



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

Donegal Tragedy and Brussels Attacks: Expressions of Sympathy	2
Nomination of Taoiseach (Resumed)	3
Business of Dáil	3
Sub-committee on Dáil Reform: Appointment of Members	12
European Council Meeting: Statements	13
Agriculture and Fisheries Council Meeting: Statements	37
Housing and Homelessness: Statements	63
Message from Seanad	120

DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 22 Márta 2016

Tuesday, 22 March 2016

Chuaigh an Ceann Comhairle i gceannas ar 10.30 a.m.

Paidir.

Prayer.

Donegal Tragedy and Brussels Attacks: Expressions of Sympathy

An Ceann Comhairle: I call on the Taoiseach. I understand he has some comments to make on the recent tragedies.

The Taoiseach: On behalf of the Government, I would like to express my sincere and deepest sympathies and condolences to the McGrotty family on their tragic loss in Buncrana on Sunday evening. Our hearts go out to them on what is a devastating impact on the lives of the extended family. We all know in our own lives the numbing grief that comes from the loss of a loved one. In these circumstances, however, this is of particular and deepest grief that the tranquility and beauty of a sunny spring Sunday was shattered by this tragedy. I would like to express our sympathy to Louise James, who lost her partner, Seán, their two young sons, Mark and Evan, her mother, Ruth, and her sister, Jodie Lee. I will recall forever, as many people will, the words of Francis Crawford in his description of what happened. I admire the courage of Davitt Walsh, who rescued and saved the life of little Rionaghac-Ann. When one tries to consider the horrendous impact of what was happening as that vehicle slid towards the water and the father, handing his baby to the rescue, saying, “Save our baby”, it puts things into perspective and into context. I am sure the House will join me in expressing our deepest sympathy and sadness at what has happened to this Derry family.

Members will be aware of an ongoing situation in Brussels where two bombs have been detonated, one in Brussels airport and one at Maelbeek railway station. The numbers killed are substantial, although as yet unconfirmed. I understand from the Irish ambassador in Brussels that, as far as we are aware, no Irish citizen has been involved in the tragedy. However, we cannot yet be certain as to the full impact of the incident. At the end of my brief contribution, I would like the House to mark a minute’s silence in respect of the members of the McGrotty family in Buncrana who lost their lives and those who have lost, or may lose, their lives as a consequence of what appear to be terrorist activities at Brussels airport and the railway station in Brussels.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call on Members to stand for one minute’s silence.

Members rose.

22 March 2016

Nomination of Taoiseach (Resumed)

The Taoiseach: Following the sitting of the Dáil on 10 March, I went to Áras an Úachtaráin to tender my resignation as Taoiseach to the President, who accepted it. In accordance with the Constitution, my Government colleagues and I are continuing to carry out our duties and will do so until a new Government is appointed. The issues of the nomination of a Taoiseach and the formation of a Government will be addressed at the next sitting of the House on 6 April.

Business of Dáil

The Taoiseach: On 10 March, the House ordered the business for today's sitting. At the request of many Deputies, I propose a minor amendment to the Order of Business to provide more time for the statements on homelessness and housing and to enable non-aligned Members to participate in these debates. I, therefore, propose, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, that the order of the Dáil of 10 March be amended to provide as follows: a non-party Deputy may be included in the opening speeches on all statements today; the statements on European Council meetings, pursuant to Standing Order 111(2)(b), will be brought to a conclusion after one hour and 55 minutes; and the statements on housing and homelessness shall be brought to a conclusion after four hours, the opening speeches on those statements not to exceed ten minutes and a Minister or Minister of State to be called on to make a statement in reply which shall not exceed ten minutes.

An Ceann Comhairle: Regarding the second item to which the Taoiseach alluded, which is an important matter of constitutional business, and following the Taoiseach's announcement of his resignation, I invite the leaders or representatives of the other parties or groups to make brief comments in response.

Deputy Micheál Martin: On my own behalf and on behalf of my party, I extend our deepest sympathies to the entire McGrotty family, particularly to Louise on the loss of her partner, Seán, her sons, Mark and Evan, her mother, Ruth, and her sister, Jodie Lee. An unspeakable tragedy and trauma has befallen the family. This has been very eloquently articulated by the local parish priest, Fr. Paddy O'Kane, in recent days. The nation is truly shocked at the scale of this tragedy and its impact on the wider community in Donegal and Derry. Of course our deepest sympathies go to the families as well.

The unfolding situation in Brussels represents an attack on all of us and on the institutions we hold dear. Again, I send our deepest sympathies to the families of those who have already lost their lives and those who have been severely injured. Brussels is the centre of European democracy and the European institutions. These attacks strike at the very heart of the European people, the European Union and the whole sense of solidarity and community that we have consistently embraced in this country. They represent another appalling scaling up of the attack on people across the European Union and indeed further afield.

While we have no difficulty with the Taoiseach's proposals for amending Standing Orders, as a precedent we think there should be proper co-ordination and consultation with others in advance of such amendments to Standing Orders. I think the timeline for some Deputies who are speaking on housing will be very tight, particularly at the end of the debate. Time has been set aside for leaders and various spokespersons, but the timeline for the general debate is ex-

tremely tight. The last I heard was that two or three speakers will be sharing five-minute slots. This is hardly the best way to go about our business. The last day we looked at and put forward the idea that we were open to an extra day's sitting this week, if necessary, to accommodate other debate. We have no difficulty with the proposal that has been put before us, but we think as a precedent for how the Dáil should operate there should be more meaningful consultation in advance.

Deputy Gerry Adams: Ba mhaith liom cead a fháil caint faoi ghnó na Dála i ndiaidh an chúpla focal atá le rá agam faoin timpiste i dTír Chonaill. Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, as ucht seans a thabhairt dom caint faoin mhéid a tharla ansin.

On behalf of Sinn Féin, I want to extend our sympathy and solidarity to the McGrotty and Daniels families on the tragic loss of Seán, Mark, Evan, Ruth and Jodie Lee, who so tragically lost their lives in Bunrana, County Donegal, this weekend. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a n-anamacha dílse. Lá millteanach brónach a bhí ann i saol an teaghlaigh seo agus fosta i saol mhuintir Dhoire Cholmeille agus Tír Chonaill. Our thoughts and prayers are with all of them at this time. We all hope the five month old baby will make a full and speedy recovery. I also want to pay tribute to the emergency services and all of those who bravely intervened, especially Davitt Walsh, who saved the child.

I also want to extend our deepest condolences and sympathies to the families of those killed and injured in Brussels this morning. I am sure all of us in the Dáil condemn these horrendous attacks in the strongest possible terms. There is a deep sense of shock at unfolding developments. News is still emerging about the extent of the attacks and the scale of the casualties and fatalities. On my own behalf and on behalf of Sinn Féin, I want to extend our solidarity to everyone involved at this difficult time.

Mar a dúirt mé, ba mhaith liom seans eile a fháil chun caint faoi ghnó na Dála. An labharfaidh mé faoi anois?

An Ceann Comhairle: Anois, le do thoil.

Deputy Gerry Adams: Go raibh míle maith agat.

An Ceann Comhairle: Táimid ag caint faoi cheapachán an Taoisigh agus an moladh a tháinig ón Taoiseach. Tá dhá rud le plé againn. We have two things to discuss: the appointment of a Taoiseach and the amendment to the Order of Business. Maybe we could deal first at this point with the Taoiseach's proposal to return to the House on 6 April next.

Deputy Gerry Adams: Under Standing Order 170, I propose, as an urgent necessity, the suspension of Standing Orders to allow an urgent and meaningful debate to take place in the House today. The Government did not want us to meet this morning; that was not its initial plan. We now have a very superficial clár. This is only the second time we have met in 47 days and there are major issues, with which we are all familiar, that need to be discussed, including homelessness, health services, water charges and child care. Sinn Féin would like to debate a motion to scrap water charges and the High Court's decision on the development of a national monument on Moore Street and in its precincts. It should be remembered that if the judge had not made that decision, Moore Street would have been demolished. This happened on the Government's watch. Another issue worthy of discussion is the shocking reports of many deaths and casualties in Brussels. I am arguing that the Dáil should be allowed to order its own business; that Teachtaí Dála should be allowed to discuss whatever issues they want to discuss

22 March 2016

and that Standing Orders should be suspended to allow this to happen; and that the Order of 10 March 2016 should be amended to allow Sinn Féin's motion on Irish water to be taken instead of the business which has been scheduled to be taken.

Deputy Shane Ross: On behalf of the Independent Alliance, I join previous speakers in expressing our condolences to the two families involved in the tragedy in Buncrana. The number of deaths is utterly devastating for the people of the area and the nation, although it should be noted that one or two heroes have emerged from the tragedy - the man who rescued the baby and the father whose last words were so tragic and poignant.

I also express my utter revulsion at what happened in Brussels today. Incidents such as this dwarf the differences in this Chamber and allow us to unite in condemnation, horror and expressing sympathy to those involved. As Deputy Micheál Martin said, it is not just Brussels or Europe that is under threat from a small number of people who are seeking to wreak havoc with the lives of innocent people but democracy throughout the world. It is welcome that all parties are able to send the message from this House that we are united in condemnation of this appalling incident.

Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Joan Burton): I express the condolences of the Labour Party to the McGrotty family on the deaths of Seán and his two sons, Mark and Evan, and the boys' grandmother, Ruth Daniels, and her daughter, Jodie Lee. County Donegal is no stranger to very serious accidents in recent years involving the loss of life. It is sad that a pleasant spring day turned into such a tragedy for this family, the extended family and their friends in Derry. Anybody who heard Mr. Walsh who rescued the baby and his partner talk about what had happened could not but have been moved by the spectacle of both the tragedy and the courage he and his partner showed in rescuing the baby and the forlornness of the farewell by the father of the family as he returned to rescue his children. In terms of the level of grief and heartbreak, it was an appalling tragedy to befall the family. I extend my condolences, as well as my admiration, to Mr. Walsh for the part he played in rescuing the baby and to all of those working in the rescue and emergency services.

With regard to this morning's atrocities in Brussels, I again offer my condolences to people in Belgium. It is almost certain, given the cosmopolitan nature of the country, that the people who died and were injured came from countries around the world, from a range of different faiths and none or may just have been travelling through Brussels and Belgium. As I said when we spoke in the House before Christmas about the many young people who were murdered in the Bataclan and elsewhere in Paris, it appears, once again, that we are dealing this morning in Brussels with efforts to destroy what we cherish most and what the EU cherishes most, which is our freedom. The attacks last December in Paris were political in nature. Such attacks may at times fly under the flag of religion but they were political in nature and meant to strike at European ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity. There will be opportunities to discuss this in greater detail but terrorism has visited again in the most awful forms and, on behalf of the Labour Party, I offer my sympathy to all those affected by this, particularly the relatives and friends of the people who have died.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: On behalf of the Independent Members, I extend my sympathies to the McGrotty and Daniels families on the terrible tragedy that unfolded in Buncrana on Sunday evening. It is dreadful to think that such a terrible thing could happen on such a fine spring evening and that there could be such a loss of life to devastate a family that was simply out enjoying a drive on a good evening. I also pay tribute to Mr. Davitt Walsh and Mr. Francis

Crawford for the efforts they made in trying to save members of the family.

I also extend our sympathies to the victims of the Brussels bombings. It is terrible that there has been such a large loss of life and our sympathies go to the families of the victims as well.

With regard to the amendment to the Order of Business, I would like to-----

An Ceann Comhairle: On the amendment, we are simply talking about the Taoiseach's proposal that nominations for Taoiseach be considered on 6 April. We are simply dealing with that issue.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: That is grand. There is also a need to have motions taken as well today because there are important motions on the Order Paper, in particular, the motion relating to SI 125 of 2016 and the penalty points system. There is a time limit regarding this motion in terms of how the Dáil can deal with it before the statutory instrument is enacted and it is vital, therefore, that time be made available to discuss motions such as this either today or on 6 April.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I join others in extending my sympathies to the families in Derry. Both communities in Derry and Donegal have been traumatised by this unspeakable event. It is always especially tragic when young children are involved and the totality of what has happened to an individual family is something that unites people in grief and puts things in perspective.

I would also like to condemn what is unfolding in Brussels. Most of us know Brussels Airport and the train station near the European Parliament and will be aware of just what an international city is Brussels. We are thinking about people from various parts of the world who have family in that location and who are worried. That will obviously be on all our minds.

On the Order of Business, I ask that we find a mechanism to be as inclusive as possible until a more normal pattern emerges. We should start as we mean to go on in relation to being inclusive as to how the Order of Business is framed. All sides of the House would be willing to play a role in doing that to permit urgent matters to be debated and solutions suggested as to how we might proceed.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: On behalf of the Green Party, I extend our sympathies to the McGrotty family as we reflect on how life can go from a lovely family occasion and slip into unspeakable and unimaginable tragedy. Our thoughts are with that family. While the circumstances are different, it is similarly the case for those caught up in the explosions in Brussels where people have gone from the pleasurable moment of flying out on holidays to seeing their lives or those of loved ones torn apart. Our thoughts go out to those who have lost their lives or are injured in the tragedy there. It is an attack on our European values. As Deputy Burton said, it is an attack on our core democratic beliefs on our European Continent. It is regrettable that we do not have more time to debate the bigger international picture because there is a connection with the wider issues of what is happening between the Middle East and Europe and it is something we need to spend our time and attention on as a Dáil. At a moment when an attack on our democratic way of life, our basic freedoms and our constitutional approach is happening, it is a pity there is still such uncertainty within the Dáil as to the future configuration of the Government. Hopefully, that is something we can all address in the coming weeks. We have a role as this is one of the 28 countries which must respond to that international environment. It is important we, as a House, do that in an effective way and stand up for our constitutional, democratic freedoms.

22 March 2016

Deputy Paul Murphy: On behalf of Anti-Austerity Alliance-People Before Profit, I add our voice of sympathy to and express our solidarity with the families of the victims of the Bun-crana tragedy, the McGrotty and Daniels families, and with their relatives, friends and everyone affected in the communities in Donegal and Derry. In relation to what is happening in Brussels at the moment, we add our voice of condemnation to what appear to be ongoing terrorist attacks. The purpose of the attacks seems at this very early stage to be to strike terror into the hearts of people and to divide them. It is to create an environment of hatred, division and racism which is the kind of environment where very right-wing reactionary forces can benefit and grow. At this stage, we must say clearly that there is solidarity and sympathy with all those affected by the attacks and that we are opposed to terror, division, racism and war. People should stand together fighting for a very different sort of society and a peaceful society.

In terms of the Order of Business, the statements today are fine. While will discuss important topics, including the EU-Turkey agreement and the housing and homelessness crisis, the Dáil should not be sitting just waiting for whoever is going to form the Government to do so. In effect, it is reducing itself to a debating Chamber which does not believe it has the power to pass anything. The Dáil exists and we have a mandate. We were elected on the basis of the positions we put forward. As such, the Dáil should be discussing motions today. There are a number of motions on the Order Paper and we in the Anti-Austerity Alliance-People Before Profit have three motions down which we consider are vital. One is on the abolition of water charges and Irish Water, another is on a series of measures to deal with the housing crisis, but the most urgent, which will be reflected in a protest today and in the Dáil discussion later, is the urgent situation of people facing eviction in Tyrrelstown and in Blackrock, Cork.

11 o'clock

We should discuss these issues as motions today. The Dáil should have the ability to pass motions instructing the caretaker Government to take action.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. By way of response to the points raised by Deputies Adams, Pringle and Paul Murphy, there are a couple of matters to take into account. As we meet today, we are bound by the current Standing Orders of the House. Tomorrow, we will convene the first meeting of the Dáil reform committee. Having read all 22 submissions, it appears that there is a substantial amount of commonality in the proposals that Members are making for change. I hope that, at our first meeting on Wednesday, we will quickly agree a number of substantial reforms that could be brought to the House for agreement on 6 April but as we meet today, we are bound by the current Standing Orders. The idea that they could be suspended is not possible under the existing Standing Orders, specifically Standing Order 200(3), which precludes a Member other than during Private Members' business from setting aside Standing Orders. We must proceed with the business that is before us and agree to it or disagree with it, whichever the case may be.

Deputy Gerry Adams: I wish to make two points. I thank the Ceann Comhairle for his remarks. First, I appeal to the Taoiseach. This is within his gift. He has ordered the business of the Dáil. He said we should go away for 15 days but we do not believe we should. I appeal, through the Chair, to the Taoiseach to allow us to discuss these matters.

I spoke to the Ceann Comhairle about my second point this morning. Any association, group, Parliament or Dáil that comes together has the right, if it so wishes, to order its own business. Any Teachta Dála has the right to propose that Standing Orders be suspended. The Dáil

might not agree with or support the proposal and it might fall, which is fair enough. Will the Ceann Comhairle, through his good offices, ask the Taoiseach to consider the points we have made? Will the Ceann Comhairle allow me to move a motion to suspend Standing Orders?

An Ceann Comhairle: I appreciate the Deputy's points and it is open to the Taoiseach to consider the first of those but it is not open to me at all to allow the Deputy to move the suspension of Standing Orders, as we are operating under them and they preclude him from doing what he is proposing. The rules as they stand are explicit at Standing Order 177(3) and do not allow him to do what he is attempting. As such, further debate on the matter is pointless. What we must now decide is whether to accept the Taoiseach's proposal that he return to the House on 6 April to raise the issue of the nomination for the appointment of a Taoiseach. Are we in favour of that or are we not?

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: On a point of order, the Taoiseach made two proposals. One was to extend-----

An Ceann Comhairle: That is a second matter that I will discuss in a minute.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I will deal with that point in a minute. The proposal involves a change to an order that was made at the last sitting, which suggests that the House can alter the arrangements for today or 6 April.

An Ceann Comhairle: Yes but the Deputy is long enough here to realise that change can only be made on the proposal of the Government. The Government is proposing a change-----

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: But-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Let us be a little orderly.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: We put-----

An Ceann Comhairle: We are dealing with the return of the House on 6 April to consider the nomination of a Member as Taoiseach. Are we in favour of that or not?

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: If the Ceann Comhairle is putting the Taoiseach's proposal, the House can move amendments to the effect of returning earlier or later than 6 April or ordering the business for the rest of that day. That would be open.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Can we call on the Taoiseach to agree that as well as discussing the election of Taoiseach on 6 April, and presuming that none is elected, we might at least discuss water charges and Irish Water? This was the issue we discussed at length in the debate on the Order of Business on the last occasion. At least in theory, Fianna Fáil should not be against discussing Irish Water and water charges. There should be a majority in this House in favour of discussing that issue. Could we at least agree to discuss it? We are discussing housing and homelessness today. Can we discuss Irish Water and water charges?

An Ceann Comhairle: The point is made. I call Deputy Halligan.

Deputy John Halligan: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for his kind deliberations. We need to bring some commonsense to the House today. Today we are to discuss the issue of housing, homelessness and migration within the European context. We have spent the past two years discussing these issues. We need ideas to come from the House. We need motions on which we

can deliberate and vote so decisions can be made. I know of a couple that will lose their house within the next week and who will be added to the list of homeless in Waterford or Ireland. We cannot wait until 6 April to discuss and deliberate on these issues, bring them into some context and vote on them. Are we seriously telling people who voted for this Dáil that the next decision on whether we will elect a Taoiseach will not be until 6 April and that we will allow this House to close until 6 April while critical issues are affecting people who voted for us? We might as well give up if that is the case. What is the point in being here at all if we are just going to talk about homelessness, unemployment, agriculture and migration and do nothing about them, and not even be in a position to vote on them or make a decision on them? What is the point? That is not why I was elected. I was elected to come here and make decisions, even decisions with which I might not agree, and pass them on to the people. I was elected here to see democracy working within this House. I do not believe any of us should be prepared to walk home from here today and not come back until 6 April and still not make any decisions on the issues affecting very many citizens, including people who are living on the street or in hotels. People will be walking the streets with their children until 6 o'clock this evening before they can go into a bed and breakfast. Hundreds of thousands of people are locked in Turkey in crisis and in terrible conditions. That we are to debate these issues again rather than make a decision is disgraceful.

An Ceann Comhairle: As we meet today, we are bound by the Standing Orders this House has adopted. The House has spoken about reform for 40 years. Tomorrow we are going to meet and, I hope, begin the process of reform. I hope some of the reforms can be enacted, by consensus, on 6 April. However, until 6 April there will be no facility to stray beyond the terms of the Standing Orders we have. The question now is-----

Deputy Gerry Adams: May I appeal to the Taoiseach to at least extend to me the courtesy of responding?

An Ceann Comhairle: Does the Taoiseach want to make a brief comment in response to the points that have been raised?

The Taoiseach: We had agreed on the last occasion that the Dáil would meet today and again on 6 April. In respect of recognising the changed circumstances that apply, I proposed two amendments to what was agreed on the last occasion. The first was to extend the period for discussion, ideas and issues surrounding housing and homelessness and the second concerned the very important matter of giving recognition to those elected Members who are not aligned to any grouping, affiliation or party such that their contributions may be heard in these debates. For those reasons, I proposed those two minor changes to what was agreed on the last occasion. It is an indication from many Deputies who look to the new Dáil to be able to have greater engagement and responsibility in respect of how it goes about its business.

Three things have happened with the commencement of this Dáil. The first is the election of the Ceann Comhairle by secret ballot of the Members of the Dáil. The second is that when a Government is formed, the committees of the House will be constituted according to the d'Hondt system. The third is that the Taoiseach of the day will have to attend committees on a number of occasions each year. The Ceann Comhairle will be conducting a meeting tomorrow, which will be very important in respect of the issues parties and individuals have brought forward on Dáil reform. I agree with him that it is important that a measure of agreement on some of these issues is arrived at tomorrow to be implemented, as intended, on 6 April to make the workings of the House more effective and engaging and have a greater degree of responsibility and accountability for all Members who are elected by the people.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is it agreed, therefore, that we will meet-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: On a point of order, I seek clarification because I believe the Dáil should meet for the rest of the week, but it is clear that this will not happen.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy. We are perfectly clear, as is the Deputy, on what the position is. We have a proposal before us that the House consider nominations for Taoiseach on 6 April in accordance with the proposal from the acting Taoiseach. That is very clear and there is not a person in the Chamber who does not understand it. I will, therefore, put the proposal and Members may agree or disagree with it. We will then move on-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: On a point of order-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Excuse me, Deputy. Will the Deputy, please, resume his seat? We will then move on to consider other matters, including the revised order.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I thank the Ceann Comhairle. I am clear on the issue on which the Ceann Comhairle stated every Member was clear. However, the point on which I am seeking clarity from him or the Taoiseach - if the Ceann Comhairle allows me to make it, he can then answer me or ask the Taoiseach to do so - is whether it is the intention, under the amendment the Taoiseach has introduced for the sitting on 6 April, that the only matter that will be discussed on that day is the appointment of a Taoiseach and changes to Standing Orders.

There has been considerable discussion of how the House does its business and how all sides co-operate in dealing with major issues. A number of motions are before the House and we are asking the Taoiseach, in proposing an amendment to the order for the sitting on 6 April, to consider other voices outside his party and allow some of the issues these voices have been mandated to raise in the House to be accepted on 6 April. I am asking for clarity from the Taoiseach on whether the nomination of Taoiseach and the adoption of amended Standing Orders will be the only matters to be discussed on 6 April and, if not, whether he is willing to entertain some of the motions that have been placed before the House so far.

An Ceann Comhairle: Again, let me be-----

Deputy Micheál Martin: In the context of-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Micheál Martin on the same matter.

Deputy Micheál Martin: While the Fianna Fáil Party fully accepts the Ceann Comhairle's ruling in the context of existing Standing Orders, we simply have to put down a marker. This is the second day on which we are witnessing procedural wrangling with political motivation.

Deputy Gerry Adams: How dare we?

