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DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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SEANAD ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 14 Deireadh Fómhair 2025

Tuesday, 14 October 2025

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach i gceannas ar 2.30 p.m.

Machnamh agus Paidir.

Reflection and Prayer.

Gnó an tSeanaid - Business of Seanad

An Cathaoirleach: I have received notice from the following Senators that they propose to raise the following matters:

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins - the need for the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade to provide an update on Ireland's position on the amendment of protocols 1 and 4 to the Euro-Mediterranean Agreement establishing an association between the EU and its member states and Morocco, arising from the Court of Justice of the European Union rulings on Western Sahara.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly - the need for the Minister for Education and Youth to make a statement on the additional supports requested by the survivors of industrial and reformatory schools who are currently on hunger strike outside Leinster House.

Senator Noel O'Donovan - the need for the Minister for Transport to provide an update on the allocation of funding to upgrade the N71 in west Cork.

Senator Alison Comyn - the need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on the lack of suitable dental chairs and beds to treat people with disabilities.

Senator Cathal Byrne - the need for the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration to make a statement on plans to establish a second Garda training college.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove - the need for the Minister Housing, Local Government and Heritage to make a statement on the enhanced defective concrete blocks grant scheme.

Senator Joe Conway - the need for the Minister for Education and Youth to make a statement on the application for an extension for Scoil Gharbháin, Abbeyside, Dungarvan, County Waterford.

Senator Victor Boyhan - the need for the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to make a statement on the closure of mink farms in Ireland and the status of the compensation scheme agreed with the affected operators.

Senator Garret Ahearn - the need for the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to make a statement on the recent €50 million funding announcement for the tillage sector.

Senator Robbie Gallagher - the need for the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality to provide an update on the timeline for the completion of the replacement facility at Clogher House, Rathcorrick, County Cavan.

The matters raised by the Senators are suitable for discussion and I have selected Senators Alice-Mary Higgins, Sarah O'Reilly, Noel O'Donovan and Alison Comyn and they will be taken now. The other Senators may give notice on another day of the matters that they wish to raise.

Trade Agreements

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, to the House. This is an unusual commencement matter in that the Senator has submitted it previously. I have reviewed the transcript of the engagement between the Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, and Senator Higgins and it seemed that all of the information that was available to the Department was not conveyed in the response, which is why I have asked that it be resubmitted by Senator Higgins.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I thank the Minister of State for coming in to deal with this very important question. I put it originally on the day before the decision was to be made. Now I am merely asking what decision has been made and for further details in relation to it. In October 2024, the Court of Justice of the European Union, CJEU, annulled the application of the EU-Morocco trade deal in relation to Western Sahara because the Sahrawi people had not given their consent. The court gave the EU a one-year deadline to try to bring its actions in line with international law. It ruled that the consent of the Sahrawi people had to be sought, explicitly or implicitly, and that there would need to be tangible benefits for the Sahrawis which did not give rise to obligations. During this one-year period the European Commission did not consult with the Polisario Front which, according to the CJEU, is the privileged interlocutor and the only recognised legitimate representative of the Sahrawi people.

The text of the European Commission's proposal reveals an approach which, rather than taking a step back in terms of international law, threatens to embed further the situation whereby there has been illegal occupation and exploitation of the resources of Western Sahara, without a mandate, by Morocco. Again, the current proposal from the Commission will be preferential tariffs for goods from Western Sahara, albeit with a labelling requirement, and investment in Western Sahara, all of which will benefit Moroccan settlers and Moroccan companies that have been operating outside the law in the extraction of resources, value and profits. This is literally akin to saying that we will intensify and give even greater benefits to settlers in the West Bank. This is the analogy, effectively, and it is true in terms of settlers in the West Bank. The proposal is that settlers will be able to profit and that is how we will engage with the issues.

Ireland has been clear on the issue of occupied territories. You do not embed or intensify occupation or create a scenario where the situation on the ground becomes impossible for the people of that place to reverse or act upon, but yet this is the proposal that seems to have been agreed. Right now, the proposal is in provisional application even though the European Parliament had not been informed on it, which was an obligation. The dates do not add up. The Commission got the mandate to negotiate on 10 September and suddenly the negotiations were over on 18 September. That is an eight-day negotiation, which seems extraordinary. Was the Commission negotiating without mandate previous to that time? What was the basis there?

We are told not to worry, that the Sahrawi people are going to get something. They are going to get humanitarian aid, which should never be linked to a trade deal. They are getting €9 million in humanitarian aid and, meanwhile, the bilateral trade between the EU and Morocco is worth €60 billion annually. That is the context in which I pose a number of very specific questions.

What position did Ireland take at the meeting? How did the Irish designated officials vote on the proposal? Did they ask the Commission whether negotiations had been taking place prior to a mandate being given by the Council? Did they seek to influence that mandate? Do they accept that the idea of a unilateral definition by the EU on investment without differentiation annexed to the agreement could incentivise occupation? Did they press for an explicit rather than implicit approach to consent? This was the opportunity to leverage the referendum we have been told is long awaited and that Ireland and the EU supports. Surely this was an opportunity to press Morocco to support a referendum and allow explicit consent from the Sahrawi people. Does the Minister of State accept that humanitarian aid is not a benefit under international law and cannot be withheld in that same way and the giving of it cannot be seen as a benefit within trade relations for a people? These are key questions. I would also appreciate if the Minister of State could comment on the timeline. There seems to be confusion, even within the Irish Government, in relation to the time. There is great concern in the European Parliament about the timeline now, where it is not being consulted in advance of provisional application.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Neale Richmond): I am very grateful to Senator Higgins for raising this Commencement matter. I genuinely welcome the opportunity to clarify the concerns raised by the Senator about information provided to the House in the debate on Commencement matters on 3 September. At that time, the Senator asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade to update the House on Ireland's position regarding the amendment of an agreement between the EU and Morocco. I wish to underline that the process to conclude the Council's decision concerning the opening of negotiations on the amendment of the 2018 agreement in the form of an exchange of letters between the European Union and the Kingdom of Morocco is nearing its conclusion. I also wish to clarify that the references to the negotiation process in the information provided to the House on 3 December referred to both the negotiations between the European Commission and Morocco and to the consideration by member states of that agreement.

On 4 October 2024, the Court of Justice of the European Union upheld the ruling of the General Court of 29 September 2021 annulling the Council decision on the conclusions of the 2018 agreement, in the form of an exchange of letters between the European Union and the Kingdom of Morocco. This decision required a negotiation of a new agreement between the

EU and Morocco. The court set a deadline of 4 October 2025, in that it maintained the effects of the existing Council decision until that date.

In July 2025, the Commission submitted to the Council a recommendation for a Council decision concerning the opening of negotiations on the amendment of the 2018 agreement, in the form of an exchange of letters between the European Union and the Kingdom of Morocco. The negotiations on the replacement agreement commenced in September, with a view to meeting the deadline of 4 October 2025. On 10 September 2025, the Council adopted, via a written procedure, a decision authorising the opening of negotiations with the Kingdom of Morocco on the amendment of the agreement with the results of the negotiation between the European Commission and Morocco reflected in several documents shared with member states on 22 September via the Customs Union group. The Commission presented the proposal at the Mashreq-Maghreb working party on 25 September. Having been initiated by COREPER I on 1 October, member states were asked to finally vote, via written procedure, on the adoption of the decision on 2 October.

The EU and Morocco signed the amended EU-Morocco agreement on 3 October and its provisional application began. The formal process is currently nearing its conclusion. At the time of the Commencement matter on this subject on 30 September, member state negotiations on the replacement agreement had not yet been fully concluded in Brussels. Discussions were still ongoing at official level as regards the decision. As Ireland had not yet taken a final decision on our position on the proposal, and as the vote via written procedure had not yet taken place, it was indicated to the House that negotiations on the replacement agreement had not yet fully concluded in Brussels. This was entirely accurate at that time. I can now confirm that Ireland voted in favour of the Council decision via written procedure on 2 October, indicating that Ireland would not stand in the way of EU consensus and in order to ensure that the EU complied with its legal obligations. However, Ireland also registered procedural and substantive concerns about the Commission's handling of this process. Ireland made clear that we expect to receive regular updates from the Commission on key issues as the agreement is implemented. Ireland also reiterated our view that the compatibility of the agreement with the fundamental principle in international law of the right of people to self-determination should be paramount in the implementation of this agreement. Needless to say, as the Senator would expect from me, I maintain that humanitarian aid should never be viewed as a benefit to any agreement.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: The issue is that what remained was the vote. The content had been determined at the time I was speaking, so I was asking specifically what position Ireland would be taking. I am disappointed to hear that Ireland did not take a stronger position. This goes absolutely against the position that the Attorney General and the International Court of Justice have taken on the occupied territories in the West Bank. The view is that occupation should not be entrenched. I would like concerns in relation to that to be addressed. Was the issue of explicit consent not being sought versus implicit raised? What were the substantive and procedural concerns raised by Ireland? These are significant matters and of concern to me, all members of the foreign affairs and trade committee and all of those concerned about international law being diluted.

Deputy Neale Richmond: It is fair to say that the handling of this matter fell below the standard we would expect across these Houses and within the Government. The late submission of documents by the European Commission so close to the 4 October deadline left member states in a difficult position. I wish to reiterate to the Senator that Ireland's long-standing position on Western Sahara is one of full support for the UN-led process to achieve a political solution to this long-standing dispute and full support of the right of the Sahrawi people to self-determination. We endeavoured at all times to provide accurate information to this House on a complex legal and diplomatic process, including in the Commencement matter. I appreciate that some of detail provided today serves to clarify matters for the House. However, I would welcome the opportunity to continue engagement, perhaps in writing, with the Senator because some of the technical detailed questions need to be replied to on paper so that both of us have them to hand accurately. I look forward as ever to continuing that discussion with the Senator.

An Cathaoirleach: The issue that the Senator raised at the time was in relation to the conclusion of the negotiations. It was coming up the following day for a decision by Ireland and other member states. The answer led us to believe that negotiations were still ongoing. The process might have been ongoing, but it appeared that the negotiations had all but concluded. The concern about the people of Western Sahara and their----

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: They did not get negotiated with at all.

An Cathaoirleach: That was an issue that was also raised. Phraseology and language are important. The decision was the following day, but it was not even alluded to in the answer. I thank the Minister of State for coming to the House. I thank the Senator for raising that issue.

Residential Institutions

An Cathaoirleach: The Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, is most welcome.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: I thank the Minister of State for coming in to speak on this important issue. I am deeply concerned about what has been going on for three weeks outside of the gates of Leinster House. As we speak here, there are four survivors of industrial and reformatory schools camping outside the gates on hunger strike, one man and three women who suffered abuse in institutions run or sanctioned by the State and have lived for decades carrying the effects of that abuse. They are making a stand. I am worried for their welfare. One of the women has developed a chest infection and is on antibiotics. Despite this, they are still committed to their cause and show no signs of giving up. There has been little movement from the Government on this. I am aware that these vulnerable people are essentially being left out in the cold, but they are not for giving up.

Legislation is not set in stone, but the Government is using that assertion in some of its letters to the victims. The Government amends and introduces new legislation all the time. This is not a viable argument against helping people who were failed so badly in the past. These survivors are among the most vulnerable in our society. Their asks are small, but the signal it would send is significant - that the State takes its responsibilities seriously even decades later.

They are asking for limited support, namely, a contributory pension and Health (Amendment) Act, HAA, card. These are not extravagant demands. They are practical measures that would give survivors some dignity, security and recognition that the State acknowledges its own failures. Does the Government have any plans to address these concerns? What will it do to bring an end to this hunger strike?

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Jerry Buttimer): I thank Senator O'Reilly for raising this very important and sensitive matter. I am responding on behalf of the Minister for Education and Youth, Deputy McEntee, who sends her apologies because she cannot be here.

I assure the Senator that the Government is very conscious of the enormous trauma experienced by all survivors of abuse. She is right that these are vulnerable people. With regard to the group currently engaged in a protest outside Leinster House, the primary concern of the Minister and the Government has been, and at all times is, that they safeguard their physical and mental health by reconsidering their action. These four people should be treated with respect and dignity.

Both the Minister and the Taoiseach have met separately with the group. Officials from the Department of Education and Youth have also been in touch with the group on a number of occasions. The special advocate for survivors, Ms Patricia Carey, has been in ongoing contact. Officials from the Department met with the group in August to listen to their concerns. At all times, they have been respectfully urged to safeguard their health and well-being. It is regrettable that they have chosen to continue their protests. The HSE has arranged for regular welfare and medical checks to be carried out and the Department of Education and Youth has offered to arrange accommodation for the group during the recent severe weather warning.

The Supports for Survivors of Residential Institutional Abuse Act 2025 was passed by the Oireachtas in July. The Act was subject to extensive debate, particularly in this House. It gives effect to the Government's decision of June 2023 to provide certain ongoing supports to survivors of abuse in residential institutions such as industrial schools and reformatories, including health, education and advocacy supports. This marks a new phase in the State's response to the issue.

The package of health supports and services provided for in the Act will ensure survivors resident in the State have access to a range of health supports through the HSE, including GP services, home nursing and home helps, chiropody and podiatry, and physiotherapy. This approach is consistent with that taken in respect of survivors and former residents of the Magdalen laundries and mother and baby institutions. The entitlement will be for life and will not be subject to means tests or periodic reviews. Survivors living abroad will be able to avail of a payment of €3,000, in lieu of this package of supports, to support their health needs. This is the same approach taken in respect of the mother and baby institutions.

The Act also provides for the establishment of a scheme involving the payment of cash grants ranging from €500 to €2,000 to survivors who are engaging in further and higher education. This scheme will ensure survivors are not required to pay the student contribution charge where this would otherwise apply.

The focus is now on implementing the legislation and the Government is not in a position to revisit it. I can confirm that officials in the Department are in the process of reviewing the recommendations of the report of the consultative forum again and I understand that, in relation to the recommendations on memorialisation and records, there is scope for further engagement.

It is regrettable that the group has chosen to take this action. I respectfully urge them to reconsider their current action in the interest of their health and to engage with officials to discuss the various matters I have referred to.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: This response is not good enough. While I understand the legal and financial limits, I would argue the State still has the ability to act to support these people. Their requests are small and practical. A contributory pension and a HAA card do not require reopening redress schemes. There are existing supports that could be made available to people who have clearly been failed by the State. It is not generous to give a contributory pension to people who are victims of forced labour; it is the bare minimum.

To say the scheme is closed and to do nothing risks repeating the same failure. These people endured abuse, often without family support, and now face old age without proper assistance. There are social protection and welfare mechanisms that could be used to help them. For example, in 2021 and 2022, the Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, transferred unused funds that had been allocated to schemes for Traveller and Roma communities and Magdalen laundry redress. He allocated €1.1 million to various LGBTQ+ initiatives. Are there potentially any unspent funds that could be allocated to ensure these survivors receive HAA cards and contributory pensions? I ask the Minister and Government to look at what they can do to address this situation.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: It is a very sensitive and difficult matter, as I outlined in my reply at the beginning. In June 2023, the Government approved a provision of a package of ongoing supports to survivors in the areas of health, education and advocacy, which built upon the already significant State response to the issue. It is considered that the package is a balanced and proportional approach which addresses a number of key issues raised by survivors. It is also broadly consistent with the approach taken in respect of other groups, in particular survivors and former residents of the Magdalen laundries and the mother and baby institutions. However, it is acknowledged that the package of supports does not go as far as some survivors would like.

With regard to health supports, as I have already said, the package of supports and services to be provided to survivors is the exact same as was previously provided under the Magdalen laundry and mother and baby institutions schemes. While there have been calls for the provision of a Health (Amendment) Act, HAA, card, it is important to note that this was introduced specifically to meet the significant health needs of a particular group of individuals who contracted a serious and life-threatening condition, that is, people who contracted hepatitis C through the administration within the State of contaminated blood and blood products.

I will bring back all the concerns the Senator raised. With regard to the ongoing protest, it is important that the group reconsiders its current actions in the interest of people's health and well-being. I ask it to do so and continue to engage regarding the issues it has raised. As I

have outlined, there has been engagement and I hope that continues. I will bring back the Senator's concerns.

Road Projects

Senator Noel O'Donovan: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, for staying with us. For more than 40 years, the people of west Cork have listened to politicians talk about upgrading the N71, but very little has changed in those 40 years. The N71 remains a national route in name only. In reality, it is a narrow, twisting and crumbling stretch of road that has seen little investment since the 1970s. Those of us who drive on it daily know its dangers all too well, including blind bends, no safe passing lanes and surfaces that would shame any other national route in the country. It is impacting our towns and villages. Innishannon, Bandon, Clonakilty and Bantry are all choked with congestion, which has an immense toll on daily life.

This is not just about a matter of convenience; it is a matter of safety, fairness and regional equality. The N71 is west Cork's lifeline. It carries our families, farmers, students and workers and our many visitors. It brings food from our fields and fish from our harbours to market. It sustains our tourism economy. For years, we have heard talk about feasibility studies, potential funding and future phases, but talk does not fill potholes and hints of funding do not build bypasses. While the N22 to Kerry has been transformed and the N20 to Limerick is being advanced towards motorway standard, our N71 still carries the same pinch points, bottlenecks and risks that existed two generations ago. That is not acceptable in 2025.

Since I was elected as a councillor and subsequently privileged to be appointed to Seanad Éireann, I have and will continue to raise the matter of the N71. It is one of my clear political priorities. Recently, we have heard talks of so-called hints of funding for the N71. The people of west Cork deserve better. We deserve more than hints. We want clear action and a plan. Our infrastructure in west Cork has been neglected for years. We see plenty in terms of social media delivery but we have yet to see tangible delivery where it matters on the ground. We need certainty and a clear multiyear funding commitment to bring this vital road up to modern standards. That means proper bypasses of our key towns; proper passing lanes; the realignment of dangerous bends and junctions; new surfaces, drainage and signage; and safe walking and cycling links near our schools and villages. These are not luxuries; they are the basic expectations for any national route in this country.

We the people of west Cork are not asking for a motorway. We are common sense, practical people. We are asking for equality. Over recent decades, other parts of the country have received transformative investment, and rightly so. West Cork now deserves similar treatment. Every visitor who drives onto the N71 from the Bandon road roundabout can see exactly where investment stops. That is not just bad optics; it is bad economics. It sends a clear message that west Cork has been left behind. It is time to change that. I am calling today for a co-ordinated corridor plan for the entire N71, from Innishannon through Bandon, Clonakilty, Skibbereen and Bantry and on to Glengarriff. We cannot continue a piecemeal, town-by-town announcement that goes nowhere. We need one joined-up vision backed by funding and timelines to make the N71 reliable for all who depend on it.

3 o'clock

I put it to the Minister of State, and I say this with respect but also with resolve, that west Cork has waited long enough and the N71 has waited long enough. Our region has carried its share of national growth and deserves its share of national investment. As a proud west Cork native and a Fine Gael Senator working for west Cork, I will continue to raise this issue in the Seanad and beyond. I will work constructively with the Minister of State, his Department and colleagues across all parties but I will also hold every one of us to account, myself included, for delivery that has been missing for far too long. After 40 years of neglect, it is time to deliver. West Cork deserves a safe, modern and fair N71, one that reflects the value of the people and the region it serves.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thank the Senator for raising the matter of the N71. The Senator is right that it is very different from when it was first originated and built. The Senator has outlined very much the key issues of safety and congestion. The traffic volume has made many of those vibrant towns very congested. I concur completely with the Senator that the N71 from the Bandon Road roundabout back to Bantry is deserving of a response from the Government and Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII. The Senator is right that the wait has been long enough. I am taking this Commencement matter on behalf of the Minister for Transport, Deputy O'Brien, who has responsibility for the overall policy and, with the Department of Transport, for Exchequer funding in relation to our national roads programme.

As the Member will be aware, once funding arrangements are put in place with TII under the Roads Acts 1993-2015 and the national development plan, NDP, the planning, design, improvement and upgrading of individual national roads is a matter for TII in conjunction with the local authority, which in this case is Cork County Council. TII ultimately delivers the national roads programme in line with Project Ireland 2040, the national planning framework and the NDP. A priority in the NDP, in line with the Department's typical investment hierarchy, is to maintain the quality and safety of the existing road network. The NDP foresees an Exchequer allocation of some €2.9 billion for the protection and renewal of existing national roads over a ten-year period, excluding those in public-private partnerships, allocated evenly across the decade. Another €5.1 billion has been earmarked for new national road projects over the lifetime of the national development plan. Approximately €502 million in Exchequer capital funds were provided for national roads through TII to local authorities this year. This is used for the construction of major new projects as well as the protection and renewal of the existing road network.

It is important to point out that a number of road projects have been delivered in the Cork area around the M28 and the N22, and also at the Dunkettle interchange. The Senator raised the N71 specifically, which is an important gateway for west Cork, as the Senator has rightly said. Funding has been given in terms of some of the improvements but again the variety of improvement schemes are not what they should be, as the Senator said. I completely concur with the Senator having used the road extensively myself and having been down there with the Senator over the summer months.

The Senator will be aware that an extension to the existing Bandon relief road is intended to address a number of issues with the current road. Currently this road ties back into the existing road network via a very steep downhill gradient. Traffic also needs to negotiate a number of roundabouts and priority junctions with the built-up area of Bandon. The proposed relief road extension will involve bridging the R603 to remove the steep gradient and the construction of

approximately 2.5 km of a new single carriageway line tying back to the existing N71 just to the west of the town. Cork County Council held a competition in 2023 to appoint technical advisers to complete phase two - options selection, and phase three - design and environmental evaluation. As part of the national roads allocation for this year, €450,000 has been allocated, which will facilitate the advancement of the planning and design stage of the scheme. In relation to the proposed bypass at Bantry, I can confirm that as part of this year's national roads allocation €100,000 was allocated to progress the scheme to the initial planning phase. I understand from my discussions with TII and Cork County Council that we are not yet in a position to prioritise the proposed bypass of Innishannon and Clonakilty due to the many competing demands for these resources, which have been required to fund other schemes.

