections for financially vulnerable customers and customers in debt;

- supporting existing customers to access a competitive rate for their energy; and

- introducing a scheme for installation of PV panels for vulnerable customers/households with a budget of €20m;

- ensure security of energy supply in the near-term by implementing the responses in the Framework, by:

- reviewing and testing oil, natural gas and electricity emergency plans and procedures against scenarios of escalating severity in the context of the war in Ukraine;

- working closely with the oil industry to monitor the supplies of oil in Ireland on an ongoing basis and keeping under review the need to release strategic oil stocks to the market;

- reviewing and updating the frameworks for cooperation on natural gas supplies to

Ireland as required, in the context of the EU's gas market and security of supply legislative proposals; and

- preparing the electricity system for potential disruptions to supplies of natural gas and managing potential impacts on final electricity consumers;
- reduce our dependency on imported fossil fuels in the context of the phasing out of Russian energy imports across the EU by implementing the responses in the Framework, by:
 - aligning all elements of the planning system to fully support accelerated renewable energy development;
 - reviewing grid connection arrangements for renewable electricity projects and the development of system services to accelerate the growth in renewable electricity;
 - accelerating investment in the electricity grid and the development of storage technologies;
 - expanding the rollout of renewable microgeneration including the implementation plan for the clean export premium;
 - appraising the potential of biomethane; and
 - prioritising the development of a hydrogen strategy;
- accelerate the measures in the Climate Action Plan 2021 that will reduce dependence on fossil fuels and increase the use of renewable electricity as this will lead to a sustainable and secure energy future for Ireland; and
- complete the programme of actions proposed by the Commission for Regulation of Utilities to longer term security of electricity supply.”

I welcome the opportunity to have a debate about this important issue. While I welcome the debate and the tone of it, I have to say that Senator Keogan has put forward her views and ideas in a questioning and thoughtful way. That is good, because we often come into this Chamber and others and we have that bickering thing about who knows best about climate change, or whether it exists, or how we go about it. At least this is a good opening and a positive debate.

From my perspective and from my party's perspective, we very much support the counter-motion. The picture presented today in the Private Members' motion is not consistent with the development of the climate and communications policy that is already there. Earlier this month, the Government approved and published the national energy security framework. That framework examines and impacts on Ireland's energy system. It sets out the structures that will be in place. It includes the over 30 specific responses that we are taking.

For me, the biggest issue around nuclear energy is that that boat has sailed. We do not have the know-how, the technology or the corporate knowledge that other countries do. It is not that we should be against it. Senator Keogan has talked about the science. I studied physics in school. I had a good interest in it. I think things have developed a lot since then. There is no doubt that it is probably a safer technology. However, others are more advanced than us. The fact that we are utilising energy that is generated through nuclear fusion is a good thing. However, the bit that is missing for me is the quality of the grid network that exists across Europe.

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We need to look from a combined European perspective at improving that grid network. If the Finns and the French have a corporate knowledge and have experience in generating electricity from nuclear, I wish them the best of luck. I encourage them to do it. In a liberated, open energy market let us buy that from them at the best rate. Energy is traded now on the half hour. Therefore, wherever it is, let us get it.

Senator Mullen makes a great point that the wind does not blow all the time, and for sure it does not. Even worse, it blows at the time when the demand is least, which is principally at night. This ties in with what the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, is talking about, which is seen in a project in the constituency that I live in, which is Clare. The ESB and others are developing a plan around hydrogen. They are taking the wind that will blow at night to generate electricity that will convert to the clean energy that is green hydrogen. It is not the conversion of a gas; it is the use of a process of electrolysis that will generate hydrogen and you store that. It is not entirely efficient either. There is a loss of 20% to 30% when you convert energy from electricity to hydrogen and the loss of energy is not what we want. It will play a significant part in our energy mix because it can be stored and electricity can be generated from it by burning it at a later stage and it can be used for the greening of heavy goods vehicles into the future, which is important. With the best will in the world, in bus technology or in heavy goods vehicles it is unlikely that we will be able to get battery technology to a point that will move our goods around Europe. Hopefully hydrogen will play a part in that, which is to be welcomed.

Ireland has become good at wind, although it is not entirely popular. I noticed in Senator Keogan's motion, which is well intended, that it was mentioned that we should be prepared to look at something we might not have looked at in the past and we should do so. We should also look at what would be acceptable to the people we represent. I come from a constituency where, in the minds of people, there is a proliferation of wind turbines. I would hate to be going to a public meeting and to have to suggest to them that we would put in a small nuclear reactor to generate electricity. It would be a tough one to have to suggest. Notwithstanding the science or the safety aspect of it, there are people who, for their own reasons, believe that shadow flicker or noise from a turbine have an impact on their health and I am not disputing that. The science does not back that up but there are people who feel it has an impact on their capacity to enjoy the surrounds of their homes. It would be a challenge to get through planning for a nuclear reactor and we would bogged down forever. While the science might be right, the propensity for objections and the way our planning laws are constructed means it would not solve our immediate problem, that has largely been caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

LNG may have to form part of the mix in the short term. I would not rule it out and I would not be against the principle of LNG, but only in certain places in a broader grid where you are pumping gas into the network. If there has to be floating storage, I am against LNG in the Shannon Estuary and I will remain against it. If you invest significantly in infrastructure the investors will want to see that amortised over a long period of time and you become captured by that technology. The principle of using it in the short term to deal with the crisis we have is fine and I would go along with the idea. There are a number of floating technologies around the world that may have to be drafted in during this emergency situation, but not in the long term. I welcome the debate and it is healthy to have it.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I thank Senator Dooley for that constructive contribution.

