



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SEANAD ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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SEANAD ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 27 Bealtaine 2026

Wednesday, 27 May 2026

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach i gceannas ar 10.30 a.m.

Machnamh agus Paidir.

Prayer and Reflection.

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 Linda Nelson Murray - The need for the Minister for Education and Youth to make a statement on the status of the review of the assistive technology scheme for primary and post-primary schools.

Senator Ollie Crowe - The need for the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration to make a statement on the streamlining and modernising of the Garda vetting system.

Senator Robbie Gallagher - The need for the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport to make a statement on online safety, particularly around the use of smartphones for children.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly - The need for the Minister for Transport to make a statement on the provision of additional funding for roads in the Cavan and Monaghan area.

Senator Mike Kennelly - The need for the Minister for Health to make a statement on the progress of the proposed HSE primary healthcare centre for Cahersiveen, County Kerry.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove - The need for the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality to make a statement on the funding of multiple sclerosis services in the north west, including a dedicated community worker for Sligo-Leitrim.

Senator Eileen Lynch - The need for the Minister for Social Protection to make a statement on the introduction of an illness benefit scheme for those who are self-employed and pay an S stamp.

The matters raised by the Senators are suitable for discussion. I have selected those raised by Senators Nelson Murray, Crowe, Gallagher and Sarah O'Reilly and they will be taken now. The other Senators may give notice on another day of the matters they wish to raise.

Nithe i dtosach suíonna - Commencement Matters

Special Educational Needs

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan, to the House.

Senator Linda Nelson Murray: I thank the Minister of State for coming in this morning. I have put in a couple of Commencement matters that involved his Department and he has been very gracious. I appreciate him coming in to answer this today. I met a lady two weeks ago who was looking for some help with her daughter, who is ten years of age and has been diagnosed with dyslexia. The psychologist recommended that she get a laptop for school but she was refused by the special educational needs organiser, SENO. When I asked why, I was told that apparently you need an IQ of 90 for a laptop for school, and she had an IQ of 89. I could not believe what I was hearing and that this was actually the case. I thought surely, we cannot be getting things like this so wrong. The mam, as the Minister of State can imagine, wanted to even buy the laptop for the school but was told it was not going to do her any good when the child gets to secondary school and that it had to come through the scheme. The school could see that the child needed the laptop as well.

I had a look into the issue, and according to Circular 10/2013, funding is provided to schools towards the cost of computers and specialist equipment which are required for educational purposes. All equipment provided under the scheme supports children with more complex disabilities who, in order to access the school curriculum, require essential specialist equipment. To qualify for equipment under the assistive technology scheme, a student must have been diagnosed with a physical or communicative disability and must also have a recommendation in a professional assessment that the equipment is essential to allow the students to access the curriculum. We are ticking the boxes here so far. SENOs will review the application and professional reports provided in support of same, to establish whether the criteria of the scheme have been met. I assume this is where the IQ of 90 criterion comes in. The SENOs will then make a recommendation to the Department as to whether assistive technology is required. Based on this recommendation, the Department will decide on the level of grant, if any, to be provided. I took that from the Department.

This says to the mother that her child has to be more clever than she is to get this equipment. Maybe her daughter might have scored 90 and not 89 if she did the test the next day. The mother is so frustrated about this. However, it turns out, after a bit of research, that a new assistive technology circular was due in the first quarter of this year. It has not come out yet. It will give the power to the school. The Department aims to shift the scheme from a diagnosis-based approach to a needs-based approach, which is music to many parents' ears, granting schools greater autonomy in determining whether a child requires assistive technology to access the curriculum. That seems like something we need to get done now. It is great that the Department has recognised this, done the work on it and can see that it is what needs to be done in schools. I am calling for this to happen now. Let us ease the pressure on parents and on this mam who cannot access a laptop for her daughter. I know the school is advocating for her. The circular was due in quarter 1. Can we please find out when this new circular is going to

come out, in order that the schools can help all the children get their laptops to help them learn at school and be the same as all their classmates?

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth (Deputy Michael Moynihan): I thank the Senator for raising the issue and for her engagement in special education. It is hugely important that public representatives at all levels are engaged with the education system. It is only by the information they are getting from families and parents that we can challenge the system on it. We are committed to specialised education, which is hugely important in getting children to reach their full potential. For me, the Minister, Deputy Naughton, and the entire Government, it is to make sure we can deliver.

The assistive technology scheme supplements the overall funding provided to schools for digital technology and equipment and supports children who require essential specialised equipment to access the school curriculum. Assistive technology is a critical enabler for students with special educational needs, allowing them to benefit fully from the modern, technological-focused education system. The Department recognises the significant benefit of assistive technology in school settings, particularly for students with complex needs, and including children with visual and hearing impairments. It supports access to the curriculum, participation in classroom learning and positive educational outcomes. Under the assistive technology scheme, as it stands under the circular the Senator cited, Circular 10/13, funding is provided to schools towards the cost of computers and specialised equipment required for education purposes. The student must have a diagnosis of a physical or communicative disability and a professional assessment confirming the equipment is essential. Between January and the end of April 2026, almost 3,700 applications for assistive technology had been received and these are progressing as a matter of priority.

In recognition of the need to improve the applications and the delivery, a review of the assistive technology scheme is now in its final stages. That goes to the point the Senator made. The review will culminate in the publication of a new circular, which is expected to be announced in the next number of months. That is the key point and based on the Senator's engagement with the family she mentioned and her understanding of the education system as a whole, it is important that we come to that without delay. I will take from the Senator's Commencement matter that we will work on that to make sure we can bring out the circular as soon as possible.

The Senator outlined her contact with the family and referred to dates, circulars and much else. We have to be child- and family-focused. The whole of government and every Department need to have a robust system in place to ensure we are reaching those who are most in need.

The review is ongoing. It a matter that has been raised continuously by me and others within the Department to make sure that new circular is in place. As part of that review, a new streamlined application process is also being developed because, as the Senator will know, a lot of families who are looking for specialised education for their children or their students are always exasperated by the amount of form-filling and box-ticking that has to be done in relation to it. These changes are to make sure that there is a responsive, effective and child-centred scheme.

Ultimately, as regards the Senator's contribution, the review and those documents were to be over the first quarter, but we will endeavour to make sure that is done in as timely a manner as possible in order that we can support children going into the 2026-27 school year.

Senator Linda Nelson Murray: I thank the Minister of State for his response and for outlining the fact that 3,600 assistive technology supports have come out this year. I am a little disappointed that we do not have the date for it. I appreciate that the Department is at the final stages of the report. I really was hoping to get a date this morning but I hope and I think the Minister of State probably can guarantee me that we will have it for the start of the school year in September. Maybe we can get it out in July or August in order that schools can get the funding and can know the children who are coming in in September. The schools know every child inside out and will know which children need it.

We should bear in mind that man whose child had an IQ of 89 and not 90. That one point will make a difference to her. The child is ten years of age. She is in fourth class and has only two years left at school. Emotionally, it is hard for the family. They would really appreciate knowing that their daughter, going into fifth class, will have access to a laptop. Right now they do not. We are going through the appeals process on it at the moment. I hope we will be successful on it but for her and for other children, time is of the essence here. I think the Minister of State recognises that, judging by his response, and I appreciate that.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: We will endeavour to have that circular in operation for September 2026. It is important as we face the school year. I think a lot of students are looking forward to the holidays. We should not be talking about September. Certainly, when I was going to school, I thought September was sometime off in the Middle Ages. Families are looking at what is the best earlier in the year. They know the limitations and the challenges their children have in school, they are looking at how best they can support their children and they are reaching out to the school authorities. We, as the Department, and all of us as partners in education, have to make sure we have as streamlined a process as possible. We did an extensive review of it to make sure that we were covering all bases in it.

As regards the issue the Senator raised, she mentioned she had an appeal in. If we can take it offline and see whether there is anything, we will do that. Overall, we are committed to ensuring that every child reaches their full potential within the education system. We have a huge amount of work done and a lot of work we need to do to make sure that we are taking the anomalies and challenges out of the system, whereby someone is just marginally at one side or the other of the line for the accommodation of that. I will commit to making sure that the new circular which governs this will be done as speedily as possible. Also, if there is any assistance we can give in relation to the existing one, we would be more than willing to help.

Senator Linda Nelson Murray: That is much appreciated.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Victor Boyhan): The Minister who is to take the next Commencement matter is not here. We understand he is on his way. It is a last-minute changeover. I ask the Acting Leader to move a suspension of the House until 10.55 a.m.

Senator Linda Nelson Murray: I propose a suspension of the House until 10.55 a.m.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Victor Boyhan): Is that agreed? Agreed.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 10.45 a.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 10.47 a.m.

Sitting suspended at 10.45 a.m. and resumed at 10.47 a.m.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Victor Boyhan): I welcome the students and teachers from Leamlara national school, who are guests of Deputy James O'Connor. You are very welcome to the House. We are now engaging with Commencement matters, during which a number of topics are taken each day and relevant Ministers to those topics come in, so here we have the Minister for justice, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan. Enjoy your day.

I thank the Minister for coming to the House.

An Garda Síochána

Senator Ollie Crowe: I thank the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, for joining us. The Cathaoirleach Gníomhach has outlined the matter. It is important to begin by acknowledging that the most important thing about Garda vetting is that it continues to be done properly, that the integrity of the system stays intact and that it remains an effective tool for safeguarding our children. Having said that, like others I am sure, I have been involved in various clubs and community organisations across Galway over recent years and I know that vetting can at times be a deterrent. It is particularly frustrating for people who have gone through the process very recently but have to do so very quickly again because they want to give a hand to their local club or whatever the case may be. One person pointed out to me recently that teachers can transfer vetting if moving jobs but it cannot be done between sports organisations. Someone who has got vetting for the GAA cannot use that for soccer and so on. Likewise, vetting is needed for a Bus Éireann driver but is not needed for a driver for a private operator. It is very difficult to defend those sorts of discrepancies from a logical perspective.

When looking online in advance of today's matter, I saw that a number of people have suggested a permanent application number, which can be provided to registered organisations for subsequent vetting. That would seem to me to make a lot of sense. In any case, there has to be a better solution to the current situation where people are having to complete the same vetting applications again and again, often in a matter of weeks or a few short months. Surely we can use technology to move to a system where time is saved from the point of view of both the applicant and the staff reviewing applications.

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I thank Senator Crowe for raising this important matter. As he knows and as has stated, the primary purpose of the Garda vetting system is and always must be the protection of children and vulnerable adults. It is essential that parents, families, sporting organisations and charities can have confidence that appropriate safeguards are in place for those who undertake these positions in trust, whether it is coaching a children's sports team, working in a care home or working with people with disabilities.

At the same time, I recognise from what the Senator and other representatives have said that concerns have been raised by volunteers, particularly sporting bodies and community

organisations, regarding aspects of the current vetting process. Concerns have included the need for repeated vetting applications where an individual volunteer is across multiple organisations or roles. As the Senator indicated, his concern is that if somebody is given vetting to coach the local hurling team, why would they need vetting to coach the local soccer team at the same time? I recognise that we need to make the system more efficient for those sporting organisations, youth services, childcare providers and community groups that rely heavily on volunteers.

I have listened to the Senator's concerns and those of other representatives, as has the Government. I am conscious that volunteers are the backbone of communities across the country. Safeguarding and their participation in it are extremely important. For that reason, following the work of the Garda vetting review group, steps are being progressed to modernise and streamline the current system, while fully maintaining the robust safeguarding standards that are essential. In practice, and subject to the general requirement that vetting be renewed every three years, it is envisaged that where a person has already been vetted for work within a particular risk category, that individual would not need to undergo a completely new vetting process if moving to another role within the same category.

This approach strikes the correct balance. It maintains a strong protection, while also reducing duplication and unnecessary administrative burdens for volunteers and organisations. I note that similar practices operate successfully in other areas. An example is with registered teachers, who are vetted through the Teaching Council. Teachers can move between schools without undergoing full revetting unless the scheduled renewal requirements are needed. There is merit in examining how a comparable model to that used by the council could be applied more broadly.

The Government also recognises the importance of an efficient and responsive system, and that it remains so. In fairness to the Garda National Vetting Bureau, it processes a huge number of applications for vetting each year. In one recent year, it processed in the region of 630,000 applications. Most are dealt with and completed within the short period of seven to nine working days.

The changes being developed will require legislative amendments and updating technical systems. My Department is engaging closely with An Garda Síochána to ensure these reforms deliver a process that is efficient and secure, while ensuring the high standards of safeguarding that the public expects. I am pleased to communicate to Senator Crowe that issues are being developed within my Department to respond to the important matter that he has highlighted.

Senator Ollie Crowe: I thank the Minister. It is welcome and timely to have reforms to the system. I hope they can be implemented as quickly as possible. As I noted earlier, we all understand the need for the system. We are all aware that it is critical that the safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults remains in place. We just want to improve the system so it is not a deterrent for volunteers, sports clubs and community organisations.

With regard to the timeline for these reforms, does the Minister have that information to hand? Is this something we could look to complete in 2026?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I am always loath to set a timeline because, inevitably, the whole focus centres on whether it is done by that time or not. As the Senator knows, it will take time to implement the necessary technical and legislative changes that I have mentioned. I assure him that work is ongoing to achieve the aim of a more streamlined vetting system. It has to go through the Department and we have to produce proposals in respect of a general scheme. It then has to go to the Attorney General's office for advice and, ultimately, there will be drafting by the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel. All of that takes time. The important thing to point out is that a decision has been made that it is an area that requires reform, and I am committed to starting the pathway for that reform.

Nonetheless, a lot of good work is done by the Garda National Vetting Bureau on a daily basis. We do not hear of the successes but only when there are issues in respect of it. Those issues can arise because many people have lived abroad for many years, and vetting sometimes requires gardaí to engage with authorities abroad, which can take time. I again thank the Senator for his question.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 10.56 a.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 10.57 a.m.

Sitting suspended at 10.56 a.m. and resumed at 10.57 a.m.

Online Safety

Senator Robbie Gallagher: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit, an Teachta McConalogue. The Minister of State is very welcome. I thank him for taking time out of his busy schedule to be here.

I attended a meeting of the local sports partnership at the Monaghan Peace Campus last Friday, where two schools, the Model National School and St. Macartan's College, gave presentations. The Model National School gave a presentation on road safety, and St. Macartan's College gave a presentation on social media.

The St. Macartan's school principal is a gentleman by the name of David McCague. St. Macartan's is an all-boys secondary school. Mr. McCague gave a powerful presentation on the impact that social media is having on young people, and he sees it daily as a school principal. He said that social media should be named anti-social media. His fear is that we would look back on this era with great sadness and regret that we have not done more to protect our young people from the evils of social media.

I would like to read out an extract from the presentation that he made, which floored everyone who heard it on that day. It states:

Social media is an impediment to all of the investment of time and focus in schools on Student Wellbeing. Social Media acts as a counter point to the learning opportunities afforded to students in school.

There are 6 Junior Cycle Indicators of wellbeing [connection, respected, aware, resilient, active and responsible] and each one of them is being challenged directly by adolescent use of social media.

1. Connection - social media actually diminishes true connection. It creates virtual and false connections between young people and replaces the authentic friendships that they should be forming in their adolescence.

2. Respected - the base level of communication between adolescents is horrific. They are insulting each other at a level that would shock people. Young people will type something that they would never say to somebody's face. They do not see the consequences of these words, images so therefore they do not consider them. It is common place for young people to tell each other to go kill themselves via social media - unfortunately this is a trigger for poor mental health, low self-esteem, depression and often suicidal ideation. Furthermore - their role models/influences are role modelling misogyny, toxic masculinity and dangerous moral values.

3. Aware - young people are now very unaware of what is real and what is false. They cannot critically evaluate the validity of sources or information causing confusion, false impressions, misplaced trust and a sense of confusion on what is right and what is wrong. They are not aware of what is acceptable or unacceptable - if it appears acceptable on social media therefore it must be.

4. Resilient - young people's dependency on validation online leads to a lack of resilience. Their need to conform to the idealistic images on social media means that their failure to meet these expectations results in collapse and sensationalising of their unique deficiencies.

5. Active - young people now relax with the phone in their hand scrolling and viewing social media - this is often at the expense of moving and exercising contributing to the rise in obesity and issues like poor posture and eye strain.

6. Responsible - social media promotes irresponsibility and a lack of self-discipline. There is no regulation - there are no consequences for breaching a code of conduct. The availability of illicit images promotes irresponsibility.

The ban on phones in schools was a welcome act but it needs to go further. We need to prohibit students who are under 16 years of age from having access to a smartphones. It is deeply affecting the moral fibre of our young people, their mental health, their ability to forge authentic connections and their ability to decode what is real, false, right and wrong.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Victor Boyhan): I welcome the students, parents and supporters from the Skerries Educate Together national school who are in the Visitors Gallery. They are all very welcome to the House. I call the Minister of State.

Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I join in welcoming the group from the Skerries Educate Together national school. I hope that they all enjoy a tour of the Dáil and their day here.

I thank Senator Gallagher for raising this matter. I also thank him for providing the real-life experience and feedback given by Mr. McCague, principal of St. Macartan's College at a presentation. The feedback has been presented in a very authentic way and is totally based on the principal's experience of education and working with young people.

I thank the Senator for outlining the feedback on the six indicators of well-being, including respect, and the potential impact on all that by social media. He outlined how the principal said that students insult each other online in a way that would never previously happen in real life. I am sure that all of us in politics, and all of us as adults, can see how adults do the same and say things online that would never be said in public. Indeed, many of the people who are most vociferous and most insulting online would, whenever met in person, would not say "Boo" to a goose. I would often wonder if they are entirely different people. We can see how social media has that impact on adults who grew up in a non-social media environment and whose development was not impacted by growing up with social media. We can only imagine how challenging social media is for younger people who have yet to develop and are in the development process, and how social media impacts their long-term development and well-being, and their well-being in school.

Online safety, in particular for young people, is a priority for the Government. As online safety touches all aspects of life, it is a whole-of-society issue and a whole-of-government issue. Our approach to protecting children online is to regulate access to content, rather than access to equipment, and to promote safety by design, for example, regulating how recommender systems are delivered to users. The Government believes that this is the most effective way to secure meaningful online safety. That approach is embodied in Ireland's online safety framework, with Coimisiún na Meán at its heart. It includes the Online Safety and Media Regulation Act 2022, the EU's Digital Services Act and the online safety code. Together, these have a variety of provisions designed to protect children and young people from seeing illegal and harmful content online. For example, the online safety code obliges designated video-sharing platforms, including YouTube, Instagram and TikTok, to ensure that people under the age of 18 do not have access to adult-only content such as pornography and gratuitous violence. The platforms are required to have robust age-assurance measures to ensure compliance.

Looking ahead, the new national strategy on digital and AI was published in February and includes a chapter dedicated to online safety. It commits the Government to explore options with other EU member states to introduce age restrictions on the use of social media, concentrating on those under the age of 16. Our preference is for an EU-wide approach to a digital age of majority because it makes it more straightforward for platforms to comply and for regulators to supervise and enforce. For now, the Government does not have plans to ban smartphones. This is a thorny area and would potentially be difficult to monitor and enforce. For example, it is not clear how the owner of a smartphone could be identified or where the liability for a breach should lie. Moreover, there is good reason to believe that many parents and guardians rely on smartphones to check in with their children during the day. This is why we take the approach of regulating access to content rather than to equipment.

Of course, online safety is not just a matter for regulation. For example, in 2024, the Department of Education issued the keeping childhood smartphone free policy to provide guidance on access for primary school pupils. Similarly, there is a circular that requires recognised primary schools to ban the use of personal mobile phones for the duration of the school day.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: Go raibh maith ag an Aire Stáit and I thank the Minister of State for his response. The presentation made by the principal of St. Macartan's College, an all-boys secondary school, last Friday is one of the most powerful presentations that I have heard in all

my years in this House. Everyone who was present was saddened, shocked, alarmed and fearful of the effect that social media is having on schools. The principals and teachers in all schools are at the coalface in that they are dealing with the effects of it on a daily basis. Some of the examples outlined by Mr. McCague were truly shocking. His fear is that we may look back on this era in time to come with sadness of regret. The Government is moving in terms of online safety but we need to move more and do it quicker because we need to protect young people in their formative years and I fear that social media gives young people an impression of the world that is far from reality.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I again thank the Senator for raising these important issues. I assure him that online safety is a priority for the Government. Legislation and regulation are a vital part of minimising the availability of harmful and illegal content, especially for children. However, we need to ensure that those laws are effective, capable of being supervised and enforced in practice, and do not go beyond what is proportionate.

The Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport, Deputy O' Donovan, has made it a priority theme for the upcoming EU Presidency to work with our EU partners to ensure that our regulation remains robust and up to date and that children are safe in the online world. This is something that is not specific to this country. If we can work with other member states, we should do so because online safety is an issue that crosses boundaries. The Senator has outlined the impact that social media can have and highlighted the exceptional presentation given by the principal of St. Macartan's College. That speaks to how important online safety is kept to the forefront of our minds. Online safety is a big issue of this generation. It is important that online safety is discussed and teased out in detail, to which the Senator has contributed today. Departmental officials, the Minister and I will work to do everything that we can to address the harmful impacts of social media on young people, in particular.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Victor Boyhan): I thank the Minister of State and the Senator.

Road Projects

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: I welcome the Minister of State. I cannot deny that I am disappointed again that the Minister for Transport, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, is elusive when it comes to appearing in this House.

Since being elected, I have consistently raised the issue of roads funding in counties Cavan and Monaghan. Roads across both counties are in a critical condition. Potholes, cracks and crumbling surfaces are accepted as normal. People pay their motor tax, carbon tax and tolls every day, yet they are driving on roads that are substandard and not fit for purpose.

Earlier this year, the Government announced roads funding and described it as a "significant investment". The overall allocation was a reduction of €28,000 when compared with the 2025 allocation. Meanwhile, there was an established shortfall of €110 million in roads investment and maintenance between 2008 and 2023.

Only yesterday, the R191 Canningstown to Bailieborough road, a major regional route, had to be closed because of a sinkhole. This shows the scale of the problem we face, which I have been trying to flag in this House at every chance I get. Official PSCI - pavement surface

condition index - ratings show a substantial portion of the road network in County Cavan is between categories 1 and 4 and in categories 5 and 6, which are the worst categories. At the current rate of funding, it would take 40 years to clear the backlog to get the roads to an acceptable safe standard. People have a right to get to work safely, and on safe roads.

Cavan county councillors came to Leinster House many times last year with detailed evidence of road deterioration. They feel ignored and completely disrespected. The previous Government blamed the Green Party for prioritising greenways over roads, but the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, appears to be continuing with the same approach. If the Government cannot properly fund both, basic road infrastructure must come first.

Will additional funding be allocated for roads in Cavan and Monaghan this year?

Acting Chairperson (Senator Victor Boyhan): Before I call the Minister of State, I welcome Deputy John Connolly and his guests from Galway. They are very welcome to the House.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank Senator O'Reilly for raising this issue and welcome the opportunity to discuss it on behalf of the Minister for Transport, Deputy O'Brien. The Senator's question relates to the funding provided for both Cavan and Monaghan county councils for the maintenance and improvement of regional local roads.

I assure the Senator that the Government is strongly committed to our existing road network. Local authorities are responsible by statute for the maintenance and improvement of regional and local roads present in their respective areas of responsibility. Any work undertaken on these roads is funded by the resources of the local authority concerned and, where eligible, this is supplemented by the Department of Transport's regional and local roads grant programme. The initial selection and prioritisation of work to be funded is a matter, in the first instance, for the local authority.

The pressure on our regional and local roads is well understood, as is the critical role they play in supporting our economic activity and community links. As a result, the regional and local roads grant programme is primarily targeted at the maintenance and renewal of our existing roads network, with the remainder invested in new roads, new bridges and road realignments. The funds available through this programme have been steadily increasing in recent years. For 2026, €718 million was made available, which will facilitate an increase of €26 million for road protection and renewal throughout the country.

The grant programme operated by the Department is focused on specific policy objectives. Restoration maintenance grants look to pavement sealing to protect the road surface from water damage. Restoration improvement grants look to road strengthening to lengthen the life of road pavements. The discretionary grants available allow for a range of activities, including pothole repair, edge strengthening, renewal of signs and lines and winter maintenance. These three grant programmes account for most of the funding available.

The basis for determining the allocations for each local authority under this grant programme is related to the total number of kilometres of regional and local roads within their areas of responsibility. This is held as being the most equitable method of distribution. The current rate of inflation or level of population are not factors taken into consideration. For

2026, allocations were notified to local authorities on 17 February. Cavan and Monaghan county councils were allocated over €19 million and over €17 million, respectively, with most of this funding directed towards protection and renewal. In addition, in 2024 and 2025, both Cavan and Monaghan county councils received funding for several pilot projects relating to road materials. The Department is appreciative of the assistance provided in the delivery of on-site works under the reclaimed asphalt pavement project.

It should be noted that Exchequer funding for regional and local roads is intended to supplement realistic contributions from local authorities' own resources. As the statutory road authorities for their areas, it is open to local authorities to prioritise own resource investment towards regional and local roads. In addition to the funding provided under the regional and local roads grant programme, national roads were also provided funding. For 2026, Cavan and Monaghan county councils were allocated €5.8 million and €10.1 million, respectively. This funding supports the maintenance, improvement and progression of new road projects.

The difficulty in delivering road programmes within existing budgets is understood, as is the additional difficulty caused by variability in the market. While there may be provisions within existing contracts that can be utilised, ultimately it is a matter for local authorities to prioritise work and determine what can be best achieved with their existing budgets.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: The Minister of State's answer is interesting as it is just a definition of all the schemes and resources available. It does not tackle the actual issue. The Minister told councillors there would be a substantial increase in funding when, in fact, there was a decrease. Those are the facts. The Minister also said there would be an announcement before Christmas, but it did not happen until February.

Councillors and Oireachtas Members continue to constantly raise this issue, but it feels like our calls are falling on deaf ears. The Minister has not been into this Chamber more than a handful of times, despite being asked to come here on many occasions. He has time to open a road in Killydoon that had already been opened by Leo Varadkar. Why would we celebrate the opening of the Killydoon bypass when it is just another excuse for the Government to have a good photo op? This 3.5 km road will be opened, while people have to travel over potholes, sinkholes and cracks on the rest of the road network.

Councillors Shane P. O'Reilly, Adrian Rogers and Brendan Fay and the Sinn Féin councillors in County Cavan have all written to the cathaoirleach and chief executive of Cavan County Council to ask for a meeting with the Minister before he opens the road in Killydoon on Friday. The response they got was disrespectful and outrageous. It stated the Minister would only be there for 20 minutes and would not have time to talk to councillors. That is the level of respect being shown to these councillors, who include members of Fianna Fáil, the Minister's own party, who are also not happy with the situation.

We are being treated as an afterthought when it comes to infrastructural investment. We have huge increases in industry and a high volume of traffic. Roads are the backbone of our economy. People need to get their products to market, and that regional road is closed in a municipal district that has no national route. I have tabled Commencement matters on roads numerous times in this House and the Minister has still not turned up for a single debate.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Victor Boyhan): Thank you, Senator O'Reilly. I have to give time to the Minister of State to respond.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: If nothing is done, the roads will continue to deteriorate and it will become a bigger issue, as it did yesterday. There has still been no answer to the question I asked.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank Senator O'Reilly again. I will pass on her feedback and comments to the Minister and Department and raise with the Minister the fact that she has raised this significant issue in Cavan and Monaghan and is seeking additional funding.

As regards the response from the Department, it outlines the level of funding for this year, which was announced in February, with €19 million for Cavan and €17 million for Monaghan. It also outlines that funding for the upkeep and renewal of roads is allocated on a per kilometre basis nationally. It depends on the number of kilometres of road in each county. Nationally, this year, we saw a €26 million increase for road protection and renewal across the country, which meant there was €718 million available. That sum was then allocated on a per kilometre basis.

I am not sure of any fairer way to allocate this funding. It has long been the Department's position regarding how roads are maintained. County councils also have capacity within their own resources, which I accept are always stretched and there are many competing interests, to decide on how they allocate their resources and whether any additional amount is given to road maintenance. That is at the discretion of the local authority.

The Senator is seeking additional funding and she outlined the pressure on the road system in both Cavan and Monaghan. I will relay that to the Minister and Department.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 11.19 a.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 11.32 a.m.

Sitting suspended at 11.19 a.m. and resumed at 11.32 a.m.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

Senator Garret Ahearn: The Order of Business is No. 1, motion regarding the appointment of members of An Coimisiún Toghcháin, to be taken on conclusion of the Order of Business without debate; No. 2, address to Seanad Éireann by MEPs representing the European Parliament Midlands-North-West constituency, to be taken at 2 p.m. in accordance with the arrangements set out in the motion agreed by the House on 13 May 2026; No. 3, Garda Síochána (Recording Devices) (Amendment) Bill 2025 - Second Stage, to be taken at 5 p.m. and to conclude at 6.30 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, all other Senators not to exceed five minutes and the Minister to be given no less than ten minutes to reply to the debate; and No. 64, motion 1, Private Members' business, motion regarding rents to be taken at 6.30 p.m. with the time allocated to this debate not to exceed two hours.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Before I call Senator Clifford-Lee, I welcome visitors from Rylane National School, who are guests of Senator Lynch. You are obviously from Cork. I see Deputy Nash is there with some guests as well; they are very welcome. Kyle Roche is here. He is on work experience with Senator Clifford-Lee. Sam Burke is here and he is on work experience with me. They are all very welcome.

I give a special welcome to the Italian ambassador, H.E. Nicola Faganello, and Michela Linda Magri. I hope I have the pronunciation right. They are here to celebrate and mark Italy's national day. Republic Day celebrates the establishment of the Italian Republic, which marks its 80th anniversary in 2026. Italy officially became a republic in 1946 after the Italian people voted in favour in a referendum. It was the first vote in the country to be carried out under universal suffrage in the aftermath of the Second World War. This year Italy held an important place on the world stage as it held the Winter Olympics in February. The games were incredibly successful and became a record-breaking event in terms of global reach. Engagement figures surpassed previous records across viewing, streaming and social media platforms both within Italy and internationally. As proud nations at the heart of Europe, Italy and Ireland share a strong connection built on common values, rich cultures and a deep commitment to democracy and community. A vibrant Italian community of approximately 18,000 lives in Ireland. There is also an Irish-Italian Chamber of Commerce in Dublin, which was established in 2020. It supports Italian businesses across a wide range of sectors. I wish ambassador Faganello and Italians living in Ireland and around the world a very happy Republic Day. *Buona Festa della Repubblica*. You are very welcome and enjoy your visit to Leinster House.

Senator Lorraine Clifford-Lee: St. Peter's GAA is a juvenile amalgamation of three Gaelic football clubs in rural north County Dublin, namely, Clann Mhuire, Ballyboughal and Garristown. All three clubs have a rich and deep tradition of football. When the players reach minor level, they go back to their home GAA clubs to continue playing at a very high level. St. Peter's GAA is going from strength to strength, but with changing weather patterns it has become apparent the current facilities are not fit for purpose. They are not available when the local juvenile teams need them and the local availability is very limited. This year alone St. Peter's GAA has had to contend with frequent pitch closures and cancelled training sessions. It is very difficult for the club to provide consistent, safe and structured training for the children and young people. There is a clear need for a community all-weather facility serving the communities of Naul, Garristown and Ballyboughal.

I recently met representatives of St. Peter's GAA on their proposal to develop a multisport community facility for all three communities. They have identified council-owned land ideally located between Ballyboughal and Naul. They have also developed a concept and plans contained in the document I am holding, which is really well-developed. Stage 1 of the proposal is to develop a car park and all-weather pitch at an estimated cost of €2.5 million. This is a very reasonable cost when you consider the huge benefit of the facility to the three communities and the kids of St. Peter's. All three GAA clubs are committed to the development of this multisport community facility and there is huge support for it locally. The children and young people of Ballyboughal, Naul and Garristown deserve excellent sporting and community facilities. I am fully behind this development and will do everything in my power to deliver it for the communities.

When discussing this development we also need to look at the concept of the third space. The third space is a social environment separate to the two primary spaces in people's lives, which are their home and work or school environments. It allows people to connect, relax and build community. There are many important friendships and learning environments people need to have access to in order to exchange ideas and decompress. These are very important to keep community cohesion, but in rural communities third spaces can often be lacking. This multisport community facility proposed by St. Peter's fills this role in these communities. It will bring three thriving rural communities together and ensure all in the community have access to a place to gather and form bonds. All three communities have grown in population in recent years and are set to grow further. I would like a debate with the Minister of State with special responsibility for sport, Deputy McConalogue, on the provision of sporting facilities for rural communities and their importance in community development, community cohesion, belonging and collective action.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I want to raise one issue today. The special advocate for survivors of institutional abuse held a press conference. I do not recall that there were any Senators there but there were a number of Deputies present. It was packed and was extensively covered in all media today. It is a reminder of a lot of unfinished business. We heard a heart-rending story from a man who was taken to Kerry and ended up being boarded out. He shared with us the enormous emotion of the separation of his brothers and the impact it had on his life. This man had an extraordinary story that I had never heard before. Many of the journalists present were deeply moved by it. The story related to boarding out. There are many aspects to institutional abuse. We talk about emotional abuse, mental abuse, physical abuse and sexual abuse. It comes in many forms and is sometimes a combination of them all. The great tragedy is that thousands and thousands of children, both boys and girls, were farmed out and were separated from their families. This was aided and abetted by the institutions of the State and the church. This was, historically, of a time. Things have moved on.