I do take the Senator's point about the co-ordinated council plan. It is one that is needed. Those of us who use the road understand the importance of what the Senator has raised. The Senator is articulating very eloquently and very passionately the views of many. I thank the Senator for his ongoing advocacy. I look forward, with the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, to ensuring that Innishannon, Bandon, Clonakilty and Bantry, and the people of west Cork, receive their share of funding. The Senator is right that it is gridlock now going through Innishannon at any hour of the day or night and it is nearly a long-term hazard. The Senator has articulated quite well that Bandon is choked too. I look forward to working with the Senator to ensure we can prioritise and progress the N71 upgrade. I look forward to hearing any further suggestions the Senator has on the matter.

Senator Noel O'Donovan: I thank the Minister of State for his comments. I acknowledge the work he has committed to in engaging with me and listening to further suggestions, and the time he gave recently in west Cork looking at various stretches of road. The majority of the response from the Department and TII refers to projects in other parts of the county. I asked clearly for a co-ordinated corridor plan for west Cork. The town of Clonakilty is not mentioned in the response and there is nothing planned for the village of Innishannon. According to the responses I have received, they are not included in the national development plan. The N71 is not included in the national development plan.

In the coming weeks and months we will go into more detail about what is included in the national development plan. I am asking the Minister of State and the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, for the inclusion of the N71 in the national development plan and that a clear co-ordinated corridor plan be put in place once and for all. Between Cork County Council, TII and the Department of Transport, the N71 is getting lost. That cannot continue to be the case. I thank the Minister of State for being here.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I accept the Senator's disappointment. The N71 is a very important gateway to west Cork. I live at the beginning of it and have travelled it. There is huge merit in what the Senator is suggesting about a co-ordinated corridor. I will not read out the rest of the response to the Senator because it will probably aggravate him further and I do not want to do that. We all share, whether it is the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, or me, the need for continued road investment and allocation of funding for projects such as the N71. I give a commitment to the Senator that I will co-ordinate a meeting between him and officials in the Department. It is something we have to look at in terms of the gateway to west Cork, which is a tourism mecca for our county and region. It is also an important one in terms of the ongoing investment

in Cork. It is, as the Senator said, to eliminate that choked passageway through Innishannon, Clonakilty, Bantry and Bandon. I will work with the Senator to ensure he gets a reply back and a meeting with officials. It is an important issue. I say this as a Cork person who understands the frustration of people in west Cork. If you stand at the side of the road in Innishannon, it is nearly a procession of traffic the whole time, as the Cathaoirleach knows. I take the Senator's frustration and annoyance at the response. I will work with him to ensure we progress the plan. I thank him again for raising the matter.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Nicole Ryan): I thank the Minister of State for his time.

Dental Services

Senator Alison Comyn: I want to raise a matter of real concern which may never cross most people's radars: the serious lack of access to dental care and surgery for people with disabilities, wheelchair users and those with significant challenges. The issue is not theoretical. In recent weeks I spoke to a constituent of mine who uses a wheelchair and has been waiting over 18 months for essential dental surgery. That is 18 months of pain, infection and distress, and all because there is nowhere in her region equipped to safely treat her. She is not the exception; she is one of many. Much of the information I am sharing today comes directly from the Irish Wheelchair Association, which has always been clear and consistent in highlighting the barriers people with disabilities face in accessing even the most basic dental care.

Right now, Ireland is reported to have only two specialist dental beds for public use that can allow dentists to carry out procedures on someone who cannot be treated in a standard dental chair. Two beds, and that is for the 20% of people living with some form disability. There are hundreds of people right across the country waiting for treatment for months or possibly years. Many are living on soft or pureed foods. Some are taking repeated courses of antibiotics or relying on daily painkillers just to function. We are not talking about cosmetic procedures here. They are urgent, medically necessary treatments for infection, decay and severe pain - the same conditions that, for the rest of us, will trigger emergency care. This is not due to a lack of dedication from our dental professionals. Our dentists and nurses throughout Ireland are doing exceptional work under impossible constraints. The problem is capacity. Just to be a wheelchair-friendly surgery is not enough. We do not have the facilities, the specialist equipment or the trained staff to meet even the basic oral health needs of people who cannot physically access a standard dental chair. It is not acceptable that in 2025, in order to receive care under anaesthetic, a person with a disability must travel to Dublin and hope to get access to one of only two available dental beds. It is not acceptable that families are told again and again to keep waiting while their loved one lives on in pain. It is not acceptable that disability continues to mean de-prioritisation within our health system.

I am hoping for some urgent action. I have a bit of a wish list here that may help. It asks for a national review of special care dentistry capacity, including access to theatres and anaesthetic support, immediate funding to expand dental surgery facilities beyond Dublin into every region and the installation of a specialised dental chair for routine and ongoing care in every primary care centre in the country so that people with disabilities can access preventative and restorative dental treatment locally without needing hospital referral. It also asks for a long-term workforce plan to train and recruit more clinicians in special dental care.

This is not a matter of luxury. We are not talking about people getting cosmetic dentistry. It is one of dignity, equality and health. Oral health is integral to overall health. We all take for granted that we can pop to our dentist and have a check-up, but it is not that easy for people with mobility issues. Right now, their access to that care depends on luck, geography and the ability to fight their way through a system that, to be honest, was never designed for them in the first place. Two specialist beds for an entire country is not a health system. It is an oversight that I feel is bordering on neglect. I ask that this issue be treated as a matter of national priority. I ask the Minister of State to please bring forward a plan, one that ensures every person with a disability in every part of Ireland has access to the dental care they deserve, provided locally, safely and, of course, with the utmost dignity and respect.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Nicole Ryan): Before I call the Minister of State, I welcome Senator McCarthy's visitors from Ukraine. Pryvet. I hope you have a good time in the Oireachtas.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): I also welcome Rodion and his family. We are delighted to have them here.

I am taking this Commencement matter on behalf of the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill. I thank the Senator for the opportunity to address the issue of accessibility and dental services for people with disabilities. The national oral health policy has two key goals, namely, to provide the supports to enable every individual to achieve their personal best oral health and to reduce oral health inequalities across the population by enabling vulnerable patients to access oral healthcare and improve their oral health.

The Government has invested over €230 million annually in the provision of oral health, including an additional €15 million in reoccurring funding since 2019-20, to support progress on the national oral health policy. The dental treatment service scheme provides a range of care, free of charge, to medical card holders aged 16 and over. More complex care, as well as a broader range of treatments for patients with additional needs and high-risk patients, are available, subject to the approval of the local HSE principal dental surgeon.

Last year, the HSE oral healthcare service provided dental care to over 150,000 adults and children. This includes almost 50,000 emergency appointments to eligible patients, either on a same-day or next-day basis. It also includes those with additional needs who cannot receive care in a general dental practice. The HSE provides these patients with an oral health examination and, where necessary, their treatment is provided using additional supports.

The HSE has invested in additional equipment, including wheelchair tilts, which enhance the accessibility of dental surgeries for wheelchair users who cannot self-transfer to a dental chair. There are currently 12 wheelchair tilts in place nationally, with a further five being considered as part of dental location developments. There is a further range of patients who are wheelchair users who are unable to attend routine dental treatment due to comorbidities. These patients can be supported to access treatment under sedation or general anaesthesia.

Through the implementation of the national oral health policy, Smile agus Sláinte, the Government has committed to reforming oral healthcare services for people with disabilities. I know this is a priority and I understand that there are challenges that we definitely need to

address. The Senator mentioned the Irish Wheelchair Association. The work that it does around the country is exceptional.

Oral health services will be prevention-focused and will be tailored to each age group across the life course, from birth to old age. Patients with additional needs will be supported to mainstream to a local general dental practice of their choosing, while the HSE oral healthcare service will reorient to provide care for those who cannot receive the entirety of their care in a general dental practice. The HSE will also develop the necessary models of care, clinical guidelines and care pathways to support the provision of these services. In budget 2025, a further €2 million was invested. The overall amount will increase to €4 million in 2026, which includes a commitment to provide an additional 15 HSE staff to deliver oral healthcare services, on top of continued efforts to address current vacancies.

Senator Alison Comyn: I thank the Minister of State for her detailed response. It is good to see that it is being noted and looked at, and that there is provision. From my point of view, I hear from people who are suffering and have been for the past couple of years. What can happen in an implementation plan is different from what is on the ground. The idea of it being prevention focused - on the root cause, if the Minister of State will pardon the pun - is the ideal scenario. That is not what is happening at the moment, which is that people are not being treated quickly enough. There is a misnomer that many dental surgeries are wheelchair accessible, but that does not mean that somebody can go and get treated there. I welcome the fact that there will be more investment next year and the following year. I would still like to see more of these beds being put into primary care centres, not just to allow a wheelchair to be tilted but also in order that people can be treated with dignity on a bed or in a hospital of their choosing. I thank the Minister of State for that.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank the Senator for raising this matter. I assure her once again that the Government is committed to supporting access to oral healthcare services for people with disabilities, which is evidenced by the significant investment in recent years. A package of measures was introduced in 2022 to expand the care available under the dental treatment services scheme, DTSS. Significantly, increased fees have been paid to contractors. These measures have improved access to care. Payments for contractor claims in 2024 showed 227,691 additional treatments were provided nationally under the DTSS, with more than 44,208 extra patients treated compared with 2022. In the long term, the national oral health policy sets out a complete transformation of oral healthcare services and the expansion of care available for both children and adults.

Under the new model of care being developed by the HSE, families will be able to access free, age-appropriate oral healthcare for their children at a dental practice of their choosing in their local community which holds a contract with the HSE. Children will be able to attend for care starting from birth and continuing regularly throughout their childhood. The HSE oral healthcare staff will have a key role in the new model. There will be an important new model set out under the national oral health policy, which will be oriented towards patients with additional needs who are less able to attend a general dental practice and who must be enabled to have greater access to oral healthcare. I understand totally. It is important that if someone needs a service, particularly if they are in pain, the service is there. I will go back to the

Minister, Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill. I will also be fully supporting this and, as I said, I will highlight concerns that are there but going forward, we will see change.

Senator Alison Comyn: To reiterate, I really appreciate the Minister of State taking the time with regard to the national oral health policy. I will be keeping a close eye-----

Acting Chairperson (Senator Nicole Ryan): Senator, we are out of time.

Senator Alison Comyn: Gabhaim buíochas leat.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Nicole Ryan): I thank the Minister of State and the Senator for their contributions.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 3.21 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 3.32 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 3.21 p.m. and resumed at 3.32 p.m.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call the Leader on the Order of Business, I welcome to the Distinguished Visitors Gallery, all the way from the state of Maryland, Delegate Ken Kerr. He is most welcome to Seanad Éireann. Ken has represented his community with distinction in District 3 and served as an English professor in Frederick Community College. He was also involved in committees on health and government operation, so if he has any advice on government operations, we would be most appreciative for any of his thoughts. He was involved in establishing the Maryland-Ireland Trade Commission, which he lifted and carried on his back single-handedly. For that, we are forever grateful. Go raibh maith agat.

Senator Seán Kyne: I welcome Delegate Kerr. I hope he has an enjoyable and productive stay.

The Order of Business is No. 1, motion regarding the arrangements of the sitting of the House on Thursday, 16 October 2025, to be taken on the conclusion of the Order of Business without debate; No. 2, motion regarding the Planning and Development (Exempted Development (Act of 2000)) Regulations 2025, referral to committee, to be taken upon the conclusion of No. 1, without debate; No. 3, statements on budget 2026 - Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment, to be taken at 4:30 p.m. and to conclude 6 p.m., if not previously concluded, with the time allocated to the opening remarks of the Minister not to exceed ten minutes, group spokespersons not to exceed eight minutes each, all other Senators not to exceed five minutes each, time may be shared, and the Minister to be given not less than ten minutes to reply to the debate; and No. 55(2), Private Members' business in the names of Fianna Fáil Senators, motion regarding support for Ukraine, to be taken at 6 p.m., with the time allocated to this debate not to exceed two hours.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: First, I extend the sympathies of the Fianna Fáil Party to our colleague, Senator Teresa Costello, on the sad passing of her father, John Francis, and to Teresa's mother, Marian, and sister, Eileen.

One of the issues I want to bring up today is in relation to an article I read over the weekend about the results of the autopsy of a young 14-year-old girl in County Clare. Her name was Sarah Mescall and by all accounts she was a lovely, bright, athletic individual. Very sadly, she passed away two years ago. That was five days after becoming unwell having sniffed the contents of an aerosol deodorant. Sarah suffered a devastating brain injury, which subsequently led to brainstem death, and also had a cardiac arrest because of inhaling the contents of the deodorant. There was a suggestion that there was a type of dare challenge on social media in relation to young people. It is important to send our sympathies to Sarah's parents, Deirdre and Joe, who very kindly donated Sarah's organs to others, but there is a really key lesson here for us. We can never give enough warnings in respect of this type of activity. It is very important that we draw attention to this matter and send out a message to ensure that proper labelling goes on all of these products. It is sad it has taken a death to alert us to it, but it is important we highlight the matter.

I also want to raise the issue of putting medicines in blister packs for elderly and vulnerable parents. Shane Ryan, a community pharmacist whom I respect greatly, brought this to my attention over the past day or so. Blister packs are a lifeline for those on multiple medications. Having to take multiple medications can lead to confusion and non-compliance, which, in turn, can lead to the need for an increasing number of hospital visits. Pharmacists are using an existing scheme, namely phased dispensing. Under that scheme, the utilisation of blister packs has given rise to a very high level of compliance. The scheme has been endorsed by GPs, hospitals, patients and families. Unfortunately, the HSE support for it will be discontinued from 1 January next, except for those who are on psychiatric medication. For a small investment, there seems to be a significant return. We should write to the Minister and ask her to continue with the scheme as is.

Senator Mark Duffy: I first offer my sympathies to our colleague Senator Teresa Costello on the passing of her father, John Francis.

I wish to raise an issue that has been highlighted with me today and that has been publicised all over County Mayo by Michael Conroy of Conroy Motors, which is based in Belmullet, Erris, County Mayo. I refer to the lack of NCT facilities in Belmullet. There are currently two NCT facilities in the county, one in Ballina and one in Westport. If you are living in Belmullet or in the barony of Erris, if you are in Aghleam, Doohooma Head, Glenamoy or Ballycroy, you have to travel a seriously long distance just to get an NCT. It can take up to an hour and half for some people to drive to the nearest centre. That is a three-hour return journey just to head to Westport or Ballina. If the car fails the test, the person will have to return for a retest.

I spoke with Michael Conroy about this matter earlier. As a businessman, he has many examples of elderly customers in his area who are afraid to travel the roads, the R312 and the N59 in and out of Belmullet. Those roads are in a total state of disrepair in both directions. Belmullet, because of its size and geography, is almost the size of County Louth. It is a huge geographical area, and because of the nature of it, so many people have to use cars. Those who live in this sparsely populated area are dependent on their cars.

I have been in touch with the relevant Departments. In that context, I ask that consideration be given to putting in place an NCT testing centre in Belmullet. This would help with waiting times, which are between ten and 12 weeks in both Westport and Ballina. It would help to alleviate the pressures on those facilities while also improving the services and conditions in Belmullet.

I compliment Councillor Gerry Coyle, who has persistently advocated for this at Mayo County Council level, and Councillor Sean Carey, both of whom are based in Erris. This matter needs to be examined and a solution needs to be found. I would welcome a debate on it.

Senator Tom Clonan: I wish to mark this occasion by welcoming the release of the remaining hostages to their families in Israel. In this House - with the leadership shown by the Taoiseach and Tánaiste and this Government and that which preceded it - we have had many dark moments recognising the loss of life in Gaza and the ongoing genocide, which has now come to what will hopefully be a permanent halt. At this current point, I really hope it will be a permanent ceasefire.

I wish to raise the issue of the whistleblower, Mr. Noel McGree, a member of the Irish Prison Service who blew the whistle on wrongdoing in the Irish Prison Service, which was subsequently investigated by retired Judge William Early, who found that serious wrongdoing had taken place within the Prison Service to the tune of approximately €20 million of a cost to the taxpayer. Unfortunately, despite the protections contained within the whistleblower legislation and EU directives, which are supposed to protect whistleblowers against reprisal, by appointment this morning, Noel McGree and his wife, Antoinette McGree, were evicted from their family home at 10 a.m., and with them their sons Matthew and Harry, aged 22 and 17, respectively. To outline part of the reason they were evicted, due to the reprisal visited upon Noel McGree within the Prison Service, he felt he was in an unsafe work environment and took sick leave. Unfortunately, given the circumstances, his payment was compromised and he now finds himself in this situation. I remind the House that whistleblowers-----

An Cathaoirleach: In relation to naming people in the House - and I am sure the Senator has permission from the people in question but I am concerned that he is bringing other family members into it, children whose names will remain on the record - I advise caution.

Senator Tom Clonan: I appreciate that. I have the email from Noel McGree asking me to speak about this on behalf of his family. I appreciate the sensitivity and tragedy of young people losing their family home. Transparency International Ireland recognises that whistleblower reprisal is a feature internationally, but it is almost a universal feature of speaking truth to power in Ireland. As a House, we should do everything in our power to support those affected. If possible, we should have a debate at some point on whistleblower reprisal, a dynamic that should become a criminal offence.

Senator Nicole Ryan: I wish to raise serious concerns about the new rules in psychotherapy, put forward by CORU, which have caused alarm across the sector. A recent report in *The Irish Times* highlighted that CORU had refused to allow a derogation sought by the Counsellors and Psychotherapists Registration Board, a derogation that would include the requirement for personal therapy during training. That is the basic standard in most countries and is seen as an

essential for both practitioner competence and client safety. What is worrying is that CORU's own head of strategy and policy has said there is insufficient evidence to show that personal therapy improves outcomes, yet the Irish Council for Psychotherapy, representing ten member organisations, has strongly refuted that and submitted detailed evidence to the Minister for Health. The ICP and all other professional bodies in this area are united in opposing these weak standards. They have said clearly that what CORU is proposing would put Ireland below the international norms, particularly those of other EU countries, and would pose a grave threat to public safety and the profession itself. It is not just a fringe concern by a couple of organisations as CORU has said. Rather, it is a collective voice of an entire profession saying that what is being proposed is not fit for service.

Given the vital role that psychotherapists play in mental health care, especially when services are already under severe strain, we cannot afford to undermine professional standards and public trust. This is incredibly dangerous. As a therapist, I cannot fathom how I am to help other people if I cannot help myself. If I do not go to therapy, it is incredibly dangerous. It opens doors for exploitation of people who are vulnerable and seeking help.

I ask that the Minister for Health come before the House to explain these standards, how they were approved, what consultation took place and how the Department intends to respond to the legitimate concerns raised by the ICP and others. This is about ensuring safety, quality and respect for the profession that supports some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

Senator Patricia Stephenson: I propose an amendment to the Order of Business, namely, that No.11 to be taken before No. 1, referring to the Domestic Violence (Free Travel Scheme) Bill 2025. This Bill seeks to provide a three-month free travel pass to survivors of domestic violence.

Today, I want to talk about the announcement of a ceasefire in Gaza, which is really welcome news after the two years of horror we have had. The scenes of relief, joy and families being reunited with each other we have witnessed over the past few days have been really heartwarming. These scenes have given us all a sense of relief, but we cannot and must not allow any complacency to set in because we know that peace is incredibly fragile. Days after the ceasefire, journalist Saleh Aljafarawi was killed. He was killed after we watched him celebrate with such joy following two years of reporting on this genocide. We have heard this morning that five Palestinian men have been killed in Gaza city. These killings represent a potentially very serious breach of the ceasefire. What we need now is a ceasefire monitor for ensuring this fragile peace is protected. The Government should actively lead within the international community on establishing this. It is vital for maintaining peace and accountability on the ground.

The suffering endured by the Palestinian people has been incredibly immense and we must not, as an international community, abandon them at this stage. The atrocities committed since October 2023 have violated countless human rights laws. There must be accountability for Israel's ethnic cleansing of Palestinians and the levelling of Gaza. We all know the popular chant "no justice, no peace". Without justice, there can be no lasting peace. Accountability measures and access to justice are critical pieces for a lasting and just peace in Palestine and in the region more broadly.

I ask today that the Government bring the occupied territories Bill back to the Dáil and Seanad as soon as possible. This is actually a crucial element to establishing accountability for the Israeli state's illegal occupation on stolen land. It is time to show our true commitment to the Palestinian people. We need to have an immediate move by the Government to pass the occupied territories Bill in full, including goods and services, as recommended unanimously by the foreign affairs committee.

I also welcome the news today that the Government is committed to increasing funding for humanitarian aid to sustain this peace. That means we need to ensure humanitarian aid flows freely and safely to those who need it most. The funding the Government has announced must help scale up support for the likes of UNRWA and the WHO because these are the organisations with the infrastructure and capacity to deliver large-scale relief within Gaza today. We need to have a debate in the Chamber about what this ceasefire means for Gaza and Palestine and what opportunities lie ahead for Ireland in supporting accountability.

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call Senator Black, I welcome Senator Andrews back. Senator Andrews, you are most welcome back to Seanad Éireann. We are glad you got back in one piece.