Senator John McGahon: This is a good debate to have. A number of months ago I stood up in this House and said we should have a debate and discussion about the use of nuclear en-

ergy and in my political outlook, having a debate on what could be perceived as contentious issues is the best way to resolve them. It is only when you challenge arguments, have debates and have opposing views against one another that you can really test out your opinion to see if it is correct or not.

That is the logic I apply to all of my political outlook and to most of the decisions I make within politics and I did that with nuclear energy. I had a number of meetings with people who are pro-nuclear energy, I met the pro-nuclear energy people when I was at COP26 in Glasgow and then I brought it up in the Seanad. I listened to what the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Eamon Ryan, had to say on it and I listened to what the Minister had to say about it today. I have changed my view on it somewhat, based on being able to listen to the arguments of both sides. That is not to say that people who propose nuclear energy have a certain view or anything but as the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan said, it is not the magic bullet. It is not something that will be able to resolve the situation and it will not help us to get to 70% or 80% renewables by 2030 at the expense of wind or solar energy. When I look at the motion, one of the points that is made is that “the average nuclear reactor produces 1 gigawatt (GW) of electricity; based on the capacity factors listed above, 431 wind turbines are required to generate the same level of energy”. I guarantee that you would be able to build 431 wind turbines quicker than a small nuclear reactor. Senator Dooley mentioned the difficulties that would be involved. Can Senator Keogan imagine if someone came along and said they wanted to build a nuclear reactor in Duleek? I do not mean that in a-----

Senator Sharon Keogan: It is not about being popular or unpopular. It is about what is right for the nation.

Senator John McGahon: That is a fair point. It is easy to come along and discuss an issue and it is great that we are doing this but it is different to then get up and champion that issue in front of a local community that may be completely against it. We have seen that with wind and solar energy and fair play to an individual if he or she is willing to stand up in the Seanad to say we need nuclear energy and then champion a nuclear reactor in their local community. I am being honest in saying I would not have the ability to do that.

Senator Keogan is right-----

Senator Rónán Mullen: A good dictatorship is what we need I suppose.

Senator John McGahon: Yes. I tried to think of a witty response to that but I have failed on this occasion. More power to you and fair play if you are willing to make the right decision, as Senator Keogan mentioned, to say that this is the right thing for us to do. It may be a good idea or the right thing to do but it will not get us there any quicker than renewable energy will. If this was a magic bullet that would get us there quicker I would be all for it. I would say let us go and do it, let us have the debate in those communities, let us champion this idea, let us sell it to the public and let us bring the public with us and say that nuclear energy is the way we need to go. The Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, has just said that it would take a long time to get something like that up and running in Ireland, even if the entire country was for it. It would take so long to build it, get it into the grid and get it working to be able to serve our system that it is not feasible at any stage because we are so far behind on the debate. I am using myself as an example, where six months ago I said we should be having the debate about it. What Senators Keogan and Mullen have said about it is legitimate and what the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, was good and that is the debate that should be had in public because the point is that we

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should have the debate. I have had the debate in this Chamber myself and I am willing to say that I have changed my views on it. I have tried to make some useful points on it.

The Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, made another point and I had a conversation about this earlier with a friend who used to work in these Houses and who now works in policy in the European Union. He mentioned REPowerEU, which is a plan to rapidly reduce dependence on Russian fossil fuels. That plan acknowledges the situation we have on the European Continent and it will dramatically fast forward and supercharge the transition, which we will do in a number of ways. The two things I want to focus on are what we will do with EU solar energy and the solar rooftop initiative. I think this is great and I will pick out a small thing. In the solar rooftop initiative, the EU will say that every public building must, by obligation, have a solar panel on its roof and this will be a requirement of the planning processes. This will not be an option or a decision when these buildings are being built. It is through small measures like that we will reduce our dependency on Russian oil and gas, it will increase our ability in renewable energy and it will help us to get to those targets by 2030 and further on.

This debate has been a good one to have, I appreciate Senators Mullen and Keogan for bringing it to the floor because the essence of this Chamber is when we are able to debate issues. Nuclear energy is not the silver bullet and it will not help us to get there any way quicker. We all want to get to the same place, whether we are on the political left, right or centre in this country. We all agree that climate change is an issue and that it is the biggest issue facing this generation and the world. We all agree on that and we all agree that we have to do something to stop it and to stop the temperature of the world rising. However, nuclear energy is not the magic bullet for that and it will not help us to reach our targets any quicker. For that reason I cannot support this motion but I can support the Government amendment.

Senator Vincent P. Martin: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan. I commend my colleagues in the Independent Group for tabling this motion. All debate on this matter has to be good. I also commend them on their tenor and tone and the constructive way they are approaching this debate. They are bringing it into the heart of the democratic system and they have every right to be heard. It is a good day for the journey as we strive towards energy security and independence to have these debates and to highlight issues. We do not have to agree, and this is one on which I do not agree with them. However, they are clearly setting out on their journey with this motion in a genuine way, with their preparation done and with every best intent. Nobody has a monopoly on the truth of what is the best journey, but my humble opinion is that their route is not the best one. There are other alternative options, which I will outline, to the route they are putting forward with affirmation in tabling this motion. These time slots for Private Members' motions are precious so I commend them on prioritising their concern for energy security and the other related matters. They have given up their time on this and they should be commended on that.