As someone who is committed to agriculture and has represented the agricultural panel for over ten years now, I am struck by the thought that young children aged five, six and seven were housed in barns and sheds. They were not housed with the family or the children. They were out picking stones. They worked as slaves seven days a week. There are stories of children who were forced to eat swill rather than food. There are stories of children who were held back from any education. However, the greatest sin of all was to break the link from their brothers and sisters. Yesterday we heard the story of a man who went on a bus to Kilgarvan and was then wrenched away from his brother and taken up to another family in Kerry, not that far away, but for ten years they never connected and never met. That has all been validated and we heard that story yesterday. Again, there was no commitment to link him in. That leaves emotional, physical and mental scars on people.

The Government has acknowledged different things. I want to make a particular reference to the Taoiseach. I am only talking about boarding out here today because there were many aspects covered yesterday. The Taoiseach gave an apology and a recognition in the State's apology to the boarded-out people, but nothing has happened. We were told yesterday about restitution that never came. That was the story about the boarded-out survivors. They are still excluded from any financial redress despite repeated recognition of the wrongdoing of the State. Indeed, I sat in the Chamber some weeks back when the Taoiseach, Micheál Martin,

who I know has huge sympathy and empathy with this particular issue, spoke about an apology but the redress has not been given. I want to thank the special advocate, Patricia Carey. I want to thank the people who shared their story with us at Buswells Hotel at the press launch yesterday. I ask the Leader if we could have a debate specifically on the boarded-out families to let us look at it again and see what practical measures there are. Redress is about more than money; it is about practical supports. I would like to have a targeted, respectful conversation with the relevant Government Departments to see what we can do to progress this matter, which is about justice and redress.

Senator Sharon Keogan: Hear, hear.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Before we carry on, I want to welcome former councillor, Kathleen Shanagher, chairperson of the Roscommon Tidy Towns Association, along with Alison Maher and Kevin Woods. I thank them for all the work they do. They are guests of Senator Scahill, who I call on now.

Senator Gareth Scahill: I welcome Kathleen, Kevin and Alison here today. Kathleen may be retired but she is probably as busy now as she has ever been with the Tidy Towns Association. She is building on the great effort she has put into that down through the years. I wish Kathleen continued success.

It is just coincidental I am bringing this up at the moment. I welcome and commend Councillor Emer Kelly for, once again, raising the ongoing parking crisis in Roscommon University Hospital at the regional health forum recently. The response that she received from the HSE clearly acknowledges the seriousness of the issue, with additional parking now described as "urgent and essential". It also sets out the requirement for the future development of the hospital campus. The acknowledgment is important because everybody using Roscommon University Hospital - patients, family and staff - know that the current situation is simply unsustainable. Parking pressures have continued to grow as services, staffing levels and activity at the hospital have increased year on year. This is not a new issue. I raised this issue when I was a member of the regional health forum in 2024. At that stage I was informed that the spatial plan for the hospital campus would be completed by December 2024 and would help to address the parking difficulties. Since then, I have continued to pursue this matter and I have worked very closely with my colleague, Councillor Valerie Duffy, who is now representing us on the regional health forum. It is very frustrating that two years later, public representatives are still being fobbed off with a reference to a spatial plan that has not been delivered, while no meaningful progress has been delivered on the ground. Patients attending appointments should not face the stress of searching for parking and staff should not be left to rely on overflow arrangements that are already at full capacity most days. Enough is enough. Action is needed. The HSE must provide definite timelines for the completion and delivery of this spatial plan along with immediate interim measures to ease the parking crisis in Roscommon University Hospital. I am calling for a debate on this matter to see whether we can ensure that HSE west and other HSE services around the country are not just fobbing off public representatives with the same answers they have been using for two and three years. When we ask these questions, we deserve honesty and delivery on them.

Senator Joanne Collins: I want to start by wishing all the exhibitors well this weekend at the Bloom Festival, where we showcase the best of our gardening, Irish products, food and sustainable living. As Senators know, it is sponsored by Bord Bia. It was raised with me over the last couple of days that there will be exhibitors there showcasing Irish wool. The Irish wool that they showcase actually has a product that is imported called merino, which means it is not actually 100% Irish wool. There is a company called Galway Wool. I have dealt with Blátnaid Gallagher from Galway Wool in the past through committee and other engagements. Hers is one of the only companies in Ireland that is 100% Irish wool. It is important to promote Irish business also, so I am not giving out that there are other companies there, because they are Irish businesses. However, it would be nice to see our Irish products being showcased also. It comes back a little to the issue with labelling when it comes to this country as to whether the product itself is an Irish product or whether it is imported or there are ingredients within the product that are imported. It is very important we ensure that if something is being promoted by us or by Bord Bia, we are promoting it correctly and making sure that people understand if it is a fully Irish product or if there is a percentage of it that is not. However, I want to wish everyone well. It is going to be a fantastic event. Thankfully, they seem to have the weather in their favour for it which means it will be even better. With lots of people coming into the city for the weekend there will be a great buzz around the place. I wish all the exhibitors the best of luck but going forward it would be nice to see our products as well as our businesses being promoted when they are 100% Irish.

Senator Patricia Stephenson: I propose an amendment to the Order of Business to seek that No. 13 be taken before No. 1. I refer to putting the Air Navigation and Transport (Amendment) Bill 2026 on the Order Paper. The Bill is grounded in the simple principle of upholding Irish neutrality, the sovereignty of our airspace and international law. For decades, Shannon Airport has been used as a transit hub for US military operations. Recent reporting in the media has raised serious questions about the scale of those activities and the lack of transparency surrounding them. *The Irish Times* has reported that 250 more US military aircraft passed through Irish airspace than was previously reported to the Government. At the same time, reports in *The Ditch* have consistently highlighted the role of commercial aircraft providers carrying weapons through Irish airspace. For example, in just one week in February last year Lufthansa carried over 1 tonne of munitions to Israel on three flights over Irish territory. American Airlines carried munitions used in the illegal war on Iran just last month, carried on passenger aircraft, including critical parts for launching missiles. None of these were sanctioned by the Government.

Under Irish navigation law, carrying weapons of war through Irish airspace requires an exemption from the transport Minister. Otherwise, it is an indictable offence. However, exemptions have not been applied for in many cases.

We have consistently heard from the Government that it is impossible to know what is being transported. Therefore, we need a random on-the-spot inspection regime. This is the central issue that my Bill seeks to address. The legislation addresses the claims by this Government that it does not have sufficient powers to inspect commercial operators transporting arms and munitions through the State. The Bill will introduce a random inspection and enforcement regime with penalties for flight operators who breach Ireland's rules on the transportation of munitions.

My Bill also responds to long held and growing public concerns about Ireland's complicity in actions linked to human rights abuses, particularly in relation to the use of Irish territory in the context of the cruel deportation flights carried out by ICE from the US last year, which we have recorded as landing in Shannon Airport between May 2025 and February this year. I do not believe the Government should be playing any part in these removals. We have seen reports of Palestinians being shackled on an aeroplane and deported to the West Bank, which, as we all know, is an occupied territory. Deporting people to an occupied territory is illegal under international law. It is horrifying that people are being shackled on aeroplanes that are landing and passing through Shannon Airport.

The Bill seeks to extend what qualifies as a State aircraft by including aircraft operating as custom flights, thus requiring custom flights to abide by human rights standards and seek exemptions before landing in Shannon. It is my expectation that the Irish Government would never provide an exemption for ICE-style deportations and would, therefore, stop these flights landing in Shannon.

This Bill is about oversight, accountability and ensuring that Ireland is not facilitating the movement of weapons or participation in actions that may undermine international law, human rights or the values that we claim to uphold. I hope my colleagues will support my proposal to amend the Order of Business.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I second the amendment.

I am very happy to support Senator Stephenson's Bill. I was deeply disappointed when my arms embargo Bill was blocked in this House. It was, again, a Bill seeking to address the transit of arms. Senator Stephenson's Bill is taking a different approach, but an equally constructive one, to the wider issue of the transit of arms and other inappropriate uses of our airspace and airports.

The Bill is very constructive. I believe it addresses many of the reasons and rationales we heard from the Government in relation to my Bill. I hope we will see it progressing through the House. I am delighted to support and co-sign it.

I also propose another amendment to the Order of Business to introduce my own Bill. I formally propose that No. 12 be taken before No. 1. I am proposing a Bill which seeks to build on something we should be very proud of, namely, Ireland's record on disarmament. Ireland was the first country to sign the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. That was done by Frank Aiken. Ireland played a key role in hosting the negotiations to ban cluster munitions. I was there myself. They are one of the most appalling weapons that specifically target and affect civilians in their impact. We also played a key role in the anti-personnel mine ban convention. This is Ireland's record in disarmament. It is something we should be proud of - in fact we should be standing over it at a time when we are seeing a slipping away in that regard. Very worryingly, countries are leaving the cluster bomb and landmine conventions.

This is our opportunity to move forward and look to the new and very serious threat posed by lethal autonomous weapon systems. These systems are defined as any weapons system with autonomy at its critical function, a weapon system that can select and attack targets without human intervention, often using AI. It separates the decision to take a human life from an individual or a command structure that can be held accountable and, instead, we have a

situation where an algorithm, programme or piece of software can in fact have the ability to decide who lives or dies in the areas where they are operating.

This is a perversion of our humanity. It is vital that Ireland take a leading role in pushing for legally binding treaties, regulating and, where appropriate, banning these categories of weapons. In 2023, Ireland signed a UN General Assembly motion tabled by Austria calling for the co-operation of states on the regulation of these weapons and supporting their prohibition in situations where there is no guaranteed human control or compliance with international humanitarian law. The purpose of this Bill is to put that in place. It is for Ireland to give leadership, not just in pushing for a global treaty but also on a national level to bring in a prohibition of this specific category of weapons system.

It is important to note that areas like AI, defence and military action are not part of the EU law structures. For example, the AI Act explicitly carves out and does not address the use of these technologies in relation to defence or weaponry because that is a national level competence. That is why we need national level leadership. Ireland, by bringing a prohibition through, will be in a much stronger position to then drive the necessary international conversation.

When we think about these programmes and how they come in, we can look to some of the programmes we have seen. Some of them may technically meet the definition here. I have drawn on the International Red Cross. Others may not. There are programmes that automatically target people based on a family member coming home, for example, the "Where's Daddy" and "Lavender" programmes. They are designed to target children, by their nature. This is something on which Ireland can give leadership. The Government has stated that this is its position internationally. I hope it will support the Bill to prohibit lethal autonomous weapons. I give credit to Stephen Reid in my office, who has given leadership in this whole programme of developing this area of work.

Senator Frances Black: I second the amendment.

Senator Paul Daly: I belatedly congratulate our former colleague and former Leader, Deputy Seán Kyne, on his election. I also congratulate Deputy Daniel Ennis. I do not know Deputy Ennis personally. I have always found Deputy Kyne to be a good colleague, a good friend and a very fair and impartial Leader. I wish him every success in the Lower House.

I highlight the fact that this is the Health and Safety Authority's farm safety partnership advisory committee's tractor safety week. It is very appropriate that we have it this week - the first fine week of the year. Rural Ireland is buzzing at the moment and the silage season has kicked in. It is important that we again highlight awareness of farm safety and the dangers that go with heavy machinery, as well as the increased and enhanced workload. It is very hard to appreciate it at a time when the weather is fine. This may only be a window. It may not be as fine next week. The cycle comes and goes. Farmers need to just stop and think that the work always gets done. It does not all have to be done today. I urge that we would create awareness on that.

In that regard, again this year, unfortunately, Farm Safety Week falls in the week of 20 July when these Houses will be in recess. That has happened in recent years, which has not afforded

us the opportunity to have statements during Farm Safety Week. I have given the Acting Leader plenty of advance warning so that between now and the recess, we might have statements on farm safety. Perhaps we could also incorporate into the discussion with the Minister awareness of the prevalence of the diseases that are now evident in the agriculture sector. We heard a lot of talk about bluetongue over the winter months, including that it would not be a threat until temperatures went over 12°C. They are well over 12°C now, so we need to be conscious of that. I urge that people travelling to places like Cyprus and Greece, where foot-and-mouth disease is prevalent at the moment, be cognisant and conscious of that. If they come into contact with any dairy or meat products or farm animals, they should be conscious of that when they come home. The last thing we need is an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease. As we are not sitting next week, I wish everybody who is taking State exams the best of luck.

Senator Manus Boyle: I have been contacted by people with disabilities. The misuse of disability parking bays may seem small to some, but for some people it has a very real impact on their daily lives. Disability parking bays exist for a reason. They are there to ensure that people with disability and mobility challenges, older citizens and those with medical conditions can safely and independently access services, the workplace, shops and community facilities. Unfortunately, we continue to see incidents of the use of these spaces by people who have absolutely no entitlement to them. What is even more concerning is the cases where permits are misused or displayed unlawfully. Recently in my local area, a vehicle was parked in a disability space using somebody else's permit.

12 o'clock

I genuinely cannot understand why anyone would think this is acceptable. It is not an inconvenience for someone with genuine needs not to be able to access these places. This is causing widespread anger among people with disabilities. People have been ringing me in the past couple of days about this.

Ordinary people have to go to the shop or attend a doctor's appointment are finding there is somebody there who is not entitled to be there. I ask people to think carefully before they park and to leave disability bays for the people who are entitled to them. They are the people who really need them, who have bad mobility and need to walk a couple of hundred yards to a doctor's surgery or a shop. I ask people, when they are out today and all through the summer, to please stay out of disability parking bays.

Senator Sharon Keogan: I want to carefully address some of the public and media reactions following the tragic death of Yves Sakila because it raises serious concerns about consistency and fairness in how we discuss these issues. In recent days, footage emerged of African religious rituals being conducted outside Arnotts in response to Sakila's death, where the officiate tells the camera he is cursing death on all who enter the premises. That conduct has not been treated with the seriousness it warrants. In fact, it has been dismissed or trivialised. At the same time, we have laws in this country where a person praying quietly within 100 m of an abortion facility can face criminal sanctions. That is a contradiction that needs to be acknowledged. I have also heard from staff, of whom there are more than 300, and customers of Arnotts who are now worried about their safety. That concern should not be dismissed out of hand.

More broadly, I am troubled by the tone adopted by many in public discourse, including Members of this House, who referred to security guards involved as murderers. That is outrageous. It is jeopardisation of an ongoing investigation and if those men are found innocent, it will be defamation.

Meanwhile, we saw the murder of Alex Coughlan in the past week. In that case there were calls for restraint and, in fact, people were expressly urged not to share horrific footage. The question I ask is a simple one. Which standards are we applying? Either we speak freely or with caution. Both have pros and cons but we should be consistent and not switch for selective reasons based, dare I say, on the ethnicity of the victim and the accused. I and others have been accused of sowing hatred and division. I do not. Upholding double standards is what creates division. Pointing them out is about defending fairness, and fairness is the foundation of peace and harmony.

Senator Joe Flaherty: We heard harrowing evidence at Longford Court last week as Garda Inspector Tom Quinn told how he feared for his life when a German shepherd was set upon him. He is a Garda of outstanding character, with an unblemished record, who has since endured an agonising eight years as a consequence of what happened that evening. Within minutes of the attack, which ultimately saw the garda produce and fire his service weapon in order to save his own life, a video went viral. It was widely shared on social media and caused Inspector Quinn's family genuine and serious distress. The video and subsequent media coverage was accompanied by horrible and vicious commentary. Inspector Quinn was the subject of threats and was forced to take his children from the family home for a number of weeks. That video is still available to be seen across multiple social media forums. His children recently told him that they have seen it for themselves. I would have expected that, at the very least, An Garda Síochána management would have pursued and ensured the removal of this video from all channels.

In the aftermath, the assistant commissioner for the western region visited Inspector Quinn and gave certain assurances that he had acted properly and the organisation would protect him. Sadly, Inspector Quinn's experience has been quite the opposite. He was very critical of the former Garda Commissioner, Drew Harris, for failing to make contact with him and refusing to sign his promotion warrant in December 2018. It was as if Harris had formed a decision that the then-Sergeant Quinn was in the wrong. Even after he was cleared by the Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission, GSOC, of any wrongdoing, his calls to human resources about his promotion went unanswered. When he was eventually and rightly promoted in August 2019, he sought to have that promotion backdated as it was having an adverse effect on his pay, pension and future promotion opportunities. Having unsuccessfully tried to resolve the issue through all channels, he had no option but to take the matter to the High Court. That court subsequently said that, given GSOC's findings, not backdating the promotion would wrongly penalise the inspector over what amounted to false accusations against him.

This officer was failed by An Garda Síochána management and at the very least deserves an apology from An Garda Síochána. The inspector has been on a panel for promotion to superintendent. However, prior to his High Court action the panel was cut short of where he was placed, and he has since applied twice for promotion but has not been selected. I take heart from his comments that he does not think the current Garda Commissioner, Justin Kelly, would have allowed the situation to be handled so badly.

We need to have confidence and a genuine belief in the absolute integrity and commitment of An Garda Síochána. Equally, serving members must feel that they have the absolute support, backing and loyalty of management. In this regard, I fear Inspector Quinn was shamelessly failed. The public genuinely needs to see this acknowledged and, as I said, An Garda Síochána needs to make an apology to Inspector Quinn.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Before I call Senator Duffy, I welcome his guest, Ailbhe Munnelly. She is a niece of Councillor Jarlath Munnelly from County Mayo. Ailbhe is very welcome. I take it she is from County Mayo as well. I hope she enjoys her visit.

Senator Mark Duffy: I welcome Ailbhe and thank her for being here to support me in an internship role.

I welcome confirmation by the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment, Deputy O'Brien, that his Department will now undertake an integrated strategy on the use of surplus renewable energy. It is an issue I have raised many times in committee and on the floor of Seanad Éireann, specifically focusing on dispatch down when turbines are being turned off because of oversupply to the grid. The Minister's confirmation today is very welcome. I have called for this on numerous occasions. Energy Cloud is a great example of using surplus renewable energy. It tops up for free hot water tanks for vulnerable households who are at risk of fuel poverty. There is a great opportunity here.

Some €500 million of wasted energy is lost every year. To create a scheme to broaden Energy Cloud's role to households around the country, specifically those most at risk of fuel poverty is excellent. Building on top of that, there needs to be support through grant aid for battery storage at a residential level. I have raised this plenty of times but I reiterate that call today, given the Minister has confirmed there will be a strategy on surplus renewable energy.

Battery storage supports for residential households, targeting those most vulnerable and most at risk of fuel poverty first, and working upwards, can have a transformational benefit for the quality of life of citizens across the country. I welcome consideration of that. Perhaps we could have a debate with the Minister on this in order that we have constructive contributions. We could take a step forward both in terms of decarbonising and putting money back in people's pockets and making energy bills much more affordable for homeowners.

Senator Chris Andrews: I support Senator Stephenson's Bill. It is beyond disappointing the way the Government looks at the other way in relation to the transportation of munitions through Irish airspace. We have to change that policy.

I express my condolences to the family of Alex Coughlan, a young man from Blanchardstown who had his life brutally taken. My thoughts are with his family and friends. Alex will be remembered as a caring and selfless man whose kindness touched so many people. I commend An Garda Síochána on arresting two suspects so quickly, and I hope Alex and his loved ones receive the justice they deserve. It is deeply worrying that across this city, crime and violence are all too common. Intimidation by organised crime or unorganised but dangerous groups of young people is the reality in many of Dublin's communities.

The people who killed Alex Coughlan must be brought to justice and must face the consequences of their absolutely brutal assault. It seems it was carried out by two 16-year-olds who stole a wallet while recording the assault. Killers like them must be held to account. Right across the city, whether in Ringsend, Blanchardstown, Pearse Street or elsewhere, people feel unsafe. Garda numbers in the south inner-city have, in effect, been stagnant for the past decade, despite rapid population growth. That is reflected on the streets. People in communities around City Quay are constantly worried about their safety. Life in that part of the city has become very challenging. The Garda does not have the resources it needs. It is really important to get more gardaí on the streets to make them safer. I ask that the Minister come to the Chamber to set out a plan for making the streets safer.

Senator Sharon Keogan: Hear, hear.

Senator Mike Kennelly: As the good weather arrives, people naturally rush to our beaches, lakes and coastline to enjoy the sunshine. Too often, however, many go into the water without fully understanding the real dangers that can exist beneath the surface. Calm waters can change in moments. Strong rip currents like we have in north Kerry, cold water shock, hidden tides and sudden water changes can turn a day out into a tragedy within minutes. Sadly, there has been an incident recently that has devastated a family and shaken a community. I send my sympathies to the family of Abbie Carmody-Pepper on her recent passing.

In Kerry, we are proud to have 15 blue flag beaches and two blue flag marinas, which attract thousands of visitors whenever the weather improves. However, with that popularity comes responsibility. The good weather can come either in the bathing season or outside it. We are currently outside the official bathing season, which normally runs from 1 June to 15 September, with many of our beaches being left without lifeguard protection. This week alone, heat records have been broken twice and beaches across the county have been packed with people despite there being no lifeguard on duty to protect the public in many locations. We saw the danger of that clearly only last Monday at the beautiful Banna beach in north Kerry, with an incident that, fortunately, had a positive outcome. We may not be so lucky the next time.

We cannot continue waiting for calendar dates while temperatures soar and crowds gather at our beaches and coastline. Water safety services must respond to real conditions, not just at certain times of the year. I call on all coastal local authorities across the country to provide lifeguard cover whenever extreme warm weather brings large numbers to the beaches. Public safety must come first and we cannot just stick to a calendar. We need a contingency plan whereby if there is good weather outside of their fixed-term agreements, lifeguards will be provided to cover the beaches.

There is also the issue of awareness. We need a strong water safety campaign reminding people to respect the water, never swim alone, supervise children closely and understand that even experienced swimmers can get into difficulty. Good weather should bring enjoyment, not heartbreak. Coastal local authorities must act now to raise awareness, including through all social media platforms, that people need to think before they act and be aware of dangers and risks to public safety.

Senator Frances Black: I want to put on record my disappointment yesterday with the Government's announcement on the occupied territories Bill. What has been proposed is a partial ban. It is a ban on the importation of physical goods from the illegal Israeli settlements, that is, the dates and olives grown on stolen Palestinian farmland. It is welcome as far as it goes but it deliberately excludes trade in services. The technology companies, tourism platforms and digital and IT firms that sustain those settlements are being let off the hook entirely. It is a significantly and deeply disappointing walk-back that will fundamentally undermine the impact of the legislation.

In the West Bank right now, Palestinian families are being driven off their land at gunpoint and their homes and farms are being seized. Communities are being forcibly displaced. Médecins sans Frontières recently documented the case of a family of six who were shot while simply driving home. Only two sons survived. Their brothers were five and seven years old. Western governments have rightly condemned such actions as illegal, yet we continue to trade with the very settlements sustaining them. That is what the occupied territories Bill is meant to address. The Government's argument that including services is not legally implementable is misleading, and one example puts that beyond doubt. Last year, Spain passed legislation banning trade in certain services with Israeli settlements. Spain is bound by exactly the same EU rules as Ireland is but it did it and it is working. Tourism platforms, digital companies, Airbnb providers and others can no longer provide support to those settlements. That was implemented in a matter of weeks. If Spain can do it, why can Ireland not do the same?

When the Bill reaches the floor of the Dáil in the coming weeks, I will work on amendments with colleagues and, I hope, Opposition Members. I ask my colleagues here to support those amendments because they are absolutely vital. My position on this has been the same since 2018 and it is not going to change now. I urge people to support the occupied territories Bill in its entirety. In 2014, when Russia occupied part of Ukraine, Ireland rightly implemented a ban on both goods and services. That ban has been in place and working for 12 years. All we are asking is that the same standard be applied in this case. If Irish businesses can be required by law to stop providing services to Russian companies tearing up Ukraine, why can they not be asked to do the same in respect of Israeli companies tearing apart and destroying the West Bank?

Senator Cathal Byrne: I refer to the lack of roads funding provided to Wexford County Council in the aftermath of Storm Chandra. We are now 120 days on from the storm, which occurred on 27 January. Unfortunately, despite a request for an emergency budget of €22 million, Wexford County Council has not received any funding to date. I am seeking answers in this regard. The council has identified 157 roads in the county as damaged to the point of being in an immediate and dangerous state of disrepair as a result of the storm. It is the largest number of roads so affected in any county. The council does not have the resources out of its ordinary roads budget to address this issue.

We have been waiting 120 days and we are still waiting. The real impact of this is being felt by the Wexford economy, with farmers unable to access some fields, milk lorries unable to enter parlours, hauliers unable to bring goods to businesses and families where a member's carer cannot access the home because they are unable to get up the road. I spoke the other day to a man who told me that the carer who comes to his grandmother has to get out of the car and walk 600 m up the road to get into the house and 600 m back down the road after leaving the

house at the end of the shift. That man is terrified about what could happen if an ambulance needs to be called and cannot get up the road. This is the type of experience being lived through by people in Wexford. I ask that the Minister for Transport come to the Chamber and explain when the emergency money and the catch-up money committed to the programme for Government will be released and when there will be certainty for Wexford County Council. The summer will be over soon, the winter will come quickly and then we will back into another storm cycle.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I welcome Deputy Sheehan to the Distinguished Visitors Gallery. He is accompanied by Dr. Clodagh Toomey of the University of Limerick, Stacey Grealish and Karen Kelleher, who have made a presentation on osteoarthritis in the audiovisual room. They are very welcome to the Seanad.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: I welcome the visitors in the Distinguished Visitors Gallery. I have just come from their briefing. As someone with osteoarthritis in both knees, I welcome their fantastic programme, which I intend to raise for discussion in the House by way of a Commencement matter.

I, too, am very disappointed that services are not included in the occupied territories Bill. I commend Senator Black again on all the work she has done on the legislation. I urge people to take on board the amendments she intends to put forward. If Spain can do it, we can do it. As Leas-Chathaoirleach of the foreign affairs committee, the Acting Leader knows a lot of deliberation took place on the legislation. Yesterday's announcement was disappointing. I urge people to read Senator Black's amendments and work with her on them.

I also want to mention some startling figures that my former colleague, Councillor Declan Bree, raised at this month's meeting of Sligo County Council. According to figures that were released on foot of a motion tabled by Councillor Bree, €7.5 million was paid to private landlords through the housing assistance payment, HAP; the rental accommodation scheme, RAS; and long-term social housing payments in 2025. At the same time, there is a waiting list of 65 homes in Sligo County Council's tenant *in situ* scheme. A budget of just €2.5 million has been allocated for that. The local authority wants to buy these homes, the tenants who are in them want to live in them, and we know that the local authorities want to build up their own housing stock, but those figures show that €7.5 million is going directly into the hands of private providers - private landlords - and will stay in their remit, while just €2.5 million has been allocated to buy some of the houses that people are living in. There seems to be an upside-down approach to the housing policies within councils. The councils are being funded to continue giving money to private providers, even though the plan is to gradually phase that out. In the meantime, can the tenant in situ scheme be massively ramped up? There are landlords who want to sell to the councils. The tenants who are in those houses at the moment want to stay in them. They have built their whole lives around them and the local schools, facilities and communities. Yet there does not seem to be a correlation between that. At least then we would be increasing the social housing stock.

Senator Noel O'Donovan: I have raised in the House a number of times the issue of infrastructure development in our towns and villages across the country, primarily for me in west Cork. Thankfully, we are seeing houses being built in many of our towns. We are seeing

hundreds of homes being built in the towns of Bandon and Clonakilty. While we are coming to terms with the infrastructure around that in terms of wastewater and water facilities and services, there is a need to audit the towns for amenities and social infrastructure as well. We talk a lot about that, but we actually have to get down to basics and go and do it. I believe there is a role for local authorities in assessing the towns in town planning. They all have planning policy units that can go in and assess all the clubs and social services. Last week, I met representatives of the family resource centre in Bandon, which is a town that is coming close to 10,000 people. They see the social infrastructure that is missing in the town and the implications this will have for the town going forward. I am calling for the Department of housing to get involved with the local authorities and ask them to create an initiative for the interactive assessment of these towns. Once towns can be assessed, we can create a plan. It is well said in west Cork that Bandon, Clonakilty and Skibbereen need plans. Those plans can be interactive, visual ones for all the various Departments so that when they come along to support towns, be it with healthcare or childcare facilities, the needs have been assessed, are visible and are clearly seen. At least we, as politicians, and our communities that we serve, can see a plan for these towns. We need to get serious and actually deliver an interactive audit and plan. If it is a case of looking at European best practice, let us see how other countries do it. I would like there to be a policy. I would like there to be a debate in this House on some stage, which I might call for.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: The Government's housing policy has become increasingly skewed towards large developers while ordinary families who are trying to build a home are left carrying the cost. People who want to build a modest home beside their parents or on a family field are being hit with a wall of costs before a single block is laid. Connection charges can run into the thousands. A standard water connection from Uisce Éireann costs €2,000. Wastewater charges are up to €4,000, or more. ESB connections are a huge cost, if you can get a connection. The most recent development contribution fees I have seen have been between €9,000 and €10,000. That is before a block is even laid. Last year, the Government pointed to the massive increase in commencement notices as an indication that there would be a significant increase in supply. In 2024, commencement notices surged to more than 69,000 but this spike was an artificial inflation. Ordinary home builders were essentially overlooked while the Government introduced a reduced 9% VAT rate for apartment construction. Nothing comparable was introduced for young families who are trying to build a home on their own land. Now the Department of Finance has acknowledged that these measures have reduced the accuracy of statistics and artificially inflated the numbers. In other words, the dramatic headlines will not reflect the number of homes that will actually be delivered. Waivers and tax reliefs should help the young couples who are trying to build their first homes, rather than large investment funds or institutional developers. Has the Government looked at reducing VAT on construction materials? We have estimated that this could reduce the cost of building a home by up to €50,000. Young people, particularly in rural areas, need more supports. We should be removing barriers to families who are trying to build their own homes. We should be looking at providing serviced sites on the periphery of towns, where possible.

Senator Eileen Lynch: This morning, I rise to speak about the domestic production and use of hydrotreated vegetable oil, commonly known as HVO. We all understand the challenges we face in achieving our 2030 climate goals. I really believe we are missing out by not utilising

HVO to its full extent. HVO is a fuel that can be used without any engine modifications. It reduces CO₂ emissions by up to 90% over its entire life cycle. As of 1 January this year, the mandatory share of renewable fuels in the transport sector has risen to 32%. We are mandating the use of these fuels yet we are almost entirely dependent on imports from abroad. Basically, I believe we are exporting the economic opportunities of the green transition. We only need to look to our European partners to see what is possible and what can be done. Austrian postal services have fully converted their national truck fleet to run on HVO. This replaces around 6 million litres of diesel each year with fuel made from waste oils and residues. It is expected to reduce emissions by several thousand tonnes of CO₂ annually. In Ireland, we have the raw materials - animal fats and used vegetable oils - and we have the expert knowledge at places like the Whitegate refinery. However, we lack clear capital investment signals and excise parity that would allow our domestic HVO industry to grow. Our farmers can use HVO as an alternative to green diesel. It is an area in which my colleague, Councillor John Reilly in Louth, has done a lot of work. He has consistently called for the increased use of HVO and a reduction of VAT on HVO. At the moment, farmers who use HVO are paying 23% VAT, as opposed to 13.5% VAT on green diesel, and we need to rectify this. If we are serious about energy transition and energy security, we cannot just be consumers of other countries' innovations. We need to make our own efforts to demonstrate that we are serious about this. Something like further use of HVO is a simple solution and these are the kinds of solutions we need to look at and implement.

Senator Paraic Brady: I would like to be associated with the comments of my colleague from Longford, Senator Flaherty, on the brutal treatment of Thomas Quinn, a local garda in our area. I will leave it there because Senator Flaherty covered it well.

I would like to speak about mental health this week. The issue of mental health certainly hit our areas of Drumlish and the wider area of Newtown Forbes in the past number of weeks. It has hit a student population who are devastated at the loss of a number of their friends. I hope that as we come up to exams, parents will be cognisant that there is a sight of pressure on kids who are going into these exams and that not every child can be a doctor or a barrister. They will always find a way in life. I ask parents to try not to put pressure on their kids when they are sitting exams because they are under enough pressure themselves. I wish all students the very best in their exams. I hope parents realise they are under enough pressure with the exams and do not put any more pressure on them at home.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I call on the Acting Leader to respond.

Senator Garret Ahearn: I thank the 20 Senators who made contributions to the Order of Business. Senator Clifford-Lee spoke about St. Peter's GAA club in her area. She mentioned that three football clubs that have come together and are working together to try to increase and improve facilities for many kids in that area. It is good to see that that has happened because there is limited funding available across the whole country to fund sports facilities for sports clubs.

We often see sports clubs going separately looking for funding. It is often to the detriment of the full area. To see three clubs come together to try to look for funding is critically important. It is good that the Senator has raised it. I think the Minister is on record as saying

that local authorities can step up as well and play their role. It is good to see the clubs are working with the local authority on a car park, because it always seems to be a big issue in urban and rural areas. The team is a third space. When we talk about communities, we talk about home and work, but amenities and facilities are critically important, particularly for kids.

Senator Boyhan spoke about the survivors of institutions. Senator Harmon raised the matter yesterday too. Senator Boyhan talked about the sad stories of people who lost contact or had broken links between brothers and sisters while in institutions. There is a good opportunity, considering that recommendations have been brought forward, which we have debated previously in this House,, as Senator Harmon said yesterday, for us to have a debate on it. When we talk about redress, we are talking about justice too. It is important that this be recognised.

Senator Scahill spoke about more parking being needed in hospitals. That can be seen that right across the country. Roscommon is at a critical stage and there is nothing worse than people going to hospital, having appointments, or an emergency, and not being able to find parking. It happened to my father last week in Clonmel. We had to drop him simply because parking is difficult to find. It is frustrating as a public representative. Councillor Valerie Duffy is working hard at this but when people are just fobbed off and told that some sort of master plan is happening at some point, but with no detail or information, and they are expected to go back to their constituents and tell them that something can be done, it is very frustrating. I acknowledge, as the Senator did, Kathleen and all on the Tidy Towns committee and the work they do. We see that across the country. People often do it when they are supposedly retired, yet seem to work harder than ever before.