Senator Frances Black: I second the amendment. I also welcome Senator Chris Andrews back to the Chamber as well. I, too, welcome the ceasefire today. I absolutely endorse everything Senator Patricia Stephenson said. On behalf of the Civil Engagement Group, we send our condolences to Senator Teresa Costello and her family on the passing of her father recently.

Today, I want to speak on voting rights for those abroad. Before I do, I pay tribute to the late former Senator for the diaspora, Billy Lawless from Galway. Billy was the chair of the executive committee of VotingRights.ie and one of several cofounders. As we all know, he emigrated to Chicago in 1998 and created a very successful restaurant business. There, he became a leader in immigration reform. I have to pay tribute to him but I call for a debate on this issue. We have the most restrictive voting rights policies in the world here in Ireland. Allowing emigrant citizens to retain their right to vote is established in most nations, including many of our fellow EU countries. There are 800,000 citizens living in the North of Ireland and more than 1 million emigrants living around the world. That is an awful lot of Irish people being excluded and deprived of their right to be heard in their own home country.

Even our own Constitution states, "It is the entitlement and birthright of every person born on the island of Ireland, which includes its islands and seas, to be part of the Irish Nation." Some of the restrictions in our voting policies include the requirement to be on the island to vote on election day and the amount of time emigrants can be away from Ireland. Once a citizen leaves Ireland for only 18 months, they are dropped from the voting roll. It is important to look at both of these policies and ask whether, in the times we are living in, especially with the type of digital flexibility we have now, it still makes sense to hold these restrictions over our citizens or whether it is time now for change. As we are ten days away from voting for the future President of Ireland, at the very least we need to be opening up these conversations to discuss and explore what options we have and what in direction we as a country can take our voting rights. I will be co-hosting a briefing on voting rights tomorrow in the audiovisual room at 4 p.m. in conjunction with VotingRights.ie. I have invited a number of experts in this area

to share their knowledge with Oireachtas Members and allow us to have that extremely important discussion. I hope Members will come along tomorrow. I would also like to have a debate on the issue in this House if possible.

Senator Shane Curley: I would like to be associated with the condolences to Senator Costello on the loss of her dad. It is a very sad time for her. I would also like to say my own hello to Mr. Ken Kerr. As someone who lived for quite a while in Maryland, it is great to have him here today.

I wish to raise the issue of critical skills visas for drivers coming into this country to drive trucks for road haulage companies. The Garda National Immigration Bureau carries out the initial background check on these licences before people come into the country. The RSA then duplicates that process. Why are two State bodies operating in silos and not communicating with each other? The RSA process can take up to six months. Drivers are left sitting in yards unable to get into the cabs of trucks for a full six months while the RSA carries out a process that has already been done by the immigration bureau. I do not understand that. It takes 12 weeks on average but can take up to six months in Ireland while it takes the department of transport in Poland an average of one month. Why are we, in some cases, six times slower than Poland? Can we eradicate the RSA duplication all together?

I would also like to welcome Senator Andrews back. What he did was very brave, fair play to him. What has gone on over the last two years is so sad. I echo the sentiments of Senator Stephenson that Ireland could play a very key role in both establishing and maintaining peace in Palestine. We have a very comparable history on this island when it comes to peace and we could play a very key role in the peace process over there. I hope that they can have a future of peace in the Middle East.

Senator Mike Kennelly: I rise today to express serious concern regarding the effectiveness of the 2025 Department of justice public awareness campaign on the dangers of illegal fireworks, which was launched in September by the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan. While the campaign rightly highlights the severe penalties, with fines of up to €10,000 and prison terms of up to five years, it is clear that the message is not reaching all communities with the urgency and clarity required. In particular, I must draw attention to ongoing incidents in Kerry, where the Garda is currently investigating multiple reports of fireworks misuse in the Listowel and Kenmare areas as well as other areas. Despite the campaign's national roll-out in collaboration with An Garda Síochána, the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, ISPCA, and the Dublin Fire Brigade, the continued disruption and danger posed by illegal fireworks in my constituency suggests a breakdown in local communication and enforcement.

Today, I am calling on the Minister to review the campaign's reach and effectiveness in all counties in Ireland, to increase targeted messaging through local radio, schools and community groups, and to ensure that the Garda is adequately resourced to respond swiftly to these incidents. I spoke on this issue twice previously in the Seanad as far back as last March and April and was delighted to see the official launch of this public awareness campaign on the severity of the misuse of fireworks. I am calling on the Minister for justice to urgently resource An Garda Síochána in the run in to Hallowe'en to address this antisocial behaviour, which has, in my opinion, severely escalated since last year. Over the weekend, for example, over fireworks were being dropped through residents' letterboxes and people were being aimed at

with fireworks. It is going to finish up ugly. We had an incident in north Kerry last year where 50 youths wearing balaclavas had an on-street fight with fireworks, which is why I am calling on the Minister to resource the Garda straight away. This is not just an issue for Kerry; it is a national issue. Someone is going to get badly hurt unless we resource the Garda for the next three weeks to stop this antisocial behaviour.

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call the next speaker, I encourage Members to be on their best behaviour because members of the Claremorris Kickboxing Club are in the Gallery today as guests of Deputy Paul Lawless. It is nice to have a bit of enforcement in and around the House. Thanks for coming, lads.

Senator Sharon Keogan: Before I begin my speech today, I would like to first send my congratulations to President Trump for the successful ceasefire in Gaza and this week's peace summit in Egypt. There is a long way to go in this peace process, but I hope everyone will join me in expressing our support for its success and for bringing an end to the horrendous suffering caused by this war.

I wish to call for a discussion on what appears to be a concerning footprint of the Muslim Brotherhood in our nation and, even more worrying, the failure of our Government to acknowledge it, let alone address it. The cause of my concern was last spring's closure of the Islamic Cultural Centre of Ireland at Clonskeagh. What appears to be a management dispute bears the hallmarks of a struggle between a leadership accused of brotherhood ties and their financial backers from the United Arab Emirates, which banned the organisation in 2013 following accusations of a coup plot. Indeed, the Irish Muslim Peace and Integration Council has raised concerns about brotherhood ties at Clonskeagh. Let me be clear that this is not about religion. This is about transparency, governance and the ideological influence of a movement that has been banned in many eastern countries, most recently Jordan where it was outlawed following a sabotage plot. Across Europe it is heavily restricted and monitored, yet here in Ireland we face the serious danger that our Government has allowed this ideological network to flourish unchecked.

Before we can discuss proscribing or even restricting this organisation and its affiliates, we must know the truth and currently we are operating blind. I therefore call on the Government and the Minister for justice to initiate a full investigation into the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Ireland. We cannot afford to be naive. The safety, cohesion and even the sovereignty of our republic depends on it.

Senator Alison Comyn: May I add my condolences to my colleague, Senator Teresa Costello, on the loss of her father.

When I was driving up from Drogheda today I heard the really sad news that the Dunnes Stores premises on West Street, Drogheda's main street, is to close in a matter of weeks. I am not certain if there will be job losses or whether people will be redeployed, but it will be devastating for those workers and their families. Some of them have worked there for decades. It is an important store because it is on the main street and is used by elderly people and vulnerable customers, so it will be a great loss to them. There are two others on the outskirts of the town. The irony is that Ben Dunne himself trained as a draper on West Street in Drogheda in the

1920s, where he first worked in Anderson's. The store on West Street has been there since the 1960s and, as I said, its closure will decimate the main street. Another irony is that we have just received funding from the living city initiative in Drogheda and in Dundalk. This is designed to encourage the use of town centre stores, town centre locations, living over the shop and all those kinds of things that will breathe life into our town centres. I want to try to promote a wider discussion for the likes of retailers to please have a look and see what the removal of such a vital store will do to a town centre. There are stores on the outskirts, but not everybody has a car or other means of transport to and from those larger stores. We are trying to breathe life into our town centres, so for this to happen is devastating. My first thoughts, of course, are with the staff, but second are to the customers and residents in the town centres. It is another conversation we need to have about protecting our town centres.

Senator Noel O'Donovan: I want to raise the issue of the serious challenges facing the fishing community. On Saturday I spent some time in Castletownbere with a friend of the Cathaoirleach's, and a former Deputy, Noel Harrington. We engaged with many in the fishing community. To say that there is a sense of shock and fear about what lies on the horizon is an understatement.

We Senators speak passionately in this Chamber on issues and inequality as we see it in society on the national and international stage. The fishing community is sick to death of what it has had to face in generations and years gone by and this needs to be rectified. I speak quite frequently about our farming community and putting on the green jersey, as we do to hold derogation. It is time that we stand up at a national level and fight for our fishing community on an international level.

4 o'clock

We know full well the quotas and the stock that we have around our coast, but our quotas and what we can catch is not reflected in what we are given. I was talking to a fisherman over the weekend. He gave the figures quite rightly. Before Brexit, he was allowed to catch 600 tonnes of mackerel. After Brexit, this was reduced to 263 tonnes. This will be down to 78 tonnes if the proposed cuts come in. Fishing communities are going to be wiped out across west Cork - in Castletownbere, Baltimore, Unionhall and Kinsale. We can forget about a fishing community in Ireland. There have been positive lights in the programme for Government. We have a Minister of State with responsibility for fisheries. However, we now need to stand up at an EU level. I commend my colleague, Senator Manus Boyle, for the work he has put in to fight for the fishing community. We now need to see action at an EU level and a national level. There will not be a fishing community unless we see improvements and proper fair access to quotas.

I ask for a proper debate in this Chamber with the Minister of State. We need a conversation quite urgently on it.

Senator Joanne Collins: I wish to start on a positive note. We had the announcement over the weekend of Ireland and, more important, Clare and Limerick winning the bid for EuroPride 2028. I congratulate those who went forward with the bid, including Limerick Pride, QuareClare and The Outing Festival, with the help of Shannon Region Conference and Sports Bureau, UL Events, Mayor John Moran, Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland. This is fantastic

to get for the region. Not only will we have the Ryder Cup in 2027, they reckon that this event in 2028 is going to be even bigger than the Ryder Cup, with more than 200,000 travelling to Barcelona last week for this year's event.

I have some props with me. This is a box of cigarettes. I was smoking for 25 years. I gave them up about seven years ago. It was not for health reasons, but because of the cost as they increased in price every year. I discovered the vape, which helped me to get off cigarettes. I had tried to get off them for many years. I could not do it cold turkey. I found the vape, which I find really good to keep me off cigarettes but, more importantly in terms of the cost of living, it is unbelievable to be able to afford and still have that little luxury in my life. Not many would call it a luxury but I hold my hand up - I do call it a luxury because I quite enjoy my vape. However, from 1 November the juice for vapes is going up by €5. To buy a bottle of juice today is €5. It is going to be €10 on 1 November. I have never in my life seen a tax put on something to double the price of it in one go. It is absolutely crazy to double the price of something just for the sake of taxing it. It is going to be unfair on people who are trying to get off cigarettes, rely on a vape and cannot afford to go through other measures. I do not agree with the tax going on them.

Senator Dee Ryan: I send my condolences to Senator Teresa Costello on the passing of her dad. I also offer my condolences to Independent councillor in Kerry, Niall O'Callaghan, and his family on the passing of his brother Paudie at the weekend.

I rise on an issue that was raised with me by my local shopkeeper. George Lee, a third generation family grocer, holds the corner shop in my village of Castleconnell in County Limerick. He brought this to my attention, and I have spoken to others since. It is an issue that will affect many retailers, including independent retailers, up and down the length of country. That is the introduction of the new annual licence next February for the sale of tobacco and vape products. For all retailers who sell tobacco and vape products, there will be a licence fee of €1,000 for tobacco and €800 for vape products, payable no matter what their turnover, square footage, location or footfall is. This is grossly unfair on the independent retailers around the country who are the fabric of our societies, and indeed akin to the independent coffee shops and restaurants that we heard so much about from the Minister, Deputy Burke, in the lead-up to the budget. They were forgotten. I ask that the Minister come into the House to discuss the supports he will introduce for these independent retailers, who effectively face a tax on a footfall driver and loss-leading product in their premises. It is very important to them and to a huge proportion of their profit margin. Those independent retailers, I remind Senators, are paying 23% VAT on what they sell.

Senator Manus Boyle: I raise the urgent issue of a boil water notice that has been in operation since 15 September in the Glenties-Ardara area. Uisce Éireann has assured me and the public that everything has been done to get this boil water notice out. The reality is 3,500 residents, as well as businesses, have to endure daily disruption. Families have to boil water for drinking, brushing teeth and food preparation. Local businesses, cafés, shops and community centres are affected. This is an ongoing issue. It seems that every time there is a storm or heavy rain, this kicks up. The infrastructure needs to be changed. There needs to be a massive improvement and new infrastructure put into the Glenties-Ardara area. It seems to

have been left behind. It is the old way of doing things. Can we get the Minister in here for a debate?

This is the third or fourth issue with Uisce Éireann I have brought up in the past couple of weeks. There was another issue in Clonmany, north Donegal. It is something we need to look at. Rural communities are being left behind by Uisce Éireann. We need to get a plan together to tell people where it will be done next and where the infrastructure will be put in.

An Cathaoirleach: Glaoim ar an Seanadóir Costello - Seanadóir Cosgrove, sorry. I cannot even read my own handwriting.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: That is all right. I know the feeling well.

I second the amendment to the Order of Business by Senator Stephenson.

I request that the Minister for education, Deputy McEntee, provide a breakdown of the €8 million allocated for youth work in the budget. As a former youth worker who worked for many years in the youth sector, I know first-hand how youth work changes lives. It has to be recognised that there is an €8 million increase on last year's budget, but it is only 13% of the increase the youth services being delivered across the country need to be sustainable. I would like to ask the Minister how this investment allows for the sustainability and expansion of youth services. They need €17.2 million to protect existing services. They want to expand services and get more young people involved. We know all the benefits of that, from friendships to developing confidence and social skills.

The National Youth Council of Ireland, NYCI, has been looking for an extra €2.1 million and for an extra €2 million for existing capital infrastructure to upgrade facilities. It is unfortunate that, for youth services and other services on the ground, capital expenditure is very scarce and they are often just about making ends meet in the delivery of capital infrastructure. How will the increase in the budget support this? Under Project Ireland 2040, €7.55 billion will be invested in education. How much of that will be allocated to youth services? Can the Minister provide information on the uplift that youth organisations, both universal and targeted, can be expected to receive as a result of budget 2026?

Senator Joe Flaherty: I was listening to "Morning Ireland" this morning. I think I should write to the director general of RTE and ask that, when EPA spokespersons are on, a health warning be given to the farming community. It was the EPA's latest dispatch on its water quality report for 2019 to 2024. If you were to listen to the radio, you would think that farmers are doing absolutely nothing in terms of water quality. Yet, from digging into the detail of the figure, particularly in relation to nitrate levels, they have reduced significantly, down 25% over that five-year period and 39% of rivers showing reduced nitrate concentration. Nitrate levels in our rivers overall are trending in the right direction. That is testament to the work done by farmers.

In the lifetime of the previous Government, I spent many frustrating hours in the agriculture committee. Every time the EPA came before the committee, it berated us and said the farming community was indeed the devil incarnate. Again, it trotted out that message this morning, saying that the lead perpetrator of this is the farming community. Everyone in the House knows

how critical agriculture is to this country but, more importantly, how critical the nitrates derogation is and how important it is that we hold on to it. Discussions on that are imminent. I am perplexed that these latest water finding reports will be feeding into that. When the EPA was last before the committee during the previous Government, we asked it to do more contemporaneous reports. We are relying on figures from 2024 which do not take account of the work farmers have done over the past year. Alas, that ask fell on deaf ears.

I would like the Minister for agriculture to come in to update us on where we are. I know he was in the House last week, but I would like him to come in specifically regarding the nitrates directive and holding on to our derogation. It is critical not only for the farming community but for Ireland Inc. that we hold on to it. As a matter of urgency, I ask the Minister to come to the House to address that one specific point.

Senator Gareth Scahill: I mention a particular issue, namely, a report that was published earlier today which ranks Roscommon as the highest tallied scorer, making it statistically the safest place in Ireland to raise a family in 2025. Leitrim, Mayo, Sligo, Donegal, Monaghan, Clare, Kilkenny, Longford and Galway all follow in the top ten. This is something that I have personally known about for years and something I have promoted for years, which is all the positive things we have in Roscommon. On the other side, however, when it comes to renewing my car and house insurance every year, I am hit with rising costs. I am told it is because of where I am living and that there are all of these impacts affecting my home and car insurance. Great work has been done by this Government in the area of insurance reform. I would like to see some of these reports that are published annually being used to help bring down the cost of people's insurance. I call for a debate on that, if we get the chance.

Reports like this should not be used as a stick to prevent counties like Roscommon and Longford from getting additional gardaí. We have one of the oldest populations in the country. Although we have a low crime rate, those people like to see feet on the ground and someone on the street. They like to know there is someone in the local station at the end of the phone when they make that call. I ask for a debate with the Minister with regard to the allocation of gardaí and the figures and reports people are using for that particular allocation.

An Cathaoirleach: Anois, an Seanadóir Andrews. Again, Senator, welcome back.

Senator Chris Andrews: I very much welcome the respite for Palestinians in Gaza. However, I most definitely do not want to be associated with the congratulations to Donald Trump, who is a genocide enabler and a psychopath, in my view.

I also extend my sympathies to Senator Teresa Costello on the loss of her father. We are thinking of her.

Today, a group of TDs, Senators and MEPs visited Dublin city dog pound in Newcastle. I thank Dublin City Council's Richard Herlihy and Barbara Jackson, who work in the pound and, clearly, care for the dogs. The pound is really good and clean and, clearly, the dogs are, like I said, cared for. I understand this pound is one of the better ones compared with many across the country. Certainly, if all pounds were like this, it would be positive.

It is clear from our visit that there is a real stress and pressure on pounds and rescues. I know from speaking to rescues that they are being overwhelmed by the number of dogs coming into them. I did not realise it, but Sweden and Florida in the United States take many of Ireland's abandoned and rescue dogs. Those working in rescue centres are at breaking point. The stress, anxiety and emotional distress for these people are intense. They should not have to put up with any of that; they are picking up the tab for Government's failure to address the crisis in dog welfare here.

Some measures that could be taken by the Government, which are desperately needed, are a neutering and chip programme and the establishment of a single database. It is beyond me how, in 2025, we cannot have a single database for the registering of dogs. Such a database would improve the management and the welfare of dogs so much. It would make a huge difference, and it is very achievable. There also needs to be a national euthanasia policy. Given that some local authorities do not have a policy at all, it would make sense to have a national policy in relation to the euthanising of dogs.

Senator Cathal Byrne: I also offer my condolences to our Seanad colleague on the very sad passing of her father. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam.

I welcome the peace that has come to the people of Gaza. I hope it will be a long-lasting peace. We in this country know how difficult it can be to sustain a peace and the work that is required by those on all sides, both internal and external, to ensure it lasts. We have all been horrified by the scenes we witnessed over the past number of years in Gaza as a result of the bombing and the devastation, the starvation and the famine to which it gave rise. What we have seen has been utterly disgusting. I really hope we are now closer than we have been in the past to a long-lasting two-state solution.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: I want to raise a concerning development regarding the hormone replacement therapy, HRT, scheme. Recently, the Chair of the Oireachtas health committee has been pushing to expand the free HRT scheme to include trans women. This totally ignores the difficulties and struggles of biological women who are going through the menopause. It is deeply misleading to suggest that excluding trans women is discrimination. The medical purpose of this scheme is to support menopausal women. Our healthcare resources should be directed where there is a need, not where ideology demands they should go. There is a question of when and where this constant pushing of ideology will end. What is next? Are we going to fight for biological men to have access to free smear tests?

The whole purpose of the HRT scheme was a recognition of the difficulties women face as they go through menopause. We currently have 740 waiting lists for endometriosis surgery. We have women across the country on waiting lists who are desperate to see gynaecologists. Worryingly, there is a 12% negative difference in the five-year survival chances for women diagnosed with breast cancer in public hospitals versus those diagnosed in private hospitals. This is life-threatening to people around the country, and it is disappointing that the focus by other parties is not on these issues. They prefer to campaign to abolish the Dáil prayer or for HRT to be prioritised for trans women or for legislation relating to non-binary people. This push goes hand in hand with the replacement of terms like "breastfeeding" with "chestfeeding" and "mothers" with "pregnant people". We are told again and again that this is inclusion. In truth, however, it is a total erasure of women, of who we are and of what we are as women.

This is not about excluding anyone from compassionate care. It is about ensuring that our policies protect the most vulnerable and that decisions are guided by facts, not by pressure from activist organisations. Women deserve dignity, respect and healthcare that acknowledges who we are, not language and legislation that seek to erase us.

Senator Pauline Tully: There is a woman in County Cavan whom I know quite well and whose dream for some time has been to join the Garda. She applied a number of years ago, but due to a bad car accident, she did not pass her fitness and medical examinations. However, she completed the vetting process a number of years ago. She has now passed the medical and fitness examinations but there have been months of delay, with her not being called up to Templemore. She cannot understand this. She has been vetted on a number of occasions, both when she applied to the Garda but also when she applied for her citizenship, which she received in recent years. She is also vetted on an ongoing basis through the Department of justice because of her current employment.