Deputy Micheál Martin: During the previous sitting we all witnessed the degree of serial misleading that took place in what actually transpired in the House when there was simply one vote on the order, as proposed by the Government. Last time out there was, for example, no motion on water charges proposed, yet it was sold and spun that somehow people had voted for or against a motion on water charges. We understand what is going on. I am fully committed to Dáil reform. I initiated it, put it on the table and want it to happen. I want the amendment to Standing Orders to be made before the next Government is formed. However, I am putting down a marker that, under no circumstances, will we stand around and watch the amended Standing

Orders or new Dáil reforms being exploited for political show-boating in the House-----

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The Deputy is the biggest show-boater in the Dáil.

Deputy Micheál Martin: -----or in an attempt to promote one party over another. All parties have been tabling motions for a long time and all of them know that, under existing Standing Orders, they are taken in Private Members' time. Let us not try to pretend to the nation that somehow the motions of one party, as opposed to those of another, are being denied an airing. One simple solution has been put before the House and it relates to Standing Orders for today. It is correct that this is a debating Chamber, but it is also a legislative Chamber which can pass laws or have legislation put to it. However, if the procedural wrangling continues today along the lines of what took place the last day, we will not even get to discuss what we asked and agreed to discuss some weeks ago, namely, the issues of housing and homelessness. We will not get to discuss the issues, given the time that is elapsing as the procedural wrangling and political show-boating continues.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: That was some waffle.

An Ceann Comhairle: The position is clear; an amendment has been proposed to the Order of Business. The order on 6 April was agreed to by the House on 10 March. The Taoiseach has brought a proposal before us today. That is what we have to decide on now and nothing else. Therefore, I am putting the question.

Question, "That the motion, as proposed by the Taoiseach, be agreed to", put and declared carried.

An Ceann Comhairle: The next item to be put to the House is the proposal from the Taoiseach that, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, a non-party Deputy may be included in the opening speeches on all statements, and, second, that the statements on housing and homelessness be brought to a conclusion after four hours. That is a two-hour extension. Is the proposal, as circulated to Members, agreed to?

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: There was a proposal earlier by my leader that the Order for today be changed. You said that the only person who could make that change was the Taoiseach and that the Dáil could then agree to it.

An Ceann Comhairle: Yes.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: In fact, what he said-----

Deputy Charles Flanagan: No, it was proposed not changed.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: There is a proposal before us and we have suggested an amendment to it. The amendment is that the business set down the last day, 10 March, not be taken today and that a motion on water charges that is currently on the Order Paper be taken in its stead. That is an amendment. I am respectfully asking that the amendment be taken and put to the House prior to the proposal from the Taoiseach, as is the current tradition.

An Ceann Comhairle: Equally respectfully I am responding to you by saying that as a Member of longer standing than me you know very well that Standing Order 200(3) precludes me from taking that proposal from you. It is not possible under the Standing Orders. However, tomorrow, when the sub-committee on Dáil reform meets, if you want to change all those

Standing Orders, you can change them, provided we can build consensus around that. While we sit today, that is not possible and I cannot take the proposal. The proposal we have to agree on is whether we accept that non-party Deputies should be able to contribute today and whether there will be two hours additional speaking time on the issue of housing.

Deputy David Cullinane: A Cheann Comhairle, I accept your ruling but the reality is that if we come back in April and the Taoiseach has not amended Standing Orders, then we are going to have the same debate.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach will not be amending Standing Orders, the House will.

Deputy David Cullinane: We are going to have the same debate again when we come back in April. As Deputy Doherty said, the only two items on the agenda will be the possibility of electing a taoiseach and amendments to Standing Orders. With respect, we have no wish to come back again in a couple of weeks' time. We want to sit and do our job. We have no wish to come back again and have the same exchanges about motions we want to discuss.

An Ceann Comhairle: Can you resume your seat, Deputy Cullinane?

Deputy David Cullinane: I am putting a question, with respect, to An Taoiseach. Will he consider the issues which have been expressed by many Members? This is not show-boating, as someone said. These are genuine and sincere issues that we want to debate as soon as possible. Unless the Taoiseach gives us clarification, we do not know what issues we will or will not be discussing when we come back in two weeks' time. That is not good enough.

An Ceann Comhairle: Can you resume your seat, Deputy Cullinane? Your leader has adequately addressed those issues. The sub-committee on Dáil reform meets tomorrow. Sinn Féin will be very well represented on the sub-committee. Many of the proposals your party has put forward, Deputy Cullinane, are solid, sustainable proposals which, I imagine, Members on all sides of the House will be able to agree on. As chairman of that committee, I am determined that we can come out of tomorrow's meeting with a series of proposals to put to the House for immediate change on 6 April. However, it is a matter for the House to change the Standing Orders.

Question,"That the proposal from the Taoiseach that, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, a non-party Deputy may be included in the opening speeches on all statements and, second, that the statements on housing and homelessness be brought to a conclusion after four hours," put and declared carried.

Sub-committee on Dáil Reform: Appointment of Members

An Ceann Comhairle: In accordance with the Order of the House of Thursday, 10 March, I wish to announce for the information of the House that the following Members have been appointed to the sub-committee on Dáil reform: Deputy Thomas Byrne, Fianna Fáil; Deputy Regina Doherty, Fine Gael; Deputy Brendan Howlin, Labour Party; Deputy Catherine Murphy, Social Democrats; Deputy Eoghan Murphy, Fine Gael; Deputy Paul Murphy, PBP-AAA; Deputy Darragh O'Brien, Fianna Fáil; Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív, Fianna Fáil; Deputy Louise O'Reilly, Sinn Féin; Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh, Sinn Féin; Deputy Thomas Pringle, Independent; Deputy Shane Ross, Independent Alliance; Deputy Eamonn Ryan, Green Party; and

22 March 2016

Deputy David Stanton, Fine Gael. The following Members have been nominated as substitutes: Deputy Marcella Corcoran-Kennedy, Fine Gael; Deputy John Halligan, Independent Alliance, as a substitute for Deputy Shane Ross; and Deputy Brendan Ryan, Labour Party.

European Council Meeting: Statements

The Taoiseach: I wish to express my deepest sympathy to the victims of the horrific bomb attacks that took place in Brussels this morning. These acts were utterly indiscriminate and an attack on our society and democratic values. I condemn them in the strongest possible terms, as I also condemn the attacks in Mali last night. Those who seek to use death and violence in this way must be confronted, will be confronted and will be defeated. Reports are still coming in from Brussels and our embassy there is seeking to establish further details about the loss of life and serious injuries. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is monitoring the situation very carefully and has activated its incident centre to deal with queries. The relevant contact details have been made available to the media and the public. Our thoughts are with the people in Brussels, the families of those who have lost their lives and those who were injured and, of course, the many Irish citizens living and working there, including many Irish public servants.

The European Council met twice recently, on 18 and 19 February and on 17 and 18 March. There have also been two EU summits with the Turkish Prime Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, both held in March. Therefore, I would like to focus my remarks today the two main areas addressed by these two meetings, namely, the EU-UK relationship and the recent discussions with Turkey on the migration crisis. I will also touch on the discussion of important economic issues. I have asked the Minister of State, Deputy Dara Murphy, to outline in his wrap-up statement broader developments in regard to migration that have been discussed at these European Council meetings, as well as some other issues addressed last week.

I note on 18 March, the European Council also adopted conclusions on climate and energy, recalling the need to reinforce energy security and sign and ratify the Paris agreement as soon as possible, as well as agriculture and the steel sector. In February the European Council also adopted conclusions on Syria and Libya. The Council conclusions agreed in February and March have been laid before the House for Deputies.

I wish first to address an issue of great strategic relevance to Ireland, that is, the UK's relationship with the European Union. This is also of great international interest. I was pleased to have the opportunity to update President Obama on the latest devolvments when I met him in the White House on 15 March. As I have said on many occasions, Ireland's approach to EU negotiations on this issue, which culminated in the new settlement last month, was consistently constructive and very pragmatic. We have also been very clear that we believe the UK's continued membership of the European Union is in our best interests and those of the EU as a whole.

Discussions at the February meeting of the European Council were lengthy and detailed, as there were many complex and sensitive issues to be addressed. The objective was to reach an agreement which allowed Prime Minister Cameron to launch his campaign for the UK to remain in the Union, while also being acceptable to EU partners. The agreement actually achieved these aims. In my intervention at the European Council, I acknowledged the work of President Tusk, President Junker and their teams in preparing a balanced and detailed text for discussion. I outlined the importance of the issue for Ireland and for the Union as a whole. I emphasised the wider benefits to us all of some of the reforms under discussion, as well as of the

United Kingdom's continued membership of the Union, and I urged partners to support Prime Minister Cameron in seeking to secure agreement.

The decision of Heads of State and Government that emerged on 19 February is a binding agreement under international law and, as such, it was registered with the United Nations in New York on 24 February. Some of the measures will be implemented by amending existing EU regulations while others, for example, those regarding economic governance and sovereignty, will be incorporated into the EU treaties whenever the treaties are next being amended.

The measures agreed were in four key areas, namely, economic governance, competitiveness, sovereignty and social benefits. On economic governance, principles were agreed to ensure a balanced and equitable relationship between the eurozone and non-eurozone member states such as the UK. Ireland's position, while supporting this objective, was also to ensure that the euro area has the capacity to do what is necessary to ensure financial stability and economic growth. However, it must also act in full respect of the Single Market and of the integrity of the Union as a whole, and without prejudice to the interests of other member states. We were satisfied that the agreement delivers on these important points.

Under the competitiveness heading, it was clear from the outset that Ireland shared the UK's enthusiasm for reform in this area. The agreement commits the European Union to further strengthening the internal market, including the Digital Single Market, where Ireland has been particularly active. The agreement also contains new mechanisms and commitments to review and, as far as possible, reduce regulatory requirements and to accelerate work on international trade agreements, including the Transatlantic Trade Investment Partnership, TTIP, which probably will not now be concluded before the American presidential election.

On sovereignty, the language agreed regarding "ever closer union" struck a careful balance between the British requirement that it be clear that it was not committed to further integration and the importance that many partner countries attach to this integration. There was also agreement on a so-called "red card" procedure, which enhances the role of national parliament measures to prevent abuse of free movement.

Finally, on social benefits, after lengthy negotiations agreement was reached in two key areas: child benefit and in-work benefits. On child benefit, our programme for Government already contained a commitment to modifying this to reflect the cost of living in the member state where a child resides, so Ireland was supportive of the concept of indexation. The measure, which will be open for any member state to implement, will apply in respect of the children of all new EU workers, and of existing EU workers after a four year period. From Ireland's perspective, the question of whether we would seek to avail of this mechanism is for a future Government decision, when the appropriate financial and administrative factors have been considered.

On labour migration, a safeguard mechanism was agreed that would allow access to in-work benefits to be limited for a total period of up to four years. The measure is designed to reduce the pull factor of the distinctive UK social welfare system and the intention is that it applies to the UK only, certainly at this stage. Like other partners, Ireland was insistent throughout the negotiations that any changes in this area would not undermine fundamental principles such as freedom of movement or equal treatment. In this respect, the decision was prepared in full consultation with the Council and the Commission legal services and has been judged by them to be compatible with all the treaties.

22 March 2016

Although it was not raised in the negotiations at EU level, the Government is aware of the possible implications of these changes for Irish workers in the UK. I assure the House that this matter has been raised with our British counterparts, including in my own discussions with Prime Minister Cameron. The UK Administration is therefore well aware of our concerns and is sympathetic to them. The unique status of the Irish in Britain over very many years is fully recognised. This issue will have to be taken forward by the next Government as a detailed scheme is prepared.

After the European Council, the British Government announced that the referendum will take place on 23 June - three months and a day from now. As we are all aware, a vigorous debate is under way. The outcome is of course in the hands of the UK electorate. However, I believe it would be appropriate that efforts continue to ensure that the Irish perspective is explained and presented to them. I hope that voters, including the Irish in Britain and the people of Northern Ireland, will be very much aware of our close economic ties, the importance of the EU to the development of Northern Ireland, and the importance of the EU partnership between Ireland and Britain. I will say a few words on the European Union's engagement with Turkey, which was the focus of the European Council on Thursday and Friday of last week. These discussions were framed by the set of principles agreed at the previous meeting, on 7 March, with the Turkish Prime Minister. In the interim, the President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, advanced work to elaborate the details of a potential agreement to ensure that partners' concerns were addressed and that the proposed deal was compatible with EU and international law. The joint statement agreed commits Turkey to readmit from Greece all irregular migrants and protect them in accordance with international standards, to tackle people smugglers, and to help prevent new migratory routes to the European Union from opening up. As of last Sunday, the new rules will apply to all new irregular migrants, and it is planned that implementation will start in a couple of weeks.

For its part, the EU will resettle Syrians currently in Turkey on a one-for-one basis where other Syrians are returned from Greece. This is to be within the framework of commitments already made, in our case up to an overall ceiling of 4,000 people. Visa liberalisation for Turkish citizens travelling to the Schengen countries will be accelerated, as will preparations to open new EU accession negotiation chapters, but in both cases existing criteria will continue to apply. If the one-for-one scheme is working, the EU is also committed to deciding on further financial assistance for refugees in Turkey in addition to the €3 billion already agreed. We also agreed to work together to improve humanitarian conditions inside Syria so that safe areas might be established there.

The core intention of the agreement is to break the business model of people smugglers who are profiting seriously from the suffering of the vulnerable, and to stop migrants attempting the treacherous journey across the Aegean Sea. We know this agreement alone will not resolve the crisis. It will not stop people leaving Syria and it will not prevent people from wanting to come to Europe, but it should help us to manage the flow of asylum seekers more effectively, more humanely and, obviously, more fairly. Critically, it should stop people getting into unsafe boats and risking their very lives. Implementation, therefore, will be crucial, and both Greece and Turkey have to take important measures. The European Commission has already presented the first analysis of what is needed to help Greece deliver on the deal and is now actively considering with member states how to clarify and respond to the needs of a large number of personnel with a range of expertise. Ireland will make its contribution to this collective effort and we are urgently considering how best to do so. The need to comply with international law was at the

heart of the discussions. The legal advice of the EU institutions is that there is such compliance. This is also the view of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, which has, however, emphasised the need to ensure that all commitments are met.

I should note that I used the opportunity of the summit to tell the Turkish Prime Minister, Mr. Davutoğlu, about the concerns raised by the aid agency GOAL about the possible closure of the border crossing between Turkey and north-western Syria at Bab al-Hawa. Every month, 500 trucks cross this border crossing and service 1 million people in Syria. I outlined for him the humanitarian aid transported across the border, to which this country is a very significant contributor, and said that if it closed people's lives would be endangered and more people would be encouraged to cross into Turkey. The Prime Minister acknowledged these concerns and gave me his assurance that the Bab al-Hawa crossing would not close.

The EU has also made clear that Turkey's desire to progress towards EU membership cannot be realised without meeting all the standards and benchmarks that European Union membership requires. Of course, the agreement with Turkey is only one part of a multifaceted response to an unprecedented migration crisis, which has also included extensive co-operation with other regional areas in the western Balkans and in Africa. The Union has engaged in serious efforts to develop a comprehensive response to the crisis, with many difficult discussions along the way. The Minister of State, Deputy Dara Murphy, will elaborate on these aspects.

In February, the European Council agreed that economic policy should have a threefold emphasis: relaunching investment, putting in place structural reforms to modernise European communities, and ensuring responsible public finances. These remain the right priorities for supporting growth and jobs over the period ahead. The discussion last week was aimed at providing further guidance to member states. In the run-up to the European Council meeting the Commission produced individual country reports and in-depth reviews of member states, including Ireland. In general, our report was very positive. It underlines that a broad-based economic recovery is under way. The issues which it highlights, both economic and social, such as housing and increased investment in infrastructure are well known to all Deputies.

The European Council also committed to further implementation of all aspects of the Single Market. This includes delivering on the Commission's Single Market and capital markets union strategies but also on the digital Single Market, which is key for Ireland and on which we insisted. Ireland has strongly supported the further deepening of the Single Market and the digital Single Market with a view to exploiting their untapped growth and productivity potential.

These two meetings of the European Council addressed a diverse range of issues, although the focus was very much on migration and the EU-UK issue. I look forward to hearing Deputies' comments and thank the Ceann Comhairle for his indulgence.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I commence my speech on the European Council meeting by again condemning the attacks in Brussels and extending our deepest sympathy to the families of those who have been bereaved and the many who have been wounded and injured. The reports are still coming in. It is an horrific attack on our institutions, democracy and fellow citizens across Europe and beyond. On another occasion it will be appropriate for the House to reflect on these happenings, with others, in what is a changing international environment and a continually evolving situation in respect of terrorist attacks that have as their sole objective the murder of innocent civilians and citizens across the globe, the creation of mayhem and the undermining of a values system that we cherish and hold dear as a country and union.

22 March 2016

Five years ago, in March, a group of Syrian teenagers were arrested and tortured for writing graffiti that called for democracy in their country. The mass demonstrations this caused were brutally suppressed and the cycle of violence now called the Syrian civil war began. It has become the greatest humanitarian crisis in recent history. Instead of engaging with its people, the Assad regime chose to suppress them brutally. As the United Nations has stated, from the very beginning war crimes have been committed, including the regular use of chemical weapons denounced as barbaric 100 years ago when deployed in the First World War. The role played by Russia, Iran and Hezbollah in 2011 and 2012 in supporting President Assad in his refusal to allow a UN path to peace has been disastrous. Their targeting of attacks against moderate forces has helped the most repressive and radicalised elements to strengthen their position. The conflict, unfortunately, is testament to the weakening of international institutions and international co-operation in recent years. The use of Russian warplanes to bomb moderate forces, including Kurdish fighters who were successfully engaging the barbaric ISIS, is something even its most uncritical apologists have struggled to justify.

I hope peace talks will finally begin in a serious way. However, the first and absolute priority has to be aiding the victims of the conflict. Over 250,000 people have been killed and 11 million displaced, of whom over 4.5 million have left for other countries. They are living in desperate conditions in, at best, basic accommodation and with none of the social or economic facilities that might give them hope. There is no question that there is a refugee crisis. People in search of a future are leaving their homes and the camps. The pressures being faced in Europe are the inevitable outcome of five years of growing despair.

When we look at the scale of the crisis and the appalling humanitarian catastrophe involved, the outcome of last week's summit is, at best, inadequate and, at worst, shameful. The core agreement reached at the summit focused solely on trying to block the main migration route to Europe through tougher border controls enforcement. This is to be achieved primarily through Turkey preventing refugees from leaving, in return for which the Turkish Government is to receive a range of long-sought demands. I will return to this deal in a moment, but the first thing that has to be said is that it is incredible that nearly two days were spent discussing the refugee crisis after which a communiqué was produced which makes almost no reference to the single most important factor: why these refugees are fleeing to Europe, which is, of course, the conditions they are living in having fled their homes. The absolute priority should be an emergency programme to ensure decent conditions for refugees. Unfortunately, this is not the priority. The United Nations and relief agencies continue to struggle for funding. They are pushed to the very limit to provide basic shelter, food and safe water for millions. There is a basic moral duty on us and on all countries to step up and do more. We must not agree with the idea that our focus should be just those who are seeking refuge in Europe.

Ireland is doing proportionately more than others but this is not enough. I believe we should immediately review our support programme, both our direct aid to organisations and the funding we provide to international bodies. We should work with other countries to set, cost and deliver at least basic standards of provision. Fianna Fáil continues to support increased funding for aiding the victims of the horrific conflict, and we call upon the Government to prepare proposals in conjunction with the main relief organisations for how this can be done. In addition, we believe that a further expansion in EU humanitarian support should be tabled at the Foreign Affairs Council.

The deal with Turkey concerning the handling of refugees seeking to travel to Greece was the dominant topic at the summit. What has emerged is highly unlikely to deliver significant

benefits and it runs the risk of causing very serious damage to core principles of the European Union. Discouraging refugees from taking highly dangerous sea journeys is reasonable. However, linking this to visa-free travel for Turkish citizens and the speeding up of accession talks for Turkey sets a dangerous precedent. As Deputy Brendan Smith stated last week, we still oppose any measure which goes against clear legal obligations. Just as importantly, we insist that the European Union cannot compromise on core values which it demands of all members and of all countries that have automatic rights to access the Union.

For all the attacks on the Union which are made by its enemies on the extreme right and extreme left, it is a community of nations which respects the rule of law and upholds human rights to a level unmatched elsewhere in the world. Equally, these are the very values which mean that it is to Europe that so many are looking for refuge rather than to the countries which seek to undermine Europe. There is no way of looking at recent developments in Turkey and saying it is upholding core democratic values. The closing down of critical media is one part of what appears to be a growing intolerance to democratic ideals.

We must all stand in solidarity with the people of Turkey against the recent terrorist attacks. They and their Government are entitled to take strong action against those who clearly have no respect for the lives of innocent people. However, as has been shown elsewhere, the most effective way a democracy can combat terrorists is by upholding the rule of law.

Fianna Fáil is extremely concerned about developments in relation to the Kurdish population. The winning of seats in parliament by a party primarily backed by Kurds should have been welcomed as a positive development but was unfortunately treated as a threat. A long-term sustainable peace in Turkey requires a return to negotiations between the Government there and the main organisations representing the Kurdish people. The role of the PKK in fighting ISIS in Syria and Iraq is one which shows that it is an organisation which cannot be dismissed.

Few commentators have suggested that this deal will play a decisive role in reducing the number of refugees seeking to journey to Europe. What all have agreed is that elements of the deal have nothing whatsoever to do with refugees. However one wants to describe these demands by Turkey, the decision to agree to them makes last week's summit one which will not have an honourable place in the history of the Union.

On agricultural matters, these will be dealt with by Deputy Ó Cuív and others later today in a separate debate. The other items on the summit's agenda were merely formal. Leaders failed to have a substantive discussion about economic policy even though there are enormous concerns about deflationary pressures. The decision of the ECB to go further with extraordinary measures to try to lift economic demand should have caused some comments, yet the decision was to just keep ploughing on.

On Brexit, which was discussed at previous summits and which the Taoiseach referred to today, I am a little concerned about the Taoiseach's remarks about the situation of Irish workers in Britain. He is hinting or implying that there will be some unique bilateral deal done between the United Kingdom and Ireland in respect of Irish workers in Britain. It needs to be set out more transparently and honestly whether it is possible under the EU framework to have a UK-Ireland bilateral deal that would be separate from every other set of relationships within the European Union. I would appreciate it if the Taoiseach could forward me a paper on the matter and, indeed, circulate that to the House, because it is a significant issue coming down the tracks in terms of the changes that have been made to welfare and workers' entitlements and benefits,

particularly how these affect Irish workers in Britain.

A number of countries, including Italy and France, have raised concerns about how the current fiscal rules are being applied and there have been calls for greater flexibility to be shown. Ireland should be supporting them in this rather than quietly going along with an approach which has manifestly failed to return Europe to sustainable growth. Ireland is doing well because of the core strengths of its economy built up over decades. It would have helped the outgoing Government if it had spent less time trying to sell a cynical story of post-2011 deliverance and more time talking about the long-term sources of growth for our country. Across Europe, unfortunately, there have been strong advocates for an orthodoxy of austerity for all, which has not worked. There are countries and circumstances where it is avoidable, but there are others where an expansionary approach, such as that seen in the United States, could be implemented and would work. Europe has been badly served by leaders going quietly along with pre-determined and inflexible plans. We still need leaders willing to show the level of urgency and ambition capable of addressing the social, economic and humanitarian crises facing our countries.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Gerry Adams is sharing time with Deputy Seán Crowe.

Deputy Gerry Adams: I extend my condolences, once again, and my party's sympathies to the families of those who were killed or injured in Brussels this morning and I condemn in the strongest possible terms these horrendous attacks. News is still emerging about the extent of the attacks and the scale of the casualties. I extend the solidarity of Sinn Féin to the people of Belgium at this difficult time.