Senator Collins spoke about the Bloom Festival, which has been so successful for the past ten years or more. She raised a key point, which is that when we have a festival like this, which is being sponsored heavily by Bord Bia, we have to make sure that most of the products there are Irish products, or if they are not, it should be clearer than it normally is. She spoke about merino wool, which is a popular type of wool for clothing. Much of that is imported. We have labelling issues, whether in wool or in food products, that have been highlighted in these Houses a number of times. It needs to be improved.

Senators Stephenson and Higgins spoke about taking Nos. 12 and 13 before No. 1. I have no problem with that at all. We had a debate with the Minister, Deputy McEntee, about international relations and development, and we discussed many of the issues that the Senators raised. There is no problem with doing what the Senators requested to change the Order of Business.

Senator Paul Daly congratulated Deputy Seán Kyne and then spoke about farm safety, which was raised by a number of Members yesterday. It is a good opportunity to have statements on farm safety, considering it is a week when we are off. Any of us who live in rural Ireland at the moment are seeing more tractors on the road. All it takes is one accident, whether on the road or on the farm, to have a massive impact on a family. As we always say, a family home on a farm is a workplace too, and something can happen very easily. We always need to be conscious of that and do as much as we can to raise awareness regarding the safety of family farmers.

Senator Boyle raised an issue that can be frustrating for people with disabilities. When they are going to the local shop in their town, a supermarket, or anywhere else, all of the disability bays have been taken up. I do not understand how people who are not entitled to take these parking spots can take them. Even now, there are parking spots for people who have young families, which are bigger for a reason, to let mothers and fathers take young kids out, and they are just randomly taken by people. That is a smaller issue but there is a reason there are parking bays for people with disabilities close to facilities, which is ease of access that the Senator or I do not need. We should always be aware of that. A 60-second walk is not that stressful and there is loads of parking in this places where we see parking bays.

Senator Keogan spoke about the sad passing of that gentleman outside Arnotts. I am not doubting what she said but we have to remember that someone died here and it is a very sad situation. There is an investigation, which is being carried out at the moment. It is not for me or the House to talk about it. I am not aware that anyone in these Houses called security guards murderers. If they did, no one knows the full story. Let the process happen. A person died and there are grieving people. Regarding the issues the Senator referred to, my view is that we should focus on the person who died first and see what happens. It is not for me to comment on that, with an investigation happening.

Senator Flaherty spoke about a garda in Longford. I do not know the details of it. I am not doubting what the Senator aid. I know Senator Brady raised it too. It is an internal matter for An Garda Síochána. We have a new Commissioner. It seems like the person the Senator is speaking to has more confidence in the new Commissioner. Mr. Justin Kelly has hit the ground running and is doing a good job. I hope that things like HR matters are dealt with. I appreciate that the Senator raised it and wants to support a constituent, but a HR issue in An Garda Síochána is not something I can comment too much on.

Senator Duffy raised the new strategy for renewable energy. He has raised battery storage numerous times and how much energy is being wasted by not having battery energy storage and energy clouds around the country. Since this strategy has been announced, it is a good opportunity to have a debate with the Minister, Deputy O'Brien. I will request that on the Senator's behalf.

Senator Andrews spoke of the very sad passing of Alex Coughlan. It is good to see that two suspects have been arrested but let us see how the process plays out. It is not for me to speak about that, but on the wider issue, as the Senator said, people feel unsafe when things like this happen. They want to see more gardaí on the street. That is why the Government has invested in more gardaí and why we expect to have more gardaí at the end of this year than ever before. That needs to be seen on the ground in the Senator's constituency and across the country. We need more investment in it. It is a good opportunity to have the Minister for justice, Deputy O'Callaghan, who is always good to have visiting the Chamber, attend to discuss that. I will try to have that happen.

Senator Kennelly spoke about Kerry, beaches and safety concerns. Given the week that is in it, it is a timely opportunity to raise that. Kerry is a popular place to go when the sun is out, with 15 blue flag beaches. There is a responsibility on people and an onus on local authorities to make sure that popular beaches like Banna Beach in Kerry have lifeguards on-site in case something happens. Many people there are not massively experienced swimmers, including

young children, and it is important that someone is there to oversee everyone's safety during the summer spell.

Senator Black raised the occupied territories Bill. I understand her disappointment. She raised the Bill and where it was going to go only a week or two ago. I said it was very close to coming to Cabinet and would be coming through the Houses. It was brought to Cabinet yesterday and will be published at the end of this week. I was on the foreign affairs committee, as the Senator knows. We did an awful lot of work on it. We had views in the committee. We did that work before the Attorney General had given his advice. I understand the Senator's concerns. I know there will be amendments. I have no doubt that we will make sure that this House has ample time to discuss that Bill when it comes through. As the Senator knows, a lot has been done by this Government in support of Palestine, recognising the ambassador and the State of Palestine and supporting South Africa in the court case. I have not seen the Bill yet. When it comes to the House, it will go some way to following through on that judgment.

That is important. It has always been the Senator's goal. We will try to do that and come to a consensus.

Senator Byrne spoke about the lack of roads funding. This seems to be a continuous issue every year. Wexford has been hit by a number of storms. It is not fair that local authorities have to use their own money in 2026 to spend on something that happened very early on, and they are waiting for money from the Department. When it is promised, that funding needs to be given to the local authorities as quickly as possible. We are quite good at giving it to businesses as quickly as possible to get up and running but there is no good in that if the roads are not being improved following storms, and if the councils have to use their own funding on the promise of getting funding, but not knowing when they are going to get it. That is not sustainable. It has happened in Roscommon and other counties. It is incredibly frustrating. We will raise the issue of emergency funding with the Minister for Transport.

Senator Cosgrove spoke on the issue of services and the occupied territories Bill. We will have a debate on that. The Senator spoke about Spain banning services, as did Senator Black. It is a bit more technical than that, as we know. I hear what the Senator is saying. We will have an opportunity to discuss it further, and I suspect that many amendments will be tabled.

With regard to Sligo County Council, those figures can be very frustrating, and they are very different in other councils. It seems that, across the country, there is a different priority in the different schemes that are available, whether it is the tenant in situ scheme or the CPO of properties. It is very different across the country, which can be frustrating. It is important to highlight that Sligo should be using more money. It needs to ramp up the tenant in situ scheme, which can be beneficial to people living in homes. A lot of money is spent on private landlords but that is also housing genuine people who need housing. It is capital funding that is needed for the tenant in situ scheme to buy a property. If there are homes to be bought, the council should be doing that.

Senator O'Donovan spoke about infrastructure development. This aligns with what Senator Clifford-Lee said about the third space. When we talk about towns, whether Bandon or Clonakilty, we want more homes, and to get more homes, we need infrastructure, whether it is wastewater, water or roads. We need to create an environment on top of that for families and young people. It is a good opportunity for local authorities to assess a town and ask how it can

develop this into a wider, long-term plan for where we want to see Bandon in ten or 15 years and what funding is needed for that. I will talk to the Minister with responsibility for rural affairs. That Department was set up ten years ago to invest in rural Ireland, to encourage people to live in rural Ireland and to make changes in order to create jobs in rural Ireland. However, we need amenities and a quality of life. People do not just go to somewhere because there is a good job. They go because there are good schools, good facilities and good road infrastructure. It is all about the quality of life. We can have a good discussion about that.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly raised the issue of building homes. This touches on the point made by Senator O'Donovan. As someone from rural Ireland, I know exactly what the Senator means about the challenges with connections, whether for the ESB or wastewater. People spend a lot of money before they have a block in the ground. We have seen an increase in the numbers this year. I know the Senator is talking about inflation for apartments but apartments are homes too. They may not be in rural areas in Tipperary or Cavan but they are still homes. There are a lot of supports, whether it is the first-time buyer's grant, the first home scheme or others. I will see if we can have a debate on that.

Senator Lynch spoke about hydrotreated vegetable oil, HVO. One of the biggest problems in agriculture is that people are being asked to move from green diesel but there is no alternative. Here is a possible alternative. There are simple things we could do with VAT, but certainly with capital investment. As the Senator said, and as I and other colleagues know, Councillor John Reilly has been raising this for a long time to try to prioritise HVO. We will see if the Minister is available to discuss that. It could also be tabled as a Commencement matter.

Senator Brady spoke about mental health and young people. It is a good week to talk about it. We are in recess next week. More than 60,000 kids around the country will sit the State exams. It is an incredibly stressful time for them and their parents. We can all have good exams and bad exams but life still goes on and we can still succeed. However, for a child who is 16, 17 or 18, it can be incredibly stressful. People need to be mindful of that. These are just exams at the end of the day. It does not have to be a situation where someone gets depressed and does something unthinkable. We will not be here next week but I wish everyone well in their State exams next week. They can look forward to the summer after their exams.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Before I deal with the Order of Business, I welcome our visitors from Wicklow Educate Together National School, who are the guests of Senator Pat Casey. We also have the guests of the Minister of State, Deputy Colm Brophy, with us. As is customary in the House, there should be no homework for the rest of the week for those from Educate Together. Enjoy your visit today.

Senator Stephenson has proposed an amendment to the Order of Business: "That No. 13 be taken before No. 1." This was seconded by Senator Higgins. The Acting Leader has indicated he is prepared to accept this amendment. Is the amendment agreed to? Agreed.

Senator Higgins has proposed an amendment to the Order of Business: "That No. 12 be taken before No. 1." The amendment was seconded by Senator Black. The Acting Leader has indicated he is prepared to accept this amendment. Is the amendment agreed to? Agreed.

Order of Business, as amended, agreed to.

Air Navigation and Transport (Amendment) Bill 2026: First Stage

Senator Patricia Stephenson: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Air Navigation and Transport Act 1946 for the purpose of giving further effect to the Convention on International Civil Aviation opened for signature at Chicago on 7 December 1946; and to provide for related matters.

Question put and agreed to.

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

Senator Patricia Stephenson: Next Tuesday.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Second Stage ordered for Tuesday, 2 June 2026.

Prohibition of Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems Bill 2026: First Stage

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to give effect to the prohibition of the use, stockpiling, production, transfer, development and investment in autonomous weapons systems.

Question put and agreed to.

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

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: Next Tuesday.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Second Stage ordered for Tuesday, 2 June 2026.

Appointment of Ordinary Members of An Coimisiún Toghcháin: Motion

Senator Garret Ahearn: I move:

That Seanad Éireann, noting that on 21st April, 2026, the Government nominated Mr. Lee Komito and Mr. Ross Frenett for appointment by the President to be ordinary members of *An Coimisiún Toghcháin*, recommends that, pursuant to section 9(9) of the Electoral Reform Act 2022, Mr. Lee Komito and Mr. Ross Frenett be appointed by the President to be ordinary members of *An Coimisiún Toghcháin*.

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 12.47 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.09 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 12.47 p.m. and resumed at 2.09 p.m.

Address to Seanad Éireann by Members of the European Parliament

An Cathaoirleach: I am delighted to welcome our colleagues from the European Parliament Midlands-North-West constituency, particularly in light of Ireland's Presidency of the EU. To be clear about the seats because I know people are very precious about seats in this House, the other House and any other elected body, the seats are allocated in alphabetical order and the speaking order will also be in alphabetical order to ensure impartiality. I welcome Ms Nina Carberry, MEP, Mr. Barry Cowen, MEP, Mr. Luke 'Ming' Flanagan, MEP, Mr. Ciaran Mullooly, MEP and Ms Maria Walsh, MEP. They are most welcome to Seanad Éireann.

As we know, the EU plays an enormous role in the lives of everybody on this island but also the lives of everyone throughout the EU and around the world.

The decisions our MEPs are involved in making through their work in the European Parliament and the committees of the European Parliament affect the lives of people throughout this island and throughout the world. This is why it is important at this stage and throughout the year that we will be engaging with all our MEPs. We have already done this with our MEPs from Ireland South and we will be engaging with the MEPs from the Dublin area in the autumn to look at the priorities that Ireland has and that MEPs have, and at the issues the MEPs are promoting and championing. The engagement is a connection between our Parliament, the Oireachtas, the European Parliament and the people of Ireland

In this House we pay particular interest to Europe. We mark the national days of the parliaments throughout the European Union. The national day today is Italy, and marking its national day yesterday was Croatia. We do that in recognition of the strong historic links we have with those countries of the European Union and in looking to the future. While we glance back, we are also looking forward into the relationships we are creating and which we are creating through the MEPs' work.

We also do work here on scrutiny of the EU statutory instruments which are the EU laws that are added to by Government Departments and signed into Irish law. It is a huge volume of legislation. Our MEPs are at the starting point of that process and are involved in the middle of the process, while we are on the tail end of that process. It is important to have that link all the way through.

The purpose of this session is the ongoing engagement, and we will have this every year. We are delighted that you are able to take time out of your busy schedules to be here. We look forward to you all outlining the proposals and ideas we should have and champion in the Presidency of the European Union. As you know, each host country gets to select two of the items that are championed or discussed as part of the Presidency. In Ireland's case we have selected agriculture, of course, as something very important to the people you represent in the Midlands-North-West, and we have also chosen the Good Friday Agreement as the other element. It is under the framework of global peace but not in an historic context. It is not about

looking at what we did 28 years ago but about what lessons we have to learn from others in implementing the Good Friday Agreement, what are the issues around radicalisation, the funding of paramilitary organisations or other areas such as gangs or criminal gangs, and how we challenge social media in relation to that radicalisation. This is a very unique idea from Ireland for what we should be discussing during the European Presidency. We look forward to the MEPs' views on that.

I thank our MEPs for being here and taking the time out. I welcome Ciarán Mullooly's wife, who is in the Gallery here to see him address the Seanad. I thank you all for taking the time. Our Leas-Chathaoirleach will be taking over and doing some of the chairing of this session as well. Each of the MEPs will speak for six minutes as an initial opening statement, which I believe is a lot more than you normally get in Europe. My Seanad colleagues are somewhat not as attentive to the bell when I ring it. Then we will have group spokespersons for five minutes and then other Senators will speak for two minutes. Obviously, we will have your contributions throughout this session. Again, I thank you all for being here. I will start, as I said, in alphabetical order with Ms Nina Carberry, MEP.

Ms Nina Carberry: Go raibh mile maith agaibh a Chathaoirligh, Senators and colleagues. It is a privilege to speak here as an MEP for the Midlands-North-West. As this House knows, the constituency covers 15 counties. I want to take my time today to focus on the main areas of my work. I currently sit on four committees in the European Parliament: the Committee on Budgets, the Committee on International Trade, the Committee on Transport and Tourism, and the Committee on Culture and Education.

As Ireland's only representative on the budget committee, I will start with the next EU budget. The budget will run from 2028 to 2034. It is known as the multi-annual financial framework, MFF, but this comes at a uniquely challenging time. Never have there been so many demands on the EU budget, including Covid debt, defence, security, pressures on competitiveness, and at the same time Europe must still fund its traditional priorities. As my group's lead negotiator on the budgetary assessment of the next Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, this is our main focus. In recent weeks the budget committee backed a clear negotiating mandate. We backed the 10% overall increase from the Commission's original proposal. We also backed a €433 billion CAP envelope. The aim is to restore previous cuts. The ask is clear: restore the CAP to at least €433 billion. It must also keep rural development funding as a separate pillar, and that includes LEADER.

As funding is pushed towards defence we cannot overlook food security. Food security is central to this equation and is something I have been constant on throughout my mandate. This is why I have tabled safeguards to the Mercosur trade agreement, why I have highlighted inconsistency with the deal, and why I supported referring it to the European Court of Justice. The same consistency applies to the next Common Fisheries Policy, where I have also tabled amendments to protect funding for our coastal communities and the fishing sector.

The European Union is at its heart a peace project. We on this island understand that better than most. While there is uncertainty about the future direction of EU priorities, I have been clear that PEACEPLUS funding must be protected and it must be ring-fenced. I recently had Gina McIntyre in Brussels. Ms McIntyre is the head of the special EU programmes body, SEUPB, which distributes PEACEPLUS funding. It supports cross-Border education

collaboration, it supports mental health workshops and it supports shared cross-community sports facilities. The Chair mentioned in his introduction the importance of the Good Friday Agreement and the importance of this funding.

That brings me to the relationship between the European Union and the UK. It is a privilege to be appointed as the trade committee lead spokesperson for relations with the UK. Ten years on from Brexit there is an important opportunity to reset the EU-UK relationship. That is especially true as Ireland prepares for the EU Presidency. Here again there is a clear objective. The European Parliament must be ready to conclude an agrifood deal with the UK. We hope to see that agreed, as well as a deal on energy trading and youth mobility in the upcoming July summit.

Another issue that is deeply personal to me and to many families across Ireland and Europe is dementia and Alzheimer's disease. The emotional, physical and financial pressure on families is immense. Unfortunately, that pressure will only grow. Recent research has found that one in three people born today will develop Alzheimer's disease or dementia in their lifetime. By 2050, the number of people living with dementia in Europe is expected to rise by 58%. This is where the EU can and must step in. I have constantly asked for a boost in research investment. I have requested that the Commission enact a European action plan for brain health. I am campaigning for investment in preventative healthcare and, in particular, physical activity. Later this year we will build on that momentum. At the invitation of the Parliament President, the FTD brothers will come to the European Parliament in Brussels. Many in this House know their story. They are running 33 marathons in 33 days to raise awareness of dementia. Their message of hope and determination is an inspiration to us all. I hope they get a great crowd tomorrow in support. I know they are coming to the Dáil so I hope everyone gets out and supports them.

Speaking of young people, Europe has unfinished business with the online world. We must do more to protect teenagers and children. Parents have genuine fears about the harm the online world can do. Again, this is where I am pressing for the European Union to act. I am working on tougher regulation of tech companies and I am pushing for faster action by the Commission on social media platforms. I am advocating for a ban on AI nudifiers to be implemented. I have pressed the Commission to prohibit infinite scrolling and addictive algorithm design, and to implement robust privacy-protecting age verification for social media. This is another area where Ireland can play a key role. I recently wrote to the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and Government Ministers to urge that online safety be prioritised during Ireland's EU Presidency. I am delighted that it will now stand as a central pillar.

I want to end on a positive note that also relates to young people. The European Union is full of opportunity. One of the most important roles to communicate is that Europe can open doors. It can open doors to Erasmus, it can open doors through the EU Solidarity Corps, and it can open doors through the DiscoverEU travel pass. Ireland's EU Presidency must communicate these opportunities clearly and widely. On that note I want to leave it there for now. Thank you very much, a Chathaoirligh.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank Ms Carberry. Anois, I invite Mr. Barry Cowen, MEP.

Mr. Barry Cowen: I thank the Chair and the Senators for the invitation to be here today and to meet and discuss the issues pertaining to what is an important moment associated with the Irish Presidency, which is almost upon us.

I begin with a point that may seem obvious, but which I think is worth making. The role of an MEP is different from that of a councillor, a TD or a Minister, and I have had the privilege of serving in all of those roles. As a councillor, you deal with the immediate concerns of your communities. As a TD, you are a national legislator and constituency representative. In the European Parliament, you are assigned files, committees and legislative responsibilities with specific remits. Success in Brussels is not measured by who shouts the loudest or who produces the sharpest social media clip; it is measured by whether you can influence legislation, forge alliances and deliver outcomes. When I sought election to the European Parliament, I did so with a purpose. I saw enormous challenges and opportunities facing Midlands-North-West with agriculture entering a period of major transition and the midlands moving away from traditional fossil fuel power generation. I also saw opportunities with renewable energy, offshore wind and strategic investment through a pro-enterprise economy.

Following my election to the Parliament, I secured places on three committees, which I believe reflect exactly those ambitions. On the agriculture committee, my priorities have been clear. The first priority, given its timeliness, was to retain Ireland's nitrates derogation. The recent extension was extremely welcome and reflected something important. When the Government, stakeholders, farmers and public representatives work together with evidence and a common approach, Ireland can and has delivered. The second priority is the next Common Agricultural Policy post 2027. I was honoured to be appointed as the lead negotiator of my group, Renew Europe, on this file, which means I am now deeply immersed in those negotiations. The Commission's initial proposal for a reduction of approximately 20% in CAP funding is not acceptable. However, it is not enough to bemoan that fact. It is incumbent on MEPs, particularly group leaders like me, to bring forward solutions. I believe I have already found two avenues to potentially fill that current shortfall. The €45 billion that came from the Mercosur concessions would see funds from the mid-term, as promised, front-loaded and fully ring-fenced for the Common Agricultural Policy. A further €48 billion can be secured through the wider partnership fund, which we can get into later. If we land both, the gap is essentially closed and there is scope to build further, for example to bring funding in line with inflation.

The next issue under agriculture is generational renewal, an issue I am hyper-focused on. The average age of an EU farmer at present is 57. The Commission's CAP proposal rightly includes increasing the allocation for young farmers within CAP from 3% to 6%, with our own Government commendably seeking and considering an 8% spend. We need to see a proper balance now between retirement and succession measures to create space for younger farmers. MEPs regularly talk about generational renewal, but it is now incumbent on us to build structures that make it possible, including significant reforms in the area of land mobility, access to finance and pathways into farming, including for female farmers.

When it comes to the international trade committee the first thing I must do is acknowledge that Ireland has benefited enormously from being one of the most open economies in Europe. In light of this, I think the Irish people understand that we cannot simply oppose every trade agreement. Equally, we cannot pursue agreements at any cost. Trade must be fair and that means ensuring reciprocity. If Irish farmers produce to world-leading standards, then imports

entering our markets must respect similar standards. That is why I have consistently opposed elements of the Mercosur deal while at the same time working to strengthen safeguard mechanisms in the event that the deal should pass, and succeeded thereafter in strengthening monitoring arrangements from six-month to three-month intervals, lowering safeguard thresholds from 10% to 5% in relation to price and volume changes that may occur, while also ensuring that these thresholds would not be treated rigidly where evidence of sectoral damage exists.

The EU-US and EU-UK relationships have also been a central focus of mine, with Ireland holding uniquely close ties with both. In the case of the US, maintaining stability and avoiding escalation on tariffs has been essential for Irish exporters in sectors ranging from agrifood and whiskey to aviation and pharmaceuticals. On the UK, the renewed positive relationship we have seen between it and the EU has created important momentum and political agreement about issues such as SPS arrangements and regulatory alignment. However, trade policy cannot simply be defensive. Opportunities elsewhere are considerable. The current geopolitical situation necessitates us to diversify strategically and means concluding trade deals in a more diligent and timely manner than ever. The EU-India agreement, for example, will bring major opportunities for Irish spirits, medtech and other sectors. I was happy to play a part in a final trade deal with New Delhi that helped to get the likes of that over line. Deals concluded in recent times include Mexico and Australia and there are more in the offing. As part of the international trade committee, I look forward to playing my own part in securing those deals that are near conclusion.

I turn to housing. Housing fundamentally remains a national competence, and we should be honest about that. The Parliament's housing committee has identified two specific areas where Europe could have a meaningful impact in facilitating rather than obstructing housing. They include reforming EU state aid rules to allow far greater flexibility for approved housing bodies and increasing access for the European Investment Bank.

I beg the Cathaoirleach to give me just one minute to conclude.

An Cathaoirleach: I will give you 30 seconds.

Mr. Barry Cowen: As we prepare for the Presidency of the Council, our role will not be to arrive with a national wish list, but to act as an honest broker. That does not mean lacking ambition. We should aim to advance the EU budget, strengthen competitiveness, support food security, drive sensible trade policy and reinforce Europe's strategic resilience. Perhaps more importantly, we should continue to demonstrate that the dissenter can deliver.

This is the last paragraph, seriously.

An Cathaoirleach: We will bring you back in as well.

Mr. Barry Cowen: I have old scores to settle here.

We live at time of extremes on both the left and right, and they are becoming louder and, frankly, much bolder. Simple slogans travel quickly, unfortunately. Fear and anger travel quickly but governing and legislating are far more difficult than protesting. Compromise is

much more difficult than outrage and delivery is harder than both. After 30 years or more in public life, I remain convinced of something simple: good politics is rarely loud politics. Good politics is serious, practical and evidence based. It is built on relationships, compromise and delivering results. That is the approach I have tried to bring and to grow throughout my career, and it is an approach I will continue to bring during Ireland's Presidency and beyond.

An Cathaoirleach: Go raibh maith agat. Anois, Luke 'Ming' Flanagan, MEP.

Mr. Luke 'Ming' Flanagan: Thank you very much. I wholeheartedly agree with Barry Cowen's final paragraph. It took me a while to learn it, but I have learned it.

I have focused on many different areas during my time in the European Parliament. However, my main focus is the agriculture committee, the fisheries committee and the consumer affairs committee. On the AGRI committee I am the co-ordinator for our group, which means I get to attend co-ordinators' meetings, and I get an opportunity to have items put on the agenda. It also means I get to speak before any other Irish member at the AGRI committee, and I get twice as long. It does not necessarily mean I speak more sense, but they give me more time. At the moment the big thing is the review of the Common Agricultural Policy. I have been lucky enough to be chosen by my group, as has Barry Cowen, as the lead negotiator. I will be in the same room as him when the negotiations are going on and that will be a positive. The more people we have from Ireland in the room, the better. I know we will be representing our groups, but we are Irish, and we have an eye on what is good for Ireland and that will be a positive.

In the previous CAP programming period from 2020 to 2027, CAP had its own stand-alone and separate regulation. In the current communication proposal, the NRPP will encompass CAP, along with other sectoral regulation for the period from 2028 to 2034. While CAP will have its own regulation, it will be under the umbrella of the NRPP. This is important to discuss. This matters because the CAP will be negotiated by AGRI MEPs who have knowledge and an interest in the subject, whether that is for good or bad. The NRPP will be a joint committee procedure, with MEPs for BUDG, REGI and AGRI, which are the budget committee, the regional development committee and the AGRI committee. They are involved with their own competing interests. I ensured that I would get to be shadow on both of them because that is important and I managed to get that. In my opinion, this joint structure will ultimately lead to a lack of accountability.

Who will ultimately be responsible and accountable for the final text of the agreement? There was considerable disquiet with the initial proposal from the Commission when it was released, as many key provisions related to CAP were in the overarching NRPP regulation which meant, as I said, that agriculture would not have sole competence on these important issues. After a substantial push-back from MEPs across the board, the vast majority of agriculture items have now moved back to the CAP regulation. There are lots of things that are important for me in CAP, but the three big ones are the budget, which has been spoken about, the dissolution of the two pillar structure and the end of the entitlement system.

On the budget, we are looking at cuts in excess of 20%. I understand what Mr. Cowen said in relation to finding other funds, but I am worried that we might be just moving stuff from one pocket to the other. We will see. Ireland will be in an influential position to secure the

maximum for CAP. We are here to talk about Ireland's position in having the Presidency. As Mr. Cowen said, we are MEPs and we do not really have any influence on the Council. There is an opportunity there for Ireland but I am not going to condemn Ireland if we do not get a bigger budget. I think there is not a chance in hell that the budget will go up much because the frugal states, who I am delighted Ireland did not meet with, do not want to increase it. They do not seem to understand, and I did not understand it when I got elected as a Eurosceptic but I have since learned, that whatever we put into the EU, while we might not get the exact same amount back out, we get access to one hell of a good club. I would like to see the budget increased but, unfortunately, I do not think it will be. I will fight for it and I will agree with it if it happens.

I am against the abolition of the two pillar structure, but this is probably a done deal. The end of entitlements is a good thing. Payments based on agricultural activity from 25 years ago are not a good basis on which to go forward. There is talk about taking money from pensioners but I do not think that is fair. There is talk about not respecting part-time farmers but there are people on the agriculture committee who are part-time farmers. There are people in other jobs who are part-time farmers and, as far as I am concerned, it enhances them as parliamentarians.

Fisheries is an area that I cover as a member of the fisheries committee. Even though our small-scale fishers make up 87.5% of the Irish fleet, we had no dedicated small producer organisations to represent them until 2021 and 2023, through the Irish Islands Marine Resource Organisation, IIMRO, and the National Inshore Fishermans Association, NIFA. I work with them in the European Parliament, listen to them and listen to what is happening with them. The main problem they have is access to funds to develop marketing plans, to promote what they are doing and to help them move on with new ways of fuelling their boats to move away from carbon. They need more support. I work in Europe and I know that many of their problems, and it is the same with farming, emanate in Europe, but most of the issues they have with regard to access to funding could be solved here. We could do it ourselves.

The final issue I will talk about is defective concrete. I will briefly mention the ongoing infringement procedure against Ireland related to the construction products regulation, CPR, and market surveillance. Last month, the Commission issued a pre-closure letter detailing a list of alleged achievements that the Irish Government has managed to convince the Commission on in relation to market surveillance. However, I and anyone who has been involved with the defective blocks campaign, should be highly sceptical of these achievements. I would genuinely love if it was true that the structures are now in place to prevent anything remotely similar from happening again because the devastation these families are experiencing is something they should never have had to endure. The Commission stated in its letter that as regards the time before 2020, the Irish authorities have informed the Commission that the market surveillance function operated mainly on a reactive basis. The market surveillance authorities would suggest that in the period prior to 2020 Ireland may indeed have failed to fulfil its market surveillance obligations under the CPR. Great news, you would think, that it was not just the bare minimum, reactive market surveillance, but as late as April of this year, Donegal County Council confirmed that market surveillance inspection and testing are generally carried out on a reactive basis only. We have asked the Commission to keep this infringement procedure open until the building standards regulatory authority is legally established and operational, the recommended staffing level of 500 professionals is reached, and the enforcement model moves from a reactive "because this is the law" and complaint-

based model to a proactive, independent testing regime. I will continue to advocate to keep this infringement procedure open, to hold the Government to account and to ensure it does not happen again.

I am proud to be Irish but I have to say that on the three issues I mentioned, I would be more worried about the damage Ireland could do, with the influence it has in the Presidency, than about what the Presidency can do for us. I wish I did not have to say it but that is what is in front of me as evidence.

Mr. Ciaran Mullooly: Is mór an onóir dom a bheith anseo inniu. Gabhaim buíochas ó chroí leis an Teach as an gcuireadh seo. It is a great honour to be invited here today. I am going to speak personally for a few moments, touch on some of the themes I think are relevant in terms of our Presidency and will turn to specifics in the questions.

I am thrilled to be here with two sisters from my family of six today. Three of our family emigrated. My late sister emigrated to the United States back in the 1960s. I was aged just one at the time. My brother went to New York. He went to Nelly's on Fordham Road and to all of those places that the Wolfe Tones sang about. He came back to work in Bord na Móna and worked in the midlands for a number of years. He passed away before the closure of Bord na Móna, which has been referred to already today as a seismic event that very much changed the nature of the midlands. This has been a beautiful day. Anybody who knows anything about the bogs will know that in its heyday our people would have been on the bog working 20 or 22 hours today, bringing home £1,600 for one week's work. When I say this in Brussels they look at me as if I had ten heads. It will never happen again in the midlands of Ireland. It has been a seismic change and although we have tried, through the European Union just transition fund, to address this, we really have not resolved the issue of finding sustainable, long-term employment in the midlands.

When you drive from other parts of the country to Dublin today, you pass what I call unofficial car parks. These are car parks at junctions and churches where workers meet at 5 a.m. to get into a van or larger bus and drive to Dublin. It is true to say that unemployment has not risen. Workers just drive to Dublin nowadays and our communities suffer as a result. Their quality of life and that of their families is affected by this. The issues of unemployment and emigration, from my perspective, are as alive and as important today as they ever were. During the Presidency I am hoping that we will address this. In the last couple of weeks, the European Commission Executive Vice-President for Cohesion and Reforms, Mr. Raffaele Fitto, was here talking about something coming in the autumn, which we are going to hear about time and time again, an initiative called the right to stay. The right to stay from a European perspective is a combination of the economic and political decisions that allow people to remain working in their community by their choice. We are a long way from that in this country at the moment. I look forward to an initiative on that.

I have been an MEP for 717 days. Like many entering public office, I came with great expectations. The reality, I can say honestly, has often been very different but the European Parliament cannot be judged over a short period of time. From time to time, we must step back and ask ourselves where we are now compared to where we were. For most people, progress is measured not just in reports or speeches but by income, living standards, opportunity and security. When Ireland joined the European project in 1973 it was a very different country.

Today we have unquestionably improved our standard of living and expanded opportunity. Yet, in this city tonight, 4,000 children will be homeless and sleeping in hotel rooms. This is a shameful situation and something that the EU and our Government must address at the highest level. In the last 24 hours we have looked at possibilities for doing so in this city. Our housing committee visited apartments on Richmond Road yesterday. Thanks to a combination of Irish funding and funding from the European Investment Bank, 23 families have now found a home. These are the types of initiatives I hope we will focus on again during the Presidency, going forward.

The European Union itself has grown enormously since Ireland joined. It has largely grown for the better. Our European family is larger and more capable of contributing positively to humanity. However, I must return to another issue.

It saddens me profoundly that the collective strength of the European Union, with its immense population, its economic growth and its global influence, has failed so dramatically to protect innocent lives in the Middle East. Over 70,000 Palestinians and more than 2,000 Israelis have lost their lives. Europe should and must do more to stop the killing. In the next six months, we are in the hot seat. I pray that our Presidency can bring a more meaningful contribution and more meaningful measures forward to move us. One of my first actions as a newly elected MEP was to raise this issue directly with President von der Leyen in Strasbourg in 2024. Article 2 is clear. Respect for human rights and democratic principles constitutes an essential element of the agreement. My position now as then is straightforward. If Europe expects human rights standards from countries seeking partnerships, trade and preferential access, those standards must be applied consistently. Yet, almost 800 days on, Europe still struggles to find the unity of purpose required to act decisively. History will judge this period harshly, me included, sitting in the European Parliament.

