



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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(OFFICIAL REPORT—*Unrevised*)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 07 Bealtaine 2013

Tuesday, 07 May 2013

Chuaigh an Leas-Cheann Comhairle i gceannas ar 14.00 p.m.

Paidir.
Prayer.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Priority Questions

Defence Forces Reserve Review

72. **Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil** asked the Minister for Defence if he will report on the implementation of the changes he announced for the Reserve Defence Force in November 2012; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21514/13]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Alan Shatter): The value for money review of the Reserve Defence Force, RDF, recommended the retention of a reserve of approximately 4,000 personnel, with a broad range of reforms aimed at ensuring a viable and cost effective reserve into the future. A high level implementation group, HLOG, consisting of civil and military personnel, is overseeing this implementation process of the major reorganisation of the reserve. When complete, it will enhance the overall capacity of the Defence Forces to deal with a broad range of contingencies.

A new single force structure underpinned by legislation is now in place since 31 March. All former Army and Naval Service Reserve units have now been disestablished, with both Reserve Defence Force and Permanent Defence Force units organised within the new single force structure. While the reassignment process put in place for members of the reserve to positions within the new structure is at an advanced stage of implementation, it is not yet fully complete. Reassignment offers have been made to individual members. However, members have the right to appeal and I understand a number have done so.

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The reorganisation of the reserve dovetails with the recent reorganisation of the Permanent Defence Force. This revised structure will improve access to equipment, expertise and appropriate training for members of the reserve. In the current phase of implementation which will extend to 30 September 2013 armed training for members of the reserve has resumed. Co-ordinated training is under way and concentrated on capability development and achieving interoperability standards. This will be met from within the existing reserve training budget. Monetary savings of approximately €11 million in 2013 will be achieved by the reduction in direct expenditure on the reserve.

The changes being implemented are a direct response to the identified need for reform and will assist in ensuring a sustainable and fit for purpose reserve into the future. I am satisfied that the changes being introduced will assist in achieving this goal.

Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil: I acknowledge that the members of the Reserve Defence Force welcome the introduction by the Minister of the single force structure. An interesting presentation was made by the said group to the Joint Committee on Justice, Defence and Equality during the past fortnight and at that meeting its representatives made it very clear to us that it was their opinion that the value for money review on which the Minister had based his amendments to the system was flawed on a number levels. They said it had failed to make any qualitative evaluation of the input of the Permanent Defence Force into the RDF. They also claimed it had made biased comparisons in its case studies, that it misinterpreted evidence and included no substantial analysis to support many of its claims. In addition, they said it completely ignored the operational capability, experience and output of the Naval Service Reserve.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask the Deputy to, please, frame his question.

Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil: Will the Minister agree with the members of the Reserve Defence Force who further said the outcome of the value for money review and the latest reorganisation of the RDF ran contrary to international trends? Will he agree that the existing studies of and reports on international comparators and previous studies of the RDF also indicate that this is the case?

Deputy Alan Shatter: The terms of reference for the value for money review were created by my predecessor in 2009. They were prescribed by the Government led by the Deputy's party. I am satisfied that a very detailed and effective analysis was conducted of difficulties within the RDF, including how to make it more effective, how to ensure that it makes a contribution that has value in the public interest and that we use funding wisely. The number of members of the PDF, the cadre who were appointed whose sole task was effectively to mentor members of the RDF, was based on an RDF contingent membership of 9,500, a strength that was never achieved during the 14 years when the Deputy's party was the lead party in government and which resulted in a substantial waste of resources. Members of the PDF who could have been assigned to other duties were given duties that were unnecessary in the context of the real strength. The purpose of the realignment that has taken place and the recommendations for its implementation that I received from the Chief of Staff and the Secretary General in the Department of Justice, Equality and Defence are to ensure that there is value for money, that those members of the reserve who, through their community spirit, want to make a contribution are given a greater opportunity to do so and to reintegrate the reserve into the PDF so that there is a closer relationship between the two which I believe that members of the reserve substantially welcome.

Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil: The Reserve Defence Forces feel that the Minister has an agenda to abolish them. I hope that is not the case. I ask the Minister to reiterate his very strong commitment to the Reserve Defence Forces. He constantly mentions what my party did in government but he has been long enough in government himself to be able to stand over the positions he is adopting. I ask him to stand over the position he is adopting in this regard and to indicate that he has no intention whatsoever of forcing the Reserve Defence Forces to the point of non-existence through the introduction of regulations and key performance indicators with which it is virtually impossible to comply.

Deputy Alan Shatter: The reason I refer to his party in government is that in so far as there is any challenge to the nature of the value for money assessment that was undertaken it was undertaken under terms of reference, with which I have no disagreement, prescribed by the Deputy's colleagues in government. One of his colleagues who was a senior Minister, Deputy Ó Cuíy, when dealing with the value for money report at a meeting of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Justice, Equality and Defence suggested that the terms of reference had been designed to produce a particular result. He seemed to be oblivious to the fact that they were designed by him and his Cabinet colleagues when in government.

To say something blindingly obvious to the Deputy, if I had an agenda to abolish the Reserve Defence Forces I would have announced its abolition. The abolition of the RDF was one of the assessments made by the value for money audit. I am acting on the proposals and suggestions made to me to make the reserve more effective. If I had an agenda to abolish the reserve instead of announcing a reorganisation in its interests and those of members of the public some months ago I would have announced its abolition. I hope that this issue will go away. I read with great interest the presentation made by members of the reserve to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Justice, Equality and Defence. They had many positive things to say and they had some understandable concerns but it is very important that we now move forward with the full implementation of the reforms and I look forward to the day when the reserve is perceived by the public as playing a role that has clear public benefit.

Defence Forces Reserve Issues

73. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Defence if he has taken the opportunity to read the transcript from the Reserve Defence Force Representative Association which was before the Oireachtas Justice Committee on 24 April 2013; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21410/13]

(Deputy Alan Shatter): I can confirm that I have read the transcript from the appearance of the Reserve Defence Force Representative Association, RDFRA, before the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Justice, Defence and Equality and have also read the RDFRA written submission to that committee. The completion of the independently chaired value for money review is an important contribution to the reorganisation of the Defence Forces. Implementation of the approach recommended will ensure that the reserve continues to provide the Permanent Defence Force with appropriate additional capacity for contingency situations. It will also maintain a channel for the provision of a well-trained voluntary military contribution from communities at local level.

The value for money review of the Reserve Defence Force was conducted in accordance with the guidelines for such reviews, which are followed by all Departments. In accordance

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with these guidelines, a steering committee which included members from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform was appointed to oversee the review. The independent chair was drawn from a list maintained by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. The members of the steering committee made their recommendations collectively, having regard to the evidence uncovered during the review. I note the Reserve Defence Force Representative Association, RDFRA, is not satisfied with the recommendations of the review. However, I was disappointed at the allegations of bias made. This is a slight on the integrity of the steering committee which is grossly unfair and unfounded. The review was comprehensive and systematic. The subsequent reorganisation proposals were recommended by the Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces and the Secretary General of my Department. At no stage was there interference by me, as Minister, with those engaged in conducting the review. Following their appointment, I simply awaited receipt of their report when they had completed their work.

I previously stated I would be willing to listen to points raised by the RDFRA and weigh them on their merits. I note there were two dominant and linked themes within the presentation and discussion, namely, reservists with specialist skills from their civilian lives should be better utilised and called up or mobilised in a paid capacity in non-crisis situations and that the ongoing calling up or mobilisation of reservists should be facilitated by employment protection legislation.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

This matter was comprehensively dealt with in the VFM review. The role of the Reserve Defence Force remains to augment the Permanent Defence Force in crisis situations. The mobilisation of reservists must be justifiable having due regard to both the gravity of the situation and the potential disruption to reservists, their families and employers. I could not justify calling up reservists in the absence of a clear requirement for additional capacity. Of course, it is a very desirable feature of the reserve that volunteers bring a whole range of talents, skills and experience through their commitment. The VFM review did recommend that the utilisation of the skills of members of the reserve should be considered on a voluntary basis and in an unpaid capacity. This represents a balanced approach to utilisation of the reserve.

I will, of course, take other views on board and look forward to further engaging with the Joint Committee on Justice, Defence and Equality on this matter in the future.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I have the transcripts of the presentation and the subsequent question and answer session with the RDFRA at the Joint Committee on Justice, Defence and Equality. It is clear that it has a significant difficulty with the VFM report and its input to it. One major point that stands out is that of training hours. Unless a member of the Reserve Defence Force has met the statutory requirement of undergoing two weeks training, he or she cannot avail of the gratuity available. The RDFRA has made the point that the number of training hours has been halved, meaning that it is difficult to avail of training. There is also the wider issue of employment legislation that will facilitate Reserve Defence Force members, for whom the majority of their time is spent in making an unpaid voluntary contribution, and give them supports in their places of employment, as is the case in other jurisdictions.

The organisation made many positive contributions at the committee. It is asking for an independent review because it believes the potential and skills Reserve Defence Force members bring to the table could be lost. What is the Minister's view of an independent review based on the RDFRA's presentation?

Deputy Alan Shatter: We have had an independent VFM review which made a number of key recommendations which are being implemented in the public interest and in that of members of the Reserve. I fully understand and appreciate that people have a difficulty on occasions with change and reform. It always takes a little time for matters to bed down. I know and I am conscious of the fact that there is an amount of re organisation involved in this and that, for some, inconvenience too. I am particularly conscious that each and every member of the Reserve Defence Force is a volunteer, giving up his or her time. Whether we are talking about the payment of a gratuity or a payment for training days, the payment is, of course, very modest and I would not pretend otherwise.

We are trying to ensure the funding available is directed in a way that is in the public interest. In the context of training days, we are trying to ensure matters are designed to encourage people who are members of the Reserve to actively engage. I am conscious that this is a reserve force and that it is in place to fill a gap, should there be a gap to be filled, and in places where the Permanent Defence Force requires assistance. It is not to provide a separate role for the RDF. That is an overwhelming aspect of the background to how we deal with the RDF and how it is trained. I hope the more integrated training that will be provided will focus on particular roles the Reserve may be able to play should it be called upon.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I do not know the answer to the question I am about to ask the Minister. Has he met with the members of the Reserve Defence Force Representative Association to seek the views of its members? It strikes me they are making a constructive contribution to the debate. They are genuinely concerned their members will not be able to meet the requirements in terms of training and they made a statement that the Reserve Defence Force could face being disbanded within three years. I do not know about that, but they have serious concerns. If the Minister has not met them, will he meet them as soon as possible to discuss their presentation and their suggestions? All the Members of this House are sensible people. If there is a layer of civic-minded citizens who want to volunteer and make a contribution to the State in a way that is clearly value for money, we must listen to them. If the Minister has met them, what was the outcome?

Deputy Alan Shatter: There was a consultative process by my officials with members of the Reserve Defence Force following the publication of the value for money report. The Permanent Defence Force, PDF, has been engaged with them also in the context of implementing the changes. I have met with members of the reserve previously. I am always happy to meet with members of the reserve and I had the opportunity when I made my presentation to the Joint Committee on Justice, Defence and Equality committee, when I was delighted to see that there were members of the reserve in the gallery. I had a very brief conversation with them. I have no difficulty in meeting with them should they want to meet with me, but I am conscious that the value for money recommendations were objectively made by a group who independently examined the way the reserve was working, where there were problems and how those problems should be addressed, not just in the interests of the reserve but also in the public interest, at a time when we must use our resources wisely.

Overseas Missions

74. **Deputy Mick Wallace** asked the Minister for Defence if a decision has been taken on the participation of Irish Defence Forces personnel in the UN peacekeeping mission to Mali ap-

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proved by the Security Council on 25 April 2013; if he will report on the Irish troops currently participating in the EUTM Mali; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21507/13]

(Deputy Alan Shatter): On 25 April 2013, the United Nations Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2100 establishing a peacekeeping force in the west African nation of Mali. Acting under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter, the Council established the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, to be known as MINUSMA, for an initial period of 12 months. The new mission will replace the African-led International Support Mission in Mali, AFISMA. On 1 July 2013, African personnel currently deployed to AFISMA will be basically rehatted to MINUSMA. The UN has initiated a force generation process for MINUSMA with a view to deploying, as soon as possible, an advance headquarters team to work alongside AFISMA force headquarters until the transfer of authority on 1 July next.

No formal request has been received from the UN for Defence Forces participation in this mission. However, the UN has advised the European Union and other potential troop contributors of current shortfalls in key enabling factors, including transport, logistics, engineering and medical. The potential for the Defence Forces to contribute is currently under consideration by the defence organisation. No decision has been made at this stage as to whether Ireland will participate.

Regarding the EU Training Mission Mali, EUTM Mali, 22 member states, including Ireland, are contributing more than 500 troops, including 250 instructors and additional military personnel. The purpose of the mission is to provide military training and advice to the Malian armed forces in order to improve their capacity to maintain security and restore the authority of the Malian Government and the territorial integrity of the Malian State.

Eight members of our Defence Forces were deployed to EUTM Mali on 23 March 2013 for a tour of duty of approximately five months. Of these, one lieutenant colonel is the camp commandant of the Koulikoro training camp, while one commandant is employed in the mission headquarters in Bamako. The remaining six form part of a UK-led infantry training team which is based in Koulikoro training camp and is training Malian armed forces personnel. This element consists of a junior officer and five non-commissioned officers. Training for the first group of 650 Malian armed forces personnel commenced on 2 April 2013 and is progressing well. The Defence Forces training team will train two platoons of Malian armed forces personnel during their tour of duty. The training teams are due to rotate in early September 2013.

Deputy Mick Wallace: As we know, military intervention rarely comes without a price. Too often, we have seen the so-called war on terror become the reason for intervention and this is, seemingly, part of the French argument for moving into Mali. I do not know whether the Minister has noticed, but in the past few weeks international agencies have been warning that northern Mali is about to descend to an emergency level of food insecurity and that if conditions do not improve, we are looking at a disastrous situation. Already, more than 250,000 people have been displaced and the number of refugees is growing. The agencies have been at pains to point out that one in every five households now faces food shortages, categorised as severe in northern Mali and as extreme in the Kidal region.

All of this is happening against a backdrop of a chronic nutritional crisis that kills children every day, the majority of them in the south of the country, where 90% of Malians live. The UNICEF Mali representative, Hector Calderon, has estimated that 210,000 will suffer from life-

threatening malnutrition this year and 450,000 will suffer a less severe, but debilitating, form of malnutrition.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I must call on the Minister to respond.

Deputy Mick Wallace: Does the Minister not think the energies of the foreign powers should be more directed towards community projects and towards sorting out issues on the ground rather than the military direction of the French effort?

Deputy Alan Shatter: I wish I lived in the simplistic world the Deputy inhabits in dealing with these issues. Of course, it is important there are not food difficulties and that those that exist are addressed. It is also important that children in difficulty have their problems addressed. UNICEF is part of the same organisation involved, the United Nations. As the Deputy may be aware, the problems - despite the way some people in this State like to paint them - that arose in Mali do not derive from the intervention of the French or the assistance European Union countries or other African countries are trying to provide. They derive from the difficulties and collapse that took place in Mali, both the collapse in takeover of the Government of Mali and, forces, particularly fundamentalist groups, who took over northern Mali.

The Deputy may be interested to know that a report by the UN human rights office in February 2013 on the crisis in Mali revealed serious human rights violations since the beginning of the conflict in January 2012. The report highlights issues which must be addressed in response to the current crisis in Mali if lasting peace and stability is to be achieved, including the serious underlying and neglected ethnic tensions in the country. The report provides a very balanced picture, showing there have been abuses by both the Malian authorities and by the militants in the north. The three main regions of northern Mali, Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu, had been controlled by four rebel groups before the French and African military intervention. The separatist National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, MNLA, and the extremist movements, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, AQIM, Ansar Dine and Movement for Unity and Jihad were all engaged.

It is important to bring to the Deputy's attention that Ministers in the north were responsible for serious violations, including summary executions, extra-judicial killings and many abuses were carried out in the name of an extreme interpretation of Sharia law. Women, in particular, endured harassment, abuse, sexual violence, rape and reviews by al-Qaeda and other Islamic groups in the north as a form of ethnic intimidation and repression. The recruitment of child soldiers, sometimes as young as ten, by extremist groups is also documented.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister should conclude.

Deputy Alan Shatter: Is the Deputy seriously saying that all of that should have been ignored or should continue to be ignored and that those groups should have been allowed to take over the entire Malian State and perpetrate murder, persecution and rape throughout that state? It was the intervention of the French and African forces that stopped that.

Deputy Finian McGrath: The Minister supports dictatorship.

Deputy Alan Shatter: What is being done now, which is important, is that the EUTM group is not merely providing military training, but is providing training in human rights issues, in conflict resolution and in civilian protection issues. This is an important element of what needs to be done to facilitate the Malian State's return to some level of normality when the

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promised elections are held next July.

Deputy Mick Wallace: I have no intention of defending what was going on there. However, the same argument was made for the invasion of Afghanistan. Terrible things were happening in Afghanistan, but after ten years, the situation there has got worse. It is all very well to say terrible things are happening and to decide to go in and sort them out. Very often, we do not go in for the right reasons. I would like the Minister to give me a litany of places that have actually been improved as a result of intervention. In the past ten years there have been disastrous interventions in countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and Yemen.

Deputy Alan Shatter: First, there are still difficulties in Afghanistan. The Deputy is wrong about the situation in Afghanistan because there are substantial improvements in that country compared to ten years ago. However, the Deputy chooses to ignore them.

Deputy Mick Wallace: I am not ignoring them.

Deputy Finian McGrath: Question No. 76 in my name relates to the situation in Afghanistan.

Deputy Alan Shatter: Is the Deputy suggesting that where there is murder, mutilation and rape-----

Deputy Mick Wallace: We know all that.

Deputy Alan Shatter: -----and where women are being violated and limbs are being cut off, the world should turn its back and do nothing?

Deputy Mick Wallace: No.

Deputy Alan Shatter: Is that what the Deputy is suggesting?

Deputy Finian McGrath: That is not what he said.

Deputy Alan Shatter: I do not agree with that point of view.

Deputy Mick Wallace: I would prefer to see the Africans solve problems in Africa.

Defence Forces Expenditure

75. **Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail** asked the Minister for Defence the savings that will be secured in the Defence Forces budget this year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21515/13]

Deputy Alan Shatter: As provided for in the Revised Estimates Volume for 2013, the gross provision for the Defence Votes in 2013 is €895 million. This figure is made up of €680 million for the Defence Vote and €215 million for the Army pensions Vote. The gross provision for 2013 shows an overall reduction of €7 million on the 2012 gross provision of €902 million and is mainly accounted for through estimated reductions in pay and allowances in the Defence Votes under the successor to the 2010-14 public service agreement, known as Croke Park II. These reductions follow further significant reductions which have been achieved in recent years in the Defence Votes. The current economic conditions have necessitated reductions in public

sector expenditure in Ireland, including defence expenditure. Having regard to these resource constraints, I have initiated a broad range of measures aimed at maintaining the operational capacity of the Defence Forces. Following a comprehensive review of expenditure, I secured the agreement of the Government to accept my recommendation to stabilise the strength of the Permanent Defence Force at 9,500 personnel. This is the optimum strength required to fulfil all roles assigned to it by the Government. A major reorganisation of the Defence Forces was initiated within this strength ceiling. This has prioritised operational capability and redeployed Permanent Defence Force personnel from administrative and support tasks to operational units. In addition, equipment procurement continues to prioritise the operational requirements of the Defence Forces. All of this has been achieved within the reduced resource envelope allocated to defence. The measures I have outlined are ensuring the Defence Forces remain fit for purpose. The Chief of Staff has confirmed that the Defence Forces can continue to meet all operational requirements at home and overseas. The Department continually monitors expenditure trends closely on an ongoing basis. No overall savings in 2013 are anticipated at this stage.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: Once again, it is welcome that expenditure is constantly monitored by the Minister's military personnel. It is also welcome that Defence Forces numbers have been fixed at 9,500. I would like to remind the Minister of the responses he gave to parliamentary questions approximately two months ago. Does he agree that he accepted on that occasion that military personnel went way above and beyond the call of duty at an early stage in meeting the demand for reform of the public service? Does he agree that he also accepted on that occasion that many members of the Defence Forces were receiving family income supplement, which is a clear indication that their incomes are very low? Does he, therefore, accept that he did not stand up to the mark as he intimated he would on that occasion - at least, that is my understanding of what he intimated - by defending the members of the Defence Forces? Does he accept that the 10% cut in allowances announced shortly after we last discussed this matter will have a very adverse impact on rank and file soldiers?

Deputy Alan Shatter: I disagree entirely with what the Deputy has to say with regard to my defending of the position of members of the Defence Forces. If the Deputy's party had continued in government, I would not have been in a position to secure an agreement from the Government that the strength of the Defence Forces should be maintained at 9,500. If I had not secured the additional funding necessary from the Government in 2012 to facilitate this, we would now be looking at the strength of the Defence Forces falling below 8,000. It was because I secured this agreement that we were able to recruit new members to the Defence Forces during the course of last year, and I am anticipating that we will again be recruiting later this year when the number of retirements for this year becomes clear.

I am very proud of the fact the Defence Forces have, in fairness to them, implemented substantial reform. They have been ahead of the public service pack in the efficiency with which they have implemented reforms and ensured resources are used very carefully in the public interest. I want to pay public tribute to the representative bodies within the Defence Forces for engaging very constructively in the process that took place with a view to assisting in saving the €300 million that must be saved this year and agreeing change and reform that I hope and believe will have very limited financial impact on members of the Defence Forces but will ensure, overall, that the savings that have to be achieved can be made.

Of course, during the many years when the Deputy's party was in government, members of the Defence Forces consistently had to apply for supplementary welfare allowance and for additional financial help through the social welfare system for a whole range of reasons, so the

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Deputy should not expect anyone to believe that is a new issue. I am very grateful to the representative bodies for their constructive engagement in the interests of their members and in the context of the public duty and patriotism displayed by them.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: Obviously, I do not agree with the Minister. Would he agree it is fair that Army generals - under his proposals, not ours - will lose 14% while Army privates lose 6%? Does he accept it is fair that - under his arrangements, not ours - new recruits to the Defence Forces will enter at reduced salary scales, unlike the arrangements that appear to have been arrived at for teachers and possibly for nurses?

Deputy Alan Shatter: In the context of any savings that had to be effected, I said that in real financial terms they were not large as they affected any individual, but the approach was that the new financial arrangements would have a greater impact on those who were better paid than on those who were lesser paid. I do not know if the Deputy is suggesting that those who are paid less should have been hit to a greater extent, because that is not my view.

If the Deputy's party had not destroyed the fiscal base of this country we would not be in this situation in the first place. We would be in a position whereby, instead of talking about having to reduce resources in a number of areas or, indeed, reduce or contain allowances or salaries, we would possibly be seeing individuals doing a good deal better than they are. The Deputy should not forget that his party practically made this country bankrupt. We are in receipt of €12 billion in aid this year from the ECB-IMF-EU and, without that, we would not be in a position to pay front-line workers the salaries or allowances they will get this year. Indeed, we would not be in a position to maintain 9,500 members of the Defence Forces, let alone look at the possibility of recruiting additional members this year, having already recruited 600 new members last year.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: The Minister is not addressing the issue of why one group will lose 14% and the other 6%.

Overseas Missions

76. **Deputy Finian McGrath** asked the Minister for Defence if he will provide an update on the role of Irish troops in Afghanistan. [21534/13]

Deputy Alan Shatter: On 20 December 2001, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 1386 under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, authorising the establishment of the International Security Assistance Force, ISAF, in Afghanistan. On 9 October 2012, the UN Security Council extended ISAF's mandate for a further year until October 2013.

Ireland has participated in the NATO-led, UN-mandated mission in Afghanistan since 5 July 2002, following the Government decision of 2 July 2002 authorising the provision of seven members of the Permanent Defence Force for service with the force. The continued participation by seven members of the Permanent Defence Force in ISAF is reviewed annually by the Government. The most recent decision by the Government was taken on 26 June 2012 when it agreed to continue to provide seven members of the Permanent Defence Force for service with the ISAF for a further period from July 2012, subject to ongoing review by the Minister for Defence. The seven Defence Forces personnel participating in the ISAF are all located in ISAF HQ in Kabul and work in planning and administrative roles. The work being carried out by Defence Forces personnel, particularly by those involved in the counter improvised explo-

sive device, C-IED, cell, represents an important contribution to this UN-mandated mission. Planning for the drawdown in respect of the ISAF generally is ongoing and the withdrawal of the Defence Forces personnel from the mission will be co-ordinated within the context of the overall ISAF drawdown plan.

Deputy Finian McGrath: I thank the Minister for his response, but I wish to raise broader issues and ask him about the role of Irish troops in Afghanistan. Does he accept that many people have concerns about their role in this very complex conflict? Is he aware that these concerns arise because, as he mentioned, these are NATO-led forces. Many respect the Irish Defence Forces for their role in peacekeeping around the world.

Another issue which arose in a previous question concerns whether the Minister is also aware of the fact that there are significant civilian casualties every day in Afghanistan. Three weeks ago ten young children were massacred in a drone attack by NATO-led forces and there was no reaction from any government, the European Union and the western media regarding these young people who were blown to bits. I notice that the figures for the past three years show the loss in the region of 600 innocent people.

Does the Minister share my deep concern that in such a situation Irish troops could find themselves being drawn in and that we might lose the respect we have built as an international peacekeeper in the past 40 or 50 years?

Deputy Alan Shatter: We have lost no respect as an international peacekeeper.

Deputy Finian McGrath: I said we might lose respect.

Deputy Alan Shatter: As I meet colleagues inside and outside the European Union as Minister for Defence, I find there is enormous respect for the role played by this country. There is enormous respect for the reality, as well as for the perception that we have no agenda of any description, other than trying to assist in bringing about peace and stability in various troubled regions of the world. That is what our seven members are doing as part of the ISAF. They have engaged in administrative work during the years and made a very important contribution.

One area in which I would expect the Deputy to have some sympathy is the training of individuals to neutralise improvised explosive devices. I presume the Deputy thinks improvised explosive devices are bad and that it is a very good idea to stop them blowing up and killing people. I have no differences with the him regarding concerns he may express about people being killed in military accidents. None of us can justify that type of event. Unfortunately, awful tragedies happen in war zones. However, I am always interested in the Deputy's selective condemnation. There is no mention of innocents being blown apart in Taliban bombings. There is no reference to the extent to which women are borne down on by the Taliban and treated as second-class citizens. There is no reference to women being shot for having the impudence in their teenage years to want to be educated. There is no reference to all of these issues. Afghanistan is a difficult and complex country and this has been a difficult and complex conflict. The UN forces are engaged in a process of withdrawal. Ultimately, I expect some forces to remain as an aid to the civil government.

The Deputy is stuck in something of a time warp. He thinks the Soviet Union still exists and that the Cold War is continuing. The main role of NATO, apart from dealing with European-Atlantic security issues, is as a regional body working in co-ordination with the United Nations in peacekeeping and peace enforcement missions. This State has been part of NATO's Partner-

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ship for Peace for very many years. I can tell the Deputy that there is no public concern, beyond the concern in his head, and the heads of a small number of people who are still locked into Cold War politics about this State being part of NATO Partnership for Peace, together with all of the other neutrals in the European Union and being able to participate in an organised way in peacekeeping missions in different parts of the world.

Deputy Finian McGrath: I wish to make three brief points. I do not know on what planet the Minister lives but in my introductory speech I spoke about all the civilians who died in Afghanistan. We should not be selective. I am not selective but the Minister's silence on the other issues shows that he is very selective. He was particularly silent over the past couple of weeks, along with the Government and NATO people, about those innocent children being killed in the drone attacks. I did not hear him. He is particularly silent when young Palestinians are being killed every day but that is another issue. To return to the core issue, he said that Irish troops are respected because they have no political agenda. I agree with that part but my problem is that the Minister and the Government and other people in this State are trying to change that agenda. They want to destroy our independence as a peacekeeping force which is respected internationally. He is trying to change the agenda; he is bringing in the NATO agenda. That is what I will fight against. As a Member of the Oireachtas I will defend and protect the Constitution and the citizens of the State. A lot of people subscribe to this view and a lot of voices agree with me.

Deputy Alan Shatter: I have absolutely no idea why the Deputy is shouting and getting so exercised nor can I figure what relevance his rather unnecessary and odd reference to Palestinian children has to this issue, unless the Deputy has something else going through his mind. Let me inform the Deputy that in the context of that issue, I have been a great deal more engaged than he. I have been engaged in talking to some of the leading negotiators on the Palestinian side. I suspect I have visited the West Bank and Gaza many more times than the Deputy has ever done. I advise the Deputy to be careful of the level of prejudice he may display in this House-----

Deputy Finian McGrath: I have no prejudice. That is an outrageous remark. I will raise the issues of any oppressed peoples anywhere in the world and I have done it many times-----

Deputy Alan Shatter: It is not a coincidence that in the context of the question about Afghanistan he diverted to other issues.

Deputy Finian McGrath: I have raised these issues because it is part of my brief. The Minister should wise up.

Other Questions

Defence Forces UN Missions

77. **Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail** asked the Minister for Defence if it his intention to deepen the Defence Forces participation in any UN mission in Mali; and if he will make a statement on

the matter. [21299/13]

81. **Deputy Thomas P. Broughan** asked the Minister for Defence if he is preparing to send members of the Defence Forces to serve in an UN peacekeeping in Mali; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21128/13]

83. **Deputy Michael Colreavy** asked the Minister for Defence if he will provide an update in the current Defence Forces participation in the training mission in Mali. [21283/13]

87. **Deputy Barry Cowen** asked the Minister for Defence if he will provide a progress report on the Defence Forces mission to Mali; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21318/13]

97. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Defence the timeframe the most recently deployed personnel to Mali will be based there. [21291/13]

Deputy Alan Shatter: I propose to answer Questions Nos. 77, 81, 83, 87 and 97 together.

I addressed the question of possible Defence Forces' participation in the newly established United Nations' multidimensional integrated stabilisation mission in Mali in my reply to a priority question.

On 17 January 2013, the Council of the European Union established the EU training mission, EUTM Mali, which was formally launched by the EU Foreign Affairs Council on 18 February 2013. Its initial mandate is to last for 15 months. The purpose of the mission is to provide military training and advice to the Malian armed forces in order to improve their capacity to maintain security in Mali and restore the authority of the Malian Government and the territorial integrity of the Malian State. Twenty-two member states are contributing over 500 troops, including 250 instructors and additional military personnel to EUTM Mali. Personnel deployed to the mission will not be involved in combat operations.