I will limit my remarks on the European Council to the refugee crisis because the conclusions of the latest Council meeting make for sober reading. Since Sunday all so-called irregular migrants who arrive in Greece are supposed to be sent back to Turkey, a country with a deplorable human rights record and a history of discriminating against minorities. The Taoiseach agreed to this. We are being told that everyone will first be screened and that only those who are deemed to be what the European Union considers irregular will be sent back across the Aegean. More than 800,000 refugees landed on Greek islands last year, yet the Taoiseach now thinks that Greece can rapidly set up a functioning and quality refugee screening programme while 2,000 refugees a day continue to arrive on makeshift boats from Turkey. We are being told that there will be no mass expulsions and that international and European law will be respected, but does the Taoiseach really believe that Greece, which is dealing with the social and economic fallout of its disgraceful treatment by the Eurogroup, including Ministers of his own Government, will be able to process hundreds of thousands of asylum claims and appeals in record time while at the same time respecting European and international laws and standards? Why does the Taoiseach ignore the concerns of notable human rights organisations and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees who stated that this deal will inevitably lead to human rights violations? Oxfam accused the EU of trading human beings for political concessions to Turkey, a country the EU has defined as a safe country of origin despite the mass human and civil rights violations that are being committed there. The response to the refugee crisis has been inadequate. What is important for this Dáil and the people of this island is that the Taoiseach has agreed to it and is going along with it. It is a further attempt to shift the problem away from the EU and to close our eyes to what can only be described as a humanitarian catastrophe.

Last year, the agreed plan was to relocate 160,000 refugees from Greece and Italy to other EU countries, and Sinn Féin supported it. The Taoiseach's announcement that the State would take in 4,000 refugees was a start to finding solutions, although we called on the Government

to do more and to create more legal avenues for refugees to be resettled here. To date, only 885 people have been relocated to other European states and only a handful have been relocated here. This is a disgrace in the face of the humanitarian crisis that has been building up for years. As an island people, with our history of coffin ships, we should have more affinity with those who are fleeing devastating war, hunger and oppression to seek asylum in Europe.

Today, the Taoiseach repeated that he had agreed to improve humanitarian conditions and establish safe areas within Syria. More than 250,000 people have been killed in Syria and 11 million people have been displaced, almost twice the population of this entire island. What is the price of returning vulnerable and desperate people to the place from which they have tried to flee? The EU will pay Turkey €3 billion and offer to open a further chapter in accession talks, despite Turkey's continuing occupation of half of Cyprus and its continued and well documented violations of human rights.

The founding principles of the EU were to combat social exclusion and discrimination, promote social justice and protection, protect human rights, foster solidarity between generations and protect the rights of the child. The latest decisions of the European Council show up the reality of these principles in practice, when the Mediterranean Sea has been turned into a graveyard. The EU, with the Taoiseach's acceptance, is planning to deport vulnerable and desperate men, women and children to the lowest bidder.

Last year, Naval Service vessels engaged in humanitarian actions in the Mediterranean saved thousands of lives, and we are thankful for and very proud of them. Each day, more refugees continue to drown. When will the Government reallocate a Naval Service vessel to the region?

Deputy Seán Crowe: I, too, want to be associated with the condolences to the families of those killed and injured in Brussels this morning. These attacks bring into sharp focus why millions of people are fleeing the violence, conflict and terror in Syria, Iraq and other parts of the world. The system by which these people and their families can get asylum, protection and safety is broken. We urgently need to fix it and create a system that will deliver a legal pathway for these vulnerable people.

A 70-page report was released by the European Court of Auditors on Thursday, 17 March, on the day the European Council meeting began. Unsurprisingly, it found that EU-funded migration projects in north Africa and eastern Europe have not achieved their goals and have largely ignored human rights. Was this element discussed at the meeting? It is another damning indictment of the EU's abject failures on the growing humanitarian and refugee crisis. The report noted that the return and readmission projects failed to deliver primarily because they were regarded by the receiving countries as part of the EU's security policy and that EU states neglected to prepare migrants for their return home. Due to a complete lack of oversight and accountability, the auditors have no real idea how much of the total €1.4 billion over the period was spent.

Jobs, growth and competitiveness was an important subject during the European Council meeting. Unfortunately, but again not surprisingly, it focused on completing the economic and monetary union, which will only further undermine the economic sovereignty of member states and try further to lock them into the disastrous economic and austerity models that have wreaked havoc on those on low and middle incomes across the EU.

My party colleague, Deputy Ó Broin, has secured documents released under the Freedom

22 March 2016

of Information Act that suggest that millions of euro, which were provided to Ireland through the European globalisation adjustment fund, EGF, had to be returned to the European Commission unspent. These funds were supposed to be spent on supporting workers who lost their jobs as a consequence of globalisation and €2.49 million was to be allocated for the 424 redundant Lufthansa Technik workers in Rathcoole, County Dublin. Considerably less than half of the Commission's €2.49 million contribution will be spent, while the remaining €1.5 million will be returned to Brussels. Why is this money not being fully utilised and spent on education and training, not only for workers who have lost their jobs at Lufthansa Technik, but also to support hundreds, if not thousands, of other young people from Dublin Mid-West and Dublin South-West who are not in education, training or employment?

On Sunday, 6 March, Ibrahim Halawa's trial was postponed for the 13th time and is supposedly to take place on 26 June. He has been detained without charge for more than 32 months, and has increasingly faced inhumane and unacceptable treatment. Did the Taoiseach specifically raise Mr. Halawa's case at the European Council meeting and did he seek the fully fledged support of other EU Heads of State to free this Irish and EU citizen? There are expressly clear grounds for Ibrahim's immediate release under Egyptian law, so-called law 140. Has the Taoiseach encouraged any other EU Head of State to lobby the Egyptian President for Ibrahim's immediate release under this law?

Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Joan Burton): There is a strong sense of disbelief that, as we discuss very important and vital European issues, we do so in the context of another terrorist atrocity striking at the heart of Europe. This morning's events in Brussels seem to be, yet again, the cold-blooded murder of innocent people. The clear objective behind the attacks is to destroy that which we cherish most, namely, our freedom. Families across Europe are worrying and praying for children and relatives. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Government will do everything they can to assist the people of Belgium and Irish citizens living there who may be affected in the hours and days to come.

The Schuman Declaration states:

Europe will not be made all at once, or according to a single plan. It will be built through concrete achievements which first create a de facto solidarity.

We will not allow terrorism to destroy that solidarity. In the recent election campaign, the Labour Party made it very clear that we were, and would continue to be, very committed to the development of a social Europe of full employment, investment, social progress, social provision and equality for men and women. We believe Ireland will be strong and our interests best served when there is a strong Union.

The economic crisis, Europe's handling of it and the impact on citizens have severely tested the solidarity between EU member states. It has meant a retreat into an intergovernmental mind set, despite an increase in the EU's powerful transnational institutions. This has undermined the vision for the EU to become a leading political and economic powerhouse in the world.

12 o'clock

It is, therefore, essential for the EU to enter a new phase of rebuilding its institutions, its infrastructure and its place in the life of all the citizens of Europe. Of course, the possibility of a British exit from the EU poses its own risks to this crucial mission. It is undoubtedly in the interests of Ireland and the EU as a whole for the UK to remain in the Union. This is a vital issue

for the whole of the island of Ireland. We are commemorating 1916 this week. It is remarkable that 100 years later, through the development of the EU and its institutions, we now sit with the British as equals at the European table.

We believe the agreement that was reached at the February Council meets the political requirements of the UK Prime Minister, Mr. Cameron, and is acceptable to all EU partners. I would like to refer briefly to an area of the agreement that falls under the remit of the Department of Social Protection. In the 2011 programme for Government, we committed to “raise the issue of payment of Child Benefit in respect of non-resident children at EU level”. We did so because the bill in respect of non-resident children had increased significantly to a peak of €20.9 million in 2008. I raised the issue personally and in great detail with the Commissioner. The Union chose not to engage with the issue at that time despite strong efforts on the part of the Government, so we took another approach, namely, to ensure child benefit was paid only to families who legitimately had an entitlement to it. Rigorous checks were introduced and made under the Department’s control and fraud prevention programmes. Customers of the Department whose children are resident abroad are now required to confirm their continued entitlement to the benefit every six months. This must include a statement from the person’s employer confirming that he or she is employed in Ireland. As a result of this approach, the cost of paying child benefit in respect of non-resident children decreased by 39% to €12.7 million last year. This is an important saving for the State. I make no apologies for ensuring the payment goes only to those legitimately entitled to it. I have always championed our social welfare system as a safety net for those who need it most. That safety net is more important than ever in the current economic climate. However, it is precisely because the State’s limited resources should go to those most in need that we must prevent any abuse of the system. As a result of the February Council meeting, the concept of indexation is now on the table. This would mean linking the rate of payment to the country in which the child resides. In my view, it is a much fairer system for every member state. The question of whether Ireland will seek to avail of this mechanism as it develops will be a matter for the next Government - taking account of financial and administrative factors - to decide upon.

I would like to turn to the issue of migration, which has been the focus of all the recent meetings. It is an unspeakable tragedy that men, women and children are dying daily in the Mediterranean. Sadly, the migration crisis has underscored the Union’s inability to move at the required speed, which is one of its great weaknesses. The EU has engaged in some serious efforts to develop a comprehensive response but the implementation of key elements of that response has been tortuously slow. That is why the Government has placed a strong emphasis on the need to step up the implementation of agreed measures. At the recent Council meeting, agreement was secured with Turkey on a series of action points to end irregular migration from Turkey to the EU and to seek to reduce the power and, indeed, the profits of the people smugglers. This controversial agreement, which has attracted some criticism, seeks to save lives by tackling the people smugglers and deterring migrants from attempting the treacherous journey to Greece. They are the objectives that Europe is seeking to address. Time will tell how possible it will be to achieve much of what the agreement seeks. This agreement alone will not solve the crisis. If, however, it is properly and fairly implemented, it can be an important part of the EU’s overall response. Ireland will play its part in all of this. We have consistently emphasised the importance of responding to the root causes of the migration crisis, as well as the humanitarian challenges posed by it.

Making peace in Syria has to be the primary objective of EU policy. Millions of people

have been displaced and forced into exile. The vast majority of those who have had to flee for their lives want to see Syria at peace so they can return home to seek to rebuild their lives. That should be the central part of Irish and EU policy in this regard. Last September, we committed to admitting 4,000 people under the various resettlement and relocation programmes. When I spoke about that figure previously, I said I would like the focus with regard to resettlement in this country to be on families with children. Furthermore, when people resettle here, I would like there to be a focus on language skills, particularly those relating to English, and on helping people to obtain employment. We have provided significant humanitarian assistance to Syria. We had given €42 million by the end of 2015 and we will further increase our level of humanitarian assistance this year. We are very proud of our Naval Service, which has saved the lives of more than 8,500 people, and we will participate in further humanitarian efforts to save people in the Mediterranean. This may well be a matter for the next Government. It is essential for the EU to continue to strengthen its response to this appalling humanitarian crisis. The pace of that response should be stepped up.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I wish to share time with Deputy Paul Murphy.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I want to start by expressing solidarity and sympathy with the people of Brussels following the awful and outrageous attacks that have taken place in an airport and at a train station there this morning. All of our hearts, minds and thoughts go to the people of that multicultural and cosmopolitan city, regardless of where they come from. Our thoughts are with them and their families. Our thoughts also need to be with the people of Istanbul, where a bombing earlier this month cost at least four people their lives and led to many others being seriously injured. It is important also to mention last month's car bomb in Baghdad, as a result of which 70 people lost their lives, because it has gone completely unmentioned and unnoticed by most people on the planet. All people's lives are valuable, regardless of whether they live in Brussels or Baghdad. We need to take note of that. All of these people are victims of terrorism and war. I just want to make a comment on that. I believe that, at present, the world is locked into a cycle of war on terrorism. There seems to be no break in that cycle. In fact, matters seem to be escalating all the time. One of the priorities of any leader in the world today must be to find a way of breaking the cycle of countries engaging in occupation, war and intervention in parts of the world in which they have no business. This is the message that should go out from a so-called neutral country such as Ireland through the European Council. In this regard, Ireland could lead by example by refusing to allow Shannon Airport or any other utility in this country to be used for intervention and imperialist activity in other parts of the world.

On the substantive issue before us, perhaps the Taoiseach, Deputy Enda Kenny, will say whether, at the European Council meeting - where, according to himself, he is well respected - he indicated, with as much vigour as did David Cameron in representing his people, that owing to the serious, extraordinary and unprecedented housing crisis in Ireland, the details of which we will discuss further later this afternoon, although I will mention that there were 700 families, including 1,500 children, in emergency accommodation last night, we will have to build at least 5,000 social houses each year for the next ten years, such that we will have to break its fiscal rules and do whatever it takes to ensure the human rights of our population. Has the Taoiseach ever done that? If not, why not? Would the Taoiseach not take a leaf out of David Cameron's book - although the latter's motives are more selfish - and determinedly represent the people of this country in terms of addressing this crisis?

Ireland has promised to take in 4,000 refugees. However, it has so far taken in fewer than 300 refugees. While the knee-jerk reaction will be for people to ask why we are taking in refugees when we cannot look after or accommodate our own people, the response must be that we have to look after both the people of this country and the refugees in the current crisis. I have many friends in Syria. It is a country I have visited many times, and I loved it. While I have heard recently from many of my friends there, I have not heard from many others in the last four or five years. Some of them are stuck in the Yarmouk Palestinian camp in Damascus, where people are literally dying of famine. We have no idea of the suffering, treachery, rape, plunder, pillage, murder and terror visited on those people by proxy armies from Russia, Saudi Arabia and the Syrian regime. These people, in their droves, risk drowning, misery or being encamped on borders for months on end with young children, and losing their families at sea, because that threat still exists, yet they are hopeful of a future for their families.

To say that the deal with Turkey with regard to the refugee crisis is any more than horse-trading is probably being a bit kind to that deal. According to *The Financial Times*, Turkey will get €6 billion, visa-free travel for its citizens and accelerated European Union membership. However, this does not mean that Turkey will comply with the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. It already has 3 million refugees inside its borders, most of whom are not living in organised camps but are scattered in towns, villages and rural areas, living in deep poverty. It is being said that Turkey is capable of taking in more refugees and that Europe is overloaded, but the contrary is the case: Europe is one of the richest parts of this planet, but it has not done its fair share in taking in refugees.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): The Deputy's time has expired.

Deputy Bríd Smith: For every refugee taken into Europe, Lebanon takes in 20,000. We need to think about that.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): I must ask the Deputy to conclude.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I would like to finish my contribution.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): The Deputy is eating into her colleague's speaking time.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I will conclude on this point. Those people about whom we are speaking, in the context of the removal of people from Greece and their return to Turkey, will be taken by force. These people, of whom there are approximately 46,000, will not go gently into the night; they did not cross the seas, risking life and limb and spending all of their money, and sit on the Macedonian border for months only to agree to be returned to Turkey. There will be violence and state terrorism. This is already happening. If we stand over it, shame on Ireland. On the anniversary of the Easter Rising, shame on Ireland for voting for this agreement. I ask that the Taoiseach return to the European Council and withdraw Ireland's support for this outrageous agreement.

Deputy Paul Murphy: There have been many low points for the European Union over the past few years, including the campaign of terror unleashed against the Greek people for daring to stand up to the troika's austerity, the fiscal treaty outlawing any policy other than Thatcherism, and the silent coups led by the European Central Bank against the Greek and Italian Governments, but regardless of how low the Taoiseach and the other European leaders have previously gone, they have now managed to go lower with this agreement with Turkey. To be

22 March 2016

blunt, it is an agreement to breach the basic human rights of some of the most vulnerable people in the world, namely, those fleeing Syria. It is an agreement for the mass expulsion of refugees from Greece and an agreement to outsource keeping refugees out of Europe to an authoritarian regime with a record of ongoing and systematic abuse of human rights. It is an agreement to turn Turkey and, apparently, a supposedly safe area of Syria into a prison camp for those fleeing war in the Middle East.

I am sure that most of the leaders of the European Union look down their noses at the right-wing, anti-migrant populism of Donald Trump. I am sure they laugh at the idea of him saying that he will force Mexico to pay for the construction of a wall to keep migrants out, but they are no better than him. This agreement is the equivalent of paying Mexico to build a wall to keep migrants out. The European Union is agreeing to turn Turkey into a wall to keep migrants out to protect fortress Europe. The agreement is so bad that it breaches the European Union's own rules. Collective expulsions are prohibited under the European Convention on Human Rights. The first sentence of the first point of the agreement states that all new irregular migrants crossing from Turkey to the Greek islands as and from 20 March 2016 will be returned to Turkey. In what world is that not a collective expulsion? The second sentence states that this will take place in full compliance with EU and international law, thus excluding any kind of collective expulsion. It belongs in *1984*. "War is peace; freedom is slavery; ignorance is strength." Collective expulsion is not collective expulsion because we say it is not collective expulsion. It is the equivalent of Richard Nixon saying to David Frost, "When the president does it, that means it is not illegal."

In order to meet this legal fiction, one has to declare that Turkey is a safe third country. On what planet is Turkey a safe third country? It is not a safe country for its own citizens, so how can it be a safe country for Kurdish people fleeing Syria when it is engaged in a war against its own people - Kurdish people - within the Turkish borders, or for those who criticise it in the media and those who stand up to it? It imprisons such people. Turkey has an horrific human rights record. It is a country that is currently guilty of returning refugees to Iraq and Syria, a country guilty of not giving refugee status to those who are fleeing Syria. This is the country to which EU border control is being handed. People will have seen the videos of Turkish coast guards deliberately trying to capsize boats of refugees attempting to reach Europe. Blood will be on the hands of EU leaders, as it currently is, if they proceed with this.

The Greek borders are to be policed by an additional 4,000 people from FRONTEX. The Taoiseach, echoed by other EU leaders, has said that, critically, this should stop people getting into unsafe boats and risking their lives. People are not risking their lives for a laugh; they are fleeing war, poverty and oppression, and they will not stop. What is being done will result in more people being killed. Some 85% of migrants in Greece are from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia and other countries in which there is Western intervention. Defend the right to asylum; end fortress Europe and allow people to come here.

Deputy Clare Daly: It is somewhat poignant that this discussion is taking place against the backdrop of the appalling terrorist attacks in Belgium, a slaughter of innocents and an experience which, unfortunately, is an almost daily occurrence in the Middle East and is now happening in mainland Europe. While we obviously offer our deepest sympathies to the victims of that atrocity and condemn those actions utterly, we cannot divorce what is going on in terms of the rise of terrorism from the emerging catastrophe and humanitarian refugee crisis. They are both by-products of imperialist interventions in the Middle East and unless we take these points on board and address our complicity in these matters, we will never get justice and the terror being

experienced so horrifically today will continue unabated.

Obviously, the primary purpose of the Council meeting and this debate was and is to deal with the humanitarian crisis involving refugees. Never in the history of the operation of human rights organisations has there been such condemnation of the activities of the European Union. When have the executive director of Human Rights Watch, the secretary general of Amnesty International and the secretary general of the European Council on Refugees and Exiles ever jointly written to the European Union to say nobody should be under any illusion that the very principle of international protection for those fleeing war and persecution is at stake? They have pointed out that governments had a choice. The choice before them was whether they should defend the right to asylum or to horse-trade with a country with an inadequate record in supporting human rights. Unfortunately, the EU establishment and Ireland have an ignominious history of horse-trading on these issues. Since the deal was announced and agreed, every human rights organisation has been in uproar. They have not minced their words, describing what has happened as a dark day for the refugee convention, Europe and humanity. Sometimes, exaggerated statements are made in the House and across the airwaves. However, these sentiments are probably an understatement regarding what is going on.

What has the European Union done? It is stating refugees arriving in Greece exhausted, terrified, cold, wet and desperate will be promptly picked up, put on boats and sent back to Turkey. There is no question whatsoever that the process will be one of illegal mass expulsions from Europe of people who - let us face it - have an absolute right under international law to seek asylum in Europe. Mass collective expulsions are prohibited under the ECHR. That is what this deal facilitates because there is no institutional capacity on the Greek islands to process refugee applications in such a short time. The only thing that will result is mass expulsions which cannot be made legally. We are supposed to believe Europe will accept in exchange 72,000 refugees under a one-to-one resettlement scheme. As it stands, that equates to 2.6% of the 2.7 million Syrians in Turkey, but we all know that nothing like 72,000 will get into Europe, given that by January this year, fewer than 800 had been brought to Europe under a 2015 deal to resettle 22,500 refugees. If the European Union cannot even do that, how will it deal with larger numbers? Ireland has to look at itself in this regard.

When the crisis broke and refugees were drowning in the numbers that they were, there was an outpouring of grief and sympathy from Irish citizens and a demand that we take more than the 4,000 refugees we had agreed to take. The State has not even taken in a fraction of that number and the Government has only planned for approximately 5% of the number. When he replies to questions, the Taoiseach needs to address how he will deal with that issue. Every principle of international law on asylum has been contravened by the deal. How Europe deals with the refugee crisis and those fleeing atrocities in which both it and Ireland are complicit must be addressed. It is a stain on the Continent's collective history and we will reap a whirlwind for it, unless it is addressed. We have been horrified by refugees being tear-gassed and beaten in Hungary, Slovenia, Macedonia and France. We stood by and allowed refugees to drown in their thousands. We can look at Council meetings that took place as a perfect example of what Hannah Arendt called "a banality of evil". The Council is bartering humans, which is dehumanising and despicable. It is akin to what happened in the 1930s in attitudes to refugees. I do not make that point lightly, but there are parallels worth noting because following the Anschluss in 1938, the British Government tightened entry requirements for Austrian Jews by introducing strictly controlled visas precisely to restrict their numbers. A total of 65,000 Austrian Jews died in the Holocaust. At the Evian Conference in 1938 all 32 nations attending, including Ireland and the

22 March 2016

rest of Europe, made sad faces about the plight of the Jews fleeing persecution in Germany but the only country to accept more was the Dominican Republic. In 2016 Europe wants to barter human lives with a country that does not fully recognise refugees and that will almost certainly return as many of them as possible to the countries from which they came because the Union will not accept responsibility for dealing with the humanitarian crisis.

I could go on all day about this, but we need to consider Turkey specially. Its human rights record is bad and getting worse. The country is rapidly deteriorating into an authoritarian, repressive state with severe restrictions on freedom of speech and assembly, a compromised judicial system and a terrifying security crackdown on anyone who dares to speak out. Last week three academics were jailed for signing a petition which talked about security operations against the PKK youth movement. There have been persistent reports of the abuse of refugees, with guards at unofficial border crossings shooting at and beating refugees and pushing them back to the Syrian war zone, the closure of borders arbitrarily and so on. These are facts. Other Deputies have referred to the fact that Turkey has never done away with the geographical limitation which was lifted by most signatories to the Geneva Convention in 1967, whereby refugees from anywhere except the European Union can only claim a limited form of temporary protection that falls far short of the full protection to which they are entitled elsewhere. Turkey cannot be considered to be a safe third country to return refugees. EU law specifically states a third country can only be considered safe if it has ratified the provisions of the Geneva Convention without any geographical limitations, but Turkey has not done so. Refugees do not have the right to work there and there are severe restrictions on numbers which make it almost meaningless. There is no judicial oversight or independent inspection of many of the detention centres where many refugees are held and NGOs are not allowed to monitor what is going on. President Erdoğan recently said “establishing a safe zone [which he is doing in conjunction with the European Union] constitutes the basis of 1.7 million Syrian refugees’ return.” They are talking about building refugee camps inside Syria and returning refugees to them. As Human Rights Watch stated, this is a little like creating the so-called safe zones that were established in Srebrenica and we all know what happened there.