On the issue of agriculture, I agree with the sentiments of my colleagues today. I agree we must restore our CAP budget to €433 million. I agree we must not rob Peter to pay Paul. However, at the end of the day, this issue is directly related to the theme I spoke of at the beginning - the right to stay. If we cannot restore the single farm payment, or come up with a generational renewal policy that works for those leaving as well as those arriving, then we will see our parishes and communities once again decimated going forward. There are many other issues. I hope to return to them during questions later.

Ms Maria Walsh: I am delighted to be with Senators and colleagues today and to follow on from my all my colleagues across Midlands-North-West. It is really important to stress, as no doubt Senators know, that about 70% to 80% of the EU legislation we work on impacts the communities and sectors here. This type of conversation is required on an ongoing basis. There was mention of our relationship with Northern Ireland. We just recently had the Northern Irish scrutiny committee come out. Diplomacy and democracy start with conversations. I look forward to a good question and answer session shortly.

Similar to my party colleague, Nina Carberry, I also sit on four committees on behalf of the constituency of Midlands-North-West. I am a full member of the committees on agriculture and gender equality. I am a substitute member of the committees on regional development and justice and home affairs. Along with many MEPs across the political groups, I cofounded an

intergroup on mental health, looking at that across all the 20 committees that the European Parliament works on and serves to. I am also on the EU delegation to the United States.

Ultimately, our role is to represent the 1.8 million constituents across one of the most diverse and wide-spanning constituencies in our European Union. It is on their behalf that I speak to the House today to talk about some of the challenges and opportunities ahead. Like many, I am a green cert holder. I have a masters in agriculture extension and innovation, and have a real grá for rural living as well as farming. That is a core part of the work I do on the agricultural committee. I know how central the EU is to the lives and livelihoods of our Irish farmers, regardless of the type of farming they do. Right now, one of the most significant negotiations under way, as colleagues referred to, is the future of the Common Agricultural Policy, taking us from 2028 to 2034. To echo colleagues - it is always the worst when you are the last to speak - Ireland's Presidency will coincide with a critical juncture and phase of these negotiations. The decisions taken over the next six months will shape the future of EU farming, particularly Irish farming, for many years to come. We have two shadow rapporteurs here. The file writer for the Common Agricultural Policy is part of the EPP group, where Fine Gael sits. He is Norbert Lins, a German MEP. He is a very workable person who has come to Ireland and will continue to do so up until the final negotiations.

My focus throughout these negotiations, as the file writer for the generational renewal report, is to look at not just young farmers but also the cradle to grave of farming. That is incredibly important when we look at generational renewal. Designing Parliament's policy on how we attract and retain the next generation of farmers across Europe is incredibly important. In my first draft report, published this month, which I am happy to share with anybody who wishes to see it, my number one priority is ensuring that at least 8% to 10% of the future CAP budget for young farmers is binding and not merely aspirational, as currently proposed by the Commission and being talked about in some of the EU councils. My work also focuses on land mobility, targeted help for women in agriculture, and expanding mental health services through farm relief services, on which Commissioner Hansen is certainly vocal. I also focus on pension schemes run by member states, where we can lean into best practices across other member states. On entitlements, I agree with my colleague, Luke Ming Flanagan MEP. I also focus on agri-environment schemes, entrepreneurship, innovation and agritech. It is widespread. As I close out this chapter on agriculture, I think we also have to collectively work together on the retention of LEADER programmes, specifically for Midlands-North-West representatives. If you have not spoken to any LEADER companies, large or small, they will be on to you. It is critical that we retain and grow our LEADER companies.

I will highlight my work on gender equality. For me, making not just Ireland but Europe a safer and fairer place for women is another key mission that drives my work in Brussels and in the constituency. I see first-hand new forms of gender-based violence and intimidation that are emerging online and spewing into offline life. Earlier this year I was part of a cohort that travelled to the United Nations, where we met the Secretary-General of the UN to discuss how to strengthen protections against gender-based violence and ensure women can participate fully and safely in public life. Of course, gender equality stretches far beyond the online world. We know this. It is also about equal pay, better healthcare providers, political participation and entrepreneurship. I will flag that 40% of our entrepreneurs in Europe are women, yet access to venture capital and angel funding is less than 3%. The big buzzword in Europe right now is

"competitiveness". If we are going to remove 51% of our population from that competitiveness, we are doing a disservice. I have a lot more to say but I see the gavel waving.

I will touch briefly on security and defence, specifically on preparedness. I have sat in rooms in Brussels where Ireland has been openly described as the weakest flank on security and defence. Whether we like it or not, these perceptions have consequences. As we go into the Presidency, I would like us to have a real, honest conversation with citizens around what preparedness looks like both online and in the physical space, when we look at defence and security. For the first time, certainly in my lifetime, at 38 years of age, we have war on multiple standpoints across the world and in our European Union. We cannot forget that. We have to be adults at the table when we are having those conversations. Go raibh míle maith agaibh. I look forward to Senators' questions.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank all our MEPs for their contributions and for sticking more or less to the time. For the next round, we will have group spokespersons from Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, the Independent Group, Sinn Féin, the Cross-Party Group and the Civil Engagement Group. Senator O'Loughlin has the first five-minute slot.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: Our MEPs are incredibly welcome to the Seanad Chamber this afternoon. I am listening to the breadth of the work they have all undertaken, some in similar areas and some in more niche areas. We thank them for the work they are doing on behalf of the 1.8 million people who live within the region they represent. I listened to Ms Carberry talking about dementia. I met the FTD Brothers this morning in Kildare. They are just incredible; Jordan and Cian and their dad, Greg. They were able to turn a really difficult personal story into one of hope. It resonated with what Mr. Cowen said in relation to the extremes that we see, the hatred that is in evidence within the political world and outside it, with racism and different elements that really show an awful lot of negativity.

What I learned this morning from the brothers was that shared sense of compassion, understanding and respect for one another for wherever any of us are at. I really felt that there was a very strong message there for us. I know we are looking forward to meeting them in Government Buildings tomorrow as well.

Many of the MEPs focused on the whole area of agriculture and the CAP. Without a shadow of a doubt, that has to be the first priority. As part of the European affairs committee, we have had several meetings with the president of the IFA, Francie Gorman; Liam MacHale, who does an incredible job in Brussels representing the IFA; and, of course, Damian McDonald. The real concern about the proposed reduction of 20% there is very tangible. We cannot accept that for a number of different reasons. We have to do everything we can to support not only our farmers and their livelihood but also the rural communities within which they live. Many of us represent rural communities, and if it were not for the farmers who are spending their money within those rural communities, a lot of the smaller businesses we have would not survive. We in Fianna Fáil are incredibly proud of the role Mr. Cowen has taken as lead negotiator with the Renew group. I am delighted to hear that Mr. Flanagan is taking that role as well. I have no doubt that, wearing the green jersey, we will have such a strong input in that regard. The generational renewal in farming and supporting the female farmers are hugely important as well.

If I may bring up something related to agriculture, namely, the equine industry, I know that two of the MEPs have particular experience in that. The scale of that industry cannot be overstated. It brings about €2.4 billion into the Irish economy and supports about 30,000 jobs. Counties such as mine, Kildare, have become internationally recognised equestrian centres. There is a huge issue about proposed EU transport regulations that could place huge additional pressure particularly on breeding horses right across Europe. When we have an industry that brings so much money into the country, when it provides so much employment and has an international recognition, we have to do everything we can to protect that. While animal welfare is hugely important, we have to do everything we can not to undermine one of Ireland's most important rural industries.

If I may mention the peacekeeping element for Europe, I was really glad to hear the Taoiseach speak last week about how Europe must come together to challenge Israel. While there is an agreement at Government level that we would proceed with the occupied territories Bill, and that is incredibly welcome, it is really important that all of Europe come together to send a very strong message to Israel, and indeed to any country that would promote war and would have such aggression against its near neighbours. Stronger pressure has to be placed on the Israeli Government regarding civilian casualties, access to humanitarian aid and adherence to international law. Supporting peace and security must mean being willing to call out actions that undermine the protection of innocent civilians.

I am interested to hear the MEPs' views on those aspects.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: I join Senator O'Loughlin in welcoming our MEPs to the Chamber. I am particularly personally proud that when I was Leas-Chathaoirleach of the Seanad I initiated this process and chaired initial meetings with the MEPs here, working alongside our Cathaoirleach at that time. It was a great initiative and it is clearly bearing fruit and today is another example of that. I want to say very unpatronisingly and genuinely that we are extremely well served by all five of them representing our region. They are doing that with a high level of competence and commitment and we can be very proud of that. That is so important to us. I do not know how these things are measured but according to all stated metrics, about 70% of the decisions that impact our lives daily here in Ireland have their genesis or origin in Europe. That makes the quality and the commitment of the people we have in the European Parliament paramount. That is why the MEPs' performances today are reassuring.

Like Senator O'Loughlin, I start with the Common Agricultural Policy. We have 80,000 livestock, beef and sheep, farmers in this country on low incomes, and any threat to the CAP is a threat to their actual existence and their families' existence. I also take the point, well made by a number of the MEPs, about the need for retention and for succession opportunity. First, how realistic is it that they can hold the line on the CAP? It is good that we have two lead negotiators here, but how realistic is that? Second, could they be specific about a farm retirement scheme? I have always been a great advocate of that. I noticed that when the pension did exist some years ago in Ireland, it was an enormous success. I would be grateful if they would elaborate on the potential for that. How would that specifically come about? How could Europe be a focus there?

Ms Carberry and others referred to the peace process funding. That is important. I would just like specifics on that. Do they think it is threatened? If it is, what can be done to stop that?

We had a new phenomenon in recent times in Ireland, and that is job losses. We had not had that for a number of years. That is within Meta, obviously. AI is a threat, so I would like the MEPs to comment in their responses on how we can get postgraduate education in artificial intelligence and master's degrees in artificial intelligence going, how we can maximise the opportunity of artificial intelligence and how we can create the jobs from it to replace the jobs it will undo. I think that would be of extraordinary interest to all of us to hear about.

Mr. Mullooly earlier was autobiographical and I will be autobiographical too. I am not embarrassed to say that I lived in the Ireland before the EU. I have lived longer, I hasten to add, in the Ireland post the EU, lest there be any ambiguity. I have lived a long time but I did live a lot of my early teenage years before the EU and I know that the EU has been transformative for women and for livelihoods and that the Single Market has had an enormous impact on jobs. For that reason, jobs in AI are critical, but jobs in alternative energy and green energy are critical too. My question or my challenge to the MEPs, or my comment here, is that we need a greater visible lead for Europe in the creation of jobs in the green energy sector and in the creation of jobs in the AI sector. In other words, we need, as society changes, to change and roll with that.

I notice that my time is going but I will just say that today is a great day's work. I am very proud of how all this, this interaction between our MEPs and the Seanad, has involved. It is an important interaction and I hope it will continue. I look forward to the MEPs responses and look forward to our meeting regularly over the coming few years - three years, we hope.

An Cathaoirleach: As luck would have it, Ms Sanna Lepola and Mr. Jesús Gómez are here. Ms Lepola is the director general for parliamentary democracy partnerships for the European Parliament, and Mr. Gómez is a director. They are visiting here today in advance of our Presidency, so it is most appropriate that they would be here for our debate with our Members of the European Parliament. Thank you for being here.

Senator Sharon Keogan: I thank the MEPs for coming before us. I want to direct my remarks in particular to those representatives here who are members of the Government parties and those who sit with the EPP and Renew groups because those groups form a central part of the governing coalition at EU level.

3 o'clock

Last week in this Chamber we debated the Canada trade deal, known as CETA, and its worrying provisions, especially the inclusion of investor-state dispute mechanisms that allow cases between foreign firms and the Irish Government be arbitrated by bodies outside our national courts. That raises serious questions about sovereignty. Not long before that we debated the application of the EU migration pact, which likewise has implications for our sovereign control over migration policy, infrastructure and resources. I do not want to rehearse all the details of those debates again but what strikes me is the pattern. Again and again, the EU moves forward with legislation packages and trade agreements that are not in Ireland's national interest. To their credit, Irish MEPs sometimes diverge from those European political groups when it comes to the final vote. We saw that dynamic clearly in the more recent legislation, although I note that in the case of CETA in 2017, Irish MEPs largely followed their party group lines in support of the agreement, even as concerns were raised domestically.

Regardless, even when divergence does occur, we still end up here, in this House, dealing with the consequences of decisions that have already effectively been made.

I want to ask a more fundamental question. What action do the MEPs present take before the vote? What have they done in the group meetings, in the committee stages, and in the negotiations that take place long before anything reaches the plenary floor, particularly for the Mercosur trade deal and the migration pact? I ask because we all know that the vote is not the decisive moment. The real shaping of these measures happens months and even years in advance. If that is the case and the direction of travel within these groups consistently produces outcomes that are misaligned with Ireland's national interest, then I think it is fair to ask why remain within those structures without fundamentally changing their course?

I will turn to the Mercosur deal. I ask each of the MEPs, very directly, what is their position? Do they believe this deal should be rejected outright or do they believe it can somehow be salvaged through amendments and safeguards? I want to be clear about my own position. It seems to me that the deal is in its nature damaging to Ireland's economy, particularly to our agricultural sector. It is simply not feasible that Irish cattle farmers could fairly compete with South American mega-ranches. We were told that safeguards and monitoring mechanisms will address these issues but I find that difficult to accept. Many of the countries involved in the agreement face serious governance and enforcement challenges. Many of these countries tied to or involved directly in the deal have serious issues of corruption and some struggle to maintain state control over their own territories. To imagine that a provision or legal safeguard signed into a deal will suddenly make it workable seems absurd to me.

We see a similar issue, albeit at a smaller scale, with the updated EU-Mexico trade agreement. It is often presented as a more balanced deal and I accept that it is not Mercosur, but it is still part of a wider trend of a cumulative opening of EU markets to agricultural imports from outside the Union. Even if each individual agreement is relatively modest, the combined effect is not. It increases competitive pressure on Irish producers particularly in sectors like beef and dairy, which are already under strain.

I also want to raise the Commission's ongoing push to move away from unanimity voting and national vetoes in the Council. This is not a technical adjustment; it is a fundamental change to how sovereignty functions within the Union. I ask the MEPs present for their views on that. Do they support the removal of vetoes in areas that clearly touch on the national competence and economic interest?

Finally, on a broader point and directed particularly to the Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael representatives, what is their position on Ireland's absence from the recent meeting of the so-called "frugal" or net-contributor member states? At a time when budgetary pressures, fiscal rules and allocation of resources are being actively discussed, is it not a dereliction of duty for Ireland not to be present at the table?

My concern is not with any one measure in isolation but a broader trajectory. It is a trajectory where, step by step, decisions are taken that reshape our economy, our sovereignty and our policy space, often without sufficient alignment to Ireland's long-term interest.

Senator Pauline Tully: Cuirim fáilte roimh na Feisirí Eorpacha go dtí an Seanad inniu. Is deis é seo chun scrúdú a dhéanamh ar na naisc idir Rialtas na hÉireann agus an tAontas Eorpach agus breathnú ar na naisc idir muintir na hÉireann agus an Aontas Eorpach.

I will begin my comments by addressing Irish unity. I will start by saying Ireland's Presidency of the European Union is a historic opportunity to focus on Irish unity. It cannot be allowed to be just six months of chairing meetings and putting on a show for Europe. It must be seen as a unique opportunity to be ambitious and bold and to proudly represent Irish interests. It has been ten years since Brexit, when the North of Ireland was dragged out of the EU against its will and it created a democratic deficit that remains unresolved. I would like to hear from each of the MEPs present about how they have engaged on the issue of Irish unity during their time in Europe so far and what they have done to push for the continuation of the PEACEPLUS programme, given that there is a potential funding gap beyond 2027. I know Ms Carberry mentioned it. I wonder whether this gap can be filled to ensure there is continued funding.

The EU was born out of a mission for peace and represents itself as a peace project, yet it has been so inconsistent in calling out violations of international law. Mr. Mullooly mentioned how over 72,000 people have been killed in Gaza. There is genocide going on there, not to mention the West Bank, Lebanon and so forth. We saw our own citizens and citizens from other countries last week being treated extremely poorly when they were abducted from international waters, yet the EU is doing nothing about it. This is a breach and a violation of international law. Will the MEPs speak to their own speaking and voting record on this issue? Have they advocated for EU recognition of the State of Palestine?

Regarding neutrality, Irish people are very proud of our neutrality. This feels threatened, not only by the talk from Government parties on ending the triple lock, but also by the moves in Europe to increase spending on militarisation. It is more important now than ever before to ensure our neutrality is both protected and respected by an increasingly militarised EU. Everyone agrees that we need to see increased investment in the Defence Forces and that there have been decades of neglect and underinvestment. However, we must not let the Government use this as a smokescreen to undermine our neutrality itself.

Last week in Strasbourg, Sinn Féin MEPs highlighted an exhibition that endorsed an EU army. There was a uniformed mannequin dressed as a soldier with an EU flag on the uniform. The exhibition was promoting the use of EU funds for propping up the military industry. What are the MEPs' views, and the views of the groups they are part of, on the increased militarisation of Europe and the increased spending on arms, which could and should be spent on other issues such as housing, food security or environmental issues? There are many other more important issues that money should be spent on.

In relation to the next CAP, which Mr. Flanagan mentioned, what is the interpretation of an active farmer and will the MEPs oppose any payment cuts to farmers in receipt of pensions or to farm income? Regarding the nature restoration law, I feel there is a need for a separate fund to implement the law. Farmers do have concerns about it and how it is going to impact their holding, depending on what their neighbouring holding is doing. Funding for nature restoration needs to be independent of CAP funding. Do the MEPs agree with that?

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I remind all Members that we are here to hear from the MEPs from Midlands-North-West on their work in Europe and European matters of relevance, especially with Ireland taking over the Presidency of the EU. I would be grateful if people would confine their remarks to that category. That is what the heading is today. That is for all Members.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: Cuirim fáilte roimh na feisirí Eorpacha go dtí an Teach inniu. I was not sure how this worked as a question and answer session. I was not sure how to do this. I am going to base my whole questioning around workers' rights. I am the Labour Party spokesperson for workers' rights, for rural and community development and for the Gaeltacht. I am going to base all my questioning around that. I am delighted the MEPs are here because we do not see them enough. We do not get the opportunity to meet enough so it is fantastic that they are here.

I want to ask about the EU Inc. and the opportunity we have during the Presidency to look at our labour laws. We would love to see a harmonisation of labour laws right across the EU, which I do not think is going to happen, but we are lagging behind. Ireland has some of the weakest workers' rights in Europe. We have seen an action plan on the implementation of the EU minimum wage directive and the Government has been dragging its heels on this but we have to have the right to collectively bargain. People want to see a social Europe. It makes sense and is a reasonable idea to have a trading bloc but not if it is to the detriment of our country, that is, if Ireland is going to be a country with shelf companies because we have weak labour laws here. I would love to hear the MEPs' views on that, particularly on collective labour laws.

Moving on from that, I want to talk about CETA. This arbitration Bill is coming before us in the House tomorrow and we have debated it here twice now. Since I have been elected, this has probably been the one piece of legislation I am most concerned about. There is no need to have it ratified; it is operating as it is. There is absolutely no reason to have a parallel court system, when we have a very mature court system ourselves. I would also like to hear the MEPs' views on that. We should not be made to do something and I believe France, Italy and Belgium have a similar stance. However, it is not getting enough talk. I know it has been spoken about but I do not think it is getting enough airwaves and it is very concerning that we are not hearing more about it.

I would also like to hear the MEPs' views on why the Claremorris to Collooney line under the western rail corridor, WRC, has not been included in TEN-T. Again, this is coming from the perspective of rural development and good jobs, and how we are working towards that. I would love to know how projects get included in that and why that part of the WRC was not included.

Turning to Border counties, I live in Sligo and I am a representative in Sligo-Leitrim. What are the MEPs' moves around unity and how have they engaged on this? As Senator Tully said, the North did not want to leave Europe and was dragged out. What are the MEPs and their party groupings doing to ensure this is not just left to these talks with no actual, concrete plan put in place? Since 2022, the Irish language has been recognised as a working language in Europe. Where would they see their role in promoting the working use of the Irish language? There has been a huge resurgence and interest in Gaeilge here, thanks to a lot of cultural

references such as Kneecap and other things. There has been a surge in interest in Irish and I wonder where the MEPs sit on that. As they represent an area where we have islands and a Gaeltacht within our region, where is their role in that? As for CAP, I come from community work, and have met Mr. Mullooly and other MEPs at LEADER conferences. There is real concern among LEADER projects that their money is not going to be ring-fenced any more. What are the MEPs' roles within that?

Finally, on the occupied territories Bill, am I right in referring to 27 foreign ministers? Mr. Cowen made a statement recently saying he is very much in favour of banning goods and services from an EU perspective with Israel? I might come back to him about that. What is holding it up and why is it not happening? Israel is a rogue and a terrorist state. Why are there not full EU sanctions on any trade on goods and services between the EU and Israel?

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: It is a crucial time for Europe. We are seeing not just worrying decisions about Europe's future but also much of Europe's past being eroded at present.

I took part in the Future of Europe process; I was one of the four parliamentarians from Ireland. When I spoke to the 800 citizens from across Europe, they spoke about European values. In a real sense, when they talked about them they meant the fundamental rights and the increase in environmental standards, employment standards and equality standards. That is what they were proud of. However, we have heard more and more of a conversation from the institutions since then about power; one that was very much shifting away from those values. I am very worried about the omnibus legislation we are seeing across a range of areas which, as far as I can see, is setting fire to many of the best things about Europe. I would love the MEPs' comments on this.

People do not expect it but we are seeing the roll-back in environmental areas and on corporate accountability. I engaged with, as I am sure did many of the MEPs, the corporate due diligence legislation. It took years to negotiate but was undone in an omnibus packet very quickly. There is a concern that the digital omnibus will undermine GDPR rights, as well as concerns regarding the environmental area. I believe there are six or seven or eight more omnibuses due, which is very worrying. I would love the MEPs' comments on that as a general approach and what specific actions they are taking within the system in challenging how that is being done.

I am concerned about the multi-annual financial framework. We are now seeing a huge shift away from social cohesion and environmental funding, which are important. We know in Ireland that social cohesion funding means actually building peace. There has been a re-routing of that into defence, with one of the clear examples being things like the lack of dedicated funding for nature restoration and the Natura programmes and LIFE programme, which all benefit many farms within the regions the MEPs represent. Those small subsidies have been very important, as they are what makes nature restoration happen. However, they have now been lumped into a competitiveness fund, where they are up against drones and everything else. Are the MEPs championing and pushing for dedicated funding in this area, and for this to be ring-fenced?

At present, and in general within the budget, how do we ensure we do not see a routing of everything towards defence without safeguards? For example, our finance committee put forward a very strong report on this, which showed that much of the money going into arms,

including into the underwriting of loans, could be used for cluster bombs. There is an area or gap regarding defence and oversight - and we know it is not even covered by the AI Act - that relates to military technologies and defence. That is an area we need to tackle collectively and, of course, it has come to the forefront when we look at what has been happening.

I would like to touch on two key trade areas I think are very important. One is the suspension of the EU-Israel Association Agreement. There are direct actions Ireland could be taking like the proper passing of the occupied territories Bill - that is clear - as well as action regarding the facilitation of Israeli bonds, arms and so forth. However, at that EU level, I was very disappointed to see a vote against a debate on the new death penalty; a death penalty which treats Palestinians differently, literally in a life and death way. A debate on that was blocked.

I am also concerned about the EU-Morocco deal, where we see a replication of some very poor decision-making and a measure which, again, could end up rewarding settlers in illegally occupied territories, rather than citizens. It is replicating some of the terrible mistakes that have been made regarding Gaza and the occupied Palestinian territories. There are crucial decisions being made at this time, and I would like to know what MEPs are doing to unpack those pieces, and not just the sloganeering on simplification, when we know it is deregulation. There may be measures of simplification but we need to hear the unpacking of that and competitiveness, when the comparative advantage Europe had was its standards and the opportunity for industries to respond to the real world, where climate change is real, where there is diversity and where society matters.

I would love if the MEPs could unpack what the learning should be, even from austerity, when we come back on the competitiveness. We lost a decade to austerity and that is where the competitiveness was lost.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I welcome to the Distinguished Visitors Gallery guests of the Ceann Comhairle, Deputy Verona Murphy. You are very welcome and I hope you enjoy your visit.

After the first session, I am now going to give five minutes to each of the MEPs to respond. We will start with Ms Carberry.

Ms Nina Carberry: We covered a lot of topics there so I will try to get through as many as I can. The FTD brothers were mentioned. They are an inspiration but they also mobilise people in a positive way through physical activity. It gives hope that people can be brought together in a positive rather than negative way, which is hugely important. It is good to think down the line and about how we can prepare ourselves for dementia and Alzheimer's and the crisis. People are getting older and we need to plan. The more money we can put into research into brain health and preventative healthcare, the stronger the position we will be in to tackle that. We could also have preventative measures for those who are their 40s and 50s, whether that is looking out for high blood pressure or having our sight or hearing checked, as these are all triggers down the line. That would be an important step for those of us in our 40s and 50s.

Many Senators mentioned the importance of CAP. I have been engaging with a lot of farming organisations and it is very clear to me that if the proposed cut proceeds, it will devastate rural Ireland. That is very clear to us. It is a huge priority in our forthcoming EU

Presidency that we fight back. We have to do whatever we can to save rural Ireland because it is under threat. I will keep trying in that regard on the budget committee. It is important, as Mr. Flanagan said, that it goes across committees, and we are working together on that.

When the national and regional partnership plans, NRPPs, come back to the governments, it will be complicated for the Departments. There is a lot of merging of funds here. We are talking about CAP and cohesion funding, which is where the PEACEPLUS funding is located. Senator O'Reilly asked me how we protect PEACEPLUS funding and make sure we have it ring-fenced following that merging of funds. We could have a situation where four Departments are looking after this big pot of money. I would not like to see schemes or direct payments to farmers being delayed because another Department is delaying the approval. We need to think about that in the coming weeks and months.

Senator O'Loughlin mentioned the equine sector and how important it is. I agree with her wholeheartedly. The regulation coming through the Parliament is not really budging. There are 3,000 amendments to the live animal exports regulation. It is very much a one-size-fits-all approach and we have found out, through a lot of monitoring groups and looking at the regulation, that only 40% of the previous regulation was implemented, meaning 60% of it has not been implemented or enforced properly. We need to look back at what we had and see whether we cannot enforce it more. We need an approach that is not one size fits all as the equine sector would otherwise be disproportionately affected. Obviously, we have horses going for slaughter and they need protection but the sport horse sector, which the Senator referred to, does not need that hard level of regulation.

A few Senators mentioned the occupied territories Bill, which we heard a lot of discussion about yesterday. I am absolutely supportive of the legislation and I am being very clear in my voting in the Parliament in my EPP group. Maria Walsh and I have stood out in voting to make sure there is a suspension of the trade agreement with Israel. We have made it very clear that UNRWA should be protected. To be honest, not everyone in the Parliament thinks UNRWA funding should be protected. We are working collectively as Irish MEPs on that.

Senator Tully mentioned PEACEPLUS funding and the importance of cross-Border projects. They are hugely significant. I mentioned I had an event recently at which we heard about the grassroots approach to this. PEACEPLUS funding does not get much airtime because it is a good news story. We need to be louder on it during our Presidency. I would love to see an event happening on the Border to promote what we have. It is something a lot of countries will learn a lot from.

I will try to move on quickly. The Mercosur agreement was mentioned a lot. I took a very clear position on Mercosur in my campaign. I was not happy with traceability and standards, especially regarding Brazil, and I was glad to see movement from the Commission on that. I made very clear that unless standards and traceability improve-----

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I have to cut across Ms Carberry because I am trying to get all the other speakers in.

Ms Nina Carberry: -----we cannot support it. With anything to do with trade, it is hugely important that we safeguard our agriculture sector. I am sorry I ran out of time.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Not at all, you are fine.

Ms Nina Carberry: I hope I can address the other points when I am finishing up.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Perfect. I call Mr. Cowen.

Mr. Barry Cowen: Like Ms Carberry, I will do my best to try to respond, even briefly, to many of the points that have been made. I thank Senators for the contributions and input.

On CAP funding and the 20% drop that is inevitable in the context of the commitment that has been made to defence and security, which we cannot disregard either, Europe has been successful when it is unified. It was unified on Brexit. It was unified on Covid vaccination programmes, in its response to the war in Ukraine and Europe's overdependence on Russian gas and in the means by which Horizon funding was provided to help with and address the issues caused by those. Efforts to disunite Europe succeed in undermining it. From our perspective, there are eastern bloc countries that, whether we like it or not, are more interested in tanks than tractors. You have to respect and appreciate that. We have a role, in a unified Europe, to ensure we play our part, even as a militarily neutral country, in assisting in defence, whether that is in relation to our waters, our cables or our cybersecurity. The Government, fortunately, is committed to that, as are the other member states. That does not take away from the fact no defence and security policy would be complete without *pro rata* provision for food security. That is the argument we hope will win the day insofar as we cannot have one without the other. As shadow rapporteurs, we have a duty to make proposals to initially bridge that gap and seek more funding thereafter due to inflation. We think we can win the support of colleagues in doing that.

On animal transport, Senator O'Loughlin rightly alluded to the fact that Ms Carberry and I joined forces on amendments to separate sport horses from the norm, although that is not to say there is not a responsibility to ensure that, as an island nation, we are protected in relation to the time of travel and so forth. There are 3,000 amendments proposed on the proposal. It is in quicksand at present and we do not see it going too far. That is not to say we will not be mindful, if and when it is resurrected, to ensure that industries such as the sport horses sector, especially by virtue of the impact it makes in this nation over others, are recognised and appreciated.

On generational renewal and Senator Joe O'Reilly's point, it is commendable that the Commission, in its proposal, has gone from 3% to 6% of the overall spend. As I said, the Government is committed to a figure of 8%, which is commendable. We hope that will become a reality. I believe it should be accompanied by exit or voluntary retirement packages, side by side. A lot of work was done by the Government in preparation for that. I would have no difficulty with that being a conditional commitment within CAP for member states in order to avail of increased payments to younger farmers. Starter help and assistance to them, with accessibility to land, finance and so forth, could be dependent on a scheme for exit, and not one that aligns with the proposal that is there to throw pensioners off a cliff in relation to their entitlements. That will not be the case.

The role LEADER plays has been mentioned. The proposal in the Commission's draft at present is for it to be outside the CAP envelope. We are arguing strongly for it to go back in.

We are arguing strongly that it be measured by traditional means and metrics rather than cohesion metrics, which would show the improvements that have been made and lessen the availability of funding.

It is something this Government should underpin and commit to in order to work with us to reassure us that, irrespective of what form the CAP takes after it has been agreed, it will contain similar commitments to LEADER programmes, local development companies and so forth because of the role they play, especially in rural communities.

In relation to trade and the Mercosur deal, Senators asked specifically about Government parties. The Government made a commitment not to support it and it did not support it. Some Senators will say it was late in the day when that was finalised. That was because of the Government's efforts to ensure there was better conditionality, safeguards and safety nets in place to address the issues. That was my job too, and I alluded to that earlier. I do not think we would have had the sort of strengthening of the conditions and conditionality associated with the agreement without that commitment. It would have been a lot easier to shout and roar from the sidelines and give out about the agreement, but I had a responsibility and duty to deal with the reality that it could well be passed without our vote, which has happened. There is a case being taken, and people will say it is looking at every aspect of the agreement, but it is not. It is merely looking at the separation of the political and trade sections of the committees in question. There is, unfortunately, precedent in Singapore where the separation was catered for, and I expect that to be the case here. There are much better safeguards and provisions in place now than there were 12 months ago, when people were saying we could not and would not vote for the Mercosur agreement and we should have been early in saying that. We respected and honoured the commitment made in the programme for Government and went so far as to ensure those improvements were made to make it a lot easier if those concerns become a reality. If we get to see it again, if we have more time, I will do that too. We are pro-trade, as I said-----

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: The MEPs will have a chance to come back in.

Ms Maria Walsh: We are on a roll now.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I am just trying to get everybody in. Before I call Mr. Flanagan, I welcome the Ballinlough Community Development Council Active Retirement Group from Granlahan and Ballinlough, led by Riona Burke. According to Senator Scahill, the group's host, they need to be let off their homework for the rest of the week. The group is very welcome.

Mr. Luke 'Ming' Flanagan: There were many questions and I could do with 50 minutes to answer them, but I will settle for five.

In relation to the Mercosur agreement, I find the whole Mercosur issue interesting from a political point of view. One of the biggest criticisms levelled at politicians is that we do not follow through on our promises. When Ursula von der Leyen proposed putting together this Commission, she could not have been clearer that she was going to go down the road of supporting Mercosur. I am not saying all European Commission Presidents tell everyone what

to do, but when it comes to this Commission, we have Ursula von der Leyen and a whole load of puppets, unfortunately. I do not like saying that but it is the reality. I have never seen such an iron fist. It comes down through the committees and the groups seem to be paralysed and unable to disagree with anything. I have a serious problem with that. The problem here, however, is that we were told by that individual that she was going down that road and, guess what, she went down that road.

I oppose the Mercosur deal for many reasons, one of which is that the amount of extra beef that could end up coming into this country has been seriously underplayed. Currently, these countries can bring beef into this country with massive tariffs of 35% or 50% and they can still make a profit. It will not be just a case that the extra quota will be the only thing that is coming in. If it is profitable to bring in beef at those high percentages, I predict that there will be extra brought in on top of that. I hope I am wrong. Whatever about the standards, I have never in my life had anyone come up to me in my town and ask if there is any chance I could get them some Mercosur beef. No one has asked me that. I do not know where the demand is coming from; it is certainly not from me. I disagree with the Mercosur deal.

On the removal of unanimity, it would be lunacy for Ireland to go down that road because we would lose a massive amount of the power we have.