With regard to the way they would like people to travel, there is a less dangerous way of getting there. I am thinking of both the disposal at the end, the decommissioning stage, and also of the war in Ukraine where Chernobyl came back into the picture. The way I propose to travel is not open to the cataclysmic atrocities which could visit us. I also believe, with the utmost respect, that their journey is extravagant. There is a more efficient way of arriving at the destination we all would like to reach. It is extravagant in both the expense of the construction, which would take a long time, and in the expense of the disposal and the decommissioning. The scale for Ireland does not represent good value, leaving aside other issues, for where the Senators wish to travel. Yes, if one wishes to travel from Ballina to Castlebar, one could do it theo-

retically on a Boeing 747. There are some advantages. It is faster and, in many respects, it is reliable. I say Ballina to Castlebar tongue in cheek and I am not suggesting we bring back-----

Senator Rónán Mullen: The Senator could at least start in Knock, given the airport.

Senator Vincent P. Martin: Well, Monsignor Horan started Knock, so anything is possible.

However, the scale of Ireland, as the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan said, does not suit what the Senators envisage for Ireland. As a member of the Green Party, I have attended many conferences over the years and I recall what Senator Mullen said, which is to keep all options open. Nobody has a monopoly on truth to dismiss disrespectfully other alternative options, but the motion, which the Senators put much thought into, is absent many of the other options.

I welcome the fact that it is not morally bankrupt by suggesting Ireland can take a holiday. That argument has long since been over. We have a moral duty to rise to the challenge. Our global emissions *per capita* are bigger than those of China. As I have said in this Chamber on a number of occasions previously, Malawi, which has a population of 20 million, has emissions of 0.11 tonnes per person while Ireland's are 8.32 tonnes. Ireland's carbon emissions are equal to those of 400 million of the world's poorest population. It goes without saying that we should always put it on the record that we should never take the road of the morally bankrupt option and I am delighted that the Senators have not done that.

However, they have failed to mention the circular economy in the motion. I realise the motion is not an exhaustive list so I am not saying this in a judgmental or critical way, but offering it as an observation. One might ask what the circular economy has to do with climate change. It has a lot to do with it. It was best articulated in the words of Ms Angela Rutledge recently, who is campaign lead for Sick of Plastic and co-owner of two Dublin restaurants. She said:

The Ellen MacArthur Foundation estimates climate action efforts such as moving to renewables and greater efficiency [which this motion is all about] can only address 55 per cent of emissions. The remaining human-caused greenhouse gases come from "making stuff".

The Government has proposed legislation on the circular economy to go through the Houses, and I am delighted that it is being driven by the Green Party. Simply put, the circular economy is about making stuff last and not packaging stuff that can be used just once. I know I am out of time, but a quotation from Arthur Miller in *Death of a Salesman* comes to mind. He lamented built-in obsolescence when he wrote *Death of a Salesman*. I am probably taking the quote slightly out of context, but I like it:

I've got to get some seeds, right away. Nothing's planted. I don't have a thing in the ground.

The motion, although it is well-intended, does not have a thing in the ground. I wish I had much more time to address it, but I genuinely commend the Senators on putting this centre stage in their Private Members' time. Although we agree to disagree, it is a good day when there is such prioritisation of the energy challenges we all face and the destination we want to reach together. I just disagree with the journey. I would like to be a passenger on the bus the Senators are driving because I believe there is a more efficient way of getting there. We will agree to disagree on that.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Thank you, Senator Martin. Of course, Members who are not from Cavan-Monaghan should not expect the same indulgence on time.

Senator Lynn Boylan: I also welcome this debate on energy. The Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, has eloquently outlined why nuclear energy is not appropriate to Ireland, even if one agrees with the technology as a runner. Ireland is not a suitable country for nuclear energy.

I support our ambition of reaching 80% renewable energy by 2030. It makes sense for Ireland. We have a huge resource, particularly in offshore wind and green hydrogen, and that is the route we should take. Today, I will outline some of my concerns about the intricacies of how we get to the 80% target by 2030, and things that have been highlighted to me through meeting with stakeholders and communities and also through the very good collective work the climate action committee has been doing on energy. I believe that if we can manage to achieve 80% renewable energy, we can have energy independence and energy security as well as tackle climate change.

The first issue of concern is the cost of renewables. We have to bring down the cost of renewables if we are to have a green hydrogen strategy that can compete on the international stage. Germany is currently looking for partners to enter with it into a green hydrogen strategy. It is looking at north Africa because it is producing solar power and producing it cheaper. Ireland has one of the highest costs for renewable energy in the EU so we have to be able to examine why that is the case. I have talked to stakeholders and they point to a number of issues that could be addressed, such as the delays in the planning system. It is not bypassing people engaging in the planning process because that is part of democracy but having set timelines, properly resourcing An Bord Pleanála and properly resourcing the environmental NGOs to make submissions on planning applications. They also point to grid connection costs and the fact that they pay higher commercial rates than fossil fuel power plants.