What happened in Europe this week was described as being “on the edge of the law”. That is not the case because it has gone over the edge. There was an excellent article in *The Irish Times* last Saturday by Thomas Klau in which he described the consequences of this deal. He stated: “If ... Europe ... now leaves millions of grandparents, mothers, fathers, youths and children to fester in hopeless poverty, vegetating in shantytowns and squalor, all this a few hundred or dozens of kilometres away from our borders, then we had better prepare for the price to pay.” That is poignant in the context of what has happened today because terrorism and refugees are two sides of the same coin of imperialist intervention and until we shape up to our responsibility in that regard, we, too, will be complicit in that action. As a neutral country, Ireland should positively stand against this. I am ashamed to say the Taoiseach did not, even if he had to stand alone in Europe. He should have done so to be true to the history of his country.

Deputy Stephen S. Donnelly: I start by expressing on behalf of the Social Democrats our deepest sympathies to the people of Belgium, the people of Brussels and the many foreigners living there, including Irish people. I was living in London and working for Transport for London when the Tube bombings took place. The effect of horrific attacks on cities and people cannot be overstated. I express our deepest condolences and solidarity with the people of Belgium and Brussels.

I am sorry the Taoiseach has just left. I will direct my comments on the European Council

meeting instead to the Minister of State, Deputy Dara Murphy. The Social Democrats are very disappointed with what has just happened at the European Council meeting in respect of the migration crisis. It is very clear from the statements from the European Council that the main focus has been on securing Europe's borders rather than on doing what is best for the people fleeing five years of horror and conflict in Syria. The communications from the European Council meeting include a focus on border guards and returning a great number of asylum seekers to Turkey. The European Council statement mentioned that priority would continue to be given to regaining control of our external borders. It does not say anything as strong or definitive about giving priority to the rights and dignity of the many men, women and children fleeing conflict. It is very disappointing to see that. Indeed, it was very disappointing, as I listened carefully to the Taoiseach's statement this morning, not to hear him give such priority to the fleeing asylum seekers, the so-called irregular migrants. What of the priority of the dignity and rights of these Syrians? With regard to the joint action plan with Turkey, what measures are being implemented to ensure that the asylum seekers being relocated are treated with dignity? I imagine they will be forcefully relocated if they do not want to go back to Turkey. According to the European Council statement, the EU reiterated that it expected Turkey to respect the highest standards when it came to democracy, the rule of law and respect of fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression. This statement was made in the context of Turkey's track record in these areas. It is very clear that words are not enough. Expecting Turkey to do the right thing by these men, women and children is not enough. The EU needs to put in place very clear safeguards and standards, including monitoring of how returned fleeing migrants are treated in Turkey.

Amnesty International's response was unambiguous. It decried the joint action plan for Turkey as "an historic blow to human rights". Amnesty says Europe is turning its back on these refugees. The Amnesty response continues:

Guarantees to scrupulously respect international law are incompatible with the touted return to Turkey of all irregular migrants ... Turkey is not a safe country for refugees and migrants, and any return process predicated on its being so will be flawed, illegal and immoral.

I cannot see any safeguard that has been put in place for these migrants. It is safe to assume that the return of migrants - of asylum seekers - to Turkey is predicated on words in the statement to the effect that the European Union expects Turkey to do right by these people, to respect international law and to respect human rights. I cannot see resources being put in place to ensure that those rights are respected. It seems sadly safe to conclude that the return of irregular migrants to Turkey will be flawed, illegal and immoral.

I would like the Minister of State to set out when he addresses the House what safeguards are being put in place for these migrants and, critically, to say what safeguards, measures and resources the Irish Government has insisted on for migrants being forcefully relocated back to Turkey, given its track record. He might provide a report to the House. It is welcome that emergency resources are being provided to Greece to help cope with the crisis as long as those resources are used to support migrants and their human rights and dignity. I ask again what measures the Irish Government asked for and advocated for at the European Council meeting in that regard. We need to play a role in ensuring the protection of the rights and dignity of people fleeing conflict in Syria.

We also need to play whatever role we can, as a small neutral country, to address the underlying causes of the migration crisis. Nearly 5 million people have fled their homes in Syria over

the last five years and we are now entering what has come to be known as “drowning season” in the Mediterranean. The situation in Syria is so bad that people feel they have no choice but to risk their lives and those of their children to get out of Syria and Turkey and into the European Union. It appears that the European Union has just agreed to send back to Turkey people who have risked their lives and the lives of their children to get into the EU. It is unclear how they are going to be treated once they are relocated. Providing resources to tackle people smuggling and to discourage people from attempting the journey is really not going to have much of an impact as long as people feel the situation is so bad that they have no choice but to risk their lives and those of their children. As such, we must support peace building efforts in Syria so that the Syrian people can return there to live without fear and rebuild their country after five years. Ireland can provide more resources directly. We have sent our Naval Service vessels, and the Social Democrats recognise fully the role they have played. We must also support calls for more funding for the UN Commission on Human Rights, as well as Amnesty International, Oxfam and other groups trying to work in Syria and outside it to support the people fleeing that country. What plans does the Government have not only to contribute more but also to call on others to step up? The UN has been calling China out on its contribution of less than €1 million. If that is not the exact sum, it has certainly been a very small amount so far. There has been a focus on the lack of aid from some Asian countries. We can obviously play more of a role in that regard.

It feels to the Social Democrats, based on what emerged from the European Council meeting and the Taoiseach’s speech today, that the Irish Government is fine with relocating these people to Turkey without the right safeguards being put in place. In his summing up to the House, I ask the Minister of State to indicate whether the Government is satisfied - and if he is satisfied, as Minister of State with responsibility in this area - that all of the necessary supports and monitoring mechanisms for the welfare of the men, women and children being returned to Turkey are in place. If the Government is not satisfied as to that, what will it do to advocate that these things be established? If it is not satisfied, will it advocate at European Union level that these men, women and children should not be returned to Turkey?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): The next speakers, Deputies Eamon Ryan and Catherine Martin of the Green Party, are sharing time. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: We are debating this matter under the shadow of the attacks in Brussels this morning. There is obviously a connection. There is a connection in the sense that the wars that are flaming in Syria and Iraq and involve extremist Islamic groups are extending into our own Continent. We must question what is happening on the Continent on that wider scale. One point that we should agree on is that in our response in defence of our European beliefs and values, we should stick to the rule of law and the agreement on the use of international collaboration and follow the proper protocols and legal mechanisms as set out in the various conventions on human rights. We should stand by these as a way of defeating those who believe they can justify the killing of innocent civilians.

By this yardstick, the deal that was agreed between Europe and Turkey and signed off on at the recent European Council meeting fails the test. Europe is not living up to the ideals for which we stand. This weakens rather than strengthens us and does a major injustice and potential harm to the hundreds of thousands of people fleeing turmoil in the Middle East and elsewhere.

I am speaking as a member of the European Green Party, which approaches this issue col-

lectively. We regret deeply that a legal agreement has not been signed, only a statement that is not subject to parliamentary oversight in the European Parliament or nationally. We can discuss it but we do not have a mechanism to challenge it legally or question its provisions. As other Deputies mentioned, it is a question of signing up to the statement and hoping that those who will be refused access to our borders will find safe havens in the so-called hot spots or Turkey, to which we are consigning people. We are saying “No” to that right of asylum, that right to arrive on our shores and seek refuge. These people are coming from the cradle of our civilisation. While the level of war and turmoil in the Middle East is unprecedented, this situation is not new and has been around since Abraham, Jacob and Moses migrated. Homer travelled those same waters. That migration is a central part of us. I had not realised something until I read about it recently but the iconography that we look at down the road in the Book of Kells stems from a Syrian tradition. While the situation is distant in some way and we as an island are separated from it, we are not removed in every sense. We have a responsibility to look after those who are fleeing.

Particularly reprehensible in the approach that is being taken is the differentiation between those fleeing different countries. Most are seeking asylum on the basis of need and yet Syrians are treated differently from those fleeing Afghanistan, Somalia and other countries that are in deep turmoil. This approach will not be effective. As much as we might try to police our borders and restrict access to new arrivals, they will find other paths, as we have seen from the hundreds of thousands of people queuing up in Libya and the recent arrivals in Sicily as opposed to taking a Greek route. The answer to this cannot be fortress Europe. We must maintain the standards and rights by which we live and extend them to those who are fleeing if we are to try to dampen the immediate crisis.

There are concerns about the increasingly restrictive administration in Turkey but we should look to our own door and what has happened in Europe. The way that Europe approached Turkish accession in the past ten years is coming back to haunt us because we did not deal with it as a proper community. We took last-minute decisions under which a promised accession process was withdrawn without agreement or a common European approach. Our problems are partly caused by the breakdown in our collaborative approach, which has led to individual deals and member states trying to manage crises on a case-by-case basis.

I will revert to the Taoiseach’s statement in this regard. The Council meeting considered a wide range of issues beyond just that of migration. The Taoiseach also referred to the February Council meeting on which he was unable to report at the time. His report on that meeting was extensive. That Council saw an international legal agreement to try to placate British interests and arrange cover for Prime Minister Cameron on the Brexit issue. Britain’s approach of distancing itself from Europe and opting out of a common European approach to refugees and other issues is shaping the whole European approach. There is a concern about the nature of the direction that Britain wants to take internationally and that we are aligning ourselves too closely to it.

I noted the Taoiseach’s comments on an issue that will arise for consideration in the House in the coming months, that being, the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, TTIP, negotiations. According to the Taoiseach, there was agreement “to accelerate work on international trade agreements, including the Transatlantic Trade Investment Partnership, TTIP”. At this uncertain point in the world, some of the underlying assumptions and ideology that have applied for the past 34 years - that trade must trump justice and the needs of international corporations must be looked after for us to be able to progress and develop effective economies - are

no longer true or fair and need to be questioned. The other Deputies on this side of the House who spoke today were right. Instead of continuing to tie ourselves to a British Conservative world view, be it on migration, trade or environmental standards, we should be willing to stand up, question it and state that different models of economics and justice are necessary.

I wish to discuss the two other elements that the Taoiseach raised. He referred to the need for increased investment in the EU, as set out in the Council conclusions. He also mentioned that the country report on Ireland recognised the need for investment. However, he passed over a matter that is of critical interest to the House and needs to be debated in the context of our EU engagement. The European Commission's country report was damning of our lack of long-term investment in basic infrastructure such as housing, water and transport. The Taoiseach claimed that we all knew this but he failed to recognise the Commission's statement that the Government's capital plan was inadequate. He glossed over this even though it was an issue at the European Council.

I am covering many issues in a short contribution. Last but not least, the Taoiseach mentioned the reference at the European Council meeting to the recent Paris agreement and the need for governments to sign up to it. While that is true, of concern was the EU's inability to show leadership and act on the agreement as opposed to saying that we should sign up to it. These issues are connected. The migration in Syria that started with the war five years ago came on the back of a stressed country suffering an extreme drought. According to all of the analysis from the best climate scientists, such extreme weather conditions will drive mass migrations from India, Pakistan, the Middle East and north Africa in the future. We must prepare for this. The inaction and lack of debate and engagement on this climate issue at the recent Council meeting show a continuation of short-term and narrow thinking that does not address the fundamental causes of the problems.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): I understand that Deputies Pringle and Healy are sharing time. I presume that it will be five minutes each.

Deputy Thomas Pringle: Yes. The EU-Turkey deal on migration agreed recently is unprecedented. There are no agreements similar to this. It is a play on and manipulation of existing agreements, both bilateral between the European Union and Turkey and within the European Union itself.

The European Union states:

People who do not have a right to international protection will be immediately returned to Turkey. The legal framework for these returns is the bilateral readmission agreement between Greece and Turkey. From 1 June 2016, this will be succeeded by the EU-Turkey Readmission Agreement, following the entry into force of the provisions on readmission of third country nationals of this agreement.

There are considerable legal ambiguities here, but even more disconcerting are the severe human rights issues that could be at play. How can the authorities decide so quickly that somebody is not entitled to international protection and to return him or her to Turkey? We have seen in Ireland how long it takes to decide on the cases of asylum seekers.

I reiterate the view of the Immigrant Council of Ireland, the Irish Refugee Council and other organisations that a humanitarian crisis needs a humanitarian response, with the needs of men, women and children central to any development. This is clearly not the case in the recently

agreed EU-Turkey deal. There is supposedly an understanding that no decisions will be taken without being compliant with international and European law. How do we actually know that? We do not. We are relying on Turkey and Greece to satisfy us in this regard. How will part of the €3 billion dedicated to oversight in Turkey prevent potential mass deportations of people entering either Turkey or Greece, and how will the safety of these people be ensured, regardless the outcome of their application for asylum? There are significant problems in this regard.

The agreement asserts that if one has tried to get to the European Union illegally, one will be at the back of the line in the legal resettlement process. On the ground, this translates to a policy whereby anyone entering Greece from Turkey from now on will automatically be sent back to Turkey because, all of a sudden, Turkey is now classified as a safe third country despite its dismal human rights record. We have only to consider how Turkey has been treating its own Kurdish population in this regard.

Turkey provides to Syrians only temporary protection that falls short of full refugee status. Human rights groups deem Turkey's sudden transition into what is termed a "safe third country" as ludicrous and highly improbable, meaning the European Union will overlook a certain amount of human rights abuses in order to push ahead with this deal. Even under the most generous interpretation of the rules, only Syrian asylum seekers, who currently make up half of those arriving in Greece, could be returned to Turkey.

The procedures Ireland has put in place are such that it has accepted only 5% of the agreed 4,000 refugees, which amounts to only 200 people. Only ten have actually accepted relocation in Ireland. Should we not address our own lack of engagement in this humanitarian crisis before we support others and before we support changes in EU rules and procedures that will have such a huge impact on this humanitarian crisis? The undignified attempt to swap one refugee for another is in itself an affront to the notions of human rights, dignity and respect for vulnerable people. Some 2,000 people are still attempting to reach Greece from Turkey every day despite this agreement last week. The agreement will only result in refugees taking even greater risks to trek across more treacherous ground or seas to enter Europe. This deal brings greater risk to already extremely vulnerable people and is again an affront to human rights.

Today I call on the caretaker Taoiseach to respond to these humanitarian concerns and express opposition to this EU deal. With only an acting Government in place there can be no opposition to tie the Taoiseach into such an agreement. Not only are there issues regarding international human rights breaches within this agreement, but there are also concerns regarding the legality and monitoring capacity of this agreement. Although there is no start date set, the European Union has been quick to implement this agreement in the hope of avoiding a "pull factor" before the new system takes effect. Real questions remain as to how everyone is going to monitor what is termed the "swapping" of Syrian refugees on the ground, and nobody seems to be able to explain this. The commitment by Turkey to overhaul its own asylum system so it adheres to Geneva standards and can carry the "safe third country" status is a non-legally binding one, and there are many questions as to how both Greece and Turkey will overhaul their systems overnight. We know the European Union is prepared to turn a blind eye to this in order to have a potential wall around the Union to prevent people coming in.

There are alternative channels for migration and legal pathways, including an important high-level meeting on global responsibility sharing through pathways for the admission of Syrian refugees on 30 March, to be hosted by the UNHCR. This meeting will attempt to address commitments for over 170,000 resettlement and humanitarian admission places for Syrian refu-

22 March 2016

gees, with a target for admission for 10% of Syrian refugees over the next three years. The EU-Turkey deal attempts to overshadow and undermine this agreement, which would be international. That is where the European Union should be engaging.

Deputy Seamus Healy: Today at South Tipperary General Hospital, there are 44 patients on chairs, trolleys and corridor beds awaiting admission. I am told this is the highest number on trolleys in the hospital in the whole country. What has this to do with the debate we are having here today? It has, of course, everything to do with it. The hospital is starved of resources. Approximately 25% of its budget, or approximately €15 million, has been cut over recent years. This is because the previous Government, namely the Fianna Fáil–Green Party Government, and the current Government, the Fine Gael–Labour Party Government, have agreed to pay €7 billion in debt repayments every year to EU institutions and banks. I wonder whether the Taoiseach raised the issue of debt and its renegotiation at the recent meetings. He told us approximately two and a half years ago that there would be a game-changer in regard to debt. It never happened. Now our services, including health and housing services, and economy are being absolutely devastated by the fact that huge sums of money are being paid out of the country to financial institutions right across Europe, including very wealthy ones. Some €7 billion per year is being paid.

The fiscal treaty agreed following the Lisbon treaty has created a new colonialism within Europe. That treaty flies in the face of the 1916 Proclamation. It is not a sovereignty-sharing treaty. It effectively sets aside Irish sovereignty and hands it over to big EU powers. It must be renegotiated. This could best be done in the framework of a debt-neutralisation conference. Ireland should demand such a conference and seek support for this demand from Greece, Portugal, Cyprus, Spain, Italy and others. The fiscal treaty requirement for Ireland is essentially a continuation of austerity over the next 20 years. This is linked to the circumstances we note today in South Tipperary General Hospital and the 1,600 children living in emergency hotel accommodation.

The fiscal compact requires that the current budget deficit be reduced below 3% of GDP, that the structural deficit be eliminated by 2018 and that the public debt-to-GDP ratio be reduced to 60% over the next 20 years. Despite the physical exit of the troika from Dublin, the Government and this country are still bound by the treaty to keep the current budget deficit below 3%. On the other hand, the current budget deficit in Germany, for instance, has been below 3% for the last number of years. It has no structural deficit and the German national debt-to-GDP ratio is at 57%, already below 60%. In other words, there are no impositions whatsoever on Germany under the fiscal treaty. The treaty is merely a device to force the programme countries and other indebted countries to make huge repayments to stronger countries, led by Germany, although all EU countries were responsible for the banking busts and European recession.

A new economic colonialism has been established within Europe through the fiscal treaty. Owing to this and the payment of €7 billion in interest, the Irish economy and public services, including health, education, housing and other services, are being devastated. Ireland will continue to pay over €7 billion per year in interest on borrowings. Our public service will remain under-funded. Any attempt to reduce our reliance on foreign direct investment through public investment in modern indigenous industry will fail because of that huge payment out of the country.

The combination of our over-reliance on multinationals and the provisions of the fiscal treaty mean the State has virtually no sovereignty or power to ensure the economic and social

well-being of its citizens.

1 o'clock

The new Dáil must demand the renegotiation of the fiscal treaty and the convention of a European debt mutualisation conference to ensure moneys are available to provide for citizens and public services in health, education, housing and many other areas.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): Approximately 15 minutes remain to facilitate questions and the Minister of State's concluding remarks.

Deputy Seán Crowe: Perhaps the Minister of State took note of the questions I asked when the Taoiseach was present.

Deputy Dara Murphy: I did.

Deputy Seán Crowe: I will recap. Has the case of Ibrahim Halawa been raised? Like all other Deputies, I am concerned about where this case may lead and I would like the Government to use every avenue and means to raise the matter.

On refugees, the European Union describes Turkey as a country of safe origin. Does Ireland share this view on the status of Turkey? In this regard, I am particularly concerned about people from a Kurdish background.

The Tánaiste noted that more than 8,000 people were rescued by the Naval Service last year when it was on duty in the Mediterranean with the Italian navy. Has the Government received a formal request for further deployment of Naval Service vessels? When I raised this matter with the Minister for Defence, Deputy Coveney, he expressed his personal view that additional Irish Naval Service personnel should be deployed to the region. Would the Government consider positively any such request by the Italian or Greek navies? This is an urgent matter. Only last Saturday, for example, a boat transporting refugees sank off the coast of Turkey, resulting in the death of a four-month old child.

Between 12,000 and 15,000 people have been stuck in squalor at Idomeni on the border between Greece and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia since the border was shut three weeks ago. Is the Government doing anything to help the people in question? Normally, some type of announcement would be made on matters of this nature. Is any such announcement pending?

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Dara Murphy): As Deputy Crowe will be aware, the trial of Ibrahim Halawa is ongoing. The Government is trying to be as measured as possible in its public comments on the case, in respect of which our objectives are twofold. The first is to ensure Mr. Halawa is released by the Egyptian authorities in order that he can return to his family and the second is to provide consular support to him while he is in detention. Mr. Halawa has received 50 consular visits while in detention, which is an extremely high level of consular visitation.

With respect to the deployment of a Naval Services vessel, the Minister for Defence, responding to a question from the Deputy, indicated that the Government is willing to make a Naval Service vessel available again. We have not received a specific request on the matter, which is ongoing. The Taoiseach and Minister have both stated that, given the excellent work done by several Naval Service vessels in rescuing more than 8,500 people in recent months, we

would make such an offer again.

With respect to the conditions on the border between Greece and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, support for both countries is being channelled and co-ordinated at European Union level. A broader response is needed to many aspects of the current crisis and it is vital that this agreed response is co-ordinated and shows solidarity towards all member states.

I will address the other questions the Deputy raised in his earlier contribution when I wrap up the debate.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Alan Farrell): As there are no further questions, I ask the Minister of State to make his concluding remarks.

Deputy Dara Murphy: I add to the comments made by the Taoiseach and many Deputies this morning in expressing my deep sadness and shock at the terrible news of explosions in Brussels this morning and the reported high level of loss of life. This was a deliberate attack on the capital of the European Union, the citizens of Europe and democracy all over the world. Our thoughts are with the victims and those directly affected, the people of Brussels and the large Irish community living and working in Belgium and its capital. Many Irish people, including me, travel frequently through Brussels Airport and the city's metro system. I have visited the city three times in the past four weeks. Brussels Airport is a vital link for Irish officials as the city is at the heart of Europe. I urge all Irish citizens in Brussels and Belgium to exercise caution and closely follow the instructions of local authorities and the advice of the consular section of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Irish Embassy in Belgium.

I spoke this morning to the ambassador to the European Union, Mr. Declan Kelleher, and have since received a further update. He informs me that, fortunately, all staff at the Irish Embassy and Permanent Representation office in Brussels and their dependants have been accounted for. On this terrible day for Europe, we must acknowledge the fear people have for their loved ones who are based in Belgium. The Garda authorities are liaising with their Belgian counterparts and will offer any assistance possible in supporting the investigation into the terrible atrocities.

I am pleased to conclude statements on discussions at the most recent European Council. As the Taoiseach stated, I will focus my remarks on the broader aspects of the migration crisis and touch on some of the other questions raised in Deputies' interventions. In the context of the migration crisis, the number of people seeking refuge in Europe remains very high and is without precedent for the European Union. We cannot ignore the fact that the EU has struggled to chart an effective way through the complexities of the issue, which, in addition to the immense human impact, is placing very great strains on many partner states.

The Union has engaged seriously to develop a comprehensive response to the crisis, with many difficult decisions having to be made along the way. Having reached agreement on critically important issues, however, implementation on certain key aspects has been slow. Consequently, in all discussions at EU level, particularly at the European Council meeting in February, there has been a strong focus on stepping up the implementation of already agreed measures and Ireland has been particularly supportive of this aspect of discussions. If we are to chart an effective response to the challenges posed by the crisis, we must deliver on commitments already made and we are seeing some signs of improvement in this area. Discussions on the establishment of a new border and coastguard are advancing well. While we will of

course co-operate with this new agency, we cannot participate in the adoption of the instrument because we are not full members of the Schengen *acquis*.

In another positive development at the General Affairs Council last week, which I attended, we adopted a regulation on emergency support for EU member states with special reference to Greece. This mechanism, which Ireland strongly supported, rightly recognises the severe pressures that are being placed on member states on the front line of dealing with the migration crisis. I hope these measures will address some of the concerns people expressed in the House this morning with respect to how the Greek authorities can manage the crisis.

In addition to last Friday's agreement with Turkey, which the Taoiseach has outlined, the EU has focused on relations with other relevant partners, including those in the western Balkans and Africa. Following a meeting in Valletta last November a trust fund for Africa was established. There have been important developments in respect of the establishment of hotspots, relocation and establishing a list of safe countries of origin as well as a proposed amendment to the Dublin regulations.

We were asked about Ireland's response. We have consistently called for an approach at European level to address the root causes as well as the humanitarian aspects. This is a feature of our national response. As announced last month, in 2016 alone Ireland will contribute at least €20 million in assistance to support those affected by the Syrian crisis. The endeavours of our Defence Forces have deservedly been commended in this House and elsewhere.