On 26 February 2013, the Government approved the deployment of approximately eight members of the Permanent Defence Force for service with the EU training mission in Mali. Three officers and five non-commissioned officers were deployed to EUTM Mali on 23 March 2013 for a tour of duty of approximately five months. One officer, of lieutenant colonel rank, has been appointed camp commandant of the Koulikoro training camp, while one commandant is employed in the mission headquarters in Bamako. The remaining six personnel also deployed to Koulikoro form part of a joint infantry training team with the United Kingdom armed forces. Training for the first group of 650 Malian armed forces personnel commenced on 2 April 2013 and is progressing well. The Defence Forces training team will train two platoons of Malian personnel during its tour of duty and is due to rotate in early September.

Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil: We welcome the relative progress achieved in Mali, particularly northern Mali, in recent times. We pay tribute to the French and the approximately 6,000 African-led troops who have been involved in the initiatives. Will the Minister inform the House whether he himself is in favour of sending Irish troops to Mali and indicate if approximately 400 soldiers is the number in question? Will he indicate when he will bring formal proposals to the Cabinet on the matter?

Deputy Alan Shatter: Like Deputy Finian McGrath, Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil gives a little too much credence to the nonsense he reads in *Phoenix*. There has been no decision about num-

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bers of troops. I dealt with this issue at some length. There is a United Nations proposal for a mission. As I indicated in my earlier reply, we are considering technical areas in which we can provide personnel. The matter is being assessed within the Defence Forces and no decision of any description has been made as to whether we will participate in the mission.

My personal view is that the mission is important. If we can help to bring stability and peace to the area, we should make a positive contribution. I await recommendations from within the Defence Forces as to whether there are areas within which we can assist the mission and whether we should provide personnel. I have no idea from where the figure of 400 might have come other than the brain of some journalist who felt the need to fill space in a particular periodical. I always find it interesting when people write authoritatively that definitive decisions have been made on matters I am dealing with when no decision of any description has yet been made.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: I note that the Minister is at least an avid reader of *Phoenix*.

Deputy Alan Shatter: It is something at which one can laugh with great regularity.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: Is the Minister stating he has received no formal request under MINUSMA and United Nations Resolution S/RES 2100? I missed the earlier reply.

Deputy Alan Shatter: Yes, that is what I said.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: I missed the reply to Deputy Mick Wallace. Can the Minister provide any indication of the number of troops he envisages becoming involved? He mentioned a figure of 22 and the training element. My understanding is that Mali may receive the third largest United Nations deployment in recent decades after the deployments to the Democratic Republic of Congo and Darfur. It will, therefore, be a major operation.

People are aware of Mali's history and economic circumstances. It is one of the world's poorest countries. They are aware of its general society and the threat from at least some organisations with connections to al-Qaeda. Is the Minister concerned about the State becoming involved in the French post-colonial system in north Africa? As he knows, France has had a long-standing role in Francophone countries and often supported powerful dictatorships and regimes which oppressed their own peoples. Does the Minister have concerns that Ireland could become implicated in this regard? He mentioned Partnership for Peace. It is fair to say, notwithstanding earlier comments, that people have concerns about this country being involved in NATO missions.

Deputy Alan Shatter: This country will not become involved in anyone's adventures anywhere. We do not get involved in adventures. We have a tradition of which we should be proud in the House and which we should never misrepresent of having enormously competent Defence Forces which bring special skills to peacekeeping and which are widely recognised globally. We punch substantially above our weight to deploy small contingents in different parts of the world, often with individual members of the Defence Forces being placed in command of troops from a broad range of countries. I am very proud of the engagements and the competence of those engagements. I do not want to upset the Deputy but I do not know why people are hung up about NATO. The Cold War was over a long time ago and NATO is effectively a regional organisation that has a substantial role and is recognised by the UN as one of the regional organisations that takes a lead role in peacekeeping and peace enforcement missions, as does its equivalent in the African states and the European Union as an entity. There is

an important role to be played in the area.

I do not know if we will participate in the mission because I am waiting for feedback from our defence organisation looking at a range of skills that the UN requested to be incorporated and provided by personnel in the mission. This is an enormously troubled part of the world. The French deserve praise for the speed with which they intervened in circumstances of horrendous atrocities being perpetrated by fundamentalists and al-Qaeda groups in northern Mali. These posed a serious threat to the whole of the country and without the French intervention those groups would have spread further. There are issues with the Malian army because there have been substantial human rights violations by the groups that took over northern Mali and human rights violations by the official Malian forces. These are the subject of investigation at the moment and there is an important role to play to ensure the restructuring of the civil government structure in Mali takes place and that elections take place so that a Government can be democratically elected in July. It is important that there are forces to back the civil power that are competent, are disciplined and trained and do not engage in human rights abuses.

The additional issue in the context of the UN mission is maintaining peace in a troubled area. Even with the engagement of the French, there has been a number of incidents in northern Mali in recent weeks. The conflict will not disappear overnight. We have an international duty to the civilian population to provide it with the protection it requires in a troubled area and a poor country. It needs a great deal more help than simply military help but we should not have turned our backs on the difficulties of the country and the ordinary people in it and, given that this is a European security issue, ignored the difficulties posed to Europe in the medium term had a fundamentalist group entirely taken over Mali, conducted itself in gross violation of the human rights of the population of Mali, planted itself in the country and posed a threat to other countries in the region and to Europe.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Northern Africa has a colonial history and was carved up by a number of countries, most notably Britain, France and Spain. It is a tragic history of the pillage of natural resources, genocide and oppression over many decades. That is the context of engagement in north Africa. France was very slow out of the blocks in Tunisia when the people had their uprising and removed the dictator Ben Ali. The French went into Libya but there was major criticism of NATO's interpretation of the UN Security Council resolution and devastating consequences in the country. We are all glad to see the back of Gaddafi but the question is whether it could have been managed better. That is the context in which we move into Mali.

It is disappointing we did not have a proper debate in the House because fewer than 12 of our Defence Forces were deployed, meaning there is no proper scrutiny of the decision over a period of time. The Minister acknowledges the Malian army is responsible for numerous reported human rights abuses, followed up by the UN, Human Rights Watch and other human rights NGOs. There are serious concerns.

3 o'clock

This is not a blue-helmet operation in which we are involved. It is not comparable to Lebanon. We are taking sides in this conflict. We are operating with other armies which are under the NATO umbrella and the concern is that this could be interpreted as having a negative impact on Ireland's declared neutrality, which is something of which we are immensely proud. We are immensely proud of our troops who have served in blue-helmet operations throughout the world. That is the concern. What does the Minister say to all of that? Is he reviewing this

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decision or is he pursuing it despite all of these concerns?

Deputy Alan Shatter: The first question to ask is what it is that Deputy Mac Lochlainn wants us to be neutral over. Should we be neutral when fundamentalist groups are killing people, chopping off their limbs and raping women? Is that something about which we are neutral? I am not neutral about that. I think we need to be of assistance to stop such atrocities happening. Let us not get lost in ideology in this area. Let us look at the reality of what was happening on the ground in Mali. There has been reference to what the French have done. What the French have done has received a broad welcome, internationally and in Africa.

I made reference in one of my earlier responses to AFISMA, the African troops who are trying to provide assistance in Mali. The current strength of the UN-authorized African-led support mission in Mali is 6,300 troops. It is the biggest group there. The mission was authorised not by NATO, as some sort of NATO junket, but under UN Security Council Resolution 2085 of 20 December 2012. That resolution is the basis on which the AFISMA group was deployed to Mali in January 2013 by the Economic Community of West African States, which is playing an important role. Additional troops are required and that is why there will be an extended UN mission. That is why it is hoped there will be additional participants, but there will still be a major African element. It will not be taken over as a European UN mission, but we in Europe have a contribution to make. In fact, one of the complaints I have made about the European Union, which I brought to the attention of my defence colleagues in Europe and which we are now addressing actively in the context of the Irish Presidency, is that European Union countries have made substantial financial contributions over the years to UN missions but have been poor in contributing troops to UN peacekeeping missions. We need to participate and utilise our skills to achieve or secure peace in troubled parts of the globe.

It is worth drawing Deputy Mac Lochlainn's attention to the fact that the role of AFISMA was to assist the Malian army in securing full territorial control throughout the country, which it could not do without the assistance of the French. Progress has been made in taking back the main cities in both the north and centre of the country.

Let us not get lost in ideology. I am not neutral when children are being dragooned at the age of ten into armies. I am not neutral when women are being raped. I am not neutral when people are being blown up. I am not neutral when people are being persecuted for religious reasons. I do not recognise that as a form of neutrality that has any particular merit. Irish neutrality has an important role in that we are not seen as having a colonial past. We are seen as being independent interlocutors in troubled regions, without any post-colonial agenda. I am not saying anyone else has such an agenda, but because of some countries' history in different regions, even when they act in good faith and with integrity, the way they act is often open to misinterpretation. That is the benefit of our neutrality: we can play the honest broker and participate in peacekeeping missions without anyone being suspicious of ulterior motive, and long may we continue to play that role.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: In reply to the Minister's remarks, nobody in the House is neutral about atrocities-----

Deputy Finian McGrath: Hear, hear.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: -----or misbehaviour by regimes or groups that want to impose their ideological view on people. None of us is neutral in that regard. Have there been

references, to the Minister's knowledge, to the International Criminal Court in respect of events in Mali? We noted at the start of the conflict the damage that was done. Mali has an incredible cultural heritage, as the Minister knows. It has UNESCO sites and, along with ourselves, it probably has musicians among the best on the planet. For many cultural reasons, Mali is an important country. Owing to Mali's French colonial history, as articulated by other Members, there are concerns that we could be sucked into a conflict that ultimately would not be in the interest of this country. Would this be of concern to the Minister as the decision is made on whether to participate?

Deputy Alan Shatter: The Deputy raised some very important human rights issues. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights produced a report that makes a number of recommendations to the various actors involved in resolving the crisis in Mali with the aim of protecting the civilian population and promoting national reconciliation. The recommendations include ensuring that all perpetrators of human rights violations committed during the crisis are brought to justice. That is an important issue. The second, to which I made reference, is ensuring that all security forces receive training on the principles of international human rights and humanitarian law. This is where we have an active engagement.

The situation in Mali was referred from the Government of Mali on 30 July 2012 to the International Criminal Court. After conducting a preliminary examination of the situation, including an assessment of the admissibility of potential cases, the Office of the Prosecutor, OTP, determined that there was a reasonable basis to proceed with an investigation. On 16 January 2013, the OTP opened an investigation into alleged crimes committed on the territory of Mali since January 2012. This decision is the result of the preliminary examination of the circumstances in Mali that the office had been conducting since July 2012. In the course of the preliminary examination, the office identified potential cases of sufficient gravity to require further action. It has been determined that there is a reasonable basis to believe the following crimes were committed, not only by government troops:

murder; mutilation, cruel treatment and torture; and intentionally directed attacks against protected objects, which Deputy Broughan referred to in mentioning the culture of Mali. Much of this has to do with what happened at the hands of the fundamentalists in northern Mali, but this investigation included any allegations made against the troops of the Malian army. Other crimes listed in the report include the passing of sentences and the carrying out of executions without previous judgment pronounced by a regularly constituted court. Deputy McGrath expressed concern about executions carried out by fundamentalists for alleged criminal activity without any proper trials. Reference was also made to pillaging and, more important, rape.

Based on the information gathered to date, the investigation

will focus on crimes committed in the three northern regions of Mali, namely, Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu. EU foreign Ministers have welcomed the announcement by the OTP that an investigation such as I have described is taking place. Lest it be believed that, in the context of the roles of this State, the Irish Presidency, my Ministry or the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, we have ignored any of these issues, I stress that not only have we not ignored them, we have welcomed the engagement of the court in examining allegations of a very serious nature that have been made and examining the background to atrocities that are clearly documented, including by film in some instances, and which clearly occurred in the past 16 to 17 months in the very troubled country of Mali.

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Defence Forces Medicinal Products

78. **Deputy Michael Colreavy** asked the Minister for Defence the medicines recommended for Irish troops travelling to Mali. [21284/13]

(Deputy Alan Shatter): Irish personnel being deployed to EUTM Mali are administered the anti-malarial medication mefloquine, also known as Lariam. Defence Forces personnel are also issued with individual first aid kits as well as insect repellent and sunblock. Irish personnel will also have access to the mission medical facilities and may be prescribed additional medications as appropriate.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I am sure the Minister understands the context of this question, namely, the concern around the use of the anti-malarial drug, Lariam, and its side effects as outlined by many serving members, many of whom I understand are taking legal proceedings in this regard. The US army ceased using Lariam a number of years ago. Why do the Irish Defence Forces continue to use it? Are there no alternatives, given the concerns around the psychological side effects of Lariam? Also the Statute of Limitations provides for a figure of two years, yet it may take a number of years for symptoms to develop. I ask the Minister to address these concerns. This matter has been raised in the House by many Members, including, I am sure, the Minister when he was Opposition spokesperson on these matters.

Deputy Alan Shatter: Malaria is a serious disease which can cause serious complications and death. The World Health Organization, WHO, estimates that approximately 1 million people in sub-Saharan Africa alone die every year from it. It has long been recognised as a serious threat to any military force operating in a malarious area. In accordance with best international practice in prescribing Lariam and taking account of the contraindications, warnings and side effects, highlighted by the Irish Medicines Board, the Defence Forces screen all personnel for medical suitability. In the case of overseas missions to malarious areas, the medical screening involves a one-on-one assessment of the individual's suitability to be prescribed the selected anti-malarial agent in line with current Irish Medicines Board guidelines. This typically involves a review of the individual's previous experience, if any, with the medication, screening of the individual's medical history for conditions which have been identified as precipitating serious side effects in association with the medication. The screening system rules out personnel with certain serious conditions from overseas service, including depression, anxiety, neurodegenerative disorders etc. which, as has been indicated by the Irish Medicines Board and other regulatory bodies worldwide, are more likely to precipitate serious adverse reactions to Lariam. In addition, blood tests are carried out to ensure the liver is healthy, as liver disease is an accepted contraindication to the use of Lariam.

It is the policy of the Defence Forces medical corps that personnel deemed suitable for use of Lariam should commence their medication three to four weeks in advance of their travel. This precaution allows a slow build-up of the medication in the blood stream, which permits assessment of the person concerned while still in Ireland of his or her individual reaction to the medication. Personnel are screened before and after deployment and all necessary actions are taken to ensure those with contraindications to Lariam use are not prescribed the medication.

In the context of what anti-malarial measures are to the forefront when preparing for missions, I have made reference to the use of Lariam and the importance of its use. In relation to the issue raised by the Deputy in the context of use by the US army, it is my understanding US forces ceased use of Lariam owing to concerns about inadvertent prescribing of the drug for

soldiers who should not take it. In this regard, I am advised that the US authorities undertook mass administration of Lariam for soldiers serving in areas subject to malaria without individual screening of personnel of the nature undertaken by the Defence Forces. The US Centre for Disease Control, CDC, is one of the major operating components of the US Department of Health and Human Services. The CDC health information for international travel known as the “Yellow Book” is published every two years and a reference for those who advise international travellers about health risks. It advises that a risk assessment be carried out before deciding on the use of a malaria chemoprophylaxis agent. Chapter 3 of the Yellow Book recommends the use of malaria chemoprophylaxis, including Lariam. Chapter 8, under the heading “Special Considerations for US Military Deployments”, states:

Individualizing advice and recommendations for large military deployments is rarely logistically possible or feasible. Recognizing this reality, in September 2009, the US military adopted a new policy on the use of malaria chemoprophylaxis in the US military.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: On a point of order, what time is allowed for the Minister’s response?

Deputy Alan Shatter: I am almost finished. The Defence Forces do not mass prescribe but rather follow all of the instructions issued by the Irish Medicines Board in order to fully screen personnel who may potentially have an adverse reaction to the medication.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: That was a very lengthy response.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Tom Hayes): The Deputy received a great deal of information.

Deputy Alan Shatter: I like to be as comprehensive and informative as possible.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Tom Hayes): The time for this question has almost expired. I will allow a brief supplementary from Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: While personnel are screened for mental health and underlying issues, there are difficulties in detecting them. How can the Minister be sure the drug is being properly prescribed? As I stated, this medication has not been prescribed for serving members of the US defence forces since 2009. Why do the Defence Forces continue using it? Are there alternatives that do not have the same side effects?

Deputy Alan Shatter: As I explained to the Deputy, the Defence Forces continue to use it because, unlike the US military, they do not engage in mass prescribing without individualised assessment of Defence Forces personnel travelling abroad. Individualised assessment is important. It is also important that individuals being assessed engage truthfully with the medical assessor and that they, if in receipt of prescribed medicines or suffering from depression or showing other contraindications, disclose this to the medical assessor. This is an issue on which I have been constantly briefed since my appointment. I am aware of the background to the small number of cases being taken. I am also aware of the concerns expressed in this area. I am assured that individual assessments and proper oversight for a short number of weeks following commencement of the taking of the medication provide essential protections. In the context of the deployments in respect of which Lariam has been used, this is to ensure members of the Defence Forces are protected from contracting malaria, a disease that can have terminal consequences.

Leaders' Questions

Deputy Micheál Martin: Thursday, 9 May, is Europe Day. Unfortunately, the European Union and the European economy are not emerging from the unprecedented financial and economic crisis. The predictions are that Europe is falling deeper into recession. For the second quarter in a row we are witnessing contractions in some of the main European states, including France, Germany, Italy and Spain, and unemployment continues to rise. There are 26 million people in Europe unemployed, some 5.7 million of whom are young people. There are also 115 million people under threat and at risk of poverty and social exclusion, with all of the problems and issues this throws up in terms of mortgage distress and the capacity to put the essentials on the food table etc.

Many European citizens believe the response of the European leadership from the outset has lacked urgency and been out of tune with the impact of the crisis on the daily lives of people in terms of their own economic reality. The twin pillars underpinning the creation of the European Union - solidarity and cohesion - have not been as evident in the European leadership's approach to the economic crisis. Some commentators and other distinguished speakers have identified as part of the problem Europe's pursuit of a singular model, in terms of economic orthodoxy, in dealing with the crisis. Despite this, there are different manifestations of the problem in different countries, including different unemployment profiles, and all we are seeing is the pursuit of one model to the exclusion of all others.

This is having a detrimental impact on the capacity of countries across Europe to recover. Does the Taoiseach believe there should be a radical rethink of the economic model Europe is pursuing now and that there is a need for radical economics across the European Union to prevent the divisions that are occurring?

Deputy Finian McGrath: The Deputy sounded like Michael D. He should just keep within the Constitution.

The Taoiseach: On Deputy Martin's comment that Europe is not emerging from the crisis that has befallen it and that it is falling deeper into recession, he knows something about this from his past experience and what did not happen that might have happened. It is fair to say that around the European Council table very different views are expressed by different Prime Ministers, some elected in different circumstances beholden to a party or a number of parties in minority situations. Many of them are not in a position to give agreement to particular programmes or proposals in that they might not be able to get them through their parliaments.

It is necessary for Europe to follow through on the decision that it makes. We can have all the economic arguments, theories and projections that people like and they might be great fun for economists and those who pursue economic theories, but the problem facing the politician is to make decisions that impact on his or her economies for their betterment and that will lead to job creation and growth. For instance, it is true to say that decisions taken by the European Council in respect of the development of the European Union, both in the eurozone and in the Union, have not been followed through in a number of cases, but many of these are very com-

plex. We discussed previously the question of the setting up of the euro while not having the facilities in place to develop it afterwards and develop the Union as people might have imagined. That is why, for instance, the question of a banking union is now one that is central to the argument that we need this facility to deal with a fundamental crisis issue in Europe, namely, that surrounding the banks and their operations. That is why the single supervisory mechanism has now been agreed in terms of its architecture to take effect next March. That is why the next stage of banking union is bank resolution and that matter is under discussion at the Eurogroup and ECOFIN. The third element of that is a euro-wide guarantee in respect of deposits. That is a complex and technical series of arguments that is being followed through. We would like to see it happen much quicker in the interests of everybody but that is not practically possible. Nor will it happen that we will have a broad range of radical rethinking of where Europe stands now. It is very necessary that European leadership follows through on the decisions it has made and demonstrates to the peoples of the European Union that there is a follow through on decisions made in their interests. As a matter of course, we should follow through on these decisions and not just talk about some alternatives. They come up at every meeting but I think leadership demonstrates to people that Europe is serious about its business - I said that again last night when I along with the Tánaiste got progress on Europe's discussions on the MFF and the deficit for 2012-13 - as opposed to having endless, and I mean endless, arguments about different economic theories that may or may not be relevant. For now Europe has made its decisions and it should follow through on those, and any new policy should be additional to the decisions that have already been made.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The problem is that those policies are not working across Europe. That is the point. They are simply not working. Millions of people across Europe are unemployed and the levels of unemployment across the main European economies are unprecedented. Commentators from the IMF, Paul Krugman, the economist, and other distinguished statespeople have identified part of the problem as simply being that Europe has followed but one model, which essentially is that fiscal consolidation is the route to economic growth across Europe and nothing else, but that it is not working and will not work. When I asked the Taoiseach did he believe there should be a radical rethink, I was not talking about abstract economic theories or anything like that. Clearly, he does not believe there is a need for a radical rethink, rather he believes that existing decisions should simply be followed through on. I put to him that the budget that was just under discussion will for the first time represent a cut at a time when Europe needed some sort of stimulus. The European leaders came together and conspired to cut the European budget, which already is about 1% of GNP across Europe. That made no sense.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The agricultural budget is being cut by 10% for the first time in the lifetime of Common Agricultural Policy. That money cut from that budget would have put funding into rural economies and the wider economy. The youth employment guarantee fund represents about €122 per unemployed young person across Europe. It is not a question of abstract economic theories that people are spinning out. The leaders of Europe should listen to what is being said by fairly informed people in terms of the direction that Europe is taking and the mistakes it has made and continues to make. It is not only one particular model that should be pursued to the exclusion of all other ideas. That is the key point I put to the Taoiseach.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

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Deputy Micheál Martin: The budget has been cut, the banking union has been delayed and downscaled from what was originally envisaged and there will be no discussions on reforms until the end of next year. I do not get any sense of leadership emerging from Europe. In particular, I believe there needs to be a radical rethink of where Europe is going and how it is going about coming out of this crisis. I ask the Taoiseach to give that serious consideration.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy is perfectly entitled to have that viewpoint. I think many people would share his viewpoint that we have to have additional proposals and indicators of what might be helpful to what is happening here. It is true to say that to have 26 million people unemployed in the European Union is astonishing and completely unacceptable. I spoke to the Portuguese Prime Minister when in Portugal last week and I also spoke to Prime Minister of Spain. Some 54% of young people are unemployed, there is no capacity for social welfare after two years, 600,000 people in Portugal are in serious difficulties, with 200,000 house repossessions in Spain. These figures spell out the scale of the challenges those countries face. France is facing a challenging time, Italy has a new government and there are problems in Cyprus and Greece. Of all of these countries, serious decisions were made in Ireland to adjust our programme to deal with our circumstances. Clearly, we are not in a position to borrow any more money. We have made the point as a matter of European policy, and I agree with the IMF on this, that countries that can borrow further moneys should borrow further moneys because that would be good for Irish exports, Irish jobs and jobs in general. I agree that we should strongly pursue the mandate for discussions on free trade between the European Union and the US which, we are told, has a capacity for at least 2 million extra jobs and a potential to grow economies by 2% or 3%. The Deputy knows this. When we sat down with the President of the Commission and the President of the Parliament within two hours we at least got movement on dealing with the deficit for 2012-13 and on the structure and timescale for the multi-annual financial framework or the budget for 2014-20, which includes a €6 billion fund for unemployment and serious moneys for cohesion. The budget was reduced by a decision of the European Council leaders but it was not reduced by anything as much as what some countries were proposing.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It should have been expanded at this time when we are in a recession.

The Taoiseach: People made the point very vociferously that every national government was reducing its individual budget in order to get its own circumstances into better shape. Any additional proposals or policies should be in addition to the central decisions made by the European Council. It is really important that people see that the decisions made are followed through, as I said in respect of the decision of 29 June last to break the link between sovereign and bank debt. That means banking union in its three different sectors. One of these is now virtually in place. The second area, bank resolution, is being discussed, and the third deals with deposits and a Europe-wide guarantee. These are central to an efficient European banking system and they are not easy because they are technically complex. That is what European leadership and politics should involve. We would be very happy to hear of anything else that comes along if it is additional to and of benefit to that process.

Deputy Gerry Adams: The most recent statistics indicate that every year more than 800 citizens lose their lives to suicide across this island. Last year the statistic was 525 in this State and 289 in the North; these do not include attempted suicides or people who self-harm. I know the Taoiseach has had personal experience of how this has affected people in this Dáil. Hardly a day goes by in which some family does not have to come to terms with the shock of losing a loved one through suicide.

There is concern that some suicide might be linked to cyberbullying. What steps is the Government taking to curb cyberbullying? We know - and it is to be applauded - that substantial resources have been made available to tackle the carnage on our roads, but now three times as many people die every year by suicide as die on the roads. The model and approach of the Road Safety Authority could be adapted, with the use of a similar authority to tackle the suicide crisis. We need to ensure there is counselling, that there are more resources and that education and information are provided for those in distress and to allow everyone else to recognise the signs so that they can help those who have difficulties in their lives and encourage people to talk.

In budget 2012 the Government told us that €35 million had been ring-fenced for 414 mental health service staff, yet by the end of last year only 62 of those staff were in place. The Minister of State at the Department of Health with responsibility for mental health services, Deputy Kathleen Lynch, said she was appalled by this. When will all the staff be in place, and what happened to the €35 million that was supposed to be ring-fenced for mental health services?

The Taoiseach: Deputy Adams raises an issue that is particularly sensitive for many families and people. It is an issue that Deputy Dan Neville raised in this House for 20 years when he was in opposition. I do not have the actual figures in front of me but as far as I am aware, those who were to be recruited using the moneys voted for recruitment of psychologists and qualified personnel to work in this area have all been recruited but for a few in particular categories that may not be available here and for whom it may be necessary to advertise internationally. I will get the figures on this for Deputy Adams, because I asked for them this morning. The Minister of State with responsibility for mental health services, Deputy Kathleen Lynch, has been heavily involved in all of this work. The commitment of €35 million of ring-fenced moneys was made for this purpose and for a range of activities dealing with community mental health teams in adult and child mental health services.

The Deputy makes a valid point about the difficulty of bullying, particularly cyberbullying, and he is aware that the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health and Children held hearings on this and is preparing a report on its impact and how it might be dealt with. The causes of suicide are many and difficult to determine, be they pressure or depression, financial problems, alcohol abuse, relationships or whatever. The tragic result is very difficult for people to understand. As one person said to me some time ago, "For the rest of our lives we will ask: was there something we should have seen? Was there something we should have known? Was there an issue that we should have addressed?" I know from talking to people across the country that there is a great deal of assistance and understanding available for those who find themselves in a pressurised situation in one way or another. The staff that were to be recruited have all been recruited except for a few, and I believe the services have to look to other areas for the categories of speciality they need. I will send the figures to the Deputy.

Deputy Gerry Adams: I look forward to receiving those figures, but by the end of last year only 62 of those 414 staff positions had been filled, which is a huge gap. The Taoiseach spoke earlier about the need for leaders to deliver. This issue is above party politics. I knew of the work of Deputy Neville before I came into the Dáil, when I was elected to the Northern Ireland Assembly and worked on this issue. It is a national crisis, and what do we do about a national crisis? We put in place structures and strategies to reduce the crisis. That is why I am advocating the establishment of an authority similar to the RSA. I am not talking about a quango or another tier of bureaucracy but an agency to focus on and educate people, to give information to help them to know the signs and be able to help, and to educate people to talk to someone. This is crucial to dealing with this issue. I am sure the Taoiseach will agree with me when I applaud

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those in the community and voluntary sector and in charitable organisations, as well as those in the very slimmed-down mental health service who work on this issue. Yesterday 4,000 people took part in a cycle against suicide. All of this work needs back-up. People want to resolve this issue but it needs to be backed up by resources and Government action. The Taoiseach is not sure of the figures and that is fair enough. I am not making a point about that, but can he give a firm commitment on when these 414 mental health staff will be in place? Does he agree that because suicide knows no borders, we need a joined-up, all-island approach to this issue?

The Taoiseach: I do. Sometimes one gets so much paper that one misses the page one should have. I have the numbers here for the 2012 mental health posts: 339 posts were filled, and in 42 cases posts have been accepted but those concerned are awaiting clearance from the Garda vetting unit. There are two positions for which candidates have been accepted and there are 20 that could not be filled in a permanent capacity, 17 of which are psychologist posts at staff grade. It will be necessary to inquire further afield to find persons of suitable experience to take up those positions.

The Minister of State, Deputy Lynch, secured €35 million for mental health services staff, the majority of whom are in place. The budget for 2013 allocated a further €35 million, which will include an additional 470 posts. These will be advertised soon. The intention is to strengthen the community mental health teams. Some will be used for advancing further suicide prevention initiatives and to initiate the provision of psychological and counselling services in the primary care area, specifically for people with mental health problems. Most of the recommendations in Reach Out, the national strategy for action on suicide prevention, 2005 to 2014, have been implemented such as delivering a general population approach to mental health promotion and suicide prevention, using targeted programmes at those who might be in a high-risk category, delivering services to those who have inflicted self-harm and providing support to families and communities bereaved by suicide.

The annual budget for suicide prevention increased in 2012 to €12 million. Of this, €7.1 million was administered by the National Office for Suicide Prevention. The remaining €5 million was available regionally to fund resource officers for suicide prevention and self-harm liaison nurses in accident and emergency departments. A further €1 million was made available for additional mental health funding, bringing the total to €8.1 million, which includes a special programme of measures. I will have these figures forwarded to Deputies.

Deputy John Halligan: I commend the Taoiseach on bringing forward the protection of life during pregnancy Bill. It cannot have been an easy task for him, given all the divisions and tensions within the coalition. It has taken some determination on his part to finally start tackling this highly charged and emotive issue, one where four taoisigh before him have failed.

However, the draft Bill provides little reassurance for rape and incest pregnancies or for those women carrying a foetus with fatal foetal abnormalities, such pregnancies that have the potential to destroy the lives of those women who face them. Startling figures were released last week that showed sexual offences rose 50% between 2007 and 2011 but only one in six cases resulting in charges being brought. The media has rightly highlighted several cases recently where a man convicted of sexually assaulting a woman avoided a custodial sentence because he paid her a sum of money. This draft Bill proposed by the Government, however, carries the potential of 14 years imprisonment for a woman, pregnant as a result of rape, who might attempt to have an abortion in Ireland. Does the Taoiseach not think this is warped justice?