Hers is not an isolated case. I have been contacted before by people who have applied to join the Garda but have been left waiting for months or sometimes longer before being called up, yet people who applied after them were called up before them. We have a shortage of gardaí and we know from the budget that the target is 1,000 recruits a year. That has not been reached. It was not reached in 2023 when there were only 750 recruits. There were only 631 in 2024. According to the evidence, large numbers apply but they are not being called up on time, they lose interest, etc. There are various reasons. We need to look at why people are not joining. Part of it could have to do with the fact that the Garda training allowance is only €354 per week, which is not even minimum wage. In its alternative budget, Sinn Féin proposed increasing it to the minimum wage, which would have brought it up to €579. That increase would recognise that people can join the Garda at a much older age now and may often have families to support.

Senator Kennelly talked about needing gardaí at Hallowe'en to address the antisocial behaviour and dangers involved with fireworks. We do not have gardaí on the ground and in our communities where we need them. We need to take serious measures to address this. The delays in calling up people who are interested in joining just do not make sense. I ask that this be raised with the Minister for justice.

Senator Aubrey McCarthy: I am out of breath, a Chathaoirligh. I rise to highlight an innovative child-centred proposal that deserves attention. It is called a peer-to-peer well-being digital licence. It builds on the success of the It Takes A Village project in Greystones and Delgany and offers a way for kids to have digital literacy and online safety in schools. It empowers secondary students to mentor young peers in primary schools, not only to upskill our youth but to also foster leadership in our communities. It is an intergenerational approach that strengthens transitions between school levels and creates a culture of shared responsibility in navigating the digital world.

The stairs are very tough to get up after the committee room.

An Cathaoirleach: Does the Senator want me to talk for 30 seconds while he gathers his breath?

Senator Aubrey McCarthy: I was looking at the Seanad on TV and wondered if I would make this.

Online safety is not just a technical issue for young people, it is also a well-being one. Young people are already dealing with cyberbullying, misinformation and data privacy issues. They must be part of the solution. This peer education initiative respects their lived experience and aligns with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. I call on the Minister for education to support the development of this infrastructure for a national pilot programme modelled on It Takes A Village, which was led by a school principal in Greystones, Ms Rachel Harper, who is a pioneer. We need to invest in young digital citizens who can lead with knowledge, compassion and resilience.

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call the Leader, I join our colleagues in extending our sympathies to the family of Senator Teresa Costello and to Senator Costello herself on the sad passing of her father, John Francis. I extend my sympathies to Councillor Niall "Botty" O'Callaghan from the Fáilte Hotel in Killarney, the home of hospitality in the kingdom, on the passing of his brother, Paudie, and also to my cousin, Councillor Fionnán Fitzgerald, on the death of his dad, Bob, who served as a garda and a teacher but was a farmer first and foremost. My sympathies to all of the Fitzgerald family on their sad bereavement.

Senator Seán Kyne: I thank all Senators for their contributions this afternoon. Senator O'Loughlin, who was joined by many other colleagues, expressed sympathies to our colleague Senator Teresa Costello on her dad's passing. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam dílis.

Senator O'Loughlin also raised the tragic case of Sarah and the autopsy in relation to inhaling deodorants. She commended Sarah's parents, Deirdre and Joe, who donated her organs to save others, and the Senator called for this very important issue to be highlighted and for there to be engagement on it. I will certainly raise that with the Minister. The Senator also raised the matter of blister packs and multiple medications. I confess I am not particularly *au fait* with that, but I will engage with her afterwards on that matter.

Senator Duffy raised the lack of NCT facilities in the Belmullet, County Mayo, area. He joined with Councillor Gerry Coyle in recommending an NCT centre for Belmullet. I ask him to put down a Commencement matter on that with the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, to see if he can get progress on that matter.

Senator Clonan and many others raised the peace deal in Gaza. We will come to that in a while. He also raised the case of Noel McGree and wrongdoing in relation to the Irish Prison Service. I have engaged with Noel on numerous occasions and I am due to give him a call again on that. I will request a debate on whistleblowing. I know he has gone through a lot. Obviously, he is presently going through even more with his eviction. I will engage with Noel on that matter as well.

Senator Dee Ryan raised CORU and the derogations in public service safety and has called for the Minister of Health. I ask her to put down a Commencement matter on that issue. It might get more of a direct response as it is quite specific.

Senator Stephenson has proposed an amendment to the Order of Business, that No. 11, which is the Domestic Violence (Free Travel Scheme) Bill 2025 - First Stage, be taken before No. 1.

I am happy to agree to that. The Senator also spoke, as did Senators Andrews, Black and others, about the peace deal in Gaza. Obviously, this is the first phase of the peace deal, which is the release of the hostages, and that Israel would withdraw the troops to an agreed line. There is certainly a long way to go. I certainly hope that the 20-point peace plan can be put into being and that we can have a full and permanent cessation of violence and move towards a two-state solution in that area.

Senator Black talked of voting rights, and I acknowledge she is having an event later in the audiovisual room. She acknowledged the work of Billy Lawless, a former Member of this House. I will request a debate on this matter. Obviously, we have a huge diaspora around the world, which means that if change were to be enacted, there would be possibly more people outside of the island with a vote than inside. It depends how broad you make it. I will request a debate, and obviously that will be a matter for the people to decide by referendum at a later date if that were to be the case.

Senator Curley talked of the critical skills visa and why two State bodies are duplicating work, the immigration bureau and the RSA. I suggest he puts down a Commencement matter on that. He also raised the matter of the ceasefire and welcomed what has been done.

Senator Kennelly raised the issue of illegal fireworks. He has commended that there is an awareness campaign but that An Garda needs additional resourcing. There is the criminal justice Act 2016, which allows for hefty fines and imprisonment for those who are engaging illegally in fireworks. Obviously, properly organised fireworks displays look well and are part of many different festivals and whatever else, but illegal use of fireworks is dangerous. A constituent in my area lost their sight in one eye last year as a result of illegal fireworks. I will certainly raise it with the Minister. I raised it on behalf of that person over the summer. There are stiff penalties under existing law, but it is about ensuring those laws are enforced and that illegal fireworks are seized. There is also the issue of cross-Border trade and sale.

Senator Keogan raised the matter of the Muslim Brotherhood. I confess I am not *au fait* with that matter. Perhaps if she puts down a Commencement matter for the Department of justice, she may get a direct response.

Senator Comyn raised the announced closure of Dunnes Stores in Drogheda, County Louth, and talked about the renewal of our town centres. I welcome the addition, in the budget last week, of Drogheda to the living cities initiative, which has been extended to five towns. I hope that all those staff are redeployed and that good use is made of facilities in the centre of the town.

Senator O'Donovan talked about fishing communities and the threatened impact of cuts in the mackerel quota, which is our most valuable source. It is worrying for fishing communities across the country. I know the Minister will be engaging as part of the Commission proposals over Christmas. I know he will have much engagement with his officials in ensuring the best deal for Irish fishermen and sustainability for the stock. Sustainability is important for mackerel and, indeed, all stocks to ensure that we have an industry going forward.

Senator Collins welcomed the announcement of EuroPride 2028 for Limerick and Clare. I agree and congratulate all involved in that. She also raised matters regarding the cost of cigarettes and vaping, and that there will be a 100% increase in the cost of vape juice. I had not heard the term "vape juice" before. The Senator said it is increasing by 100%. Senator

Dee Ryan also raised the matter of taxes on tobacco and vapes for independent grocers. The Minister, Deputy Burke, will be in to speak on budget matters later today, so it may be an opportunity for both Senators to raise that matter with him.

Senator Boyle raised the boil water notice for communities in Ardara. It might be an idea to table a Commencement matter or engage directly with Irish Water. There is commitment to additional funding by Irish Water for a range of projects around the country.

Senator Cosgrove spoke about the need for a breakdown of the allocation of the €8 million for youth work in the recent budget. I know it is stipulated to be for current and capital increases and will support the sustainability and development of youth services, providing tailored supports and spaces for young people. I will ask the Minister, Deputy McEntee, to come into the House, or perhaps the Senator can table a Commencement matter. We will try to get Ministers in, if possible, to talk about their budgets. The Minister, Deputy Burke, will be in today to talk about business.

Senator Flaherty raised the EPA results and called for a debate with the Minister, Deputy Heydon, on water quality, particularly the nitrates derogation. I will request a debate on that matter. As the Senator knows, there is a Cabinet committee on water quality which will hopefully assist in retaining our derogation. Obviously, we have to ensure that the results regarding water pollution improve across all sectors of society. I agree that there has been huge investment in the farming community over the years. That needs to continue and the targeted agricultural modernisation scheme, TAMS, has an important role in that.

Senator Scahill raised the matter of Roscommon being the safest place to raise a family, yet there are rising costs of car and home insurance. These are valid points. He also said there is an older population and that may, unfortunately, be reflected in insurance premiums. He also mentioned Garda resources and is concerned that this would result in lower levels of gardaí being allocated. Garda resources are a matter for the Garda Commissioner but the Senator can certainly continue to raise and highlight that in these Houses and with the Minister for justice directly.

Senator Andrews welcomed again the deal and respite for Palestinians. He raised matters regarding Dublin city dog pound and the need for investment and a change in policy, including a neutering and chip programme and a national euthanasia policy. I ask him to table a Commencement matter.

Senator Cathal Byrne raised Gaza and the need for a two-state solution, which is not part of the 20-point plan, but is something we have to move and aspire to.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly raised her concerns about a free HRT team for trans women. I do not have information on that and perhaps the Senator should table a Commencement matter for the Department of Health. She may get a direct response but I will raise it with the Minister anyway.

Senator Tully raised Garda recruitment and a specific case. Perhaps she might engage directly with the Minister for justice or the Garda Commissioner about a specific case. She can raise the larger issue of the timeline in a Commencement debate, but if she wishes to go into a specific case, I suggest she engage directly with the Minister or Garda Commissioner.

Senator McCarthy talked about the innovative child peer-to-peer online safety initiative, which mirrors the "it takes a village" policy. He talked about digital literacy and empowering students. He called for the Minister for education to fund this as part of a national programme. If I get the Minister in to debate the budget, the Senator can raise it at that stage or he can table a Commencement matter.

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Stephenson has proposed an amendment to the Order of Business: "That No. 11 be taken before No. 1". The amendment was seconded by Senator Frances Black. The Leader has indicated that he is prepared to accept this amendment. Is the amendment agreed? Agreed.

Order of Business, as amended, agreed to.

Domestic Violence (Free Travel Scheme) Bill 2025: First Stage

Senator Patricia Stephenson: I move:

That leave be given to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to establish a free travel scheme for victims fleeing domestic violence; and to provide for related matters.

That leave be given to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to establish a free travel scheme for victims fleeing domestic violence; and to provide for related matters.

Question put and agreed to.

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

Senator Patricia Stephenson: Next Tuesday.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Second Stage ordered for Tuesday, 21 October 2025.

Sitting Arrangements: Motion

Senator Seán Kyne: I move:

That, notwithstanding anything in the Standing Orders relative to Public Business, the Seanad, on its rising on Wednesday, 15th October, 2025, shall adjourn until 9.30 a.m. on Thursday, 16th October, 2025, and the following arrangements shall apply:

- (a) Commencement Matters shall be taken at 9.30 a.m. in accordance with Standing Order 31;
- (b) *Statement by An Taoiseach, Micheál Martin, T.D.*

The proceedings in respect of the Statement by An Taoiseach shall commence at 11 a.m. and shall conclude no later than 12.30 p.m., and shall consist of:

- (i) a speech of welcome by the Cathaoirleach which shall not exceed 4 minutes;
 - (ii) an opening Statement by An Taoiseach which shall not exceed 10 minutes;
 - (iii) a contribution by the Leader of the House which shall not exceed 5 minutes;
 - (iv) a contribution not exceeding 5 minutes by other Group Leaders (time may be shared);
 - (v) a contribution not exceeding 3 minutes by other Senators (time may be shared);
 - (vi) a concluding response of not less than 10 minutes by An Taoiseach;
 - (vii) a speech of thanks by the Leas-Chathaoirleach which shall not exceed 2 minutes;
- (c) Standing Order 32 shall stand suspended;
- (d) No other business shall be taken unless the Seanad shall otherwise order on motion made by the Leader of the House or such other Senator as he may authorise in that behalf in accordance with Standing Order 18;
- (e) The Seanad on its rising on Thursday, 16th October, 2025, shall adjourn until 2.30 p.m. on Tuesday, 21st October, 2025.

Question put and agreed to.

Planning and Development (Exempted Development (Act of 2000)) Regulations 2025: Referral to Joint Committee

Senator Seán Kyne: I move:

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

Planning and Development (Exempted Development (Act of 2000)) Regulations 2025, a copy of which has been laid in draft form before Seanad Éireann on 7th October, 2025, be referred to the Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage, in accordance with Standing Order 79(2)(b), which, not later than 21st October, 2025, shall send a message to the Seanad in the manner prescribed in Standing Order 84, and Standing Order 86(2) shall accordingly apply.

Question put and agreed to.

Budget 2026 (Enterprise, Tourism and Employment): Statements

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister, Deputy Burke. I thank him for coming to contribute to this all-important debate - statements on budget 2026. The Minister has ten minutes for his opening statement.

Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Peter Burke): I welcome the opportunity to address Senators today and make a few comments regarding budget 2026,

particularly the budget measures that relate to my own Department. Budget 2026 is a strongly pro-jobs, pro-enterprise budget. The signal has gone out that Ireland is a fantastic place in which to do business, to scale and to invest. We must ensure that our economy and workforce continue to reap the benefits that the enterprise economy brings.

The budget demonstrates the Government's commitment to ensuring that our economy delivers for our citizens and that we support our people and businesses through investment and sensible management of our finances. The fact that we have a record number of over 2.82 million people in work and that our economy continues to enjoy very healthy levels of growth, notwithstanding strong geopolitical headwinds, is a testament to the hard work of the Irish people and the benefits of Government budgetary policy.

The package of budget measures announced continues our dual approach of safeguarding the national finances while also providing supports to targeted areas. Our aim as a Government must always be to improve the lives of our people. Focusing on quality employment and keeping businesses viable provides a pathway for people to access meaningful opportunities which provide economic stability and enhance quality of life.

Resilient, productive economies do not happen by chance, and our business ecosystem requires smart intervention to future-proof our industries and jobs. We have seen how careful, considered management over the last decade has strengthened our economy, and we must continue on this pathway to ensure we do not get complacent as we prepare to take advantage of the next wave of technology and advancement.

The reduction in the hospitality VAT rate to 9% will benefit all food businesses, which are integral parts of every town and village in the country, providing valuable employment in their local communities. While a significant support, the hospitality VAT rate reduction amounts to 18% of the overall tax package and is an appropriate lifeline to our hospitality SMEs when it comes to viability and value. This sector accounts for almost 200,000 jobs, with many of those workers on the national minimum wage. Some 75% of these businesses have fewer than ten employees and just 0.4% of hospitality SMEs are considered large businesses or food chains.

I will now outline some of the other pro-business tax measures in budget 2026. There is an increase in the rate of the R and D tax credit from 30% to 35%, which will be of huge benefit to our innovative industries, increasing investment and employment in pharma, medtech, engineering and more in the coming decades. I am determined that more indigenous SMEs can access the R and D tax credit, and changes have been made so that the threshold for first-year refunds will increase to €87,500 to support smaller projects. We have increased the capital gains tax, CGT, revised entrepreneur relief lifetime limit from €1 million to €1.5 million, at a rate of 10%. We have increased the employer PRSI threshold to ensure that employers do not pay the higher rate of PRSI for full-time workers earning the proposed increase to the national minimum wage. We have made amendments to the digital games tax credit to support the life cycle of video game development. We have extended the special assignee relief programme, SARP, for a further five years. There are changes to foreign dividends rules. We have extended the key employee engagement scheme to the end of December 2028.

These measures, when taken together, strongly signal Government's commitment to the pro-enterprise vision espoused in the action plan on competitiveness and productivity which I launched with the Taoiseach and Tánaiste last month, as well as the action plan on market

diversification. Both comprehensive plans signal the pathway forward for Irish SMEs as we navigate changed geopolitical trading environments.

The Government has endorsed the recommendation of the Low Pay Commission to increase the minimum wage to €14.15 per hour. In coming to its decision, the commission took a number of factors into consideration, including the potential impact of any increase on employment and competitiveness. The 4.8% increase in the minimum wage is not dissimilar to the overall expected increase in wages across the economy next year, and will benefit 200,000 workers across the State. The Low Pay Commission is made up of both employee and employer representatives and delivered this unanimous recommendation, which Government has accepted and will now implement.

I will now turn to the resources allocated to my Department under budget 2026, resources that will enable us to deliver on our strategic priorities for enterprise, innovation, and tourism. This year, we have secured a gross allocation of €1.298 billion, made up of €618 million in current funding and €680 million in capital funding. Under the national development plan, our capital envelope of €3.68 billion, augmented by agency-generated income, will allow us to invest nearly €5 billion over the next five years. This funding will support both existing programmes and new multi-annual investments aligned with the programme for competitiveness and our actions through government.

We are investing in next-generation foreign direct investment, FDI, sites, scaling indigenous businesses through a new scaling fund, with €120 million allocated to support Irish participation in European innovation projects like IPCEI, or important projects of common European interest. We are also expanding technology centres, boosting European Space Agency contract opportunities, and driving innovation through the disruptive technologies innovation fund.

On the current side, the €618 million allocation will support the establishment of the national AI office, enhance tourism development and strengthen operational capacity across our agencies. It will also ensure we are ready to lead during Ireland's EU Presidency in 2026, including our role in shaping the European Competitiveness Fund. These investments are strategic, targeted, and essential to securing Ireland's future competitiveness.

On the tourism side, we will receive €70 million in national development plan funding over the coming years, and later this month I will be launching our landmark new tourism strategy. The strategy will expand the remit of Fáilte Ireland, include plans around our new national culinary strategy, as well as laying out our ambitions and targets around business events and tourism. Ultimately, we will be introducing key performance indicators to ensure that our SMEs remain at the very heart of our tourism offering and that they can grasp the opportunities tourism presents for our local economies and our indigenous enterprises.

The expenditure and taxation measures announced in budget 2026 have been framed in light of the need to moderate the level of public expenditure increases while also targeting those areas where support is most needed. The taxation and expenditure announced in the budget will ensure that we can continue to grow our economy through increasing our competitiveness and productivity, delivering quality jobs and diversifying across international markets to mitigate against economic shocks. In today's volatile global economy, we are keeping a laser focus on supporting Irish SMEs, regional development, innovation and tourism to ensure

Ireland remains resilient and competitive, and so that quality job opportunities remain available to our citizens. The 2.82 million workers in our economy must be protected through every available means and budget 2026 has job protection objectives right at its core.

Senator Linda Nelson Murray: As a spokesperson on enterprise here in the Seanad I very much welcome the opportunity to speak to the Minister today and to the budget for enterprise and tourism, which we learnt of last week. I thank the Minister for taking the time to join us here.

Ireland's overall international competitive position is strong and currently ranks as the seventh most competitive economy in the world. Ireland has experienced a decade of very significant economic expansion, a strong increase in population, rapid gains in employment and a substantial rise in energy demand. The Minister has been quoted as saying, "Where businesses thrive, jobs follow." This budget of €1.3 billion has invested in Ireland's enterprise base, regional development, innovation, tourism and long-term competitiveness. We have a volatile global economy and we do not really know what is around the corner, so using a budget to focus on supporting enterprise, regional development and tourism is a good call. It is vital that we protect the 2.82 million jobs in our economy. Some of the measures include: a hospitality VAT reduction for food catering and hairdressers from 13.5% to 9%; a research and development tax credit increase from 30% to 35%; capital gains tax was revised; an extension of the special assignee relief programme; the extension of the key employee engagement programme; enhancements to the digital games tax credit; and relief on foreign earnings was extended to the end of 2030.

I am particularly delighted to see enhanced funding for tourism bodies and local enterprise offices. In Meath we have a fantastic tourism body, namely, Boyne Valley Tourism. The Boyne Valley, birthplace of Ireland's ancient east, is steeped in history and it is a really special destination. The board does fantastic work to promote our area, so investment here is very welcome. Likewise, in our local enterprise offices. The Minister attended the launch of our new Thrive Centre of Business Excellence in County Meath only a couple of weeks ago. The Minister will agree it was a super evening. The Thrive Centre of Business Excellence will serve as a central hub for supporting and attracting foreign direct investment into the county. The new 21,000 sq. ft facility will offer improved supports to businesses, from start-ups and small SMEs to larger companies operating on a global scale. I offer my congratulations to Meath County Council and the Minister's Department on the centre.

In other parts of the budget we saw the proposed establishment of the AI office in Ireland, which will be a landmark step in positioning Ireland as a leader in responsible AI adoption, while also helping our competitiveness and growth. As the Minister mentioned, at €1.3 billion this budget represents €618 million in current funding and €680 million in capital funding under the national development plan. Total capital investment into the enterprise sector in 2026 will be €800 million. The budget targets key priorities identified in the programme for Government and the action plan on market diversification and competitiveness. Additional priorities include €100 million to prepare large-scale regional service locations for future FDI, an additional €50 million to scale centres and drive innovation, and €70 million to develop our Irish tourism SMEs and attractions.

There is no doubt this is an ambitious budget for enterprise and tourism but right now, I would like to move on to small businesses. In our action plan for productivity and competitiveness, which was produced ahead of target, one of the six thematic challenges is creating and scaling more SMEs. We are repeatedly saying in government that SMEs are the backbone of the Irish economy. The Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, has said supporting small businesses and sustainable jobs remain at the heart of the Government's commitment to a strong economy and that is very much backed up with the VAT reduction, enhanced local enterprise offices, investment in innovation and scaling. I also very much welcome other improvements like improved access to supports by the national enterprise hub.