The genocide in Palestine was mentioned. As I said earlier, I got elected as a Eurosceptic. I have seen massive positives. I was listened to. I saw a situation where the European Union forced Ireland to give more money to people who were on smaller payments and I thought to myself, "You know what, there are a lot of positives here." However, bar Ursula von der Leyen burning down the European Parliament, I do not think she could have done any more harm. She had an organisation that was meant to be a symbol of hope, fairness, caring about the environment and caring about whether someone was going to not only shoot children but have bets as to what part of the body they would shoot, and she has not done nearly enough to condemn this. She has irreparably damaged the European Union. You could say that is terrible and we will never recover from it - poor old us - but what about the people who are dead and will never recover from it?

Senator Higgins mentioned the omnibus regulations that are seeking to roll back an awful lot of positive things the European Union has done. The phrase "simplification" was mentioned. Simplification is a word that people seem to have amnesia about in the European Parliament. Phil Hogan, in the most recent CAP reform, introduced it under one heading - "Simplification". I like the consensus idea in the European Parliament where we all work together, but there is one downside to it. When someone messes up, no one actually says "You made a mistake the last time and what price will you pay for it?" Phil Hogan said he was bringing in simplification. What is this CAP about? It is about simplification. Obviously, simplification did not happen the last time and even in discussions and debates in the Parliament, everyone seems to have forgotten that Phil Hogan spoke about simplification. Simplification will never happen if we want sophisticated, targeted policies that help everyone, whether in relation to the environment or people.

All Senators have complicated jobs but I will them something that makes life a bit simpler for them. They have a damn good wage at the end of the day. If we pay people properly to do environmental work, they will put up with something that is not actually that complicated and they will deal with those complications. We have evidence of that. I will finish on this. I could

have said an awful lot and I am sorry for leaving out other areas. We have evidence that if people are paid well enough, they will do the right thing environmentally. We had Natura 2000 payments of €242 per hectare. In today's money, that is almost €600 per hectare. Far from farmers rejecting having to do that Natura 2000 work, when their lands were initially designated they had so much money coming to them that their neighbours who were not designated complained about it. That proves that if we fund this work, people will do it. The problem is not that people do not want to do something to save us from the crisis we are heading down the road towards; it is that we are refusing to pay them to do it. Pay them and fund it. That will deal with the problem.

Mr. Ciaran Mullooly: I agree with Luke Flanagan on that last point. When we arrived in the European Parliament two years ago, the vote on nature restoration had just been taken. At the time, there were blatant promises made that there would be funding. We and our colleagues were told that. When we went into the chamber on the first day to speak to the Commissioner he confirmed there was no funding. The vote was taken in circumstances where people were not given the truthful situation.

The Mercosur agreement, as mentioned, has taken many years to reach this stage, and I make no apology for the role I played in scrutinising it, or indeed for that of my colleague Deputy Fitzmaurice in the other House. I am proud to have worked with a cross-European coalition on this. People ask what did we do. We worked with Polish, Italian, French, Irish and Spanish MEPs from across political groups, and our objective was clear, namely, to use the proper procedures of the Parliament to seek legal clarity on whether the agreement complied with EU treaties or not. I did not care who did it before. This was the first time the South American countries were before us and I wanted to see the treaty examined by a court. Some criticism was made in Ireland but, on Brazilian beef, many of us raised concerns on public health and food safety grounds. Recent developments have shown that these concerns were legitimate. We were right. The Commission has taken Brazilian meat off the safe list. It has told Brazil to get its act together by 3 September, but we want to see it get its act together now. Why should we sit by in a calm and relaxed way while Brazilian beef comes in, especially in pre-packed meals in our schools, with a question mark over it? That is not scaremongering. I absolutely refute any suggestion-----

Mr. Barry Cowen: Is that true?

Mr. Ciaran Mullooly: -----that other people-----

Mr. Barry Cowen: Is Mr. Mullooly saying beef is going into schools? That is dangerous.

Mr. Ciaran Mullooly: Last Thursday, and Mr. Cowen knows this because I told him already, I met the Commissioner for food safety.

Mr. Barry Cowen: Dangerous.

Mr. Ciaran Mullooly: I met the Commissioner for food safety. This is the situation. The Commissioner stands over the audits that are in place on European countries. The

Commissioner said to me: "The issue of pre-packed meals coming from the UK is a major problem." Those are his words.

Mr. Barry Cowen: Into Irish schools?

Mr. Ciaran Mullooly: Into Irish schools.

Mr. Barry Cowen: Did he tell Mr. Mullooly that? Did Mr. Mullooly fact-check that?

Mr. Ciaran Mullooly: And nursing homes and hospitals.

Mr. Barry Cowen: Mr. Mullooly might fact-check that.

Mr. Ciaran Mullooly: I can go further in terms of that.

Mr. Barry Cowen: Be honest.

Mr. Ciaran Mullooly: The Commissioner made it very clear that he does not have the same control of audit over the UK because of Brexit. That is the simple situation. There is what he describes as an estimated audit going on in the UK. He hopes it will improve. He said to me in the context of a negotiation with the UK, which we are involved in at the moment on a range of issues, that he hopes the audits will improve but he cannot put his hand on his heart and look over that situation so I make no apologies. That is why I contacted the Food Safety Authority of Ireland, FSAI, when I came back last week and I asked it to directly follow up on this. If the FSAI does not do it, I will go further. I will ask parents and schools to investigate this matter with the schools authorities themselves to get to the bottom of this because that is how strongly I feel about this matter. It is the health and safety of our children that we are talking about as well as everyone else's.

Funding is an issue for various problem areas in agriculture. LEADER and other areas were mentioned. In terms of the overall situation, people must realise what has gone on in terms of the budget this year. At European level, defence has become the order of the day. Under the proposed MFF that we are debating and considering all of the time, the plans are to allocate €131 billion to defence, security and space. That is a fivefold increase compared with the current budget situation and the consequence is clear. CAP is becoming the poor relation in the EU budget. For Ireland, the proposed CAP allocation will fall from €10.7 billion in 2021 to 2027 to €8.16 billion. That represents a reduction of €2.5 billion in cash terms and a 20% to 40% reduction when compared with the current allocation. This matters because Ireland is already a net contributor to the EU budget. Crucially, approximately 75% of the EU funding Ireland receives comes back through CAP. Therefore, any cut to the allocation has a double impact. It means less direct support for Irish farmers and rural communities while worsening Ireland's net position with the EU budget. In practical terms, if billions of euros less comes back to Ireland through CAP then Ireland's net contribution rises in real terms or it has to. The Government's position must be clear. Ireland cannot accept a future EU budget where defence spending increases dramatically while food production, farm incomes and rural viability are weakened. There is a trend because during the mid-term review in the Parliament Cohesion

Funds disappeared for defence looking at bridges and roads on the Ukraine-Polish border. This was the start. It is continuing in the MFF and will continue unless we oppose it left, right and centre.

Finally, I worked for LEADER for three years. I get it and know of LEADER's concerns. I agree that we have to ensure that the funding is secure but we also have to ensure that we do not rob Peter to pay Paul taking money from another budget and, therefore, leaving the Irish Government to reduce the budget for the LEADER companies.

Ms Maria Walsh: Similar to my colleagues, some of the questions that were asked are outside the scope of my remit, as I see it, but colleagues might feel different. I will try to stick within the time and on topic in terms of the work that we can do.

Senator Joe O'Reilly asked how realistic is it to hold the line on CAP. All of us work within the agriculture committee indirectly or directly and we can all confirm that what we have now is the ring-fencing of the basic farm payment and where the MFF will go in the next weeks and months during our Presidency is incredibly crucial. Regardless of where we sit politically, I hope that, collectively, there is agreement that if there are shortcomings that the Exchequer will need to feed into agri-schemes or pension schemes, which the Senator mentioned. I did a lot of work on this, particularly around the generation renewal file, to make sure that the first draft contained some element of pensions. Other member states do it really well and have done for decades. In Finland and regions in Germany, strong pension schemes are held by local authorities or municipal areas. There is no reason we cannot learn from that example. I have spoken to older farmers who accepted the retirement scheme 20 years ago. They had to stand outside the farm gate which meant the knowledge transfer was lost. I do not want us to go there because we need that knowledge. The Senator's second question was on AI. We cannot get everything from AI, certain books or TikTok, despite what other politicians might feel. That knowledge transfer is needed from people who have grown up on farms and a pension scheme has to be considered in that context. The age threshold for farmers age should increase from 35 to 40 or 45 to reflect reality. I know of a lot of young farmers are part of that lost generation who are trying to take on a farm or access to land or funding at a critical time when they might be starting a family, re-educating themselves or starting a new career and they are trying to grow installation aid yet do not have the funding to do that. Within this space, there is a lot of best practice that we can feed into but the pension scheme will have to be run by the member state.

I want to respond to Senator Keogan's comment on the migration pact because it was used almost as a negative. Since 2019, I have been a member of the EU Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs. If we did not have the pact that had been negotiated, and worked on, for ten years prior, the Senator would be saying something very different. A firm and fair humanitarian-based pact is definitely required. I will allude to the other points that were raised about humanitarian crises outside of Ireland and Europe. We need a system that allows us to support people in the best possible way and that can only be done when we are at the table with like-minded people. Across the 27 member states, certainly from the amendments I tabled and the conversations that I have had with representatives of other countries, then on the western side of Europe, where we are privileged to sit in comparison with Greece and Italy, we have to learn and understand that the migration pact is a positive.

Senator Cosgrove made a point about workers' rights. From the standpoint of Fine Gael, Ms Regina Doherty, MEP is a member of the EU committee that deals with employment law. During my previous mandate, I was a member of that committee and worked on pay transparency. I do not want Ireland to water that down or delay that. We have heard some whispers of that and I hope that we can find some tangible work there. Pay transparency is critical if we are going to remove or reduce the 14% gender pay gap experienced by women, which, in turn, affects their pensions. There is no reason any company, large or small, cannot feed into better pay transparency for women and people in general.

Another Senator mentioned the PEACEPLUS programme. Ms Carberry, MEP is a member of the EU Committee on Budgets or BUDG. There is also the EU Committee on Regional Development. Both BUDG and REGI feed into the programme by tabling amendments. As I said in my opening statement, we recently met Northern Irish representatives to discuss the programme.

The western rail corridor was also flagged. Based on evidence, national government support is required. There is an ability to apply in the next round of MFF through the Connecting Europe facility but it has to be done through the Department of Transport.

Finally, there has been a lot of talk about trade deals but nobody has mentioned that €1 billion is spent each year on trade with African countries. A number of regimes are questionable in terms of breaking of human law. I hope that this House and certainly us, as MEPs, would look to the relationships we have in Africa because they are a good source of support but we need to also support them.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: We move to the two-minute slots. I call Seanadóir Flaherty.

Senator Joe Flaherty: I welcome all of the MEPs. In particular, I welcome my former neighbour, Mr. Mullooly, MEP. He is a native of County Longford and he is following a long tradition in this House. The MEP could see the house of the late Paddy Belton across the fields from where he grew up. Mr. Belton was a Fianna Fáil Deputy in the First Dáil, an eminently intelligent man. Subsequently, he became a member of the Fine Gael Party but we cannot account for that. I am also delighted to welcome him and to see that the MEP's sisters, Rose and Eithne, his wife, Angela, and members of his team, Pat O'Rourke and Brid Reilly, were here today. Most of them have now left the Chamber.

I do not think it was because they did not want to wait for me. I think it was because they were bogged down with European speak.

I only have one request. In the aftermath of Ireland moving forward on the occupied territories Bill yesterday, there is an onus on MEPs. We can achieve very little as a country. We are small, but we have a powerful voice and we have been the foremost country in Europe on Palestine. We led from the start. We were the first European country to recognise Palestine as a state. We have defended the United Nations Relief Works Agency, UNRWA, and its funding and we have been a strong voice. Every legitimate government agency in the Middle East will attest that Ireland has led the way. There is a huge onus on MEPs. Mr. Mullooly said he spoke to President von der Leyen, but he needs to bring the same commitment to this cause. This is the defining cause of our age. It is one thing to talk to President von der Leyen, but the

MEPs need to engage with their groups. We are coming into the Irish EU Presidency and it would be great if we could get mid-way through that Presidency and see Europe respond as a single voice to everything that is happening in the Middle East.

I will also talk about the issue of school lunches. I am sure the MEPs are aware there are at least four significant school lunch companies in County Longford, which can all attest to where their food comes from. We spend more than €350 million-----

Senator Gareth Scahill: They have confirmed that.

Senator Joe Flaherty: -----on school lunches. Parents are worried. Scaremongering has no place in the EU Parliament and no place in this House. We have more than 200 full-time and part-time jobs related to school lunches in Longford.

Mr. Ciaran Mullooly: Prepaid UK is what I said.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: The Senator without interruption.

Senator Joe Flaherty: No, he tarred all those companies with the same brush and it was deeply unfair.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I have to be strict about time because there are a lot of speakers and we have limited time, so I apologise.

Senator Manus Boyle: I welcome all the MEPs and thank them for the courtesy they showed me the few times I was in Brussels and for what they have done for the Irish fishing industry. It is good to have a group that comes together and facilitates meetings.

I will stick to my brief, which is fishing. How can we get more pressure put on the PECH committee, seeing as we do not have any full-time member?

Can we come together as a group, with the MEPs' political groups to see whether we can get reform of the Common Fisheries Policy? It is 40 years old and is not working for Ireland.

Will Europe enforce tariffs against the third countries that are overfishing? Something has to be done. We need to get these people in line. Why is Europe taking the cuts when these other countries can fish away and do what they like?

Will the MEPs come together as a group and push for the Hague preferences to be reinstated for Ireland? We had the Hague preferences for many years and were thrown under the bus last year. It is totally wrong. A total of 8,000 tonnes might not be a lot to some people, but it is a lot to the people in Donegal, Castletownbere, Dunmore East and all around the country. It is what will keep them afloat. That wee bit makes a wile lot.

Can the MEPs come together to do something about the super companies that are operating in Europe? We call them "The Dutch five". They seem to be running the whole show. They have boats flagged in every country and we cannot lay a hand on them. Something has to be done about it.

I thank the MEPs again for what they are doing and ask them to keep going with it. We are coming from a low base, but we have made a lot of headway.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: I commend Mr. Flanagan, Sinn Féin and Mr. Mullooly on the work they did in helping to secure a referral of the EU-Mercosur agreement to the Court of Justice of the European Union, CJEU. I also commend Mr. Mullooly on his appointment as a full voting member to the agriculture committee. With four Irish MEPs holding voting rights on that committee, we expect big things and a strong position for the next CAP reform. I ask them to prioritise generational renewal, protect family farms and ensure young farmers can afford to enter the sector.

The agriculture sector needs support, but I am equally concerned - I am on the Oireachtas fisheries committee, like Senator Boyle - about the fisheries sector. It is being systematically dismantled. We control roughly 12% of EU waters, yet receive 3% to 4% of the quota allocation. Irish fishermen watch bluefin tuna swim through our water while being restricted to a catch and release system with virtually no quota. The EU-Norway deal is another disgrace. Norway gains access to the blue whiting worth more than €21 million while Ireland is left with quotas that are not economically viable to fish.

The EU has also shown far too little leadership on Palestine. We hear statements condemning Israel's actions; yet commercially and politically, it continues business as usual. Why has the EU-Israel Association Agreement not been suspended, when the human rights clause has clearly been breached? The contrast between the EU response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its response to Israel's actions in Gaza is impossible to ignore. Economic interests are being prioritised over human life. The MEPs might have some insight into this.

I was deeply disappointed that MEPs support an amendment to recognise transgender women as women, while simultaneously rejecting or abstaining on the amendment that only biological women can get pregnant. Do they believe it is possible for men to get pregnant?

I am happy to hear Ms Walsh talk about gender equality.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Go raibh maith agat.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: Women have faced violence, harassment and discrimination, precisely because we are female. Yet now, women who defend sex-based rights-----

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Go raibh maith agat, a Sheanadóir.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: -----are mocked, shouted down and branded hateful. Irish people believe in dignity and respect for everyone, but they also want fairness in sport-----

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: A Sheanadóir, please.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: -----to safeguard sexes of bathrooms and changing rooms-----

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Everyone else is trying to keep to the timeframe.

Senator Sarah O'Reilly: -----and to protect children from irreversible medical procedures.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I have to get in a large number of speakers so I am sorry, I have to keep everyone to their two-minute slot.

Senator Alison Comyn: I thank the MEPs for attending. They do tremendous work in Europe on behalf of all their communities in the Midlands-North-West constituency. I love the diversity, that we all came from different backgrounds. Mr. Mullooly and I left the fourth estate and moved to the first estate, as it is called. Some would say we leapt from the frying pan into the fire. I hope he is enjoying his role as much as I am.

Mr. Mullooly left in 2021. I have been working all week to make sure RTÉ is providing value for money to its viewers. It is State-funded. Did he understand, when he accepted his voluntary redundancy from RTÉ back in June 2021, that his midlands correspondent role would likely only be vacant for 13 months? Did he believe RTÉ was permanently abolishing-----

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: I am sorry, Senator Comyn.

Senator Alison Comyn: -----the midlands correspondent position when he accepted his redundancy package?

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: We have to stick to Ireland questions and the European Parliament.

Senator Alison Comyn: It is very relevant to what we have been debating over the past few weeks. Will he disclose the exact value of the redundancy package he received? We understand it was an RTÉ decision, but it had a huge bearing on the fact that position was filled. It was not done away with and only 13 months later it was filled. I would be grateful for his comments on that.

Senator Gareth Scahill: The MEPs are all very welcome. Europe often speaks about balanced regional development. The Midlands-North-West constituency still faces major deficits in transport, connectivity and economic investment. Addressing those challenges requires every level of government to work together properly. This is why the relationship between our MEPs, the European Committee of the Regions and our regional assemblies is important. REGI exists to represent local authorities and regional voices in Europe. It gives councillors and regional assemblies a direct channel to EU policymakers and funding priorities. MEPs should work closely with these bodies to strengthen the voice of our local authorities, not try to replace them or do the work of councillors. I welcome Mr. Cowen's clarification about that earlier.

Councillors are elected to deal with local delivery and local priorities. The role of our MEPs should be to use their influence in Europe to secure investment, shape EU policy and build partnerships that help regions like ours to finally get the infrastructure we deserve. Beyond commentary and publicity, how are the MEPs using their positions in Europe to work with the

European Committee of the Regions and our regional assemblies to deliver the infrastructure investment our wider region needs?

Across Europe at the moment, we are seeing a clear rise in populist politics. It is often driven by fear, frustration and division in our communities. At a time public trust in institutions is already fragile, misinformation and disinformation can spread quickly and have a real consequence.

4 o'clock

What responsibility do the MEPs believe they have, politically and morally, to ensure accuracy in their own public statements and to challenge misinformation in a way that does not contribute to fear, hostility and division within our communities?

Senator Paraic Brady: The MEPs are very welcome. As a small rural farmer from north Longford, I totally agree with the sentiments Mr. Mullooly expressed earlier. We have to protect the farming community at all costs. Food security has to be number one when it comes to the next CAP. That is certain. The responsibility for defining an "active farmer" should continue to rest with the member state and, therefore, it should continue to rest with Ireland. We should define "active farmer" ourselves. I would not like us to lose that. We have a lot of people who are not actively farming but are still in receipt of huge CAP payments. We must target supports for active and productive farming.

I want to ask all our MEPs about the safeguards. Some of them voted against the safeguards and others voted for them. Could they clarify why they voted against the safeguards? Any safeguard that protects Irish farming is something that every farmer needs to know about.

I would like to clarify one issue regarding school meals. We have huge businesses in Longford, as Senator Flaherty said. I have visited these businesses and know at first hand that the meat that goes into our school meals comes from local produce. Local farmers are delivering into local abattoirs that are supplying these businesses. I ask Mr. Mullooly to withdraw what he said in this House. He worked in RTÉ but has not clarified the statements he made in the European Parliament to the effect that there were tanks on the streets of Dublin during a peaceful protest. I ask him to withdraw that statement. That was very damaging to this country on a world stage. My brother in America rang and asked me what the hell was going on that there were tanks on the streets of Dublin. As Trump said in America, false information can be damaging at all times. Mr. Mullooly knows that was false. I ask him to withdraw his comments in this House today. I ask him to get up and confirm it was false information. People need to see the smoke from the trees.

Senator Linda Nelson Murray: I thank the MEPs for coming. My focus is on small businesses and always has been. I would like when we take over the European Presidency that we have a focus on Irish business. When it comes to insurance, for example, we have not had a new entrant into the Irish market for 11 years to provide public liability insurance. I would like to know what the MEPs can do on that issue to help small businesses.

The issue of counterfeit and fake branded goods entering the Irish market is becoming a major consumer safety problem, particularly for children's toys. I appreciate that there was a new toy safety regulation in 2025. That was enacted in January but there is a four-year waiting

period before it is fully enacted. We have thousands of parts coming into Ireland that are not safe for children. That is something that needs to be looked at. The Irish toy market is worth between €300 million and €600 million per year. It looks as if approximately 10% of the goods that are coming in are counterfeit goods, which is bad for Irish business.

I would also like to mention hot school meals. I wrote a 48-page report on them. I visited suppliers the length and breadth of the country and schools. The Joint Committee on Education and Youth had numerous witnesses and stakeholders in to discuss the issue and never once did I hear that there was Brazilian beef in hot school meals. Some €300 million is spent on hot school meals in Ireland. That goes to companies. A total of 3,200 primary schools and 500,000 students avail of the programme. How dare Mr. Mullooly sit there and say that the hot school meals programme is using Brazilian beef? How dare he scaremonger? The Society of St. Vincent de Paul last year had 112,000 requests for food assistance. There is a massive problem with child food poverty in Ireland. What Mr. Mullooly has just done is scare parents, principals and teachers by talking about Brazilian beef in hot school meals. Like my two colleagues, I want him to withdraw that comment. I hope he does not get any coverage out of it because it is simply not true. Until he can come to the Upper House and prove it is, dún do bhéal.

Senator Mark Duffy: I welcome the MEPs from Midlands-North-West. I put on record my support for the suspension of the Israel trade deal with the EU. It has been mentioned by many Senators. This is the mechanism that Ireland should use in supporting all MEPs. Do they all support that suspension? It is the most pragmatic approach to take in a European context. That is the best move forward. There has been progress on the occupied territories Bill here, but at European level, we can have an impact on what is a devastating humanitarian crisis that was totally avoidable.

I sit on the Oireachtas joint committees on transport and climate, energy and environment. As was mentioned previously, the western rail corridor is one of the key infrastructural projects that can reignite the west coast, connecting many counties. Like Senator Cosgrove, I would like to see it continue on to Sligo. What can we do as a State to engage in unlocking funding in Europe to ensure we can have nation-building projects such as the western rail corridor connecting Sligo all the way down the western seaboard?

A number of national road projects are also at different stages. I would like to see what can be done to ensure we use every financial asset within Europe to ensure their delivery. The region the MEPs represent is one of the worst for transport infrastructure. It is unique because it is sparsely populated without the large cities there are in other regions. Transport and connectivity are challenges. We need to see this as an opportunity. We must ensure we have investment and delivery.

What are the MEPs' thoughts on Ireland's influence at a bureaucratic level in Brussels? It has been reported that it is waning and declining. That again is a big problem because we have baked in representation at a political level but we need to have influence across all spheres of civic and political life in Brussels to make sure that Irish voices, opinions and positions are cutting through at every level. I would welcome the thoughts of the MEPs. I thank them for being here.

An Cathaoirleach: I am conscious of time and know we are running over time. I will ask the Leader to propose an extension of time, but I will ask the remaining speakers to limit themselves to one minute each. I will then bring in the MEPs again. If Members want to take a sos, we can do so. We are scheduled to go until 4.30 p.m. We can keep going, depending on what Members would prefer.

Senator P. J. Murphy: I thank our MEPs for being present. I thank them for all the work they do on our behalf. I was delighted Ms Walsh mentioned the farm retirement scheme. She absolutely hit the nail on the head regarding the flaws in the previous farm retirement scheme. My grandfather availed of that scheme. While it helped to transition the use of land from generation to generation, it was filled with flaws in requiring the retiring farmer to step away. We need to achieve two priorities from any new farm retirement scheme. The first is the transfer of knowledge from the retiring farmer to the farmer who is taking over. The second relates to the fact that our land is a limited resource and we only have a small amount of it. We need to ensure that the land we have is being used by the people most fit to use it. Land is currently being minded by armchair farmers. We need to get that land into the hands of young farmers. The MEPs are conscious of that.

Like my colleagues, I ask MEP Mullooly to withdraw his shocking statements. He has stained an industry with his statement today.

We have all listened to his populism and his nonsense over the past number of months about the fuel protests and Mercosur. He should not stain this House with his nonsense. He should have respect for this House and withdraw his statements.

Senator Martin Conway: I welcome our MEPs, particularly Mr. Flanagan, who served here for a couple of years, and Mr. Cowen, who I served with in these Houses for many years before he went to Brussels. I commend them on the great work they are doing in Brussels on behalf of the people of Ireland.

As a former Chair of the Seanad EU scrutiny committee, which the Cathaoirleach currently chairs, I hope this engagement is the start of a process that will evolve, mature and develop over the years. Unfortunately, the distance between Brussels and Ireland still exists. We need to bridge that democratic deficit and to do it urgently. When there is a deficit, a vacuum exists.

I am conscious of the Cathaoirleach and of time. There are a number of comments I would have liked to have made but I will ask one question that affects my constituency, Clare, and the MEPs' constituents as well relating to the proposed electric vehicle rental fleet mandate that is coming in in 2030. I want a commitment from the MEPs that Ireland will be exempt from that. If it is not, the entire rental fleet market will close. When people fly into Shannon Airport, Knock and other places, they will not be able to rent a car because there are not enough charging points to facilitate electric cars. If all rental cars are electric, it is just not going to work.

Senator Rónán Mullen: I welcome the MEPs and thank them for being with us. Many parents across Europe are concerned about the problems caused by their children having excessive, and excessively early, exposure to screen time, particularly the challenge posed by young people's access to social media. Many countries are taking their own initiative on this matter. Energy has been focused on the specific issue of whether tech companies should be

prevented from opening social media accounts for young people. There is widespread misunderstanding of this issue. Some people think what is being posited is a ban on young people accessing social media. That is not what it is about; it is about whether young people should be able to open accounts because it is through accounts that tech companies challenge.

The Minister for communications said to us at a committee meeting today that European countries take different points of view. Some have a *laissez-faire* approach to restrictions on young people's access to media. What are the MEPs' views? Can the European Parliament take an initiative in this area? Will we hear the voice of Parliament? It is important that Ireland would legislate on its own for whatever we believe to be in the common good, but what happens in Europe matters.

I add to that the concern about the widespread availability of pornography and the impact that is having on young people. It seems bizarre that it is easier for a young person to access pornography online than to buy a pair of shoes, gamble or buy vapes, for which they would be required to use a credit card. Young people are being damaged by their exposure to pornography and it seems Europe is not acting strongly enough to protect them in this area. I would be grateful for our guests' thoughts and views on that.

An Cathaoirleach: The Acting Leader has a proposal. We have gone a small bit over time. We were supposed to finish at 4.30 p.m.. If it is all right with Members, we will extend it by a small bit.

Senator Garret Ahearn: I propose, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders or the Order of Business for today, that No. 2 will conclude at 5 p.m., if not previously concluded, and No. 3 will be taken immediately thereafter.

An Cathaoirleach: Go raibh maith agat. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Before I call our Members back in for their final contributions on a wide range of questions and then ask the Acting Leader and the Leas-Chathaoirleach to make their concluding remarks, I welcome from the great state of Utah my good friend, the president of the Utah Senate, Senator Wayne Harper; Jeff Moss, director of the governor's office in economic development; his wife Kim; Franz, the director of the centre of international business and diplomacy; Anthony from the Utah House of Representatives, "the Lower House" as we would call it here - and Kira his wife; and Ryan, a professor of engineering and quantum, to put it correctly. All are here from Utah and I look forward to welcoming them back soon. I thank them, especially Kim and Kira, for putting up with all the meetings from us. Quite a lot of meetings they had over the past number of days. Especially to my friend Wayne, thank you for being here and for your friendship.

Anois, again in alphabetical order, just to be transparent and clear, I call Ms Carberry. She has five minutes to answer all those 50 questions.

Ms Nina Carberry: It is a lot of issues, again, to try to get through. I will start off with the fisheries. It is hugely important. I touched on it with the budget amendments I have made to the MFF. The CFP will hopefully be reviewed during the Irish Presidency. We have a unique opportunity. We were disproportionately affected when Brexit happened from a fisheries

perspective. I am working closely with Senator Boyle and I know all the Irish MEPs are doing the best we can for the fisheries and making sure the Commission understands the migratory change in fish. It has not been reviewed in 50 years. We need to make sure a review happens and recognise the challenges we face with overfishing and third countries entering our waters legally. I look forward to working with Senator Boyle and will continue beating the drum on that.

Senator Scahill mentioned a lot of issues. How do we work for our regions? Working closely with REGI is important. Working on the ground with councillors is essential. I met with Séamus Boland, president of the European Economic and Social Committee. It is important to keep connecting with the Irish people we have and using them the best we can. The Senator talked about disinformation. Public representatives have a responsibility to make sure everything they say is factual. That is something I try to do every time I talk. I try to respect it as much as I can. A lot of populism and extremism is happening in the Parliament at the moment and the centrist party, EPP, along with Renew, Greens and Social Democrats, are trying to work towards that.

Active farming and part-time farming are hugely important. There will be lots of discussion but Ireland is well-represented on CAP and we will reinforce the importance of that. Trying to define it will not be an easy discussion either.

I would love to work with Senator Nelson Murray on public liability. I can try to look more into public liability insurance and making it more competitive across the European Union. On the toy safety regulation, there are counterfeit products, particularly from China. It is not adhering to the regulation and we need to be stricter in enforcing safety standards. That is an area we need to focus on.

Senator Conway mentioned the rental fleet. The regulations coming through are at an early stage in the Parliament. I would oppose strict targets that would unfairly and disproportionately affect our small companies and airports. That is something I will put amendments to in the coming weeks and months when it comes to the transport committee.

There was a mention of online safety and tackling platforms to make them more accountable. It is hugely important. We need to work with the Commissioner from a grassroots perspective. We need more education. We can make all the rules and regulations we want - and that is necessary - with our Digital Services Act, Digital Networks Act and Digital Fairness Act. These regulations are all worthwhile and we need to make them more robust but we need a grassroots approach as well. When it comes to education, It Takes A Village in Greystones is doing amazing work on getting the whole community involved and giving children tools to make sure they are protected online. That is working peer to peer. I look forward to having representatives of the initiative in the European Parliament and giving them an idea of what we can see rolled out throughout the EU.

It is a great project that we could see happening throughout the Irish Presidency and I will get behind it.

Going back to the Irish language, it is hugely important. Some of the meetings can happen in Irish. I really support that, and we have a huge opportunity now to advocate for the language. It is something that I am going to try to get better at as well.

One of the Members mentioned TEN-T. It is hugely important. There is a long process involved in TEN-T and getting on that network, but it is hugely important that we keep pushing. Island member states should not be at a disadvantage because we are not in land contact with Europe. That is something that I will be advocating for. We have seen a lot of TEN-T funding heading to the Dublin-Belfast railway line and Dublin and Cork ports. These are all things that have been funded by TEN-T but we need to see it expanded into the western rail corridor and this is something I would support too.

I have run out of time. I am only here to help and communicate and I am delighted to answer any of the Members' questions after we have finished.

Mr. Barry Cowen: I will try to run through some answers to the various questions. For those we cannot answer, we will definitely remain in close contact in the coming weeks to respond to them.

In relation to the issue of Irish school meals supposedly being compromised, I refute that. I disagree with it wholeheartedly. If Mr. Mullooly has evidence of that I ask that he lays it on the table. If he has not, he should withdraw it and let us move on.

The Common Fisheries Policy is under review at present and will be under the Irish Presidency. I expect that the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, will be conversing with Members and the stakeholders with the view to seeking to have that overhauled because, as was rightly said, it is very dated. It does not bear much resemblance to the industry today and the way the quota system has evolved over time with Brexit, the deal with Norway that was alluded to and so forth.

In relation to the issue of MEPs liaising with the Committee of the Regions, regional authorities and local councillors, notwithstanding the added bonus of my neighbour Séamus Boland being president of the Committee of the Regions presently, we have a very good working relationship. We are kept abreast of developments and of their input and asks with a view to ensuring that irrespective of what committee we individually sit on, we reflect their opinions and aspirations, and support policy and legislation that will help rather than hinder them in their efforts to grow their own communities and regions.

On the question on active farming and arriving at a successful definition that takes note and is cognisant of the diversification we have even in Ireland, there are certain parts of the country where food production is more intensive. However, we would like to see no further conditionality on sustainable food production but rewards for those who move with innovation, technology and new practices, and to augment that and build on the success we have had both in our own internal market and beyond Europe's shores in international trade, which I mentioned. That is notwithstanding the progress we have seen in relation to the 7% increase in our beef trade, the 20% increase in our food exports and new markets being opened all the time on foot of European agreements and then carried through by our Government in its efforts to reopen and present new markets.

I am also conscious of those farmers who are on less productive and less arable land, who are not full time and are not profitable but are supplementing their family's income. It is essential that is recognised because in the absence of those farmers we would see depopulation

in rural areas, so we have to find a way of monetising that. We have to look at making sure that nature and carbon trading is not an aspiration but a reality.

The issue of nature restoration and the funding towards that was mentioned in this House previously. I know that the previous Government gave a commitment to divide the windfall taxes between the nature fund and the Ireland fund. We saw the augmentation and repurposing of the national development plan, provided for with the finances that I alluded to. I expect the same in relation to nature restoration and rewetting. We made commitments during the course of the last election that no farmer would be forced to engage in that practice bar they wanted to do so voluntarily. However, they have to be rewarded for doing it and there has to be an income benefit to them along the lines of the supplementary income that I mentioned. That is the sort of concept we want to engender and ensure is easily visible in the context of a new Common Agricultural Policy.