As the House will be aware, a Government decision was taken last September to welcome 4,000 refugees and asylum seekers into Ireland through a combination of resettlement and relocation programmes. I am pleased to say that the resettlement project has been advancing well. We have exceeded half of our resettlement commitment for 2015-16. Moreover, in the mission to Lebanon in January 2016, Irish officials selected a sufficient number of refugees to complete the resettlement commitment. Unfortunately, progress on relocation overall has been slower. This is due to delays in Greece and in Italy in establishing properly functioning systems. While I am pleased to note that a family of ten people arrived in the State last month from Greece, in the context of our overall commitment it is clear that far more work has to be done, not only by us but by all member states. While the complexities of the migration crisis remain testing, we can at least point to some positive developments. Certainly, more needs to be done.

Quite rightly, the migration crisis will remain a priority for the European Union for the foreseeable future. Ireland will be constructive and will seek to continue to play our part in responding to the challenges posed. It is acknowledged in the agreement that certain changes to Turkish procedures will be required before all elements of the plan can become operational. This includes confirmation that standards are up to the level of the 1951 convention. The EU institutions, member states and NGOs are working together to ensure this happens as soon as possible.

In response to comments made today, I am keen to acknowledge that the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees has revised its initial opinion and now considers the agreement to be in compliance. The agreement is in compliance with European Union and international law as long as the safeguards required are properly implemented. The UNHCR will remain on the ground to this end. The EU has also agreed to speed up the disbursement of funds to help Turkey to provide adequately for refugees. The €3 billion to be committed by the European Union and to which Ireland will contribute its share will be going directly to sup-

22 March 2016

port Syrian refugees in Turkey through the provision of schools, housing, health care and other necessities.

The March meeting of the European Council dealt with other areas under its consideration of jobs, growth and competitiveness issues, including the steel sector and other sectors.

Thank you for your time today, Acting Chairman. This has been a testing day for all of us who support the European Union and this great project of democracy. The Government and the Irish people must continue to show our solidarity with the people of Brussels and Belgium. Europe has been through many testing times over its long history, but the rule of law and democracy must bind us together. We must all play our part in ensuring the ambition of the terrorists, which is to divide the people of Europe, can only be defeated.

Agriculture and Fisheries Council Meeting: Statements

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): Before I speak about agriculture, I wish to express my solidarity and my revulsion at what has unfolded in Brussels today. It has been reported that up to 34 people, maybe more, have lost their lives in a metro station and at the airport there. From our point of view, today is about solidarity. Ireland and Europe collectively need to find ways to respond to try to guarantee the security of our citizens and prevent the kinds of atrocities that we have seen in multiple European cities at different times in recent years, the latest being in Brussels. These issues are not easy to address. I believe the House should and will spend many hours debating broader security issues and the consequences of deep conflict in different parts of the world now impacting on security within the European Union. The solutions are incredibly complex. They require collaboration, partnership and support within the European Union and further afield. Undoubtedly, there are links between the extremism, conflict and division in other parts of the world and what is happening now in the European Union. Today is a day for solidarity, sympathy and support for a city that most of us know well. Certainly, I know it well, having lived there. Indeed, more than 10,000 Irish people live and work in Brussels. I hope none of them has been directly affected by this but I imagine many of them will know people who have been. It puts many of the other issues we are discussing today into a sobering context and light.

I am glad to have the opportunity to update the Dáil on discussions that took place last week at the AGRIFISH Council of Ministers in Brussels. Proceedings were dominated by the debate on the continuing difficulties being experienced in dairy and pigmeat markets. My opening remarks will concentrate on these issues, but I will also give the House a brief synopsis of some of the other things discussed.

I welcome the new Members, several of whom have a great deal of experience with agricultural issues. That is welcome and I look forward to the debates we will have in future in respect of agricultural issues, regardless of which side of the House we are on.

Agricultural markets, in particular the dairy and pigmeat markets, have been under sustained pressure for a considerable period due to factors such as the slowdown in the Chinese economy, the Russian ban on EU food imports, increased EU and global production, low oil prices and especially sustained low grain prices during the past four years. Although price volatility has been a feature of commodity markets for some years, the latest downward pressure on prices has continued for a longer period than expected and has caused real difficulties for producers in Ireland and throughout the European Union. Member states and the Commis-

sion have been monitoring the situation closely since difficulties first started to emerge. The emergency meeting of the AGRIFISH Council in September led to agreement on a €500 million package of measures designed to help farmers to overcome the crisis. This came on top of measures that had already been in place in response to the Russian ban and included a targeted aid fund of €420 million allocated to member states in national envelopes, with the option of a 100% top-up using national funds, an enhanced private storage aid scheme for skimmed milk powder, a further private storage aid scheme for cheese, increased rates of advanced payments under the direct payment scheme and rural development programmes and increased funds for food promotion programmes. It was also agreed that efforts to tackle non-trade barriers in third countries should be intensified. Efforts to further develop third country markets should also have been intensified. The monitoring of the dairy market should be and has been strengthened. A task force on agricultural markets should be established.

Ireland's share of the targeted aid fund came to €13.7 million and in December I announced my intention to match this EU fund with a further €13.7 million in Exchequer financing. This allowed me to allocate a total of €26.4 million to dairy farmers in the form of flat payments of just under €1,400 per farmer, a top-up for young farmers and a further €1 million in flat rate payments to pig farmers.

Other member states have also been implementing the September package, to varying degrees, in recent months. However, the continuing difficulties and the general pessimistic outlook for the rest of 2016 prompted a further discussion of the situation at the AGRIFISH Council in February. Member states were asked by the Commission to submit proposals for consideration and these were discussed at our meeting last week. We also had a dairy forum meeting to make sure there was a broad input into the package of measures we would put to the Commission.

The Council's discussion was generally very constructive, helped in large part by the Presidency's distillation of the many suggestions received by member states into a coherent overall presentation and by the willingness of the Commissioner, Mr. Phil Hogan, to respond positively by coming forward with concrete proposals. For my part, I fully shared my colleague's concerns about the way the market situation had developed. I agreed that, despite the range of measures put in place under the September package, the price pressures being endured by dairy and pigmeat producers had not abated and that it had also become clear that the global downturn in commodity prices would be more prolonged than originally anticipated. However, I also emphasised that markets were affected by many factors at any given time and that the ones I mentioned, which are influencing the situation, were temporary in nature. We need to ensure the demographic and other demand factors that underpin agrifood markets in the medium and long term will remain fundamentally sound. We also have to bear in mind that farmers and processors need policy certainty and stability. It is, therefore, critically important to avoid doing anything that would undermine confidence in the policy framework. It is also critically important to avoid any action that would distort the Single Market, particularly from an Irish perspective. While, of course, we need to deal urgently and effectively with this temporary problem and ensure Irish and EU farmers will be protected from the worst impacts of the fall in prices in the short term, we must also ensure they will be remain well placed to avail of emerging opportunities when markets recover, as they will.

I was broadly happy with the conclusions of the Presidency following the Council meeting which addressed most of the demands set out in the ten-point plan Ireland had presented to the Commission. It acknowledged the depth and duration of the crisis and called on the Commission to take a number of initiatives, including the activation of all available and appropriate

measures and the doubling of the intervention ceilings for skimmed milk powder and butter to 218,000 tonnes and 100,000 tonnes, respectively, and to consider further support for the pigmeat sector through a new private storage scheme and greater flexibility in the implementation of the enhanced private storage scheme for skimmed powder in order that it would be more attractive to operators. We will reduce the length of time required to keep skimmed milk powder in storage in order to avail of the advanced storage aid package that will cover the full cost. Previously, producers were required to hold onto it for a full 12 months and would have been subject to penalties if they had brought product back into the market before then. Ireland also called on the Commission to consider further flexibilities in the operation of the state aid regime.

I have also called on the Commission to further consider the temporary suspension of EU import tariffs on fertilisers in order to reduce import costs for farmers in Ireland and the rest of the European Union. The idea that we are charging a tariff on fertilisers imported into the European Union and, therefore, increasing prices when farmers are operating within very tight margins, if there are margins at all, is totally unacceptable. The Commissioner supports that position, but other Commissioners are involved in the decision.

The conclusions also provide for a temporary facility, allowing producer organisations, inter-branch organisations and co-ops in the dairy and pigmeat sectors to control supply among their members on a voluntary basis, in response to very strong lobbying on the issue from France and other member states. In the lead up to the Council I expressed my total opposition to supply controls and last week reiterated Ireland's view that constraining EU production would amount to a free gift to our global competitors, as well as slowing recovery in the European Union when markets improved. I also voiced our opposition to the allocation of any new EU funding to incentivise such reductions. These arguments found favour with many of my colleagues around the Council table.

While I remain concerned about the inclusion of supply control provisions in the Presidency conclusions, the measures are voluntary and limited and actions taken by producer organisations and other first purchasers of milk are of a temporary nature. They do not and will not constitute a return to quotas. It is very important that we emphasise that point, something we made very clear at the Council and which was confirmed in its conclusions. We are responding using all of the tools available to us.

Others have sought an increase in the intervention price. The Commission is fundamentally opposed to this because it would encourage some countries to produce more milk, which is not what it wants. However, on balance, the actions taken to date constitute a reasonable response. We need to keep the issue under review and will return to it again at the June Council.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I welcome the opportunity to say a few words about the outcome of last week's Council of Agriculture Ministers meeting. It is fair to say we are at a crossroads as regards farm incomes and, in particular, the continued viability of the family farm model. A few years ago we were told that dairy farming was the new gold, *ór nua*, and that if people invested large sums in expansion, it was a good bet. The reality is that 17,000 farmers are facing very precarious times, with an average milk price of approximately 25 cent per litre, including the VAT rebate. This is below the cost of production. Orna, the Irish Dairy Board, has forecast an average price of about 24 cent per litre for 2016. The reality is that farm incomes were down by 9% in 2015 compared to the figure for 2014, while average dairy farm income dropped from about €68,000 in 2014 to €48,000 in 2015, according to the Teagasc Outlook 2016 report.

There is a perfect storm. Difficulties in the Chinese market, a Russian ban and a high tax bill in 2014 have all contributed to the current situation. As I said, when the Minister was constantly referring to expansion, I warned that it would be particularly precarious for young farmers with limited experience and high borrowings if there was a downturn in the market. I did not realise it would be so severe and rapid.

I refer to the European Council meeting last week. There were some welcome measures but we need more concrete measures, and we are particularly worried about milk supply management measures. The problem is that if the crisis continues, the supply that comes in voluntarily today could become mandatory in the future. A reality reduced production will not solve the crisis. I understand that France was heavily demanding that the Commission would introduce supply management measures by invoking Article 222 of the Common Market Organisation Regulation. The French position is very different from ours because they have a large internal market of 60 million people. However, if we were to go down the supply reduction route, it would hugely affect exporting countries such as Ireland and those in which milk exports are a major revenue earner. Some 90% of our milk is exported, and we produce 5.5 billion litres per annum. Dairy exports are worth approximately €4 billion. Therefore, supply measures, as the Minister stated, do not make sense because when an upturn happens we will be behind the curve with respect to world competition. Also, as the Minister has continually pointed out, year on year over the longer term the world market for dairy increases by 15 billion litres per annum, which is approximately three times our production.

Our concern is not about the voluntary measures but that this is a step-by-step approach because that is normally the way Europe works. We are concerned that if the market deterioration continues, what is voluntary today will become compulsory or they would levy over-production in Ireland, as they would see it, to pay or compensate continental farmers for reduced production. The Minister might say that is not in the conclusions. I know that, but this is only one round of what might be a number of rounds, and once we start giving in on the approach of supply reduction rather than other methods, we will be going down a slippery slope.

We welcome the measures agreed at last week's EU Council, including the increase in intervention quantities for skimmed milk powder and butter, a new private storage aid scheme for pigmeat, financial tools to support farmers and a new model of export credit insurance. We very much welcome the increase in state aid ceilings. I have felt for many years that state aid ceilings and various *de minimis* rules are way too restrictive. The increase of €15,000 per farmer per annum, compared with €15,000 over three years, which is €5,000 per annum, is certainly welcome. That will allow us to come up with flexible solutions such as farm taxation methods to allow for income averaging without breaching European Union laws.

I do not agree with the Minister, or Europe, that the lack of an increase in intervention price is a good idea. Intervention in terms of world prices is a contradiction because if we get the product at a world price, we get it anyway. The product is quite saleable at that price. Intervention prices should reflect basic production costs. We are not and have not been looking for any more. We should continue to seek a review, and the French approach should not dominate all the time.

We must also convince our European counterparts to introduce measures to ensure market stability. We believe the basic support should be increased from 21 cent to approximately 26 cent per litre.

An issue of major concern to us is the failure once again to get a deferral of the superlevy. One would have thought that would have been an easy win, but rather than collecting the superlevy that arose in the final year of milk quotas, the European Union is insisting on this levy being collected in the current crisis. I regret very much there was no consensus to remove fertiliser tariffs, which would have benefited all farmers.

I welcome that the Agricultural Markets Task Force will deliver conclusions and legislative recommendations in autumn to improve the balance in the food supply chain. In fairness, the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine in the previous Dáil did a great deal of work on this issue. I have done a lot of work on this issue as well, and I believe it is one that must be tackled urgently at a European level. We need first to find out who is getting what in the food chain. Is it the farmer, the distributor, the processor or the retailer, and how does that change over time? There would appear to be strong evidence in the liquid milk trade, according to the market agencies' figures, that the percentage the farmer is getting has dropped dramatically. The price of a litre of milk has dropped dramatically since 1995.

We believe also that EU legislation should make it mandatory on food retailing firms that exceed certain thresholds to supply information and data on the gross margins. If we had that information, it would allow us take subsequent corrective action. A major deficiency is that this country has been slow to deal with this issue. Britain, France and many other European countries have moved ahead in getting information on who is getting what from every euro the consumer spends in the supermarket.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I add my voice to the voices of those who spoke about what happened in Brussels this morning. As the Minister stated, it is alarming that the death toll has risen greatly.

To return to the issue of the EU agriculture Ministers meeting, to tell the truth, that seems a long way off from the place I come from, namely, the west, and especially the constituency of Sligo-Leitrim. Many farmers and non-farming rural dwellers are not seeing any recovery and believe they are being forgotten not only by the EU but by Dublin. The question they ask is whether the EU is listening to them.

Many sectors of the farming community are in crisis, and even the European Commissioner, Phil Hogan, recognises that. He began to take measures last week which dairy farmers had been calling for since last summer. Perhaps it took criticism from the French and other quarters in the EU for him to take notice and take action.

Commissioner Hogan and the Minister, Deputy Coveney, have not yet taken any action in regard to the banking sector. Banks are putting serious pressure on farmers who were encouraged by the Department, Teagasc and the banks themselves to borrow and invest in dairying. These producers are now in crisis, with the price of milk showing no sign of increasing. Farmers were convinced that the ending of milk quotas was the equivalent for the dairy sector of winning the lotto, but now those same farmers are being incentivised to reduce production. The intervention price remains too low to make the sector viable in terms of making ends meet, never mind paying off the large debts many of them have incurred.

There is a great deal of dissatisfaction among farmers. They believe they have been ignored by the European Union, and it is difficult not to agree with them when they cite the rules, regulations and directives that make it very difficult to farm their land.

In my region farmers have also raised the serious issue of hydraulic fracturing or fracking. They have major concerns about the devastating impact this dirty industry would have on agriculture in the area. The use of fracking is highly likely to wreak havoc on Leitrim farms due to the destructive nature of gas extraction. Farmers in Leitrim wish to see a total ban on fracking, but the EU and the Government do not seem to be listening.

Flooding is another serious issue in the part of the world where I come from, and many farmers have been seriously impacted in recent months. I am aware of horticultural providers with tunnels on the Roscommon border that were flooded. Their livelihoods were destroyed but they do not qualify under the schemes put in place. There are many such instances throughout the country.

Another scheme which is an absolute disaster is the beef data genomics scheme which seems designed to be the least farmer-friendly scheme in existence. It has made access so difficult that many farmers are in despair and many who are part of it want out of it. Now there is talk about the sheep sector and introducing a €20 premium per ewe, which seems to be equally unfriendly to the farming sector. The suggestion to model it on the beef data genomics scheme is an example of copying failure.

There is a lot of worry in the suckler and beef sector about what may happen in the future, and the big question being asked is who is supporting the farmers. It seems as if beef processors and supermarket chains call all the shots and farmers are left with no control over anything. All cattle farmers need better prices, and this starts with the factories being pulled into line and forced to pay proper prices for finished animals. If this were to happen, it would trickle down to the producers of these animals. In Leitrim we have five cattle markets, and many buyers come from the midlands to buy weanlings in Carrigallen and Manorhamilton. These farmers need to get a better price for their product but they will not get it if the finishers do not get a proper price at the other end.

Another issue very much related to this, particularly with regard to the rural area I represent, is cross-Border penalties. Farmers depend on buyers coming from the North and taking the cattle back across the Border, but the processors have put in place penalties so those farmers will not get the same price for the cattle. The factories are always talking about consumer demand but, in truth, the consumer is nothing but an excuse for the processors to limit prices. What the consumer wants is grass-fed Irish beef that is free from hormones and antibiotics. The consumer does not care if an animal is 36 months old or 48 months old, what weight it was when it was killed or how many movements it had. These specifications were put in place by meat processors so they can penalise farmers and make more profit. Someone needs to stand up for the farmer against this excessive profiteering. There also has to be proper transparency and fair competition in the industry. There is great concern throughout the country at the taking over of 50% of Slaney Foods by ABP. A monopoly is not good for anyone except the company operating it. This is certainly not good for the consumer, the producer at the other end or the industry as a whole.

Is the EU listening when it comes to forestry? It seems to be the super-incentivised sector at the moment, but while it may seem like an attractive prospect for some farmers, especially those with poorer quality land who are trying to be part-time farmers to make a living, what is it doing to farming in the country as a whole? Large areas are now devoid of active farming and are covered in forestry. I see this in my neighbouring parish where land has been planted which isolates communities, and before long people will not be able to see daylight in their homes.

22 March 2016

Despite all the talk and the heralding of recovery in Ireland, the people of rural Ireland see no recovery. Austerity has devastated the west, from where our young people still emigrate. They are not returning and there is no stream of them coming back.

There was very little listening to the reasonable objections by fishermen to the way the penalty points system was being run. My colleague, Deputy Pearse Doherty, will address this. Fishermen had to go to court to get a hearing on it. Despite promises they would be listened to as stakeholders, the Minister reinstated the system without any consultation.

Farmers ask me who is looking after them. It is very hard to answer this question when several sectors are in severe difficulty, and the pigmeat, dairy and other sectors have been mentioned. The overall agenda needs to change and become focused on making the family farm a profitable enterprise. When small farmers are making money, the rural economy is vibrant because they spend all their money in the local economy. The EU and Ministers with responsibility for agriculture throughout Europe and here must recognise the vital stimulation that a profitable food production sector can offer to deprived rural communities and they must support the family farm. Last week, I met a young man in my area who farms approximately 40 acres and has 22 cows. He is rearing three children and sends them to our local national school. He told me his lament is he did not do what his brother did seven or eight years ago, which was to leave and go to the United States. This is an indictment on where small farmers and smallholdings in the west have been left. This needs to change. We need to protect the people at the bottom to ensure everyone can make a profit and have a decent income for themselves and their families and keep rural Ireland alive. The Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine in particular, and his colleagues throughout Europe, have a role in ensuring this happens. It is the same throughout Europe. Recently, I met farmers from deprived areas of Europe who also deal with smallholdings on marginal land. They have the very same issues as we do. We need to ensure farming is made profitable for smallholders because if it is then rural Ireland will become vibrant again.

Deputy Willie Penrose: I wish the Ceann Comhairle well in his position.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Willie Penrose: I join colleagues in offering my sympathy to the families of everyone injured and bereaved in the horrendous acts of terrorism in Brussels this morning. I hope the perpetrators are brought to justice as quickly as possible.

As far back as we can go in our history, this country has been a farming nation. It has a very proud tradition of people making a living from the land, of families continuing the work of their parents and of a rich rural community based on the vital work of farmers. Action on agriculture has been a consistent feature of our economy, and the Labour Party wants to ensure it stays this way. Many challenges face our farmers and producers. Global forces demand change from us all, whether we have a volatile global market place, the need to tackle climate change or simply the demographic pressures that are changing how our society works. Irish people are emerging from a long and difficult downturn, and every group has made real sacrifices to get to this point.

An issue which has been very important for farming is volatility in the milk market and the outlook for same. Volatility has increased in the dairy sector for various reasons. Generally it is a question of mismanagement between supply and demand, but other factors are at play. Dairy and food in general are unusual because minor changes in supply and demand, scarcity

or oversupply can lead to major changes in price. The reason for this is the time lag involved, which is generally one to three years, unlike other industries which can be changed overnight and turned off.

Since 2007, the frequency and magnitude of change has increased quite dramatically. There are a number of reasons for this volatility. We have moved from a regulated dairy market to a free market with very little product subsidisation and no refunds. Intervention, at 21 cent, is well below market levels, with the cost of production at 27 cent, and this will be a huge shock. Weather shocks are also having a major impact. A further complication in the Irish context is the seasonality or grass-based nature of our milk production. We have a peak to trough ratio of 7:1 whereas the rest of Europe is quite flat. Somebody pointed out to us one time that if 75% of milk is produced over a short period, perhaps 50% of the year, and the market is very firm, much of the milk will be bought at that price, but if the market is very weak, it compounds the volatility. The flat curve which occurs in the rest of Europe almost has a natural hedge built into it. An issue is that European production has been very strong. EU milk production increased by 4.5% in 2014 and 1.6% in 2015. This is a 6.1% cumulative increase in two years. We must remember that Europe is seven times the size of New Zealand when it comes to milk output, so what happens in Europe is key.

There are also a number of issues on the demand side. The Russian ban has had a huge impact on EU exports, especially cheese. Russia imported approximately 30% of EU cheese and butter, or 240,000 tonnes per annum. This is huge and accounted for 15% of EU exports. The second big demand player was China. In 2014, when it imported a large volume of powder, the equivalent to an additional 2.2 billion litres of milk over 2013, everyone thought it was genuine demand but it was not. Approximately 1.5 billion litres had to be taken out because of foot and mouth disease, poor weather conditions and stricter farm regulations. Since 2014, this has been corrected and domestic supply has recovered. Imports in 2015 reflected this. A number of issues have affected where we are in the milk trade in terms of the world market, and we must be cognisant of this. What is very important, but very unusual in terms of milk, is that overall Europe exports approximately 10% of its milk but closer to 40% of Ireland's volume is exported outside Europe, so there is a high dependency outside Europe and these are the markets that we will grow and focus on from now on. Daily consumption, especially of butterfat, is increasing in the US. That is a bit of positive news. Ten years ago, butter was the villain in respect of health but now it is seen positively, which shows how things can change.

I notice what has happened with Commissioner Hogan. States are now being allowed to subsidise agriculture which will put a significant strain on us. It is an important deviation from the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, that we are now moving to state-backed subsidisation, which would mean that very wealthy states are in a position to do that as opposed to Europe taking the role itself. That may be the first step to something that may come back to haunt us, so we have to be very careful. What we wish for might happen.

I wish to talk about beef, which is a very important, but first I will discuss an issue regarding the failure to meet commitments agreed on for farmers in the farmers' charter in respect of no-notice inspections and so on. It is time interest was payable to farmers for the failure of the Department to make timely payments because that applies for small businesses and so on. There must be tolerance regarding cross-compliance. We cannot have huge penalties for small inadvertent breaches. One of the things I noticed in terms of the Bord Bia quality assurance scheme was that trivial reasons were cited. I know it is being reviewed but a bit of common sense must be introduced and farmers must be given time to address minor omissions or

failures rather than being locked out for three months. Approximately 7% of those who failed beef quality assurance did so because of record-keeping issues. Farmers used to get a month to correct the oversight in cases of non-compliance and the same should apply for the revised beef scheme. That can lead to a loss of 12 cent on cattle, so it is extremely important.