The Taoiseach might not be aware of this but 17 women who became pregnant after being raped had abortions last year. Incidents of rape are on the increase and it must be acknowledged only a small number of rapes are reported. However, instead of supporting women who become pregnant as a result of being violated, the Government proposes to penalise them.

The pro-life argument centres on the right to life of the foetus. A woman also has a right not to be raped. If her right is violated and she becomes pregnant as a result, I believe she has a right to end that pregnancy at her discretion. I defy any Member to look a pregnant rape victim in the eye or a woman carrying a baby that is certain to die and tell her that we are more entitled than she is to control her body. We cannot continue to brush these cases under the carpet and pretend they are not happening.

Will the Taoiseach give support to a constitutional referendum to allow for abortion in cases of rape or fatal foetal abnormalities? I am calling on the Taoiseach to let the people, not party politics, to decide this issue.

Deputy Finian McGrath: Hear, hear.

The Taoiseach: I assure Deputy Halligan that I have absolutely no intention of playing any party politics with a matter as sensitive as this.

Deputy John Halligan: I never said the Taoiseach did.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy should understand that heads of the Bill approved by the Government last week will be sent to the Oireachtas health committee for hearings to be conducted under the chairmanship of Deputy Buttimer. The Bill is not drafted yet. The Government approved the heads of a Bill and has sent it to the Oireachtas committee at which a discussion will take place on them. After the committee holds its hearings, it will send the heads back to the Government and the Bill will then be drafted and the process of putting it through the Oireachtas - Second, Committee, Report and Final Stages - will then follow.

When Deputy Halligan speaks of warped justice, the Oireachtas has no input in the decisions made by the courts which are completely independent in the way they do their work and the decisions at which they arrive. While people might have a view of the decisions taken by the courts, that is the courts' independent decision.

We are confined here in what we are doing by the Constitution and, within the Constitution, the law as determined by the Supreme Court. It is within these confines that the heads of this Bill have been approved by the Government and will follow through the process.

This does not involve anything extraneous like what the Deputy mentioned in terms of foetal abnormalities, rape, incest or whatever. The Deputy must remember that the people voted on this in the past. They made their intentions very clear in that the right to travel was given specifically to women. While people may have different views on this, the fact of the matter is that a woman in this Republic can only have access to a termination where there is a real and substantial threat to her life. Within that definition of the threat to her life is the Supreme Court determination of the right to life of the unborn. The circumstances in which this arises are emergency medical risk and the risk from suicidal intent which is a very different issue from suicide ideation.

The Government is focused on dealing with what it has to deal with within the Constitution

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and within the law. There is no change nor will there be any change in the work that is going on here to that. I hope that clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Deputy John Halligan: I want to be very blunt without being offensive. I do not know if the Taoiseach has ever spoken to a woman who has been raped. I have several years ago. She spoke to me about how she felt after being violated, how she was continually showering and washing herself internally. It is inhuman and deeply offensive to tell a woman who has been violated and raped that she must present herself as being suicidal before she can have an abortion in Ireland. With all due respect, the Taoiseach's answers are those which would have been given 20 or 30 years ago. This is 2013, a year in which hundreds of women are raped and violated.

I am sorry for being blunt but if it were the Taoiseach's daughter or mother or if it were my daughter, mother or granddaughter who was raped and violated and became pregnant as a result, would we expect her to present herself as being suicidal in order for her to have a termination of her pregnancy? Worse still, would the Taoiseach expect a woman who has been violated to go through nine months of that pregnancy? Then she would probably become suicidal.

I ask everybody to reflect on this. I am not into derogatory remarks or being sensationalist about this particular Bill. This is an important issue as there is a section of women in society who every year are violated. Some of them become impregnated as a result of that violation and they will still have to travel to England or present themselves as being suicidal. I consider that to be inhuman in 2013.

The Taoiseach: The answer to the question is "Yes". I have spoken to women who have had abortions. I understand the circumstances they explained, how they were feeling, and what it has meant in terms of the life they have to live. I have also spoken to women who have been raped inside marriage. Last week I attended the launch of a programme on domestic violence which includes short videos produced by Safe Ireland, in which so-called macho men said they take what is theirs by right by domination, force or whatever. These are arguments and issues that can be discussed during the course of the debate on the Bill when it comes back here after it is drafted.

Deputy Halligan raises very important issues that people make choices about, in many cases in circumstances of great duress. It is now 30 years since 1983 and this Administration has agreed unanimously a set of heads for a Bill dealing with what the Constitution now means in terms of the law as determined by the Supreme Court. The Government has set that process in train and I hope the Bill can be enacted before the House rises for the summer. It does not deal with the issues Deputy Halligan raises, and there are a range of other views around the House and throughout the country about what might or might not be done, but in so far as our duty as legislators in a republic is concerned, we must deal with what our Constitution means in terms of the law as set out by the Supreme Court, and that is what we will do.

Ceisteanna - Questions (Resumed)

European Council Meetings

1. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Taoiseach if he will circulate any papers and or proposals at the European Council summit on the 14 and 15 March 2013. [9920/13]

2. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Taoiseach the issues he will prioritise at the European Council meeting on the 14 and 15 March 2013 in Brussels. [9921/13]

3. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Taoiseach if he will raise the issue of bank debt at the European Council summit on the 14 and 15 March 2013. [9922/13]

4. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Taoiseach if he will raise the issue of the Middle East peace process at the European Council summit on the 14 and 15 March 2013. [9923/13]

5. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach if he will be distributing any documentation prior to the March EU Council meeting; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12331/13]

6. **Deputy Joe Higgins** asked the Taoiseach the priorities he will set for the European Council meeting on 14 and 15 March. [12518/13]

7. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach if he held any bilaterals when attending the EU Council meeting in March; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14639/13]

8. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach if he has spoken to or held a bilateral with President Nicos Anastasiades of Cyprus; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15985/13]

9. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Taoiseach the recent contacts he has had with the President of Cyprus Nicos Anastasiades. [15996/13]

10. **Deputy Gerry Adams** asked the Taoiseach if the Cypriot crisis was discussed at the EU Council summit on 14 and 15 March 2013. [15997/13]

11. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach if he has spoken or written to Mr Mario Monti since the recent election in Italy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16006/13]

12. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach if he has spoken to or had a bilateral with Prime Minister Pedro Passos Coelho recently; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18350/13]

13. **Deputy Micheál Martin** asked the Taoiseach if he circulated any papers at the most recent EU Council meeting; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18354/13]

14. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the European Council meetings on 14 and 15 March 2013; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18600/13]

15. **Deputy Dara Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will give an outline and update on EU Council meetings. [20183/13]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 15, inclusive, together.

I attended the meeting of the European Council on 14 and 15 March in Brussels. As I have previously informed the House, the meeting was firmly focused on the key challenges facing

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Europe - those of generating growth and creating jobs. We brought the first phase of the European semester process to a conclusion. During Ireland's Presidency of the Council of the European Union, we provided a report of deliberations in various Council formations, which informed the discussions. The European Council reiterated the priority areas for attention listed in the Commission's annual growth survey published in November of last year.

The European Council had a comprehensive discussion on the economic situation in the EU, including the competitiveness challenge, and agreed that the focus should remain on implementing decisions already taken, particularly with regard to the compact for growth and jobs and the completion of the Single Market. I briefed the meeting on the work we are doing in our Presidency and I thanked colleagues for their co-operation in areas in which we have already had good outcomes, such as the two-pack, the youth employment initiative and the youth guarantee. President Barroso gave a presentation entitled Growth, Competitiveness and Jobs: Priorities for the European Semester 2013. In the subsequent discussion, leaders focused on the continuing impact of the economic crisis and the steps required to move beyond it.

In our conclusions, we placed specific emphasis on addressing unemployment, especially among the young, the Single Market, and reducing unnecessary administrative burdens, especially on small and medium-sized enterprises. We also took stock of progress on the legislative proposals relating to the integrated financial framework, or banking union, as it is known. Leaders reiterated the imperative to break the vicious circle between banks and sovereigns. I briefed the meeting about the progress we are making in our Presidency in regard to the single supervisory mechanism and the recovery and deposit guarantee, and stressed that we remain committed to delivering on the timetable set in December.

While the multi-annual financial framework, or budget, was not on the agenda for this meeting, President Schulz of the European Parliament, in his presentation at the beginning of the European Council meeting, informed the meeting about the outcome of the vote on the MFF in the Parliament, and I updated colleagues on the work we are doing in our Presidency. In this regard, I had a meeting with Presidents Barroso and Schulz in the margins of that meeting and we agreed to continue to work closely together for early agreement.

Later on the Thursday evening, I attended the Euro summit meeting. The president of the European Central Bank, Mr. Draghi, briefed leaders on the economic situation in the euro area, pointing to three vital requirements - confidence, credit and competitiveness. There was a shared view around the table that we need to maintain our efforts to achieve sustainable finances, but that we also must step up our efforts on growth. While we welcomed the new Cypriot President, Nicos Anastasiades, to the table, we did not discuss the situation in Cyprus in detail as it was to be discussed by the finance Ministers in the Eurogroup on the Friday afternoon.

On Friday morning, 15 March, the European Council had a useful, free-flowing discussion on the EU's relations with strategic partners, with a particular focus on Russia. Leaders also had a discussion on the evolving situation in Syria. It was agreed that EU foreign Ministers would be asked to consider this matter further at their informal ministerial meeting in Dublin on 22 and 23 March. The UK Prime Minister, Mr. Cameron, updated leaders on preparations for the G8 summit, which will take place at Lough Erne, County Fermanagh, in June. We are co-operating closely with the British authorities with regard to this important event.

While I had no formal bilaterals with President Anastasiades or the then Italian Prime Minister, Mr. Monti, I had discussions with many of my colleagues in the margins of the meeting,

including a bilateral meeting with Mr. Cameron. I also met with Presidents Van Rompuy and Barroso ahead of the meeting of the European Council on 14 and 15 March, as is customary for the Presidency, and, as I have already stated, I had a separate meeting with Presidents Barroso and Schulz which focused on the MFF.

The agenda for this meeting of the European Council was prepared in the normal way. President Van Rompuy submitted an annotated draft agenda to the February meeting of the General Affairs Council. He then circulated draft conclusions of the European Council, which were discussed by ambassadors in Brussels and subsequently by Ministers meeting at the General Affairs Council, which the Tánaiste chaired. In the usual manner, at each step in the process, Ireland conveyed its comments on the draft conclusions, as appropriate.

The issue of the Middle East peace process did not arise as a separate item at this meeting.

On 28 and 29 April, in the course of a visit to Spain and Portugal, I had separate meetings with the Prime Ministers, Mr. Rajoy and Mr. Coelho, as well as with German finance Minister, Mr. Schäuble. We discussed a range of major EU and Presidency agenda items, including the MFF negotiations; economic and monetary union, including progress towards banking union; trade, particularly prospects for an EU-US trade agreement; progressing the Single Market agenda; and developments in the euro area. I also updated both Prime Ministers and Mr. Schäuble on progress made during the Irish Presidency and on ambitions for the rest of our term.

Deputy Gerry Adams: I am sure the Taoiseach appreciates the difficulty that arises from the fact that some of these questions were tabled prior to the European Council meeting on 14 and 15 March, in that we are now, almost two months later, trying to deal with them. I do not know how we can resolve that problem. However, the Taoiseach may recall that prior to that Council meeting he agreed in response to a question from me to raise the Jerusalem report, which was published by European diplomats. I was very pleased when the Taoiseach agreed to do that, yet in his reply he states that the Middle East peace process did not arise, which is another way of saying he did not put it on the agenda or he did not raise it. The Taoiseach may recall that these diplomats raised serious concerns about the actions of the Israeli Government in building settlements and excluding Palestinians from their land.

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This has come from the heads of mission of the European Union, that the issue was not raised, contrary to the Taoiseach's commitment. My question was what actions had been taken on foot of the report, but if it was not even discussed, what is the point?

Has the Taoiseach raised within the European Council the recent Israeli attack in Syria? I am sure he agrees that this is a serious escalation of what is an increasingly dangerous, ongoing, deadly conflict in the region.

The meeting held six or seven weeks ago was about economic policy and dealt specifically with the issues of growth and job creation. There has been a reluctant acknowledgement that the policy of austerity is not working, but there is no evidence that this goes beyond the rhetoric and of any real change towards growth and job creation. Within the eurozone there are almost 20 million citizens out of work and 6 million young people across the European Union are out of work. Here, the level of youth unemployment is 30%, while it is 24% generally across the eurozone. Our 30% level of youth unemployment does not take account of the scores of thousands of young people who have had to leave for other parts of the world.

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I have raised the issue several times with the Taoiseach that there are dire social consequences to the so-called austerity policy. This can be seen in the absence of young people from the kitchen table. In the Taoiseach's county it can be seen in the inability of senior teams to field a full panel. Travelling through rural Ireland, one sees how devastated communities are by the scourge of emigration. Was there an acknowledgement of any of this at the meeting? The sum of €6 billion allocated over six years to tackle youth unemployment is insulting. It is almost offensive and only a drop in the ocean compared to what is required. Last night the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste were engaged in discussions on the EU budget or the multi-annual financial framework. Was there a focus on the issue of youth unemployment?

The Taoiseach: European Council meetings are structured in a way that allows the High Representative, Catherine Ashton, to give reports on issues such as the situation in Syria or other incidents and circumstances in that region. Therefore, it is not a case of having a specific debate at European Council level on the Jerusalem or any other report; rather, the structure of meetings is such that Catherine Ashton gives an updated report which has come through the various committees and the Council of Foreign Affairs Ministers with which she deals. I recall that she gave a detailed report on Syria and the considerations involved regarding the difficulty as to whether increased arms supplies should be given to rebel forces. I read reports on allegations of Sarin gas being used by elements in the rebel camp, but whether these are true I do not know. I will update the Deputy on the position in respect of the Jerusalem issue based on Ms Ashton's report.

Nobody in this House condones the use of the much abused term "austerity" which has crept in the same way as "the Celtic tiger", but it is not a term I tend to use. The answer to our problems is not just to sort out the public finances but also to get people working, as the Deputy knows. I was happy to meet him in Dundalk recently on the occasion of the announcement of the PayPal and eBay jobs. That announcement was great for young people who will have a whole new life created for them in that kind of company. The same is true of the announcement made by Glanbia of a major investment in the south east, with the capacity to create 1,500 farm jobs, from County Cork to County Louth, or of the 1,000 jobs that will be created when the contract is finally signed for the N7-N11 project southwards. These announcements are great news for people who will be able to find employment in these areas because it means they will have a life and the capacity to spend in the economy and build homes.

At European level, the extension by an extra two years for France and other countries is a recognition of the particular circumstances these countries are facing in meeting the deficit reduction target of 2015. This is reflected in the warm decision made by the Bundestag to provide for an extension of loan maturities for both Portugal and Ireland, which helps us in having our debt profile flattened out. In the discussion Mr. Mario Draghi had at the European Council he continued to repeat - he has followed it up with action - that whatever it was necessary to do to protect the euro would be done. Obviously, the European Union makes its own decision on interest rates. Mr. Draghi's analysis was focused on competitiveness and he said countries that were prepared to make decisions to make themselves competitive would reap the benefits in terms of economic activity, exports, job creation and economic growth. He defined this by producing a series of relevant slides, showing the differences between countries that adhered to that discipline and those that did not. This was self evident.

As I said to Deputy Micheál Martin, it is critical that European leaders follow through on the decisions they make and these decisions are not made lightly. While it takes some time to deal with a question like banking union, it is something that must happen. I do not want to see

a situation where we will get to June and the anniversary of the decision taken last year to break the link between sovereign and bank debt and all we will have in place is a single supervisory mechanism and its architecture. It is necessary to go beyond this. This is a credibility test for the European Union. Citizens want to see a follow-through on decisions made.

The unemployment factor is central to this issue. Who wants to be proclaiming that the unemployment rate is rising to the extent it is in some countries, with a 54% youth unemployment level? Deputy Gerry Adams says €6 billion is only a drop in the ocean, but it was not available before. Getting €6 billion from the paying countries is a recognition of the scale of the problem and the challenge faced. That is why our Presidency does not want to see this proposal drift or to see us end up with annualised budgeting because of the failure to get the multi-annual financial framework, MFF, through. We travelled to Brussels yesterday specifically to remove that road block and deal with a strategy to deal with the deficit for the Union for 2012-2013. Also, in parallel, we wanted to get discussions going on a timescale to conclude the MFF during Ireland's Presidency. This would help to release the funds in question. While yesterday's meeting was not focused on this issue, countries being able to expedite the release of some of these funds to deal with particular circumstances was raised and is something we support strongly. As President, we will articulate this view today at the budgetary committee, tomorrow at COREPER and during Monday's meeting - the first formal discussion on the MFF. It will be conducted for us by the Tánaiste, with his counterpart, Mr. Lamassoure, from the European Parliament. I think that is a recognition that there is a blockage that needs to be released so that things can get moving. It is clear that the challenges from the Iberian Peninsula to Cyprus will not sort themselves out. They require political courage. Bigger countries need to support smaller countries. While it has been very challenging for people here in Ireland, I am glad to see the private sector is beginning to move. Some 1,000 jobs a month are now being created there. All of that is to be welcomed; the more the merrier. These discussions are helpful. Obviously, everybody wants to see results. We will be judged on that basis.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Five or six questions have been tabled. Deputy Adams asked what could be done to get more timely answers to the questions that were tabled before the last summit. I suggest we go back to the two-day arrangement that prevailed in previous Dáileanna, when the Taoiseach of the day took questions on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. That might give us a bit more time.

It seems to me from what the Taoiseach has reported that the defining characteristic of the work of the European Council over the last six months is that things have slowed considerably and very little is being done. The Taoiseach hinted at that when he spoke about the failure to follow through on decisions that have been taken. There is no question that we are witnessing slow implementation of existing agreements. It can be argued that the banking union has been delayed and downscaled by comparison with what was originally envisaged. It is fair to say that trust in the European Union and its leaders is at its lowest ever level across Europe. Unfortunately, surveys and barometers of public opinion across Europe are illustrating this serious point. This brings into question the legitimacy of democracy across Europe and the sustainability of the democratic norms and values we cherish.

I will cut to the core point. It appears to me that Europe needs to support economic stimulus, strengthen the foundations of the financial system and introduce wider reforms of the structures and systems that contributed to the economic crisis. Any discussion of the wider reforms that have been mentioned has been postponed until the end of 2014. We are not getting an economic stimulus. That is why I asked the Taoiseach earlier whether it is time for him to speak

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up for more radical action, for a radical change of position and for a move away from the one-dimensional economic model that is being pursued to the exclusion of all other ideas. There is a need to consider alternative approaches in light of the unprecedented levels of wide-scale unemployment across Europe. In the last six months, I have not witnessed any significant new jobs initiative emanating from Europe to deal with what everybody agrees is a chronic unemployment problem across the EU.

The real issue with the multi-annual financial framework is not the question of a breakthrough in the normal negotiations between the European Parliament and the European Council but that it is the wrong budget for the times that are in it. We are witnessing a net cut in the European Union's budget. That is the opposite of stimulus. It is extraordinary that the impulse of European Union leaders is driven towards reducing the European budget at a time when unemployment is at its highest, youth unemployment is at its highest and up to 115 million people across the Union are at risk of poverty. In that context, the driving impulse of the European leaders beggars belief. Our leaders have conspired with that. In my view, they have not questioned it in a sufficiently radical way. The Common Agricultural Policy, which is one of the best instruments Europe has had since its foundation, could be used as a vehicle to significantly improve economic activity in parts of the Union. It is wrong that its budget is to be cut by 10% over the seven-year lifetime of the next plan. This is the opposite of what is actually needed.

The provision of €6 billion for the youth employment guarantee involves the shifting around of moneys. There is a net budget cut. Supports have always been provided under various headings. It is not enough to create a new pigeonhole, a new brand or a new heading and claim it represents the provision of additional money, because it does not. Money is being shifted around within the existing budget, which is being cut. There is no argument about this. It is being cut because, in the middle of the worst crisis Europe has experienced since the 1920s, the British and the Germans wanted it to be cut. Different approaches were taken when there were crises of this magnitude in the United States and in Europe after the Second World War. Dramatic and radical approaches were taken to stimulate the European economy after the war. Radical policy departures were taken after the financial collapse of the Great Depression. I think Europe is at that juncture now. It needs to fundamentally revisit its position.

The Taoiseach might indicate, with specific regard to Question No. 5, whether any documentation was circulated prior to the European Council meeting in March from the perspective of the Irish Presidency or the Irish Government. Would he accept that the budget being proposed is totally unsuited and ill-equipped to deal with the crisis Europe is currently facing?

The Taoiseach: I begin by responding to the Deputy's first point. I am doing some work at the moment on how effectively our time in this Legislature is actually used. The programme for Government commits us to having many more Dáil sitting days. While that has happened, the amount of time devoted to legislation is not as much as it used to be. We need to have a discussion about how we want to run this Chamber, how we take the Order of Business and how the week is structured. I am sure nobody wants to be here five days a week, and people do not want to be here until 12 o'clock every night. I do not want to be required to go back to the guillotine business every so often because of backlogs with serious legislation. We have had to use the guillotine, which has been used extensively over the years. When I have done that work, the leaders of the various parties will need to discuss the matter seriously.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach might discuss it with us before it becomes a *fait accompli*. We have been here for two and a half years now but no one has discussed a thing

with me.

The Taoiseach: I will not come up with a *fait accompli* before we discuss it. I would like to get the Deputy's views on how best we can do what we are supposed to do here. We should consider whether we should have a committee week, as was tried before, or whether we should adjust the structure that determines how the Dáil is run from Tuesday to Thursday or Friday. We need to do whatever will have the best effect on Committee Stage debates on Bills, which is the really important part of the legislative process. We will have a chat about the matter before we make it a *fait accompli*, if that is okay with Deputy Martin.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach wants to discuss it before he makes it a *fait accompli*.

The Taoiseach: I share the IMF's view that countries that can borrow more money should do so. We cannot do so because our debt-to-GDP ratio is very close to 120% at the moment. It is not possible for us to do that. Of course it would be great to have an economic stimulus and another €500 or €600 million, or €1 billion, to throw into these things, but it does not happen that way. Somebody has to pay for this. The Deputy is aware that the Netherlands, as a paying country, has had to make some serious changes recently to deal with banks, the retail sector, taxation policy, etc. The provision of €6 billion in recognition of the problem of youth unemployment is an example of a new initiative that was well supported by Europe. Europe said in a forthright manner that it was willing to open trade negotiations with the US.

Deputy Micheál Martin: This should be about jobs.

The Taoiseach: Europe and the US are the two greatest trading blocs in the world. There are differences of opinion in some countries in certain respects. The French have specific concerns that relate to their culture. There are issues relating to software and to the Common Agricultural Policy. Having said that, it is important to open the gates and see where the discussions go.

There was an expectation that the Common Agricultural Policy cut would be much bigger than the cut that actually occurred. It was very important for Ireland, as a food-producing nation, that the question of flat-rate payments was dealt with. There was a strong lobby in favour of doing this on a per-hectare basis across the board, which would have destroyed the principle of productivity in this country's case. If a person with a very high level, productive farm of, say, 400 acres of intensive dairy production, were to be paid on the same basis per hectare as a farm of 400 acres of poor ground with relatively little activity, that would destroy the level of productivity. Some of the other countries in eastern Europe are of massive scale and size and they clearly have a great deal of potential up front. That is why what Glanbia did in its decision to invest very substantial moneys in the south east is a recognition of its confidence for the future, when quotas go, and its confidence on where future productivity can actually come from. The projection of 1,500 jobs on farms is exceptionally welcome.

Everybody would like to see a situation where economic stimulus is provided and jobs created. One could say that, five years ago, this country was certainly Europe's problem but it is important it is one of the few with a positive growth projection regime, which is expected to grow further, and where confidence is beginning to return to the private sector in particular. In response to questions in the last fortnight, I pointed to the presentation given recently by Mr. Alan Gray in respect of the international economy in Ireland, the multinationals, the growth in

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numbers and the growth in exports, which are very important in the context of the continued strong line of investment into Ireland. The challenge is to deal with the indigenous economy, part of which is to get our public finances right. We are borrowing just over €1 billion a month to pay for social protection, public services and public service salaries, which is unsustainable, so that has to be dealt with. It is not an easy challenge, as the Deputy is aware.

I cannot recall tabling specific documentation here but, clearly, there would have been correspondence between the Permanent Representation on behalf of Ireland and the different committees. Whatever is relevant there, I can supply to the Deputy.

Deputy Joe Higgins: Just to be helpful, austerity is widely understood as an economic policy where governments slash the living standards of ordinary people through income cuts and higher taxes to pay for the bailout of bankers and speculators when their casino-like money market system fails. People throughout Europe will find it amazing that the Taoiseach or Prime Minister of the country that holds the Presidency either denies that it exists or is not fully *au fait* with it, judging from the Taoiseach's earlier remarks.

Has the Taoiseach discussed this whole issue of austerity throughout Europe with the President of the European Commission, Mr. Jose Manuel Barroso, since he made his recent remarks which raised serious reservations about austerity? Does the Taoiseach not feel that people like President Barroso should be called to explain, if he has these reservations, what is the alternative and what is the logic of having such reservations if he and the Commission continue, as part of the troika, to impose a savage regime of austerity on the people of Greece, Portugal, Ireland and other countries? Does the Taoiseach, who has the Presidency of the EU, have a particular responsibility to demand straight answers from those who wield enormous power within the European Union at present, or are words cheap and mean nothing, and people just sound off and feel no responsibility to honour what they say? This applies to the Minister for Social Protection. Should she not resign rather than implement any further savage austerity by the Government? If austerity is a deeply damaging and immoral hegemonic model, should there not be a refusal by the President to sign into law further tranches of that austerity from the Government, like the property tax, which is hugely damaging living standards and causing huge angst? Do words mean anything in this day and age if people feel they can just make speeches and try to enunciate the feelings of tens of millions of people throughout Europe, but then not stand behind them?

The Taoiseach has less than two months to the exit of Ireland from the EU Presidency. Will he not find it shameful if, even once, he does not stand and challenge this disastrous policy that is being inflicted on tens of millions of ordinary people throughout Europe, given he has not challenged it once? He should use his international platform to challenge it on behalf of the Irish people, who are victims of this austerity which he is implementing, as well as on behalf of tens of millions of people throughout the EU. Will he not have a sense of shame or failure that he is not in any way challenging these effects, which are now commonly accepted and understood, not just by the real left, which has exactly spelled out what the disastrous consequences would be, but even by right wing economists, who are now arriving at this conclusion as well? The effects of this policy are emblazoned on society and on the lives of our people to their great cost.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy will recall me saying on more than one occasion, as many members of the Government have pointed out for quite a long time, that we cannot tax our way back to prosperity and we cannot cut our way back to prosperity. We have a set of problems

here that we have to deal with because nobody else is going to deal with them. As I have said on many occasions, from a point where we were losing 7,000 jobs a month in the private sector, it has now come to a point where 1,000 jobs are being created every month, which I believe everybody could welcome. While it is clearly not enough to do what we need to do and get where we want to be, it is a good start in the reversal of the direction we were headed in.

Let us be clear. In so far as my contributions at the European Council are concerned, with regard to this philosophy of saying we cannot and would never be able to either cut or tax our way back to prosperity, what we need to do is to set out a strategy for the development of the Union and the eurozone as we see it, and follow those things through. Yes, it would be lovely to have mountains of money to throw into stimulus of one sort or another, but let us consider the circumstances we found here, as well as the fact all of these facilities that are now becoming available were not available then. Our debt to GDP ratio would be below the European average had we not had to deal with the catastrophic position in regard to the banks and their recapitalisation.

President Barroso understands very well what is going on around Europe - he is a former Prime Minister of Portugal. As I said to the Deputy in my reply, President Barroso gave a presentation to the European Council meeting on growth, competitiveness and jobs, and the priorities for the European semester for 2013. If the Deputy does not have it, I will forward him a copy of that presentation as it may contain some paragraphs of interest to him. It points out the opportunities for competitiveness and, arising from competitiveness, for growth and jobs, which are the fundamental issue here.

It is not true to say we live in some kind of pretend world. Rather, we live in the world of reality which walks in the door to everybody in government every day, with unemployment, lack of economic activity and, as a consequence, lack of hope - I am sure the same applies across Europe. The Deputy asks why I would not stand up and defend the position he articulated here even once. It is not just about doing so on one occasion. It is pointing out on a consistent basis what Europe needs to do to rectify its problems. The first thing it must do is follow through on its own decisions. If there are additional proposals that are of benefit to the European economies and can create jobs and stimulate growth, I can assure the Deputy that the European Council is more than amenable to working with any such suggestions. All the think tanks in the world will not be able to sort this out unless countries themselves take the actions that are necessary at national level and work as a unit to grow the Union. Clearly, there are serious challenges ahead and the situation in many countries is fragile but it must be dealt with. If someone says we can suddenly arrive at billions of a stimulus, that would be great but the real world does not work that way. While Mr. Draghi has pointed out that he will do whatever is necessary at European Central Bank level to protect the euro and is doing so, governments individually and collectively as a eurozone and Union need to follow through on decisions. We have been and will continue to be very strong and vociferous on that because that is where the future growth and benefit will come from for, as the Deputy pointed out, millions of people.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Those of us on the Left who have criticised the strategy pursued by the Government and European leaders have repeatedly pointed to an alternative strategy. When somebody talks about alternatives, the Taoiseach is obviously not interested. He denounces us for never having alternatives but when we try to talk about them, he does not listen. Our alternative strategy, which has been repeated endlessly and which people like the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources would probably have supported in opposition, is for a radical redistribution of wealth and capital away from the private financial

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sector and multinationals towards public enterprise and public investment to create jobs. That is the alternative solution that was attempted even by non-socialist governments in the 1930s and 1940s and which in some way began to chart a way out of the crisis of that period.

Instead of that, the Taoiseach continues to peddle myths and pursue a failed strategy. Will he stop repeating the untruth that we are borrowing €1 million every month to pay social welfare? Will he please correct that?

The Taoiseach: The figure is €1 billion.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I appeal to the media to scrutinise that statement. We are borrowing €12 billion or so every year and €8 billion of that goes towards interest on debt. Will the Taoiseach please acknowledge that fact? It would be helpful in having a serious debate. A total of €8 billion, which is two thirds of what we are borrowing, is being used to pay interest on debts. That is a fact. Please admit it.

Is the Taoiseach not living in a dream world when he says confidence is returning to the private sector? Is he not aware that the purchasing managers' index in the past week or so has reported the largest fall in employment in the manufacturing sector in four years in this economy and that manufacturing overall has, for the past four years, fallen at the fastest pace in recent times? The export and manufacturing sectors, on which the Taoiseach has placed so much emphasis in pointing to the so-called successes of our economy, is seeing an unprecedented decline. It is just about balanced by some expansion in the service sector but I put it to the Taoiseach that when manufacturing is in trouble, the economy as a whole is in very serious trouble.