Unfortunately, businesses are working at reduced hours and closing early because of cost. They do not open Mondays and Tuesdays and I will include our own business in that. They are faced with increased rates, there are 17,500 fewer jobs in retail this year versus last year and we have seen an increase of 112% in insolvency between quarter 1 and quarter 2, one in four of those being retailers.

Minimum wage, which is good news for employees and news that employers welcome for the people who work hard for the business, will unfortunately put them under pressure. I do not know any employer who does not want their employees to be rewarded for their hard work but it is about being supported to do so. There has been a 44% increase in minimum wage in six years.

My colleague in the enterprise committee, Deputy Clendennen, ran a survey on small businesses and the number one impact was wages, the second was the cost of raw materials, the third was the cost of energy, the fourth was tax demands - which in fairness restaurants, cafes and hairdressers have been looked after - and the fifth was insurance premiums. It is important, having listened to these businesses, that we take on board what they have said.

I spoke to one business today that has gone from a profit of €200,000 in 2022 to €15,000 in 2024. This business owner has not taken a salary in the past year to keep the doors open. Their business has changed. The world of online shopping and cheaper Asian imports has had a dramatic effect. Walking down the main street in Navan, when I read this budget and listened to the Minister, I thought of Geoghegans clothing and curtain store, Reign Boutique, Chislors Boutique, Tierney's Newsagents, Connollys Seafood shop, Sorella Boutique, Ribbon Rouge, Tara dry cleaners, Balance Clinic and beauty spa, Jack Kiernan sport shop, Cordners shoe shop, David's Family Butchers, Henry Loughran's pub and Fitzsimons pub.

These businesses are retail, pubs and beauty salons. I worry for them and I worry we need to do more for them. Perhaps we might have thought about beauty along with hairdressing. Many hairdressers also offer beauty and I believe the numbers employed in both are roughly the same. I worry for Navan town and every town with increased cost of doing business. I would like us to reassure all these businesses - I know the Minister does - that we have their back and that this budget will, in turn, help all these businesses and that we have not finished here.

I welcome that we are going to cut the red tape on the length of forms for LEO grants under €3,000. That is brilliant. We need to push more Irish businesses to take up the research and development tax credit. We need to focus on SMEs and how we can support them with grants and business advice. Could we look at supporting small and rural retailers, pubs and beauty

salons to level the playing field? Can we look at reducing business rates for businesses and sectors under severe pressure and in particular when there are roadworks happening?

I heard of one business last week which lost 70% of turnover because right outside the door the street was being dug up. In my own town of Navan, we have an amazing plan in the Navan 2030 project. There is so much work being done to make our town a better place to come to but businesses that are already on the edge suffer during this phase. Could we offer energy supports for struggling businesses, apart from the upgrade to cleaner energy which is of course very beneficial? Can we examine fair trading practices? Could we offer locational zoning protections for town centre shops versus out-of-town developments? Could we ensure transport access? I feel it is very important to be able to park outside a shop. Could we also have another campaign to encourage shopping local, which I know we do very well every year? Maybe we should do one again.

Finally, we should ensure small retailers have voices and policy information in order that regulation does not inadvertently disadvantage them. I know the Minister meets many of them on a monthly basis. I thank him for his plan and for protecting jobs and businesses with this budget. Some €1.3 billion is a massive statement and a massive investment. As I said earlier, protecting small business remains at the heart of this Government commitment.

I look forward to what we have promised businesses in our programme for Government, which includes bringing forward measures to support SMEs with changes to PRSI, reduced energy costs for businesses and making sure business policies do not hinder jobs and do not hinder businesses. I very much look forward to working on all these with the Minister.

Senator Aubrey McCarthy: I thank the Minister, Deputy Burke. I reiterate what Senator Nelson Murray said to welcome him to the House. I thank him for engaging with us on budget 2026.

The budget arrives at a very important time for Ireland. I am a member of the enterprise committee so I know what is happening out in the real world with the small firms, the family businesses, the cafes, the florists and the hairdressers. You can certainly see the pressure mounting. People are working harder than ever before just to stay in business. One statistic came to us at the enterprise committee a few weeks ago which said many businesses are six months away from shutting down and they definitely need supports. While the official economy looks stable, that is simply not what we are hearing on the ground or what people are experiencing. When we then see the global landscape shifting rapidly, and that we are facing higher interest rates, soaring costs and low confidence, we can see that uncertainty is everywhere, from the war in Europe to worldwide trade tensions regarding tariffs, as we have discussed in this House many times. As a small, open economy, Ireland is squarely in the middle of all this, facing all the headwinds of this turbulence. I do not envy the Minister's task and I know this moment in time demands leadership. It demands a clear path to protect Irish jobs and strengthen our enterprises. Our small and medium enterprises are the true backbone of this economy and they are under immense strain. We see that weekly in the enterprise committee. These are the people that open the shutters every morning, pay the pay cheques at the end of the week and sponsor the local football team. For them, everything seems to be getting tougher. As we have discussed before, energy bills are getting excessive, access to finance is tightening, insurance costs are crippling and, on top of all of that, there is a lot of

bureaucracy and red tape. I am sure the Minister is aware that these are the daily realities for people trying to keep their doors open.

Budget 2026 was an opportunity to show real belief in these people, but I do not believe it went far enough. Our indigenous enterprises deserve the same level of confidence and commitment we often show multinationals. What the Irish and the IDA have done regarding attracting foreign investment is phenomenal. It has transformed Ireland, created jobs and put us on the global map, but it is also dangerous to rely heavily on a handful of global corporations for our tax base. I live in County Kildare and God help us if Intel or Pfizer or other such companies leave. One change in global tax policy or shift in corporate strategy, as we have seen recently with the US and pharma issues, and we could find ourselves deeply exposed. Strengthening our domestic business space is key. It is not just about economics but also safeguarding our national resilience.

One issue I brought up in this House before is the deemed disposal route on index funds. I had hoped that would be addressed in the budget. It perfectly illustrates how outdated parts of our system are. While it sounds technical, if we look at the mechanics of it, it is fundamentally unfair. At the moment the Government is introducing auto-enrolment to make sure that people plan ahead. At the same time, we penalise ordinary savers who have done the right thing and planned ahead, in trying to build security for their families. Every eight years they are hit with a tax bill on profits they have not even cashed out on. That in itself seems senseless and discourages both investment and long-term saving. Fixing this would not cost the State a huge amount of money, but it would send a powerful message that Ireland supports those who plan ahead, take responsibility for their future and believe in building for it.

While also discussing enterprise, one thing that is key to our committee is tourism. Tourism is also one of the key features of the Irish economy, and from Killarney to Kilkenny, from the Wild Atlantic Way to the Wicklow mountains, etc., tourism sustains our towns, employs many people and injects energy into every corner of the country. One figure came across our tourism spend. The numbers are similar but the tourism spend has reduced drastically. Therefore, many small operators are close to the brink. We need targeted, smart supports without layers of complicated schemes that seem impossible to access. We need to focus on sustainable tourism that brings life to all the regions of Ireland all year round, not just for the summer months. When we talk about enterprise, we are talking about real people, and behind every budget line and policy there is a human story of a worker, family or student.

5 o'clock

When a small business closes, as Senator Nelson Murray mentioned, it is not just a balance sheet loss, it is the end of somebody's dream and livelihood in a locality. Often, a whole community suffers. That is why we need to focus on enterprise policy as social policy. The Minister visited a social enterprise that I started in Greystones and was very receptive to what we do there. It shows that if we back small businesses, we back families, towns and opportunity. I urge the Department and the Minister to adopt a whole-of-government approach and to get serious about investing in, upskilling and transforming our workforce through innovation in order that Ireland can be the best small country in the world in which to start, run and grow a business, not just for multinationals but for the people who call this island home. We cannot afford to wait for the next crisis before we act. I have spoken in this House about the need to strengthen the younger entrepreneurs that are coming behind. The next Collisons

are probably leaving school now, so we need to focus and make sure those people are empowered to start their companies here. The true measure of a successful budget is not how it looks in the Department's report but how it feels in people's lives. Let us ensure that budget 2026 delivers not just numbers but hopes.

Senator Ollie Crowe: I welcome the Minister and thank him for joining us to talk through budget 2026 from an enterprise, trade and tourism perspective. The budget was very positive for Irish businesses and companies that have invested in Ireland. It reflects the Government's commitment to supporting our businesses and its determination to continuously attract foreign direct investment that will further strengthen the Irish economy.

Our economy has rebounded well from Covid but it is important not to take that for granted, particularly in light of the challenges from a global perspective. I welcome, in particular, the VAT reduction for the hospitality sector. As the Minister will be aware, the current 13.5% VAT rate in Ireland is one of the highest rates on food services in the EU. The industry has faced spiralling costs in recent years, leading to a raft of closures. We also have data which makes clear the impact this has had on employment within the sector. The labour force survey for quarter 2 of 2025, which was released in August, made this obvious. Hospitality employment stood at 181,000, down from 184,200 in the same quarter of 2024. This is a 1.7% reduction year on year. By way of comparison, total national employment grew by 2.3% in the same period. The labour force survey also shows that full-time employment in hospitality fell by 6.7%, which is very worrying. It should also be noted that these are frequently jobs in small towns and villages that are very difficult to replace and that have an outsized impact on local economies. I know from speaking with hospitality businesses in Galway city and county how much pressure they have been operating under in recent years and how incredibly tight margins have become. It should also be acknowledged that the industry is vital to the regions, particularly to small towns and villages where cafés, bars and restaurants serving food are often the main employers. Such businesses are also a resource to their local communities. They provide premises for events and when they close, communities are often left without a suitable venue to host confirmation, communion, and birthday celebrations as well as sadder occasions. These businesses are not just important to the families who typically run them but also to the communities they serve.

Anyone with any knowledge of the hospitality industry will recognise that in the absence of Government action the sector would have continued to struggle and would have faced ongoing closures. The move has been met with criticism in certain quarters from those who have used examples that are outlandish and that ignore the thousands of small family businesses across the country that employ tens of thousands of people. The VAT reduction is a vital and essential measure for an industry facing considerable challenges. I acknowledge that the Minister, Deputy Burke, pushed strongly for the reduction. The rate is due to be introduced from 1 July next year. Ideally, however, the reduction would be introduced earlier in view of the pressures businesses are facing, such as high inflation, sick pay costs, pension auto-enrolment and so on. Is that possible or is the July date effectively set in stone? I previously raised with the Minister the issue of excise duty on draught products for rural establishments and alcohol-only, non-food pubs. A small investment there would have a significant return for pubs across the country. I ask the Minister to consider that.

The efforts to strengthen regional development from an enterprise perspective in budget 2026 are especially welcome. As the Minister outlined, the budget provides enhanced funding for local enterprise offices, targeted enterprise supports and strategic investment in innovation and scaling. We want to see jobs growth across the country and these are vital measures which will support businesses that are seeking to grow and create sustainable jobs across Ireland. I also welcome the increase in the research and development tax credit, from 30% to 35%, because it will enhance Ireland's position for both foreign direct investment and domestic innovation. Given the recent US tax changes that discouraged research and development activity outside the US, this measure was particularly needed and welcome. I also welcome the fact that the first-year payment threshold was raised from €75,000 to €87,500. This will support smaller research and development projects.

The establishment of the AI office of Ireland is also an important measure. This is an area we are still learning about. I expect, on the basis of what has happened in the past 20 years, that Ireland will also become a leader in this new technology sector. It is especially important in the context of continuing to attract foreign direct investment that we maintain our reputation. AI is clearly a helpful resource for companies if used appropriately. The establishment of an office which can assist businesses in achieving that goal is a logical measure. The Minister has said that the office will be up and running by August 2026. What staffing resources are planned for that office and how will it engage with businesses? If available, such details would be appreciated.

I also want to highlight the measures taken to continue to attract foreign direct investment. I already mentioned the research and development tax credit which is just one of a number of measures included in budget 2026. The €100 million next-generation sites fund is obviously the stand-out initiative and it is very welcome. This fund will be used to prepare large-scale regional serviced locations for future foreign direct investment. It is my understanding that the first of these sites is expected to be in the west of Ireland. I ask the Minister to tell us a little more about the process and whether there has been any progress in identifying suitable sites. A number of smaller measures will also assist in attracting foreign direct investment, including the extension of a special assignee relief programme and the extension of the foreign earnings deduction. These are both positive and welcome. I welcome the €120 million in funding for important projects of common European interest which will position Ireland at the forefront of strategic European industrial initiatives, including advanced semi-conductor and AI technologies. This is essential, given our determination to continue to be at the heart of Europe and to work closely with partners across the EU.

Budget 2026 is a pro-enterprise, forward-looking budget which supports businesses and workers. It balances the need for short-term supports with long-term vision. It recognises the need for balanced regional development, the vital role that SMEs across the country play and the importance of foreign direct investment.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Joe Flaherty): Sinn Féin has the next slot, which Senators Collins and Nicole Ryan will share. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Nicole Ryan: I welcome the Minister to the Chamber. It is lovely to have him here today to discuss budget 2026. In this section of the budget, there are lots of welcome initiatives, including the VAT reduction. I am sure many people are really thankful for that. However,

every October we hear the same story of record budgets, record spending and record promises, but people in constituencies like the one in which I live, Cork North-West, are looking around and asking about where the change is taking place. The budget was billed as one for working people. When we strip it back, however, we can see that it is the workers who are still paying the highest price. The more they work, the more they are taxed. The more overtime they do, the more they lose in deductions. The more they try to get ahead, the more they feel like they are carrying the system on their backs, supporting others when no one seems to be supporting them. I am not talking about the people who genuinely need help. I am talking about those who can work but who choose not to because the system rewards inertia instead of effort. Meanwhile, the nurse doing 12-hour shifts, the teacher staying late to help a struggling student and the ground worker driving 60 km to a site before dawn are footing the bill. Where is the incentive to work in rural Ireland today? When we do the maths and factor in the cost of fuel, childcare, rent and endless stream of bills, it is no wonder people are better off staying at home. This is not sustainable. It is not fair and it is not what people voted for.

For years, people across Ireland have done everything right. They have worked hard, paid their taxes and kept their communities going, yet they are the ones being punished now. They are told there is no money for the GP service, no bus for their kids and no counselling for their teenagers, but somehow there is always money for tax breaks for developers and billion-euro profits for banks that we still will not tax properly. The Government calls this a pro-enterprise budget. However, the Minister would have to tell that to the small business owner in Macroom who cannot get staff because people cannot afford to live locally. He should tell it to the young couple in Kanturk who are saving for a deposit while rent swallows half of their wages.

This is about equity. Working people are not looking for handouts; they are looking for their fair share. The Government says that if they work, contribute and build a life in their communities, they will not be penalised for it. However, this budget tells them the opposite. It tells them that the harder they work, the less it matters. That is why people are disillusioned and that is why trust is breaking down. If the Minister and the Government want people to believe in work, they should reward that work. If they want people to live in rural Ireland, they have to invest in rural Ireland. If they want to talk about fairness, they should deliver it - not in headlines but in people's homes.

Senator Joanne Collins: I welcome the Minister. I have a specific query. I made the same query on the Order of Business earlier. It is not something that everybody would think of, but as a reformed smoker who uses a vape, it is definitely a bone of contention in my house. I gave up cigarettes seven years ago because I just could not afford to keep smoking as a result of the fact that the tax on cigarettes was increased every year. I switched over to vapes. A bottle of juice for the vape contains 10 ml and costs €5. As of 1 November, 50 cent per millilitre will be added to the price, which will bring it up to €10. That is double the cost of what it will be come 1 November. In terms of the cost of living, for somebody who is giving up cigarettes for a cost reason and not a health reason, to double the cost of their bottle of juice is going to be very hard for them to swallow. They are giving it up for a reason, namely because they cannot afford it.

I have never in all my days of watching budgets and price increases seen a tax go on something for the very first time to make it double the cost it currently is. That is quite unfair. It is not going to affect everybody, and it is not going to be at front top of everyone's mind, but

there is a good chunk of the population who gave up cigarettes for health or cost reasons. They have moved to vaping. I will hold my hand up; my vape is the only reason I am not still smoking. If it was the case that it came up to the same price as cigarettes or close to it, I probably would go back on to cigarettes because I gave them up for cost as opposed to health reasons. I just want to make the point that it would be nice to have this looked at to see whether the price has to double or whether the level of the increase can be reduced.

Senator Dee Ryan: The Minister is very welcome. I take this opportunity to welcome this very important budget for our country as we move forward into uncharted economic waters. We did say that we were going to place an emphasis on infrastructure, housing and child poverty. In this budget, which we hope is the first of five, we have done precisely that.

In the context of his Department, I congratulate the Minister on the very pro-business budget he brought forward. In particular, I recognise the increase in the research and development tax credit, which is really important, as well as the allocation of €618 million for a national AI office. As we know, the success, resurgence and, indeed, blossoming of our economy in the past decade is down to our ability to attract and retain multinationals. However, and I welcome the Minister's emphasis on this, we must see the support in scaling and development in innovation of our SMEs and our indigenous sector as being the next chapter in our economic future. In that context, I highlight the research and development tax credit and the €618 million for the national AI office today.

With the greatest respect, I differ from my colleague Senator Crowe in his assessment of the 9% VAT cut. I would have preferred to see a more targeted approach to supporting what I recognise as vulnerable businesses within the hospitality sector. However, I do welcome the support for them.

This leads me on to an issue that is coming down the line and that is going to affect a sector comparable with the hospitality and food and beverage sector. I refer to independent retailers and grocers across the country who, come next February, will be facing the introduction of a new licensing fee for tobacco and nicotine-inhaling products. The amount involved will be €1,800 if they are selling both. That is per premises and is regardless of the size of their premises, turnover or footfall. It is a blanket charge of €1,800 and it will be felt far more keenly by those in the independent grocery sector, who, I would argue, are very much the same as the independent coffee shops and restaurant businesses across the country. They are the fabric of our local communities. Just like the coffee shop, the local grocery shop is where we go to pick up the paper or, perhaps for some, to buy a box of cigarettes or a vape. We certainly call in to inquire as to what the latest goings on are in the local community and to learn about and get involved in our own communities.

The Minister was involved in introducing the relevant legislation in 2023. In light of the serious cost-of-doing-business challenges the independent grocers to whom I refer are facing and the competition from multinationals, will he examine the fact that the perhaps unintended consequence of this licensing fee will be that it will drive the sale of tobacco and vapes underground? It will fuel the black market for those products and may be a further nail in the coffin of independent grocers throughout the country. Will the Minister please consider a derogation for those small independent retailers when he is seeking to introduce this license fee next year?

Senator Gareth Scahill: I propose to share time with Senator Noel O'Donovan.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Joe Flaherty): Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Gareth Scahill: The Minister stated, "Budget 2026 is a pro-enterprise budget that recognises the critical link between industrial development, infrastructure investment and job creation." In this volatile time, the focus was on protecting the 2.81 million jobs in our economy that we cannot take for granted. First and foremost, the reduction of the VAT rate from 13.5% to 9% has straight away saved and protected 191,000 jobs that would probably be the most susceptible in a volatile economy. The Minister must be credited for that.

I also welcome the research and development tax credit. To bring it down to a local idea, in Monksland in County Roscommon we have Novo Nordisk, an international company that announced large-scale job cuts recently enough. Thankfully, the Monksland site was exempted from a large percentage of those cuts. That is directly related to the investment this country has made in research and development tax credits, and the 5% increase introduced in the budget. Indirectly, we have probably protected an awful lot more jobs with that initiative as well. I commend the Minister on that.

We in this House constantly talk about supporting small businesses. Budget 2026 has strengthened regional development and supported our local enterprise offices. We have spoken continuously about the cost of business advisory forum and the small business unit, which are all welcome initiatives from the Minister's Department. I am very impressed with the national enterprise hub. How an initiative like that had not been thought of years ago is beyond me, but bringing it all together it is exactly what our businesses, especially small businesses, need.

We need to weigh some of the supports available for small businesses and there needs to be a lot more collaboration with other Departments. For example, the Department of rural and community development has a town centre first initiative to create public realms. As Senator Nelson Murray said, we cannot create initiatives that jeopardise small enterprises or take away parking spaces from businesses. The Minister's Department needs to support those businesses and make sure that initiatives cannot be introduced from other Departments that will take from them. I will let Senator O'Donovan take over on tourism.

Senator Noel O'Donovan: I thank the Senator for his kind offering. Like other speakers, I want to commend the Minister on his work on this budget. It is a prudent budget and what we have come to expect from the Minister, Deputy Paschal Donohoe. The Minister said in his contribution that there are 2.82 million people in work. When I left college in 2011, the jobs market was quite bleak. We can never forget where we have come from and where we are now. People have a reason to get up in the morning, go to work and earn a fair living to support themselves and their families. It is a major hallmark that we should never forget.

The Minister referenced the 9% VAT rate, something for which he has campaigned for a long number of years. West Cork has a large number of businesses that have engaged with me on this issue and will benefit from the VAT reduction. They are busy businesses. I have continually made the point that businesses have extremely high footfall, yet are still struggling. As Senator Scahill said, we need to be even more proactive in the months and years ahead. We

need to ask these businesses questions and listen to them. Local enterprise offices can play a role. They arrange conferences, meetings and workshops, but there is a benefit to knocking on the doors of businesses and asking them questions.

I have some suggestions for next year's budget. The town of Bandon is currently going through major public realm work, which is welcome and transformative for the town. During the process, however, businesses have suffered in terms of footfall and revenue, yet the local authority has very little discretion in terms of a rates waiver. The car park in Bandon has been finished. There is scope at ministerial level for the Minister for local government and local authorities to ensure that when works commence in a town there is discretion to support businesses. We will see similar in the town of Bantry shortly, which will undergo flood culvert works. Again, the town and businesses will need support.