The mid-term review of CAP will offer opportunities to build and expand some of the existing schemes. We certainly need a new scheme for sheep. If I do not mention this, Eunan Bannon will give out to me. The €20 was agreed many years ago by a committee chaired by Deputy Bobby Aylward's brother, Liam. That €20 has been hanging around since being recommended by a cross-party committee. It is about time that Europe stepped up to the plate and honoured the commitment that was given many years ago in this regard. It is extremely important.

In regard to beef, Ireland's livestock sector plays a key role in the national economy and there are more than 100,000 farmers involved in cattle production. From a supply base of more than 1 million sucklers and 1.3 million dairy cows, the industry produces more than 550,000 tonnes of beef annually, of which almost 90% is exported, so there is a 9:1 ratio of export to domestic consumption. As a result, Ireland is the largest net exporter of beef in the northern hemisphere and the fourth largest in the world. Irish beef exports exceeded 500,000 tonnes last year and according to Bord Bia, it is valued at €2.4 billion. Following a difficult back end for cattle prices, market conditions since the beginning of 2016 have been poor. That can happen for various reasons, such as changes in consumer preferences and patterns of purchasing behaviour. Recent analysis of the Department's agriculture and animal identification and movement database suggests that during the first half of 2016, prime cattle availability will be the same as 2015 but recovery of supplies will materialise in the latter half. We will have approximately 60,000 to 80,000 additional head of cattle for slaughter and the impact that will have on the price must be factored in. It should be noted that the European cow herd has increased by 0.5 million cows since 2012; there are now 32 million cows right across the European economy. We have to be very cautious in that regard.

We have Bord Bia's quality assurance scheme but I cannot but note - I am not a bit surprised at the recent statement from the Irish Co-operative Organisation Society, ICOS - that the beef grid as currently constituted is anti-trade and urgently needs to be reviewed. The beef forum discussions have clearly failed to address this and it is a long-standing and thorny issue - the quality payment system, where penalties are significant at farm level, losing up to €75 or €80 per head, with a strict 420 kg carcass weight limit. It is clear there are issues with weight limits and age and quality assurance restrictions. The 70-day pre-slaughter movement restriction can impact on price achieved and the 12 cent bonus can be wiped out. I know from where I come that it is clear that the vast majority of cattle from the suckler cow herd would exceed the 420 kg carcass weight limit and it would be impossible to achieve this restriction on a grass-based system. We will end up losing the competitive advantage we have always enjoyed through grass-based production. We have now arrived at a situation where, as Edmund Phelan from the ICSA said recently, the weight limit of 420 kg hits hardest on the better U-grade carcasses, with a bonus of up to 20 cent per kilogram being lost. One was of the view that the quality payments system, QPS, rewarded quality. It is time the beef forum facilitated a full review. The Minister should ensure Teagasc has a significant input into that. We need a full and thorough independent investigation of the type and level of competition across the sector and to continue the availability of markets for live exports. There is an important role in sustaining competition. I know the Minister has fought hard to get the north African markets open and like us, all beef imports must meet the same safety, traceability, animal health and welfare and environmental

standards as applies to all beef produced within the EU. There can be no concession for any trading bloc in this area; we are entitled to the same standards that apply everywhere else.

We have looked at the disproportionate power of the retail corporations and it is of major concern. We need legislation at EU level to curb the power of the multiple retailers and corporations in order to improve the lot of primary producers, so they can get a fair return from the marketplace. We need to ban below-cost selling of food produced by farmers. I believe it is going on this week, with carrots and so on. How can we expect farmers to continue to survive in a climate that undermines their efforts. Why should they be expected to survive in markets where there is obviously a distortion of that nature?

Deputy Mick Barry: A debate like this can often be taken up by the minutiae of subsidy regimes, quotas and CAP reform but the bigger picture can be lost if it is confined to such narrow terms. The Department of Social Protection reported in 2013 that one in ten persons in this State was experiencing food poverty. The European Federation of Food Banks likewise reported food poverty rates of 9.6% across the European Union in 2014 and they applied the same definition as the Department of Social Protection. In addition, the European Federation of Food Banks states that a further 14.8% of the EU's population is at risk of food poverty. I need not illustrate the point further by venturing into the global south, where the rates of food poverty and starvation are far greater again. In spite of this, the main crisis occupying the agriculture Ministers across the EU happens to be a crisis of overproduction, particularly in the dairy and pigmeat sectors.

To focus on the dairy sector specifically, the former Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Phil Hogan, who now occupies the position of EU Agriculture and Rural Development Commissioner of Agriculture, promoted with some fanfare last year the lifting of milk quotas and put forward a perspective that small and medium-sized dairy farms in Ireland could now upscale in an era where the sky would be the limit. However, the weak predictive powers he had on display when he was the Minister responsible for water charges are now fully on display in the European arena. Hardly a few months had passed from the lifting of the quotas when the Putin regime in Russia announced its embargo on EU dairy products, leaving those farmers who borrowed to expand their dairy farms high and dry. Without a hint of humility, Commissioner Hogan, in his address to the EU agriculture Ministers last week, said that the lifting of the quotas was always going to lead to volatility in the market. Rather than admit defeat and return to the quota system, the Commission has announced a series of supports and exceptional measures for storage of surpluses.

2 o'clock

The very desirability of expanding dairy and meat production with a view to encouraging exports outside of the EU has to be challenged from an environmental perspective. The active encouragement by the Minister, Deputy Coveney, and the Commissioner, Mr. Hogan, of dairy farmers in this country to expand their production flew in the face of the necessity for Ireland, like every advanced country, to lower its greenhouse gas emissions - something from which the Taoiseach disgracefully sought to exempt Ireland at the Paris conference last December. Trade agreements such as the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, TTIP, which, if passed, will have a major bearing on agribusiness, will likewise serve to encourage a global increase in air miles and the ludicrous situation of identical food products crossing each other's paths on the high seas and in the skies, contributing to the wrecking of the planet. Yet such an intensification of global competition is underpinned by an obscene EU agricultural promotional budget

of €111 million.

We need an absolute break from the capitalist mode of agriculture, which benefits big business the most. The website *farmsubsidy.ie* provides the startling figure that the main beneficiaries of the current subsidy system are not the small farmers who are most vulnerable to the chaos of the market. Rather, it is the multinational giant Greencore that has gained the most - €88 million to date. In fact, all of the largest beneficiaries are in the big business sector. What is needed is a national, Europe-wide and global plan for food and timber production that puts people and the environment first. It is entirely technically feasible to rationally plan agriculture, fishing and timber production in a manner that can eliminate food poverty and provide a decent diet for all as well as a living income for small family-based farms and for workers engaged in primary economic activity the world over. However, while food production remains concentrated in the hands of agribusinesses, which benefit most from the current dispensation, and while the political establishment in Europe remains wedded to supporting what is a fundamentally capitalist model of food production, with a system of subsidies that does not guarantee a living income for farmers with small or medium-sized holdings, we will continue to have the perversion of food poverty co-existing with overproduction, alongside the destruction of the environment, which hurts most those countries that already experience the worst in food poverty.

The Anti-Austerity Alliance rejects the stereotype that places the radical left in opposition to the farming community. We support a living and secure income for those with small and medium-sized farms, and the type of socialist planning that I describe is the best way to achieve that. However, at the top of food production, agribusiness has fused entirely with the capitalist mode of production and, here and the world over, has to be taken into democratic public ownership as an essential service to the public.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank and congratulate Deputy Barry. I believe that was his maiden contribution to the House.

Deputy Mick Barry: It was.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Clare Daly. The Social Democrats and the Green Party are next, followed by Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice.

Deputy Clare Daly: The Minister's attitude to the latest EU meeting, in celebrating the failure of the EU to agree a system in which we would be incentivising a reduction in milk supply, is a little like the fellow who is laughing at the funeral and crying at the wedding. While there are many circumstances in which such a reaction might be appropriate, it is not the norm.

The Minister's reaction is out of kilter. While we can look at the overall issue - the rights and wrongs of quotas and of incentivising people not to produce something, and the madness of that-----

Deputy Simon Coveney: We are not proposing that.

Deputy Clare Daly: If we park that for now and look at what is going on in the world, and consider a holistic approach to agriculture, factoring in the environmental costs, then the only conclusion that could be drawn is that we need to take an entirely different approach, instead of responding systematically to short-term interests and being motivated by farmers' incomes - which are important but are not the only issue - regardless of the environmental costs. We have a serious problem, because what is necessary in this country is quite a radical restructuring of

the way in which we farm.

The outcomes of the latest meeting include Ireland's being allowed to continue to ramp up its milk production, which the Minister is obviously delighted about, but it fails to take into account that ramping up beef and milk production has serious consequences for the climate. Milk output is expected to increase from 5 billion litres to 8.5 billion litres by 2020. The Minister is on the record as saying that this means exporting an extra €1 billion worth of milk. It means increasing the herd size by between 300,000 and 400,000 cows, which, Deputy Coveney stated, will make Ireland the fastest growing dairy producer on the planet for the next five years and, he went on to state, probably the next ten years. This is not good, and I do not say that lightly. I say it, actually, in a thoughtful manner. Ireland's 1.1 million cows produce huge amounts of methane, as well as nitrous oxide, another powerful greenhouse gas. Methane, as the Minister will be aware, is 20 times worse, as a driver of climate change, than carbon dioxide over 100 years. Ireland's agricultural sector accounts for one third of national greenhouse gas emissions. That is three times the EU average or, in the words of the Department, the highest proportion of any country in the developed world. It is simply unsustainable.

The Minister told us in November 2014 that planning a boom in dairy and beef exports by increasing the size of the herd could be done while maintaining the existing carbon footprint of the agricultural sector. He was wrong in that regard. It is not true. That is not what happened. Agricultural emissions, which already make up 30% of Ireland's total, are expected to grow by a further 12%, according to the EPA, thanks to the impact of Food Harvest 2020 and the removal of milk quotas. That is an unthinkable increase in the context of the Paris agreement and the absolutely dire need that Ireland has now to cut its emissions. We have spoken about it here previously.

Ireland is an emissions disaster. On a *per capita* basis, we currently emit 75% more greenhouse gases than China. We are the second worst *per capita* polluter in Europe, after Poland. The total greenhouse emissions from Ireland-----

Deputy Simon Coveney: We are the most efficient dairy producer on the planet.

Deputy Clare Daly: That is my next point. I find it intriguing that I am the only Deputy the Minister has chosen to interrupt. I am glad to see the Minister is continuing in this Dáil as he left off in the previous one. If the Minister does not mind, I will address the point in a minute.

It is unacceptable that total greenhouse gas emissions from Ireland, with a population of 4.5 million, are greater than those of 400 million of the poorest people on the planet, and policies of the Minister and others have contributed to that. John Sweeney, professor of geography at NUI Maynooth, has pointed out the hypocrisy of Ireland's approach on this, stating in a letter to *The Irish Times*: “[W]e look to China to reduce its emissions while feeding our demand for manufactured goods, but facilitate Irish agriculture via Harvest 2020 to increase its emissions in order to supply powdered milk to meet the demand from middle-class Chinese consumers.” We have to stop dancing around this issue. If we are to have any hope of doing our bit to avert climate catastrophe and if we are really interested in food security, we have to radically restructure how we do farming here, and the sooner we do so the better.

Deputy Simon Coveney: We are.

Deputy Clare Daly: No, we are not. Ramping up production of dairy and beef and arguing at EU level for the right to continue to do so, as the Minister did last week, is incredibly short-

sighted and will drive us into further costs, environmentally and financially. One of the key actions we must take is to turn away from beef and dairy towards more sustainable agriculture, and changing our diet is a key part of it. We should eat far less red meat and dairy, and it must be among our Government health promotion initiatives. The UK's Chatham House has pointed out that, despite their vast contribution to climate change, beef and dairy production attracts very little policy attention. We must change this. One can make a compelling case that without dietary change at a global level, the 2° Celsius global warming goal is pretty much off the table. As a means of converting calories into food, red meat production is staggeringly inefficient. Recent research has found that producing one calorie of beef requires 160 times more land and produces 11 to 48 times more greenhouse gases than producing food such as potatoes or rice.

One of the most significant changes we could make to effect climate mitigation would be to eat less meat. It would also do our cancer rates no end of good and, probably, contribute to the rising battle against obesity. The Minister should persuade the Government of the benefits of this as well as pursue serious changes in the structure of agriculture. However, the Minister is doing the opposite. Justin Kilcullen of Trócaire has rightly said the policies the Minister is pursuing regarding beef and dairy production have nothing to contribute to world food security. If anything, they will achieve the opposite in the long run. They are inefficient.

The Minister is fond of saying we are the most sustainable, and he piped up with it a minute ago. It is arguable. I would not say we are the most sustainable. While we are not the least sustainable, but the fact that we are not the worst of a bad lot is not something we should crow about. Not only are Irish beef and dairy farming unsustainable for the environment, they are economically unviable. The Irish beef sector survives only thanks to generous EU subsidies. Without EU subsidies, averaging approximately €400 per hectare, many Irish beef farms could not survive. As we fail to reach our emissions target, thanks to Government policies such as Harvest 2020, we will be hit by massive fines of up to approximately €500 million per year. These fines will land on the shoulders of the Irish taxpayer, making cattle farming even less sustainable, never mind the cost of climate change and the impact it will have. Dr. Stephen Flood of NUI Maynooth has estimated losses of up to €2 billion per year linked to agriculture and climate change costs. It is huge.

We must step back from how we have done things, relentlessly driving beef and dairy farming forward. There must be a shift in policy, such as switching cattle farms to alternative land uses such as bioenergy crops or forestry, which could ultimately lead to a more secure and balanced income outcome for farmers. A shift to forestry would, ironically, help with the flood situation which has become a permanent feature. If we do not do it, there will be a catastrophic outcome for all Irish citizens, including Irish farmers. We cannot focus only on short-term income.

Large vested interests stand in the way of any such change and they must be tackled. Glanbia, which in 2014 routed its €40 million profits through a brass plate company with no employees in Luxembourg to cut its tax bill to only 0.5%, is happy to lump Ireland with these costs. However, the Minister should not be happy regarding the welfare of the nation, including farmers.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: There is nothing like “just-in-time speaking”. I am very proud to be able to make a short contribution on behalf of the Green Party. I will broaden the debate from the immediate outcome of the European Council meeting and provide a reflection from our experience during the election campaign. As a south County Dublin Deputy running a national

party, it was a chance to review what is happening around the country in a way that one rarely gets to do. We ran candidates in all 40 constituencies and in a large number of them, agricultural policy was centre stage regarding what our party stood for.

It was a very energising experience. Far from the farming community and the green community being at odds, in meeting after meeting we found ourselves agreeing with the farmers and we found them coming to us afterwards and saying that, at last, they were meeting members of a party that understands something of what is happening. This happened because we have a broad, fundamental understanding of the powerlessness into which we have led the farming community under the structures we are applying in the Common Agricultural Policy and in the broad agricultural strategy we follow. The lack of direct contact between farmers and their consumers has led to a significant transfer of power to the processing and large retail sectors. I will cite some examples of people who are engaged in an alternative approach.

Our candidate in Clare, Fergal Smith, runs a community supported agriculture project and was meeting farmers who recognised that he was trying to break the lack of connection between consumer and farmer. He is trying to provide an alternative approach that may lead to a better and more secure price for the farmer, which is not reliant solely on international markets, with what happens in China or New Zealand undermining what one can do here. I recently heard the Minister say international markets may change and the factors regarding how one is paid vary, depending not only on the international bulk price for milk but quality and other factors. However, there is an underlying problem. In Tipperary, one of the finest areas for dairy farming, farmers told me they could not make it work at the current price. Farmers who have some of the best land in the country and the best dairy conditions on the planet told me it was not viable. They, too, recognised that what is happening is not working.

As a Deputy representing the great agriculture community of Dublin Bay South, I do not claim to be an expert. However, I am a business man, and there is a need for us to re-examine the agribusiness sector. Going green is not against technological improvement. At a recent National Ploughing Championships I spent the entire day asking questions of farmers as they passed by. I asked what were the main changes they had seen during the past ten years, what changes they expected in the next ten years and what advice they would have for the Green Party. I was amazed at how many said the biggest change they had seen was automation. They said the use of technology in farming had changed the nature of farming and how it worked. They anticipate it will continue in the future. There is a connection between going green and a future for farming. We also see the case for using new digital technologies that can measure water quality and analyse soil samples using new technology on one's phone. The use of this very highly advanced technology to give a real understanding of what is happening in land, to look after soil and manage the basic raw materials we have in farming is an area in which the business and farming communities have a common cause.

During the election campaign, every part of the country was suffering from flooding. Again, I am not an expert. I met a farmer in Donegal who had a simple sense that he could no longer use a field that had been flooded for sheep, given that the watery environment would cause the fluke to return. A fundamental shift in thinking happened this year in the nature of the storms and flooding. Farmers have started to realise that they are at the front line of the climate change challenge we face. As we are increasingly realising, the response to this must involve managing our land from the mountaintop right down to the sea in a way that looks after the natural systems and ecosystems that are provided on our land. It is not just about agricultural output. There is a value in having uplands with forests or certain other conditions. They should not be

shorn. Flood prevention measures should be provided. Farmers and the farms we have need to play a part in flood prevention. We need to help farmers to deal with floods, so that they start to become part of the solution. As we manage our land in an integrated way, we must look after water quality, flooding and the farm outputs in a co-ordinated way.

We need a national spatial strategy to examine how we develop housing in this country and where economic development occurs. Such a strategy should include a land use strategy that integrates the entire ecosystem, looks after the areas of wilderness that we need to provide biological and ecological services and proposes changes in the way we do forestry. We need to do what we have to do to switch how certain areas of farmland are used. As a Teagasc climate adviser, Dr. Rogier Schulte, has said, if one can manage the land in a way that optimises the environment, one will optimise one's profit. Environmental thinking and good agricultural management go hand in hand. This must be done as part of a co-ordinated national plan that manages and protects against climate change risk.

These issues have arisen time and again over the past six months, for example as we have faced the flooding risk associated with climate change. We have met farmers and heard about the latest technologies, such as the use of automation, that allow the use of land to be optimised. We have looked at new business models that reduce our reliance on international markets and start to bring back a connection with the consumer here at home. This connects with our tourism industry, facilitates the provision of healthier food and leads to more secure incomes for farmers. Time and again, I have helped farmers to realise that what the Green Party has to say on farming makes sense. If we are going to be "origin green" and if we are genuine about our intention to sell this country in the expectation of getting a premium as a land that looks after its natural systems and provides healthy and safe food, we will have a better agricultural future.

Deputy Simon Coveney: I agree with that.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I think that is something we can get agreement on, but we have to do it in reality. We must make sure it is actually delivered. We need to get people on board. We have to effect a real change in land use. This should not just be about doubling output, reducing water quality and eroding the natural systems on which we all depend. I look forward to such an agricultural future. I look forward to further debates in this House, when the representatives of Dublin Bay South will stand up for the farming community once more.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I wish the Ceann Comhairle the best of luck in his new role. I wish everyone in the House well in the coming week. I am pleased to have an opportunity to speak on this issue. As the Minister knows and as Europe knows, many sectors of the agriculture industry are in trouble at the moment. We are well aware that the dairy sector was put out as the new Sanyt that was coming right across Europe as quotas disappeared. I warned many people that this would rebound back. Many people who borrowed money are suffering. They will probably go through a rough year this year. With luck, things will progress a bit for next year and should be better.

The sheep sector has toddled along for the past few years. Prices have been somewhat better over the past year. There is no doubt that we have to give the people involved in this sector some help. I am not saying we can give them everything they want, but I emphasise that they need a certain degree of help. We have lost things at the moment. This is clear when one goes to the mountains. We should have concentrated on the likes of organic lamb. The animals living on any of our mountains are basically organic. We should be selling them to Europe. We

should not be making excuses for why the animals above on the mountain are not organic.

I think we have a tough back-end coming with the beef sector. The number of cattle exported in 2015 was 65,000 less than the equivalent number in 2010. That is a phenomenal number of cattle. If we do not export them on the hoof, our good old friends in the factories will make sure to drop prices every week when they see the glut of cattle coming out. I think we have to be ready for this. Manners have to be put on the factories that are screwing farmers year in, year out. The feed lots that those factories have at the moment are questionable. If they are feeding a large number of cattle in those feed lots, they can distort the numbers that are coming out each week. I suggest that we hit trouble any time the weekly cattle kill exceeds 27,000 or 28,000. This has to be tackled. Europe has to come on board, even if intervention has to open for a while.

We cannot have a situation where farmers who are fattening cattle are losing money. If this is happening, they will eventually go away. In fairness, I understand that Egypt is going to open. I know there are new markets on the horizon. We have to do whatever is necessary to entice the animal on foot out of the country. This will put manners on the factory system. Obviously, there will be more Friesians coming from the dairy herd. As I have said previously, I encourage the Minister to bring forward an initiative that would allow calves under the age of four, five or six weeks to be taken out of this country rapidly. Holland, Spain and other countries are pretty good at feeding or driving such calves on and killing them as veal. I think we need to do this.

I would like to mention something that is within the Minister's grasp at the moment and needs to be done. Some 14 or 15 months ago, not long after I was first elected to this House, the European Investment Bank and Commissioner Hogan announced that low funding would be made available to the dairy sector and, indeed, all farmers. When I was at the transport committee in Europe, I quizzed the head of the European Investment Bank on this matter. He got pretty upset when he was told he had not delivered everything he had said he would deliver, not to mind talking about giving the same thing to the transport industry. He said it was coming. I accept that an announcement was made by Glanbia and the dairy guys last week or the week before, but where is the announcement for the west of Ireland? Not one dairy co-op has taken it up. I have rang them, but they do not seem to be worried or bothered about it.

With all due respect to farmers down in the south - Glanbia might be on its game and fair play to it if it is - they can get the low money. However, farmers in the west of Ireland, above in Donegal or in Leinster for that matter might not be able to get it. A system needs to be rammed through a bank or something - we could even put it through a credit union - to make sure this funding is made available to beef farmers and farmers in the other sectors, some of whom are struggling. I ask the Minister to make sure the scheme mentioned by Commissioner Hogan and the head of the European Investment Bank is adhered to because this low money needs to be provided if we are to talk about recovery in rural Ireland. I will give the Minister an example. A credit union in a local area near me at home brought out a loan at a rate of something like 5%. Between €2.5 million and €3 million was borrowed in that area. This generated an unbelievable amount of revenue in a small community.

I heard people saying earlier in the debate on this topic that we need to make sure we sow more forestry. I can tell Deputies about how forestry has changed in case they do not know. It is no longer sown on boggy ground because that is not allowed. Now it is being sown on land that is a bit better. The west of Ireland was earmarked for much of this forestry. I want

to make it clear that if this great idea of sowing forestry almost exclusively in a certain part of the country is adhered to, we will have to consider what to do with the people of that region. Should we run them out of it? What will we do with the local communities, schools and shops? Are we going to decide to close one section of Ireland because the land there might not be of the same quality as the land elsewhere? The people of the area might not have the dairy cows or the tillage ground like the rest of the country. We have to make sure we do not go down a road we might regret. We cannot shove everyone into the towns because we do not have the facilities there.

I know the Minister is aware that the pig sector is in trouble at the moment. If we keep going down a road that makes farmers hit a stop-gap every few years, they will have no certainty or consistency with regard to prices. I know the Minister has spoken about producer groups and all of that. That is fine and okay, but we need to make sure the cartels - the shops and the factories - are not constantly driving the agenda for farmers. I urge the Minister, with his inspectors and the appeals board, to ensure farmers are treated fairly. The introduction of the yellow card system is to be welcomed. The relationship with farmers should be such that the objective is to help them rather than take money from them. As I have stated many times over the past year, when it comes to the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, the objective must be to protect the family farm. Any increased use of Pillar 2 must be directed towards small family farms. It must be remembered that 95% of money invested in a family farm is reaped locally. This is evident from all the relevant statistics. Any reduction in that investment will impact negatively on local shops, local schools and local communities. I would ask the Minister to consider that.