Is it not a fact that Ireland was the guinea pig? We were the laboratory experiment for an austerity policy that has devastated our economy. As that experiment is being applied to the rest of Europe, just as we predicted would happen, it is devastating the rest of the European economy to the point that even the think tank, Bruegel, which presented a report at the recent European Council, the European Commission, the OECD and, most recently, the Italian Prime Minister all say the austerity strategy has failed and something must be done about it. The Taoiseach says he is not a fan of austerity and that what we need is competitiveness and structural reform but this same argument is being made in Europe. Again, this is an Orwellian playing with words. Austerity involves competitiveness measures and so-called structural reform. Competitiveness is a code word for attacking pay and conditions. Structural reform is a code word for privatisation. So when the Taoiseach says that we are in favour of alternatives to austerity, what he is really saying is that the alternative to austerity is more austerity but with different names.

We on this side of the House are asking the Taoiseach to genuinely consider alternatives given the mounting evidence that policy that has been pursued and that has focused on propping up private banks, imposing cuts in pay and conditions and privatising sectors of the economy, has demonstrably failed; that European economies are like lemmings following each other over the cliff into economic depression; and that we need to seriously debate and scrutinise alternatives and consider the alternative proposed by those on the Left not just in this country but across Europe. Such an alternative focuses on redistribution through taxes on wealth and capital and redirecting those moneys into public investment and enterprise, employment and infrastructure projects that would put people back to work and facilitate growth. I put it to the Taoiseach that if we do not go down that road, we are stumbling from a recession into an economic depression. Is that not what all the evidence is mounting up to say? Is that not clearly apparent when

even those in the middle and on the right of the economic and political spectrum accept that the strategy is failing and that we need to move beyond political point scoring, look at the facts and look at alternative ways of dealing with the crisis?

The Taoiseach: I never thought I would hear Deputy Boyd Barrett appealing to the media for help. He was always able to generate a bit of heat and coverage. The fact of the matter is that we are borrowing €12 billion every year - €1 billion per month - and this figure goes to pay public salaries and social protection payments whether the Deputy likes it or not.

The Deputy should appreciate that the structure of economies is changing very rapidly. I had the privilege of opening a unit in Parkwest in Dublin last week. It has a very simple name for the Deputy to remember - *MicksGarage.com*. I did not hear its story on the radio but the company was founded by two brothers, one of whom was unemployed. Due to their capacity to use their various talents, they are now one of the leading enterprises in Europe for supplying car parts online, employ more than 60 people and have a design capacity to inform people and supply. It is an exceptional operation.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Fair play to *MicksGarage.com*.

The Taoiseach: One does not hear as much of that story as one should. A person was unemployed, said they were going to do something about it and over a couple of years, has grown an enterprise that is outstanding in its effectiveness, efficiency and ability to supply internationally and is one of the leading players in Europe. I spoke to Prime Minister Letta in Italy the other day. In the past week I have spoken about European matters to Chancellor Merkel, President Hollande, President Barroso, President Schulz, Prime Minister Rajoy and Prime Minister Coelho. I also spoke to them about the necessity for Europe to drive on with the creation of jobs and growth. I refer to my reply to Deputy Joe Higgins that President Barroso produced a report on competitiveness, growth and jobs. Our competitiveness has improved, not because of any external facility but because the Government made decisions that impact on our competitiveness, with the result that Ireland is an attractive location for investment. The need for flexibility for investment is very important and needs to be followed through. As I said in reply to Deputy Martin, the IMF has decided that countries that can borrow, should borrow. This would help our exports, our jobs and help the IMF economies to develop in a fashion. Competitiveness has improved by over 20% as a consequence. This provides the opportunity for job creation.

If 50 more industries were brought into the country next week, we are still faced with the situation that more than 400,000 people are on the live register, 90,000 of whom are working a three-day week or other form of part-time work. We have a challenge to use that live register as a resource containing people with experience, talent and ambition. These are people who want to be employed. The live register should not be regarded - as it was for years - as some kind of an off-limits list of people who simply went to a social welfare office to sign on and draw their free money. The vast majority of these people want to work. We do not want a situation in which sons and daughters in families become serially unemployed and unemployment becomes part of a social stratum. We do not want that and neither do they.

I commend the Minister, Deputy Burton, on her work in changing the structure of the social protection system. The new Intreo facilities have taken the place of the social welfare offices. They include community welfare and HSE staff as well as social protection staff. This resource will identify and interview people, encourage talent and provide opportunities. The indigenous economy will be created as a result.

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For example, Deputy Boyd Barrett may wish to employ five people. They may have been out of work for two years, they have had nothing doing and their confidence and hope is gone. One of the five may say: "For the past two years I have been giving a voluntary commitment to my community." That spark of initiative is out there and we need Deputy Boyd Barrett's encouragement to get people to involve themselves so that they leave the live register and long-term unemployment. Such involvement will create a new energy and dynamism. The same applies in other countries. We have to be creative and imaginative in how we go about it.

I spoke to the Minister, Deputy Burton, at a recent briefing meeting on this issue. I do not agree with a system where people participate in education and training courses year after year but there is no employment at the end of it. That is not the way to do the business. People with that experience and talent want to be employed and to make a contribution. I agree that upskilling and retraining is important but it should not be carried on for a lifetime. The same applies to those in the social protection system who see no hope other than the next scheme or the schemes after that. I also commend the Minister, Deputy Burton, on dealing with professional, serial fraudsters, many of whom have had the opportunity to fly in and out of here and sign on once in a while with others filling in for them. That is not the kind of system we want. I know Deputy Boyd Barrett does not support such a system.

These are all aspects of dealing with the live register which is a resource, as I see it, and not just a list of persons who merely sign on and who, in years gone by, were regarded as being somewhere "over there". Let us bring them out front. I can testify that a number of recently established companies have been astounded at the quality of people on the live register who are based locally, who are willing and happy to work but have never had that opportunity. A little retraining or upskilling can result in the live register providing the most magnificent workforce. I am sure the Deputy supports the Government in this regard.

Deputy Dara Murphy: I refer to a table outlining the attendance of Irish Ministers at European Union meetings. I congratulate the Taoiseach because Ireland is ranked second out of the 27 member states for the attendance of Ministers and the Taoiseach at these meetings. I urge the Taoiseach to continue this process because there is no doubt that this attendance is vital in the pursuance of our national interest. Speaking to other European politicians and Irish people working in Europe, there is no doubt that significant damage was done to our reputation by the very poor attendance by Ministers in the previous Government-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: That is not true.

Deputy Dara Murphy: I urge the Taoiseach to continue that policy because-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Deputy does not have the statistics. The opposite is true.

Deputy Dara Murphy: -----it is clearly reaping benefits.

Sixty-three years ago, Schuman spoke of a community of nations and 40 years ago, Ireland joined the EEC, as it was at the time. We are now in our seventh Presidency. President van Rompuy referred to the four critical components of the European Union with banking union, fiscal union and economic union being the first three. I welcome the Taoiseach's comments about agreements to date being honoured. Deputy Eric Byrne and I attended this afternoon's meeting of the Joint Committee on European Union Affairs at which the fourth component was discussed, which is democratic legitimacy and accountability. I refer to one of the conclusions of the meeting of October 2012. Contrary to public opinion about national parliaments losing

power to the European Union, the conclusion stated that one of the guiding principles in this context is to ensure that democratic control and accountability take place at the level at which decisions are taken and implemented. It concluded that in this spirit, ways to ensure a debate in the context of the European semester, both within the European Parliament and in national parliaments, should be explored.

I have two questions for the Taoiseach. Is the issue of democratic legitimacy and accountability still being discussed at European level? I know that our party - the EPP, for example, is suggesting a directly-elected President of the Commission. How does the Taoiseach envisage our Parliament developing further scrutiny and oversight of European decisions?

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy Murphy for his comments about the attendance of Ministers at EU meetings. They prepared well for the Presidency. It is their obligation and responsibility to attend those meetings. I think two meetings were not attended by Ministers, one of which was held on 16 March when people were away.

The issue of democratic legitimacy and accountability is central to the whole business now. When President Schulz spoke in this Chamber on behalf of the European Parliament he made this point very strongly. Following the ratification of the Lisbon treaty, one cannot have a European budget without the approval, *imprimatur* and consent of the European Parliament. As the elections will be held next year, this is clearly an issue for sectors, groups and individuals who want to make their cases. That is why it is important to get the MFF through during the current Presidency. If the matter is left outstanding into the post-summer period, people will begin to focus on the European elections next year. People sometimes play games with issues involving these serious matters. We made the point at the meeting in Brussels last night that the democratic legitimacy and accountability that Deputies Dara Murphy and Eric Byrne heard about today are crucial. That is what the people decided in respect of the Lisbon treaty. The European Council can no longer make its own decision on the budget. It must rightly be the subject of consent by the elected representatives of the peoples of Europe, which means there is room for discussion on own resources and flexibility and a review period between 2014 and 2020. While no one knows in what shape the economies will be in 2017 or 2018, there is room for discussion about it. We hope during our Presidency to reflect what the European Parliament is saying, which is that there should be some scope for analysis.

There was a committee of the Houses of the Oireachtas previously which dealt with European decisions. It was a small sub-committee of what was then the Joint Committee on European Affairs, and it was required to deal with a flood of decisions, directives and regulations every week. They became a torrent and the sub-committee was in a position to scrutinise only small numbers of serious decisions. It had to hope for the best in terms of covering the issues of real importance and hope that the process undertaken by our permanent representation in Brussels and by negotiating Ministers and Ministers of State ensured everything else was in order. Deputy Dara Murphy will be only too aware that in times gone by Ireland tended to implement regulations and directives to the nth degree in their first year while other countries took their time to see what effect they might have over a period. We seemed to do it all in one, which sometimes caused problems, including with the soil directive. These things work themselves out over a period.

In the coming period, democratic legitimacy and accountability will be critical both here and from a European point of view. In the course of discussions about where we are headed, the views of Members will be more than welcome in committees or here in the House.

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An Ceann Comhairle: The time for Taoiseach's questions has expired.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It has been filibustered.

Written Answers follow Adjournment.

Order of Business

The Taoiseach: It is proposed to take No. 6, motion re ministerial rota for parliamentary questions; No. 7, motion re proposal that Dáil Éireann adopt the "EU Scrutiny Work Programme 2013, Joint Committees' Priorities"; No. 8, motion re Standing Orders 28, 39 and 102A; No. 9, motion re proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of a directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on the protection of the euro and other currencies against counterfeiting by criminal law, and replacing Council Framework Decision 2000/383/JHA (back from committee); No. 17, Defence Forces (Second World War Amnesty and Immunity) Bill 2012 [Seanad] - Order for Report, Report and Final Stages; and No. 18, Housing (Amendment) Bill 2013 - Second Stage (resumed).

It is proposed, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, that Nos. 6, 7, 8 and 9 shall be decided without debate. It is further proposed that the Dáil on its rising today shall adjourn until 2.30 p.m. tomorrow. Private Members' business shall be No. 102, motion re the fodder crisis.

An Ceann Comhairle: There are two proposals to be put to the House. Is the proposal for dealing with Nos. 6, 7, 8 and 9, inclusive, without debate agreed to? Agreed. Is the proposal that on its rising today the Dáil shall adjourn until 2.30 p.m. tomorrow agreed to? Agreed.

Deputy Micheál Martin: According to the latest figures from the Health Service Executive, more than 5,600 patients in Limerick have been waiting for four years or more for an outpatient appointment. Of those, more than 4,000 have been waiting four years or more for appointments at the orthopaedic hospital in Croom, while 1,400 have been waiting for appointments at the nearby Mid-Western Regional Hospital in Dooradoyle. Nationally, more than 105,000 patients have been waiting for more than a year for a first outpatient appointment with a consultant. There appear to be a lot of issues with information systems on the waiting times for elective and outpatient appointments. Can the Taoiseach confirm when the health information Bill will be brought before the House?

The Taoiseach: Deputy Martin has raised an important point, the details of which I will not go into. In October last year, the orthopaedic outpatient service in Limerick had a waiting list of 10,900 people. In the six months since then, the evolution of the National Treatment Purchase Fund into the special delivery unit has reduced the waiting list by almost 33%, and it now stands at 7,477. To be fair, Deputy Martin should note that we must validate the figures. Some of these people have been waiting for a very long time and some may well have had treatment elsewhere. I expect the validated figures to be available for everybody towards the end of the month.

The health information Bill is not due until early next year.

Deputy Micheál Martin: When is the gas regulation Bill due, given the Bord Gáis Energy sale?

The Taoiseach: It is due this year. I congratulate Bord Gáis Energy's new chief executive, who took up office today.

Deputy Gerry Adams: Tá cúpla ceist agam faoi reachtaíocht atá forógraithe. Bhí mé ag éisteacht leis an méid a dúirt an Taoiseach faoi conas is féidir ceisteanna chun an Taoisigh a dhéanamh níos fearr as seo amach. I listened intently to what the Taoiseach said about trying to rearrange Question Time. Today's session was the most frustrating I have spent in the Dáil. It was a complete waste of time from the perspective of a person representing an oppositional point of view. I was advised there would be a certain number of questions, of which I had tabled 26. We did not get past any of them, nor did we get any sense in response to those questions that were answered. As he reviews how we do our business, I ask the Taoiseach to consider this. He sat in opposition for long enough to know what it is like to be bamboozled and filibustered. I ask him to take that on board.

On the Order of Business, I am advised that the Minister for Health has had the report of Professor John Higgins on the establishment of hospital groups for some time. It will have a significant impact and has already started to cause concern on foot of rumours and leaks. Has the report been discussed by Government, when will it be published and when will it be discussed in the Dáil?

Can the Taoiseach set out when Report and Final Stages of the Criminal Justice (Spent Convictions) Bill will be taken in the Dáil? Will all Stages have been completed before the summer recess?

The Taoiseach: When I entered the House in the 1970s, the Minister of the day, as the Ceann Comhairle will recall, could be *in situ* answering questions for six months. As a case in point, the Minister for Agriculture could start answering questions when the Dáil resumed at the end of October after a summer recess and still be doing so the following March. Deputy Adams talks about frustration. We have tried different approaches over the years and I am as amenable as anyone to improving matters. It does not mean coming in on Wednesdays-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach keeps saying that, but he is not.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Martin asks the questions and I try to answer them. Everybody else asks questions. Deputy Boyd Barrett is on his austerity rant all the time, and so on.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: And the Taoiseach is peddling his myths at length.

The Taoiseach: We will discuss this matter again.

We are waiting for Report Stage of the Criminal Justice (Spent Convictions) Bill in the House. It is part of dealing with the legislation problem that we have.

5 o'clock

The hospital groups have not been discussed by the Cabinet yet but I expect the Minister will bring his report and recommendations to Cabinet next week. It will be published immediately afterwards.

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Deputy Gerry Adams: The Minister has had the report for some time.

The Taoiseach: Yes, but he has not brought the report to Cabinet. I expect he will bring it next week. It will be discussed, decided upon and published immediately.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Will there be a Cabinet sub-committee for that too?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Waterford Crystal workers, in their battle to get justice over the collapse of their pension fund, won an important ruling in the European Court of Justice that has major implications for them and the issue of pensions generally. Does the Government have legislative plans to respond to the implications of the landmark case? Is it the intention of the Government to meet the representatives of the Waterford Crystal workers to discuss wider implications for legislation arising from this?

The Taoiseach: This case was referred by the High Court to Europe for clarification on a number of technical issues. These issues have been clarified by the European court so it returns to the High Court and we will await the court's decision, having received the clarification sought.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The workers would rather meet the Government.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: With regard to the great work of the Road Safety Authority over the past number of years, does the Government have proposals to make the same effort in the prevention of suicide as it makes for road safety? Are there proposals in this respect? It is very important. Is it contained in any promised legislation? Can the Taoiseach provide clarity? In other words, will the Government put the same effort into prevention of suicide as it put into road safety?

An Ceann Comhairle: Is there promised legislation on the issue?

The Taoiseach: No, but the Minister of State, Deputy Lynch, is doing an enormous range of activities in suicide prevention, counselling, psychological care and the employment of personnel in the mental health area with the moneys allocated and ring-fenced for the purpose. It is a valid question. There is an enormous amount of information, help and assistance but it needs to be co-ordinated. When a tragic incident occurs in a parish or town, another group tends to be set up. The challenge is to co-ordinate the information, the symptoms, the signs and the counselling and assistance available. That is what the Minister of State, Deputy Lynch, is trying to do.

Deputy Seamus Kirk: Is there any progress to report on Narrow Water Bridge?

The Taoiseach: The case has been made clearly. We had a meeting in the constituency of Deputy Kirk with members of different groups. The point has been made clearly by the Tánaiste at a meeting in Belfast with the First Minister and Deputy First Minister. We are following it through. All of the issues that must be dealt with by the administrative authorities here, such as the council and the Government, are in place. There is a process with the Minister, Sammy Wilson, in the Northern Ireland Executive in Stormont and I hope it can be brought to a conclusion successfully. The funding is in three parts, with Europe, the Northern Ireland Executive, and the Government and the local authority in the county Deputy Kirk represents. I hope we can make progress to a conclusion.

Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) (Amendment) Bill 2013: Second Stage (Resumed) [Private Members]

An Ceann Comhairle: A division was challenged last Friday on the question that the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) (Amendment) Bill 2013 be read a Second Time. In accordance with Standing Order 117A(4), that division must be taken now.

Question put: “That the Bill be now read a Second Time.”

The Dáil divided: Tá, 38; Níl, 80.	
Tá	Níl
Adams, Gerry.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.
Broughan, Thomas P.	Breen, Pat.
Colreavy, Michael.	Bruton, Richard.
Cowen, Barry.	Burton, Joan.
Crowe, Seán.	Butler, Ray.
Doherty, Pearse.	Buttimer, Jerry.
Dooley, Timmy.	Byrne, Catherine.
Ellis, Dessie.	Byrne, Eric.
Ferris, Martin.	Carey, Joe.
Fleming, Sean.	Collins, Áine.
Fleming, Tom.	Collins, Joan.
Healy, Seamus.	Conaghan, Michael.
Healy-Rae, Michael.	Connaughton, Paul J.
Kelleher, Billy.	Conway, Ciara.
Kirk, Seamus.	Coonan, Noel.
Kitt, Michael P.	Corcoran Kennedy, Marcella.
Lowry, Michael.	Coveney, Simon.
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	Creighton, Lucinda.
Martin, Micheál.	Daly, Clare.
McConalogue, Charlie.	Daly, Jim.
McDonald, Mary Lou.	Deasy, John.
McGrath, Finian.	Deenihan, Jimmy.
McGrath, Mattie.	Deering, Pat.
McGrath, Michael.	Doherty, Regina.
McLellan, Sandra.	Dowds, Robert.
Murphy, Catherine.	Doyle, Andrew.
Naughten, Denis.	English, Damien.
Ó Caoláin, Caoimhghín.	Farrell, Alan.
Ó Cuív, Éamon.	Fitzpatrick, Peter.
Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.	Flanagan, Luke ‘Ming’.
Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	Flanagan, Terence.
O’Brien, Jonathan.	Gilmore, Eamon.
O’Sullivan, Maureen.	Halligan, John.

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Pringle, Thomas.	Harrington, Noel.
Shortall, Róisín.	Harris, Simon.
Smith, Brendan.	Hayes, Tom.
Stanley, Brian.	Hogan, Phil.
Troy, Robert.	Howlin, Brendan.
	Humphreys, Heather.
	Humphreys, Kevin.
	Keating, Derek.
	Kehoe, Paul.
	Kelly, Alan.
	Kenny, Enda.
	Kenny, Seán.
	Kyne, Seán.
	Lawlor, Anthony.
	Lynch, Kathleen.
	Lyons, John.
	Maloney, Eamonn.
	McCarthy, Michael.
	McEntee, Helen.
	McGinley, Dinny.
	McHugh, Joe.
	McLoughlin, Tony.
	McNamara, Michael.
	Mitchell O'Connor, Mary.
	Mulherin, Michelle.
	Murphy, Dara.
	Neville, Dan.
	Nolan, Derek.
	Noonan, Michael.
	Ó Ríordáin, Aodhán.
	O'Mahony, John.
	O'Reilly, Joe.
	O'Sullivan, Jan.
	Phelan, Ann.
	Phelan, John Paul.
	Quinn, Ruairí.
	Reilly, James.
	Ring, Michael.
	Ryan, Brendan.
	Shatter, Alan.
	Stagg, Emmet.
	Stanton, David.

	Timmins, Billy.
	Tuffy, Joanna.
	Wall, Jack.
	Wallace, Mick.
	White, Alex.

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Catherine Murphy and Thomas Pringle; Níl, Deputies Paul Kehoe and Emmet Stagg.

Question declared lost.

Ministerial Rota for Parliamentary Questions: Motion

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Paul Kehoe): I move:

That, notwithstanding anything in the Order of the Dáil of 9th March 2011, setting out the rota in which Questions to members of the Government are to be asked, Questions for oral answer, following those next set down to the Minister for Finance, shall be set down to Ministers in the following temporary sequence:

Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform

Minister for Education and Skills

whereupon the sequence established by the Order of 9th March, 2011, shall continue with Questions to the Minister for Social Protection.

Question put and agreed to.

EU Scrutiny Work Programme 2013: Motion

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Paul Kehoe): I move:

That Dáil Éireann adopts the 'EU Scrutiny Work Programme 2013, Joint Committees' Priorities' which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 2nd May 2013 by the Joint Committee on European Union Affairs.

Question put and agreed to.

Standing Orders 28, 39 and 102A: Motion

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Paul Kehoe): I move:

That, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, the Standing Orders of Dáil Éireann relative to Public Business are hereby amended as follows:

1. in Standing Order 39, the substitution of the following for paragraph (2)(a):

‘(2)(a) The time allowed for each Question nominated for priority shall not exceed six minutes, of which--

(i) the time allowed for the initial Ministerial reply shall not exceed two minutes: Provided that, where a Minister or Minister of State so requests, the Ceann Comhairle shall direct that a statement containing additional information which is directly relevant to the Ministerial reply be furnished in the Official Report of the Debates, such statement being referred to in the course of the reply, and

(ii) the time allowed for each supplementary Question or the reply thereto shall not exceed one minute.’

2. in Standing Order 28, paragraph 3(i), after subparagraph (a), by inserting the following:-

‘(aa) Motions in relation to Reports from Committees relating to EU Affairs and other related matters given priority by the Parliamentary Steering Group under Standing Order 102A’,

and

3. by the adoption of the following additional Standing Order:

Consideration of European Affairs

‘102A: (1)(a) Dáil Éireann, cognisant of the role of national parliaments in contributing actively to the good functioning of the European Union under the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, and of the need to promote and engage in European Union affairs, shall establish a Parliamentary Steering Group on EU Affairs whose function shall be to give parliamentary and cohesive direction in European Affairs matters to enhance the role of the Dáil in EU affairs through engagement with the Government and through Dáil Éireann and its Select Committees.

(b) The Parliamentary Steering Group shall prioritise for debate in the Dáil motions in regard to reports from the Select Committees on EU Affairs or on other related EU matters and such business shall take precedence over other business in the Dáil subject to Standing Order 26: Provided that the Member of Government announcing business shall give an explanation to the Dáil if the priority business is not taken within two weeks of being prioritised and such explanation shall fix another date for the taking of such business.

(c) The Parliamentary Steering Group shall be chaired by the Ceann Comhairle (*ex officio*) and will also comprise the Chairman of the Working Group of Committee Chairmen, the Chairman of the Select Committee on European Union Affairs and the Chairmen and Deputy Chairmen of other Select Committees established by Dáil Éireann under Standing Order 82A.

(2) Notwithstanding the generality of paragraph (1):

(a) A motion shall be tabled in advance of each EU Presidency by a Member of the Government for adoption by the Dáil setting out the Government's priorities for the EU Presidency for the time being.

(b) The Taoiseach will make statements to the Dáil in advance of and/or following each European Council meeting.

(c) Notwithstanding the generality of Standing Orders 82A and 83 and having regard to the EC Annual Work Programme and the Government priorities for the EU Presidency for the time being as adopted, it shall be a function of the Select Committee on European Union Affairs to present an annual EU work programme for adoption by Dáil Éireann by way of motion which shall set out its own priorities and those of other Committees established under Standing Order 82A.

(3) Dáil Éireann and its Select Committees will promote engagement in European Union affairs, including through measures such as Europe Week and the consideration of EU proposals and initiatives, to foster greater public awareness of the role of the European Union.

(4) In accordance with the European Union (Scrutiny) Act 2002, the Select Committee on European Affairs shall make an annual report to Dáil Éireann on the operation in the preceding year of this Act and include in such report measures and oversight initiatives/activities, such as pre-EU Council engagement with Ministers Council engagement with Ministers, taken by Dáil Éireann and its Select Committees to promote the role of the EU.'".

Question put and agreed to.

Protection of the Euro and other Currencies against Counterfeiting by Criminal Law: Motion

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Paul Kehoe): I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the exercise by the State of the option or discretion under Protocol No. 21 on the position of the United Kingdom and Ireland in respect of the area of freedom, security and justice annexed to the Treaty on European Union and to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, to take part in the adoption and application of the following proposed measure:

Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on the pro-

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tection of the euro and other currencies against counterfeiting by criminal law, and replacing Council Framework Decision 2000/383/JHA,

a copy of which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 15th February 2013.

Question put and agreed to.

Topical Issue Matters

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 27A and the name of the Member in each case: (1) Deputy Patrick Nulty - the implications for the State of the European Court of Justice ruling with respect to the pension scheme of former Waterford Crystal workers; (2) Deputy Pearse Doherty - the need to reclassify Down's syndrome as a low-incidence disability in order that children who have it can get teaching and learning resources appropriate to their needs; (3) Deputy Róisín Shortall - the implications for the State of the European Court of Justice ruling with respect to the pension scheme of former Waterford Crystal workers; (4) Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh - the decision to reconfigure the youth-centred homelessness project St. Catherine's Foyer, Marrowbone Lane, Dublin 8, to become a general homeless centre; (5) Deputy Shane Ross - the reduction in the teacher-pupil ratio at Holy Cross school, Dundrum, Dublin 14; (6) Deputy Ciara Conway - the need for the State to engage with a delegation on behalf of former Waterford Crystal workers following the recent ruling by the European Court of Justice; (7) Deputy Michael McNamara - the regulation of small food businesses - a barrier to growth and employment; (8) Deputy Brendan Smith - the measures that will be taken to combat smuggling and the illegal sale of solid fuel following the extension of the carbon tax to these products; (9) Deputy Denis Naughten - the need to extend and enhance supports for the importation of fodder to meet current needs and future requirements; (10) Deputy Thomas Pringle - the need for LYIT to maintain a campus in Killybegs; (11) Deputy Derek Keating - the need to reduce the use of prefabricated classrooms; (12) Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin - the need to compile accurate data on the educational outcomes of children in care, as advocated by the Ombudsman for Children; (13) Deputy Clare Daly - the European Court of Justice order that found that the refund on fuel used by disabled drivers was unlawful; (14) Deputy Eamonn Maloney - Department of Education and Skills statistics on access to third level education; (15) Deputy Michael McGrath - the Mercer report on the banks and the way savings achieved will benefit the customers of the banks; (16) Deputy John O'Mahony - the need to locate a passport office in the west; (17) Deputy Mary Lou McDonald - the need for the State to provide an apology for the small number of remaining survivors of Bethany Home; (18) Deputy Dessie Ellis - the cut in social welfare for those under 25 years in emergency accommodation, coming out of homelessness, or in care; (19) Deputy Mick Wallace - the need to seek the closure of Guantánamo Bay; (20) Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett - the European Court of Justice ruling in relation to pension protection for Waterford Crystal workers; and (21) Deputy Joe Higgins - the need to have a fresh military court inquiry into the circumstances of the death in 2009 of Air Corps cadet David Jevens.

The matters raised by Deputies Derek Keating, Eamonn Maloney, Brendan Smith and Aengus Ó Snodaigh have been selected for discussion.

Dáil Éireann
Topical Issue Debate

School Accommodation

Deputy Derek Keating: I thank the Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Ruairí Quinn, for coming into the House to discuss this matter with me. I wish to raise the issue, or what many would regard as the growing problem, of prefabricated classrooms in schools, in addition to their unsuitability and cost. It is reckoned that a massive number of prefabricated structures are being used as classrooms in schools throughout the country. While they are supposed to be used in the initial stages of building projects and temporarily to facilitate demand, there is evidence to suggest the cost to the State of renting or part-leasing is multiples of what is first planned. Representatives of one school told me recently that they were disappointed and frustrated. They were in despair because permission was granted for a new school beside the existing Archbishop Ryan school in Lucan, which has a considerable number of prefabricated buildings. The school, like many others in the State, has served its community well. It has been serving the community in Lucan for over 30 years. Some 1,500 children are in prefabricated structures in the Lucan area, including Archbishop Ryan school.

I had a discussion recently with a principal in the Newcastle area in my constituency. I was told the principal's school had a two-storey prefabricated structure. This causes frustration.

I am conscious that the Minister was bequeathed a budget by the previous Government and he is expected to do wonders with what is a limited budget in the most difficult times. On a number of occasions I stated that during the Minister's first two years in office many schools had been granted extensions and permission for new buildings. Permission for nine has been granted by the Minister in my constituency. I have two questions for him. I ask him to consider arranging a special examination to ascertain the value for money of prefabricated buildings. Could the Government have a special building programme that would bring about job creation, in addition to banishing the dreadful prefabricated buildings? I acknowledge the wonderful work we have been doing in difficult circumstances. Considerable progress has been made in the Government's first two years in office, but, as part of the legacy the Minister has inherited, conditions are very unsatisfactory, including in many schools that have had prefabricated buildings for many years.

Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Ruairí Quinn): I thank the Deputy for raising this matter, as it gives me an opportunity to outline to the House the progress made in recent years by my Department in reducing the number of prefabricated classrooms in use in both primary and post-primary schools. When in opposition, I raised the fact that approximately 80,000 pupils were in prefabricated classrooms.

The overall policy goal of my Department is to ensure the highest standard of permanent accommodation for all schools. In regard to the number of prefabs being rented in schools, through the prefab replacement initiative, I have provided an opportunity for over 170 schools, out of a total of 4,000 primary and post-primary schools nationally, to replace their prefabs with permanent accommodation. In excess of €42 million has been allocated for this initiative, of which €22.3 million has been paid to date. In the context of a rapidly increasing school population and competing pressure on the capital budget available to my Department, it is still sometimes necessary to make use of temporary accommodation in order to meet the ac-

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accommodation needs of schools. Where a major project is being delivered at a school that has temporary accommodation, my Department endeavours to replace this temporary accommodation with a permanent structure where the prevailing funding permits and site conditions and circumstances allow.