I suggest we support our chambers of commerce and business associations in the work they do to support businesses in towns. We have seen how well the support for agricultural shows has worked throughout the country, which have been given €5,000, €6,000 or €7,000. Our business associations support businesses in towns, including with Christmas lights and various events. A body of work could be done to look to next year's budget to support the chambers of commerce and businesses and communities. I commend the budget and the work of the Minister.

Senator Aidan Davitt: I am delighted to welcome the Minister to the House. It is a testament to how hard-working he is that all of the people who have spoken have commented on well he has done in his brief since he started. He should keep up the good work.

I have some queries and a question on the local front. I refer to apprenticeship schemes. It is not under the Minister's brief, but he is dealing with business and getting people into work. One of the biggest problems we have now is getting qualified staff for many jobs. As the Minister is aware, we are providing waivers and permits to bring people into the country.

Regarding auctioneering, there is a one-off grant per year when somebody starts – I believe the figure is €3,000 and was originally €1,000. We are treated very differently from the wet trades, such as block layers, plasterers, electricians or whatever else. Such apprentices are subsidised by the State, but that does not happen in our industry. An auctioneer sends somebody off to college one day a week and does not have them working for them, yet is paying them the entire time. They are paid the minimal wage and whatever else. People starting off find it tough. A hell of a lot of schemes are in the same boat. There are banking and insurance apprenticeships, as the Minister is aware. Perhaps when he is around the Cabinet table it would be worth discussing. A change would help and encourage more people to take on more apprentices.

I refer to auto enrolment. In fairness, the Minister understands the pressures businesses face as regards the minimum wage and auto enrolment. He is doing his bit regarding the hospitality industry, as has been discussed. I know a little about the industry and I know it is not that easy at present to get companies to play ball. They do not want to know about auto enrolment or pension schemes. Some businesses only have one or two employees. It is a problem for them. Getting people signed up and organised is a hassle. The amount of time involved is considerable, in particular for people who have no background in this. There should be a small grant or some sort of one-off allowance in next year's budget to assist people, in particular

smaller businesses that are trying to establish themselves. Larger companies often have someone experienced in pensions and investment working in them and their own pension scheme or whatever else, but many smaller companies do not have a clue what is going on. I am sure the Minister is well aware of this. He is from that background and I am sure he is receiving these sorts of queries.

Senator Scahill mentioned the far side of the River Shannon and guys who think they are in Athlone. He referred to Novo Nordisk. I am sure anybody in Athlone who asks is told there is only one reason those jobs are there, namely, the Minister. There is no doubt about that. We would not have to ask the Minister twice. It was a coup and it is to be hoped the ship has sailed and there will be no further jobs lost because they are very good high-paying jobs in Athlone. They have been a great help to both counties straddling the River Shannon.

On a local note, there have been announcements and some things are in the pipeline regarding local jobs. The Minister might give us a brief outline of what is going on locally, if he does not mind.

Senator Mike Kennelly: I welcome the Minister to the Seanad. I welcome budget 2026. I want to begin by welcoming the decision of the Government in 2026 to reduce the VAT rate for the hospitality services to 9%. It is a positive move and one that will offer some breathing room to many businesses across the tourism sector. It was not an easy decision, and I appreciate the efforts of the Minister and his Department to support this vital industry.

As a proud Kerryman, Kerry is home to football but also tourism. Tourism is more than just an economic activity; it is part of our identity in Kerry. From the lakes of Killarney to Muckross House, the Torc Waterfall, Dingle, Kenmare, the Ring of Kerry, the beaches of Inch, Ballybunion, Ballyheigue and Fenit and the Listowel races, tourism sustains thousands of jobs and supports hundreds of small businesses in Kerry and Ireland. It is the backbone of many communities, especially in rural and coastal areas.

I offer my sympathies to the O'Callaghans of the Fáilte Hotel in Killarney on the passing of Paudie O'Callaghan, who was an ambassador for the tourism market in Kerry over many years. I served on Kerry County Council with his brother, Councillor Niall "Botty" O'Callaghan. Our sympathies to him and his family.

On the reduction of the VAT rate to 9%, almost 15,000 people in Kerry are employed directly in tourism-related sectors. That is a significant portion of any workforce. When we factor in the indirect employment in retail, transport, food production and cultural services, the reach is even greater. I know the Minister has seen this at first hand. Earlier this year the Minister visited Kerry with me and we met with groups like the Killarney hotel federation, the Tralee Chamber Alliance and the Listowel Business and Community Alliance. The Minister listened to their concerns about rising costs, staffing shortages and the need for continued investment in infrastructure and connectivity. That engagement by the Minister was appreciated locally and shows his commitment to the sector. Indeed, canvassing for Heather Humphreys in the last number of days and the last week was a pleasure. People recognise her contribution, her being pro-jobs, and her identity on that budget.

While the VAT reduction is welcome, I believe there is room to do more. Many non-food hospitality businesses such as guesthouses, bed and breakfast accommodation, caravan parks,

leisure centres and local attractions continue to face real challenges as well. These businesses are essential to the tourism visitor experience and deserve equal support. I ask the Minister and his Department going forward to again really consider extending the 9% VAT rate to all non-food hospitality services, including the wet bars. Suggestions were made to save these rural pubs across the county of Kerry and indeed across the whole country. Life does exist outside the capital and in rural Ireland we need these to exist.

There was one suggestion made about the draught excise rebate scheme. The Vintners' Federation of Ireland has called for a cap on the excise rebate on draught beer and cider. Such a measure would directly support traditional pubs. Its absence in budget 2026 is, and is seen as, a missed opportunity to relieve the pressure on these wet bars. When I say "wet bars" these are the crossroads bar, maybe in the small town that might have two or three pubs operating. They do not do food but they also need to be targeted, supported and kept open. One of the competitive factors introduced was in targeted supports for seasonal and rural tourism operators for investing in regional tourism infrastructure, signage - which is a simple thing - public amenities, and digital marketing to support destinations. These are places like Ballybunion and Ballyheigue. This was also for supporting workforce development with training incentives and accommodation supports for all seasonal staff.

Tourism in Kerry is about more than numbers; it is about people. It is the students who get their first summer job in the local hotel, the local bar or the local restaurant. It is the family who own bed and breakfast accommodation with pride. It is the small businesses and business owners who depend on the visitors and the tourism market to keep their lights on. I welcome the budget for 2026. Let us keep working together to ensure that tourism in Kerry and across Ireland not only recovers but continues to grow and thrive.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Joe Flaherty): I thank Senator Kennelly for a wonderful account of tourism in County Kerry. We will go to Senator Conway now and see if he can extol the virtues of tourism in Clare.

Senator Martin Conway: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Acting Cathaoirleach. Of course I will. I commend my colleague Senator Kennelly on espousing the virtues of Kerry. Indeed he is right. Clare, across the Shannon, has equally as much to offer.

The Minister is very welcome to the House. I am delighted that tourism has been added to his brief. When we look back to 2010 to 2012, when we were on our knees as a country, the first industry that bounced back was tourism because we approached it strategically. We created product that was attractive internationally. It started with The Gathering and then it evolved to the Wild Atlantic Way, which was the first time we had a joined-up thinking approach in marketing us as a country, the west of Ireland from Donegal to Cork, in a professional way internationally and in a way that can be attractive, similar to camino walks in other countries. We need to build on that.

Back in 2017 or 2018, I tabled a motion in the House that the 9% VAT rate would be retained permanently in the tourism industry because of what it did as a budgetary measure that really did have impact. Funnily enough, my Private Member's motion actually did not pass because people had reservations about it simply because of the cost. I would argue that it is the right decision and, as time evolves, it will be proven to be the right decision because there are tens

of thousands of potential jobs yet to be created in the tourism sector in this country. There are also the tens of thousands of jobs currently that need to be protected. This is one measure that will protect them. It is not coming in until next July and that the minimum wage is increasing after Christmas, so there is a lacuna of a few months that some businesses will find extremely difficult.

I also welcome the Minister's creative thinking when it comes to tourism. I urge the Minister to look at some sort of a scheme to support villages to retain the fabric they have. A village is only a village when it does have its pub, its shop, its coffee shop and somewhere for people to eat. I welcome and really support the gold-plated tourism products. In County Clare we have the Cliffs of Moher, which is one of the top tourist attractions in the country, but we also need silver-plated ones. It is pointless in County Clare for a bus to come from Dublin to the Cliffs of Moher, spend four hours at the Cliffs of Moher and then for the bus to go back to Dublin. We need to create a two- to three-day package where the buses will come and absolutely they will visit the gold-plated facility but there are lots of silver-plated facilities as well. We need to keep investing in them to make sure they are up to best international standard. We cannot let our silver-plated facilities dwindle because of the lack of investment. The joined-up thinking with rural development and the work involved was done by Heather Humphreys when she was the Minister, and Michael Ring before her, investing in swimming pools, in visitor attractions, in museums, in community hubs and so on that are the silver-plated facilities that benefit communities as a drop down from the gold-plated facilities. It is important that they are supported.

We are living in an Internet age and a digital marketing age. As a country, we need to be spending the bulk of our international marketing budget in the digital space. I welcome that there is a team within the Minister's Department that is working on digital marketing, but I really think there needs to be a facility for ramping that up significantly, particularly in the lucrative markets like the European market, the American market and the new growing markets in places like Asia. When they come, it is the trip of a lifetime and they spend money. The car rental sector also needs to be supported. The Leader, Senator Kyne, will be talking to the Minister on that specific issue in the coming days. We have had an engagement with our former Oireachtas colleague in that area.

It would be very useful if there were a fund available within the Minister's Department to support and engage when particular elements of the tourism industry find themselves in trouble. It worked during Covid when we were able to intervene and save businesses. I am one of the people that does not believe in saving businesses that are not possible to save long term. There is no point in government money being spent to prop up a business that ultimately will fail if it does not get government money but there are a lot of businesses that need a leg up. We will find that, between January and July, some businesses will suffer because of the minimum wage increase in advance of the VAT reduction. There needs to be a fund that is swift, quick and reactive and can intervene to stabilise businesses to prevent them from going under, which potentially they could do in the short term. The Minister has a business mind and he thinks that way. I encourage him to make sure his officials are flexible with those types of schemes because they can be the difference between a business dying and a business surviving and, ultimately, the preservation and retention of jobs.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Joe Flaherty): I thank Senator Conway. I do not think we have any more Senators offering to contribute, so before he responds, perhaps the Minister could indulge a few of my queries if he does not mind. As his Westmeath colleague, Senator Davitt, has pointed out, the Minister has delivered enough jobs to Athlone and Mullingar already. I ask him to update us on the plans for the IDA advanced manufacturing facility in Longford town. Will he confirm that it will be 30,000 sq. ft, as per the spec of other facilities that have been delivered nationwide? Are we close to a date when work can start? Are they close to applying for planning permission on the site?

I was pleased to see the commitment to AI in the budget, which was an important first step. We have a huge challenge in the country in terms of AI literacy, particularly with older people, but surprisingly with our young people as well. It will be one of the key challenges for us as we move to the next phase of tech investment in Ireland. To that end, I think the national AI centre is critical. It was good to see the money announced for this in the budget. There is no reason that the centre has to be based in Dublin. AI can be anywhere and it would be an important statement for the Government and the Minister's office if that facility went to rural Ireland. As we know, there is enough already in Athlone and Mullingar and it would be seen as a very political decision if it was located there, but the Minister is aware of the empty shopping centre and the Providers building and I know Longford County Council management has spoken to him at length. It would be an important statement from this Government of the role that AI is going to play, not only for the future Ireland, but indeed for the regeneration of rural Ireland. I would welcome the Minister's thoughts on where he thinks that will be located and if it is a possibility that it can be located in rural Ireland.

Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Peter Burke): I thank the Acting Chairperson and all 14 Senators for their contributions and the points they raised. I will just touch on a few of the points. Certain themes went through a number of the points. First of all, Senator Linda Nelson Murray made excellent points about SMEs. We all know that small family businesses employ about two-thirds of people across the country and they do not have HR directors or finance directors. A lot of their great work is done around the kitchen table. That is why we are very keen to support them in having grants that do not require a huge amount of time. We are now putting a huge amount of effort into doing things simpler, lighter and faster, reducing the conditions and hopefully getting to a stage where we can turn those smaller SME grants around in 24 hours to grant approval in principle, particularly in the space of digitalisation and decarbonisation. We know that if companies can change the business model and reduce their utility bills, it gives them a fighting chance of being sustainable into the future.

In relation to scaling, we will come forward later next year with our new national accelerator programme. That will join all the dots between the current model, with Dogpatch Labs, PorterShed and Republic of Work and so many different pieces of the jigsaw around the country. We will have a very strong model with Enterprise Ireland at its core. That will allow our SMEs to scale and give them the support and the funding they need at an early stage, which is critical to their success.

One point that really runs through a few of the themes is in relation to our indigenous economy, which is very close to my heart and is very important. It is very important to have a strong multinational space as well, because some of the companies that are referenced here

have been in this country for 50, 60 or 70 years. One of the great things that can be seen as a theme running through those companies is that many of them have hundreds of SMEs deeply embedded in their supply chains. We brought packages to Cabinet today with research, development and innovation grants. Some of those companies have small SMEs right across the country that are providing key services for them to be successful here in the Irish economy and it is important we never forget that. Intel, for example, has 850 SMEs working for it, including Banagher Precast Concrete and Kiernan Structural Steel in Longford. It is a hugely diverse spread. It is important that we understand this integrated relationship.

It is also important to note that the top ten Irish companies based in Ireland employ 450,000 people globally. This demonstrates the strong internationalisation of the Irish economy. If we go by evidence, which we all should in this Chamber, and look back, we had a record year for Irish indigenous companies last year, with exports of about €36.75 billion. They employ 234,000 people through Enterprise Ireland. We are looking to get to 50,000 exports in the next four years. In the key markets, Europe grew by 8%, to approximately €10.6 billion euro. This is now the lead market for our Enterprise Ireland clients. The US grew by 8% and the UK grew by 4%. We have a very strong base and it is growing and we are creating more jobs in it. That is the explicit evidence as we look at it. We can grow the links between our SMEs and our multinationals. I was awestruck by the connection between one of the very big life-science companies in Athlone and smaller companies. I was in Ballinasloe visiting a small printing company. This is a family business which employs some 25 people. The owner told me that the instructions that go into each bottle of medication are printed by his company and it is linked into one of the biggest life-science companies in the country. This demonstrates that link which should not be taken for granted.

Regarding the 9% VAT rate, this is very important to sustain jobs in rural and regional areas of the country. Senators Crowe and Nelson Murray pointed out how important it is to look beyond that. We have in the programme for Government measures that are contained within PRSI for our SMEs, particularly in retail and hospitality. We cannot do everything in one budget, and hopefully we will be looking at areas of further improvement for viability in the years ahead, and also looking at other areas that we could not deliver in this budget. Excise duty is one of those that is very important for our pubs and wet pubs, which provide a very strong offering. That is another area where I think there is significant merit in the proposal, particularly for the on-trade, which is very important to sustain. It is something we can look at in the future.

On the points raised by Senators Ryan and Collins, the licensing issues come under the remit of the Department of Health, unfortunately. I have raised the issue of the increase in licensing fees, particularly for corner shops. I have written to the Department of Health on the matter. There has not been any change on it yet, so we await further developments. Senator Kyne raised the matter with me already. He said it was raised on the Order of Business. It is another issue that we can respond on.

Regarding Senator Scahill's points about the national enterprise hub, the team there has responded to 7,800-odd strong leads since its inception, which is very strong. There is a lot of investigation in terms of working with and supporting many of our SMEs and considering the fact that time is a premium for family businesses, we want to do a lot more in that space and hopefully help them further.

Senator O'Donovan's point about the chambers of commerce is a good one. We can look at working more closely with them, particularly in relation to many of the grants that are available through local enterprise offices. The chambers can be brought on board as well to assist companies in accessing those grants. We have a lot of work to do to make them simpler, and that is the first horizon I am trying to get over, particularly the ones that are not of high value. There is no big risk to the taxpayer, but it is important to turn them around as quickly as we can.

Digitalisation is a very important objective of the Government. We are trying to improve the approach to make businesses more sustainable and we will be doing a lot in that regard. As Senators Davitt and Lawless pointed out, apprenticeships are also very important. The national action plan for competitiveness and productivity contains a large number of actions on apprenticeships and trying to upskill people, which is going to be critical. Incentivising businesses to take on apprentices is a key element. Businesses face a huge challenge with employment costs and we need to ensure that they are getting incentivised to deliver those apprenticeships. We have a lot of work to do in this area.

Auto-enrolment is a big challenge for businesses and I will raise the matter with the Minister, Deputy Calleary. We know it is a very significant policy decision to support the demographic change in our country and sustain people to have a proper income as they go into retirement, but there is a big challenge for business as well. We have to try to support them with information and support in terms of the mechanism to do it, but also financially it is a big challenge. That is why I am hopeful that some of the viability measures will help some cohorts, but I agree that we have more to do and we have to try our very best on it.

In relation to Mullingar, there have been a number of improvements relating to the advanced factory unit, on which the sod has been turned. A huge amount of work will be done there over the next 18 months to ensure it is delivered. There was also the announcement in the past month by the US company G and F Precision Molding of 30 jobs in the area.

Senators Kennelly and Conway raised important points about tourism, digitalisation and improving the offering. I am hopeful that we will have our tourism strategy ready next month. We will be doing a number of things within the tourism strategy. We will expand the remit of Fáilte Ireland. It will work with our restaurants now, having focused more on hotels previously.

We need to develop the model. How do we make the offering more sustainable? We will embrace SMEs because they are integral to grasping the opportunity that will be in the marketplace. We will put boots on the ground where there are new air routes. We have three new gateways into the US market this year - three new direct flights. We have 21 in total. When policy decisions like that are taken, we need to put resources behind them to sell them and get people back here. That will be important.

We will have an all-Ireland food strategy, which will be particularly important in the European market where there is a challenge with the lack of understanding of the huge artisan offering we have in Ireland. We will expand our business events strategy and will potentially get €1 billion per year out of that.

That will all be captured by our tourism policy and we will have key performance indicators with our State agency, Fáilte Ireland, to ensure we are reaching our targets. They will be significant targets but we have to aim big because the sector can bring revenue to all parts of

our country. I know from meeting businesses down there with Senator Kennelly how important it is. Equally with Senator Conway in County Clare, I saw how critical it is to Ennistimon, Lehinch and the towns and villages around there. The huge offering tourism makes is very important.

Senator Flaherty raised a number of issues. Artificial intelligence will be key. It is for the future. It does not have to be located in any one town or city. It is an area where we will have a lot of opportunity in the future. We will finish transposing and designating competent authorities under the AI Act by next August. Then we will establish our office, which will be a significant statement by the State. That will work not only on regulating artificial intelligence, but also on developing the model and looking at opportunities for our businesses across the country. There is a huge opportunity and it is something we have to grasp with both hands.

On the IDA, I understand from the last conversation I had that we should be due an announcement pretty shortly on it. I will try to get the Senator a note on that to bring us up to date. It is a significant priority. There are a few issues that Transport Infrastructure Ireland was working through on the site it has. Those have been resolved, I understand, and we can progress on it. I know it is very important for Longford town and the area.

I have covered as much as I can in my response and I thank everyone for their time.

Senator Aidan Davitt: A report on the cost of power today said Ireland was the most expensive country in Europe. It is evidently a massive factor in industry. What can we as a Government do about it? What are the Minister's thoughts?

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Senator for that intervention. We are price-takers in the market. That is a big issue in power. We have set up the national affordability task force and the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, is trying to ensure that as we invest in our grid, we make the user pay less.

In the new capital programme, PR6, we are investing about €18 billion in improving our transmission and grid capacity. In PR5, we invested about €8 billion, so it is a significant increase in expenditure. The framework is the key thing that Government will have to grasp. This capital expenditure will transform our generation capacity. We will have 9 GW of solar come into the grid by 2030, 8 GW of onshore wind and, in theory, 5 GW post 2030 of offshore wind. How do we make that investment cheaper to the user? We know we are the most expensive economy for electricity in Europe because we are price-takers. We have two interconnectors waiting to come on stream, one with the UK and one off the coast of Cork with Brittany. They will make a difference.

As we go through the national affordability task force, we have to grasp the nettle. As the Government puts billions of euro into energy, we cannot levy it back on the user. That is the current framework and that is the change that needs to happen.

Senator Aidan Davitt: I thank the Minister for the clarification.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Joe Flaherty): Thank you, Minister. I was reprimanded for letting in Senator Davitt a second time but I knew it was a very important issue and that the Minister was keen to respond.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 5.55 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 6.03 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 5.55 p.m. and resumed at 6.03 p.m.