One of the calls from the stakeholders is eminently sensible.

3 o'clock

It is something Sinn Féin has repeatedly called for, which is a cross-departmental stakeholder forum that would identify the policy changes needed to reduce the cost of renewables. The renewable electricity support scheme, RESS, 2 results were supposed to be released earlier this week. I understand they are going to come out tomorrow. They will show that the cost of renewables has not decreased. In fact, it has increased. In March I asked Mr. Mark Foley of Eirgrid about this. I asked whether there was concern that RESS 2 would see an increase in renewable energy costs. He told me he has no doubt the market will ultimately deliver significant reductions in the cost of renewable energy. We will not see this. It is very concerning. I echo the calls to establish the cross-departmental stakeholder forum without delay to make sure we have the policy changes and that we have a green hydrogen strategy that will be able to compete on the international stage.

The next matter I will speak about is demand reduction. The Government's amendment does not make reference to data centres despite the fact they accounted for 73% of the increase in the consumption of electricity in the period from 2015 to 2020. We have to address this elephant in the room. We are an outlier in Europe and the world when it comes to the number of data centres we have. There are also other areas in demand reduction. The demand reduc-

tion strategy is due to lapse. It was designed in 2011. So far, the Department and the Minister have had no meetings with stakeholders on the new demand reduction strategy. This is very concerning because the climate action plan states demand flexibility will make up 30% of the reductions by 2030.

Another area of concern is the democratising of the energy system and smart meters. We are told they will play a critical part in reducing demand. The smart meters we got in Ireland seem to be just an update of previous meters. They are not doing what smart meters should be doing. We do not have dynamic tariffs. We do not have real-time information for households. Households are unable to actively participate in demand reduction and the decarbonisation of the grid.

It is the same with rooftop solar planning. Private Members' time has been used to discuss the guidelines and exemptions from planning permission for rooftop solar. We were told we would get interim guidelines and the concern was about glaring glint at airports. However, Dublin Airport has put in for its own solar farm, Schiphol Airport has a solar farm and, even more interestingly, Belfast City Airport has a solar farm. Not only does it have a solar farm beside the airport but because it is allowed to have direct lines, which we are not allowed to have because of the Electricity Regulation Act, Belfast City Airport gets 25% of its electricity from its own solar farm. I could go on discussing such issues.

I absolutely support the 80% target. I absolutely support the direction we are taking on renewables. We can have secure energy through renewables. However, there are concerns about how we will reach the target. This is where I would like the focus. I echo the call to make sure microgeneration addresses inequality. If the PSO levy will be used to fund people generating their own electricity, those who will not be able to participate should not be footing the bill. We need a redesign of the PSO levy. We also need the grid's software to be upgraded so that it recognises multi-hour and multi-day energy storage. In Britain, energy storage batteries are displacing gas-fired power generators whereas the grid in Ireland does not recognise them. We are introducing temporary gas-fired power generators to meet our demand.

These are my concerns. I support the direction we are going with renewables and I support the targets but I cannot support the amendment or the motion.

Senator Marie Sherlock: I welcome the Minister of State. I thank Senators Keogan and Mullen for the motion. As others have said, it is very timely. It is important that we talk through all of the options for our energy security. As others have also said, the existing energy crisis shines a light on our dependence on other countries. When we had fuel crises 1968 and 1973, nuclear energy was very much on the agenda for the Government of the day. Thankfully, it was taken off the agenda. This is the context in which we are having the debate again. I find it very difficult to support any proposal for nuclear energy particularly because of the waste storage issue. This is not an insignificant issue. In the United States, there are 90,000 tonnes of high-level nuclear waste with no long-term waste storage solution. We can take a short-term view that nuclear may be able to fill a gap or allow us to find an alternative source of energy supply but what will happen in the longer term? In this context, nuclear energy is not in any way acceptable.

The biggest objection to nuclear energy is not necessarily storage but the timing. An IPCC report in April stated we have less than ten years to make the changes necessary. Yesterday, the World Meteorological Organization published a report on the very dramatic changes that are

already happening to our climate. How does nuclear energy fit in with that? Frankly, it does not. We are told there are no commercially available suitably-sized small nuclear reactors on the market and there is no chance of them being on the market until 2030. We know there is a big issue with the availability of uranium, which is necessary for nuclear reactors. Sufficient supplies will not come on stream until 2040. These are complicating factors. We have had various estimates that the earliest we could have a nuclear plant, however small in size, is 17 years away. This is simply too long a period of time. There is no conceivable scenario whereby nuclear energy could make a contribution towards reducing our carbon emissions in this country and become a realistic alternative to the energy supply we have or that we must import.

Attention must be on where our resources and our political and technical energies are already committed and how we accelerate this process. I very much share the concern expressed in the motion about the failure to meet targets, but it is not sufficient reason to change course. We need to look at the targets. We know Ireland has been extremely slow at building wind infrastructure. We know the planning system have been a source of difficulty. We need to look seriously at the wind energy proposals for Dublin Bay. We may not like them from an aesthetic perspective but in terms of our energy security we need to take the proposals very seriously.