Since 2008 the practice in the Department has been that where the need for additional accommodation is likely to be for a finite period of less than three years, the school is given approval to rent temporary accommodation. I refer to the closure of a gap of three years, or less. Where the need for additional accommodation is likely to be for a period of more than three years, the school is given grant aid to either build a permanent structure or purchase a prefabricated structure. Of 409 classrooms approved under my Department's additional accommodation scheme, 360 opted for permanent buildings. Following the introduction of this policy in 2008, the numbers of prefabs being rented has reduced to the point where only 38 new rental contracts for prefabricated accommodation at primary level were entered into in 2012. The number of schools receiving grant aid towards the cost of rented accommodation at primary and post-primary level is now in firmly in decline.

Deputy Derek Keating: There has been considerable work done, as referred to in my opening comments, and also considerable progress. The report indicates very clearly that there has been a dramatic reduction in dependency and that we are certainly heading in the right direction. I received a letter last Thursday from the Minister on Archbishop Ryan school. He offered me the opportunity of meeting his officials to ascertain how the case in question could be examined, given that it had been outstanding for so long. I referred to Newcastle primary school, but there are other schools in my constituency. I thank the Minister for his recent correspondence. Could he give me an additional update on some of the schools to which I referred? If he can, I will be most grateful.

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: I thank the Deputy for giving me the opportunity to outline to the House the work done to reduce the number of prefabricated classrooms in both primary and post-primary schools. I will continue to use the resources available to me to reduce further the use of prefabricated classrooms in all schools. I am aware of the problems in the Deputy's constituency, particularly Lucan. The matter has been brought to my attention by the Deputy's colleague, Deputy Joanna Tuffy, and my colleague, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Deputy Frances Fitzgerald. I refer, in particular, to a large school that has been in place for some time. I am aware of the concerns some schools have been expressing. Whereas they are still in prefabricated accommodation, new schools coming through are getting new buildings. Understandably, this is causing some concern and difficulties. The reality is that we have changed the policy on prefabricated buildings. During the height of the building boom prefabricated buildings were seen as an answer, but in retrospect, it was crazy. The amount spent on renting prefabricated buildings has dropped considerably, but we will continue to make progress throughout the five year construction plan I announced in March 2012. This outlines the major schools building projects that will proceed to construction over the duration of the plan. Should additional funding become available, projects not included in the plan will be considered further. The five year plan is not the end of the story. However, it is a priority because, having seen increases in population, the Deputy will be aware that it is important that the children who were born this morning in maternity hospitals across the country be looking into a schoolyard in four years, not a field. I am constantly concerned about this issue and it has to be the overriding priority. While some schools are in prefabricated buildings and believe they are being bypassed, we must increase the available accommodation to meet the fastest

growing population in Europe so as to ensure children will have a classroom in which they can be educated.

Third Level Funding

Deputy Eamonn Maloney: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for selecting this topic for discussion. I commend the Department of Education and Skills and its Ministers for the recently published *School Completers - What Next?* and early school leavers reports which are enlightening and provide the up-to-date detail required by those of us interested in education, particularly equality in education. Both reports highlight the level of work in which we, as a Parliament, need to engage to bring about equality in education, particularly at second level. They indicate the disadvantages for children of working class families in not completing second level education and highlight the difficulties they experience in accessing third level education, universities in particular. They also vindicate my view which I have held all of my adult life that the State should not be providing financial support for the small number of private schools operating in the country. The reports clearly state this gives children attending fee paying schools the edge in that they are three times more likely to access third level education than children from working class backgrounds who attend schools in working class areas. If we are to ensure equality in education, this funding must cease.

In regard to the continued subsidisation of private schools, I have previously pointed out to the Minister that, for all that is said about discrimination in Northern Ireland, private schools there do not receive one cent of taxpayers' money; rather, they operate independently. That is how it should be here. I am opposed to the State subsidising private schools. If we are to ensure fairness in second level education, the subsidisation of private schools must end.

Minister of State at the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Dinny McGinley): I thank the Deputy for raising this matter.

A new report published today, *School Completers - What Next?*, shows that over 50% of students who were enrolled in the final year of senior cycle in Department of Education and Skills-supported post-primary schools in 2010 went directly to higher education. This is the first in a series of reports by the Department that tracks pupils one year after they leave school. This evidence-based research has been compiled using data matching of administrative data.

The Department also produces reports on projections of enrolment at third level and the retention rates of pupils in second level schools. Data showing where school leavers went having completed the leaving certificate examination in 2010 are contained in *School Completers - What Next?* It found that of the 54,824 school leavers that year, 44% went on to study a higher education course in a HEA funded institution; 20% enrolled in PLC courses; 5% repeated the leaving certificate examination; an estimated 4% enrolled in colleges abroad, predominantly in the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland, and just over 2% were estimated to have enrolled in a non-HEA funded institution. The report also shows that 66% of students who attended fee-charging secondary schools as compared to 47% from the non-fee charging secondary school sector progressed directly to higher education. Some 42% of students from comprehensive schools, 38% from community schools and 34% from the vocational sector progressed directly to higher education. In terms of students attending DEIS schools, some 24% as compared to 49% from non-DEIS status schools went on to higher education. While over 57% of pupils attending all-Irish schools progressed directly to higher education courses,

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it should be noted that this refers to a small sample size - 826 of 1,437 pupils.

In the 2011-12 academic year there were over 163,000 full-time students in publicly funded third level institutions. Demand for full-time education has risen substantially in recent years, with full-time enrolments rising from just under 116,000 in 2000-01. Owing to the underlying demographics, demand is projected to increase continuously up to 2026, with a projected level of demand for full-time places of over 192,000 by 2020-21 and 209,000 by 2026-27.

Deputy Eamonn Maloney: I thank the Minister of State for his reply which indicates the progress being made. Historically, too many children, particularly from working class communities, have left school too early, but this is beginning to turn around. I welcome any improvement in that regard.

On funding for fee-paying schools, neither the Minister of State nor I can be blamed for this situation which got out of control during the Celtic tiger era. The level of funding provided for private schools in this jurisdiction over 14 years amounted to almost €1 billion, which is a lot of money. As I said, if we are to ensure equality in education and give all children the prospect of accessing third level education, we will need to rectify this.

The Minister of State may have heard last week that one private fee paying school, one of the best in terms of performance, with almost 90% of its students going on to third level, reported a €400,000 surplus in its 2012 accounts to the Companies Registration Office. Not only did it have a surplus of €400,000 last year, this was an increase on the surplus of €300,000 recorded for the previous year. Many have commented on how tough things are and the need to continue paying all of this money to private schools. However, this does not stand up. We are paying money to schools that are operating on a surplus. For this reason, the abolition of this funding is justified.

Deputy Dinny McGinley: I take the points made by the Deputy. A number of initiatives to make third level education accessible to those who are under-represented have been initiated. One of these is the third level access fund, as administered by further and higher education institutions, to support the retention of certain target groups, namely, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, mature students, students with disabilities and those from ethnic minorities. It is managed on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills by the Higher Education Authority's national access office. In 2009-10, entrants from these target groups made up 37.1% of all entrants to third level institutions. The back to education initiative aims to increase the participation of young people and adults with less than upper second level education, particularly the so-called hard-to-reach, who experience strong barriers to participation in a range of part-time accredited learning opportunities leading to awards on the national framework of qualifications to facilitate their access, transfer and progression to other education and employment pathways. We also have the Springboard programme. These initiatives have been established to enable those from the lower socioeconomic categories to have access to third level or higher education. We are trying to improve the situation, while paying attention to the funding that is available and that is not easy in these difficult times. I thank the Deputy for raising the matter.

Carbon Tax Collection

Deputy Brendan Smith: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for selecting this topic and appreci-

ate that the Minister for Finance, Deputy Michael Noonan, is present to respond to it.

As a Border county Deputy representing the counties of Cavan and Monaghan, I have a particular concern about the smuggling of fuel across the Border, not just diesel and petrol but also solid fuels. Alcohol, tobacco and a range of other products are also being smuggled across the Border. Unfortunately, that black economy is thriving and it is doing untold damage to our revenue base.

Domestic solid fuel in the North is already cheaper due to a 5% VAT rate, compared to a 13.5% VAT rate here, and an exemption from the British Government's climate levy. However, as announced in the budget in December, the carbon tax has been extended to solid fuels. A rate of €10 per tonne has now been applied with effect from 1 May, and a rate of €20 per tonne will be applied with effect from 1 May next year. I understand that is the current proposal. According to the industry, by next year that will add €2.50 to a 40 kg bag of coal and 50 cent to a bale of briquettes. A household that goes through two bags of coal a week for half of the year - which is not unusual, particularly for those houses without central heating - will pay an extra €130.

Introducing these phased carbon tax increases on solid fuels without considering their impact on poorer families and the increasing incidence of fuel smuggling is not a good example of joined-up thinking by the Government. A number of years ago when the carbon tax was first introduced, the intention was that it would not be applied to solid fuels - namely, coal and turf - until there was practically an equivalent price north of the Border. That is not the position at the moment. I know some fuel traders who are very concerned about the possible impact on the trade south of the Border due to the price differential resulting from the imposition of the extra tax. I raised this issue during the Second Stage debate on the Finance Bill and I hope the Minister will be in a position to address it. Fuel merchants have pointed out to me and many other public representatives that smuggling and the potential for further losses in the trade means they may have to let employees go, with a resultant loss of income tax, PRSI and other revenue to the Exchequer.

When the introduction of a carbon tax was first mooted in 2009, the solid fuel trade group, the industry's representative body, stated: "The proposed carbon tax would introduce a 22.5 per cent wholesale price disadvantage to Republic-based coal distributors - with the end result being the complete domination of the solid fuel trade in the Republic by coal from Northern Ireland." The group's spokesman at that time said there was evidence of coal being smuggled as far south as the Minister's province of Munster.

From an environmental point of view, it is worth noting that Scottish coal has a relatively high sulphur content, nearly three times the maximum allowed in the Republic. The industry has estimated that smugglers could make €2,500 to €3,000 per truck bringing in smuggled coal. We already know the massive profits that are made from well-organised smuggling of diesel and cigarettes and the activities, which we all find despicable, that are often funded from these operations. It seems we are now going to give even more opportunity to the same people so that they can make money and in the process deny the State millions of euro in revenue.

The Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government yesterday announced his decision to press ahead with a nationwide ban on smoky coal. There will be benefits from that decision but there will be an additional dimension in terms of costs for consumers.

Representations have been made directly to me by many small-scale fuel merchants who

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are concerned that they will have severe difficulty remaining in the trade, particularly those in the three Southern Border counties, those along the Border and those even further south. I ask the Minister if something can be done to ensure that revenue is not lost to the State and that everything possible is done to protect that trade and the resultant jobs.

Minister for Finance (Deputy Michael Noonan): The Revenue Commissioners are responsible for the collection of the solid fuel carbon tax. This tax was introduced with effect from 1 May 2013 and will be collected on a self-assessed basis. In line with its approach generally, the Revenue Commissioners will apply the full range of compliance interventions and enforcement provisions for self-assessed taxes to the solid fuel carbon tax.

The tax is payable on the first supply in the State and will therefore be paid by importers and manufacturers at the earliest point possible in the domestic supply chain. Retailers that source their fuel from distributors in the State will not be making a first supply in the State and therefore will not be required to register for the tax. However, if a fuel trader or retailer receives some or all of its solid fuel supplies from a supplier based in another member state - for example, a supplier based in Northern Ireland - that fuel trader or retailer will be accountable for the tax when it supplies the fuel onwards to its own customers.

If a supplier based in Northern Ireland is supplying households here directly, that supplier will be making a first supply in the State and must register for the carbon tax and make payment of the tax on its supplies to the Revenue Commissioners. In circumstances in which there are grounds to believe that tax has not been paid in respect of a taxable supply of solid fuel, the Revenue Commissioners will investigate the person's tax liabilities in accordance with the particular circumstances of each case. If confirmed, it will enforce the collection of any unpaid carbon tax and other taxes, such as VAT.

A tax liability does not arise where an individual personally purchases and brings into the State solid fuel from a supplier in another member state, provided the fuel is for his or her own private use. However, should that individual, instead of using it him- or herself, supply another person in the State with that fuel, he or she will have made a first supply of solid fuel in the State as a supplier, will be liable to pay a solid fuel carbon tax on that supply, and must register with the Revenue Commissioners accordingly.

It is important to note that the solid fuel carbon tax will become operational in a market that is already subject to strict regulation. Regulations to enable local authorities to control the type of coal supplied in the State have been put in place as part of the robust mechanism introduced by the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government to address the risk of coal products with lower environmental standards, and on which carbon tax has not been paid, being sourced from Northern Ireland. Suppliers who are producing and supplying solid fuel unlawfully are subject to investigation and prosecution by local authorities and other State agencies charged with enforcing environmental regulations and preventing such supply. The Revenue Commissioners will liaise with these bodies as required to ensure lawful supplies of solid fuels are properly taxed.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I thank the Minister for his reply. I compliment the Revenue Commissioners on the excellent work they have been doing in recent years to deal with the scourge of washed diesel and the illicit trade in diesel, in particular, but also in tobacco products. I know from speaking to those officials that they are dealing with a very difficult issue and have made substantial progress, which we welcome. We want to ensure that type of illicit

trade is eliminated as far as is practicable. Being realists, we know that it is not possible for the Revenue Commissioners or any State agency or its officers to police on an ongoing basis the Border areas in the constituencies that the Minister of State, Deputy McGinley, and I represent.

In his concluding sentence, the Minister said that the Revenue Commissioners would liaise with the bodies to which I referred. One of the fuel merchants made the point that they need assurance that there will be good policing in the new situation that has arisen with regard to solid fuels. Co-ordination is needed to ensure that if there is a marked decrease in the legitimate sale of products south of the Border, some action will be taken to deal with the illegal supply. When the Minister is planning the budget, I ask him to consider not applying the increase proposed for May 2014, because the British Government has not yet indicated whether its carbon charge will apply to solid fuel products in the North of Ireland. We need to plan as much as possible for the difficulties that will arise for this business south of the Border too.

Deputy Michael Noonan: The Deputy has raised three issues in his supplementary question, one of which was the level of enforcement by the Revenue Commissioners and how they will co-operate with other authorities. They have assured me that they are intent on rigorous enforcement using all the powers under the tax Acts and that they will liaise with other authorities. The second issue is the high sulphur content of some coals that come from Northern Ireland, particularly if they are sourced in Scotland. There are regulations already promulgated by the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government and enforced by local authorities to do with the quality of solid fuel burned, particularly coals with high sulphur contents. They will continue their enforcement as they have been doing up to now but they will cross-refer anything they do to the Revenue Commissioners, which will be in contact with the local authorities to see if enforcement is required or if there is a trail that can be followed to source smuggling from Northern Ireland.

The third question is a budgetary matter. When I extended the carbon charge to solid fuels I said we would bring in only 50% of the tax this May, with the other 50% to be brought in next May. However, we do take cognisance of what the British authorities are doing in Northern Ireland because we do not want legitimate trade to evaporate across the Border because of price differentials.

Homeless Persons Supports

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I appeal to the Minister of State at the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht and to the Government to take an interest in St. Catherine's Foyer, which has been in place since 2004. Will the Minister of State intervene before a final decision is made to close or alter the management ethos of the Cara Foyer in Marrowbone Lane? There were other Cara foyers elsewhere. Dublin City Council and the Simon Community are in discussions about this centre. The main source of funding is the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government via Dublin City Council. The current discussions have not included the local community in any way. The community is hearing by drip-feed about the proposals to turn the foyer into a general homeless shelter. This is not a case of NIMBY-ism. That is not the attitude. The community wants this facility to remain and does not want it altered.

What is being proposed is contrary to the commitment given to the community when it agreed to have the foyer built on its community space when its sports and youth centre was

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being built. The community was told that unless it allowed the foyer to be built it would get nothing. Thanks to the combination of the St. Catherine's residents' association, the Coalition of Communities against Drugs and Dublin City Council, two fine facilities were built in this severely disadvantaged area of the south inner city. Hundreds of young people and many adults use the sports complex, which shares an entrance with the 48-bed foyer, every day. This is a mixed complex and to the best of my knowledge there has not been one incident or problem between the residents of the foyer and the local community, which augurs well for the future if it is allowed to continue under the ethos and management that it has now.

Up to 14 people between the ages of 18 and 25 years who are homeless or at risk of being homeless can have their own space in this centre for up to two years while they are getting on their feet and availing of a key worker in the complex, as well as other services including educational opportunities and access to work placements. It has been an innovative, unique and holistic answer to the needs of many young homeless people in Dublin and has been very successful. It is a safe space that is now at risk from a proposed change which would allow anybody from the homeless list in the Dublin City Council area, which includes drug users and convicted sex offenders, to invade this space next to a youth centre that is used by hundreds of people every day. If the foyer is changed to a homeless shelter, of which there are already several in the constituency, it will not be the centre of excellence that it has been. This is of concern to the community. I urge the Minister of State to ensure that if Cara wishes to extract itself from the foyer, other options are considered, such as its being taken on by Dublin City Council or another youth organisation to ensure the facility is retained and the community is safe.

Deputy Dinny McGinley: Unfortunately, the Minister of State with responsibility for housing and planning, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan, is not available to take this debate today, but she has asked me to thank the Deputy for providing this opportunity to discuss the issue of homelessness and the Government's response to it.

The Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government's role in respect of homelessness involves the provision of a national framework of policy, legislation and funding to underpin the role of housing authorities in addressing homelessness at local level. Statutory responsibility for the provision of accommodation and related services for homeless persons rests with the housing authorities - in this instance, Dublin City Council. The Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government has no function in this regard, nor is it involved in decisions on operational matters.

I understand St. Catherine's Foyer is a housing facility in Dublin 8 which deals exclusively with young people aged 18 to 25 who have experienced homelessness or are in danger of becoming homeless. The facility can accommodate up to 40 individuals for stays of up to two years. There is a focus on personal development and all residents are assigned a member of staff who assists them in achieving life goals such as education, skills development, job searching and emotional development.

The future day-to-day operational management of St. Catherine's Foyer is a matter under consideration by the board of the foyer - that is, Cara Housing Association Limited. This consideration relates to its ongoing role as a management agent in the provision of homeless services in Dublin.

6 o'clock

Both the Health Service Executive and Dublin City Council are supporting Cara Housing in this process and the board of the foyer is now engaged with Dublin Simon in exploring opportunities for the ongoing management of services in keeping with the Government's policy on addressing homelessness.

The Minister of State, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan, recently published the Government's homelessness policy statement. It is a clear, concise and accessible articulation of the political and policy focus that informs the approach to ending homelessness. It places an explicit emphasis on a housing-led approach as the primary response to homelessness. Long-term and sustainable housing should be the primary response to all forms of homelessness. A housing-led approach is the emerging consensus in international social policy, both academically and in practice. It is generally accepted as a positive departure from previous models which saw stable housing as the end goal in combating homelessness and individuals moved through various stages in residential services, from emergency to transitional, before being assessed for long-term independent housing.

The previous approaches to homelessness saw individuals trapped in emergency accommodation for long periods. The emphasis on short-term emergency interventions has proved expensive to administer and operate. More importantly, it did not serve the individual well in terms of dignity and well-being. The housing-led approach to homelessness outlined in the policy statement incorporates the provision of support for people in their homes according to their needs. We need to focus on long-term solutions to homelessness. The goal is to assist homeless persons who can live independently into mainstream accommodation as soon as possible. It is about sustaining tenancies. It is important that a range of housing options is available to enable someone to move out of emergency accommodation as quickly as possible into long-term accommodation more suited to their needs. There can be no greater solution to homelessness than providing people with a home where they can live as full and valued members of society.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: That reply has absolutely nothing to do with the issue I raised. The Department can involve itself in the operational questions around this centre since it is the primary funder. It is a pity the Minister of State, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan, is not in the Chamber because she would be well aware of the work of Cara Housing, as she was a director - she possibly still is - and perhaps even was chair of that company. Questions arise about the English Cara Housing Association extracting itself from Ireland.

The centre in question is working. Its success is highlighted by testimonies from social workers and youth workers across the city. With the HSE and the Garda, they attest to the fact that this is the type of centre required. If its ethos is changed, we will end up with the chaotic circumstances one sees in homeless centres in this city. Changing the ethos would mean people on the general homeless list would be entitled to avail of this centre, meaning they would share an open door with St. Catherine's Community Centre in which there are young people. One could have sex offenders, chaotic drug users and alcoholics going to the complex which was prevented in the past.

The young people in this centre are at risk and not on the transitional housing list but are given two years to allow them the space to get their lives together and back into education or a job. The centre has been successful in this respect, as has been proved in every evaluation of it. Will the Minister intercede before Dublin City Council makes an arrangement with the Simon Community to turn this into a normal Simon homeless centre? There are other alternatives. It could be run by the city council, as happens in Cork, or by another youth service. Several youth

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services have indicated an interest in running the centre.

Deputy Dinny McGinley: The future day-to-day operational management of St. Catherine's Foyer is a matter under consideration by the board of Cara Housing Association Limited. This consideration relates to its ongoing role as management agent in the provision of homeless services in Dublin.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Is the Minister of State, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan, still on the board of directors of Cara Housing Association Limited? If she is, that would give rise to a conflict of interest.

Deputy Dinny McGinley: The Minister of State has set out the ambitious target of ending long-term homelessness by the end of 2016 by explicitly adopting a housing-led approach. Considerable funding has been extended to tackle homelessness annually across the Government. The Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government has overseen local government and State expenditure exceeding €50 million a year in respect of the running costs of homeless facilities and associated services. There is also considerable capital investment in homeless services on an annual basis. In addition, the HSE is spending over €30 million on care packages for the homeless every year. A housing-led approach is not just about achieving a better return on public investment. Its driving ambition is ensuring the dignity and value of individuals and families. By definition, a home encompasses security, safety and well-being.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Has the Minister of State resigned from the board of directors of Cara Housing Association Limited?

Deputy Dinny McGinley: It is not just a place to shelter but a place in which we flourish and from where we contribute to our wider community. The Minister of States's targets and approach are enlightened.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I agree they are laudable but not in this case. This is a facility that is not even operating at capacity.

Deputy Dinny McGinley: That will be brought to the Minister of State's attention.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Good, but she will be well aware of it already.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Byrne): The Deputy had his time.

Message from the Seanad

Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Byrne): Seanad Éireann has passed the National Lottery Bill 2012, without amendment.

Deputy Alan Shatter: One would not have bet on that happening.

Defence Forces (Second World War Amnesty and Immunity) Bill 2012 [Seanad]: Order for Report Stage

Minister for Defence (Deputy Alan Shatter): I move: “That Report Stage be taken now.”

Question put and agreed to.

Defence Forces (Second World War Amnesty and Immunity) Bill 2012 [Seanad]: Report and Final Stages

Bill reported without amendment and received for final consideration.

Question proposed: “That the Bill do now pass.”

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: I thank the Minister for his work on this legislation, as I know he has pioneered it. I also thank his officials in the Department who are responsible for bringing it to fruition.

Fianna Fáil made it clear throughout that it had no interest in opposing the Bill. I hope that in the course of our contributions we managed to put in context the reasons the severe sanctions were imposed on Army deserters at the time. The Minister would not want to see widespread desertion from the Defence Forces at any stage. At the time the penalties were understandable and, with the benefit of hindsight more than 70 years on, we realise the need to take action. We hope the survivors, their families and relatives and those directly affected take some consolation in the initiative taken by the Minister and the Houses of the Oireachtas. I hope the broader membership of those who fought in the Second World War against tyranny and the horrendous regime of the Nazis will take some consolation in the words of support and recognition from all sides of the House during the debate. We can take a bow on this issue.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: My party welcomes the legislation, as it is right that the soldiers in question are pardoned. Fascism did not just emerge with Hitler’s rise to power. It was already evident in Mussolini’s Italy and later in Franco’s Spain. Many men from this country who went to fight fascism in Spain were excommunicated from the Catholic Church. They were condemned up and down the country and isolated on their return. Many of them never returned home. If we are to look back and address those who took the decision to confront Nazism and fascism, we must do it in the round.

We welcome this legislation. The men who served in the Allied forces suffered egregiously when they returned home, as did their families, for many years. The passing of this legislation is the right thing to do, but I ask the Government to also consider what it can do to heal the wounds of the men and women who left this country to fight fascism in Spain and with the 5th International Brigade who received no real acknowledgement from the State of the unbelievable courage they showed at the time.

Minister for Defence (Deputy Alan Shatter): First, I thank colleagues in the House for their supportive remarks. In marking the passage of the Bill through the Dáil today, we are making a small piece of history. It is very desirable that Members on various sides of the House who have contributed to this debate are supportive. It is a tribute to how far we have come as

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a society that a Bill on such a sensitive issue could receive practically unanimous support from all sides in both Houses of the Oireachtas.

The Government's rationale for introducing the Bill was twofold, first, to put to rest the concerns of those individuals still alive who had deserted from the Defence Forces to fight with the Allied side during the Second World War and, second, to lift a veil for the families of those who had already died. The provisions of the Bill are an acknowledgement of the harsh treatment individuals received and an acceptance of the special circumstances at the time when they deserted the Defence Forces. For this reason, it is important to acknowledge the courage these individuals showed in what must have been extremely difficult times, not just for them but also, in the majority of cases, for the families they left behind in Ireland. These individuals contributed in no small part to the Allied victory against tyranny and totalitarianism. That contribution was made not just by the approximately 5,000 who deserted from the Defence Forces but the extraordinary number - over 60,000 - of citizens of the then Free State who joined the British forces - the army, the navy, the air force - to join in that fight. In total, 100,000 or more from the island of Ireland joined in the fight and it is right that we acknowledge what they did and their courage. Their efforts, in an indirect way, also contributed to the safety of their home country. If the United Kingdom had fallen to the forces of Nazi Germany, the same fate would almost certainly have been visited on this island, with all of the consequences that would have gone with it.

In seeking to grant an amnesty to these individuals the Government has been very careful to respect the vital contribution made by members of the Defence Forces who did not desert during the Second World War. At one stage we had 42,000 members of the Defence Forces, an extraordinary number, compared to the 9,500 we have today. In this context, I again acknowledge the tremendous work undertaken by the individual members of the Defence Forces who stayed loyal to the Defence Forces during the period of the Second World War. We should not underestimate at any stage the importance of their loyalty and continuing engagement in the State at a time of global difficulty and chaos within Europe. Loyalty is an extremely important aspect of any military force and the Defence Forces are no different in this regard. Those who remained loyal during the period we knew as the Emergency performed a crucial duty for the State at a key time in its history. The loyalty of these members of the Defence Forces to the State was indispensable. It is always essential to the national interest that members of the Defence Forces do not abandon their duties at any time and no responsible Government would ever depart from that basic and fundamental principle. However, as I said, it is good that this House has united behind the Bill. It is important to a substantial number of families in the State, a fact that a number of Deputies acknowledged during the debate. For example, Deputy Áodhán Ó Ríordáin made particular mention of the late Con Murphy, a former RAF man, who died in Cork recently. There are countless others like him who did not live to see the day the State finally acknowledged the role they played in seeking to ensure a free, democratic and safe Europe.

The enactment of the Bill sends an important message to those surviving and the relatives of those who have since passed on. It is a very simple message: "You can be proud of your contribution, or your relative's contribution, in the fight against tyranny and this contribution is now fully acknowledged by the State." It is important, as we look to the commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the commencement of the Great War and the 75th anniversary of the Second World War in 2014, to the memory of all those who served and died in these conflicts, those surviving and the relatives of those who have since passed on. The Bill is bringing out of

the shadows and into the daylight a crucial part of the complex history of the State, this island, families in the State and individual citizens. It is also bringing greater into the daylight the complexities of the relationship between the island of Ireland and Britain, the mutuality in that relationship and the connectivity between families on the two islands.

As I said, it is estimated that over 60,000 citizens of the then Free State and in the region of 100,000 who resided on this island fought against Nazi tyranny during the Second World War. I believe, as does the Government, that for too long in this state we failed to acknowledge their courage and sacrifice and that for too long their contribution was airbrushed out of official Irish history as taught in schools and at third level. I cannot recall any mention of their contribution at any stage during my school education many years ago or when I initially took history as a subject in my first year in college. In recent years things have changed and the role played by them has been documented and written about, which is as it should be. I hope the Bill provides a statutory foundation to ensure they will never again be ignored or forgotten in narratives covering the history of Ireland from 1939 to 1945. It is important that we acknowledge the realities and complexities of our history and the complexities of the histories of individuals and families on this island. That history is much more complex than the simple manner in which it is frequently and, unfortunately, presented.

To return to the theme Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn raised, I appreciate the sentiments he expressed about others who had fought fascism. The Bill is addressing a State issue. It is addressing the issue of individuals who deserted the Defence Forces, fought tyranny and Nazi Germany and were either court martialed for their desertion or summarily dismissed from the Defence Forces and who, following the ending of that terrible war, found themselves - those who returned to Ireland - effectively prevented from being engaged in any State or State funded employment. Not only could they not be recruited to work in Departments, they were also excluded from basic and menial work provided through local authorities or other State agencies. Many of those who were treated as heroes in Britain found that they had been turned against on this island because they had fought in the British Army. Many of them found their families in major financial difficulties. Many of them had to leave the Free State and return to Britain to seek employment. What we are doing, as I said previously in the House, is apologising for that occurring and recognising the courage and value of their contribution at the time. It marks an important milestone in the maturity and politics of the State that we are taking this step. I am very pleased the Bill has met with the approval and support of all sides of the House. Many of us come from different political backgrounds and perspectives and it is a good day for the Oireachtas that the Bill has passed through both Houses without contention and with considered and interesting contributions from Members, both those attached to a party and Independent Members.

I thank Members for their constructive and support engagement and I thank Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl for his generous comment. I am very pleased we can mark that at 6.20 p.m. on this day in this House, the Bill has completed its passage.

Question put and agreed to.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Byrne): A message shall be sent to the Seanad acquainting it accordingly.

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Housing (Amendment) Bill 2013: Second Stage (Resumed)

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

Deputy Sandra McLellan: Sinn Féin supports this Bill, but with some reservations. Housing is a hugely important issue for people and for the State. As we know only too well, it was housing or an obsession with property and the buying and selling of houses that brought this country to the brink of financial ruin. While we support the Bill, we believe that in terms of housing, the State is failing the people miserably. When we look at the issue of housing in Ireland, we see a dismal picture. Thousands of families are in mortgage arrears and struggling to survive. The Central Bank's figures show that more than one in ten mortgage holders is now in arrears of three months or more and that some 27,000 people, or almost 18% of buy-to-let mortgages are in arrears.