In relation to Gaza, first and foremost, Netanyahu, his people, government and army were more than entitled to repel Hamas's illegal incursion and drive it back to its own territory, but under no shape or form would we support or be in favour of what is against the international rule of law and all human rights as we know them, and in total violation of everything we stand for. Irrespective of what we think of the leadership and governance of Israel, I am sure there are plenty of good people there too whom Netanyahu does not act on behalf of.

I commend the Government on the leadership it has shown to many other states within Europe. We are in the minority in many cases in relation to this issue. I and my colleagues in Fianna Fáil did not vote for von der Leyen initially because of the lack of meaningful response in relation to this issue. Some will point to subsequent votes that have happened in the meantime. Those subsequent votes have added value to them in the context that if we get rid of her, we will get rid of the whole Commission, including Michael McGrath and the work he is doing in the whole area of justice and the responsibility he has in that regard. There has been some progress of late. It is moving in a far better direction than it was previously. I remain committed, as do my colleagues of all parties and none, to voice the concerns, worries and aspirations of the Irish people in relation to what they can see is just appalling and disgusting. I could not give Members the words that are needed to describe what I think of Netanyahu as a person and the way in which he carries out his duties supposedly in the name of his people, which I doubt very much would be the case if it were put to a democratic test.

Mr. Luke 'Ming' Flanagan: I thank the Cathaoirleach. I am delighted that fisheries was brought up. I will clarify my role on the fisheries committee. If an MEP is a member or substitute member of the committee, they can contribute amendments, participate and speak at any committee meeting they want. I am a substitute on the fisheries committee, but no MEP has spoken more often than me on that committee. Some people would like to use the role of substitute as an excuse to hide but that cannot happen because they can actually achieve just as much. It might not be as good for someone's ego but who the hell cares about our ego? As a substitute member, I am now the lead negotiator for our group on the sectoral regulation. That is good news. We will now have seven MEPs in the whole of the European Parliament who will discuss the sectoral regulation on fisheries, and we will have an Irish MEP present there. Whether I am a substitute or a full member is totally and utterly irrelevant as it turns out.

One of the big concerns that I have for fisheries is the fact that ring-fenced funding has gone down from €6 billion to €2 billion. When an MEP is on the agricultural or the PECH committees, it is a bit like going to mammy and she says that she will give you something and then going to daddy and he says that he will give it. However, when you get the two of them together, it is not quite that simple. We on the PECH committee are told not to worry and that we will be able to get extra money for that fund. On the agricultural committee, we are also told that we will be able to get extra money from that fund and not to worry, but if everyone gets extra money there will not be enough money. The reality is we are looking at cuts and we should not be. There is an opinion produced by the committee which is looking for €7 billion and we should be because it is very important.

The issue of the Irish language was touched upon. For a start, the best thing we can do for the Irish language is to guarantee that the people who already speak it can continue to live in their area. The areas we are talking about are areas that are dependent upon small-scale fishers and small-scale farming, but what have we done? We have cut funding to fisheries by 66%, funding to agriculture by 20% and in real terms funding to agriculture has been cut by 68% since 1991.

Were we to maintain that budget, the average payment for farmers this year in Ireland would be around €18,000. That would help an awful lot of people. It would not just help the farmers because I am not a farmer and have never been a farmer. It would not necessarily be a bad thing but I would have a London accent now if it was not for the Common Agricultural Policy because my father would have had to leave again. If it was not for that policy, all the people for whom he put in the windows, doors and fitted cupboards would not have had any money. The hairdressers in my town would not have had any money because my mother would not have been able to go there. An awful lot of money would have been lost.

To go back to the Irish language, without people we will not have an Irish language. We need to protect the industries they are most dependent on. As the shadow rapporteur on that sectoral file, I am placing in a number of amendments to help fishers. I am looking for a fair allocation of resources to coastal and island communities. I am looking for prioritisation of small-scale fishers who have a reduced impact on the marine environment. They represent 87% of fishers in Ireland. People might ask what I am going to do for larger fishers. While there are plenty of other MEPs there, the reality is that even if I was to put all my effort into getting us more quota, as an MEP I have virtually no control over it. What I try to have control over is that the quota we have is fairly distributed and those people are respected. I also have amendments on generational renewal and facilitating a just transition to low-impact fisheries.

We talk about populism. Everyone is capable of populism. Everyone has been guilty of it. We would not be human if we were not. I would say that people complaining about the old Common Agricultural Policy regulation was populism. Virtually none of them ever read it. They said that we need to get rid of it. They banged their drum. Now, what have they done? They have got rid of it. What have we got? We have got something worse. Under the old Common Agricultural Policy, we could have given more money to the environment. We were free to do it if we wanted to. Under the old Common Agricultural Policy, we had national plans - we still have national plans - where we could decide locally. We could have done everything that these people were demanding and had a better policy than the one that is currently coming in. Everyone is capable of populism; not just the people who are being accused of it. There

are plenty of populists here. I have tried and will stick to trying not to be Mr. Populist because it does not gain anyone anything. I do not want reform of the Common Fisheries Policy. I want us to implement the one that we currently have and to implement Article 17. We have freedom to do this. Article 17 would support low-impact fishers and small-scale fishers, that is, 87% of fishers in Ireland. I guarantee Senators that the Irish language will do well out of that because fish and animals cannot speak. Biodiversity is very important but we are important too. We need people in these areas and to have that, we need money. There is money there; it is just going to the wrong places.

Mr. Ciaran Mullooly: On the previous issue, I agree with Senator Flanagan about the-----

Mr. Luke 'Ming' Flanagan: I am not a Senator yet.

Mr. Ciaran Mullooly: I beg your pardon; I meant MEP Flanagan, who is a former Deputy. I agree with him in relation to where things are. Senator Manus Boyle has been out several times. I am a new MEP and people say to me that the origin of this is the Brexit deal. This is where we initially lost out despite promises at the time that we would be considered. I recall in my old job interviewing a European Commissioner and Ministers here and they said the welfare of fishermen in Ireland would be looked after. We lost 24%. That was from the horse's mouth. That is the origin of the deal. Correcting it is not going to be easy. It might be popular of me to say that there are going to be 100 ways of doing it but there is not. While efforts have been made, I was particularly disappointed last December that we did not do better in terms of the negotiations that were going on at that stage. It is a bit like CAP and Mercosur. In the European Commission, you have to form alliances and get people with you around the table. That did not happen last December in the fishery negotiations at that stage.

There was a question regarding the Israeli settlements (prohibition of importation of goods) Bill. The Government has justified the approach it has made on the basis of legal advice that it is going to be limited to goods and does not extend to services. I note the Oireachtas foreign affairs committee's pre-legislative scrutiny supported the inclusion of services. Yet this is now to be disregarded by the Government. What is the point of the foreign affairs committee carrying out this work if it is going to be ignored?

On clarifying my comments, I thank Senators O'Reilly and Flaherty for the kind comments and will reiterate my comments in relation to school meals. Last October or November, a consignment - albeit a small consignment - of beef came from Northern Ireland into this country. The consignment included illegal animal growth promoters called oestradiol. It is carcinogenic. It came from the UK. Last Thursday, I spoke to the Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi to ask him how this could happen. He explained how it happened on two occasions. First, it was through the UK. Second, it was through Antwerp. Three different consignments on three different boats were brought in through Antwerp. He said Antwerp was on top of it. It is frozen and in many cases, it is pre-packed. In the case of Antwerp, new safeguards are there and we are going to hope that they do the job. In the UK, he cannot put his hand on his heart and say that we have safeguards because they are not there.

Mr. Barry Cowen: There is an agreement between the UK and Ireland.

Mr. Ciaran Mullooly: I asked him. There is an agreement that does not provide the same level of audit. If I could finish the point, that is the bottom line. Regarding school meals, they came up in that discussion in relation to who is using them. At no stage, I said it was Irish. I said UK-based frozen meat. That is what came in and was consumed in this country-----

Senator Paraic Brady: No school-----

Mr. Ciaran Mullooly: ----- by a family. Not in a school situation; in a family situation.

An Cathaoirleach: Mr. Mullooly, without interruption.

Mr. Barry Cowen: That is not what Mr. Mullooly said.

Mr. Ciaran Mullooly: That is what I said last Thursday-----

Mr. Barry Cowen: That is not what he said an hour ago.

Mr. Ciaran Mullooly: ----and that is what I am saying here again today. For the want of clarity on the issue-----

Senator Sharon Keogan: Let the man speak.

Mr. Ciaran Mullooly: For the want of clarity on the issue-----

An Cathaoirleach: Mr. Mullooly has possession. I ask him to continue without anybody interrupting.

A Senator: Stop talking waffle.

An Cathaoirleach: Please, out of respect for our guests, I ask Members to let them finish their contributions.

Mr. Ciaran Mullooly: The facts are as follows; at the moment Brazilian beef is not safe on the European list.

Mr. Barry Cowen: It has been stopped.

An Cathaoirleach: Sorry, could I ask-----

Mr. Barry Cowen: There is no school impact.

An Cathaoirleach: Everybody gets their time.

Mr. Barry Cowen: It is pure scaremongering.

An Cathaoirleach: This part is for the MEPs to finalise their contributions to the questions that were asked.

Mr. Ciaran Mullooly: I thank the Cathaoirleach. As a result of that, the Commissioner has said that he requires safeguards to be improved and checked with regards to Brazilian beef before 1 September or it will be off altogether. The focus that we have in the intermediate period is meat from the UK coming in here, including frozen and pre-packed. That includes pre-packed food coming into schools and hospitals in certain cases. I asked the Food Safety Authority of Ireland to investigate this. It has not been in a position to clarify-----

An Cathaoirleach: Hold on. Please. Sorry-----

Mr. Barry Cowen: There is no proof then.

Senator Paraic Brady: What is going on here today is detrimental. We have farmers in this country. That is detrimental. That is absolutely criminal. That is detrimental to our beef sector. Our beef farmers are suffering at this minute in time where beef has fallen every day by 27 cent per kilo and we have a MEP coming into this Chamber. That is detrimental. That is disgusting.

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Brady-----

Senator Paraic Brady: No way.

An Cathaoirleach: Everybody-----

Senator Joe O'Reilly: On a point of order-----

An Cathaoirleach: No, we have not changed the ruling.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: -----we need clarification for parents sending children to school. We do not want to instill fear. This matter needs clarity. On a point of order, this has to be sorted.

An Cathaoirleach: The question was asked. The guests with us are entitled to answer the questions in any way that they feel appropriate. I am not directing how they do it. Everybody has been given the opportunity to ask their questions. MEPs are entitled to give their contribution. I am going to give more time because there has been a number of interruptions.

Mr. Ciaran Mullooly: I thank the Cathaoirleach. In case there is any doubt about it if the beef coming into a school is Irish beef, there is no issue regarding the health and safety of it. If the meat coming to the school is from the UK, I am asking questions, and the safety Commissioner is asking questions. We need it clarified. I am not prepared to wait until 3 September for this. I have told the Food Safety Authority this very clearly. I could not it make any clearer.

Mr. Barry Cowen: Is Mr. Mullooly saying-----

Mr. Ciaran Mullooly: I have answered this question. I could not make any clearer. If the meat in the school is coming in-----

Mr. Barry Cowen: Mr. Mullooly is saying what he likes, as usual.

Senator Joe Flaherty: He effectively said that every school lunch is getting Brazilian beef.

Senator Paraic Brady: Withdraw that statement.

Senator Joe Flaherty: Withdraw that remark.

Senator Paraic Brady: There is absolutely no evidence of that whatsoever.

Senator Aidan Davitt: On a point of order-----

An Cathaoirleach: Members, a question has been asked. A Member of the European Parliament is answering the question. He and any Member is entitled to answer the question any way they feel fit. That is the rule of the House. We have not changed the way the debate is structured.

Senator Paraic Brady: Hundreds of people working in the school lunches sector-----

Senator Aidan Davitt: As a father of young children, I want that man to withdraw that remark.

Senator Joe Flaherty: He needs to withdraw that remark. He has absolutely no evidence--

Senator Aidan Davitt: He did not address what you said.

An Cathaoirleach: The structure of the debate has been outlined and agreed by the House today.

Senator Joe Flaherty: We are not concerned with the structure of the debate. We are concerned that a scurrilous accusation has been made about school lunches. He does not want to stand over his remarks on Brazilian beef and he has no evidence to confirm that.

An Cathaoirleach: Members are aware, whether a Minister or anybody comes into this House and they are giving their answer, they are giving their answer. The structure-----

Senator Aidan Davitt: He is not standing over what he said.

An Cathaoirleach: Everybody, including Ministers and yourselves, are entitled to answer the questions put to them in the way they feel is appropriate. We have lost more time. I want to go onto our final contribution before the Acting Leader-----

Senator Paraic Brady: He still has 15 minutes to reply.

Senator Aidan Davitt: He has not addressed what he is saying.

An Cathaoirleach: I will give you one more minute. Mr. Mullooly, without interruption. Everyone is aware of all the questions being asked of the Members of the European Parliament. They are answering the questions as they see it.

Mr. Ciaran Mullooly: I will try to wrap it up.

Senator Alison Comyn: He has not addressed at all the question I-----

Mr. Ciaran Mullooly: I am coming to the question, if I get an opportunity.

An Cathaoirleach: We will give one more minute and I want to-----

Senator Gareth Scahill: Give him two.

Mr. Ciaran Mullooly: I have been in public life as a journalist and a politician for 37 years. My record stands as it stands for 37 years. I am honoured by my peers and others for my work in journalism and my honesty and truth. I do not have to answer questions relating to that. I make the statement for clarity. Irish beef is not a problem. Irish school meals made with Irish beef are not a problem. Beef coming from the UK without proper auditing is a problem.

Mr. Barry Cowen: Is it going into schools or not?

Mr. Ciaran Mullooly: Frozen meat from the UK going into schools and elsewhere is a problem.

Mr. Barry Cowen: Name them.

Mr. Ciaran Mullooly: It is continuing. On the other comments made, I am trying to answer a question-----

An Cathaoirleach: Mr. Mullooly, MEP without interruption please.

Senator Linda Nelson Murray: Can Mr. Mullooly prove that Brazilian beef is going into Irish schools via the hot school meals programme?

An Cathaoirleach: Sorry Senator but-----

Senator Linda Nelson Murray: I am so sorry, but the amount of businesses that will be affected by this-----

An Cathaoirleach: The questions have been asked and I am trying to-----

Senator Linda Nelson Murray: But he is not answering it, with the greatest of respect.

Senator Gareth Scahill: The question was on the initial remark. It is to withdraw it. That was the question.

Mr. Ciaran Mullooly: I am not withdrawing anything. I told the House what I said about UK meat.

Mr. Barry Cowen: Is it UK meat or Brazilian meat coming through the UK?

Mr. Ciaran Mullooly: Senator-----

Senator Aidan Davitt: He should know the difference between UK beef and Brazilian beef.

Mr. Barry Cowen: Is it UK meat or Brazilian beef coming through the UK?

Mr. Ciaran Mullooly: The problem is Brazilian beef coming through the UK. The Commissioner made it very clear.

An Cathaoirleach: Through the Chair.

Senator Aidan Davitt: I am the father of two kids getting school meals and I want to know should I not do the school meals any more.

An Cathaoirleach: Excuse me. I ask Mr. Mullooly to finalise his contribution because we have gone way over time on his contribution. I know there have been a number of interruptions. I want to get to Maria Walsh, MEP before I ask the Acting Leader and Leas-Chathaoirleach to come in.

Mr. Ciaran Mullooly: I do apologise. To answer Senator Comyn, my settlement from RTÉ, for the record, was less than the amount due to the presenter of "The Late Late Show". I do not have to answer that question.

An Cathaoirleach: I know.

Mr. Ciaran Mullooly: That was my final settlement. I am answering it anyway. That was the question raised.

Regarding my comments in Brussels and in general, as I said for 35 years I have asked questions. I will continue to ask hard questions. no matter where I am.

Mr. Barry Cowen: Answer them.

Mr. Ciaran Mullooly: If Mr. Cowen is going to interrupt me-----

An Cathaoirleach: Without interruption, Senator.

Mr. Ciaran Mullooly: -----say something parliamentary.

An Cathaoirleach: I ask that questions be directed through-----

Mr. Ciaran Mullooly: I will finish with these words. "I've learned a hard lesson. ... I owe apologies, I was sloppy ...". Does Mr. Cowen recognise those words?

Mr. Barry Cowen: With the tanks?

Mr. Ciaran Mullooly: They were the ones from Mr. Cowen's colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, when he managed to leave the Chamber even though six votes had been taken in his absence. Does he remember that? In terms of mistakes-----

(Interruptions)

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: That is farcical.

(Interruptions)

Mr. Ciaran Mullooly: In terms of mistakes-----

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: On a point of order, the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, is not here to defend himself. That has to be withdrawn.

(Interruptions)

Mr. Ciaran Mullooly: The Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, when I make those comments-----

Mr. Barry Cowen: Usually you would be in attendance.

Senator Sharon Keogan: It is wonderful today that Mr. Mullooly is in the hot seat because it is normally me.

Senator Paraic Brady: On a point of order-----

An Cathaoirleach: No, there is no-----

Senator Joe O'Reilly: Hungry children going to school depend on these meals. That is why we need this clarity.

Senator Paraic Brady: On a point of order-----

An Cathaoirleach: No.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: This is actually not-----

An Cathaoirleach: I call on Ms Maria Walsh.

Senator Paraic Brady: I know we have to move on, but Mr. Mullooly did not rectify the question when I asked about the tanks on the streets of Dublin. Does he withdraw that here today?

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Brady-----

Senator Paraic Brady: Were there tanks on the streets of Dublin?

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Brady-----

Senator Paraic Brady: He knows well there were not tanks. Will he withdraw it or will he not? Will he answer the question? I want the question answered.

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Brady, the next contribution is Ms Maria Walsh MEP.

Senator Joe Flaherty: Senator Comyn deserves a response to her questions. Ciaran Mullooly went from a taxpayer funded job. He subsequently was in two further taxpayer funded jobs and his currently in the EU subsidised by taxpayers-----

An Cathaoirleach: Can I just be clear, what we are debating here-----

Senator Joe Flaherty: The question needs to be answered. How much was his redundancy? Did he understand it as a redundancy payment or a set-up by RTÉ to facilitate it?

An Cathaoirleach: Just to be clear, this is an address to Seanad Éireann by Members of the European Parliament about Europe. What anybody did in a previous job is not the issue before us here today. I call on Ms Maria Walsh, MEP.

Senator Aidan Davitt: I want to know should I ask my kids school meals-----

An Cathaoirleach: Ms Maria Walsh, without interruption.

Ms Maria Walsh: I thank the Cathaoirleach. I will start where the debate finished. To answer Senator Brady's question, I am delighted. I was one of the MEPs to vote in favour of safeguards in the Mercosur trade deal. The debate we had and the misinformation that was shared would not be used in that case. I only have a few minutes and wanted to run through some points.

One point I did not highlight in my earlier interventions was the occupied territories Bill and the stance on the genocide that is happening by Netanyahu. I want to be really clear in my language that when we talk about Israel, it is Netanyahu and allies specifically and not the Jewish or Israeli people being referenced. There seems to be misinformation online and offline in that regard. I have been very clear on the stopping of the Israel trade agreement. I am disappointed, in many cases, that services are not being included in the occupied territories Bill. I want to be clear on that.

The occupied territories Bill should not reference only Gaza. Goods and services are coming in and out of the EU from territories in Cyprus that were invaded by Türkiye and many other countries. I mentioned Africa earlier. If we are going to do this, we should do it properly and with good judicial and legal standing.

Senator Boyle's questions on fisheries were answered. It is important that Fine Gael is in the EPP group due to our strong relationship with Commissioner Kadis. We need to build on that. It is not a clear pathway. One could be the loudest in the room in the nosebleed seats and get nothing done or one could be in the Colosseum and try to get stuff done. Sometimes we forget about that in politics. We need to get back to that. Being in the EPP allows us to have those interventions and conversations.

I wanted to pick up on a real issue. I work really hard, along with my team, on gender equality. A question was asked about our trans community and the real issue with women's safety - and evidence is very clear - is that the overwhelming majority of violence against women happens in the home or is committed by someone known to the person. Some 35% of women, more than one in three, have experienced psychological, physical or sexual abuse from an intimate partner. Scapegoating or using other minority groups does absolutely nothing for women's safety. It is a distraction.

I will lean into Senator Mullen's point on pornography. From a European and Irish standpoint, access to porn is, on average about ten to 13 years. I think it is younger. The UK statistics show children younger than seven access pornography.

If we are taking in the realm of the increase of violence online and offline, it is right that we have to look at what Europe can do but we also look at what Ireland can do. We hold a number of tech companies accountable here, or not accountable enough in many cases. The roll-out of the verification tools by the end of the year was led by the EU Commission for this country and any other member state. It is probably the right step to take but we have to also have age-appropriate sexual education in schools. Consent-based conversations need to happen, sadly, at a younger age if children are accessing pornography at the average age of ten here.

Senator Sharon Keogan: No way.

Ms Maria Walsh: I am sorry; I thought the Chair was asking me to wrap up. If anybody has tuned in to the last nearly three hours of this debate, and a lot have, they have seen a lot of negativity about what the European Union is. That is a disgrace. My generation has benefited so greatly. We can live, work, love, study, travel anywhere across 27 member states. Our young people have access to interrailing. Our third level universities are the pinnacle of best practice when it comes to R&D and other investments into our education. We can also look at Erasmus. I refer to what Senator Scahill said. Any euro that gets spent by the Government from EU taxpayers has to be identified because we end up having nationalistic anti-European sentiment. Sadly, we are seeing that more and more. We cannot be ignorant of the fact that 83% of citizens are pro-European.

Our reputations are not permanent; they must be protected, strengthened and earned. We stand at a pivotal point. I hope what we have just seen in the previous intervention a few minutes ago and prior to that about misinformation are called out and that Members hold us accountable, as we hold them. We support councillors and the European Committee of the Regions in putting Ireland at the very core of being pro-European. We bucked the trend. We bucked it in 2024 and we need to continue to do it because, as we all know, equality is very hard fought but very quickly lost.

An Cathaoirleach: Before I call on the Acting Leader, I thank all our MEPs for their contribution and outlining the work they do. As this is broadcast on Oireachtas TV over the coming weeks I hope that the MEPs, having outlined all the committees they are working on, much of which is unknown and unacknowledged. I want to acknowledge it here today. We thank the MEPs for all the work they do on behalf of Ireland at all those committee meetings. There is not a lot of glory and medals won sitting in committee meetings for hours on end for projects that can take years to get across the line, and the small victories that nobody at home will hear about that they are achieving on our behalf. I thank them for that. I will ask the Acting Leader and the Leas-Chathaoirleach to make a few closing remarks.

Senator Garret Ahearn: On behalf of all Senators, I thank the MEPs for being here today. This was a really good initiative that was set up in the previous Seanad. It is very constructive. It is a great opportunity for us to understand what they are doing and it is a great opportunity for the MEPs to outline their priorities and what they are highlighting at a European level. There has always been a little bit of a disconnect. When someone gets elected to Europe, people often say they do not see them for four or five years. That is just the feeling on the ground. They do not know what is happening and they are a little bit disconnected from European politics. As many of the MEPs said, there are so many benefits from membership of the European Union. That is why a discussion like today's is so important in outlining those benefits.

A lot of the discussion has been about the EU Presidency. There is a huge opportunity for Ireland to prioritise issues for Ireland, whether it is CAP negotiations, fisheries or defence and security. We can play a leadership role in the continued support for Ukraine. There was a positive result in the Hungarian elections. We can continue to play a leadership role on the EU-Israel Association Agreement.

I smiled when Mr. Flanagan was talking about people who talk about the CAP but do not read the documentation. Mr. Mullooly talked about the occupied territories Bill. He clearly

has not read it because it is stated about five times in the Bill that we had not availed of the recommendation from the Attorney General. It says so many times in the report - if he reads it - that the recommendation is really important in delivering a decision. We spent 30 hours at the foreign affairs committee meeting hundreds of representatives and formulated a position, but it was not based on the Attorney General's advice. We all agree that such advice is a critical part of making a decision on policy and whether it is implementable.

These sessions work really well when MEPs are here, but they only have credibility if all MEPs are here. It is important to recognise and thank them for that. We all have different views and perspectives but the MEPs are all here. It is important that I make the point on behalf of Senators - not every MEP may be aware of this - we conduct ourselves differently in this House. There are other parliaments in Europe and in the other House in this building where people conduct themselves differently and use opportunities to mislead people and to scaremonger. This is not a House where we do it. It is very disappointing. As has been said, people watching here today would be very worried about comments that were made. I find it extremely worrying that when people stand up here to highlight it, there is smiling on the other side. That is very disappointing. I ask people to reflect on that. We have a responsibility as public representatives to reflect on that. We can have our views but we should not smile at the concerns that people on this side are outlining. I thank the MEPs for the work they are doing. It is a tough job - as someone said before as an MEP. It is tough on families. We recognise that. We thank them for being here today.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: In my closing remarks, I sincerely thank Ms Nina Carberry, MEP, Mr. Barry Cowen, MEP, Mr. Luke 'Ming' Flanagan, MEP, Mr. Ciaran Mullooly, MEP and Ms Maria Walsh, MEP, for coming here today and for their contributions. We are five weeks away from the European Presidency on 1 July. It is important that we have this conversation. As Ireland's voice in the European Parliament, our MEPs play a vital role in shaping decisions that affect the everyday lives of Irish citizens. We are very grateful for the insight they have shared with us.

Today's discussion also highlights the practical impact of the European Union but also its deeper importance. The European Union stands for shared democratic values, respect for human dignity and the rule of law. It continues to be a cornerstone of peace, security and co-operation across the Continent at a time those principles are more important than ever. This engagement also underlines the importance of maintaining and strengthening the connection between this House and our representatives in the European Parliament. Today has helped to deepen our understanding of its relevance and the crucial role our MEPs play within it. The co-operation between Seanad Éireann and our MEPs is greatly valued. I hope we will continue to build on this relationship in the time ahead, in particular during the Presidency of the European Council. I thank all Senators for their contributions and participation. I again thank our MEPs for their time and their continued service to the people of Ireland. I wish them all the very best of luck for the future, especially as we go into the Presidency.

Garda Síochána (Recording Devices) (Amendment) Bill 2025: Second Stage

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

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I am very pleased to be back in the Seanad for the second time today. I cannot, however, guarantee the same level of excitement that took place before my arrival. I am pleased to introduce the Garda Síochána (Recording Devices) (Amendment) Bill 2025 and I look forward to hearing the contributions from Senators.

The Bill before the House amends the Garda Síochána (Recording Devices) Act 2023 and will provide the ability to utilise biometric analysis on a retrospective basis only. This technology is sometimes referred to more generically as facial recognition technology. There are a variety of types of facial recognition technology. One is biometric analysis, while another is biometric identification. Both can be carried out on a retrospective or live basis. What we are dealing with here is biometric analysis on a retrospective basis only.

The need to provide An Garda Síochána with technology such as biometric analysis is well established. We live in an age where the proliferation of data in society has an impact on Garda investigations. In any one investigation, gardaí could be examining enormous quantities of images or video footage that may contain vital information or evidence. Where computers, mobile phones or other devices are seized by gardaí on foot of warrants issued by a court - this could be for crimes relating to terrorism, organised crime or child abuse material - the array of documents that form part of an investigation can number in the hundreds of thousands, or even millions. An Garda Síochána will not be able to reliably process large-scale data without the relevant tools to aid this process. Biometric analysis will be a crucial tool to aid this important work.

To take the example of an investigation into child sexual abuse material, the Garda may find hundreds of thousands of images and videos on a seized device. If it has access to biometric analysis, it could utilise these tools to sort instances of a particular physical feature of a known or unknown person, such as the victims of these crimes, in that cache of images or video. This work is concerned simply with the organisation of information and will ensure that victims of these crimes are removed from harm at the earliest opportunity.

By giving the Garda the power to use biometric analysis, I am not seeking to replace traditional policing methods. Rather, this technology will aid gardaí in their work by allowing them to categorise, sort and filter documents gathered in the course of an investigation utilising biometrics for further review. This is not to say that use of these tools should be without safeguards, however. Senators will note that several safeguards are detailed in the text of the Bill, which I will summarise. Biometric analysis will not be used in every investigation. Rather, it may only be utilised where it is necessary and proportionate in respect of a specific Garda investigation into an arrestable offence, a matter relating to State security or in the context of a missing person investigation. Gardaí will only be able to search for certain data subjects, including persons reasonably suspected of having committed an arrestable offence or being a threat to the security of the State, victims of arrestable offences or missing persons.

This technology will be used to support Garda decision-making only. Human review and intervention to assess the reliability of any matches produced is built into the Bill. That means a trained garda will be responsible for its use and any decisions arising from the processing of biometric data. Gardaí finding a match utilising biometric analysis with no further interrogation of the footage or images will not be the basis for an arrest in itself. Biometric

analysis is solely a tool to be used to assist with the sorting of information and provide gardaí with a starting point or leads within their investigation.

Any use of biometric analysis will be governed by a code of practice, which will set out the procedures that apply to the use of the technology. This will be drafted by the Garda Commissioner and will be laid before both Houses of the Oireachtas. Approval of the code is dependent on positive resolutions being passed by both Houses. This will give Senators the opportunity to consider the code prior to its signing. As part of the process of developing a code, human rights and data protection impact assessments will be required, the results of which will be provided to the bodies listed in section 10 of this Bill. There will also be the opportunity for members of the public to provide feedback on the code, alongside the bodies set out in the Bill during the drafting process. Any use of biometric analysis will also be subject to judicial oversight by way of an annual review of the operation of this technology by a judge of the High Court.

I will now take Senators through the Bill. It is divided into 11 sections. Sections 1 and 2 are standard provisions providing for commencement orders and definitions. Section 3 amends section 2 of the principal Act. It inserts the definition of an arrestable offence and amends the definition of a code of practice to take account of the new provisions being inserted by section 10.

Section 4 amends section 3 of the principal Act, as it relates to orders and regulations.

Section 5 amends section 7 of the principal Act. This is to ensure that CCTV applications currently in train may continue to be assessed under section 38 of the 2005 Act upon commencement of the relevant CCTV provisions in the principal Act. Section 7 currently sets out transitional arrangements for existing CCTV authorisations.

Section 6 amends section 13 by removing the definition of an arrestable offence.

Section 7 amends section 20 of the principal Act. It will delete subparagraph 20(2)(a)(iv), one of purposes specified for the use of automatic number plate recognition, ANPR. The provision was deemed unnecessary as the occasions for which it was included are adequately covered by subparagraph 20(2)(a)(ii).

Section 8 will insert Part 6A into the principal Act. This comprises five sections, namely, sections 43A to 43E, inclusive. Section 43A sets out the definitions for the new Part. These include the definition of biometric analysis. The definition will cover searching for general characteristics such as height and hair colour, as well the searching of biometrics of unknown and known individuals.

Section 43B sets out that the Bill will not apply to certain enactments to ensure that any co-operation internationally where gardaí have access to or utilise biometrics will not be impacted by the provisions of the Bill.

Section 43C sets out the substantive provisions for the carrying out of biometric analysis. There are only three purposes for which it can be used, namely, the prevention, detection, investigation or prosecution of arrestable offences; the protection of the security of the State; and looking for missing persons. In all cases, it must be necessary and proportionate. Section 43C also lists the data subjects that may be searched utilising biometric analysis. This is to ensure transparency as to who the Garda may look for using these tools. As biometric analysis

will only be utilised as a decision-support tool, the section also ensures that human review of any results is required.

Section 43D is a standard processing provision, which aligns with the principal Act. It is to make clear that gardaí may further process the results of any analysis conducted. A range of offences is then set out in section 43E.

Section 9 of the Bill makes amendments to the code of practice provisions in section 47 of the principal Act. The main change being made by this section is the inclusion of provisions to allow for minor amendments to the code of practice without the need for a full consultation process under that section.

Section 10 will insert Part 8A into the principal Act. It provides that the Garda Commissioner will have to draft a code of practice for Part 6A - the carrying out of biometric analysis. This follows on from the principal Act whereby the code will set out the procedures by which gardaí may carry out biometric analysis. The code will also outline requirements in relation to storage, access, retention, deletion of data and confidentiality.

Finally, section 11 will ensure that the carrying out of biometric analysis will be overseen by a designated judge of the High Court who will report to the Taoiseach annually.

I advise Senators that I plan to put forward two minor technical amendments to section 8 of the Bill on Committee Stage. These include a minor amendment to the wording in the definition of "biometric analysis" at section 43A, and an amendment to section 43B as it relates to international co-operation. It is of the utmost importance that effective international co-operation can proceed and the Bill does not impede such co-operation. This is particularly in the case of child sexual abuse material investigations. As Senators will be aware, the Garda regularly engages with its counterparts internationally.

Finally, it must be recognised that this Bill falls within the wider framework of EU law on the use of AI systems. The EU AI Act has direct effect, and where gardaí deploy high-risk AI systems in this context, there are obligations for the providers and deployers of such systems under that Act. Members will be well aware of that.

The programme for Government includes two commitments in respect of Garda use of this type of technology; namely, to support the Garda to use AI; and to deploy facial recognition technology for serious crime. This Bill will be a step towards fulfilling these commitments. It is also my intention to publish a general scheme of a second amending Bill which will provide for retrospective identification, and for live use of biometrics. Together, these will provide a firm legislative basis for the Garda to utilise biometric systems in the course of their work, while respecting privacy rights and working within the well-established principles of data protection. It is important that the Garda has access to the most up-to-date tools necessary to combat serious crime.