Ireland is one of the few countries that does not have a green hydrogen strategy. The Minister stated that we will have one at the end of the year, It is worth saying that we have been extremely slow in developing it. Developing a strategy is one thing, implementing it is an entirely different matter. We need to get our skates on in this regard. Wind Energy Ireland estimates we have capacity to generate 70 GW around the island of Ireland, whereas the ambition to 2030 is for approximately 30 GW. There is a gap between what Ireland can produce through wind energy and the Government's targets.

We are very focused on energy supply today but I want to say something about energy consumption. There are two parts to the equation. The national retrofitting scheme is welcome but we need to look at the shortcomings to ensure people consume less energy, or consume less carbon-intensive type of energy in their households. I have a significant difficulty regarding how the national retrofitting scheme relies, effectively, so much on private households having to step up to the mark. The numbers entitled to the fuel allowance are small. It is also only that category of people who are entitled to avail of the better energy warmer homes scheme. We must do much better for that broader cohort of low- and middle-income households that simply cannot afford to reduce their energy consumption or to ensure they have a better mix of energy sources, whether that involves solar power or otherwise. I say that because, ultimately, this is a crisis. We must see climate action as a public good, like health or education, and the State's resources must be applied on the same scale in undertaking this endeavour.

Senator Seán Kyne: I welcome this debate initiated by Senator Keogan. It is thought-provoking and there is great detail in the text of the motion. There is enough material contained within it for three or four different motions, but the motion is certainly worthy of debate anyway. The Government has proposed an amendment to the motion that also highlights several other important and concerning points in this context, including that we import more than 70% of the energy we use. This compares to the EU figure of 60%. That in itself is rather high, considering the present situation and the uncertainty of energy imports. I refer to the impact, so far, of the illegal invasion of Ukraine and possible future implications. Oil and gas energy sources represent about 80% of Ireland's primary energy requirement, while renewable energy sources currently account for 13% of that requirement. Self-evidently, all political parties have been advocating for that percentage of renewable energy sources to increase over time.

I always feel people say they are in favour of an increased use of renewable energy sources, but that the situation may be different when it comes down to applications that are made to locate such facilities in communities, whether for an onshore facility or an offshore installation. We have not had many of the latter projects initiated yet, but I hear rumblings already in areas about that aspect. Equally, I heard concerns expressed on local radio recently regarding a biomethane plant. We do not have solar farms here, but concerns were expressed on the “Countryfile” programme in a UK context regarding the type of land being used there for solar farms. These are genuine issues that exercise people when applications are made. This aspect should not be treated lightly, because it is going to become more common and prevalent. There is always a reason to be found regarding why something should not be done, why there should not be change, why the landscape should not change, why a risk should not be taken or why other locations would be better. This is a real concern and an aspect we must tackle. We must get real regarding the delivery of these renewable energy sources. I am not so sure about the use of nuclear energy. I am not qualified to speak on this topic. Several of my constituents have advocated for us to at least have a debate on this technology. I refer to small modular nuclear reactors. I am told they are the size of shipping containers, or something like that, and that they can be used in different locations. Again, I am not qualified to speak on this matter. Everything is worthy of debate, but the Government has decided there will be no change in the policy in this area.

Regarding the Government’s plans, I agree with the stance that the carbon tax is not the cause of the current energy price inflation. This is important. The issue has been conflated with the increase in wholesale oil prices because of uncertainty and the war. Obviously, we have listened. There is a high level of tax on the use of fuel, but those tax revenues are used to provide a range of public services in every constituency. This is also important. Therefore, the Government, if it was so minded, could reduce the level of tax on fuel. It would then, however, have to make up those lost revenues somewhere else to enable delivery of the same level of services as are currently provided.

Turning to the issue of turf, this subject has also raised concerns lately. Again, I agree with considering a ban on smoky coal. This was explored in the past, but such a measure was not implemented for reasons that are clear. The principal reason was that there was no easy or clear process regarding how it could be done. The current Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Eamon Ryan, is examining how smoky coal can be banned and how the sale of turf, or “sod peat” as they say in certain areas, can be looked at. The current proposals, however, which we have not seen written down, but that have been in the ether and in the mix, are causing concern. We thank the Minister for meeting us as a parliamentary party in this regard. There may be many untruths and mistruths regarding the proposals. I have tried to clarify the position as best I can, based not on having information in front of me but from what I know of this proposal.

However, concerns have been expressed about plans to limit sales on a population basis in the context of not having the requisite data on who exactly is burning turf, their age profile, their economic ability to consider alternatives and what those alternatives are. In regard to telling people burning turf now that they cannot burn it from 1 September 2022, what are the alternatives for people? One is to burn coal, which may not be suitable in other areas. Therefore, we must examine targeting people in that situation with retrofit schemes. A targeted scheme was established in 2012 for a specific cohort of people with lung and bronchitis issues. Therefore, options exist in respect of limiting the impact stemming from this proposal by providing alter-

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natives for those who currently burn turf. I refer to providing deep retrofitting and all those kinds of measures. It will take time to do that, however, and I urge caution regarding whatever plans are being put in place. We must ensure they are fair and enforceable.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly: I thank Senators Keogan, Mullen and McDowell for bringing this motion forward. To be honest, having looked through the text of motion, it seems to be a collection of things and I am unsure why they have all been put together. I refer to aspects such as turf, data centres, LNG and nuclear power. I will discuss the issue of nuclear power specifically, but this seems to be a collection of controversial issues that have all been put into one motion. While I appreciate having a discussion on nuclear power, because I think it is of interest to people, I do not think it was helpful to join all these things together. I say that because this is a serious topic. No data centres have been connected to the grid for two years. The Minister has already outlined this aspect and representatives from EirGrid have been in to discuss this situation. It is a concern for people because a legacy exists in this regard. For two years now, however, we have not had a data centre connected to the grid, and we now have a strategy where companies have to bring with them some benefits for Ireland and to offset some of the energy used and to make it more sustainable. Therefore, it is extremely important to communicate the facts in this respect.