How does the Government respond to this crisis? It responds by introducing legislation that makes it easier for banks to repossess family homes. This type of policy decision and other initiatives of the Fine Gael-Labour Party Government are yet again on the side of the rich, the privileged and big money. Time and again they favour the banks and the big financial institutions over the people. Even more depressing, we have a chronic shortage of social housing, with almost 100,000 people on the housing waiting list. This is an appalling indictment of any state. Fine Gael and the Labour Party have failed people, especially those who depend on social housing. The State has a duty and an obligation to house people. If it is to do this in an efficient and successful manner, it must ensure the public housing stock is maintained at levels that can accommodate those who require housing.

On the question of rent supplement, the picture is also bleak. Some 94,000 people are now dependent on rent supplement to keep a roof over their heads. This is taxpayers' money. In other words, it is money from the public purse that is going to private landlords and property speculators. This is an appalling state of affairs and is a direct result of the policies of this and previous Governments and their abysmal failure to ensure the State's public housing stock is adequate for its housing needs. Another 24,000 people are in receipt of State money from the rental accommodation scheme. This highlights the Government's failure to address in any meaningful way the whole debacle around the housing issue and the resultant crisis. The real casualties of this are families, children, young couples and single people.

Nowhere is the human impact of fall-out from the State's indifference and ineptitude more glaring than in the numbers of homeless young people, who must either sleep on the streets or take their chances in dangerous and frightening hostels and emergency accommodation. The Government pledged to end homelessness by 2016, yet it goes about achieving this target by slashing the housing budget. It introduced draconian laws, capping rent supplement and hounds people into finding cheaper accommodation. The result is that many people, many of whom are vulnerable, disabled, have an addiction problem or are just poor, end up living in sub-standard accommodation.

A recent investigation by Dublin City Council of just under 1,500 flats found that 1,400 did not meet the minimum legal standards for private rented accommodation. The council found that flats had no private bathrooms, people lived in rooms without windows and flats were damp, had mould, poor electrics and inadequate heating. A well thought out proper State housing policy would ensure diversity would be the hallmark of housing in the State. In other words, there would be a balance between public and private housing stock, rather than as we

have currently, an excess of privately owned dwellings coupled with an appalling lack of public and social housing.

I mentioned on a previous occasion that foster care allowance should not be included as reckonable means. It is not reckoned when calculating social welfare payments. Also, the fact people on supplementary welfare allowance cannot go on the housing list is wrong. I know of people who have been removed from the housing list when reviewed because of being in receipt of supplementary welfare allowance.

The issue of transfers from one local authority to another is huge. This problem arises in particular where there is a marriage break-up and the person from another part of the country cannot transfer. Other times the problem arises when the person on the list wants to move to get a job or when a person wants to move from one area, such as Cork, back to the home area, such as Galway, to care for an elderly parent. This issue needs to be examined.

It is very important local authorities keep a database of the people who have applied to local authorities and have failed to be approved for housing. On a number of occasions I have been aware of people who have had three or four failed housing applications. Some of these people suffer from mental illness and are on rent allowance, but when the rent allowance is cut off and the local politician makes representations on their behalf, the local authorities say they have no record of applications made by these people. However, the local politician might have a thick file covering three years recording the fact the person has been trying to get on the housing list. Therefore, a database documenting failed applications would be helpful.

Deputy Seán Crowe: I welcome this Bill, which allows elected representatives to take part in setting rent rates in local authorities. This already happens in some local authority areas, but for the most part one relies on the goodwill of local management. Sinn Féin is in favour of stronger local government and we welcome the transfer of decision making powers to properly funded local councils. It is important that this Bill ensures rent levels will not be set by county or city managers alone, but that there will be an input from local representatives. This is a positive development. The Bill will allow councillors to use their local knowledge and enable people to hold decision makers to account.

However, the Bill will not resolve or solve the housing crisis facing people in the State. We have a severe housing shortage, with 97,000 people on the housing waiting list, 94,000 on rent supplement and 24,000 on RAS. This is a problem the Government has failed to tackle. It has allowed the need to grow, rents to rise, conditions to deteriorate and speculative landlords to make huge profits in the absence of public provision. Successive Governments have overseen the depletion of the public housing stock, the over-burdening of the voluntary sector and the drive to subsidise private landlords, developers and speculators who provide what is often below standard housing at a very high price.

A recent parliamentary question submitted by Sinn Féin to the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government revealed that in the more than three years of NAMA, only 263 of a promised 3,949 units have been delivered for local authority use. We face one of the biggest housing crises the State has ever seen and if the Government continues to provide social housing at this critically low rate, the crisis will only get worse and will affect more individuals and families. It is a major issue that people across the country are in sub-standard accommodation while units lie empty in estates near them. People cannot understand why these units are not being used to relieve the crisis.

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The Minister of State said previously that she would address and speed up this process, but units are not being delivered at the speed people expect. I heard the Minister of State speaking in this House previously about speeding up and addressing this process. The units are not being delivered at the speed that people expect. Unfortunately, the crisis is getting worse, as waiting lists get longer.

We are facing one of the biggest housing crises the State has ever seen. If the Government continues to proceed at such a low speed, things will get worse for families. The length of time someone has to spend on South Dublin County Council's waiting list has increased from five years to eight. It is not acceptable that a person who goes on the list tomorrow will have to wait eight years before he or she receives an offer of housing. The children who are stuck in this situation have to move from one area or school to another and do not have any consistency in their lives. Dublin City Council recently found that 90% of the apartments it inspected did not meet basic standards.

The Government has created a new timescale for homelessness. It aims to bring long-term homelessness and rough sleeping to an end by 2016. Many of us attended the launch of Focus Ireland's report earlier today. When I spoke to people before the event, they referred to the failure of previous Governments to live up to the 2010 commitment made. I do not think anybody believes the Government has a hope in hell of meeting the new 2016 target. I hope it will happen, but I just do not believe it will. I appreciate the goodwill on the Minister of State's part, but most of the players in the system do not believe long-term homelessness will be ended by 2016. Homeless services have made it clear that they cannot take more cuts, including those made by the HSE. We heard the message from Sr. Stan at today's event that more cuts will mean reduced services.

According to Focus Ireland, there are approximately 5,000 homeless persons in the State. On any given night, up to 90 people could be sleeping rough in doorways, parks, derelict sites and abandoned cars in the Dublin City Council area. The same applies in the other local authority areas. People in the South Dublin County Council area sleep rough around The Priory, in Clondalkin and other areas. They can sleep in parks in warmer weather. They sometimes sleep in basements of apartment blocks. The official figures are not picking up many of the people in question. The number of sleeping bags that the homeless unit in the Tallaght area has to give out every year does not equate to the council's official number of rough sleepers in the county.

People sleeping rough represent the tip of the homelessness problem. Those who live in hostels, refuges, bed and breakfast accommodation, shelters and forms of emergency accommodation comprise the less obvious side of the problem. Sadly, the hidden homeless population is 20 times bigger than the number who sleep rough. There are 531 homeless children in the system. According to figures we were given today, there are 439 children living with a parent in homeless accommodation. All of them are in this hopeless situation because of the lack of action in providing appropriate accommodation to meet their housing needs. A large proportion of them are vulnerable victims. Society's failure to respond to their needs is making many of them more vulnerable. I refer to basic needs such as a roof over one's head, or somewhere safe and warm where one can sleep.

Other Deputies have spoken about rent supplement thresholds. The threshold for a single self-contained unit in my constituency of Dublin South-West is €475. I checked *daft.ie* today when somebody came into my office to try to find accommodation. According to *rent.ie* this morning, the monthly rent for a single apartment in the Tallaght area ranges from €780 to €850.

When people come in, they are told this is the level and advised to look further out. If they look in Rathcoole or Saggart, they will find that accommodation is not available, unfortunately. Many of them have children who live in another part of the city. The difficulty is that people are being pushed further and further out of the city in order to meet the Department's guidelines. The reality is that the system is not working.

Many people are in despair as they try to find somewhere within the threshold. Many of them do not have the experience of dealing with landlords that would help them to negotiate rent reductions. Housing problems are by far the most frequent issue I deal with in my constituency office. I do not know if other Deputies have the same experience of the crisis. People come into my office because their marriages have broken down and they have to leave the family home, for example, or because someone has been assaulted in the home and they have to get out. They want to know where exactly they can go. They come to us for advice as they seek to solve their problems. Many of my constituents have encountered problems when their relationships have broken up. In such cases, it is usually the male partner who suddenly finds himself with nowhere to live. The age profile of many of those who come in seems to be getting older.

I wish to mention a recent case I dealt with. A male constituent of mine is renting a room in a house for €300. He receives €180 in rent supplement. The RAS section of South Dublin County Council has told him he must leave to find private rented accommodation up to a threshold of €650. The Minister of State might be able to make sense of this. In effect, this means the RAS section will allow a single person to rent somewhere for up to €650, but the community welfare officer will not. Rather than paying rent supplement of €120, the council is forcing this man to look for somewhere in the €650 bracket. He has not been able to find such a property on any of the rental accommodation websites. If he does not find somewhere suitable, South Dublin County Council will pay up to three times what it previously cost the community welfare officer to house him. It does not make sense. Perhaps I will send the details to the Minister of State.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: Yes, please do.

Deputy Seán Crowe: It is one of these quirky cases. The council might want to move people on, but it does not make sense in a case like this, especially given that so many people are on the housing list. The man in question is happy in his current accommodation which is costing the taxpayer less than the arrangement suggested by the council that wants to move him on. It does not make sense.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Thomas P. Broughan): I have to ask the Deputy to wrap up.

Deputy Seán Crowe: I look forward to hearing further discussion on the Bill which has a great deal of positive merit.

Deputy Seán Kenny: I would like to share time with Deputy Robert Dowds.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Thomas P. Broughan): Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Seán Kenny: The Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 which amended and extended the Housing Acts 1966 to 2004 provided local authorities with a framework for a more strategic approach to the delivery and management of housing services. The framework provided for the adoption of housing services plans, homelessness action plans and anti-social behaviour strategies. It allowed for new and more objective methods of assessing need and

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allocating housing and for a more effective means of managing and controlling tenancies and rents.

One cannot discuss homelessness without referring to the recent case of a homeless man, Josef Pavelka. His plight received national attention when it emerged that he was living in a public toilet. Sadly, he was found dead in a laneway in Ennis at the weekend. His plight and that of his friend, Mr. Baram, received attention last month after Judge Durcan described the fact that they were sleeping in a public toilet as “a scandal”. In the aftermath of Mr. Pavelka’s appearance at the District Court, the housing agencies sourced emergency accommodation for him at a hostel in Galway. However, he returned to Ennis where he tragically died in a laneway. In the light of what has happened, Clare County Council needs to review its housing strategy and, in particular, provide an outreach service for homeless persons in that county.

The legislative framework also provides a more developed legislative basis for the provision of rented social housing by means of leasing or contract arrangements with private accommodation providers and expanded opportunities for home ownership for low-income households through an incremental purchase scheme and a tenant purchase scheme for apartments. This is long overdue. Local authorities provide housing accommodation through the rental accommodation scheme, RAS. Dublin City Council has used this scheme to a considerable extent, as it provides a housing solution for many families. It has come to my attention that some of the RAS housing units do not meet the mandatory standards for rented accommodation and the same problem applies to some housing in the private rented sector. Many families who call to my advice centres describe defects in their rented accommodation which include inadequate heating systems, the lack of insulation and dampness. If public funds are being paid to the private rented sector, either through rent supplement or under the RAS, the accommodation being subvented must comply with the standards set for rented housing accommodation. I ask the Minister of State to look into this matter.

I raise the matter of the review of the housing lists carried out by the local authorities during which applicants are asked to return a form stating they are in need of housing and wish to remain on the local authority housing list. In my experience, some families on the housing list fall off it during this review process when they find out Dublin City Council is telling them that they must reapply from scratch for housing, as they did not return the housing revision form. There are genuine reasons people should not be forced to forfeit the points accumulated while on the housing list when this happens. Some applicants will say truthfully that they simply did not receive the form in the post in the first place or that they posted it to Dublin City Council which did not receive it. I have dealt with cases in which housing applicants in receipt of rent supplement continuously over the length of time in question from Dublin City Council were removed from the list. Housing applicants who are tenants in private rented accommodation and in receipt of rent supplement regularly move from one rented dwelling to another for a variety of reasons. I ask the Minister of State to look at this problem which is not unique to Dublin City Council, whereby people are removed from housing lists and forfeit the points they have accumulated.

The differential rents charged to social housing tenants by Fingal County Council in my constituency compare well with those charged by other urban county councils, according to that local authority. My colleague on Fingal County Council, Labour Councillor Peter Coyle, asked the council how its differential rents scheme compared to that in place in other councils. He was told that the Fingal County Council differential rents scheme was similar to others throughout the country in that the rent was based on a proportion of net assessable income of

the principal earner, together with a contribution from each subsidiary earner in the household. Rents under the Fingal County Council differential rents scheme are calculated on a figure of 12% of net household income, with a cap of €40 per week for each subsidiary earner. Of the schemes reviewed throughout the State, 12% is the second lowest rate charged. South Dublin County Council has the lowest rate at 10%, while Dublin City Council has a much higher rate of 15%. Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council charges even more at 16%. Galway County Council operates two rates of 15% and 20% of household income, while Cork County Council charges a rate of 15%.

The different schemes reviewed also show variances with regard to commencement dates, with a commencement date of March in other Dublin local authorities. Others had a commencement date ranging from January to June. One of the changes in the scheme being implemented by Fingal County Council involves the movement of the commencement date from January to the last Saturday in April. This was done to facilitate the annual rent assessment, with the objective of advising tenants of the rent charges before the April starting date and, therefore, assisting them in the management of their rent accounts.

The rent scheme details the manner in which the local authority will determine rent and other charges. Local authority rents are set in accordance with the rent scheme adopted by each housing authority, having regard to the principles laid down by the Department in section 58 of the Housing Act 1996, as amended. The percentage of income varies within and between rent schemes, depending on the terms of the scheme and the particular circumstances of the household concerned. The new legislation for local authorities differs from the existing legislation in a number of respects. The making of a rent scheme is now a reserved function of the housing authority, giving the elected council a role in determining the authority's rental policy. The Minister has clear power to make regulations prescribing the specific matters each housing authority must include in its rent scheme.

I commend the Minister of State with responsibility for housing and planning, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan, for the work she has put into this area. I look forward to working further with her on the housing reform agenda.

Deputy Robert Dowds: I fully support the Minister of State, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan, in her work to achieve harmonisation of local authority rents across geographical areas. I also support her determination to continue the system, whereby rent is determined as a proportion of a tenant's income. It is good that local democracy will, in this small way, be strengthened if county councils have the power to set rent levels. One aspect we need to watch is the need for local authorities to ensure tenants avoid running up large rent arrears. I am aware the Minister of State and the Minister for Social Protection are very much aware of the need to tackle this issue.

To address the housing issue more generally, the Government has been left with a hugely difficult housing problem. There are many critical problems in housing provision. Last week I listened to Deputy Michael Healy-Rae as he got into a big lather about how badly the Government was dealing with the issue. One would swear he and his family had nothing to do with the Fianna Fáil approach during the 14-year period from 1997 to 2011 when it held power. Many of the problems being confronted in the provision of social housing stem from the fact that those Fianna Fáil Governments essentially left it to the private rented sector to provide for most of those on the housing list. This directly led to a situation where 100,000 families are on the housing list. In my own area, south Dublin, 10,500 families are on the housing list. We must face up to the growing problem in housing provision, especially in the capital and other major

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urban centres. To highlight this problem, the website *www.daft.ie* shows that as of today only 2,300 properties are available for rent in Dublin.

An increasing trend in recent years is of private landlords not being willing to accept rent allowance tenants. Ten days ago I spoke to one auctioneer who said none of his client landlords wanted to take people from the social housing list who would be receiving rent allowance, in part because of the bureaucratic hoops they would have to jump through with the local authorities and also because it was much simpler to deal with people who were working when renting property. I was very struck by that conversation. He was saying the landlords dealing with him did not want to have to deal with the county council.

Another related issue which must be addressed is that of the rental accommodation scheme, RAS. One needs to be unemployed to be placed on the RAS in the first place. There is, therefore, a case to be made for the scheme to be broadened. There is also a problem in that estate agents such as the one to whom I referred tend to run from a mile from the RAS as landlords want to be able to vet their tenants to ensure they have good and reliable tenants. This obviously conflicts with the traditional system of being placed on the list for a time period, which councils have understandably used. Some tweaking of these arrangements is needed. More generally, delays in processing housing requests mean tenants are losing out on houses.

Last week Deputy Pascal Donohoe referred to the substandard nature of some private rented housing. Part of the reason for this may be that landlords are in negative equity, but it is a scandal that needs to be addressed.

There are several anomalies within the rent allowance system which I hope will be addressed. For example, the level of payment is not sufficient in Dublin which, as others have mentioned, is leading to under the counter payments, which put great pressure on tenants. There are also anomalies in the allowance being granted. For example, in the Clondalkin area in my constituency one or two adults and a child are entitled to €875 per month, but when the child turns 18 years, this amount drops to €600 per month, even if he or she continues to reside with the parents. Another issue is that the rent for even modest three-bedroom accommodation is significantly more than the €875 per month, while bedsits cannot be found for the sum of €475 on offer for them. In Clondalkin the asking price for a one-bedroom unit is between €600 to €650. Therefore, rent supplement is not covering the cost and is creating problems as a result.

I know the Minister of State has sympathy for this idea because it is traditional Labour Party policy to have a house building programme. Alternatively, vacant buildings could be taken over, preferably by county councils, because it would mean they would build a body of housing that they could rent to tenants on the housing list. There is also a need for a significant retrofit or upgrade of accommodation. I hope that if moneys become available from whatever source, be it from the European Union or money we can provide ourselves, some of it will be directed in these directions. One of the advantages of county councils having more housing units available than housing organisations is that it would provide for more local control over housing provision.

I ask the Minister of State to clarify what the position on the possibility of EU investment and getting money through the European Investment Bank which could be directed down this route. Overall, we need to get away from the situation allowed by Fianna Fáil Governments where private landlords looked after people on the housing list. We need a national housing strategy to work out an inventory of how many social houses are needed. I support the Bill.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Thomas P. Broughan): Deputies Catherine Murphy and Clare Daly are sharing time.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Bill, of which I am generally supportive. I have two queries and would welcome it if the Minister of State addressed them. They relate to changes being made to section 6(b) and (e) of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009. I cannot find an explanation of the intended consequences and would welcome it if the Minister of State addressed them.

Rents are one aspect of the problem. Very few of us are staying with the Bill, but the area of housing dominates much of our work as public representatives because there is such a crisis which manifests itself in a range of ways. A review of the housing waiting list is taking place, but there are 97,000 individuals or families on the waiting list, a considerable number of whom are in receipt of rent assistance. There are poverty traps in the system. If people find a job, it is often difficult to see how the provisions sit with the job activation measures run by another Department.

The housing waiting list problem is not the same throughout the country. I had put figures together in parliamentary questions. A total of 43% of all housing applicants are located in six areas: Dublin city, south Dublin, Cork city, Cork county, Kildare and Fingal. The six areas with the lowest percentage are Leitrim, Roscommon, Longford, Laois, Cavan and Sligo which account for a figure of 3%. Therefore, the picture is not the same nationally and there may be different responses in some parts of the country. There are about 7,000 individuals or families on the waiting list in my county and there is a real difficulty with the rent cap limits. The position in south Dublin has been mentioned. The rent caps in Kildare are €200 lower on a *pro-rata* basis. When one looks at major companies such as Hewlett-Packard and Intel and the National University of Ireland, Maynooth where a considerable amount of student accommodation is required, these rent caps almost seem like an attempt to cleanse the area of people receiving rent assistance. I have seen families who have lived in the area all of their lives and have an attachment to it having to take their children out of school and move further away. Taking their names off the list and moving to the counties mentioned where the waiting lists are smaller is not an option because they would have to start from scratch. There is a real problem with moving people away from their families and where they have connections and supports.

Differential rents are designed to ensure there will be a fair ratio between rent and income. I can find very few people in my area who are not topping up. People just call it topping up and do it under the counter. If they tell the Department of Social Protection that they are topping up, they will be told to move. They are ending up in the MABS and not paying their ESB bill and possibly not putting food on the table. It has become a major problem, one I have raised with the Minister for Social Protection for the past year. It must be addressed.

In respect of the RAS, it takes more than six months for housing to become available in the system. I find it incredible that one receives a lot more in Kildare if one enters the RAS than one would in receipt of rent assistance. I spoke to a man recently who had leased his apartment for 15 years under the RAS. In the 15 years he will be paid the equivalent of what the apartment is worth by the State and will still own the apartment at the end of it. It is crazy; one cannot rationalise it. I understand why it is happening - bailing out the banks and paying the bondholders have reduced our ability to tackle debt levels and that there is a Government debt level ratio that must be maintained, but there are false economics and I would be surprised if the Minister of State disagreed with me. Landlords do not want to engage with the RAS because it takes too

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long. The only way I see houses under the RAS coming into the system is if landlords match a tenant to whom they would like to rent their house. I also note that nearly all of the time of staff in the council is taken up in maintaining existing RAS houses and that getting additional houses into the system is time-consuming. The fact that staff numbers in local authorities are being cut also presents a difficulty. Local authorities are hesitant in taking on obligations when there may be a change in the system. There is an urgent need for certainty.

The shared ownership scheme will become a problem because people will not be able to buy out the other portion of their shared ownership loan. Some of these are 50-year loans and very often people took them out in their late thirties. They will have reached retirement age before the second part of the equity is supposed to be bought out, but nobody will give a mortgage to someone where the house is worth less than when it was bought. That is a problem with differential rents coming down the tracks. There will be a serious problem not too far into the future.

A tiny number of mortgage-to-rent properties are coming into the system, but a bigger take-up would place a demand on the Revenue budget. The number of repossessions will increase. Therefore, a policy to deal with repossessions must be devised.

Like Deputy Robert Dowds, I asked auctioneers in my area why they were not taking RAS houses. In the main, they complained about the bureaucracy involved. They do not wish to deal with rent assistance tenants because it may take months before the application is granted. It is common in the outer reaches of my constituency, rather than in urban areas. I took photographs of the notices in the windows of auctioneers' premises which show that they are screaming for houses to rent. In a strong rental market the people who will do least well are those in receipt of rent assistance and subject to a cap on their assistance payments.

I may have strayed miles from the subject of the Bill, but we need to get to grips urgently with this problem. There are different solutions for different parts of the country. Everyone on a housing list will require some form of accommodation, but there is a real crisis in urban centres and people are paying a very heavy price for the uncertainty when trying to put a roof over their head.

7 o'clock

Deputy Clare Daly: I wish to make some brief points from a couple of standpoints. It is necessary to consider the interest of the tenant and of the local authority and also the overall situation in the real-world rental market.

Other Deputies are correct in highlighting the current situation. I refer to the recent report in the media about the rise in private rents which has vindicated what all of us knew and have been saying for a long time. The banks are not lending money for new mortgages so it is inevitable that rents in the private rental sector are rising. The figures are quite stark. The average rent for any property in the State is €815 per month. The gap between the urban and rural areas which has been highlighted by other Deputies, has been growing steadily over the past number of years. There is now a serious disconnection in our system and for which ordinary tenants are paying the price. I will not list the rents and maximum permitted rents in the various local authority areas. Suffice to say that it is only in the four Dublin local authority areas that an amount over the average house price is allowed for which is for the biggest three-bedroom house type. The figures allowed in other parts of the country are falling well short. I will not repeat the points, only to say that this is the cause of significant financial and emotional stress

for many families. There are many cases where people have fought to get private rented accommodation in their area but they have been unable to meet the demands from the Department of Social Protection to have that rent lowered. They are then forced to move out of the area which results in a disconnection of other aspects of family life. For example, a lone parent of a child with special needs may have to remove the child from the local school because staying in the area is not a reality. There is a disconnect between different Departments and this is having a significant impact on people who are renting.

What is happening in the private rented sector feeds into the Minister's overall housing policy. Clearly this Bill is a step in that process of handing over the management of rent supplement to the local authority. We have to take this into account. There are positive aspects to that move. It is a good thing that local authorities would be charged with the management of all housing accommodation. However, there are also significant dangers if sufficient resources are not provided. It also reflects a moving away from the idea of direct provision towards housing support which, in my view, is not adequate. We have already highlighted that the supports have been inadequate. People are moving from secure, relatively permanent, decent accommodation into much more flexible, transient and less regulated accommodation with far less security of tenure. That is a difficulty which needs to be examined. Against that backdrop, those who have a council house and who are the beneficiaries of this Bill are the lucky ones. The differential rents system, whereby one's rent is linked to ability to pay, is a good system which should be protected. However, in recent times the increases in local authority rents is a concern. I have no doubt that the Department will deny it but the word on the street in the local authorities is the reason for the rent hike is to cover the demands being put on local authorities for the new home tax which they need to recoup elsewhere. They are already grappling with tenants who have large enough volumes of arrears. We need to be cognisant that an increase in rent will not help that situation. We need to factor in the issue of the impact on the maintenance of housing stock of other cutbacks at national level. This scheme proposes a streamlining of local authority rents around the country. This is welcome, as is the plan to fix those rents at 12% to 15% of income. Allowing councillors a flexibility in deciding those amounts is a very good proposal. We have long argued that the removal of powers from councillors has been a retrograde step. It is essential that more power be devolved to local authorities. I would prefer to see it go further. We have to dig deeper.

If councils are to have the power to set rents at these levels and to impose increases then this must be considered in the context of the overall management of housing stock and the anomalies that have arisen. I refer to Fingal County Council, the one I know best. It currently charges tenants €3 a week for boiler maintenance, amounting to €150 a year on top of rent. I do not pay that much; it is an astronomical price for boiler maintenance. The council says it has no option. Local authorities cannot absorb the price of repairs because their central budgets have been cut. Many local authority houses have windows and doors in poor condition. It annoys the tenants of such houses to see vacant houses being refurbished with new windows, doors and insulation to create energy-efficient houses for new tenants. The loyal tenant who may have been a tenant of the local authority for years will ask, "What about me?"

We need joined-up policies. Last Friday, the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, Deputy Rabbitte, launched something - I am not sure what he was launching because he seems to launch something every day of the week. He issued a few press releases to argue correctly that energy-efficient homes are the long-term solution to fuel poverty. What about our housing stock? The windows are draughty and people are spending more just to

keep themselves warm because local authorities are not being adequately funded to bring those houses up to standard. These things feed into the overall change proposed to local authority powers to set and streamline rents. There are very big differences. For example, in relation to local authority dwellings that have been taken over but are being run by management companies, the tenant not only pays rent to the local authority but also pays a €10 or €15 management fee. For someone on a social welfare income, it is a highly onerous demand. In discussing changes in this area, we must examine the larger picture. There is no point in providing local authorities with the power to increase rents if it means it will drive someone over the edge. The only result, apart from the stress on the person, will be an increase in arrears. I would like to see how this fits in with the whole area of incentives or initiatives to bring housing stock up to an adequate standard to meet the new regulations. What will happen where a tenant is in a position to improve the state of a house and would like to invest in it? Can we link the rent system with an ability to improve the housing stock for the benefit of everybody?

There is nothing hugely wrong with the Bill. I have some questions about the move to an over-reliance on support as opposed to direct provision, which has stood the test of time and been a desirable mechanism for providing people with a stake in their communities. There are a great many unwilling landlords who bought homes they cannot afford to live in and are now renting out. They would get rid of them if they could but, because of negative equity, they are afraid of the debt they will have if they walk away. Presumably, the State could do some deal with the banks to take over those units while writing off the debts of the owners to allow us to improve the housing stock and create security of tenure. There is an overemphasis and reliance on the private market.

Deputy Ann Phelan: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on this important Bill. While the sole purpose of the Bill is to make technical changes to the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009, it is none the less very important. It is a short, technical Bill that is required to ease the path of legislation which has already been enacted. I will try not to raise issues already raised by other Deputies. There is a desire on all sides of the House to solve the issues we face. I do not envy the Minister of State her post. She has inherited legacy issues from the overhang of the Celtic tiger era which will be difficult to sort out. A certain amount of realism must be brought to bear in the debate. Those of us who came to the House after cutting our teeth in local authorities know how important housing issues are. As a Labour Party Deputy, I would like to see the Government maintain direct provision, which, as other Deputies have said, has stood the test of time. Something went hugely wrong during the Celtic tiger era, particularly, if memory serves me, in 2004 with the watering down of the provisions of Part V of the Planning and Development Act. Martin Cullen was the Minister with responsibility at the time. That was when we started on the slippery slope to where we have ended up today, with a significant housing crisis.

I welcome the fact that the Bill will transfer powers from local authority management to elected representatives, which will serve us very well. Many people nationally find themselves in serious economic difficulty and the Bill will phase in changes over a period of three years. There will be a bedding-in period to ensure that those affected do not suffer undue hardship while the transition is being made and the rental scheme is being harmonised. There is no doubt that we face a crisis in this sector. Housing lists far exceed the amount of housing available to meet demand. Nevertheless, I have noticed that there are a huge number of unoccupied houses in places where people do not want to live. Housing lists are extremely lengthy and we do not appear to be able to match up the people with the houses or the areas. There is a great deal go-

ing on and I do not envy the Minister of State her task of solving the problems we face. Due to the crisis, we must be creative. It makes me angry to think of the mess we have been left in as a direct consequence of greed and in some cases, though I am loath to say it, pure stupidity. One cannot build houses in the middle of nowhere and expect people to flock to them when there is no local chemist, school, doctor or shop. The mind boggles at the idea that communities would develop in these areas.

The last Administration sat idly back as developers dictated where houses were to be built. I do not want to see us relying on the private sector. I want to see us revert to direct provision at some stage. However, if we are to change to a warts-and-all model of private sector provision, which is not something I want to see, we must build houses based on housing needs assessments. Not doing so was one of the reasons we got ourselves into such a mess. We need good, clear data which dictates where needs are and we must build only where a need has been identified. The data must be accurate and in black and white. In my constituency of Carlow-Kilkenny, I see on an almost daily basis the problems associated with a lack of appropriate housing, particularly in rural areas, including Borris, Leighlinbridge, Paulstown, Gowran and my own town of Graiguenamanagh. There are no houses available for rent in those places because the houses do not exist.