Support for Ukraine: Motion

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I welcome the Ukrainian ambassador to this debate. I also welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, and the staff from the Department. I understand Senator O'Loughlin is sharing time with Senator Paul Daly.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: Yes.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I move:

“That Seanad Éireann:

agrees that:

- in February 2022, Russia - a founding member of the United Nations (UN) and a permanent member of its Security Council - launched a full-scale, illegal invasion of Ukraine, in defiance of international law, and in defiance of the UN Charter;
- Russia has prosecuted the war with a wilful and reckless indifference to its human consequences;
- tens of thousands of Ukrainians have been killed and maimed, millions have been forced to flee their homeland and millions more have been internally displaced;
- Russia has deliberately and cynically targeted civilians and civilian infrastructure;
- Russia has caused immense environmental devastation;
- cities such as Mariupol, Kharkiv and Bakhmut have been bombed to rubble;
- Ukrainian prisoners have been mistreated by Russia;
- Ukrainian children have been abducted by Russia;

recognises that:

- President Putin has frustrated every attempt to bring about a ceasefire and negotiations, including those led by the President of the United States;
- there are no signs whatsoever that President Putin is ready for peace;

- President Putin has refused to meet President Zelenskyy and has again intensified Russia's attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure in Ukraine;
- Russia has engaged in a reckless pattern of incursions and interference in European Union (EU) States;
- Russia has violated the airspace of several countries, including Denmark, Poland and Estonia;

acknowledges that:

- Ireland, as part of the Coalition of the Willing in support of Ukraine, will stand with them, shoulder-to-shoulder, for as long as it takes;
- if Russia chooses not to come to the table, the world must increase economic and political pressure on it until it does;
- with our EU and international partners, we will strengthen and tighten our sanctions;
- Ukraine is part of the European family and that its future lies within the EU; and

calls for:

- the EU to maintain its efforts to strengthen our economic and political support for Ukraine;
- a focus on achieving a just and lasting peace for Ukraine;
- increased pressure on Russia to agree to a ceasefire and meaningful negotiations, including by stepping up sanctions and other economic measures;
- security guarantees that Ukraine needs to underpin any future peace agreement;
- EU membership for Ukraine as part of a comprehensive set of security guarantees;
- the unblocking and acceleration of Ukraine's EU accession negotiations."

We are accepting the two amendments to the motion.

I add my voice of welcome to Ambassador Larysa Gerasko. I also welcome our guests in the Gallery. I hope they enjoy the debate. I thank the Minister of State for being here. I know he was in London last night with the British-Irish Parliamentary Association, BIPA, and he gave a good and comprehensive report about how we do not go back to conflict. The two subjects are not totally removed from one another. We have learned a lot in our quest for peace. We now have to help support the people of Ukraine in their quest for peace and for a peaceful existence. As the ambassador said earlier at the foreign affairs committee, it is not just about a ceasefire; it is about a permanent peace so people can go about their lives and live in the normal way that we all take for granted, but which the people of Ukraine cannot take for granted.

Today marks 1,329 days since Russia launched its full-scale invasion and war of aggression against Ukraine. As the people of Ukraine continue to endure relentless and brutal bombardment by Russia, it is absolutely vital and more important than ever that the European Union, including Ireland, keep up its efforts to strengthen our economic and political support for Ukraine. As I mentioned, our focus has to remain on achieving a just and lasting peace for

Ukraine. It is, therefore, hugely important to increase pressure on Russia to agree to meaningful negotiations, including by stepping up sanctions and other economic measures. EU membership for Ukraine must be part of a comprehensive set of security guarantees. The Taoiseach is continuing to push for the unblocking and acceleration of Ukraine's accession negotiations, and I know the Tánaiste is too. Ukraine is doing a lot of hard work on reforms, but the EU must also play its part.

The ongoing onslaught against Ukraine and the violation of the territory of EU member states in recent weeks underline the serious threat posed by Russia to our collective security. That is not taken seriously by some, including some Members of the Oireachtas. We have to call that out. Russia could, and should, end its brutal war at any moment. It has to halt its attacks, accept an unconditional ceasefire and come to the negotiating table. It has shown no sign of doing that. Instead, Russia has intensified its air attacks against Ukraine's towns and cities, deliberately targeting civilians and essential infrastructure. That is something I witnessed two weeks ago when I went to Kyiv for approximately 36 hours. For me, it was important that I go. It was an EU delegation led by the Danish Presidency. There were approximately eight of us on it. It was really important to show solidarity and bear witness to what is happening. What I saw and experienced will genuinely never leave me.

The chair of the Ukrainian Parliament's European integration committee, Ivanna Klympush, was our host. She was the former minister for EU integration. There is nothing like hearing, and seeing, as witnesses in the place where this is happening. It was moving to lay flowers at a tribute to those from the Ukrainian Parliament, the Rada. Both elected members and staff members have died, and we had the opportunity to pay our respects to them. We then went to the centre of Kyiv, where there is a photo montage of all of those who have died. You can imagine the thousands upon thousands of photos. While we were there lighting candles, families, friends and neighbours came up to pay their respects, and there was a pall of sadness and uncertainty because we do not know how long that war is going to get, and families do not know how many more of their family members will have to go to place a candle and another photograph there.

While we were there, we went to Bucha where we saw the grave of 500 undocumented people, a mass grave of people who were just thrown into it. The Ukrainians have since opened the grave and taken the bodies. They are still not all identified, but they have now been buried according to their own religion and tradition. To think that this only happened three years ago.

We went to the town of Moshchun and saw a large stone inscribed with "2022" and I was reminded that it was just three years ago that 189 young people were murdered there trying to defend their town. That happened just after the invasion, when the Russians thought this was going to be over in a week and they could march into Kyiv having taken over the land of Ukraine.

We went to see a power plant that was bombed. This power plant provided all the energy for the large town of Ukrainka. That was destroyed and then destroyed again two weeks after it was rebuilt. In the last two days, the attacks on energy plants have escalated and we now know that the railways have been attacked. The railway system is the only way to bring in supplies, including food, as well as international delegations such as ours to be able to bear witness. That is incredibly disturbing.

I want to briefly mention what the ambassador said today at the foreign affairs committee. It is important to give testament. Unfortunately, the ambassador cannot speak here today but I want to speak on her behalf and on behalf of all Ukrainians. The ambassador correctly said to us:

This is the largest and most brutal war Europe has witnessed in generations. Its consequences extend far beyond Ukraine [we have seen evidence of that in Poland, the Netherlands and Denmark recently], threatening global security and undermining the rules-based international order.

Over the past month, the intensity of Russian aggression has escalated.

When we were in Kyiv it was very disturbing to hear a briefing from the ministry for defence that its intelligence knows that Russia is now making 1,000 drones every day. If it is making 1,000 drones every day, it intends to use those drones every single day. The night I was in Kyiv, most of which was spent in a bomb shelter, four people were killed, including a 12-year-old girl, two very close to the hotel we were in. We went there the next morning. It was really shocking and sad. The authorities in Kyiv had already been there and had started making sure the place was safe. They brought counsellors for all the families. They were just sitting out on the grass talking about how they deal with yet another child killed.

Two people were killed that night in the cardiac unit in the hospital in Kyiv. Again, hospitals are being targeted, which is absolutely shocking. It is not just military installations that are being targeted. It is the energy grid, the hospitals, schools and homes. It is not simply warfare. It is calculated, deliberate and nearly industrial-scale cruelty and terror. Russia generally strikes under the cover of night.

Anyone who goes to Ukraine is advised to download an app which tells people when the area they are in is in danger. I cannot delete the app from my phone. I look at it every day to see the places under pressure in Ukraine and particularly the areas I visited. Most upsetting of all is that when people have died because of an attack, a little reminder comes up to stop and give a moment of peace for those who have died overnight in Ukraine. That happened the night I was there and it has happened practically every night since.

It is unbearable to think how people are living their lives. I commend the people I met in Ukraine on their resilience, bravery and courage in how they try to live their lives as normally as possible. They are very concerned about many things. Obviously, they want to live their lives as normal, but they are very concerned about losing a generation, the generation of young people who left when the war started. They are now starting school and college in Ireland and in other places. Ukrainians are afraid that they will never get back that lost generation. They are very concerned about those areas around Mariupol where Russia has now taken over territory. People are not allowed to speak their own language. They cannot attend a Ukrainian school. Everything has changed for them.

There is much more I could say. I appreciate that my colleague Senator Daly has his own sense of this and wants to put his own words to this motion, which is very important. I thank my party for agreeing to bring it forward. I thank others, including our coalition partners, for supporting it. At the start, I said that Senator Stephenson had tabled two amendments which we are accepting. They will be in the body of the motion to be put to the House and hopefully will be passed.

Senator Paul Daly: I second the motion. I thank our leader, Senator O'Loughlin, and everybody involved in putting the motion together. On 26 February 2022, my father died, four days after the outbreak of the current part of this war because that was not the start of this war, as we have to acknowledge. It has been a lifetime for me since that personal loss on 26 February 2022. I can only imagine what it has been like for the people who suffer attack every day and every night, and have also lost loved ones. It is an eternity. It is no way for any human being to have to live.

I welcome the ambassador. In recent deliberations with the foreign affairs committee, she said that Russia is not winning and Ukraine is not losing. That is stalemate in anyone's language. I am concerned about the media commentary over recent days. On his way to play a major part in a resolution to the crisis in the Middle East, President Trump flippantly said that America might send Tomahawk missiles, to which the response was, "Well, we can respond with nuclear." That is the stalemate we have reached. That is why it is so important to get everybody around the table. Russia is refusing to engage in any meaningful peace process. The only way to get Russia to the table is through further sanctions. I know the coalition of the willing is playing a very big and important role in this, but it is not enough if it is not having results. In any walk of life people can do no more than try their best but if it does not achieve what they set out to achieve, it is ultimately a failure. We need to revisit the sanctions and get Putin to the table because it is at the table that this will eventually be resolved.

Drones and illegal aircraft are flying over European airspace. The EU was formed post the Second World War. This is as close as we have ever been to a similar crisis since that war ended in 1945. As people here know, I am a farmer. My input costs are affected because of the war. It is affecting us all. That seems totally insignificant when we are talking about lives but it is important.

I thank those who put this motion together. It is important to keep this issue to the fore. It is hard to say this correctly because all war is wrong and all life is important. A Ukrainian life is no more important than that of a Palestinian or an Israeli, but because of what was going on elsewhere, the Ukrainian situation was somewhat in the background in the media. It is very important that we highlight it and bring it to the fore again this evening. If we achieve nothing else by this motion, we need to get this issue back as the headline. That is what puts pressure on the ultimate powers that be - if it is on the front page, if it is the headline and if it is the first thing on the lips of every human being. That is what makes people act. We want to get that back to the forefront of conversation. We want to get everybody concerned around the table to thrash out and implement a ceasefire, with a workable peace process going forward from there.

Senator Aubrey McCarthy: I thank the Minister of State for being here. I rise to support the motion. As Senators O'Loughlin and Daly mentioned, there is a lot going on in the world at the moment, and often Ukraine is not mentioned and is forgotten about because the war has been going on for so long. We are rising to support the motion, however, affirming Ireland's unwavering solidarity with the people of Ukraine.

I was asked by the Ceann Comhairle a number of months ago to be the convener of the Ukraine-Ireland parliamentary group, and I was honoured to do so. Last month I, like Senator O'Loughlin, had the honour of visiting Kyiv. It is an amazing city. Even the journey to get there was difficult but, when I arrived, I saw a country and a city that has endured unimaginable

hardship, yet one could see the resilience and conviction of the people there. I had a meeting with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, and that man embodies the resilience and the leadership of a country that is under siege. I was privileged also to meet the Prime Minister, Yulia Svyrydenko, the Speaker, Ruslan Stefanchuk, and members of the opposition, including Ivanna, whose second name I will not try to pronounce. They are amazing people. I was brought into the Parliament and, as Senator O'Loughlin said, we used an app that showed us when drones were about to hit. I thought that as we had former general Keith Kellogg with us we were fairly safe, but he flew home and, within 48 hours, the building we were in was bombed. It is a real situation and it is affecting the lives of so many people.

I compliment Her Excellency Ms Larysa Gerasko on the leadership she has shown in keeping the war to the fore of Irish people's minds. We compliment her on all she has done regarding the relationship between Ukraine and Ireland, and on behalf of Ukrainians in Ireland. I also want to compliment our own ambassador in Kyiv, Mr. Jonathan Conlon. He is an amazing diplomat, an outstanding man and a wonderful representative for Ireland over there in such difficult times.

What struck me in Ukraine was that they have strategic clarity that their future lies within the European Union. Their belief is that democracy, even when it is bombed and bloodied, must never surrender. When I, like Senator O'Loughlin, stood in Independence Square, I saw the flags, flowers and memorials and the faces of the fallen. I took different photographs. *The Irish Times* published a photo I took in Kyiv, and a mother in Newbridge got in touch with me. I had taken a photo of her son's memorial. His name was Robert Deegan and he gave his life in defence of Ukrainian freedom. He was from Newbridge, County Kildare. This story brought home to me how close defending the borders of Europe is to us, including for people from Newbridge.

I witnessed the devastation first-hand. I witnessed the shattered buildings and bombed streets, but I saw that Ukrainian resolve is second to none. They are a strong people and, since March 2022, Ireland has stood with them. As chair of an organisation called Tiglin, we welcomed over 150 Ukrainian guests on St. Patrick's Day in 2022. I remember their faces coming in that day. One of the first to arrive was a young guy called Rodion Kudryk, who has cerebral palsy. When he was fleeing the war, he had to leave his wheelchair behind, so he was literally carried to Ireland. When he arrived with us in Tiglin, he had a bright smile. Today he was my guest in Leinster House for lunch. He was here in his new electric wheelchair and complained about some of the lifts in Leinster House but, otherwise, he was very happy to be here. I am delighted he was here. Not only that, many of my Ukrainian friends are in the Gallery. They are guests of mine in Greystones. These are people who have made their lives here in the most difficult of circumstances after having to flee home.

Ireland has, through humanitarian aid, diplomatic advocacy and the tireless work of the ambassador, managed to do a lot to try to make a difference, and that is why this motion is so important. It affirms what we already know is true - that Russia's illegal invasion is a crime against international law and humanity. The world must continue to put pressure on Russia through sanctions and isolation until this aggression and war ends. Ukraine's rightful place is within the European family. That is protected by the security guarantees of peace, democracy and membership of the EU. Though Ireland might be a small nation, our moral voice is not small, and we have seen that lately, even through what happened in the Middle East. Our

neutrality must not be indifferent and I do not believe it is. It has to be an active commitment to peace and justice, and justice in this situation demands that we stand shoulder to shoulder with Ukraine until the last missile falls. When I was in Independence Square in Kyiv, I was reminded that, as one memorial read, freedom is our religion. We need to make sure Ireland continues to stand on the side of that freedom, and not just in word, but in action.

Senator Garret Ahearn: I welcome the Minister of State to the Chamber, his old home. I thank my Fianna Fáil colleagues for tabling this very important motion. Obviously, we in Fine Gael support it.

As Senator O'Loughlin mentioned, we had a very good and productive meeting with the Ukrainian ambassador here in Ireland that finished about an hour ago. I welcome her and thank her for all of the work she does on behalf of Ukrainian citizens in Ireland, and for keeping us informed on what we can do to help. It is lovely to see some Ukrainian friends in the Gallery, particularly those of a very young age. Oftentimes I hear Ukrainian people thank Irish people for welcoming them in, but we want to thank them for the positive contribution they have made to Irish society, and in particular to young people. I have a child in senior infants in a tiny school in a small village in the countryside. He has friends who are Ukrainian. They go to school and integrate. It is brilliant for his development as a young child to understand that the world is bigger than Ireland and that people who come from different diversities and backgrounds can become friends. We actually have a couple of Ukrainian kids who we think could be good GAA players as well. They are integrating very well at a young age.

Other speakers spoke about their visits to Ukraine and their personal experiences there. As Leas-Chathaoirleach of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade, I was there a couple of months ago. I have seen quite a substantial change in the past three years. My first visit to Kyiv was in April 2022, just two months after the war started. We were the first delegation of European parliamentarians to visit and stay overnight. At that time, the city was absolutely empty. There was nothing happening; there was no life. It was very clear we were in a war zone. I spoke about this at the committee today. The second time I visited was in August of that year, maybe five or six months into the war, and the rebuilding of the country had already started. The first time I went to Bucha, the bridge had been bombed. To travel to Bucha one had to go around the bridge and down a dirt track. I came back six months later and the bridge was built again and you could travel out. The point is that while this war has been going on for the past three years, the Ukrainian people and the Ukrainian Government have consistently tried to rebuild the country to build back that confidence with the Ukrainian people. On my last visit to Ukraine, for all the world Kyiv looked like a normal city, as Senator O'Loughlin and others would agree. Restaurants and coffee shops are open and people are going to work. If you did not know any better, you would think everything is fine, but that is just not the case. As other Senators have mentioned, there is an app that sets sirens off to let people know a missile is coming within the next five minutes and everyone needs to go to a bunker or the underground metro network to try to find shelter. People ask all the time why it is looking like it is a functional city. As would happen in any country, the reason is people at some point have to try to get on with their lives and live their lives. The only way to feel some way normal is trying to get up in the morning, go to work and give their children an education, but in the back of their minds, they know of the possibility of sirens going off. The frustrating part of it is that, from my experience, most of these sirens are going off at night-time. This

impacts on sleeping and the daily lives of Ukrainian people who are trying to live a normal life. When we talk about rebuilding the country, that is where Ireland can play a role. We have had a number of companies already that have invested in Ukraine. As the ambassador said earlier, Ukraine is open for business, and it is open for investment. That is where we should be looking at the moment.

When I was there, Deputy Barry Ward and I had a one-hour meeting with President Zelenskyy. We discussed many issues. One of the points I wish to put to the Minister of State is that, in terms of rebuilding, every country can play its role. The first deputy minister for development of communities and territory development, Ms Aliona Shkrum, is writing to all departments of foreign affairs in the EU asking that each country appoint an envoy to Ukraine. Ten of the 17 countries have done that. The UK has done it. The Labour MP for Leeds, Mr. Alex Sobel, has been appointed as an envoy. The thing they have experienced in the past six months is that having an envoy on behalf of a country speeds up the process of companies coming in to invest, develop and rebuild Ukraine. We cannot rely on Ministers. The Minister of State is busy, the Tánaiste is busy and there are a lot of things that have been done, but if we appoint someone with the responsibility of helping the rebuilding of Ukraine from Ireland, we can speed up that process and help our friends abroad.

Senator Maria McCormack: I wish to give a special mention to the Ukrainian choir that has been set up locally in Portlaoise. It is fantastic and brings so much love and light to our community. Like other Senators have said, with the mixture in our schools and so on, it has been such a positive experience for us. For all the Ukrainians coming over here, it is at a time when they are in dire distress, but they can bring so much light to our communities. However, it is our job as a neutral country to protect where we can. I welcome the ambassador to the House.

Since February 2022, Russia has been inflicting death and destruction on Ukrainian people on an immense scale, resulting in the mass displacement of millions of people, widespread human rights abuses and the clear attempt by Russia to expand its own territory at the power and expense of its neighbours. I commend Fianna Fáil for bringing forward this motion and the amendments by Senators Stephenson and Higgins.

We extend our solidarity to the people of Ukraine who have endured the most horrific three and a half years imaginable and who have faced this invasion with tremendous resolve and courage. Hundreds of thousands of people, including many women and children, have been killed. Ukraine's infrastructure and economy have been devastated. Russia's attacks on the civilian population, as well on medical facilities and electrical infrastructure, are nothing short of war crimes and have to be condemned in the strongest way possible. It has been horrific in every sense of the word as we have looked on. Putin's invasion cannot be defended. This conflict urgently needs to come to an end, with countless lives being destroyed every day this war continues.

All parties involved, including the European Union and the United States, have crucial roles to play in bringing an end to this conflict by putting the lives and well-being of the people above their own narrow geopolitical interests. Ireland has rightly supported the Ukrainian people amid the crisis caused by Russia's illegal invasion and should continue to use our neutral position to call for a sustainable, permanent and just outcome to this war through a negotiated

peace settlement. Our status as a neutral country is a valuable tool in supporting the peace process in Ukraine while providing us with an opportunity to identify breaches in international law, occupation, annexation and military aggression where they exist. We should be investing our energies and resources in conflict resolution rather than conflict participation.

Ireland must remain militarily unaligned, but that does not mean that we are morally neutral or afraid to take action to punish Russia for its illegal actions. We should be taking actions in response to clear breaches of international law. Ireland can and should be advocating for economic and diplomatic sanctions and working to facilitate peace talks. Peace will, hopefully, be delivered before too long although when and on what terms we do not know yet. However, there will undoubtedly be a need to support the Ukrainian people further in rebuilding their country and repairing the damage of the Russian invasion. Thousands of Ukrainian people have come to call Ireland home and very many will want to return home once a sustainable and just peace is achieved. Ireland has supported the Ukrainian people in the wake of this invasion. This solidarity should continue until Ukraine is restored as a stable, prosperous and peaceful country.

Senator Patricia Stephenson: I move amendment No. 1:

After “recognises that:” to insert the following paragraph:

“- Ireland has a role as a historic leader in peace, with our credibility as peace leaders grounded in Ireland’s neutrality;”

Senator Maria McCormack: I second the amendment.

Senator Patricia Stephenson: I thank the Minister of State for coming in. I acknowledge the ambassador and deputy ambassador and thank them for coming to the foreign affairs committee today, and to the Ukrainians we have visiting the Chamber.

I reaffirm my commitment, our commitment as a Chamber and our solidarity with the Ukrainian people who have suffered horrendous conditions and human rights abuses for the past three years from Russia's illegal invasion. We have already heard it this evening but it bears repeating that the Ukrainian people have demonstrated a huge amount of resilience and courage in defending their country against Russia's invasion. The civilian population has endured constant danger and uncertainty and drone and missile strikes in residential areas far away from the front lines. The UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine estimates that over 14,000 civilians have been killed - that could be much higher now - and over 37,000 people injured since the invasion started. I cannot imagine the pain and suffering for the communities and families who have lost loved ones and, indeed, the trauma that will exist for generations.