Some 18 months ago, no one would have thought that floating offshore wind facilities would have been a reality. It would have been seen as a pie-in-the-sky approach. That was what the representatives of the energy industry were saying then, because it was so untested. Now, though, this is the technology we are investing in. It is the same with green hydrogen. Not that long ago, people would have said this was a power source of concern only to academics, but it is now a genuine possibility. A solid group is working on this technology in Galway. It involves representatives from the Port of Galway, CIÉ, EirGrid and SSE Renewables and the National University of Ireland Galway, NUIG, working together on a hydrogen hub. It would allow one of the most successful wind farms in the country, the Galway wind farm, to use its excess energy by putting it into producing green hydrogen. We could then start to power our buses and our ferries in Galway and be innovative in how we use that green hydrogen power source.

There are many such innovations and this is why it is important to have conversations around the topic energy. I completely understand this perspective. There is also a point, though, at which governments must decide on things and what to invest in. In this context, the generation of nuclear energy is prohibited. I see from the Senators' motion that they wish to change this policy. The Government, however, does not have plans to revisit this ban and this is appropriate for all the reasons outlined by the Minister. It is far too expensive. It is wrong for Ireland's size. Huge planning implications have been outlined by others. It is hard enough to get something over the line when it comes to renewables which do not have that impact. People worry about nuclear power. It makes no sense. It is not only the building of the infrastructure but producing energy from it is four times more expensive. I do not buy the argument that it should be open-ended, indefinitely. We need to make decisions as a country and for the sake of the industry. We need to be really clear that Ireland wants to invest, and wants investors to invest in renewable energy. That is where our focus is. It is completely right and proper that we say that we have no plans to revisit the ban on nuclear power. We also introduced a ban on the exploration and extraction offshore oil and gas and there are no plans to revisit this ban, which is also mentioned in the motion.

In regard to liquefied natural gas, LNG, the programme for Government and the recent policy statement include a clear statement on LNG and the importation of fracked gas. Ireland

does not support LNG or LNG infrastructure, and does not support the importation of fracked gas. This is not open for redebate.

The proposed regulations on solid fuel will prohibit the sale of smoky fuels throughout Ireland in response to the serious impacts on air quality and people's health that arise from smoky fuel. There will be no change to turbary rights. Those who have turbary rights will not be impacted by these regulations. It is the responsibility of honest, decent politicians not to cause fear among people about this. There has been some fear, so I want to be really clear. We need to do whatever needs to be done to protect people. However, we also need to protect those who are dying. Literally thousands of people have died while governments and past Ministers have refused to take the necessary steps. I want to be clear about that. It is my obligation to say that and put that on record. That does not take away from the fact that a great deal of work has been put into this motion. However, I would argue that if we really want to be brave and think outside the box, we should look at all the other innovations. Let us look at all the things that are now possible but were not possible 18 months ago. Nuclear and many of the things mentioned in this motion are long in the past and they are almost prehistoric in terms of energy innovations we are seeing. I will support the Government's counter-motion and vote in favour of it.

Senator Micheál Carrigy: I want to touch on one area mentioned in the motion, which, naturally enough, is turbary rights and turf. I come from Longford where we had Lough Ree power station and Mount Dillon, which supplied the power station at Shannonbridge. Objections to planning permission for an extension of that caused both of those stations to close and, indeed, the turf production that was supplying them. As a locality, we bought into the just transition. This was due to close down in 2027 and that was accepted by the people. We were working towards that. However, the objections brought everything forward, namely, the closure of the two plants and the closure of Mount Dillon works.

I do not think the proposals recently put forward by the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, are acceptable. Approximately 4% of the population burn turf as fuel to heat their water and their homes but in the midlands that figure is more than 20%. Significant funding has been put aside by the Government, with more put forward by the Green Party, to retrofit homes. This is extremely welcome but the reality on the ground is – I know this from my own county of Longford – that there is at least a two-year waiting list for people in Longford for warmer homes scheme. They are the people who are in energy poverty and on the fuel allowance. It is my strong view that we cannot bring in changes that will stop people using turf as a fuel for heating their water and their houses.

One of the proposals put forward was to have a limit on the size of town in which turf could be purchased. For example, and the Minister will be well aware of this, Lanesborough has a population of approximately 1,000 people. Lanesborough is where the Mount Dillon works, which was closed down, is based. It is surrounded by bogland but it is a town in which people would not be able to buy turf while those in Ballyleague, which lies about 150 m across the River Shannon, would be able to do so. This needs to be revisited.

The people in my area of the midlands have bought into just transition. We have not seen jobs on the ground that were meant to come with the just transition because of it being brought forward by six years due to the closures. That should be considered in the context of any changes that are going to be made. I accept changes have to be made but they should not be made until 2027.