I look forward to hearing Senators' contributions in respect of this Bill.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire ar ais arís chuig an Seanad um thráthnóna. I welcome the Minister back to the House this afternoon.

On behalf of the Fianna Fáil Group, I welcome this debate and very much support the Bill. We firmly believe that everyone deserves to feel safe in their home, in their community, on our streets and on public transport. To achieve this, citizens must have faith and trust in An Garda Síochána to effectively tackle crime. Providing gardaí with the technologies needed to deliver an effective policing service is a central goal to this. Currently, Garda investigations can involve teams spending months trawling through CCTV footage or footage captured on phones by passers-by. This Bill, if passed, will allow the retrospective use of biometric analysis by An Garda Síochána which will help members to carry out investigations quickly and efficiently, saving valuable Garda time. It will be of most assistance where time is of the essence to preserve a person from a threat of serious harm or a threat to their life. It will also save the gardaí from the harrowing work of poring over thousands or even millions of images and footage of child sexual abuse material.

The use of biometric technology will be limited to cases of arrestable offences where it is proportionate and necessary. It will be subject to strict safeguards and a code of practice that will outline the specific data protection and human rights controls that must be taken into consideration when utilising this technology. In any serious investigation there can be a significant amount of digital data. Without data analysis tools, the length of investigations is likely to increase and have an impact on the Garda's ability to prevent and detect serious crime. The aim in proposing this legislation, as the Minister outlined, was to introduce a limited form of retrospective facial recognition which can assist An Garda Síochána to search CCTV, video footage, images or other documents, where it already does so manually, more quickly and more efficiently.

The Bill amends the Garda Síochána Recording Devices Act 2023 in order to give effect to the Government decision to provide that biometric technologies may be used by An Garda Síochána. Biometric analysis is the automated organisation of biometric data of documents, including images of video footage. Its use will mean that gardaí could sort and filter, or cluster, relevant images from a collection of images or footage. It does not seek to identify a person. Rather, it seeks to find an instance of a person across the relevant images or footage where it is necessary and proportionate to do so. Under the Data Protection Act 2018, it is not possible for An Garda Síochána to process biometric data without a clear statutory basis. The power to carry out biometric analysis needs to be explicitly provided for and is set out in this Bill.

Biometric technologies are already being utilised in police services across the EU and, indeed, in the UK as well. The Bill is subject to EU law in this area, including the AI Act and two regulations. The Bill was drafted with these two laws to the fore of its considerations and any future work in this area will have to ensure there is no conflict with EU law. The Bill contains a requirement that An Garda Síochána only carry out biometric analysis in the context of investigations of an arrestable offence. An arrestable offence, as the Minister outlined, is an offence for which a person of full capacity and not previously convicted may, under or by virtue of any enactment or of common law, be punished by imprisonment for a term of up to five years or by a more severe penalty, and includes an attempt to commit any such offence. Whether the processing of biometric data is relevant to a particular arrestable offence will be assessed on a case-by-case basis. Human rights and data protection impact assessments will be required as part of the procedure and drafting of a code of practice. The Data Protection Commission, among others, will be consulted during the drafting process. The purchase of commercial data basis, etc., against which biometric identification could run will be prohibited.

As the Minister outlined, An Garda Síochána already maintains databases of images and has a legal basis to process images of individuals arrested or convicted under various enactments with the existing rules on retention of those images.

The regulatory strategy throughout is to frame a Bill as a balanced response between privacy rights and public safety. I look forward to the Bill proceeding.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: The Independent Group is next. Am I to understand Senator McDowell is sharing time?

Senator Michael McDowell: Yes, if that is agreeable to the House, on the basis of three minutes for me and five minutes for Senator Boyhan.

An Leas-Chathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Michael McDowell: I welcome the Minister to the House and welcome this Bill entirely without reservation, except that it may lean too far backwards in restricting the use of these methods to assist An Garda Síochána. I fully accept that European law is a constraint in this matter.

I merely wanted to put on the record of the House that it is now more than 20 years since I went, with the then Commissioner of An Garda Síochána, to the United States of America and inspected CCTV systems run in Chicago and other places to reduce crime in those cities. We provided, in the 2005 Act, for the use of CCTV by An Garda Síochána and by local authorities, and then we ran into the activism of the European Union, which began to restrict, under data protection law, the use of data in a way which has very seriously handicapped the use of a CCTV system, even when a local authority wants it as a general measure to discourage criminality. One only has to think of the Graham Dwyer case to see that the EU has thoughtlessly said that data which an Irish telecommunications company used to retain for civil law purposes for six years should not be available, except up to two years. These are foolish and unnecessary restrictions. To be honest, I have always thought that if my privacy is intruded upon by the Garda being able to look at my phone records for two years back to see who I have been contacting, I do not see how my civil liberties are dramatically changed if that period is six years.

Especially in relation to subversion and very serious crime, that was a foolish mistake. I put on the record my full support for the Minister on this matter and my regret that he cannot go further, for instance, to prevent graffiti being put up. These are not serious offences, but somebody should be able to use CCTV in some places to stop people defacing streets in circumstances like that. Insofar as this Bill goes, it has my total support.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I wish I could say the same. I am very positively disposed to this legislation. I thank the Minister for giving his comprehensive statement to us. I smiled with delight somewhat when I heard the Minister pointing out further elements of and commitments in the programme for Government and that he is driving them through. Clearly, this is a Minister with intent and who has a reforming zeal. He is also keeping one eye on the programme for Government, which is encouraging. I do not think any other Minister has ever

come in here to us in the past year and a half and talked about the programme for Government in terms of rattling off the to-do list, as the Minister has. Well done. It is great to see that the Minister is clearly very focused on that.

The Joint Committee on Justice, Home Affairs and Migration carried out an extensive paper and pre-legislative scrutiny on this Bill. There are elements that have changed. I acknowledge that Senators McDowell, Gallagher and Ruane, who are on that committee, made 32 recommendations. It is worth looking at the analysis of those recommendations as compared with the Bill that is before us today. I thank the Oireachtas Library and Research team. I do not know if the Minister has seen their report yet. It is a really good report. Every Minister should always see the Oireachtas Library and Research work. They have done an analysis on the 32 recommendations in the report and have broken them up into four statuses. They say that the key issues that have clearly been accepted and reflected in the Bill amount to four. There are other areas. Adoption of current issues have not been brought into play. They raise interesting points. I intend to look at one or two amendments. Before I do so, I hope I can engage directly with the Minister's Department because I believe in being proactive with the Department rather than coming in here. It is only as a last resort. It may be an issue of clarification. I thank the library and research team for the extensive work that they have done. It aids us in analysing legislation. That is what they are there. I draw that fact to the Minister's attention. This document was carried out by Karen McLaughlin, senior parliamentary researcher. It is dated 16 December 2025.

It is interesting to look at a number of submissions. I am going reference them rather than talk about them. There was a very interesting submission from the Law Society. There was a particularly interesting one from the Rape Crisis Ireland. There was a submission from An Garda Síochána. There were interesting issues there. Of particular interest were submissions by the Data Protection Commissioner, Safe Ireland and the Irish Council for Civil Liberties. There are many more, but these were the six that I took out and read. There are some key issues there. I do not think we are that far apart. Facial recognition is about technology, data protection and impact assessment, which the Minister dealt with in his statement to us today. Legislation and the code of practice are clearly important. What do we want at the end of all this legislation? We want to ensure for Irish citizens that there are high standards that the public can expect of An Garda Síochána. I know An Garda Síochána is committed too. It is about confidence in a system that is not subject to or open to abuse. I referenced those particular submissions to the Minister. I have a few amendments in mind. I am a pragmatist at best. I would like to work with the Minister's officials next week, send a draft to them, and maybe they will be able to clarify some of those points. That would be very helpful.

I wish the Minister well on this important legislation. I understand the significance of embracing innovation and technology. At the end of the day, what the Minister said last night to us in another debate within his brief, there are a lot of very dangerous and sinister people out there. We have to use all technologies in identifying, exposing and bringing people to justice and account. That ranges from sexual offences, rape, intimidation, blackmail and all sorts of other issues. When we talk about smarter gardaí, it is about being smart. Gardaí on the streets does not necessarily mean everything for people. It is always important that while nothing deters crime, we must always go back to community. We need to get under the skin of why so many crimes are happening, but that is for another day. I wish the Minister well. We are going

to embrace technology and innovation. If that aids and makes this a safer place for our citizens, then that has to be the right thing to do.

Senator Garret Kelleher: On behalf of the Fine Gael group, I welcome the Bill before us. As the Minister articulated in his opening remarks, it is a step forward in fulfilling the obligations made under the programme for Government, especially in the support of Garda use of artificial intelligence. Again, this is the type of thing that we would speak about in this Chamber on numerous occasions, particularly in relation to Garda powers and legislation on a broader basis to deal with modern challenges faced today that would not have been encountered previously, as we have discussed on umpteen occasions here in recent weeks, such as the challenges of social media, how we can counteract misinformation and disinformation, and enabling the legislation to be modern, robust and deal with the challenges that we face today. There is also the importance of allowing the use on a more widespread basis of the facial recognition technology, especially for serious crimes and in cases of missing persons. I do not have a huge amount to add to the contributions that have already been made by the Minister in his opening remarks and Senators Gallagher, McDowell and Boyhan other than to welcome the legislation as a step forward. It has the full support of the Fine Gael group.

Senator Joanne Collins: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this. This is very important and far-reaching legislation that will deserve careful scrutiny because it deals with the balance between public safety, effective policing and the protection of civil liberties and privacy rights. Sinn Féin believes that facial recognition technology and other biometric technologies can have a very rewarding and positive role in assisting An Garda Síochána, particularly in the investigation of serious crime, matters relating to the security of the State and locating missing persons. Gardaí today are dealing with an enormous volume of CCTV footage, digital evidence and recorded material. Technology can help process that evidence more effectively and potentially speed up investigations, identify subjects, locate vulnerable people and, ultimately, save lives. We recognise those potential benefits. We also recognise that these technologies can carry very significant risk if they are introduced without strong safeguards, proper oversight and clear legal limits. It is not an ordinary technology. The Artificial Intelligence Advisory Council stated in June 2024 that facial recognition technology when used in a lawful enforcement context is a high-risk technology given the potential consequences of its use for individuals. The council went further and advised against procuring and deploying such technology until statutory independent evaluations are conducted under real-world conditions relevant to Irish law enforcement.

The core concern here is that we do not drift into a surveillance society where people's movements, behaviours and identities can be tracked in ways that undermine fundamental rights and freedoms. The use of biometric analysis must be necessary, proportionate and strictly limited to serious and clearly defined purposes, which the Minister has outlined in his opening statement. There are some welcome provisions within this Bill. The fact that the technology can only be used retrospectively and not in real time is important.

The fact that it is confined to arrestable offences, State security matters and missing person investigations is also very important. Likewise, requirements for a code of practice, human rights assessment and engagement with bodies such as the Data Protection Commission and Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission are very positive steps.

However, there remain serious questions that need to be answered. Sinn Féin believes there must be far stronger safeguards written directly into legislation, rather than relying too heavily on future codes of practice. Codes of practice are important, but the Oireachtas must have the opportunity to scrutinise and debate the key protections in primary legislation. There must be independent oversight and a regular review of how the technology operates in practice. Reviews cannot simply examine operational effectiveness. They must also examine the accuracy rates, potential for discrimination or profiling and the impact on the right to privacy and human rights more broadly. Any wider roll-out across the State should only occur following a tightly controlled pilot phase with independent evaluation. We need evidence that the technology works effectively in Irish policing conditions and that it can do so without causing disproportionate harm.

We also cannot ignore the lessons of the past. Unfortunately, there have been incidents where Garda systems have been misused. We know a number of gardaí face disciplinary action for misuse of the PULSE system, including the shocking case of a former garda who unlawfully disclosed personal data related to colleagues and members of the public. Those incidents involved only a small minority but they underline an important point, namely, that whenever the State grants additional surveillance or data powers robust safeguards, accountability and oversight are absolutely essential.

At the same time, we must be honest about the wider challenges facing policing in the State. Technology is not a substitute for properly resourced community policing. The biggest challenge facing An Garda Síochána today is the recruitment and retention crisis. There are simply too few community and roads policing gardaí, too few detectives and far too much reliance on overtime to carry out routine policing duties. Sinn Féin has set out comprehensive proposals to tackle this crisis. We have proposed increasing the garda training allowance, the equivalent of the minimum wage, increasing the intake capacity in Templemore, introducing incentives for former members to return to policing, improving pay progressions, recognising long service and increasing the mandatory retirement age to 65. Those measures are essential because safe communities are built, first and foremost, through visible policing, strong community relationships and properly staffed Garda stations, not solely through new technologies.

Technology can support policing but it cannot replace trust, experience and human judgment. As the Bill progresses through the Houses, Sinn Féin will engage constructively and responsibly. We believe there is a legitimate role for these technologies, but only where there are strong safeguards, democratic accountability, independent oversight and full protection of civil liberties. The public must have confidence that any use of biometric analysis is lawful, proportionate and necessary and that the rights of ordinary citizens are not sacrificed in the process. That is the balance we must achieve and it is the standard against which the Bill must ultimately be judged.

Senator Martin Conway: The Minister is welcome to the House. It is great that he comes to deal with his legislation on such a regular basis. We have spoken on previous occasions about Ministers having respect for the House. He has shown respect in spades and he is very welcome, as always. The Bill is part of a commitment in the programme for Government to embrace and develop new technologies in An Garda Síochána to enable the force to take full advantage of those new technologies to do its job more effectively. Facial recognition is in

operation in many jurisdictions, in particular in airports and so on. Enabling An Garda Síochána to utilise and benefit from this type of technology makes absolute sense. I am glad to hear that it is recognised across the House that this is a step in the right direction.

AI is something we are all trying to get our heads around. Clearly, it will define society in the future. It is the next generation, the same way as social media was to the generation of the early noughties. An Garda Síochána needs to be on top of it and to benefit from it. We do not need to be laggards when it comes to this. Rather, we need to be out in front, similar to how we were European leaders when it came to the Criminal Assets Bureau, CAB, which has been imitated by other jurisdictions. We need to adopt the same approach when it comes to embracing technology, given the fact that many of the tech giants have their European headquarters in Dublin. We need to reflect that in our modern policing.

Having been on the political scrutiny committee of Europol for seven or eight years, and having attended its meetings on a regular basis in Brussels and other European countries, I know how committed Europol is to embracing and sharing technology. We need to be front and centre as part of that.

The Bill is welcome. It is good to see the justice elements of the programme for Government being implemented in a very judicious way. I commend the Minister on that.

The Minister was in Clare a couple of weeks ago, for which I thank him. It was a visit organised by Deputy Cathal Crowe. He spoke at the Ennis Chamber of Commerce and met a group of business people, along with public representatives, in Ennistymon. There is a major issue with a lack of gardaí in the Ennistymon-Kilrush area, which has been amalgamated into one district. Last Saturday night, there was a shortage of personnel on the ground. I believe only one patrol car was operating between Kilrush and Ballyvaughan. The patrol car was diverted to Shannon because a plane had to be protected. That leaves the system vulnerable. I know it is a policing matter and a matter for the Garda Commissioner, but to be fair to our chief superintendent in Clare, he can only deal with the resources he has and he has to supply them as he sees fit. It is a loaves and fishes scenario. Perhaps the Minister is able to do something about additional resources in the Clare division so that situations like this do not happen on weekends. Last weekend was a beautiful weekend. The populations of Kilkee and Lahinch balloon when the weather is like this. We cannot have vulnerabilities in the system. I appeal to the Minister to address that.

On the Bill, it is great to see it being introduced in order to take full advantage of modern technologies and innovations so that An Garda Síochána can do its job more effectively, efficiently and determinedly.

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I thank all Senators for their contributions. I will try to deal with the issues they have raised. I agree with Senator Gallagher that one of the benefits of the Bill is that it will prevent gardaí having to spend hours ploughing through vast amounts of data or video footage. I saw that myself this time last year when I was in Store Street Garda station. At the time, a number of gardaí were spending hours going through video footage from the Dublin riots which had taken place in November 2023. There were trying to identify individuals in the video footage to see whether they were the same as the people they had other video footage of going to a different location.

The Bill will have a real benefit in terms of An Garda Síochána freeing up Garda time so that we can use technology and, rather than gardaí having to sit in front of video screens for long periods of time, technology can be used and gardaí can be freed to do other more important and productive work. Senator Gallagher is correct in that what we are talking about here is balancing the rights of privacy with the right of the public to be protected and giving more powers to gardaí.

I thank Senator McDowell for his full support. He said that the Bill may be too restrictive. As I mentioned earlier, more legislation will be coming forward. When gardaí are looking at video footage in, say, Store Street, the technology will be able to assist them because they will be able to find out rapidly whether the person they saw robbing a shop during the riot in November 2023 is the same as the person getting off a bus in Rathmines, where there will be other video footage available. That will clarify matters. That is why it is called retrospective biometric analysis. It is not measuring against a database of identifiable people. Instead, someone is looking to see whether the face or image in one piece of video footage is the same as that in another. It is so important in missing persons inquiries because he or she will have the image of the person and be able to check to see whether it is the same as in another piece of footage.

I noted what the Senator said about the data retention rules and the rulings of the CJEU. As a result of the decision of the CJEU, we do not have a modern legislative instrument from Europe that deals with data retention. It really is important for the purpose of police investigations, not just in Ireland but also throughout the rest of Europe, that there be a live and effective directive or regulation in place for the purpose of data retention for law enforcement. When serious crimes are committed, the public expect that all available information that can be investigated for the purpose of resolving the crime will be used.

Senator Boyhan spoke about the Oireachtas Library and Research Service team. Its work is excellent. I am aware of the recommendations of the Oireachtas joint committee on justice. As has been indicated, some of the recommendations have been included. I will examine further the library document to which the Senator referred.

We need to use modern technology. Sometimes people are fearful of it. In the Lower House, there were references to reports that show this type of technology can be inaccurate but many of those reports are from many years ago. The technology has advanced considerably. I am sure most of us here use it for the purpose of unlocking our phones or accessing banking information. It is technology that is advancing every day.

Two days ago, the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, and I were in Dublin Airport to launch the new eGates. That is a real example of biometric facial analysis. A person puts their passport in and a photograph is then taken of his or her face. The system compares the photograph of the person in the airport with the face on the passport being analysed. This technology is getting better all the time and we should not be fearful of it. Particularly because criminals are now using technology to advance their criminality, we should be using it to stand up to them.

I very much welcome the support from Senator Kelleher. He correctly spoke about AI and the fact that modern challenges require modern methods of investigation. That reiterates the point I just mentioned. We need modern methods of investigation and we should not stay away from them because they are new or modern.

Years ago, maybe when Senator McDowell was Minister for Justice, there was concern as to whether DNA evidence would be reliable. We have now gone through many years of expertise with DNA technology and science, and the evidence has proven to be very reliable. It has resulted in many cases being solved. We have to move with the times in using technology.

I thank Senator Collins for her contribution and recognition that the camera technology can play a positive role. She said that she, like many, I am sure, fears living in a surveillance society. In many respects, however, and not just through the State, there are cameras everywhere. When a crime has been committed, one of the first things that An Garda will do is seek to get camera footage, whether from cars passing by or shops in the vicinity. There is a huge amount of coverage of what is happening on the streets, particularly in cities. It is a huge assistance to An Garda Síochána when it comes to investigating criminal acts or locating missing persons. I am conscious that there is a balance to be struck but shops and cars have these cameras. We know ourselves that if something happens out on the streets, people on those streets also use cameras. I am aware that it causes some offence if people video things in public, particularly if they share the footage, but their footage can be of use to an investigation.

Senator Collins expressed concern that the information or technology should not be misused. She expressed some concern about its use in a live scenario. I intend to introduce legislation to provide for live biometric analysis and identification. When we discuss it – it is not in this Bill today – we might ask whether telling a garda to stand at the top of Grafton Street to keep an eye out for a well-known criminal in order to apprehend him is all that different from there being a camera at the top of Grafton Street with information about the criminal that can identify him if he walks by and then alert the Garda. I realise it is a contentious issue but it is something we cannot ignore. Again, it can create efficiencies in the work of An Garda Síochána.

The Senator also referred to a recruitment and retention crisis. Even the Garda Representative Association is not referring to it as a crisis now because there is no retention crisis. The number of resignations from An Garda Síochána is less than 1%, which is bizarre and highly unusual by comparison with the numbers for the PSNI and all the other constabularies in the UK. Fewer than 140 resigned from An Garda Síochána in 2024, so the retention rate is really high. In respect of recruitment, later this year we will have the highest number of sworn members of An Garda Síochána in the history of the force. I believe that, by the end of the year, we will be at or very close to 15,000 sworn members. Of course, that does not take into account the 3,500 staff who do really important work as well and free up gardaí to do their front-line work.

I thank Senator Conway for his contribution in respect of the programme for Government and AI. Across the range in government, we will just have to adapt to AI so that we can avail of its benefits while ensuring the threats are not too accentuated.

I hear what the Senator said in respect of Clare. I had a pleasant and enjoyable visit there. One thing that was consistently said to me there was that more gardaí are needed there. As the Senator knows, I do not go around directing the Commissioner, but I have certainly passed on the concerns of the elected representatives in Clare. Aside from that, it was an hospitable visit. I thank the Senator and my colleagues for the invitation.

Senator Martin Conway: The Minister is welcome at any time.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Thanks very much.

Question put and agreed to.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Alison Comyn): When it is it proposed to take Committee Stage?

Senator Robbie Gallagher: Next Tuesday.

Acting Chairperson (Senator Alison Comyn): Is that agreed? Agreed.

Committee Stage ordered for Tuesday, 2 June 2026.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar fionraí ar 5.48 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 6.34 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 5.48 p.m. and resumed at 6.34 p.m.

Rental Sector: Motion

Senator Joanne Collins: I move:

That Seanad Éireann:

notes with extreme concern that:

- 7,062 eviction notices were issued to tenants from January to March this year, up 51 per cent on the same period in 2025;
- new private rents have hit their highest level in 25 years with the rate of rent inflation at the highest since records began;

further notes that:

- for three consecutive quarters, the number of eviction notices has increased dramatically, 38 per cent in Q3 2025 and 41 per cent in Q4 2025;
- statewide, market rents have jumped 7.8 per cent in the first quarter of this year to €2,176 a month for a two-bed apartment, costing €26,000 a year;
- in Dublin, new rents are up 7 per cent, with a two-bed apartment now costing €2,536 a month and €30,000 a year in rent;
- in Galway City, rents have increased by a staggering 18 per cent with a two-bed apartment costing €2,290 per month and more than €27,000 a year in rent;
- in Cork City, rents have increased by 13 per cent, in Limerick City they are up by 9.7 per cent, and in Waterford City they are up by 7.6 per cent;
- this dramatic surge in market rents is a direct consequence of the Government's decision to allow landlords to reset rents between tenancies;

- these trends are the direct result of Government policy and will lead to increased displacement of tenants, increased rents and increased homelessness;
- the Government continues to miss its social and affordable housing targets, targets that were too low to begin with, and too few private for-purchase homes are being built or coming to the market;

resolves that:

- Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael's housing policy continues to make the housing crisis worse and, in particular, is failing renters;

calls on Government to:

- introduce an emergency ban on rent increases and no-fault evictions;
- cut private rents by putting a full month's rent back into every private renter's pocket;
- oppose rent increases for council tenants, those in receipt of Housing Assistance Payments, Rental Accommodation Scheme payments and cost rental tenants; and
- introduce a radical reset of housing policy as set out by the Housing Commission and to increase and accelerate the delivery of social, affordable and private for-purchase homes.

I wish to share time with Senator Andrews.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Joanne Collins: I welcome the Minister to the Seanad. I and my colleagues in Sinn Féin have brought this motion forward because we remain deeply concerned about the rental sector in Ireland and, of course, the Government's policies which are worsening the housing crisis month by month. The updated homelessness figures will be out this Friday and no doubt the figures will, sadly, break new records. Every month more people are forced into homelessness. More young people end up back with their parents in their childhood bedroom and unfortunately, we see many of them, who just cannot continue to stay there due to the lack of dignity, independence and privacy, leave every single week whether it is to Australia, Canada, New Zealand and so on.

This Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Government recently introduced new rental measures - a market reset – which is already showing to be disastrous for people, workers and families who already struggle to pay rent and are now receiving eviction notices. The Daft report published last week proved what we were saying all along, that the rent hike Bill would push up rents. Alongside the higher rent increases, we are also seeing a 51% increase in eviction notices across the country. This is no coincidence. This is a direct result of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael policy. These figures are stark, but they are not just numbers. They are real people struggling with the real impacts of these policies. Last week's Daft report showed that to rent a two-bedroom house in County Limerick has gone up by a staggering 32% since last year. The average rent on two-bedroom houses is now just over €1,700 a month.

Where does that leave families? One family I spoke to in Limerick last week, came into my office crying and sobbing with sheer depression. It broke my heart to sit there and listen to what they are going through. Jane - I am not going to use surnames - and her husband are just €1,000 over the limit on their wages to be able to apply for social housing. They have two young children and they have been given a termination notice on their rented home. So, where do they go? They do not have family they can turn to. They do not qualify for the housing assistance payment, HAP, or long-term emergency accommodation. If they are lucky enough to find another house to rent, and if Members go on *daft.ie* any day of the week, they will see that there are slim pickings out there, they are looking at a significant increase in their rent payment.

I am going to run through their situation. This family has an income of about just over €710 per week. Based on the average rent they will pay if they find another property, that is €400 a week leaving them with €310.

A weekly shop for a family of four - two adults and two kids - costs approximately €180. That leaves them €130 a week to pay for electricity, gas, bin charges and school fees and, considering they live in County Limerick with its lack of public services and public transport, they are guaranteed to have a car which brings with it tax and car insurance. God forbid something goes wrong with the car because they will not have the money. On €130 per week, they will find it very hard to budget for that. It is just an impossible situation for them and they are at their wits' end. I am hearing this consistently in my office. I have families coming in to me who are looking at eviction notices. They do not know how they are going to survive this.

The Government can put whatever spin it wants on housing policy and how successful it thinks it is but the facts are the lived experiences of the people, and they tell a completely different story. This Government is not listening. We told it the rent hike Bill would cause an increase in rents. The Government said it would not and told us we were being dramatic. What does the Minister say now that the facts and figures are laid bare for him?

This is from last week's report by *daft.ie*:

This sharp surge in rents coincides with the new rent control system. A key feature of the new rules is the ability to reset rents to market levels when a tenancy ends. For landlords whose rents had been constrained by earlier rules, this represents an opportunity to realign rents with prevailing market conditions. The scale of the increase in early 2026 suggests that this opportunity has been taken up widely, where tenancies have recently turned over.

This surge in rents comes at a time when the overall availability of rental housing remains very limited. As a result, the price effects of the new system have appeared more quickly and more clearly than any increase in supply.

These are not my words; they are from a *daft.ie* report. Will the Minister acknowledge the figures? Does he agree or disagree with the report? Does he acknowledge and agree or disagree with the Housing Commission's view that a radical reset of housing policy is needed?

The amendment to the motion is an insult to every single renter who is struggling to keep a roof over their head. It is an insult to the 17,500 people who are homeless and the thousands of young people who are fed up because they feel they will never move out of their family

homes and instead are leaving the country. This Government does not listen and it is high time for it to admit the policies it is putting in place are not working.

Again, we call on the Government to introduce an emergency ban on rent increases and no-fault evictions; cut private rents by putting a full month's rent back into every private renter's pocket; oppose rent increases for council tenants, those in receipt of HAP and rental accommodation scheme, RAS, payments, and cost rental tenants; introduce a radical reset of housing policy, as set out by the Housing Commission; and increase and accelerate the delivery of social, affordable and private for-purchase homes.

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome to the Distinguished Visitors' Gallery a former Senator from County Clare, Tony Mulcahy. Thank you for being here with your guests today. Anois an Seanadóir Andrews.

Senator Chris Andrews: I first commend the work my colleague Deputy Eoin Ó Broin has done in the area of housing, particularly for those in social housing and private rental properties, by leading the way in showing that there is an alternative model for our housing system. There is a lot of hopelessness among the public right now when it comes to the housing crisis and a lack of belief that the challenges we face in terms of affordability and access to decent housing can be overcome. This is hardly a surprise when we look at the housing Ministers we have been graced with in the past decade or more.

In 2020, before the formation of the previous coalition Government, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael stood before the Irish people and pledged to build 200,000 new homes during their term in office. This goal was not met. We are now well into a new Government term, and this goal of 200,000 homes, which itself was already too low, has still not been met. Rents and homelessness have increased year on year. Buying a home is only getting more difficult and more out of reach for working families. Rental properties are only getting harder to find, especially for those on HAP. Social housing is practically non-existent for the vast majority of people who need it and the conditions in existing social housing complexes are often unliveable due to poor maintenance and a lack of facilities. If someone were to join the Dublin City Council social housing list today, they are likely to be waiting a full decade, if not longer, before being offered a home. Social housing in this State was designed to be a safety net, but it is clearly not working if someone is falling for ten years before being caught in that safety net.

Since 2014, Governments have announced housing plan after housing plan that promised to get our housing system back on track and end the housing crisis once and for all. How many times have we heard that? First came the social housing strategy under the Labour Party-Fine Gael austerity Government. Then came Rebuilding Ireland, which only made the housing crisis worse. Then we had Housing for All, which failed to meet its targets or improve access to housing. Each of these plans was an abject failure and the housing crisis has continued without a dent being made in it.

Now, the Government has announced yet another housing plan, this time named Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030, which rehashes all the failed policies of the past decade. A critical piece in this new housing policy was the Government's rent-hike legislation, which has led to the fastest quarterly rise in rents since 2002. Under these new rules, landlords have been able to hike rents up to the highest possible market rate regardless of where they

were before. This means that in the first quarter of 2026, the average private rent has jumped a staggering 7.8% in just three months. In that same period, eviction notices were up over 50%, as landlords looked to end their existing tenancy agreements and replace them with new agreements that are not exempt from these new rules. The Government knowingly pushed rental inflation to its highest level in a quarter of a century, solely in the hope that it will give additional incentives to developers and speculators. This is a perfect example of the Government's misguided approach to housing. Tenants are the last to benefit from Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael's housing policies while developers are the first, and often only ones, to gain from Government policy.

The solution to the housing crisis is not going to be found by further tightening the noose on private renters and social housing tenants and it will not be found by selling out the country to foreign speculators and developers whose only interest is delivering a profit for their shareholders. The only solution will be for the Government to turn this disastrous approach around, institute an immediate rent freeze and eviction ban and accelerate the delivery of social and genuinely affordable homes. Social and affordable housing is ultimately the key to bringing down rents and ensuring that everyone who needs a home has a home. Cities like Vienna have a far healthier and affordable rental market, with housing costs in many cases half of what they are in Dublin. This is a direct result of 60% of homes in that city being owned either by the state or their version of approved housing bodies. In Vienna, a two-bedroom apartment can be found for just over €1,000 per month. In Dublin, that same apartment would cost an average of €2,500 a month, or over €30,000 a year. A family would need a six-figure income in order to afford to rent an apartment in this city.

In new-build developments like the glass bottle site, rents are completely out of reach for all but a tiny, wealthy proportion of the population. Across the city, developers will not lower the rents on new-build apartment buildings, as that would reduce the speculative value of their properties. As a result, the buildings lie empty, while people sleep on the streets. We have homes without people and people without homes. A housing system that prioritises property values and investor profits over the public need is a broken system. That is what this motion is ultimately about. Our housing system is failing. It is failing renters, who are extorted for all they earn. It is failing social housing tenants, who are completely ignored by the State unless they miss a rent cheque. It is failing prospective buyers, who are seeing house prices constantly go up. The Government needs for once to admit it has made a mistake when it comes to housing. It is well past time to start putting renters and tenants first, not last.

I would like to ask the Minister about the Glass Bottle site, which I have raised here previously. There is ongoing concern that the groups down there that have worked with the Government, Dublin City Council and the developers are being ignored by the Minister. They have put in a request to meet the Minister and he has failed to meet them. It is hard to understand why. Maybe the Minister could give some insight as to why he is refusing to meet the Glass Bottle residents' groups who have worked tirelessly to ensure the community is involved and housing is delivered in Ringsend and on Pearse Street.

Another group of residents who have been looking to meet the Minister but he has avoiding them is the Pearse House residents. The Minister pulled the regeneration of their flax complex and he came up with a yellow-pack version for the regeneration of Pearse House. The residents have asked to meet the Minister and he has refused to meet them. The least they deserve is to

meet with the Minister, engage with him and figure out a way of delivering better homes for families in Pearse Street. That is all they deserve. They deserve that and it is the least they deserve. I ask that the Minister gives some insight as to why he has refused to meet the Pearse House residents and the Glass Bottle residents' group.

I second the motion.