As a country deeply committed to international law and peace, it is vital that we call out instances when the principles underpinning global peace and security are blatantly violated. This motion rightly condemns Russia’s actions and acknowledges the tremendous human cost of war. It also correctly lays out some of the necessary steps towards achieving a lasting peace in Ukraine, including exerting economic pressure on Russia to bring it to the negotiating table. Ireland can and should contribute to supporting Ukraine both unilaterally and as a member of

the EU. I have concerns when it comes to Ireland's role in the coalition of the willing. I am sure the Minister of State will speak to that a little bit more in his statement. The coalition of the willing, a group whose name echoes another illegal invasion from two decades ago, the Iraq war, does not necessarily align with Ireland's position on neutrality. I am sure the Minister of State will explain a bit further, but as far as I understand, it is predominantly a military alliance. I am not sure if that is in Ireland's best interest, given our position of neutrality.

Our tradition of neutrality requires us to work through international institutions rather than through split regional blocs that may require Ireland to commit peacekeeping troops outside of the United Nations mechanism. This is our current legislative context. Whether that changes in the future, it is currently where we are. My amendment is about recognising Ireland's role as historic leaders in peace because the foundation of that leadership is our neutrality. It allows Ireland to stand as honest brokers and peacebuilders in whatever the peace process may be and the wider post-conflict future for Ukraine. We mentioned to the ambassador earlier that that feels like a very far off reality for the Ukrainian people.

I welcome the collaboration with the Fianna Fáil Senators. I thank them for accepting my amendments. Peace may seem far out of reach, as Russia ramped up its attacks last week. It is impossible to imagine that context when peace is an option. We need to look at what we can do for strengthening Ukrainian civil society and local organisations when it comes to the table. That is also about looking to provide supports to alleviate the various issues conflict can leave and the scars the conflict can have on communities. They are long-lasting scars, and we know that from our own history. I do not really want to draw huge parallels between the North and Ukraine because the scale of it is completely off the Richter charts. It is incredibly different.

We know that conflict permeates all levels of society. For peace to be sustained and for it to be just, it needs to come from the bottom up as well as the high level negotiations and summits. In fact, regardless of the facts of bottom-up or top-down, we have seen the Ukrainian Government even excluded from international talks about peace agreements and ceasefires. It baffles me that we could ever have any negotiations on peace without the Ukrainian Government present.

A study by UN Women found that peace agreements are 64% less likely to fail when civil society representatives participate and, therefore, the voices of ordinary people in peace agreements are crucial for sustained peace. We know in the North that creating the conditions for peace and assisting communities in healing from the trauma of conflict is a really important step to play. I would love to see further steps - I know the Government has done this - supporting local Ukrainian organisations, encouraging collaborations with our own organisations here and in the North, where we can share experiences and provide support, looking at the inclusion of Ukrainian voices in the peace process.

I would also like to touch on the treatment of journalists in Russian detention, including Victoria Roshchyna, who was murdered. Her corpse was brutally returned to her family, which was a calculated effort of terror by the Russian regime. Journalists are really important. They provide light in those dark spaces where regimes try to hide what they are doing. Aggressors prefer to do those things in the dark and the treatment of Ukrainian journalists in Russian detention is something worth noting. Perhaps there is support the Irish Government can give with regard to targeting media houses and sustaining journalism and journalists when they are under targeted attack by the Russian regime.

As an EU member state for over 50 years, we need to offer support to Ukrainian state institutions in meeting the EU's accession criteria so that, when the time comes for Ukraine to join the EU, whether as part of a peace deal or later on, the transition can be seamless and Ukraine can stand as an equal member with fully functioning institutions, strong rule of law and a vibrant democracy. That is what we all want.

I will conclude by standing in support. Ireland stands firmly with the people of Ukraine while remaining true to our principles of peace and neutrality. I also offer my support to the robust sanctions regime and for looking at other practical steps we might be able to take. Senator Ahearn talked about the importance of reconstruction. We also heard from Ukrainian ambassador earlier about critical energy infrastructure being systematically targeted, with people now looking to a long winter with attacks on energy, and what more can Ireland do in that space to help the rebuilding.

Senator Michael McDowell: I thank the Fianna Fáil Members for tabling this important motion. Those of us in the Seanad Independent Group had put down a similar motion, which was much less elaborate, on 22 September to the same effect. I thank those Members who have also tabled amendments to the motion.

It is important that this House speaks frequently on this subject. While you can illuminate the outside of the Houses of the Oireachtas with Ukrainian colours, there is a sense that events in the Middle East have dwarfed the Ukrainian struggle. Figures have been given here for the number of civilians who have died in the Ukrainian conflict and the invasion by Russia. I know there are reasons we do not get accurate figures for the amount of military casualties on both sides, but not only have there been many brave Ukrainians who have died for the preservation of their country, but I would say that more than 100,000 or maybe 200,000 Russians have been driven into this conflict by Vladimir Putin and have died as well. The extent of this tragedy in Europe is almost incalculable and very hard to grasp.

Mention has been made of Ukrainians playing an important part in Irish life since they came here seeking refuge. I mention Ms Zoriana Drul in our own Seanad Office, who is working to keep this establishment functioning. The extent of integration is everywhere. People ask what Ireland is actually doing, and non-lethal assistance to the Ukrainian military has been furnished. It is probably small in the larger dimension of that military struggle, but the Irish people have extended to Ukrainians very significant financial support. The Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, recently revealed that over €1 billion per year is spent on housing Ukrainian people seeking refuge in Ireland. It is a lot of money for a country of our size.

I note and fully understand how the Fianna Fáil motion does not refer to America, but I want to say one thing. Whatever Donald Trump achieved in Gaza, and we do not know what he has achieved in Gaza or how long it will take for peace to come there, he has the capacity to end the war in Ukraine. Without being recriminatory and being positive as far as I can, my mind cannot exclude the scene when President Zelenskyy was brought to the Oval Office and humiliated there by President Trump, Vice President Vance and Secretary of State Rubio. It was a disgraceful scene. I am glad that, in the unpredictable policy formulation that seems to grip Washington, at least a different attitude is now being demonstrated, but there can be more. Europe should get real backing from America in its contemplation of the seizure and application to Ukrainian reconstruction of frozen Russian assets.

American behind-the-scenes negotiations with Belarus, and even the First Lady's personal initiative in regard to children who have been abducted, show an ambivalence with regard to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. I hope that somebody in the American embassy in Deerfield or Ballsbridge listens to what is said in this House. I want to put it on the record: America must now do something. If you want Nobel prizes for peace and to parade the world as bringing peace to the Middle East, you can stop the war in Ukraine if you are determined so to do. The message should come back from these Houses via American diplomats that we expect America to do more to bring this horrific struggle to an end. American ambivalence has been problematic. We have had the extraordinary situation that Russia, China, North Korea and India were all participating in military manoeuvres in Belarus only very recently. The attitude of the Trump regime has created an international alliance against America, at one level, but against Ukraine in particular.

We are also censored in what we actually see. Our media, very kindly and very properly, perhaps, does not show what happens when a bomb hits a railway station, and very rightly. I have seen stuff in videos which turned my stomach, including videos of the execution of Ukrainian prisoners by Russians who were machine gunned into graves. Those kinds of things can never be forgotten. The House must keep returning to this matter. We must keep banging the drum in order that from Deerfield, where the United States ambassador resides, and Ballsbridge, where the United States embassy is located, the message goes clearly back to America that we want it to stop this war and that it can do so.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Neale Richmond): I sincerely thank the proposer and seconder for tabling this motion and Senators for engaging constructively with the amendments. I join in the welcome to our dear friend the Ukrainian ambassador, Larysa, and our friends from Tiglin in Greystones and beyond in the Gallery. They are welcome, not just Leinster House, the people's house, but also to Ireland for however long they need to be here.

It is over three years since Russia's unprovoked and unjustified war of aggression against Ukraine brought large-scale conflict back to the Continent of Europe. As has been noted, this was not the creation of a new war. It was merely the latest invasion of Ukrainian territory by Russia in modern times. We have to be absolutely unequivocal that the blame for this conflict lies with Russia. The decision to invade Ukraine came from the Russian president, Vladimir Putin. Let us not lose ourselves in conspiracy theories, whataboutery or bringing up concerns about other powers. The issue here lies with Russia. There can be no whataboutery. Since those days over three years ago, indescribable suffering has been inflicted upon the people of Ukraine. Millions have been forced to flee their homeland and millions more have been internally displaced. Hundreds of thousands have been killed, with thousands more, including children, forcibly removed, tortured or arbitrarily imprisoned by Russian forces.

We are at a critical moment in the trajectory of Russia's war in Ukraine. Russia is escalating its aerial bombardment on Ukrainian cities and civilian infrastructure while its forces continue their offensive along the front line unabated, seeking additional territorial gains. Civilians continue to bear the brunt of Russia's brutal war of aggression. Russia's full-scale invasion triggered the largest displacement crisis in Europe in decades, with millions displaced and in need of continued, lifesaving support. We have heard horrific reports of gross and systematic violations of human rights by Russia. We consistently see reports of the very means of life,

namely food and energy supplies, being targeted by Russian forces. One of Russia's most brutal and egregious crimes has been the large-scale forcible kidnapping of Ukrainian children from their homes. Any peaceful resolution to Russia's war must involve the return of all forcibly transferred persons, particularly children. Such actions may amount to war crimes. We must work to hold those responsible to account.

At the same time, Russia's increasingly provocative and reckless behaviour against EU member states is justifiably raising concerns and tensions across Europe. In recent weeks, Russian drones have breached the airspace of fellow EU member states, and fighter planes have violated the skies over Estonia. The Government has strongly condemned these activities. We have seen disruption to critical infrastructure, airports and logistics hubs paralysed by cyberattacks and elections targeted by malign influence campaigns.

In the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, all EU member states, including Ireland, have re-examined their foreign, security and defence policies. It is perhaps easy to look eastward and believe that the fires of war burning in Ukraine will never reach our shores, that distance is somehow a protection, but it is an illusion to believe that we are immune from this pattern of growing threats. Our commitment to a values-based foreign policy, to multilateralism and to a policy, clearly, of military neutrality does not insulate us from the impacts of a rapidly changing and volatile international security environment that has become the new reality across Europe. Distance does not protect us from the campaign of hybrid activity that Russia has unleashed against European countries, which has increased in scale and recklessness in the past year. It is our duty and our obligation to take our security and our responsibility towards our like-minded partners more seriously than ever. That obligation and duty in no way contravenes our clear policy of military neutrality. It is merely common sense.

Through its sustained pursuit of hybrid campaigns, Russia is a major threat to stability, democracy and social cohesion throughout Europe and beyond. These activities represent an attempt to divide EU member states, particularly in relation to support for Ukraine. The proposer and seconder of these motions, Senators O'Loughlin and Daly, are, like me, sanctioned by the Russian war machine and Vladimir Putin. I had not intended to visit Moscow any time soon. I certainly do not intend to do so now. I wear that sanction as a badge of pride, as I know my senatorial colleagues do too. The Government takes the risks posed by these activities very seriously, and we are responding. We support the full use of all means available to prevent, deter and respond to Russia's aggressive hybrid activities, including through sanctions.

Domestically, the Government is implementing a range of relevant measures at national level to strengthen our resilience and combat hybrid threats from state and non-state actors, including Russia, its proxies and aligned actors. Such measures include a substantial increase in investment in the National Cyber Security Centre, the publication of a national counter disinformation strategy and legislation to enhance election security through the Electoral Commission, the commencement of legislation on third-country investment screening and the control of exports. The Department of Defence will publish Ireland's first national maritime security strategy by the end of the year. We are also building up Ireland's national capability to identify, mitigate and counter hybrid threats through our membership of the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats in Helsinki.

The European Union has been steadfast in its solidarity with Ukraine since the first day of this terrible war. The message is clear: Russia has to understand that Ukraine's partners,

including its European partners, have the will and the means to continue supporting it until a just and lasting peace is achieved. Ireland will be part of a coalition of the willing. We will ensure, Senator Stephenson, that our participation is fully aligned with our policy of military neutrality, but at this time we have to show that we are willing to stand not just by the people of Ukraine in our words but also in our actions. The EU's continuing commitment to Ukraine will also be a key focus when European leaders meet again formally on 23 and 24 October. This will be an important moment for the EU to reiterate its commitment to stay the course in support of Ukraine and to maintain pressure on Russia to halt its war of aggression and engage in real negotiations.

Measures in this regard include the adoption of unprecedented sanctions. The latter include a broad range of sectoral sanctions, including measures targeting Russia's military, technology, transport and energy sectors. These sanctions are having an impact by limiting access to battlefield goods and reducing Russia's access. It is with pride that Ireland's David O'Sullivan is the main European official who monitors the effectiveness of these sanctions. Ireland welcomes proposals for a 19th package of sanctions, and we will work with our European partners to ensure that these can be agreed quickly. We also firmly believe that Russia should be held accountable for its actions and should have to pay for the destruction it has caused. We are therefore supportive of exploring options for the further use of Russian sovereign assets to support Ukraine.

Ireland has been steadfast in its support for Ukraine since day one of this war. The impact of this war is felt by every household across the country, materially as well as emotionally. Members of this House have visited Ukraine to not just convey our solidarity but also to bear witness to the brutal consequences of Russia's full-scale invasion at first hand. In September of last year, then Taoiseach, Simon Harris, travelled to Kyiv for a meeting with President Zelenskyy and to sign a comprehensive bilateral agreement on support and co-operation between Ireland and Ukraine. In May, I visited Lviv to attend an informal European Council meeting and endorse the draft legal framework for a special tribunal.

We talk a lot, rightly and genuinely, about solidarity in this Chamber, but what does solidarity mean and how do you count it? Since February 2022, Ireland has committed €138 million in stabilisation and humanitarian supports. In addition to this, a further funding package of €33.5 million, announced last month, is currently in the process of being disbursed. Ireland has also welcomed more than 118,000 Ukrainians who were forced to leave their homeland and who sought sanctuary here.

7 o'clock

Many of them have remained. They have integrated well into Irish society, and they have also brought the joys of their own culture to our community. I have no doubt that, in time, they will play a crucial role in rebuilding their own country when it is once again safe to do so. For now, though, they are here, and they are consistently welcomed here and that will not change.

As I have outlined in great detail, Ireland is militarily neutral, but we have never been politically neutral, and certainly not in the face of Russia's unprovoked aggression against a sovereign state. Ireland recognises that its continued support for Ukraine is a necessity, not a choice. We are playing our part by providing non-lethal military support to Ukraine. Through the Department of Defence, we continue to provide direct military support-in-kind. In June,

five air defence radar systems and a fire tender were delivered to Ukraine. A further donation of 34 vehicles, including ambulances were delivered in two convoys in early September. Three Reacher bomb disposal robots were delivered to the Ukraine defence contact group, UDCG, de-mining coalition in mid-September. Over the coming weeks, the Defence Forces will deliver a further training module of basic training to Ukrainian armed forces personnel via the European Union military assistance mission, EUMAM, Ukraine. This will take to 22 the total number of modules delivered by Irish personnel.

Through the framework of the European Defence Agency's EU SatCom market project, we provided support to Ukraine in respect to provision of satellite communications equipment at a value of €1.36 million. Ireland has contributed approximately €66 million to the European Peace Facility, EPF, for non-lethal military support to Ukraine. At EU level, the release of the majority of remaining committed funding under the EPF is currently blocked. The Tánaiste therefore sought agreement to provide €100 million, outside of the EPF, in non-lethal military support to Ukraine in March. The Tánaiste is firmly committed to continuing this strong support for Ukraine and I expect that a further substantial package of non-lethal support will be announced shortly. In July, €10 million was provided to each of the Ukraine defence contact group coalitions on de-mining and IT support, led by Lithuania and Iceland and by Estonia and Luxembourg, respectively. The remaining €80 million is being disbursed to EU member states with whom Ireland has agreed procurement partnerships, primarily for the procurement of non-lethal elements of air defence. We continue also to be open to considering contributions to any EU packages containing non-lethal elements of military support.

Senator Ahearn raised the issue of reconstruction. I was delighted to attend a reconstruction conference in Rome this year on behalf of the Government. He raised the issue of an envoy in relation to trade. I can confirm that Enterprise Ireland has appointed a Ukrainian pathfinder to help Irish companies engage more with the Ukrainian market, particularly SMEs, given the already existing role of companies such as CRH and Kingspan.

Senator Stephenson rightly raised the issue of not just supporting civic society but also journalists currently and in the future in Ukraine. Ireland has made that commitment and is already in the process of working with a range of different organisations as well as individuals.

Ireland's commitment to international law is steadfast, as is our commitment to the fundamental principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity outlined in the UN Charter. Russia's actions have undermined the foundations of the international rules-based system on which the United Nations is based. The principle that borders cannot be changed by force protects us all, yet a permanent member of the UN Security Council has cast this vital principle aside. This should concern us all. Universal principles, including the right to territorial integrity, must apply to each nation equally and in full. Any credible future for multilateralism depends on this. Ireland supports the continued investigations of the International Criminal Court in Ukraine and welcomes the historic progress made towards establishing the special tribunal for the crime of aggression. At the Council of Europe, Ireland has been a founding member of the register of damage. We welcome the finalisation of a draft convention establishing an international claims commission. These are all important steps towards redressing internationally wrongful acts committed by the Russian Federation in or against Ukraine.

We all want Russia's war of aggression to end, but it must end on the basis of a comprehensive, just and lasting peace, one that respects Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, and the principles of the UN Charter and international law. It is also vital that Ukraine's security be protected in the long term. That means strong, credible guarantees that ensure Ukraine can defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity to avoid a repetition of the past. Ireland's position remains clear. It is for Russia to now show through its actions a willingness to achieve peace by halting its brutal attacks and agreeing to a full and unconditional ceasefire. It can do so at any time. Ukraine and President Zelenskyy have clearly done their part.

Ireland believes that, ultimately, the greatest security guarantee that we can offer to Ukraine is membership of the European Union, the greatest peace project that the world has known. We strongly support Ukraine's path towards EU membership and are determined to advance it under our EU Presidency, which begins next year.

While the current challenges may seem unsurmountable, we must not falter in our resolve. Our continued support for Ukraine is a necessity, not a choice. It is why Ireland stands with Ukraine now and however long it takes.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I thank all who participated in the debate, including my colleagues, Senators Daly, Ahearn, McCarthy, McCormack, Stephenson and McDowell. I thank the Minister of State for his response.

Senator McDowell was perfectly correct in what he said about calling out the United States and President Trump. When we see the efforts the EU has gone to in supporting Ukraine and trying to plan for the future, it is quite unconscionable that the US has done so little but humiliated President Zelenskyy to try to defeat his morale and make him appear indecisive and less than another Head of State. It was despicable viewing, and it does need to be called out.

It is also very concerning, as the Minister of State said, that Russia remains a permanent member of the security council while absolutely undermining the very foundation of the international rules-based system on which the UN is based. That is certainly something that hugely concerns me.

The Minister of State mentioned the Council of Europe register of damages. I was privileged to be the rapporteur for the fourth summit, where we introduced the register of damages. That is something that is absolutely going to make a difference.

All contributors spoke about the conditions people are now living under in Ukraine, and also how Ukrainians are living outside of Ukraine, like our guests present. It is no way to live. It is no way to try to have normality in life, work, have a family and be in contact with parents, neighbours or extended family. Those who have left Ukraine are increasingly worried all of the time about phone calls they may get at any point in time about family, friends and neighbours. That is not a way to live your life.

We are at a stalemate, as my colleague Senator Daly said. We do not see any movement. Within Europe, we are looking at the 19th set of sanctions. While we look forward to those coming and it is important we continue with sanctions, there is no sign that they are being taken in any way seriously by Russia, in that Russia is not making any type of preparation to look to the future and be able to try to live in peace as neighbours and come to a resolution.

All life is important and there is now an estimate that roughly 1.8 million people have been killed since the war of aggression started. That certainly includes a very large number of military personnel, but those lives are important, too. Many of those who have been sent out in Russian armies have done so because they have been conscripted. It is not because they have joined voluntarily. Some 1.8 million people have been killed in three years. It is incredulous that this is happening under our watch.

I acknowledge that Senator McCarthy is chair of the friendship group. He is doing a really good job. He mentioned Mr. Robert Deegan, a young man from my own town who went out to Ukraine twice. He lost an eye and came home. When he recuperated, he went back again. There was a very fitting tribute to him at the Hill of Allen when he passed. That is how his family chose to celebrate him, as a warrior.

We also remember Pierre Zakrzewski, who was a Franco-Irish citizen and journalist. Very early on in the war, he went out to bear witness. The point was well made about the journalists. They are going out to document war so that the rest of the world can see and hopefully act. We lost Pierre at a very early stage. There are many really great people in Ireland who have helped to support the Ukrainian people who have come here. They include Emma Lane-Spollen, Angie Gough and Jill Robinson, to mention a few.

It is important that we speak and speak often. The Middle East has taken over in terms of wars globally. Hopefully, with the actions of the last few days, we will continue to see progress there. For now, we have to stand in solidarity with Ukraine and help it on its path to accession to the EU. All that remains for me to say is that I commend the motion and I appreciate the support that has been shown. *Slava Ukraini.*

Amendment agreed to.

Senator Patricia Stephenson: I move amendment No. 2:

To delete the first paragraph under “acknowledges that:” and substitute the following:

“- Ireland, as part of the international community committed to international law, will continue to support and stand in solidarity with Ukraine;”

Senator Michael McDowell: I second the amendment.

Amendment agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: When is it proposed to sit again?

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: Tomorrow at 10.30 a.m.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar athló ar 7.13 p.m. go dtí 10.30 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 15 Deireadh Fómhair 2025.

The Seanad adjourned at 7.13 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 15 October 2025.