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Senator Róisín Garvey: There is such a cocktail of things here it is hard to know which to choose. It is as though somebody had a lot of random thoughts about all things energy in Ireland and threw them down in a motion. I will go through a few of them. The motion states that to meet our demands for energy and the targets set out in the carbon budgets, Ireland needs to generate more electricity while also reducing carbon emissions. That is right. That leaves no room for debate, as nobody is saying otherwise. It states that while the Climate Action Plan 2021 does not list individual targets for each sector, it details emissions reductions that are needed for each sector of the economy. Sectorial targets are being worked on as we speak, so I am not sure why that is there. It states that Ireland is very heavily reliant on fossil fuels and that approximately 85% of Ireland's energy needs come from fossil fuels. I have no idea where that figure came from as about half of our energy needs come from sustainable and renewable energy sources. I wonder where some of these figures come from.

The motion states that 70% of Ireland's electricity is supposed to come from renewables by 2030 and it is expected that most of Ireland's energy will come from onshore and offshore wind fields as well as solar energy. That is a good thing. We also hope that 30% of that will be community-owned energy which would be really positive. It states that data centres currently consume up to 11% of Ireland's electricity. I love this one. According to the EPA, if you look at our energy and carbon emissions, 37% is from agriculture, 20% is from transport, 12% is from buildings, 15% is from energy and of that 15%, 14% is from data centres which brings it down to 2.12%. On this freaking out about data centres being the cause of all the carbon emissions, somebody needs to have a maths class on the basics of percentages and how they work because it is not true. If it was true, I would be the first to object to data centres. I will argue with anybody on facts.

There is the whole nuclear thing. I thought that was a joke. I would invite Senator Keogan to Sellafield to meet the families who I met when I went over there. She should listen to their stories about children with Down's syndrome, one pregnancy in four ending in miscarriage, birth defects and mental health issues. She should visit Sellafield with me, meet the people who live there and look at the sea. All you will see there are dead animals. You will see nobody at the beach but in the local hall, you will see a historical gallery of how the beach used to be before the Sellafield plant was built.

She should visit the health board in County Louth and look at its statistics and figures. There are issues along the estuary there because of nuclear waste. I see the Senator is writing but I hope she is listening as well because this is too serious an issue to be messing around with.

I do not know if Senator Keogan remembers Carnsore Point. I was not even born when it was an issue but to bring up nuclear energy again is just very dangerous. We have not figured out nuclear waste. It is being dumped into the Irish Sea. That last thing we need is to dump it into our sea ourselves. It is bad enough that it is happening in Sellafield and we cannot do anything about it.

My colleagues and I shut down Sellafield for a day because we did proper research and properly informed ourselves on nuclear waste management. It is not happening. It is still being dumped all over eastern Europe. If nuclear waste is not a bad thing, why are they not dumping it in their own country? Show me a nuclear power plant that is being dealt with properly and is dealing with nuclear waste and then we will have a proper discussion on nuclear energy. Until then, it is dangerous to be toying with the notion.

It is important we focus on real facts and issues so that, as a House, we can come together with solutions because we all agree that have a climate emergency and an energy emergency. Let us focus on getting things done as opposed to throwing random muck that should not even be there.

I mention the issue of turf. Nothing has been set in stone about how we will deal with turf, but we need to deal with it. It is officially a smoky fuel, unfortunately. We all want smoky coal to be banned. We cannot legally ban it without looking at the commercial selling of smoky turf as well. That is the only reason it is there. Do Senators think our thing is to sit around going “Let’s mess with the old people of rural Ireland and make sure they can never burn turf again”? Nobody has that thought. The big thing is we have air pollution issues and huge public health issues around smoky coal. We saw over 350 lives saved per year in Dublin because they have the ban since the 1990s. We need it nationwide.

We need Senators to come to the table with the brilliant solutions they have to offer alternatives to turf and not to simplify it in a populist way to suggest we want to lock away all the poor grannies of rural Ireland and that everybody in rural Ireland is reliant on turf. I live in rural Ireland and we save a bit of turf but neither I nor any of my neighbours is completely reliant on turf. I do not believe that 20% of the population of the midlands is reliant on turf solely to heat their houses. It is an insult to the people of the midlands.

Senator Micheál Carrigy: Those are the figures that are out there.

Senator Róisín Garvey: Most houses have immersions since the 1970s or 1980s so it paints a funny picture of midlands residents sitting around with turf as the only way of heating their homes. I do not believe it is 20% and, if it is, we need to find solutions because, unfortunately, we cannot continue burning turf forever. Those plants were closed down not by the Government but by Bord na Móna.

It chose to shut down those plants-----

Senator Micheál Carrigy: The power stations shut down because of planning-----

Senator Róisín Garvey: Based on EU planning laws, it chose to shut them down. If we are to have a debate on energy, climate and fuels, which are important, let us look at solutions. We need to move away from burning turf in the long term. We are not against people cutting turf. I will be cutting turf this summer and next summer because I know the Green Party never said one could not do so. Let us talk truth and facts and have a proper debate in this House. I am sick of the twisting and the populist notion that the Greens want to ruin rural Ireland when I live in rural Ireland and am in the Green Party because it has the best policies for rural Ireland. However, it is hard to get the truth out with all the populist rhetoric that goes on here.