GLAS has been changed a few times. I do not know what is going on in Europe or in Ireland that a scheme can be changed three times in one year. I cannot understand how one day low input permanent pastures in the meadows on a half and half basis was acceptable only for this to be changed to a requirement to all of one or none of the other. In regard to marginal land, one cannot use a dribble bar in Leitrim, or even in my area, because the quality of land cannot support the tanker. What about the farmer who has sheep from which no slurry is derived? The response is usually that one can sow wild bird cover. One can sow wild bird cover in the Golden Vale but one cannot sow it in marginal land, particularly in west Cork and Kerry. There are parts of Ireland to which this is not suited. We need to tailor schemes to resolve these issues if farming is to be viable into the future.

On land use, many of the farms currently coming up for sale are being bought up by vulture funds. These vulture funds are working for the banks and are buying up land, often comprising 40 to 50 acres, adjacent to working farms. The former Land Commission while not perfect ensured that land was retained within communities. What is happening now is that outside interests, often American vulture funds, are investing money and local farmers are losing out. This issue needs to be tackled.

The issue of farm debt also needs to be addressed. With the funding from the European Investment Bank, EIB, longer term loans may be possible. If we do not keep people in their communities or keep farmers in operation our exports will decline, as will other sectors of the food chain. As a country, Ireland produces better food than any other country in Europe. I have no doubt about that. Ireland can compete with the best. Let us stick our chests out and when Europe raises issues such as carbon emissions and killing off the national herd, we should quickly point out that we can produce meat or any other type of agriculture product more efficiently than any of our European counterparts. For once, let them take the heat and leave the Irish people alone, bearing in mind the recent crisis they have come through.

An Ceann Comhairle: The next five-minute speaking slot is being shared by Deputies Martin Heydon and Pat Deering. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Martin Heydon: This is my first time to speak in the House since the Ceann Comhairle assumed his new position. As a constituency colleague, I wish him well in his new role.

I would like to touch on a couple of the contributions made earlier. In response to the Sinn Féin representative who referred to the relationship with the banks, it is important to put on the record that the Minister has had numerous meetings with the banks. The banks are a key part of the dairy forum, which regularly discusses the pressure on farmers and solutions to ease the short-term pressures. Only recently Glanbia, Rabo Bank and Finance Ireland launched a new partnership approach which allows for repayment plans to be linked directly to the price per litre of milk, which is a sensible approach in these difficult times.

Deputy Clare Daly has a frightening perspective on the world. She would turn us all into vegetarians, return us to famine times where we are dependent on the potato and then take all of our good agricultural land and plant trees on it, which, personally, I think is unethical never mind ludicrous. The Deputy failed in her contribution to acknowledge that our grass-based system is one of the most environmentally friendly in the world.

On the EU agricultural Ministers meeting, I have concerns about the voluntary supply control measures permitting producer organisations and co-operatives to compensate their suppliers for reductions in supply. At home in south Kildare, I am surrounded by neighbours who have invested massively in their dairy farms to ramp up supply in this post-quota era. Commodity prices are cyclical. Notwithstanding the sustained period of low prices, they will rise again. Farmers must be able to make money on the up-swing when prices increase. It is vital that voluntary supply control measures remain voluntary and that there is no row back on quota times.

I would like to speak a little about the Glanbia plant in Ballitore in south Kildare. Ballitore is a small rural village with a population of 685 people. The Glanbia plant in Ballitore employs 250 people. Only last week the company held a jobs fair and is currently taking on an additional 25 people because for the first time, it will produce bottles at the plant. This is an example of the impact expansion in the dairy sector has on rural Ireland and rural Ireland life. For this reason, it is crucial there are no barriers to expansion. The difficulties being experienced are not only in the dairy and pigmeat sector - the tillage sector has also experienced three very difficult years. As a mixed enterprise farmer, I know that the Teagasc cereal crop margin calculator is unpleasant reading as it does not allow for a person with conacre. The removal of import tariffs on fertiliser in the EU is crucial to a reduction in costs. We also need to strive to ensure the availability of cheaper finance, including by allowing provision by the European Investment Bank of low interest rate loans to tillage farmers. Also, aid to a private storage scheme for barley would provide some short-term relief. These three measures, in particular, are desperately needed if our tillage sector is to be progressed. I know the Minister, Deputy Coveney, will in Europe strive to achieve them.

Deputy Pat Deering: I, too, wish the Ceann Comhairle well in his new position. I am sure he will find his new role enjoyable and fulfilling.

I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important issue. In my opinion, agriculture is an issue that does not get the credit it deserves. It has been the driving force behind the economy

of this country getting to where it is currently. It has been a key driver in the economy over the past number of years. Unfortunately, as has been mentioned by a number of speakers, it did not receive the respect it deserved during the recent general election campaign. As a dairy farmer in my spare time, I am only too well aware of the difficulties being experienced by this sector. I am also aware of the impact which increases in the dairy sector can have on the rural economy.

Deputy Heydon referenced the Ballitore plant in his constituency. I would like to speak a little about the Ballyragget plant in south Kilkenny in my constituency. Any increased production in this area, in terms of the 75 mixed dairy producers in the Ballyragget area, will result in an additional €10 million being spent in the rural economy of Ballyragget over the next five years. Agriculture is crucial to the development of rural Ireland. Once a farmer has money, it will be re-invested in the economy. From a dairy sector point of view, we are experiencing many difficulties. I returned to farming approximately 20 years ago, when the price of a litre of milk to the farmer was 28 cent per litre. Today, the price per litre is 24 cent while at the same time the cost of production has increased by 50%. This is not sustainable into the future. It is important this issue is addressed.

I welcome some of the packages that have been introduced recently, including the €500 million package from Europe in September last, which was topped up by national government and the package introduced last week. However, these packages, while important and helpful, are only short-term measures. We need to re-examine the intervention price for milk. Many people believe we need to put in place a floor in relation to milk prices. The 28 cent per litre price needs to be re-examined over time. It is also important that the top-up payment for young farmers is reintroduced if they are to remain sustainable into the future.

The beef issue has been articulated by many people in recent times. Additional cattle will come on to the market given the increase in the number of dairy cows over the past year or so. By this time next year, there will be a perfect storm from a beef point of view and we need to plan for that. The only way to address this is to increase exports.

As we approach the mid-term review of the CAP, it is important that there be significant consultation regarding all the issues. For example, the sheep industry was mentioned earlier. The simplification of the CAP needs to be addressed as we move forward.

An Ceann Comhairle: Three Members are sharing the next five-minute slot - Deputies Jackie Cahill, Kevin O'Keeffe and Eamon Scanlon - two of whom are making their maiden contributions.

Deputy Jackie Cahill: I thank the Minister for his comments at the beginning of his contribution. A number of Members who have contributed do not realise the pressure on farm incomes currently. All sectors of farming are under huge income pressure, including the dairy, grain and pig sectors. The beef sector is heading down the same road with increased production and no plans to rectify the imminent income crisis. The beef forum has failed miserably to deliver for us with no improvements coming out of it. Last week, the tariff on fertilisers was not removed, which was very disappointing. We, as farmers, are producing food to the highest standards and we have made huge investments to do that but now we are being asked to produce food under the cost of production. That is unsustainable and has to change.

Reference was made to banks earlier. A structure must be put in place under which banks must wait for repayments due from farmers in 2016 without penalty, otherwise many farmers

will go bankrupt. A number of countries have introduced supply controls. That is a dangerous precedent for Ireland as an exporting country, and we have to guard against that. It could undermine the Single Market, which is important to us. The increase in volumes that can go into intervention and how quickly they have been taken up shows how long the distressed state of our dairy market will last. Something must be done and I was disappointed to hear the Council of Ministers will not meet again until June because additional measures must be put in place to ensure something is done to alleviate the crisis that is coming towards us like a juggernaut.

Deputy Kevin O’Keeffe: To balance the debate, I would like to highlight the importance of agriculture. Sometimes, I have sympathy for the Minister because I am sure when the record is read later, people will wonder about the balance of the debate in regard to the current agricultural crisis. There is a major crisis, as previous speakers said, across every agricultural sector be it beef, dairy, tillage or suckler. My background is in the pig sector and the situation is serious at the moment. All these sectors create invaluable employment. Reference was made to the number of jobs created in the dairy sector but significant jobs have been created in the pig and beef sectors and through related services. I brought a long document with me but as I only have a few seconds left, I would draw the Minister’s attention to farmers facing a double crisis following the flood damage caused by recent storms. A cohort of tillage farmers in east Cork whose land has been affected by salt drift from sea mist caused by the storms should be looked after. It is important that they are addressed in the context of compensation and I ask the Minister to give this attention.

I hope agriculture will be given more recognition in the House. I can see why Dáil reform is needed, as some Members do not realise that the agriculture industry is the backbone of this economy.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: I wish the Ceann Comhairle the best in his deliberations over the next few weeks.

I am glad to have the opportunity to address a few issues in respect of farming in the north west. I come from an area in which there is not much dairying but there are beef farmers who produce top quality store cattle. I refer to the issue of nomad cattle. Cattle are being produced but because they are moved from one side of a field to the other, this can mean they move from the Republic of Ireland to Northern Ireland and then their price is cut by €150 or €200, which is unfair. When we joined the EU, we joined as an equal member state. Every EU citizen has equal rights, except when it comes to cattle. These cattle are classed as exports but they are only being moved from one side of the road to the other. This is wrong and unfair. I plead with the Minister to address this issue, which has serious consequences for the area I come from.

With regard to GLAS, I understand 13,000 places on the scheme were intended for farmers. This number was then cut to 11,000. Many farmers spent between €450 and €500 on their applications for GLAS funding only to discover they have been refused. It is unfair to put people to that cost and encourage them to apply for the scheme before cutting the number of places by 2,000. That needs to be addressed.

The third issue I would like to raise relates to a co-operative in my area. Deputy McLoughlin will be very much aware of it. The co-operative was established more than 100 years ago to help and support small farmers in this rural area. A product is manufactured in Achonry Creamery for the market worldwide - Connacht Gold butter. It is one of only three plants of its kind in the world. The technique used to produce the butter was established in the State.

A total of 25 people are employed in the creamery and they work around the clock to produce this butter but they have discovered their jobs are being moved to Cork. These jobs are being taken from a rural area that badly needs them to sustain the area. It is unfortunate that this will happen. Is State funding being used to subsidise the plant in Cork or a plant elsewhere in the country, which has received State grants, to take jobs from another area? It is wrong that this should happen.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: One of the most important outcomes of the Council's latest meeting related to the pig sector. The sector has reduced dramatically in recent decades with only 1,500 holdings remaining last year. Even the nature of pig farming has changed, as it has become a much more intensive operation. IFA pig prices are currently more than 20 cent per kg below the cost of production, meaning a loss to the average pig farmer of €5,000 per week. In response to a disastrous price year, pig farmers were promised a portion of the aid package announced by the Commission in September 2015. This promise, however, remains undelivered. The delay is increasing the significant hardship being experienced by these farmers and I call on the Minister to take immediate and urgent action to ensure these payments are processed without further delay.

I also welcome the opportunity to address the fisheries element of the Council. As important as agriculture is to our economy, I cannot help but feel that fisheries will always be the poor relative in such a configuration. There is no telling how much longer the Minister, Deputy Coveney, will represent Ireland at these meetings but he seems determined to go out on the offensive against our fishermen to the very end. By signing SI 125 of 2016, he has ridden roughshod over the rights of fishermen and, indeed, over the High Court. Fishermen are used to Governments introducing new regulations and blaming the EU, but it is a new low for a Government that was kicked out of power to bring in an instrument and refuse to allow any debate on it. This instrument was signed into law by the Minister on 1 March while some count centres were still counting the votes in the general election. It was brought in because the previous statutory instrument was struck down by the High Court, which was a vindication of what the fishermen were saying. My Sinn Féin colleagues and I have tabled a motion annulling the instrument and I hope the Dáil can do its job and permit time for the motion to be taken. It is one of the issues I raised this morning. We have an obligation in that regard because a statutory instrument can be annulled by either House of the Oireachtas within 28 sitting days by a simple majority vote. I ask that this motion be tabled for the next sitting of the Dáil to facilitate a transparent debate. If the Dáil wishes to introduce this type of penalty system for our fishermen, so be it, but if it decides otherwise, we should annul it.

Fishermen from Killybegs, the Rosses and other areas in Donegal have contacted me expressing their anger at what they see as the criminalisation of their livelihoods, and it strikes me as unprecedented for a statutory instrument to be introduced which flies in the face of not one but two High Court judgments. The High Court ruled that the provisions of a penalty point system for fishermen who engage in illegal, unreported or unregulated fishing were unconstitutional and therefore not fit for purpose. The Minister had to revoke the 2014 statutory instrument because the courts had struck it down. However, without any reference to the House, he has introduced a statutory instrument to bring in these regulations. Notwithstanding all we will hear about political reform in the weeks and months ahead, the new statutory instrument for which the Minister, Deputy Coveney, is responsible proceeded without any consultation with the industry or Opposition spokespersons and without any involvement by Oireachtas committees or other stakeholders. There are major questions about the legality of an instrument which

states that regardless of the outcome of criminal proceedings and the acquittal of a fisherman in a court of law, penalty points will still be assigned to his or her licence. This instrument must be the subject of a full debate and a vote to annul it. Time is required for real discussion on how we treat our fishermen. I am calling for a stop to this process and the annulment of the statutory instrument. I am asking the Minister to agree to talk to the fishermen, to listen to the outcome and to suspend, annul or revoke the instrument, or at least allow us to debate the issue so that the Parliament can decide if it is the right course of action. It sticks in the craw of fishermen. People have been asking me-----

Deputy Simon Coveney: I speak to fishermen all the time.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister can respond in his own time. Hopefully, he will allow everybody to respond by allowing a debate on this when we come back on 6 April. Fishermen are really annoyed that while here in Ireland the penalty points system is applied to a T, the Danish authorities refused to apply points to a Danish vessel found guilty of fishing in our seas without a quota by the Sea Fisheries Protection Agency. While the courts struck down the penalty points system and said to the Minister, Deputy Coveney, and his Government that what they did in 2014 was unconstitutional, days after the general election and without a sitting of the House, he signed on 1 March a statutory instrument introducing nearly the same law as was struck down by the courts.

Deputy Simon Coveney: It is not the same law.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It is an absolute affront to fishermen out there. Let us have a proper debate by putting it on the agenda of the next Dáil sitting, and let us vote on it.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Let us have a proper debate, rather than using this debate.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I am glad the Minister is willing to do so.

An Ceann Comhairle: Can Deputy Doherty conclude, please?

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I hope he will be true to his word on 6 April and that it will be on the agenda.

An Ceann Comhairle: The next speaker is Deputy John Paul Phelan, and I ask that he be allowed to speak without interruption from anyone.

Deputy John Paul Phelan: I thank the Ceann Comhairle. I will try not to interrupt myself. I congratulate the Ceann Comhairle, as have other speakers, on his historic election. I was interested in Deputy Eamon Scanlon's comments earlier when he wished the Ceann Comhairle the best of luck in his deliberations over the next few weeks. I presume he was referring to the committee and not having a premonition about the term of office of the Ceann Comhairle, although he may have more information than I have.

I agree with previous speakers who mentioned the importance of agriculture as a sector of the economy, particularly in the recessionary period that the country has been in for the past seven or eight years. It has not received the recognition in the broader media that it deserves as a significant component in the improving economic situation of the country. That is important to state. For the first time in my life, I find myself in agreement with Deputy Pearse Doherty, which may be a sign of the new consensus politics that may be forced to emerge, on the pig sector. I confess that I come from a farming background, but there are not that many pig producers

in south County Kilkenny, although there are some. I recently spoke to a significant producer who outlined to me the issues affecting his particular sector of agriculture, particularly in terms of labelling. While the Minister has made some inroads in that area, the case was put strongly to me that despite the expectation of shoppers and consumers that the pigmeat products of significant well-known Irish brands are actually Irish, the majority of what those companies are putting on shelves is not of Irish origin. I understand the purpose the green mark that goes on those products is meant to serve, but it does not outline clearly enough the fact that so much of the pigmeat sold on shelves in this country is not from here. The shopper and the general public would be shocked at the level of imports in that particular sector. Deputy Doherty is right that the production of pigmeat is not sustainable when the price is 20 cent per kilogram below the cost of production. There might be a job of work to be done in that particular area.

Others have spoken about intervention prices in the dairy sector, and I concur with the points that have been made. I note that in the lifetime of the last Dáil, a number of new taxation measures were introduced for the agriculture sector, including with regard to partnerships and companies and different measures that made it easier for new people to come in and for young people to partner with their parents on the family farm. There is significant opportunity now to look at what happens in other countries in terms of income-averaging over a number of years. I note that there have been some measures introduced in that regard here, but I am thinking in particular of an Australian scheme which was advocated for over a number of years by the IFA, although it seems to have dropped off its radar in the past 12 months. In terms of the dairy sector in particular, something like that, which is a little bit creative and different, would assist dairy farmers, many of whom are exposed to significant borrowings and cannot sustain a long period of depressed prices. Let us be honest: there is not much light at the end of the tunnel at the moment in terms of milk prices. Intervention is significant and important but it is not removing the problem. Rather, it is just postponing it. There are other measures which should be considered also.

Things are pretty much the same in the beef sector. A significant overhang is going to hit the beef sector in the next 12 months with the huge increase in the number of dairy cows across the country. That is going to result in the production of a lot of plainer cattle. The Minister has made significant strides with regard to reintroducing live shipping, and there was an announcement not so long ago. I hope he can progress that further, because if the overhang hits in full it will further depress the price of beef and cause a significant shock in the sector.

An Ceann Comhairle: There is one slot remaining and I will call on Deputies Denis Naughten and Mattie McGrath who will have roughly two and a half minutes each.

Deputy Denis Naughten: That is great. I am glad I have the first two and half minutes and that Deputy Mattie McGrath is coming after me rather than the other way around. I thank the Ceann Comhairle for giving me that big break. I welcome the opportunity to speak on this issue. It is a pity we do not have more debates on agriculture on the floor of the House.

Deputy Simon Coveney: Absolutely.

3 o'clock

Deputy Denis Naughten: It was the one element that maintained the economy during the darkest years of the past decade.

I wish to raise a couple of issues, the perennial one being that of on-farm inspections. As

the Minister knows, there is a mechanism for CAP simplification as a result of Commissioner Phil Hogan's announcements. It is imperative that they be implemented in respect of the basic payment scheme this year and not be kicked out until 2017. There is a major problem with the variation in randomised on-farm inspections across counties. Bizarrely, the penalty rate in County Roscommon and east Galway is 20 times that across the River Shannon in County Longford. At the end of each year after on-farm inspections are completed, will the Department hold a series of regional meetings to explain to farmers where common mistakes have been made and how they can avoid repeats? The Department's objective should be to try to keep the penalty rate down, not to drive farmers out of agriculture and reduce incomes.

Will the Minister adopt another suggestion? Each basic payment scheme map has a date at its bottom. That is the date on which the map was printed, which is of no use to anyone. Could the map state the dates on which the remote picture was taken and last amended?

I wish to raise two further issues, the first of which relates to the beef sector. We need additional direct payments for the suckler herd. Will the Minister immediately commence the review of the beef data and genomics scheme instead of dragging it down the road? It is vital that a targeted payment of €20 per ewe in the national sheep flock be put in place and that sheep farmers have direct access to the knowledge transfer, TAMS, GLAS and areas of natural constraint programmes.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Déanaim comhghairdeas leat, a Cheann Comhairle. Best of luck in your role and thank you for giving me this time.

An Ceann Comhairle: Go raibh maith agat.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I concur with many of the previous speakers, and Deputy Naughten in particular, about specific payments for sheep farmers. It is a difficult area. The beef and milk sectors also need supports. As Deputy Naughten stated, farmers kept the economy going in the recession. The Government claims that we have recovered from it but we have not. Farming kept rural Ireland alive, as it did in many other dark recessions down the years. When farmers do well, they spend that money locally.

When they must apply for GLAS, they must pay a certain amount to get a qualified person, yet they might not even get on to the scheme. We have too many announcements and not enough substance behind them. The delay in payments for the partnership scheme that people entered into in good faith, the single farm payment and not being able to get in contact with the Department are frustrating and annoying. This is a major issue. When I raised this, the Minister told me that we were one of the best in Europe, but if we are, then they must be very bad in Europe, and I do not believe that.

People are looking for gardaí in rural Ireland and there is one garda for every 370 people, but there is one agricultural inspector for every 30 or 35 people. What is going on? Why is there not more efficiency and why do we not have more time to deal with issues?

I appeal to the Minister to re-establish the Land Commission or some form of land agency to stop the swallowing up of farms in Tipperary, east Cork, west Waterford and everywhere else by certain large racing syndicates. It is terrible that small farmers are being bought out and bulldozed out of the way. The Land Commission was introduced to disseminate large estates in the 1940s. It did a good job. Now, a conglomerate wants to invest in every five or ten acres that are going. This is unpalatable, unfair and morally wrong and needs to be addressed. People

are afraid to discuss it because the organisation is so powerful, but it is not good for the future of farming.

I salute the organisation's powers over the stud book. What it does with racehorses is wonderful but now is the time to let the farmers live, not to drive peasant farmers off the land or make them unsustainable. We need an agency, for example, a reinstated Land Commission, to consider what amount of land any one group can own and fence off to the point that not even a snipe can get through. This relates to hunting, fishing rights, etc. It is wrong. I appeal to the Minister and the Department to sit up and listen before it is too late. This issue not only affects south Tipperary, but north Tipperary, west Waterford, east Cork and beyond. Thousands of acres have been amassed. This is not acceptable to young farmers who want to buy ten, 15 or 20 acres to make their farms viable and expand. It is not acceptable that farming organisations and everyone else is turning a blind eye. We have seen enough of big business ruining our country in many respects. We do not want that to happen to the good farmers in Tipperary and elsewhere. I am speaking for Tipperary. This situation is too much. I appeal to the Minister to examine it and set up a body to consider land usage policy.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister has five minutes to respond. I am conscious that it will be inordinately difficult to address all of those issues in five minutes but perhaps we could examine that matter when we consider the Standing Orders.

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Simon Coveney): I hope so. I thank and congratulate a number of Deputies who made their maiden speeches on this debate. I agree with some Deputies who stated that we needed longer debates on agriculture and all matters linked to it. I hope that we will have an opportunity to do so in future. Regardless of what part of this Chamber I will be standing on, I would welcome that.

Many issues have been touched on and I would like to answer them in detail. Deputy Pearse Doherty asked specific questions. We did not deal with fishing at the Council meeting last week because it focused on milk prices but the issue that he raised is one of concern for the fishing industry. We changed a statutory instrument significantly to take account of the industry's concerns about the previous statutory instrument but we will have a long opportunity to debate the issue because whoever will be the future Minister in my Department will be required to introduce primary legislation to deal with the question of penalty points thoroughly. At that point, there will be a full opportunity to tease through the issue, as part of which there will be full consultation. I will be starting that consultation in the coming weeks. There will be an opportunity for debate and we will not have to rush it on 6 April or whenever. We will go through the full legislative process.

Regarding pigs, there is a payment of €3,000 per farm. The closing date for applications for that payment was 9 March. We will get that payment out as quickly as we can for pigmeat farmers who are facing difficulties.

Regarding some of the broad principles, I encourage those who are criticising Ireland's current agriculture strategy from the point of view of sustainability or climate change to read Food Wise 2025, in which we make clear that sustainability is just as important as productivity in terms of planning, policy and financing the modernisation, change and technological advancements that are happening, and need to happen, in agriculture. I am in the business of ensuring that family farms can stay on the land, be they small, medium or large, and that we help farmers in disadvantaged areas as well as those who are lucky enough to have fertile land. Consider

my decisions on how to allocate resources. We have prioritised farmers in disadvantaged areas. We have changed the criteria for entrance into GLAS across two application phases so as to ensure a broad response in terms of environmental measures, which we are using EU and national funds to pay for as part of the rural development programme. We are required to do that. This is a significant scheme.