Senator Joe Flaherty: I move amendment No. 1:

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

"notes that: -

- the Government is fully committed to tackling high rents and ensuring an increase in the supply of affordable high-quality rental accommodation through continued significant capital investment including cost rental and other means and in a manner that respects the security of tenure for renters by ensuring equity and fairness for landlords and tenants;
- comprehensive reviews of the private rental market and of the rent pressure zones (RPZs) rent control system were undertaken in 2024 and 2025, which assessed the rental market generally, the operation of RPZs since their introduction, their impact on the market and relevant stakeholders, the retention of landlords and attracting new investment;
- the modifications to rent controls were informed by the findings of the Housing Agency's Review of Rent Pressure Zones and Consideration of Potential Policy Options. The review involved engagement with a broad range of stakeholders, including representatives of landlord and tenant advocacy groups, academics, investors and the Residential Tenancies Board (RTB);
- it recommended a modification of rent controls and also recommended that landlords be allowed to reset rents to market levels between tenancies, while providing for stronger tenant protections to guard against economic evictions;
- the review indicated that the provision to reset rent between tenancies may see some rent inflation, but that this is expected to moderate as new supply comes on-stream;
- online platforms measure rent asking prices, which tend to be higher than the actual rents paid;
- there is consistently a variance between online platform asking prices and the RTB rent index of actual rents paid in new tenancies; online advertising is not the sole mechanism for letting to tenants;
- the Rent Index report published by the RTB is the most accurate and authoritative rent report of its kind on the private rental sector in Ireland;
- compared to other market monitoring reports produced for the Irish rental sector the RTB Rent Index has the considerable benefit of being based on regulatory data covering all new tenancy registrations, regardless of how the property was advertised for rent;

- the most recent Rent Index report, released by the RTB on 14th May, 2026 in respect of Q4 2025, shows that nationally, standardised average market rents continue to rise for new and existing tenancies; the rate of new tenancy rent increases has been relatively stable for the last six quarters at a national level, although the trends do vary across regions; a 5 per cent yearly increase was reported nationwide;
- the standardised average rent for new tenancies in Q4 2025 is €1,755 nationally, €2,232 in Dublin, and €1,437 per month outside Dublin;
- the standard average rent for a two-bedroom apartment in a new tenancy stood at €1,792 nationwide, a 4.4 per cent yearly increase, but a 0.8 per cent decrease compared to Q3 2025;
- in Dublin, the standard average rent for a two-bedroom apartment in a new tenancy was €2,315, up 3.9 per cent from last year, but down 2.6 per cent on a quarterly basis;
- the Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2026 came into effect on 1st March, 2026, introducing a new national rent control for all tenancies, which limits rent increases to inflation as measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI) up to a maximum of 2 per cent; for new build apartments and student-specific accommodation, however, rent increases are capped at the level of inflation (CPI) only; these changes were introduced to promote greater investment in the rental market and to increase the supply of rental properties; the Act also provides significant improvements in security of tenure for renters;
- while February saw a sharp increase in Notices of Terminations (NoTs), the RTB confirmed that the trend is moderating, with an 18 per cent increase for March compared to March 2025 but a 39 per cent decrease from February 2026;
- to offer greater protection to tenants, rolling six-year tenancies of minimum duration (TMD) apply for new tenancies created for the first time between parties on or after 1st March, 2026; this means a new tenancy that continues for six months becomes a tenancy of unlimited duration, with rolling six year TMDs, providing real security of tenure for tenants;
- nationally, registered private tenancies rose by 2.44 per cent annually to 246,477 in Q1 2026;
- the number of private landlords rose by 1.3 per cent annually to 105,847, indicating increased participation in the rental market; there is no exodus of landlords from the market, and the rental sector continues to show resilience;
- prevention of homelessness in the first instance is an absolute priority; there are many prevention initiatives already underway in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and across Government; this includes the provision of social and affordable housing, Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) and homeless HAP, and tenancy protection legislation;
- in order to ensure a fully aligned all-of-Government approach, the Programme for Government includes a commitment to a holistic, cross-departmental approach to homelessness prevention; work has commenced on developing a national Homelessness

Prevention Framework to ensure all possible measures are being taken across Government to prevent homelessness; it is intended that this framework will be in place later on in the year;

- addressing family homelessness is another key priority for Government; the new housing plan includes a commitment to develop a dedicated Child and Family Homelessness Action Plan; this will bring together key stakeholders to drive the continued focus on preventing children and families entering emergency accommodation, providing enhanced supports for children experiencing homelessness, as well as measures to accelerate exits and reduce the time spent by children and their families in homeless emergency accommodation;

- delivering Homes, Building Communities recognises that the rental market is an important element of a well-functioning housing system; it contains a suite of measures to support domestic and international investment in the delivery of new rental properties, in particular the supply of new apartments;

- Ireland is facing a shortage of rental homes, especially apartments; recent reforms to the rental market aim to encourage investment and development, which will encourage the building of new rental apartments, help slow down rent increases and moderate rent levels over time;

- the Government has significantly increased resources allocated to the RTB to meet the demands of a modern rental sector;

- further Government measures introduced to support renters include the increase in the tax credit for renters under Budget 2025 to a maximum of €1,000 for each renter in a household; Budget 2026 extends the Rent Tax Credit, which was due to expire at the end of 2025, for a further three years, to the end of 2028;

- the increase in the thresholds for access to cost rental homes, which was increased from €53,000 net to €66,000 net in Dublin and €59,000 outside Dublin, in July 2023;

Seanad Éireann acknowledges that increased supply is key to meeting demand and moderating the pent-up pressures in the private rental sector and welcomes that:

- there has been an unprecedented level of delivery of new-build social homes, with 2025 representing the largest number of new-build social homes constructed since the foundation of the State;

- the new housing plan Delivering Homes, Building Communities is focused on putting in place the conditions to enable delivery of a minimum of 300,000 new homes between 2025 and 2030;

- the plan includes a commitment to deliver 72,000 social homes and provide 90,000 affordable supports to help people secure a home of their own;

- it seeks to significantly accelerate delivery of new homes by focusing on activating land and creating the optimal environment to encourage housing activity – including regulatory reform, tax incentives and the largest ever capital investment in the history of the State, with €275 billion invested in infrastructure over ten years through the National Development Plan;

- to accelerate future supply, Budget 2026 included a suite of taxation measures aimed at stimulating the supply of new apartments including a reduced VAT rate and an enhanced Corporation Tax deduction for apartment construction costs;

- the revised National Planning Framework, published in April 2025, is a major step forward in this regard, and will help increase capacity and accelerate home building across the country;

recognises that considerable progress has been made, including that:

- almost 149,000 new homes have been delivered over the past five years; this compares with 83,267 in the previous five-year period and just 29,217 in the five years before that;

- a total of 36,284 new dwellings were completed in 2025 – an increase of 20 per cent year on year;

- the unprecedented level of investment the Government has committed will bring about a very significant scale-up in the delivery of housing over the coming years, address the needs of the most vulnerable in our communities, make buying and renting homes more affordable and support the development of villages, town and cities across the country;

- the delivery of 300,000 homes by 2030 that will, however, require an estimated €20 billion in development finance each year, a significant portion of which will need to come from investment by the private sector to support home ownership and a well functioning private rental market; and

agrees that continued implementation of Delivering Homes and Building Communities represents the most appropriate response to deal with the housing challenges which Ireland is now facing.”.

I welcome the Minister to the House. I say to Members on the opposite side of the House that nobody on this side of the House is immune to the housing crisis. We hear the same concerns and tales of distress and upset in our constituency offices on a daily basis. We are confident and conscious that the Government and us as a collective body are working to resolve this problem. It is frustrating when we come in here and hear the same, tired mantras coming from the Opposition. It is the same rhetoric and the same song list every time they come in. When I hear them applauding Eoin Ó Broin and all he is doing for housing, all he has done so far is write a few books. He has yet to build a house.

We have an action plan that will see the delivery of 300,000 houses in the lifetime of this Government. Last year, 36,284 new dwellings were completed. That was a record for recent years. There was also a record 7,856 houses completed in quarter 1 of 2026, a rise of 32.9% on the same period for 2025. Even Daft, which the Opposition is so keen to quote - it is great to see people from the socialist world quoting *daft.ie*, which is very much a commercial vehicle about making money on the backs of renters and the property market. Over recent years, it has paid out substantially large dividends. It is great to see the Opposition can find favour with that organisation. This Government is fully committed to tackling high rents and ensuring an increase in the supply of affordable, high quality rental accommodation through continued significant capital investment, including cost rental and other means, in a manner that respects the security of tenure for renters and by ensuring equality and fairness for landlords and tenants.

Overseas landlords and holders of property were referenced but the vast majority of landlords in this county are your Mamas and Papas landlords. They are people who might have one property or, in exceptional cases, may have two or three properties. That is the vast sum of landlords in these countries. They have rights too. They should not be thrown under a bus. Many of these people bought houses at the height of the property prices and paid exorbitant fees for them. They struggled for the past 20 years with the prices and expectation that was placed upon them by that excessive investment. They are now just coming out the other side. If they want, they have a right to sell that property while respecting tenants' rights. Nobody should bounce a property owner into a situation where he cannot have at least some control of his or her property. It is very easy to roll out the mantra of tenants. We respect and know full well the challenges that tenants are facing but there is another side to the equation and it is those landlords who the Opposition would be all too happy to throw under the bus.

The Government has undertaken comprehensive reviews of the private rental market and of the rent pressure zones rent control system throughout 2024 and 2025, which assessed the rental market generally, as well as the operation of RPZs since their introduction, their impact on the market and relevant stakeholders and the retention of landlords and attracting new investment. That told us we needed a seismic intervention and we needed a once-in-a-lifetime recalibration and resetting of the rental market in Ireland. That is what this Government did. It did not do it willy-nilly and it did not come out with the old, tired Sinn Féin mantra of bringing in an eviction ban. We looked at the market and said how best can we calibrate a broken market. We looked at best practice across the world and we made a significant intervention. It was an intervention which will, in the fullness of time, be proven to show it was the right intervention for the time.

The modification of rent controls were informed by the findings of the Housing Agency review on rent pressure zones and consideration of potential policy options. The review involved engagement with a broad range of stakeholders, including representatives of landlord and tenancy advocate groups, academics, investors and the Residential Tenancies Board. It recommended a modification of rent controls and recommended that landlords be allowed to reset rents to market levels between tenancies, while providing for stronger tenant protections to guard against economic evictions.

What the Opposition, and Sinn Féin in particular, will not acknowledge is that renters in Ireland now have the best safeguards ever in this country. It was not Sinn Féin that brought them in. It was a Fianna Fáil Government that brought them in and we are very proud of that. We are proud that we have always delivered on housing since the foundation of this State and we always recognised the rights of - the Opposition can smirk all they want, they have nothing yet on housing. You cannot build a house in Northern Ireland for love or money. Yet, you are coming down here and telling us how to build houses. You have done nothing on housing in Northern Ireland. The record speaks for itself up there.

Senator Pauline Tully: For God's sake. Fianna Fáil's record speaks for itself.

Senator Joe Flaherty: It does of course.

All Sinn Féin is doing is coming in here and throwing out the same old tired mantra. We have made the hard decisions, as we have had to do time and time again over the decades. We

have made the intervention that the market said was correct, what the academics said was the correct thing to do and we have done it. We have not done it on the back of one of Eoin Ó Broin's books either. The review indicated the provision to reset rents between tenancies may see some rent inflation - we acknowledge that - but this is expected to moderate as new supply comes on stream.

New supply is coming on stream. There were a record 7,850 homes completed in quarter 1 of 2026, an increase of 33% on the previous year. The only way we will address the housing supply and rent crisis in this country is to build more houses. We are building those houses. We are building them with conviction and ramping up those numbers on a monthly basis. We are doing so because we have a Minister of housing at the helm who cares passionately about this. He recognises the challenges that young couples, elderly people and society generally are facing right across the country. He engaged with the industry, best practice and looked around the world and saw what was needed here. We made a seismic intervention in the rental market - a once-in-a-generation intervention that has reset and recalibrated this rental market. It is something Sinn Féin would never have done because they would be afraid there are no sound bites that can guide them through the hard decisions.

Senator P. J. Murphy: I welcome the Minister to the Seanad. I thank him for being here for this debate this evening. We need to look at the question; why would anybody be a landlord? Why would anybody put their hard earned money and savings into buying a second or third house and renting it out? Why? They would do it to make some profit is the obvious answer. What is being proposed here is that all of these small landlords, who saved their hard earned money over many years to buy a second or third house, would no longer be in a position to make enough of a profit for it to be worth their while doing that. Already, we are seeing a huge number of small landlords leaving the market because of interventions to date that many people suggest to me have already gone too far. However, what is being proposed here goes way further again.

7 o'clock

What is being proposed presents a risk of market distortion and reduced money for investment in maintenance and refurbishment of properties that are on the rental market. What Sinn Féin is proposing would freeze the market and make the shortage of rental accommodation substantially worse as the exodus of small landlords from the market would accelerate as a result of what is being proposed, if it were to go through.

This Government has already introduced substantial residential tenancy changes. I find it most entertaining to hear the Sinn Féin spokespersons quoting Vienna as a fine example of the rental market. When this Government tried to reduce minimum apartment sizes, in line with Vienna, guess what Sinn Féin did? It voted against it, as usual.

We hear the argument that this Government is making the housing crisis worse. This claim, I am afraid, ignores the concrete legislative action taken in 2026. The Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2026 is the strongest tenant protection legislation in the history of this State. On more than one occasion, the Minister, Deputy Browne, has stated correctly that tenants in Ireland will have the most robust set of protections they have ever had. Sinn Féin's own position of opposing investment-friendly policies would reduce supply and push rents higher over the medium term.

It has been suggested by the Opposition that the Government is failing renters. The legislation enacted earlier this year provides renters with a national rent cap for the first time outside the rent pressure zones, RPZs. It provides effective abolition of no-fault evictions for larger landlords. It provides full transparency on rent history and market comparisons. It provides long-term security through minimum duration tenancies. These are not aspirational commitments. They are law, in force since 1 March 2026.

The Sinn Féin motion is a political attack that fails to account for the Government's substantial recent legislative achievements. The Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2026 and the Delivering Homes, Building Communities policy represent a comprehensive two-pronged response to the rental crisis, robust tenant protection in the short term and a credible plan to deliver the supply that will bring lasting stability in the housing sector into the future.

Senator Laura Harmon: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this important motion. It is telling how vexed the Government side is getting about this topic.

Senator Joe Flaherty: Emotional.

Senator Laura Harmon: It is indefensible.

An Cathaoirleach: The Senator, without interruption.

Senator Laura Harmon: The progress made is indefensible. It is crystal clear that the targets for house-building and social homes were not met last year. If it is so hard to be a landlord, why are one in five TDs landlords? Only eight Members of the Oireachtas are renting. There are 234 Members of the Oireachtas and only eight of them are renting, according to a survey in *The Irish Times*.

The homeless figures are released every month. We know that the figures are much larger than what is reported in terms of hidden homelessness. More than 17,500 people are reported as homeless, 5,500 of whom are children. Poverty is skyrocketing in this country, which is supposed to be wealthy. Some 28% of children in this country are at risk of poverty when housing costs are taken into account. Rental property prices across Cork city, for example, were three times the national average at the end of March this year. Rental prices there are 64% higher than pre-Covid levels and 110% higher than their Celtic tiger peak. The cost of living and the cost of renting is crucifying people in this country. I do not believe that this Government cares about renters. It has thrown renters to the wolves. The average cost of renting a two-bedroom apartment in Cork city is now €2,126 per month.

The fastest growing cohort of people falling into homelessness in this country is single people. It is impossible for them. People on single incomes are really struggling. They are struggling to get onto the property ladder. There is very little support for them when it comes to buying their own properties. More needs to be done to get people out of renting. There was a record number of eviction notices for rental properties in Ireland in the first three months of the year. We said this was going to happen. It was predictable and preventable. The Minister said he made a seismic intervention in the rental sector. What he has done is make more people

homeless. That is an absolute fact. It is recorded. The Residential Tenancies Board received 7,062 notices of termination in the first quarter of this year, up 50% from the same period last year and the highest quarterly figure since these data series began in 2022. By what measure is the Government succeeding in protecting renters? The data does not lie.

The landlord's intention to sell the property was listed as the reason for the termination in 60% of the cases. We need good landlords. Of course we need landlords in the market. I would argue that the Government opened the floodgates and let in the vulture funds. It has let in big investors and developers, who are buying up properties that people living in this country wish to buy. When we are trying to buy properties in this country, we are competing with big investors and developers. That is the position in which the Government has put the Irish people when it comes to trying to get on the property ladder. I have said this a million times before, but one of my biggest concerns at the minute, and it should be all of our concern, is that we cannot have a whole generation of people renting in the future when they are of pension age. People's pensions are already being eroded. There is already poverty in old age. What are we going to do when a whole generation of renting pensioners fall into homelessness? This is a ticking time bomb. It is already becoming a crisis in this country.

We need to build at scale. The Labour Party is calling for an emergency three-year eviction ban. We need to end no-fault evictions. We need emergency protections for renters now. I would argue that we need a rent cap. A rent cap for student accommodation is vital. The Minister for further and higher education was before the House just the other day. We see colleges are bypassing the RPZ rules and increasing service charges to increase rents. There needs to be an intervention in that part of the market and more joined-up thinking between the Department of housing and other Departments, such as the Department of further and higher education. That needs to be addressed as part of this.

The latest figures show a housing market that has been destroyed by Fianna Fáil's tried and tested policies, with rents increasing by more than 100% in the past decade and almost 50% since the Covid-19 pandemic. Those figures come before the devastating impact of the market reset mechanism is fully felt. That will allow landlords to reset rents to market rates between tenancies to bring about the return of double-digit rent increases and a return to economic evictions. One in four households entering homelessness in Dublin, for example, is coming directly from the private rental sector, driven by notices of termination and unaffordable rent.

What would we in the Labour Party do differently? As I said, we would introduce a ban on no-fault evictions, increase the targets and meet the targets for social and affordable housing to at least 16,000 homes per year, overhaul second-hand acquisitions and the tenant in situ scheme to improve prevention, supply a State-led solution through a State construction company working with local authorities, and transform the Land Development Agency. Many of us in the Opposition have been proposing this for a long time now. There are solutions. I do not envy the Minister's task. Many of the issues were inherited by him but we absolutely need to address them. We need urgency around it because the country's future is at stake.

Senator Pauline Tully: We have had a housing crisis in this country for some time and the reason for it is that Fianna Fáil crashed the economy in 2008 and decided to stop building houses. It had no foresight whatsoever and allowed our construction workers to leave the country and go elsewhere. Now we have in excess of 17,000 people in homeless

accommodation, including 5,000 children. This does not count all the families who do not access emergency accommodation, including those who sleep on our streets, in their parents' box rooms and on their friends' sofas. There are also the people who are emigrating because they cannot afford to live here.

The Minister speaks about constituents going into his office to tell him their stories. He has the power to do something about it but he is not doing it; he is making the situation ten times worse. Evictions in the first three months of this year were up by 51%. In my county of Cavan there were 77 evictions in the first three months of the year. A total of 111 families have presented as homeless so far this year in my county. This is a mixture of families, couples and single people. Of these, 29 families or households had to access emergency accommodation. I have to commend Cavan County Council, which does its utmost to try to house people, avoid them having to go into emergency accommodation and help them find rentals. It is difficult and it is getting more difficult to find rentals that people can afford to live in.

Rents continue to rise. People facing eviction who have been renting a house for a number of years at a reasonable rent are suddenly being evicted. This is, perhaps, because the person who owns the house had it as their retirement policy. That is fine and they want to sell the house and enjoy their retirement. Perhaps the owner has a family member who needs a home. Whatever the reason is, when those families are evicted they have nowhere to go. Rents rose by 4.5% again in the first three months of the year.

Cavan is one of six counties that has double-digit rent inflation on last year, at 10.6%. The average rent for a two-bedroom apartment is €1,245. I was contacted by a person looking for a rental property. An unfurnished two-bedroom apartment in a rural area of the county was advertised at €1,100 but when the person inquired, they were told it was €1,750 unless someone is in receipt of the accommodation recognition payment, ARP. Why would this amount of money be charged for a two-bedroom unfurnished apartment in the middle of rural Cavan? Why would it be advertised falsely as being for €1,100? As someone said to me, the situation is causing huge resentment and division in communities. People feel they are being treated differently depending on what supports they qualify for. The person went on to say that, regardless of nationality or background, the reality is the housing system is failing everyone trying to rent privately, and I absolutely agree.

There are 1,157 people on the housing list in Cavan at the moment. Most of them have to wait years before they are housed by the local authority. They have to rent privately. They get the assistance of HAP but they cannot find a landlord who will accept HAP. They end up moving in with parents, accessing emergency accommodation or leaving the country. Those who are over the threshold for social housing but do not earn enough to get a mortgage are completely caught. They have no support whatsoever and they cannot find somewhere to rent they can afford. They are faced with moving in with their parents or leaving the country. We need a lot more social housing and a lot more affordable housing on a large scale.

The Act that was sold to us came into being in March. We were told there would be short-term pain for long-term gain but people have been suffering for a long time. It is not short-term pain. They are already suffering and they cannot suffer any more. They cannot afford to pay colossal rents that continue to rise. What is the point of giving them security in a rental if they cannot afford it? Everyone should have tenure security but if they cannot afford to rent in the first place, there is absolutely no point.

This is a never-ending cycle and we need some proper policies. We need a ban on no-fault evictions for a period of time until the Government gets its act together to provide sufficient social and affordable housing for the people of this country.

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy James Browne): I thank the Sinn Féin Senators for initiating the motion and I thank colleagues for their contributions to what I consider to be an important discussion in the House. Housing and homelessness are defining social and economic issues for this country and they have my unwavering focus and priority. Access to suitable, affordable and safe accommodation and secure tenancies is essential for every family and individual. The Government is mobilising the most significant resources in the history of the State to tackle the challenge at hand. I reassert the Government's commitment and determination to tackle the challenges in the housing sector.

The Government's goal is to have a housing system that genuinely responds to the needs of our people and has safe and secure homes for people to grow up and grow old in, regardless of where they are in life, what pay band they are in or whether they are renting or intend to own. No one in the Government underestimates the scale of the challenge. We must ensure that we enhance supply as much as possible.

I recognise the strain and stress that can be caused by the scarcity of rental accommodation, the rent pressures that often accompany it and those who may end up in homelessness. I am doing my utmost to tackle this and improve the situation. We have to increase the supply of all types of homes, including social, affordable and cost rental, and increase the availability of homes and rooms in the private rental market and to purchase. Only a sustained increase in the supply of homes of all tenure types can actually solve this problem sustainably. Other measures are temporary at best and will do little to get what we need in terms of the number of homes people need throughout the country.

An eviction ban and rent freeze would have a significant impact in deterring the medium and longer term supply of rental accommodation. It would act as a disincentive to landlords who are considering entering the rental market and for investors who supply the number of homes needed to part solve these challenges. A freeze on rents would only freeze the rental crisis without a solution. We need to provide hope, not only for those renting but also for those who cannot find anywhere to rent and need the supply of homes increased.

It is clear that the motion was prompted by the recent publication of the Daft rent report. However, the rent index report published by the RTB is the most accurate and authoritative rent report of its kind on the private rental sector, as it tracks actual rents paid and not asking prices. It is independent in how it puts together its evidence to provide the figures available. It is important, in the context of this debate, to focus on the evidence we have and on facts. Nationally, standardised average market rents continue to rise for new and existing tenancies but the rate of new tenancy rent increases has been relatively stable for the last six quarters at a national level. The rent index for quarter 4 of 2025 showed that year on year rents in new tenancies increased nationally by 5%. However, there was a decrease of 1.1% from quarter 3 of 2025, which is a positive sign. The rent index for quarter 4 of 2025 showed that year on year existing rents increased nationally by 4.4% and by 0.7% quarterly. This again demonstrates a moderating trend.

The number of private landlords rose by 1.3% annually to 105,847, indicating increased participation in the rental market. It shows there is no mass exodus of landlords from the market. The latest data published by the RTB shows continued resilience in the Irish rental sector, with ongoing growth in tenancies and landlords in the market. This is important when we look at the increase in the number of homes delivered last year and the number of tenancies. We are providing more homes for people throughout the country.

We have to implement an ambitious plan to reform practically every aspect of our housing system. Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030 is that action plan. Despite the challenges we face, the plan is moving the dial in the right direction. There is momentum and we will drive on. I am determined to do that. We are working tirelessly to address the challenges and implement policies that make a positive difference to individuals and wider society. While there is still much to do, the motion initiated by Sinn Féin Senators does not fairly represent the efforts and progress made to date.

It is important that I reiterate the real progress we have made in recent years, including that relating to social and affordable housing delivery. I will set out the key changes we have introduced and our plans to scale up the supply of housing across all tenures. Between July 2020 and the end of 2025, almost 59,000 social homes were added to the social housing stock and more than 15,000 homes were brought back into use under the voids programme. Local authorities are delivering affordable homes, with funding of almost €690 million approved from the affordable housing fund to support the delivery of over 7,650 affordable purchase and cost rental homes by 25 local authorities. Over the past five years, almost 149,000 new homes have been delivered.

This is significant progress but there is recognition that we have to build on it. The Government has implemented a range of measures in recent years to ensure a balanced housing market across all tenures, including home ownership, social and affordable housing and private rental.

The recently enacted Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2026 introduced a new national rent control for all new tenancies, which limits rent increases. It also now means that Ireland offers among the strongest tenancy protections in Europe, with these measures providing the most robust tenancy protections in the history of this State.

These changes were also introduced to help to attract and increase the supply of rental properties. Ireland is facing a shortage of rental homes, especially apartments. The reforms aim to encourage investment and development, while also providing stronger protections for tenants. It will take time for new supply to materialise given the nature of investment decisions and large-scale residential development. Affordability is also at the heart of the Government's housing policy, as embodied within our housing plan, with the Government targeting the delivery of 72,000 new social homes and 90,000 affordable supports. The plan reinforces and expands the range of existing measures being implemented by the Government to tackle the issues of supply and affordability, thereby supporting the increased provision of new homes to purchase and rent.

Record levels of social and affordable housing delivery have been achieved in recent years. In 2025, a total of 9,089 new-build social homes were constructed. This is the highest delivery of social homes in the history of the State. It is an increase of 1,256 homes, or 16%, compared

to 2024. Over 42,000 new-build social homes have been delivered between 2022 and 2025. I am providing substantial funding to local authorities, the Land Development Agency, LDA, and the approved housing bodies.

To support increased delivery, the national development plan has committed record levels of funding. In 2026 alone, a record level of investment is being provided for housing delivery, with €5.2 billion in Exchequer capital funding complemented by investment through the LDA and lending from the Housing Finance Agency. This brings the total capital funding for housing in 2026 alone to over €9 billion. This record level of funding is supporting the delivery of social, affordable and cost-rental homes. This capital funding will be supplemented by over €2 billion in current funding to address housing needs. Since the launch of cost rental in 2021, around €2.25 billion in Exchequer funding has been approved for cost-rental projects.

I wish to emphasise that the programme for Government recognises the important role that the private rental sector plays in housing for many people and will continue to do so into the future. This Government will address the challenges in this sector, including standards, security and affordability. The Government recognises that there is a need to urgently and substantially scale up housing delivery, including emergency accommodation and social housing. This will take some pressure off the rental market.

There has been clear progress and we have a solid foundation upon which to build for the future. The reforms we have introduced have taken time because they are so comprehensive and far-reaching. Housing delivery envisaged under Delivering Homes, Building Communities is focused through short, medium and long-term actions. The Government is working every day to deliver on its comprehensive and detailed plan of action.

Senator Joanne Collins: I have been hearing about safeguards for tenants and renters and Ireland having some of the strongest protections for renters. If people cannot afford to rent a house, the safeguards and strongest protections are not worth the paper they are written on, because people will not have the house to have those safeguards. They will be stuck in emergency accommodation. I did smirk and laugh a little bit while some of my colleagues across the floor were speaking because I found it quite comical to hear that the Government has done so much for housing over the last number of years, and that it does this and does that. The only thing I can see the Government doing for housing is enabling evictions and putting policies in place that ensure landlords can undertake these evictions.

Senator Joe Flaherty: The Senator is only cherry-picking the numbers now.

Senator Joanne Collins: No. I am speaking without interruption.

An Cathaoirleach: Senator Collins, without interruption, please.

Senator Joanne Collins: The Government's representatives need to start listening to what the people who come into their offices are saying. They need to actually listen to them, because I do not think anybody across the floor listens. People are in bits. They cannot find somewhere to live and when they do, they cannot afford it. People are constantly in fear of being evicted because the new rules that came in ensure the landlord can up the price once they evict the

tenant. It is an absolutely ridiculous rule to have put in place. The rent caps put in are too high, to start with.

Deputy James Browne: It is the complete opposite.

Senator Joanne Collins: The only thing that does not work in this country is the majority of people's wages. For middle-income earners, the only thing not going up is their wages. The costs of paying for the food shop, car insurance, rent, insurance and tax have all gone up for them. The cost of everything they are paying for has gone up because of inflation. The only thing not matching it is their wages.

What do I say to Jane and her husband, who are left with €130 a week just after paying the rent? They have two kids. What if a school tour comes up? Do they have to go to the principal or teacher, get down on their hands and knees, with embarrassment and pride in their heart, say they cannot afford the school tour this year and ask if they can get a payment plan for it? What is an experience like this doing to people? I just do not think the Government is seeing the bigger picture. I do not think it is hearing the stories it needs to hear.

What is wrong is that the offices of the Government representatives are being packed up with the developers and investors. They are the ones getting the sweet deals when it comes to rent in this country. The Government is saying that our Private Members' Bill does not represent the progress that this Government has made. The 17,500 people living in homeless accommodation represent the Government and what it has done. This is what it needs to look at.

I am really sorry if it sounds very blunt, but the Government's policies are not worth the paper they are written on, because they are not working. Do you know what? I would respect the Government and its representatives so much more if, just once in a while, they put their hands up and said this is not working, so let us stop and look at it, and go back and change it a little bit. The Government does not have to say that we were right. We are not asking for that. We just want the Government to get this right for the people on the ground. By the way, Deputy Eoin Ó Broin is not in government and never has been. How could he build a bloody house?

Senator Chris Andrews: On a point of order-----

An Cathaoirleach: There is no point of order.

Senator Chris Andrews: I put a couple of questions to the Minister for some insight-----

An Cathaoirleach: There is no point of order once-----

Senator Chris Andrews: -----but I did not get any answer on why he refuses to meet residents in respect of the Irish Glass Bottle site.

An Cathaoirleach: -----the format of the debate is agreed by the House.

Senator Chris Andrews: I am sorry.

An Cathaoirleach: The format of the debate agreed by the House today was that once the proposer of the debate finishes, that is the conclusion of the debate.

Senator Chris Andrews: Well, maybe next time the Minister can give some insight into why he will not meet the residents in Ringsend.

An Cathaoirleach: I thank the Senator.

Amendment put:

The Seanad divided: Tá, 31; Níl, 7.	
Tá	Níl
Ahearn, Garret.	Andrews, Chris.
Blaney, Niall.	Collins, Joanne.
Boyle, Manus.	Cosgrove, Nessa.
Brady, Paraic.	Harmon, Laura.
Byrne, Cathal.	O'Reilly, Sarah.
Casey, Pat.	Stephenson, Patricia.
Clifford-Lee, Lorraine.	Tully, Pauline.
Comyn, Alison.	
Conway, Martin.	
Costello, Teresa.	
Crowe, Ollie.	
Curley, Shane.	
Daly, Paul.	
Davitt, Aidan.	
Duffy, Mark.	
Fitzpatrick, Mary.	
Flaherty, Joe.	
Gallagher, Robbie.	
Kelleher, Garret.	
Kennelly, Mike.	
Lynch, Eileen.	
Murphy, P. J.	
Murphy O'Mahony, Margaret.	
Nelson Murray, Linda.	
Ní Chuilinn, Evanne.	
O'Donovan, Noel.	
O'Loughlin, Fiona.	
O'Reilly, Joe.	
Rabbitte, Anne.	
Ryan, Dee.	
Wilson, Diarmuid.	

Tellers: Tá, Senators Cathal Byrne and Paul Daly; Níl, Senators Joanne Collins and Pauline Tully.

Amendment declared carried.

An Cathaoirleach: I welcome to the House, and I am reading this as it is written in the note, "and say hello to my better half, Conor Cosgrove". By the way, that is Senator Cosgrove's better half and not my better half. I also welcome his friend, Brian Kinsella, both up today from Sligo. I thank them for being here.

Senator Nessa Cosgrove: My husband is not from Sligo. He is from Cavan.

An Cathaoirleach: We are also joined by guests of Deputy Malcolm Byrne from the Croghan Athletics Club parkrun group. They are most welcome. I know the Deputy has done something like 50 marathons or something like that.

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

The Seanad divided: Tá, 31; Níl, 9.	
Tá	Níl
Ahearn, Garret.	Andrews, Chris.
Blaney, Niall.	Collins, Joanne.
Boyle, Manus.	Conway, Joe.
Brady, Paraic.	Cosgrove, Nessa.
Byrne, Cathal.	Harmon, Laura.
Casey, Pat.	Keogan, Sharon.
Clifford-Lee, Lorraine.	O'Reilly, Sarah.
Comyn, Alison.	Stephenson, Patricia.
Conway, Martin.	Tully, Pauline.
Costello, Teresa.	
Crowe, Ollie.	
Curley, Shane.	
Daly, Paul.	
Davitt, Aidan.	
Duffy, Mark.	
Fitzpatrick, Mary.	
Flaherty, Joe.	
Gallagher, Robbie.	
Kelleher, Garret.	
Kennelly, Mike.	
Lynch, Eileen.	
Murphy, P. J.	
Murphy O'Mahony, Margaret.	
Nelson Murray, Linda.	
Ní Chuilinn, Evanne.	
O'Donovan, Noel.	
O'Loughlin, Fiona.	
O'Reilly, Joe.	
Rabbitte, Anne.	
Ryan, Dee.	
Wilson, Diarmuid.	

Tellers: Tá, Senators Cathal Byrne and Paul Daly; Níl, Senators Joanne Collins and Pauline Tully.

Question declared carried.

An Cathaoirleach: When is it proposed to meet again?

Senator Garret Ahearn: At 9.30 a.m. tomorrow.

An Cathaoirleach: Is that agreed? Agreed. I remind everyone that it is Senator Joe Conway's birthday, and Senator Cathal Byrne's too. Happy birthday.

Cuireadh an Seanad ar athló ar 7.48 p.m. go dtí 9.30 a.m., Déardaoin, an 28 Bealtaine 2026.

The Seanad adjourned at 7.48 p.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Thursday, 28 May 2026.