Senator Sharon Keogan: I thank the majority of my colleagues for engaging with my motion and the respectful debate we had until our last speaker. I did not consider my motion to be “muck”, and no Senator who puts down a motion should have it so described. It is disrespectful. We have to think past this Government because there is no doubt we are here to legislate for the now. There are people who will not be in government next time, and that may be because of their policies.

This motion was about securing our energy and our future. It takes great leadership to effect change. It is not easy to get up and talk about the possibility of nuclear energy in the future but

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we must be prepared to have those conversations. Our ask today was to amend section 18 of the Electricity Regulation Act 1999 in order that EirGrid could use electricity generated from nuclear fission. Will we have to wait another 23 years to look at it again? Is that the way things will be? We do not ask the Government to construct a nuclear power plant starting tomorrow. We ask it to look into it and for legislation to be put in place to allow flexibility in tackling the issue of our energy security.

I am not against hydrogen. The Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, spoke today about the hydrogen future. That will be the cool kid on the block for the next number of years but nuclear will progress in that time too. Let us not rubbish the idea of nuclear energy going forward. Interconnectors are good but in the event of an Irish shortfall, they make us reliant on the grids of other countries, which we have no control over. If something happens in the UK, France or Norway, we are goosed. The supplies we have are under significant strain following the war in Ukraine. Brexit also threatens Ireland's energy security and ability to provide energy. I believe the Government has overpromised on green policies. I do not believe we will be able to guarantee Ireland's energy security based on the plans it has.

Wind energy, on which Ireland depends, requires back-up of energy supply. The difference between nuclear and wind is that the former would produce far more energy. Nuclear is not the stuff of the past. It has been developing alongside the likes of green hydrogen and turbines. It would not make sense for that not to be the case. There is investment and progress in all areas, and that is to be welcomed. That is particularly so in the area of waste. Nuclear waste is not glowing green barrels. It is spent fuel and cooling rods which can be disposed of in fast-burning reactors.

There are many reasons for which we wanted to put this discussion on the table for the future. We should not rule anything out. Our citizens demand that. Energy costs are rising. Nuclear is much less expensive than the forms of energy we are producing and plan to produce.

I thank my colleagues and the Chair, and I thank the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, and the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, for coming in. I will pass on to Senator Mullen to finish up.

Senator Rónán Mullen: I thank Senator Keogan and echo what she has said-----

Acting Chairperson (Senator Róisín Garvey): There are no more contributions. Sorry, Senator Mullen.

Senator Rónán Mullen: That is grand. I am delighted to second it again and urge all colleagues to support our motion.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Róisín Garvey): The Senator can sit down. Suigh síos, maith an fear.

Senator Rónán Mullen: Chill out.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Róisín Garvey): You do not have speaking time.

Senator Rónán Mullen: You owe me a tenner, by the way.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Róisín Garvey): Chill out there and have a bit of respect for the Cathaoirleach, go raibh maith agat. I am sorry, Minister of State, for that rude-----

(Interruptions).

Senator Sharon Keogan: With the greatest of respect-----

Acting Chairperson (Senator Róisín Garvey): His name is not on the list.

Senator Rónán Mullen: There is something a bit ruthless about it. It is nothing personal.

Senator Sharon Keogan: We have had a very respectful-----

Acting Chairperson (Senator Róisín Garvey): I am about to put the question to the House and I should not be interrupted by Senator Mullen.

Senator Sharon Keogan: We had a very respectful debate and you are being very disrespectful to Senator Mullen. I did not realise he could not come in. You should not have treated him so rudely.

Senator Rónán Mullen: A twinkle in the eye will always get you further.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Róisín Garvey): I am not being rude. I am doing my job as Acting Chair of the House. Senator Mullen knows damn well how this Chair works and has no right to speak out of turn. We have a speakers' list.

Senator Rónán Mullen: A twinkle in the eye will always get you further.

Senator Sharon Keogan: The Acting Chair does not have to swear.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Róisín Garvey): We have a speakers' list. He understands how the system works.

Senator Rónán Mullen: I did not, actually.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Róisín Garvey): I will reprimand him if he speaks out of turn, as is my job as Acting Chair of the Seanad.

Senator Rónán Mullen: There is no need to be so cutting.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Róisín Garvey): Ba cheart don Seanadóir suí síos, a scíth a ligean agus é a thógáil go bog.

Senator Rónán Mullen: Gurbh amhlaidh don Chathaoirleach Gníomhach.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Róisín Garvey): Níl cead aige a bheith ag labhairt anois. Níl sé ar an liosta. B'fhéidir go dtuigfeadh sé i nGaeilge. If he does not understand it in English, I will try it in another language.

Senator Sharon Keogan: That is very condescending.

Senator Rónán Mullen: This is such an unclassy way to chair a debate. It is entirely unnecessary.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Róisín Garvey): You are speaking out of turn, Senator Mullen.

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Senator Rónán Mullen: If I made a mistake, you could be more gracious about it.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Róisín Garvey): You did not make a mistake. You know damn well know how this House works, better than I do. You are not allowed to speak out of turn.

Senator Sharon Keogan: This is not parliamentary.

Amendment agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar athló ar 3.39 p.m. go dtí meán lae, Dé Máirt, an 24 Bealtaine 2022.

The Seanad adjourned at 3.39 p.m. until 12 noon on Tuesday, 24 May 2022.