Security of tenure is of great importance. If people are going to go to the private sector, we must provide for security of tenure as they do on the Continent, where 99-year leases which can be passed on to one's children are available. Leases of five, ten or 15 years will not make for good communities.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: The Bill amends section 31 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009, which makes provisions with regard to the rents systems and charges of housing authorities, so that they can be brought into operation in an effective sequence. The Bill proposes the deletion of wording in section 31 which conflicts with a rent system in which charges are determined on the basis of household composition, income and, where applicable, the cost of the facilities provided. The Bill will provide for the effective implementation of a new, harmonised local authority rent system from 1 January 2014 and pave the way for a new housing payment scheme whereby responsibility for the rent supplement scheme will be transferred from the Department of Social Protection to local authorities.

Responsibility for setting local authority rents has been devolved to city and county managers since 1986, with the result that there is wide variation across the country in rent levels and the method of their calculation for broadly similar assets funded wholly by the Exchequer. Every effort will be made in prescribing base and differential rent calculations to limit the increase or reduction in rental incomes that many local authorities will inevitably experience when rents are harmonised. In particular, the regulations will allow for a transition period for households whose rent increases significantly under the new scheme and other households of differing compositions and income will be charged at a lower rent. The making of a rent scheme is now a reserve function of housing authorities, giving the elected council a role in determining the authority's rent policy. Further legislation, relating to the new housing assistance payment scheme and other issues, will be published later this year.

Not a day passes without me being contacted by families from my constituency of Louth and east Meath looking for houses from local authorities. The main trouble involves upgrading. A family may have been granted a house four or five years ago when it had only one child, but there may now be two or three children. The family needs more space and a bigger house.

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There is a shortage of two-bedroom houses in the constituency of Louth and the best way to combat it is to upgrade. Young families with one child must wait a very long time because of the shortage of two-bedroom houses. They are not entitled to three-bedroom houses so they must wait for two-bedroom houses to become available.

Deputy Anthony Lawlor: Having spent a number of years on a local authority, I welcome this Bill. Any power being divested to council members is always welcome. For some strange reason, local authority members never seem to use the powers they have or reflect on the powers they use. We seem to be fearful of using the powers we have. Local authority members may be scared they will not have the pothole down the road filled if they start to give out to the county manager and use the powers as they are entitled to. I welcome the fact that this Bill is giving more power to local authority members. Previous Administrations used to centralise power compared to what we are doing in this Bill.

There is a problem in certain areas of north Kildare with regard to rents. Kildare is taken as a whole county and calculations for rent supplement are based on what is perceived as the rental value in the whole county. However, in certain parts, particularly in the northern end which is mostly in my constituency, rents have been forced upwards in areas like Celbridge, Leixlip, Maynooth and Naas, particularly since the announcement of the Kerry Group coming to the area. As a result, rent supplement does not match the requirement on the ground. The idea of divesting that power from the Department of Social Protection to the local authority should be taken on board. The local authority should have some say on rent supplement. People are starting to move to Athy because rents are so much lower and rent supplement, which is applicable to the entire county, can be used for it. People cannot get the same kind of property in the northern end of the county. Divesting this power to local authorities would give them some say in the matter.

A problem mentioned by other Members is boarded up stock in local authority areas. It is a shame considering the number of people on the housing list. If we send a letter to each of the county managers or through the County and City Managers Association, perhaps it will put pressure on them to do something about it. We see boarded up stock in local authority estates and rural areas.

Another problem concerns Part V of the Planning and Development Act. I voted against it on my local authority and I have been a vociferous critic of it. I could see what some local authorities were trying to do with the 20% social and affordable housing provision. Some local authorities used to negotiate with landowners on the zoning of land on the basis that if they were given 20% of the land it could be used for a school site, playgrounds, recreation fields and a building for small businesses. Instead, the Part V social and affordable housing provision meant only houses could be built on this land and made available to the local authority. This provision was supposed to solve the problems by getting people off the housing list but the list has expanded rapidly since then. It is a failed policy of a previous Administration. Perhaps the Minister of State will examine it and get the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Hogan, to think about introducing an amendment to the planning Acts to remove the provision. Local authorities should be allowed to build houses on land. As a work in practice, it has failed utterly. People are trying to pay back the loans they received from the local authority when they received a house under the Part V provision. Some people have not been housed because of the lack of housing stock. Since the crash in 2008, virtually no houses have been built so no additional housing stock has been built as a result of Part V. Perhaps the Minister of State can take these points on board. I welcome the Bill and anything

that gives power back to local authorities is always welcome. Councillors should have more of a say in what they need locally.

Deputy Joe Carey: I welcome this technical Bill. The main objective of the Bill is to enable local authorities to draw up rental schemes as a reserve function. I concur with Deputy Lawlor that any occasion of central Government giving more power to local authority members is welcome. I am a former member of Clare County Council and its strategic policy committee on housing. I see the merit in the proposal.

Local authorities are key providers of housing and various housing supports and schemes. Housing is of fundamental importance to each individual in the State. The Bill will bring about greater transparency to the system by which rents are calculated. As it stands, there is a wide variation in the rents charged by local authorities. This Bill will bring about standardisation in the system and allow a certain level of discretion required for local authorities in setting rent parameters in the area. Legislation will be published later this year to facilitate the transfer of responsibility for the administration of rent supplement to local authorities. This change is welcome as local authorities are key agents in assessing housing applicants and knowing their needs. It makes sense to transfer the function to local authorities.

On a daily basis, my office is in touch with Clare County Council and the county's various town councils in respect of housing matters. I express my thanks to the hard-working staff of various housing sections. I have always found them helpful. A question that has risen over the past number of years concerns the processing of housing improvement grants by Clare County Council, namely, the housing adaption grant for people with a disability, the mobility aids housing grant scheme and the housing adaption grant for new houses. Unfortunately, access to these vital grants has been restricted to individuals experiencing exceptional health issues. The Department provides two thirds of the funding for each of the grants and the local authority, Clare County Council, provides one third. There is a problem in trying to get access to these vital grants that help people with their quality of life. There is a major backlog in County Clare.

Debate adjourned.

Fodder Crisis: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I move:

“That Dáil Éireann:

calls on the Government to make adequate financial supports available to assist those who cannot afford to feed their stock and also to transport fodder to this country from abroad;

fully recognises the major role agriculture plays in creating employment, generating economic activity and acting as a custodian of the countryside in Ireland;

appreciates the unique vulnerability and exposure of agriculture to fluctuations in the weather and food markets;

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records the ongoing hardship inflicted upon farming communities across Ireland due to the fodder crisis that has been evident in the country since last July and the sacrifices farming families have made to protect their livestock;

acknowledges the devastating consequences that the aftermath of the fodder crisis will have on countless farms and the pressing need for the Government to put in place a structure to address their exceptional circumstances;

criticises the complete and utter failure of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine to address the growing crisis in its early stages in 2012, which has directly led to the devastating impact it is currently having on farming families;

calls on the Government to establish a special unit in the Department to oversee and co-ordinate efforts amongst Government Departments, agencies, co-ops, marts and financial institutions to tackle the crisis and its long-term consequences;

further calls on the Government to empower this special unit to keep fodder and credit supplies under review with fail-safe measures to ensure that such a crisis does not emerge again; and

exhorts the financial institutions and the Department to reach a sustained agreement to ensure an adequate supply of credit to farmers during times of acute supply and market pressures.”

With the permission of the Chair, I wish to share time with Deputies Kirk, Dooley, Cowen and Brown.

Ba mhaith liom an rún seo a mholadh, rún atá thar a bheith tábhachtach mar go bhfuil géarchéim feirmeoireachta sa tír. Is géarchéim í seo a mhairfeas go ceann tamaill, mar tá an éigeandáil seo tar éis cur as do fheirmeoirí ar go leor bealaí éagsúla.

On 28 March, I raised this as an issue on behalf of Fianna Fáil on Leaders' Questions. In reply, all the Tánaiste could offer at the time was that the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy Coveney, had “written to the banks to highlight the extreme challenges facing farmers”, asked Teagasc to give “specific weather-related advice”, and asked farmers to share surplus fodder amongst each other. All of those are worthy, but it did not in any way tackle the crisis.

When I pursued the Government, asking, “Does the Tánaiste believe that advice will feed the cattle?”, and when I outlined the importance of the issue of affordability and availability of feed to the Tánaiste, the reply I received was, “Deputy Ó Cuív’s difficulty with the issue of feed for livestock is that the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy Coveney, is already ahead of him and has already responded to the matter.” The Minister’s response was - nothing - to tell the banks to give more credit to farmers who have extended their credit to its limit and tell farmers get advice as to where one would get non-existent fodder.

The Tánaiste further stated, “The IFA has also called on farmers to “take stock of what fodder they have at this stage, and if they have some surplus, they should make it available to their fellow farmers who are in short supply”, and “That is the position the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine has taken.” It was weeks after that before the Minister, Deputy Coveney, realised that there was not enough fodder in the country and that something urgent needed to

be done.

I welcome the belated attempts he has made to deal with this issue. It is a serious issue that has significant consequences for farmers in their daily lives. There are farmers who have been driven literally to desperation, one of whom I know in the Deputy's own county-----

Deputy Tom Hayes: Which Deputy?

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: -----because of the pressure that has been placed on the farmer by his inability to either source or afford feed. The reality is that at last some help has been made available, but much more needs to be done.

There are both short-term and long-term measures the Minister needs to take because, whereas the immediate crisis if the weather holds up for the next few weeks will solve itself, as the Minister will be aware, we already face a challenge because many farmers have not been able to close fields as they would otherwise have done to preserve them for silage making and, therefore, we face a challenge coming into the autumn because farmers are potentially starting with every shed in the country empty and also with many fields that would have been producing early crops of silage being a number of weeks behind. This means we need proper planning on this occasion. This was foreseeable from last summer. When there was a very wet summer, many farmers failed to get the silage out of the fields and it was obvious a long way back that if this was followed by a cold winter stretching into May, it would have a significant effect on the farming community.

Unfortunately, I will not have enough time to make all the points I would like heard tonight and I want to address myself to a number of specific issues that at this stage the Minister could deal with.

The first action I hope the Minister takes tonight is to give a clear commitment that the transport scheme that has been made available by him will continue after 10 May, which is Friday next. I am aware of co-operatives which are already planning beyond Friday next and which know they will have a requirement for fodder beyond that day because in some parts of the country the fodder shortage will go on longer than in others. I ask that he will also undertake here to make whatever financial resources available to deal with the issue and to ensure the transport scheme will be funded as long as it is needed.

I compliment the IFA for its assistance in this issue. I also compliment the flexible way the various co-operatives have worked with the scheme. I particularly thank good friends of mine in Connacht Gold over many years who, once again, teamed up with the local co-operative, CDS Teoranta in Corr na Móna, and have been making feed available because we do not have any dairying in Connemara, a point that seems to have passed the Minister.

Deputy Simon Coveney: It has not passed the Minister.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Thanks to the flexibility of CDS Teoranta and Connacht Gold, we have been able to reach areas which we would not have been able to reach otherwise under the Minister's scheme.

Channelling funding through the district veterinary officers, DVOs, for those who cannot afford feed is not dealing well with the problem. Many farmers are out of money and have no way of buying feed, but they are afraid that if they go to the district veterinary officer and bring

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in Department officials, they will compound rather than solve their problem. I note the hardship. Like anybody who is dealing with farmers, who is listening to farmers and listening to those dealing directly with farmers-----

Deputy Tom Hayes: Deputy Ó Cuív is not listening to them after that statement.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Maybe Deputy Tom Hayes' farmers are different to mine.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Ó Cuív has the floor.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: As I stated, it would have been much better to direct that funding through Teagasc which could have undertaken its assessments but which would not have the same connotations for many farmers as involving the veterinary offices. I mean no disrespect to the veterinary offices, but as we all know, many people are suspicious about what I describe. Deputy Tom Hayes may shake his head, but we all know the general reaction when departmental officials wander over farms to carry out inspections. I refer, in particular, to the reaction of farmers who, perhaps for financial reasons, might not have been able to keep their stock in perfect order. The approach in this regard could have been better.

It is important for the Minister to issue the AEOS 1, AEOS 2 and REPS payments. In the counter motion the Government boasts about what it is doing. The payments should have been made ages ago. No reference is made to REPS 4 payments. As the Minister knows, there are many to be made. If he does not know, he should because everybody else in agriculture knows that while the REPS 4 payments were cleared in Johnstown Castle, farmers are being told they will have to wait two or three weeks because of some glitch in the payments section in the Department. I do not understand why, in the middle of a crisis, the Department cannot issue the payments. Farmers who ring the Minister's Department are told they will have to hang on for three or four weeks for the REPS 4 payments, even though they have been cleared. It is important that the Minister clarify when the affected farmers will receive their payments. Ultimately, the promise of a payment never paid the bank manager. The only thing the bank manager accepts is the actual payment up-front.

If there is a cold spring next year, it is important that there be a proper plan in place to deal with a crisis. Owing to the very late spring this year and because no feed is held over in sheds, as used to be the practice of many farmers, there is no feed in the country. Any farmer who had feed sold it and made it available. Therefore, we need to ensure this crisis does not recur.

I have two final suggestions. The first is that the Minister reverse the decision on stocking density requirements under the disadvantaged areas scheme this year. Every farmer must use his or her land and, under the rules of cross-compliance, cannot obtain the single farm payment unless it is kept in good agricultural and environmental condition. It is ridiculous to force ever higher stocking densities this year, a year in which every ounce of surplus grass is likely to be needed. It would be very simple for the Minister to address this. It was a purely Irish decision to increase stocking densities. The Minister should return to the previous stocking densities and ensure farmers with certain grazing patterns will not have to buy in stock. It is time we recognised that grass, be it silage or hay, is a crop in itself and that it is as valid a crop for feeding cattle as barley, for example.

My final point is that late every autumn, after payments have started, the Department raises queries about certain farmers' applications. In many cases, these farmers are not paid until much later than the rest of farmers. In many cases, it is the vulnerable who are affected. I refer

to those who may be prone to a small error here or there.

I understand the Minister's position. Perhaps he might confirm that there is a limit to what he can do in bringing payments forward because of EU regulations. Many have asked me to ask him to bring forward payments such as the disadvantaged areas scheme payment and the single farm payment, but I understand he cannot legally do so because there is a European regulation that has to be honoured and that the payments can only be made on a certain date. However, under Ireland's Presidency, it is important that the Minister bring forward the date in the autumn as much as possible in view of the circumstances that arise. Since the applications are being made this month, we should use the months of June, July, August and September to check every file. If there are queries about files, they should be raised in this period, not when the farmer expects to receive the payment. When the payment is expected, the farmer rings the Department only to be told it will be writing to him or her the following week about a query about his file. Doing what I propose would be very simple step. It is totally within the gift and capability of the Minister. The suggestions I have made are practical and would make a difference to farmers. No doubt my colleagues will be adding to my suggestions in order that we can ensure that what happened in the spring will not happen again.

Deputy Seamus Kirk: I am glad to have the opportunity to support our spokesman on agriculture, Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív. The fodder crisis has devastated the agriculture industry. At a time when many farmers were planning to expand their dairy, suckler or drystock herds, they found they were hit by a crisis that perhaps did not start three weeks ago but last summer because of the particularly bad weather in that season. Owing to the particularly bad weather, the quality of silage and hay made in the country was poor by comparison with that normally found on farms. This exacerbated the difficulty. There was a long winter and poor quality feed was available for livestock. The condition of livestock was affected because of the poor fodder available. This meant that individual farmers had to feed more concentrates and that the outgoings of farmers, be they dairy farmers involved in liquid milk production or those carrying drystock through the winter, were significantly increased by comparison with previous winters. This has created a very serious financial problem on many farms across the country.

Most agricultural economists believe the industry has potential for development and expansion and that it has the potential to help considerably with the economic recovery of the State. None of us disagrees with this. The industry, by its nature, is capital intensive. It is capital intensive if one is starting with an enterprise, buying land, buying livestock, or developing a farm or farm facilities. In such circumstances, one finds one needs to have a very generous bank manager in one's locality who is prepared to back the individual business plans.

This year we had to import hay from France and fodder from England and other locations. Farmers were particularly glad to have it. We should commend the IFA and the various co-operatives around the country for their initiatives in helping this process.

The reality is that the Minister is faced with a set of circumstances in which individual farmers are in dire financial trouble because of the measures they had to take to acquire fodder. The health of farmers and their families has been affected seriously in many instances because of the stress they have been under throughout an exceptionally long winter. The fertility of breeding stock in the dairy and suckler herds will be seriously affected because of underfeeding and the poor condition of many animals. This will have an impact on the breeding programmes on farms which, in turn, will have implications in the coming year. I know dairy farmers in County Louth and neighbouring counties in the north east who are getting by because they are grazing

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silage ground. The Minister knows about agriculture. He knows that a farmer needs to set aside a certain amount of ground on a farm to cut silage to get through the following winter. The domino effect will soon kick in and farmers will not have sufficient silage to get them through next winter. We do not know what type of weather we can expect between now and July, which is the silage and hay-making period. This will add to the difficulty.

A number of things, apart from the financial initiatives, need to be done. A unit to coordinate the different agencies and initiatives needs to be set up in the Department. Teagasc has a vital role to play in terms of advising individual farmers about how to tackle the issue of volume and quality of silage in the coming year. What will be the implications under the nitrates directive for individual farmers who have to use more urea or nitrogen to increase the volume of silage? Is the Minister prepared to ask the EU to ensure no penalties are imposed on individual farmers who have had to use additional nitrogen to boost the volume and quantity of their silage this year?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy's time has expired.

Deputy Seamus Kirk: I regret I do not have more time. I ask the Minister to respond to the points I have made.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate and compliment my colleague, Deputy Eamon Ó Cuív, on tabling this comprehensive motion. Deputy Ó Cuív has over the past few weeks set out a number of options which he would have liked the Minister to undertake to try to deal with this crisis. The word "crisis" is often over-used in this House and in general discourse. However, I do not think it an exaggeration to say that the current lack of fodder is a crisis. People involved in the knackery business and the statistics in this area indicate that the number of fallen and dead animals this year has surpassed any recorded for the past 30 years. I am not suggesting responsibility for this lies entirely at the Minister's door.

Deputy Simon Coveney: That is not true. The level is the same as for 2009.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: It was clear last summer, given the level of rainfall and poor quality of forage being collected, that a prolonged winter would result in difficulties. In my view neither the Minister nor his Department put any strategy in place for such an eventuality. The skill set in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine for dealing with crises is quite high. It has dealt with BSE, foot and mouth disease and the illegal importation of cattle. The special investigation unit has also been established. It is clear there is a skill set in that Department to deal with crises, forward planning and strategising. To the best of my knowledge, virtually nothing was done in this regard.

Deputy Simon Coveney: To the best of the Deputy's knowledge.

Deputy Pat Deering: The Deputy has been asleep.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I accept that the weather changed and that we have had a prolonged period of cold weather, as a result of which there was no growth, and cattle were not out on the pastures, as they normally would be at this time of year. The snowfall is not the Minister's fault but, coming from a background of and understanding farming, and taking account of the poor level of harvest last year, he should have recognised the need to put a plan in place.

The Minister belatedly put in place a scheme for transportation of fodder, which was welcome but not good enough. The IFA deserves to be complimented-----

Deputy Simon Coveney: The Deputy was not calling for it.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: -----on what it is doing in consultation with Kepak, SuperValu and others. I understand approximately 3,000 tonnes of hay is on the way from France. That is good. In my view, the scheme introduced by the Department needs to be extended to cover cattle marts, other co-ops and private merchants. Why is it limited to a particular number of co-ops?

Deputy Simon Coveney: It is not.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: In my opinion, it is.

Deputy Simon Coveney: The Deputy does not know what he is talking about.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I have spoken to people in the marts who have told me they are not included in the scheme. Perhaps the Minister will clarify the situation.

My colleague raised the issue of stocking density in disadvantaged areas, which is an issue with which I am familiar. People are being forced to keep a Connemara pony or donkey in order to reach targets. The Department should encourage them to save some fodder which they can sell rather than penalise them at the back end for not having had the stocking density over the required period. This would go some way towards recognising that there will be difficulties next year. The Minister knows that meadows that should be closed now are not closed and that cattle will need to be put out when first growth emerges. There will be no extra supply of fodder at the back end of this year.

I ask that the Minister, unlike last year, begin the necessary process now, recognising that there is a potential for a crisis. It is akin to the Minister for Transport, when Fianna Fáil was in power, being blamed for a lack of salt during a prolonged period of bad weather. That was not repeated the following year.

Deputy Tom Barry: What about the former Minister for Agriculture and Food who did away with the sugar industry?

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Deputy Barry has a few more things to answer for. I appeal to the Minister, working on the basis that there was a crisis this year and recognising that there will be a shortage next year, to put a strategic group in place to develop a plan to deal with next year's potential crisis. He will then be able to come back to this House and admit he learned something after the horse had bolted or, in this instance, the cow died.

Deputy Barry Cowen: It is widely known that agriculture plays a major role in the Irish economy.

Deputy Pat Deering: Belatedly.

Deputy Barry Cowen: It is widely known that it has played and will play a major role in helping our economy get out of its current difficulties. It is also widely known that the European budget announced yesterday will greatly affect the Irish economy. Listening to the Taoiseach this morning, I concluded that this would perhaps be a negative effect. It is also known

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that Irish agriculture has come out of that process poorly.

Deputy Simon Coveney: That is not true.

Deputy Barry Cowen: The 10% reduction in the budget will have an impact on Irish agriculture. It is a hit Irish agriculture can ill afford.

Deputy Pat Deering: That speech was written last year.

Deputy Barry Cowen: It was not. It is a beating for Irish agriculture that the Government has accepted, a beating not strongly fought against by the Government. Its ultimate effect now depends on the conclusion of CAP reform. Will that CAP reform amount to a cut in single farm payments for all, or will opportunities be taken to ensure that input towards the 2020 targets can be more inclusive of all farm enterprises, big and small? That responsibility passes to the Minister, Deputy Coveney, and will be carefully monitored. We hope and expect a better defence than that given by the Minister's superiors in relation to the overall budget for Europe.

Some weeks ago Deputy Martin raised with the Taoiseach the lack of a cohesive, inclusive and concerted effort by Government to establish a special departmental unit to co-ordinate stakeholders, financial institutions and agencies in response to the crisis. He also asked that a fund be put in place and that financial credit supplies be reviewed. The Taoiseach's response amounted to "Phone a friend". We do not need to repeat the advances that have been made in this country by the agricultural sector over the past number of years, leaving us with a sector which we are all proud to acknowledge is a world leader in many facets of its field.

The Government's resolve in the area of agriculture has been tested twice recently. It can be argued that it failed in the European budget and failed to respond adequately to this crisis over the past number of weeks. The Minister will be aware that farmers have been phoning friends, financial institutions and suppliers but have not been able to avail to any great extent of what was promised. Having raised this issue six to eight weeks ago, Deputy Ó Cuív was forced to table this Private Members' motion to call again on the Government, in the interests of proper planning, to act not only in the interests of the economy at large but obviously in the interests of the agricultural sector and those farmers whose livelihoods have been decimated in recent months and weeks as a result of the lack of planning, despite Government knowing full well about the poor harvest achieved last year owing to the weather and lack of production of hay, silage and so forth. The problem was greatly increased by the continuation of the cold weather into April.

8 o'clock

I ask the Minister not to ignore the motion, to adhere to facets of it that can improve matters into the future and no doubt leave him in a position where by next year he will not be allowed to repeat the mistakes already witnessed by us all in this House.

Deputy John Browne: I support the motion put forward by Deputy Ó Cuív. The tabling of it emphasises the need for the Government to tackle the ongoing fodder crisis.

As many Deputies on this side of the House have said, this crisis was ignored by the Department when it began in 2012. It is now inflicting grievous damage on livestock. There is an urgent need for co-operation between Government agencies, financial institutions and suppliers to help struggling farmers. There is a certain amount of co-operation, but in the current circum-

stances, it does not go far enough. The Minister made available some moneys for transport, which was a good initiative, but many farm organisations and farmer groups have told me that the €1 million made available by the Minister is nowhere near adequate to meet farmers' needs.

I never thought I would see the day there would be there would be a fodder crisis in parts of Wexford. Farmers have contacted me, as I am sure they have contacted Deputies Kehoe and Twomey and the other Oireachtas Members in the county, to point out the situation in parts of County Wexford. I heard a good news story in recent days of Wexford farmers selling bales of silage to farmers in Galway for €15, bearing in mind it costs €20 to produce them. There is an air of generosity among farmers in our area. That is good because it is important that farmers who have fodder would help out farmers in the west and other parts of the country.

The agrifood sector is an important one. The plan for the sector is to increase production massively between now and 2020, which was introduced by the previous Government has been taken on board by the current Government. We are aware of the importance of the cattle industry and the meat plants, a number of which are located in my county, of which the Minister will be aware. Those engaged in the management of them are concerned that because of the scarcity of cattle and lack of breeding, as pointed out by Deputy Kirk, and because some farmers are threatening to get out of the cattle industry, there may not be adequate product to meet their needs for the future. It is important the 300,000 jobs in this area would not be affected by a lack of decisions by the Department.

I was a Minister of State in the Department for a few years. The officials in the Minister's Department adopt a very conservative attitude when it comes to giving out money. They always advise the Minister to spend as little as possible. It is important he would be his own man in the Department and would do what needs to be done to help farmers at this time. He would have to accept that the amount of money he put forward to date will not meet the needs of the farming community. The IFA and other agriculture bodies have made more moneys available than the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. It is good that those bodies are making money available as well. At a time of crisis, the Department cannot carry the full can and it is important that such bodies would contribute. The Minister must increase the funding and the involvement of bodies across the board to ensure a similar situation does not arise again.

I understand that SuperValu has come on board but what about Tesco, Dunnes Stores and the other supermarkets that avail of high quality Irish products from the farming community? They should also come on board in terms of making a contribution. If farmers are not in a position to produce because of the lack of fodder, we will not have many high quality Irish products, which are essential, on the supermarket shelves. Fair play to SuperValu, but many of the other supermarkets should follow suit.

A number of farmers, particularly those living in disadvantaged areas, have asked me if the Minister would bring forward some of the payments that he can bring forward. I accept that some cannot be brought forward, but farmers in disadvantaged areas in particular are suffering severely, and it is important, if possible, for the Minister to make advanced payments as quickly as possible.

On the matter of funding from the banks, I know the Minister has met the banks and they have made promises but usually they make many promises they do not keep. They need to loosen up in terms of access to funds but, more importantly, they need to fast-track decision making. I know of many farmers with a good credit record who have applied for loans in the

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current circumstances and it has taken a month to six weeks for the banks to make decisions on their applications. Farmers need the money from the banks as quickly as possible. I ask the Minister to contact the banks again and ask them to fast-track loan applications from farmers. Some farmers will be refused a loan because of their credit rating or for some other reason, but farmers who have a good credit rating need to have a decision made on their loan applications as quickly as possible.

Another issue that concerns many farmers is that we did not react when this happened in 2012, and it has happened again in 2013. What management plan will the Minister put in place to ensure this crisis does not happen again? The loss of grass growth during recent months will create major problems in 2014. I do not like to be a doomsday person but I think we will have a similar or perhaps a bigger problem in 2014. There is considerable expertise in the Department, in Johnstown Castle and in Teagasc, and surely with the combination of that expertise working with the farm organisations, the merchants and the co-operatives, the Minister can put in place a system that will ensure adequate fodder will be available in 2014. The necessary arrangements need to be made and if the fodder has to be brought in from abroad, so be it, but there should not be a fire-brigade approach to addressing the issue, as happened this year. The fodder that is being brought in is welcome, but future provision of it should be well planned. I hope the Minister is doing that in the Department and that his officials are working not alone on the current situation, which must be dealt with as a priority, but on the situation down the road and how he will deal with problems that may arise in late 2013 early 2014.

Farming community groups have taken action to help farmers grapple with the crisis. The IFA has created a €1 million fund, the Irish Dairy Board has established a €2 million fund for redistribution to dairy farmers, and the co-operatives have taken a lead in sourcing supplies through co-operatives. It is important that the lead given by the farm organisations and the co-operatives would be reciprocated by the Minister and by his Department. The amount of money that the Minister has made available is nowhere near adequate to meet the needs of farmers. I estimate that it needs to be increased tenfold between now and later this year to ensure there is adequate funding available to meet the problems that may arise later in the year.

Farming is an important industry and it is important to the economic future of the country. We all accept that the one area where there has been growth and that has helped to develop the economy during the past 18 months is the farming sector. It would be a disaster if we were to have a lower level of production, less product for meat plants, less products for supermarkets and less products in our country at a time when there are opportunities for farmers in the European and world markets. We must help farmers through this crisis to ensure that they increase, expand and develop for the future, but they will only do that if they get further help and support from the Government.

There are not many disadvantaged areas in Wexford but there are large disadvantaged areas across the country. They need help and prioritisation now. If the Minister can make funds available he should do so without any further delay.

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): I move amendment No. 1:

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

“acknowledges the very difficult situation which has been facing farmers in light of the

fodder shortage caused by unseasonal weather and the resulting delay of grass growth;

notes the fact that efforts have been on-going since last September to alleviate the fodder situation after a poor summer, through Teagasc, the Farm Animal Welfare Advisory Council and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine's Emergency Animal Welfare System and the fact that the delayed spring has unfortunately elevated this issue to a more serious level in recent weeks;

recognises the on-going financial assistance and advice being provided to farmers through the Farm Animal Welfare Advisory Council's early warning system and helpline, which has dealt with approximately 550 calls to date;

notes the introduction of a €1 million Government transport subsidy scheme, which has to date resulted in approximately 600 loads of fodder being imported into the country;

acknowledges that the Government extended this scheme until the 10th of May in consideration of continuing challenges facing farmers;

recognises the significant efforts made by co-ops to source and import fodder, to reduce costs to farmers by providing credit flexibility and interest free credit for fertiliser;

acknowledges the additional initiatives introduced by the farming organisations, the Irish Dairy Board and other organisations to assist farmers in recent days;

notes that the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine and his Department have met and been in regular contact with the banks, co-ops and others in the industry to identify any particular problem areas or difficulties facing farmers as the fodder situation continues;

notes the role being played by the advisory services to date and their on-going advice to farmers in dealing with the provision of adequate fodder stocks for the winter ahead; and

recognises that outstanding farm payments are being processed as quickly as possible to assist farmers in financial difficulty; following the issue of approximately 1,500 Agri-Environmental Options Scheme (AEOS) payments over the last 10 days, close to a further 600 AEOS payments valued at just over €1.3 million are expected to issue within the next week."

I am sharing time with Deputies Kieran O'Donnell, Noel Harrington, Paul J. Connaughton, Tom Hayes and Arthur Spring. I thank the Opposition Deputies for putting down this motion. It gives me an opportunity to outline what is happening and to answer some of the questions they have rightly raised.

There is a total misunderstanding about the level of engagement that has been taking place between my Department, agencies linked to my Department, farming organisations and farmers themselves about the very difficult winter followed by a difficult summer which has become a fodder shortage crisis and which we are managing on that basis. We have been engaging since virtually this time last year with farmers and farming organisations as we had a very difficult summer that was incredibly wet, making it difficult to save hay and silage and that resulted in lower volumes of silage of poorer quality than normal. We knew that and we have been trying to manage that situation throughout the winter. Teagasc advice has focused on that. If the Deputies opposite spoke to farmers on the ground, as I do regularly, they would hear that they have been working through, with their advisers, how to get the best out of their fodder and how

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to add to that, having to pay much more for increased quantities of meal and so on but also how to get the most out of that roughage and protein mix to ensure that they would extend the limited volumes of fodder they had in storage and to maximise its use. That has been taking place throughout the winter.

The Farm Animal Welfare Advisory Council has also worked through the winter with farming organisations such as the Irish Farmers Association and the Irish Creamery Milk Suppliers Association on a county-by-county basis, working with veterinary surgeons to establish the extent of the problem and focus supports as they are needed on a confidential basis with farmers to ensure that people get assistance when they need it. That has been going on. If the Deputies did not know that it was happening they should have. In recent weeks we have been engaged in crisis management. Everybody, including farming organisations and everybody else, expected that we would have some normalisation of weather patterns this spring. That has not happened. Normally grazing would start towards the end of March but that did not happen. The month of March was one of the wettest on record and it was followed by one of the wettest and coldest Aprils on record. We saw fodder running out and we examined how to assist farmers. Instead of just announcing some form of fodder fund for farmers, for which the Opposition Deputies asked, with no detail as to how that might work, who might apply for it and who would be eligible for it we focused public money where it would alleviate the real problems, which is primarily a fodder access problem. That is why we focused public money on subsidising the transport costs to bring feed into Ireland in very large volumes. That has had two results, it has incentivised co-ops to bring in large volumes of feed because we are paying for it and it has made that feed available to farmers when they desperately need it at prices that they can afford, normal prices for hay and haylage and for maize in the case of Glanbia.

Instead of putting together a fund for farmers for which they would have to apply and for which we would have to go through a long assessment procedure and that would probably not result in payments until July or August because of that process, we put together in 48 hours a scheme that could get money to farmers directly to cover the cost of importing fodder which is badly needed. Yes, this has been a crisis and there are farmers who are highly stressed, concerned and worried about where the next bale of hay will come from for their animals. I have said many times that for many farmers not being able to feed their animals is almost as stressful as not being able to feed their children because of their attachment to, and the time they spend with, their herds. We are working not only through dairy co-ops but through other agencies to get fodder into Ireland in very large quantities and it is working. So far we have brought in 730 loads of hay and maize. That is the equivalent of providing feed for 2.2 million animals in terms of days of feed. There will be another 170 loads before the end of this week and more significant volume next week. For the first time ever Ireland is importing large volumes of fodder and grass because of extraordinary weather patterns last summer, a long winter and delayed spring. This is not just a political response, it is a collective response from the industry, farming organisations, co-ops and neighbours to ensure that farmers who desperately need to access fodder are getting it, by and large. If they are really struggling to get it there is a helpline available and we have a system to get fodder to them quickly. That is also working. There is no ceiling on the funds we will spend on that to ensure that animals are fed. There is no reason why animals should starve regardless of credit problems or problems of access to fodder. I encourage farmers to use that helpline. That is what it is for.

I recognise the role of dairy co-ops and other co-ops and marts working through those co-ops to get fodder out to people as quickly as they can. They have done an extraordinary job. In

a very short space of time they have used their logistical expertise to try to solve a short-term crisis problem to get animals fed while waiting for grass growth which has begun. This will be another very wet week which will pose problems, particularly for pockets of the country that are very vulnerable. West Limerick, north Kerry and along the west coast could be badly affected by the banks of rain coming in over the next few days.

I will clarify for the Deputies opposite what we are doing about this fodder scheme. Last week we decided to extend it for an extra week. We are setting deadlines because I want to incentivise the import of large volumes of hay over a short period. I do not want a drip feed through the summer weeks and months as it is needed. Instead, we want a large volume over a short period to kill off this fodder shortage problem early in the summer so that farmers can concentrate on working with their advisers, whether private or Teagasc advisers, or with each other, to manage grazing patterns to try to get cuts of silage in place as well as efficient grazing management to return to some kind of normal grazing season and farmers can benefit from the current strong prices for beef, dairy and other products.

So far we have received 500 or more calls for the emergency animal welfare assistance. A little over 100 of those have been genuine crisis and emergency situations and we have intervened. I am frustrated to hear Deputy Ó Cuív say that we should not do this through district veterinary offices. I challenge him to talk to any one of those 100 farmers who have received assistance from my Department in the past few weeks. It has been sensitive, discreet, confidential and professional. Animals have been fed and there is no consequence for farmers of any kind in the way of inspections or anything else.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I was talking about the perception.

Deputy Simon Coveney: There should be no perception that by telephoning that animal welfare helpline farmers should have anything to fear. They should not. This is a pragmatic response of getting feed to animals that need it, that might otherwise starve. It is working. There is no ceiling on that fund. As it is needed throughout the summer and if it is needed next winter it will still be there.

As regards credit, a fairly regular occurrence in this House is to criticise the banks and the banking system, which is understandable. However, I have spent some time on this matter with the key banks, Ulster Bank, AIB, Bank of Ireland and Rabo, which all maintain to me that they have significant credit available for farmers and want farmers to talk to them about it. However, as I have said repeatedly, if farmers go to their banks about issues relating to this fodder crisis but do not get the response they need, then I need to hear about it. I will then aggressively challenge the banks on this because I have got strong commitments that there are teams of bank staff in place who want to help farmers bridge credit problems between now and the autumn by putting short-term loan facilities in place or increasing overdraft facilities. If one checks Bank of Ireland's books, one will see 65% of farmers have still not maxed out their overdraft facilities. I encourage farmers to challenge the banking system and use it. If it is not working, my Department wants to hear about it.

Deputy John Browne: Yes, but the banks are slow in making decisions.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I am being told they are not on fodder. It might not be the same in the case of other loan facilities for, say, machinery or land. I am told access to credit for fodder is being made available. If it is not, I need to hear about it to follow it up and I will then give

the Deputy the answer to that.

The co-ops are making significant credit available. Glanbia, for example, has made an extra €15 million available to their farmers while Dairygold, Connacht Gold, Lakeland, Kerry and others have similar arrangements in place. It is in their interest that farmers feed their animals and spend money on getting fertiliser out to be used this month.

Farm inspections are a sensitive issue for farmers and farming organisations. We have spoken to our inspectors and they are being much more cautious and sensitive in how they treat farmers at the moment. It is recognised people are under stress but we cannot simply stop inspections. That is not a practical or sensible suggestion because it will have knock-on consequences for disallowances and European auditing.

In the past two weeks, we have made payments to over 1,500 farmers in the agri-environment options scheme, AEOS. Many of them have been difficult cases that have been delayed for reasons that needed time to sort out. We will be making another 600 payments in the next week. This all amounts to €3 million in AEOS payments in less than three weeks. Payments have been fast-tracked.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: What about REPS 4 payments? Will the Minister come back to me on this?

Deputy Simon Coveney: We are trying to fast-track all payments that are due.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: What about REPS 4 payments? There seems to be a hold-up in REPS payments in the Department. I have had many farmers on to me about this over the weekend.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I will look into it. Payments, however, will only be delayed if there is a good reason to do so.

Deputy Seamus Kirk: What about the issues I raised concerning breeding stock fertility levels and the implications for the nitrates directive?

Deputy Simon Coveney: There are serious management challenges with the management of last winter and the management of the current crisis. We now must manage to ensure we minimise the likelihood of this happening again. We are addressing issues concerning medium-term planning through the farming organisations and Teagasc, as well as getting support from the co-ops. Many of the co-ops are making interest-free funds available to farmers to buy fertiliser for May and they may extend these beyond should it be necessary. The accusation that we need to set up a task force in the middle of this while we are managing it effectively, given the challenges that exist, is nonsense. There is essentially a task force already in place in my Department which works across the Department and the agencies involved.

We are doing everything we can to intervene where there are extreme situations. I encourage farmers to use the freephone number, 1850-211990. We are continuing to import and subsidise fodder. We will not extend the date beyond this Friday. Instead, any fodder importer, mainly the co-ops, which has proof of purchase of fodder before this Friday can continue to bring it into the country into next week and the week after. I want to keep the pressure on to get as much fodder purchased and imported into Ireland as quickly as possible so as not have a drip-feed management through the summer. We have been in consultation on this with the

co-ops and the farming organisations which understand this point about keeping the pressure on getting as much fodder purchased and brought into Ireland as quickly as possible. This is the reasoning behind keeping deadlines intact.

Deputy Noel Harrington: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on this motion. The crisis that hit our agricultural sector was extremely difficult for many farmers. It was clear that certain areas were particularly badly hit including parts of west Cork, north Cork, west Limerick, north Kerry and other counties. Equally, other areas were better insulated and did not feel the effects of the shortage until later on in the crisis. It is also evident some farmers were more vulnerable than others, whether it was because they were overstocked or would always have had tight fodder supply and simply could not weather this storm. This has led to some farmers experiencing some great distress and anxiety. I can think of nothing more depressing for a genuine farmer than watching helplessly as his animals suffer.

Understanding and communicating effectively is still a significant element of the Government's response. Farmers who need help will continue to receive assistance. The Department will continue its early warning system where emergency assistance is provided to farmers whose animals are experiencing serious welfare issues and where the farmer is unable to cope. Those that need it most will be helped. I encourage these farmers to contact the helpline at 1850-211990.

The Minister, Deputy Coveney, has been involved in trying to manage a very difficult situation for many months. This situation did not just arise in the past several weeks. Last year's poor summer with high levels of rainfall and a lack of sunshine resulted in poor and smaller quantities of silage. The onset of winter came early, which meant that grass growth ceased earlier than normal. In addition, it was extremely wet and farmers were obliged to bring their animals indoors. Some had to keep their animals indoors during the summer and the autumn. The Minister engaged with farmers, in conjunction with Teagasc, through the winter months to extend and maximise the potential of their fodder. Regrettably, the winter lasted six weeks longer than normal. As a result, grass growth is five weeks behind the level at which it should be at this time of year. This has resulted in a real and measurable fodder shortage with which the Minister is dealing.

We have seen fodder arrive from France and the UK in the affected areas of the south and the west over the past few weeks in a targeted response with the cost of the transport covered by the emergency reserve fund. I welcome the collective response by all those people and organisations involved in the agricultural sector such as the Irish Farmers Association, IFA, the Irish Cattle and Sheep Farmers Association, ICSA, as well as the co-ops, including Drinagh Co-operative, and food companies such as Glanbia and Dairygold, all co-ordinated by the Minister.

The Minister has led from the front all the way through this crisis like he has done with the other issues that he has had to deal with since taking office just over two years ago such as the horsemeat crisis, reform of the Common Agricultural Policy and the Common Fisheries Policy and the European Presidency to mention a few.

Recent warmer weather has alleviated the difficulties a little for now but the Minister and his Department are now focusing on the longer term effects of the prolonged inclement weather. I would call for greater flexibility in the rules to allow increased and appropriate uses of fertiliser to, for example, reverse the decline in the phosphates level in the soil, incentivising or encouraging greater cultivation of fodder crops and continuing engagement with the co-ops and finan-

cial institutions to deal with the inevitable cash flow difficulties that will surface later this year.

I congratulate the Minister, Deputy Coveney, on his response to this issue.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I am delighted to contribute to this debate. I commend the Minister on the progress he has made in dealing with this crisis. For me, it is about practical measures. In some cases individual farmers are under great strain, but it is working. The measure with the co-operatives was practical and quick. Farmers are working with it and are happy with its effectiveness. There has been growth in recent days and it is hoped it will sustain farmers. The two key features are ensuring farmers have proper yields from their silage cuts and that they are able to put proper measures in place for grazing.

The Minister has said he is managing the crisis on a day-to-day basis and referred to future measures. He has also said he will put in place contingency plans to address what will happen in the coming months. Obviously, they will include the co-operatives, with which I am aware the Minister is continuing to have discussions, Teagasc, the banks and the farmers' organisations. As a Deputy in Limerick, I know that agriculture contributes enormously in terms of jobs to the rural economy and that it is extremely important that we support it, but what has been done to date by the Minister is yielding huge results. The approach he took in respect of the co-operatives and purchasing of fodder was inventive and practical and it has worked. The key feature is to have proper contingency plans in place in the coming months to deal with all eventualities.

Deputy Paul J. Connaughton: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this issue. This is, without doubt, a very serious problem, but some of the Deputies opposite appear to blame the Minister for not being able to control the weather, such is the predicament in which we find ourselves. We faced into a spring the likes of which we had never seen previously. A Deputy on the opposite side of the House said he had never seen anything like it; therefore, how were we supposed to predict we would have a winter lasting almost eight months is beyond me.

We have two options in dealing with the crisis. We can be strategic in the way the Minister has gone about it and try to take a hands-on approach or announce a fund of €5 million, €8 million or €10 million. That sounds good and it would make for a very good press release, but there is no explanation of the source of the money. In these tough times when the money would have to come from another budget in six months time, there would be a shortfall somewhere else. We can do what the Minister has been doing and take a strategic approach to it. We can work on the ground, talk to farmers, work with organisations and get across what can and cannot be done to address the issue. That is what the Minister has done and he has been complimented on it.

It has been said we will face a fodder problem at the back end of the year. In most parts of the country we are already four or six weeks behind and it is important that we now look to see how we can fix it. Many on this side of the House have raised the issue with the Minister and I know he is doing everything he can to get farm payments out to farmers as soon as possible. Many agri-environment option scheme payments have been made. I have concerns, as I am sure does Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív, about individual farmers, but we are not here to discuss individual farmers. We have to work through all cases, but it is easy to raise the one case when hundreds of euro have been paid out. We must keep working on the basis that we will get a payment out to everyone as quickly as we can possibly do so.

This is a crisis. There are many farmers in tough circumstances, but I compliment the Minister on tackling on this issue in a strategic way. From what I have heard in the debate, it appears his only failings are that he cannot control or predict the weather.

Deputy Tom Hayes: I am glad to have the opportunity to contribute to this important debate. Recent months have been tough for farmers or anybody involved in the agriculture industry. The Minister, the co-operatives and everybody associated with it have been complimented, but what struck me was the generosity of ordinary farmers up and down the country to their neighbours. They helped each other out when they had surplus food and silage. That should be highlighted, as well as the hard work done by the Department and the Minister.

We are where we are, but the position has changed a great deal in the past week. While there will be more difficult weather conditions in certain areas, as the Minister has pointed out, the good weather enjoyed in recent days has had a huge impact. Where I come from in County Tipperary the grass is growing. As I travelled from Tipperary to Dublin today on every farm there were cattle out, even though the grass is short, but it is growing.

The issue is to plan, as Teagasc has urged in its latest article, for availability of fodder next winter because that is the real difficulty we are facing. Silage ground throughout the country has been grazed, but the reality is that we must use a lot more fertilizer in the coming weeks. In that regard, the Minister has been to the forefront in meeting the banks. That is where the difficulty lies, as people owe substantial amounts of money for meal following the winter. Nobody has denied this, but that is what people did. Farmers are resilient. They care for their animals and as a result have run up big bills. They now need fertilizer to plan for next winter and it is on that issue we must focus. I am not always happy with banks, but they need to be monitored on a regular basis in the coming months to make sure those who are in financial difficulty because of the extreme winter conditions are helped. I say “well done” to everybody involved in dealing with this tough crisis which did not cost the taxpayer billions of euro.

Regarding some of the contributions made by Deputies on the opposite side of the House, they would like to see the bad weather continue for another few weeks because then the motion would be relevant. It is not relevant tonight because things are changing. We should be fair about it. The problem is difficult to manage, but the reality is that it is being managed well in tough circumstances.

Deputy Arthur Spring: I agree with what some Deputies said about the way farming families have pulled together to try to solve the problem. Deputy John Browne said some farmers in County Wexford were sending bales of silage to Galway for €15. As we never gave them a hiding in hurling, they might send something in our direction in County Kerry.

Deputy Tom Hayes: That is a good angle.

Deputy Arthur Spring: There is a crisis and it is predominantly felt along the west coast. I travelled to Dublin by train this morning and the fields are black instead of green because there is nothing growing in them. Farmers have been perturbed mentally by what is happening. They are in dire straits financially, but as one of the Deputies representing the western region pointed out, this is a factor due to the weather, it is not political. The issue was raised by Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív on 28 March and I believe it was the Tánaiste who replied to him. The Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy Simon Coveney, has dealt with the issue adequately and I particularly like his current strategy. Rather than pouring money at the problem which would

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have been the solution of those who went before us, he has decided to front-load the solution by including as much stock as possible to ensure a problem will not arise next year, if we do not have good quality grass available.

In an article in the *Irish Independent* on 19 February a veterinarian surgeon, Mr. Donal Murphy, from Rathmore stated we would have problems owing to the poor quality of grass. He said the fat content of animals was down and that we were looking at a higher incidence of liver fluke in calves as a result of the poor quality grass production. He also said silage quality in the following year would possibly be decreased owing to the level of rainfall. At that stage people were paying between €25 and €30 for a round bale and anybody who does basic mathematics will tell us that if one has a decent sized farm and we are heading toward the middle of May and one still has animals indoors, one has a huge problem.

The banks have been helpful. They are trying to lend money to the agricultural sector. I often use the acronym TEAM - team, energy, agri-business and microenterprise - which will help us greatly to move forward and resolve the issue. The co-operatives have decided to grasp the nettle. They are giving credit to farmers. They are sourcing silage, hay and maize silage from France and England. It is appropriate that we give them a one week window, but if we have to learn a lesson from this crisis it is that, in terms of Food Harvest 2020, we need to have a reserve in place. It is not a question of having to send a text to the Minister every time one throws a round bale into the slatted unit. It is more about the fact that managing stock and stock density is increasingly important. If we are trading commodities - grass is a commodity - it may be worth looking at the possibility of striking a deal with the British and French so that if we hit a crisis again next year, we will have an agreed price and can purchase at that price. An option is what we are looking for. Overall, the Minister is doing the right thing and the country will be better off for it.

Deputy Martin Ferris: I welcome the motion and concur with its main proposals. I also propose that other measures be put in place, both to address the current crisis and to address any possible recurrence. That can not be ruled out given the weather conditions we have experienced over the past two years and the possibility of further bad weather later this year.

No one expects the Department, any more than farmers themselves, to be clairvoyants when it comes to predicting future weather patterns. However, the likelihood of severe conditions, even in late spring and summer, must be planned for, given what we have seen over the past few years. No other sector of the economy, apart perhaps from the fishing sector, is as much at the mercy of the weather as the farming sector. While we are experiencing a change in the weather currently, which will, hopefully, ensure the crisis will not get any worse, we are still a long way from seeing an end to it. Many farmers are still struggling to cope with the demands placed on them and the financial implications will carry on into the future, with potentially severe implications for many farm households.

One of the most worrying factors of this crisis is that farmers will be short at least one cut of silage this year. I have travelled the country and have seen very little silage cut so far. If farmers get two cuts between now and September, they will be doing well. I am concerned, therefore, that farmers will face the same crisis next year because of the lack of the extra cut of silage this year.

The financial implication of the crisis for farmers has not been helped by the attitude of the financial institutions. Some of the institutions are expressing little gratitude for the fact that the

ordinary people of this State have saved them, at the expense of an austerity programme which has hit a huge number of people, including the majority of small to medium farm families. Deputy McLellan has informed me that a farmer who came to her office had applied for a loan of €5,000 to get him over the crisis. However, he was only given one month to repay the loan. That is disgraceful behaviour from institutions the people have bailed out. It is disgraceful they act like this towards people who are so dependent on them to provide loans so as to provide fodder for their animals.

The reluctance and refusal of banks to extend lines of credit has prevented many farmers from addressing the shortage of feedstuffs. The same applies to co-ops, which for the greater part ignored the appeal of the Minister to extend credit to farmers in urgent need of supplies. This indicates a lack of responsibility to the sector as a whole and a lack of responsiveness to the opinions of the wider community upon which they depend. This does not apply to all co-ops and some have been extremely helpful to farmers in need of fodder and have extended credit lines. When the Minister addressed the joint committee last Thursday week, I was of the impression there would be a three-month payment freeze on co-op credit, but that does not appear to be the case. A small minority of co-ops have attempted to take advantage of the crisis by charging increased prices. In general, however, most commercial enterprises within the sector have behaved responsibly.

Farmers have been massively impacted by the fodder shortage and it has placed enormous pressure on many of them due to the financial burden and the perceived threat to many family farms. That aspect of the crisis will be harder to deal with than the immediate problem of accessing feedstuffs. Watching animals starve to death, as many have done, is an extremely traumatic experience, apart altogether from the impact that has on farm businesses. In some parts of the country, collections of dead animals have increased by up to 40%, and the Department of Agriculture and Food and the Marine has confirmed that deaths of cattle aged 48 months and over were up by 60% between January and February of this year compared with January and February of 2012.

Apart from the pressure of maintaining farm operations, the crisis has placed considerable personal pressure on farmers and their families. One of the saddest aspects of the crisis has been the increase in farmers who have considered taking their own lives. In my county, the farm and rural stress line operated by Console in Tralee has reported a significant increase in the number of farmers contacting it in regard to personal pressures. Some of those farmers impacted by the fodder crisis were obviously under such extreme pressure, they could see no way out of the situation. Many of those farmers are single and live in isolated rural areas. The pressure of loneliness and isolation added to the pressure of trying to feed animals has driven some of them almost over the limit.

The crisis has, however, brought out some of the better aspects of rural communities, which have generally been supportive of their neighbours who have been worst affected. I commend the farming organisations which acted swiftly to bring in feed for their members. Communities from all areas of the country have offered support. Some north of the Border have brought foodstuffs to farmers in trouble, as they did a number of years ago when there was a crisis west of the Shannon. The solidarity within rural communities and farm workers is great, but there are also people who exploited the situation.

On the other hand, there is a feeling the Department's response has been inadequate. Although the Minister's announcement in regard to imports, which he claimed reduced costs by

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approximately one third, was welcomed, some would feel more could be done. The ICMSA suggested the Government might apply to the EU solidarity fund for emergency funding to address the crisis. Given that the crisis is estimated to be the worst to impact on Irish farming in half a century, surely there would be a good case and this would not impact on the domestic budget, if that is a chief consideration. I look forward to the Minister's response to that.

Deputy Simon Coveney: We have looked at that. I spoke to the Commissioner, but it is unlikely we will be able to draw on it.

Deputy Martin Ferris: I welcome the fact the Minister has tried it. There are a number of precedents for the use of the EU solidarity fund aid, which has been used on 20 occasions to aid farmers. These included two occasions in 2002 when farmers in Austria were assisted in the midst of a food crisis similar to that being experienced by Irish farmers currently. I echo the call to extend the transport subsidy scheme in order that it can take in commercial imports that could pass on savings to farmers. This would take some of the pressure of farmers affected, by reducing the costs of imports and transport.

While current weather conditions appear to promise the situation will not get worse, there is a need to ensure measures are in place to prevent a repeat situation in the autumn. The current crisis could have been anticipated on the basis of bad weather in previous years. While no-one can predict what conditions will be like later this year, the possibility of another exceptionally wet summer must be considered and contingency plans must be put in place.

In most instances, those involved in the political sector here have behaved responsibly during the crisis and have given leadership in their areas. We should learn from the experience of this year and the lack of a structure so as to be better able to deal with any future crisis. I have serious concerns about next year, more so than now. There has been great growth in the past week. I have been out around the farming community all this weekend and have seen people put their cattle out, albeit they will be cutting their first crop of silage. This will take the pressure off this year, but next year could be a serious situation, because farmers are already down one crop of silage for the year. We must learn from the failings now and put provisions in place. Nobody can predict future weather conditions. The seven weeks of easterly winds we had this year did enormous damage to the grass crop and put a lot of pressure on farmers. Many of them spread fertilizer, but it did not work because of the weather conditions.

Deputy Michael Colreavy: I was not quite sure what to say in this debate because I believe the Minister does a good job. He is the best Minister in the Cabinet. Those who proposed this motion would probably not have done as much as the Minister has done during this crisis. That is conjecture. I would like to refer briefly to this year before focusing on the lessons we might learn from this experience. We need to apply those lessons so we do not have the same problems next year.

Perhaps the Government should have foreseen the fodder crisis that the agricultural community is experiencing. According to Met Éireann, last year we had one of the wettest summers on record. This was compounded by poor weather in the spring of this year. Many farmers recognised towards the latter part of last year that this crisis was imminent. Tillage yields were significantly down because many farmers and agricultural contractors could not get into the fields to harvest their crops due to the wet surface conditions. There was little farmers could do at that stage other than ration what fodder they had and hope the Government intervened to help. It is disappointing that the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine did not see

this crisis coming as quickly as many farmers did.

The fodder crisis has had a real and terrifying effect on rural communities. I am sure many rural Deputies have heard the tragic stories of suicide that have spiked on farms across Ireland since the beginning of the fodder crisis. I understand it is so bad that officials from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine have received training from groups like Pieta House on how to identify the signs of the risk of suicide. I welcome this initiative.

Deputy Simon Coveney: On a point of information, can I clarify what the Deputy has said? The briefing in question happened many months ago. As there has been a misunderstanding about this issue, I want to clarify that no mental health or suicide awareness training has been organised in response to this crisis.

Deputy Michael Colreavy: It was just a general briefing.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I accept that farmers have been facing a great deal of stress.

Deputy Michael Colreavy: The move to arrange the briefing mentioned by the Minister was a positive one, particularly given the circumstances that have arisen recently. Many farmers are feeling the strain and stress of listening to their animals bellowing with hunger but having neither the fodder nor the money to tackle the situation. This is wreaking havoc on the financial and mental well-being of farmers. It is important for the Government to take all measures open to it to alleviate the suffering of farmers. It needs to co-ordinate with the marts, the co-ops and, in particular, the financial institutions to ensure farmers have access to fodder and credit. We need to ensure they do not suffer in the long term as a result of the fodder crisis.

It is important for the Minister to make allowances in this year's stocking rates for farmers. It is clear that land used for agriculture is not yet able to handle heavy stocking levels this year. The Minister must be aware that farmers may not be able to reach the minimum stocking density that is required for receiving payments under schemes such as the agri-environment options scheme. If the Minister does not significantly reduce the minimum stocking density and the retention period, the land will not have time to recover for next year. In such circumstances, it is inevitable that farmers and their animals will face the same crisis in 2014 that they face at present.

Apart from the humanitarian aspect of this issue, it is ultimately important to remember the essential role agriculture plays in the Irish economy. The agri-food sector contributes a valuable €24 billion to the national economy, generates 6.3% of gross value added, accounts for almost 10% of Ireland's exports and provides 7.7% of national employment. Irish agriculture plays an invaluable role in food security, not just domestically but across the EU and further afield. This industry must be protected. The Government has to take action to ensure the fodder crisis does not have a knock-on effect on the Irish economy this year or next year. The industry is simply too valuable to be allowed to fail.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I would like to share time with Deputy Tom Fleming.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this evening's debate. It is important to note that a great deal of fodder is coming into the country at present. The problems in some parts of the country are starting to ease as growth seems to be happening and

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grass appears to be growing. Growth has not yet started in all parts of the country. Things have not picked up in County Donegal as they have elsewhere. That needs to be considered when decisions are being made on where to send the fodder that is coming in so that farmers can avail of it. I appreciate that many farmers have acted generously by sharing fodder with their neighbours to ensure they can continue to feed their animals. Equally, we have all heard stories of farmers capitalising on the fact that the price of fodder has gone through the roof in some parts of the country. Such behaviour should be condemned. I do not think anybody should be profiting from the woes of certain farmers.

As the problem eases in the coming weeks - I hope the weather improves, we get some warmth and growth recovers across the country - it is vitally important for the Department to review what has happened in recent weeks. In particular, there should be an examination of whether the banks have been providing credit to farmers. The Minister confirmed at a committee meeting approximately ten days ago that the Department would ensure feed was supplied for the animals of farmers who did not have fodder and were unable to access credit. I would like the operation of that system to be reviewed over the next few months. I would like to hear from farmers and from the Department about whether support was made available and what farmers had to do to receive it. That will be very important.

As other Deputies have said, this crisis will probably recur next year because the growing season has started so late this year. Many farmers have lost a cut of silage. There will probably be another fodder crisis in the spring of next year. The provision of aid towards the purchase of fodder has to continue in the Department. I know the Minister has said he will continue to support that. The Department has to continue to support the purchase of fodder to ensure there are stocks for next winter and the early spring of next year. I would like the Minister to make sure that is continued.

Deputy Tom Fleming: It is evident that this is a devastating time for the farming community throughout the country. There is huge negativity among those involved in family farms who have been striving against the odds in recent years to keep their small businesses going. I have spoken to a number of farmers of all sizes and categories who are contemplating the sale of up to half of their herds, which would be an awful scenario. The halving of cow numbers by many farmers would be a retrograde step for this country's dairy industry. Farmers in the south west face the elements and contend with high levels of rainfall to a greater extent than their counterparts in other areas, such as the sunny south east. There is a better quality of land in many parts of the east. Significant amounts of hay were being imported into County Kerry as far back as the latter end of last autumn. I think that is a demonstration of the contrast that exists at the moment.

We are fortunate that English hay is being brought into this country through the transport subsidy scheme. I compliment the Minister on the efforts he is making in these constricted times, when budgets are not very plentiful and we must make the most of what we have. I also compliment the efforts of the IFA and the farming communities that have co-operated with one another.

9 o'clock

They more or less kept the people who were in real need in existence all along-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask the Deputy to conclude.

Deputy Tom Fleming: The other point I make is that the scheme should be extended further. For example, there is real need for the French hay that is coming in through the efforts of the IFA. The transport scheme needs to be extended. I would like to have clarification regarding the marts. Last Thursday, I requested the Minister to extend the scheme to cover the other organisations we could use and which are relevant to the situation. I believe the marts should be included, with the co-ops, at the initial stages. We need to continue the scheme as it will help the situation until the end of the year and into the next year. I also ask the Minister for flexibility in regard to farm inspections.

Debate adjourned.

The Dáil adjourned at 9 p.m. until 2.30 p.m. on Wednesday, 8 May 2013.