There was criticism of the beef genomics scheme but we will spend €300 million supporting suckler beef farmers through it. We will help them to put better breeding programmes in place so as to produce animals that grow faster, are more efficient and produce less methane in their lifetimes. The €300 million spend, more than half of which comprises EU funds, is a climate change measure for the beef industry. When people discuss agriculture as if it is doing nothing for the climate change challenge, I say that we are arguably doing more in agriculture in Ireland than any other country in the world. The majority of the funds we are spending under the rural development programme are actually devoted to the environment and climate change. Some 46,000 beef farmers in Ireland are currently measuring the carbon footprint of their herds on their farms. No other country in the world is even talking about doing that, yet we are doing it. All 17,000 dairy farmers in the country have, through their farming organisations, signed up to sustainability audits that will measure emissions and feed conversion efficiency and ensure animal husbandry is of an acceptable standard.

Since 1990, Irish agriculture emissions have actually reduced by 10% while transport emissions have increased by 119%. That said, we need to do more to meet climate change and environmental challenges in agriculture and we must constantly ensure we are setting standards and doing more. However, we also need to recognise the progress that is being made in this area. We can do a lot through technology and we can show other parts of the world how to produce food in a much more efficient way. That is why we have spoken to the World Bank about what Ireland is doing and how we can transfer knowledge to other parts of the world. We have spoken to the World Wildlife Fund for the same reason.

I am protective of our industry when people criticise farmers for not doing enough for the environment or to meet the climate change challenge Ireland must face along with every other developed country. We are doing a lot in this area but we need to and will do more, but let us recognise the progress that has been made over the past five years in particular.

There are sectors under real pressure at present. I look forward to the opportunity to have more debates on agriculture and more time to debate many of these issues. The food industry, the agri-food industry and agriculture comprise the most important sector of the Irish economy. It provides livelihoods in every parish, from Donegal to Cork and everywhere between. We need to protect that and invest in it, and we need policies that are progressive. We need to challenge farmers when they need to be challenged but we also need to support them and keep them in business. Over the past five years, we have had a reasonable balance in ensuring that what we are doing is progressive and taking opportunities that exist, but also ensuring a change in attitude to sustainability, the protection of the environment and meeting the climate change challenges. Who would have thought that farmers would be actively measuring the carbon footprint of their own herds on their own land regularly and inviting audit teams to assess independently and certify internationally, through the UK Carbon Trust, the efficiency of their meat and dairy production from an emissions perspective? Who would have thought that ten years ago or even seven years ago? Now we are doing it. We need to protect these sectors. We are spending approximately €12.5 billion doing so under the new Common Agricultural Policy. We need to ensure the money is well spent and well focused, keeps people on the land and in business, and

protects family farming, not large corporations.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Hear, hear.

Deputy Simon Coveney: As long as I am Minister, my main priority will be to keep rural Ireland alive, vibrant and sustainable while protecting the environment that allows us to farm in the first place and keeping farming families in their communities. I look forward to taking on these challenges. We will have challenges. This is a huge sector and has a turnover of approximately €26 billion per year. Since it is huge, there will always be sub-sectors within it facing challenges that will need policy change and support to ensure people and their livelihoods can be protected. We also need to change agriculture and keep moving it in the right direction in response to global, food security and environmental challenges as they emerge.

I thank the Deputies for their input today and look forward to more detailed debate in the not-too-distant future.

Housing and Homelessness: Statements

Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Alan Kelly): I ask Deputies to cast their minds back to 2012 when many reports were being published on the sorry state of the economy and property market at the time. One report issued a severe warning to the property sector that it could take more than 40 years to deal with the oversupply of housing unless we started bulldozing houses. The report stated: “Barring a sudden and sizeable recovery in Irish net migration, or the politically controversial policy of demolishing large volumes of housing stock, housing oversupply will remain a feature for many years, possibly decades, to come”. I note this to demonstrate the way in which housing challenges have completely transformed in the past five years. The challenge of empty houses has been replaced with under-supply and the required supply increase takes time to implement.

Tackling the housing and homelessness crisis will take considerable time. Contrary to what has been said by some commentators, there is no instant answer to the problem or one that fits into a soundbite. I raise this matter now because I want this debate on housing to be informed and different. The election is over and I want to stick to the facts in the housing market, as it stands, rather than being politically defensive. I also want to be as helpful and productive as possible to the incoming Minister with responsibility for housing who may well be in the Chamber.

In short, the position is simply that the construction sector is not building anywhere near the number of residential units required in a country with a growing population and an even faster growing economy. Developers in urban areas are not playing an active part in delivering the units we need. This is putting upward pressure on rents, thus condemning a generation to rent expensively priced properties as they struggle to save deposits and are unable to purchase a home. This sharp increase in rents is pushing vulnerable persons into emergency accommodation. While a solid foundation has been laid to ensure these developments are temporary as opposed to permanent features of the housing market, it will take an equal commitment from all sides of the political debate to deal with the issue.

Based on the housing manifestos produced during the election, all of which I studied, no political entity, individual or party has all the answers. I do not have time to go through all of the documents today, but if any Deputy believes he or she has an instant answer, I hope he or she

will lay it before the House today. Perhaps they might remain stuck to the narrative of blame. We can have hope and while it will take time to do so, we can deliver for people. We have all been elected to this Dáil to act in the interests of the country. The time for sitting on the fence and opposing everything must come to an end. With election to this House comes responsibility and those waiting on a home will not thank those Deputies who shout, rant and roar instead of engaging in a constructive attempt to actively solve housing supply problems.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The Minister has certainly not changed much since the election.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I challenge those Deputies who believe they have all the answers to take the opportunity to step up to the mark, enter government and continue the work of solving the housing problem. This is an incredibly difficult and complex challenge, one from which, based on their utterances, many parties in the Thirty-second Dáil have effectively walked away because they refuse to countenance entering government and instead shout from the sidelines all the time.

I have seen at first hand the upset, strain and stress that problems with housing cause for people and their families, particularly the most vulnerable. Our homes should be places where we feel safe and secure, rather than a cause of stress and worry. For this reason, when I took office in the summer of 2014, I made housing my number one priority. I was under no illusions that this was one of the biggest challenges facing the country as we emerged from the deep economic crisis. By 2014, local authorities no longer had either the skill set or finances to kick-start major house building programmes. This issue was rectified through the sanctioning of more than 450 new housing staff for local authorities and providing €4 billion in social housing funding.

With regard to protecting those renting privately, we were determined to significantly strengthen the rights of tenants and that is what we did. The changes to the Residential Tenancies Act passed in December will be of significant help to 320,000 people in private rented accommodation. One of the best policy options in the short term to support families who find themselves in emergency accommodation owing to a lack of housing options is the rapid build housing programme I initiated. The houses in question are not prefabricated buildings but high quality, A-rated homes which, if delivered on a sufficient scale, offer the best hope for people in the short term. I urge all Deputies to reflect on this point and visit the units in Poppintree. I hope everyone with an interest in housing will visit the site and perhaps we might discuss the issue again in a couple of weeks when they have all done so.

I do not claim that we fixed everything in housing in the past year and a half. That was never a possibility as a true fix will take many years. Nevertheless, it is important to note that much has been done and further steps are planned to deal with what remains to be done. Increased supply across all forms of housing is required. The construction sector appears to be struggling to make large-scale residential developments work. The 11,000 and 12,500 homes completed in 2014 and 2015, respectively, amounted to less than half the estimated requirement of 25,000 units per year. We needed 50,000 homes in the past two years, yet the private market delivered less than half of this figure. To tackle these problems my Department, in addition to implementing the social housing strategy, deployed a large range of measures to increase the supply of private houses being built by bringing the costs of constructing homes more within reach of what ordinary people and families could afford to pay. Reductions in local authority development contributions, a streamlining of the Part V social housing requirements, more consistent application of apartment standards and, recently, a targeted development contribution rebate scheme

22 March 2016

have together reduced input costs by between €20,000 and €40,000, depending on whether apartments or houses are being constructed. It is clear, however, that we need to do more.

Some parties believe the reversal of the new Central Bank rules is the answer. While these rules need to be tweaked, their whole-scale reversal would simply clear the way to start repeating the mistakes of the past when families ended up paying €500,000 for a family home and faced the worry of having to pay for it for 30 years. If we, as parliamentarians, would like more and more people to get the keys to the homes they need and deserve at prices they can afford and in locations they desire, we will have to go further and address the following questions. What is a fair price for a home? How do we reduce input costs, including the tax take which accounts for more than one third of the cost of delivering a new home? How do we guarantee reductions in input costs by the State will be passed on to households? From where will the money come to invest in the infrastructure needed to prepare land for housing development? How will we provide better legal protections for those renting privately? How will we keep a lid on land prices? Addressing these questions raises politically and socially important issues which will have to be debated in this Dáil term.

When it came to the introduction of legislation that sought to secure a tenancy in the event of the sale of a home, the introduction of a vacant site levy to tackle land hoarding or legislating for the introduction of a “use it or lose it” system of planning, it was the Constitution and the way in which it was being interpreted by the courts that restricted us most in our attempts to deal with these problems. I want to be frank and honest to move the debate on. I originally proposed a vacant site levy which would have been applied at a higher rate than had been subsequently proposed and would have been in place next year to tax unused development land. I also proposed that tenancies would be protected in the event of a property sale such as the current sale in Tyrrelstown. In that regard, I welcome some of the residents of the area to this debate. I also proposed that certain models of rent controls be implemented.

Insurmountable obstacles to the implementation of these measures arose due, in the main, to constitutional constraints. As a parliament we must collectively face up to this fact: if we truly believe people’s incomes, rather than the demands of developers or landowners, should determine housing costs, then the following points must be considered: first, targets for reductions in housing construction costs will have to be set and delivered by all stakeholders, including developers, suppliers and, most importantly, the State; and, second - this is also extremely important - there needs to be a public debate on Article 43 of the Constitution to examine whether we have the right balance between the protected and legitimate rights of individuals, as property owners, and the wider needs of society, including housing needs. The latter point is crucial. I have a strong belief in the importance of property rights for our society - including the right of people to enjoy their property - and our economy. However, our Constitution was framed in 1937 when colonial land theft remained in the memory. In the light of the examples I have outlined, I am of the view that an imbalance exists between ownership rights and the public good to such an extent as to warrant an in-depth constitutional review to examine the appropriate balance between the public good and the property rights of individuals. It is incumbent on all of us to at least discuss this issue in some depth. I say as much to be constructive rather than defensive and to generate debate and demonstrate that efforts on the part of officials in my Department have been made in recent years. However, some obstacles are even beyond the control of Ministers.

We have worked hard since 2014 to turn around the disastrous housing situation that was left to us. It will take determined action by the Thirty-second Dáil and its successors to build

on what we have started and the great deal of work done to ensure that we have an affordable supply of housing coming forward. It is now incumbent on everyone in the House to offer solutions. In particular, it is incumbent on those who have the capacity, and many do, to offer such solutions. Instead of simply talking, they should come to the House, take this seat, if they so wish, and deliver on those promises. Now, in this Dáil, a number of Deputies have the opportunity to do so. They should put up, or else.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Byrne): The next speaker is the Taoiseach, Deputy Enda Kenny, who has ten minutes. I wish to apologise to Deputy Ruth Coppinger. There are ten minutes to be shared between her and Deputy Brid Smith. The Deputies must share the time.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: That is fine.

The Taoiseach: I look forward to hearing and reading the propositions of the various Members. Access to affordable, safe and secure housing has shaped Irish politics since before our State was founded. Few issues are as fundamental to the social and economic well-being of any nation as housing and the security it brings. There is nothing more mentally or financially destructive than the loss of one's home and no fear is so paralysing as the potential loss of the roof over one's head. It is for all these people that I and the previous Government worked to fix our broken economy and the housing sector.

Each Government has had its approach to development and housing policies but problems have persisted across the decades. When I became Taoiseach, the country had just suffered from the worst housing crash it had ever faced. In 2006, over 93,000 new houses were built. By 2012, the figure had fallen to a little over 8,000. The property bubble trapped over 315,000 people in negative equity, the level of mortgage arrears was climbing sharply and ghost estates littered the countryside. The collapse of the construction sector was swift and brutal. House prices collapsed and workers emigrated *en masse* to seek employment on sites in the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia.

Since 2014, the speed of the economic recovery and the growth of employment and of household formation has dramatically overtaken the capacity of a damaged and over-borrowed house-building sector to respond. It is easy for anyone to stand in the Dáil and list these well-known problems. However, what I would like is to discover how we plan a way forward together, build on recent initiatives to improve the supply of housing and ensure that all of those involved, including first-time buyers, renters, social housing tenants and families, can live their lives without the constant threat of housing insecurity hanging over them.

The previous Government's first major intervention came in May 2014 with the Construction 2020 strategy. The main features of the strategy were enacted in the Urban Regeneration and Housing Act, which introduced a vacant site levy - to which the Minister, Deputy Kelly, referred - on developers hoarding land in high-demand areas. It reduced development charges on new construction as well as other changes to improve the economic viability of new housing construction. In the budget announced in October 2014, the Government subsequently set aside almost €4 billion to build 35,000 new social homes and expand the use of the housing assistance payment and rental accommodation scheme to help 75,000 other households to meet their housing needs. These were all significant interventions but it is clear they are taking longer than expected to have an impact in the context of the availability of new housing.

22 March 2016

All the heart-rending stories of homelessness, rising financial pressures on families and young people being locked out of home ownership by rising prices and minimum deposits stem primarily from one inescapable fact: not enough homes are being supplied to meet the rising demand from a growing workforce and population. Unless we address the barriers to housing supply, we are simply displacing one family in distress by another.

Our most recent intervention came in November last when the Government decided on a targeted development contribution rebate initiative in Dublin and Cork for housing delivered at certain price points. This will enhance the housing supply at prices that people can afford in these areas where the demand is most acute. In addition, a number of other measures to stimulate the provision of housing supply were adopted, such as changes to planning guidelines on apartment standards which set a consistent national approach. New measures to maximise the potential of strategic development zones were also introduced. Taken together these provisions are designed to speed up the delivery of housing supply. However, it is clear that the scale of the property collapse and the subsequent dysfunction of the residential housing sector is so great that more Government intervention is required to kick-start house building in a real way.

It is imperative that a new Government takes immediate action on housing. It is my ambition that after forming a stable Government, it would introduce a new housing initiative within four weeks. Similar to the jobs initiative that the previous Government introduced within 100 days of taking office to deal with the major jobs crisis, the new housing initiative would be designed to tackle this crisis. It is also my intention to appoint a new cabinet level Minister with responsibility for housing to take the lead on the development of the initiative. The nature of the crisis, however, requires a collective approach and I hope that the design of this new initiative will be informed by input from all Oireachtas Members and other personnel interested in working for solutions to this problem. I see today's debate as the first step in this process. Once approved by Government and the Oireachtas, it will form the start of a new annual action plan on housing. Similar to the current Action Plan for Jobs, responsibility for implementation across Government would be overseen directly by the Department of the Taoiseach.

There is no shortage of development land but many urban sites remain stranded by a lack of local infrastructure. One measure that should be considered for the new housing initiative is a new local authority residential infrastructure fund in order that local authorities can bid for extra capital funding to unlock residential sites in high-demand areas. The time has come for the State to invest in this necessary local infrastructure to facilitate the development of affordable family housing in such high-demand areas. Building on the already-legislated-for vacant site levy, which will apply from 2018, I believe we should look again at tax and regulatory measures to incentivise the speedy development of zoned land and land banks that could service high-demand areas.

There are many frightened people listening to this debate today. They are frightened about the next rent review and mortgage payment as well as their prospects of ever owning their own homes. It is our duty as national legislators to propose and debate a constructive way forward, and to alleviate their fear and not to trade off it. That is what people watching us on their screens or listening to the debate will want to hear. Thanks to their hard work and determination the Irish economy is now improving. We need to ensure that is sustained and felt inside the home of every Irish family. This has to be the singular mission of the Thirty-second Dáil and the next Government, and the first item on that agenda should be a cross-party effort on housing. I look forward to the contributions from all of the Members.

Deputy Barry Cowen: It is a well-known fact that the outgoing Government failed miserably in its efforts to deal with housing. It allowed a crisis to develop into what is now undoubtedly an emergency. On assuming office, there were 90,000 applicants on housing lists throughout the country. On the basis of further information, not from the Government but from information requests and questions to local authorities, we know the list now extends to 140,000 applicants. Some 350,000 people are now on housing lists.

As the Government knows, the building of houses ground to a halt. The low level of priority shown to housing by the previous Government was its choice and not part of a legacy. That is proven by virtue of the fact that it cut funding for the provision of housing by 54% since it came into office. Fine Gael and the Labour Party also allowed banks to have a veto on solutions for distressed mortgage holders, which caused more families to lose their homes, something that continues right up to today. The number of repossession hearings increased by 20% this year compared to last year. Vulture funds, which are subject to no regulation, are now threatening up to 47,000 homeowners throughout the country, something which was not mentioned by the previous two speakers despite the fact that they want to tell us they will do within the next four weeks what they could not do for the past five years.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I referenced it.

Deputy Barry Cowen: I will check the record. The Government and Taoiseach now claim, as usual, that the social housing strategy is working, something which could not be further from the truth. Fewer than 274 homes have been built since 2015, 90% of which were provided by social housing agencies and 28 by local authorities. The Government claimed during the course of the election that 30,000 keys were handed over to applicants last year, something which is factually incorrect and untrue - the Taoiseach can call it what he likes. Up to 8,000 of those people comprised those who were moved from one scheme to another, such as from a RAS to a HAP scheme. The Government may not like it, but it is the truth and it was found out.

For the record of the new Dáil, it is incumbent on us as Members to again inform the record of the House of the situation we are facing, given that we are in the midst of an emergency. Some 750 families are homeless, 1,700 children are living in emergency accommodation and there are 3,500 homeless households in the country, which equates to about 6,000 individuals.

Rent supplement simply is and has been too low. I accept and expect the Taoiseach and others in the Government to reject proposals from me or anybody on this side of the House, but the Taoiseach also rejected information from the stakeholders at the coalface. The current average rent for a two-bedroom unit in Dublin 2 is €1,649, while the rent supplement threshold for a couple with one child is €835, a difference of 74%. As far back as two years ago we were told that would lead to further problems. A single person looking for a one-bedroom unit receives a supplement of €520, a differential of 170%.

The Taoiseach consistently slammed local authorities for the lack of progress on the provision of housing. The Department is not approving social housing projects for voluntary housing associations at the required pace. During the course of questions from me and others, including party leaders, I often heard the Taoiseach refer to 300 sites around the country on which homes were being built to deal with the need that we all want to see addressed.

One of the sites is supposed to be in my constituency and €3 million has been allocated for the provision of 15 or 17 houses. Ground has not been cut in the two years since that an-

nouncement was made. Does that not tell the Taoiseach that he needed to bring in the Department, ascertain what the delay was, effect the necessary change and change the archaic system and procurement process which was not working? The Taoiseach failed to do that and now proposes to solve the problem within four weeks, despite failing to listen to suggestions and proposals for the past five years.

I will repeat what I stated in our election manifesto. Whether we are in or out of government, we will use the diversity in the Chamber to allow meaningful proposals to be brought to the House to instruct the Government. If the Government will not instruct the Dáil, we will do it. We want to create a Minister for housing, planning and local government, which is not something we dreamt up having met a few rural Deputies, and a housing authority. Their first job will be to accept, acknowledge and declare a national housing emergency, something the Taoiseach and Government would not do for the past two years. That will be the obligation of the new Government, whatever its configuration.

We would seek to introduce a series of measures, whether in or out of government. Capital funding would be provided to renovate social housing units. We will seek the passing by the Dáil of a Bill to regulate vulture funds. We would seek to renegotiate the NAMA house building plan in order to increase the number of social and affordable units to 20%, given that the previous Government reduced it to 10%. We will restore Part V to 20%, despite the fact that the Government reduced it to 10%. We would develop housing association bonds similar to those that exist in the UK. We would open strategic investment funds to facilitate private investment in housing association bonds.

I refer to the Taoiseach's attempt to make finance available to those who want to construct private dwellings and get involved in the development of private houses, a sector which was on its knees. In response to the lack of available funds, the Government joined up with an American fund - we will not call it a vulture fund for fear it is not - added €125 million to its €375 million and asked it to make funds available to the housing sector. It did not inform people that the rates the fund sought to charge were similar to those charged by the Mezzanine fund for the past number of years, that is, 16%. NAMA, which deals with people in housing difficulties, those whom the Government is supposed to represent, charged 4% or 5%. That is how shambolic the system that was allowed to develop is.

We would open discussions with credit unions on how to best utilise the €5 billion they informed the Taoiseach they are willing to invest in the housing sector. The Taoiseach left that proposal on a shelf in a Minister's Department. He brought forward directives against credit unions in regard to other aspects of their business in recent months. He never had their best interests at heart. Whether in or out of government, we will bring forward the means by which the Dáil will decide how best to utilise the funding that is available in many communities across the country.

In the next 12 months we will introduce a new refurbishment scheme for derelict vacant sites. I acknowledge what the Minister, who is speaking in an acting capacity, said about the issue and what other stakeholders have said about the myriad derelict buildings in many towns and villages throughout the country. I know property rights are associated with many of them, but there has to be a means by which compulsory purchase order legislation can be strengthened in order to utilise it to revitalise and re-energise towns and villages which have such sites available. There could be a rental return for those who own the sites, whatever the configuration of that ownership.

We will also invest €334 million over and above the figure committed under the social housing strategy 2020 in order to build 45,000 new homes. We will allow local authorities to decide the mixture of social and affordable homes and, where feasible, undertake the Part 8 planning process for local authority lands for a mix of social and private housing. We will allow local authorities to review public procurement processes with a view to considering joint venture arrangements to support the building of social units for leasing to voluntary bodies and the sale of residential units on the open market. We will overhaul the Private Residential Tenancies Board and streamline the landlord and tenant dispute resolution process. We will strengthen tenants' rights, security of tenure and rent certainty measures. We will establish family tenure to strengthen security for families as long-term tenants.

All of these proposals seek to address the emergency, while being mindful of the fact that we have to tackle it from a public and private perspective and the perspective of the rental sector. I implore the caretaker Taoiseach and his caretaker Cabinet, in the absence of a Government being formed and this Dáil having the powers necessary to effect the change the public wants us to bring about, to wake up to the reality, declare an emergency and bring forward emergency resolutions to address it.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Byrne): I ask Members to stay within the time allocated to them as many speakers are offering. The next slot is to be filled by Sinn Féin Members. The speakers are Deputies Dessie Ellis, Mary Lou McDonald and Eoin Ó Broin.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: It is 24 days since the votes of the people were counted. For nearly three weeks it has been clear that if a Government is to be formed in the Thirty-second Dáil it will be made up of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil. In those three weeks many more families have become homeless, while these two parties play footsie under the table and shadow-box for the public. For its part, Fine Gael, as part of the previous Government, showed that it cares little about this issue. Its policies directly increased the level of homelessness and the party has always been ideologically opposed to social housing provision. The previous Government failed to build even 1,300 council houses in its five years in power. It also failed to tackle the issue of soaring rents. It twice cut rent supplement and the dole for young people. It failed utterly to protect tenants and homeowners from profiteering which threatened their homes. Clear examples are Cruise Park Estate in Tyrrelstown and Eden in Blackrock in Cork where vulture funds out to pick the carcass of the Irish housing market have laid their greedy hands. I commend the Tyrrelstown Tenants Action Group, the members of which are in the Visitors Gallery. They are fighting for their families, children and community. They are real people and there will be real consequences if they are put out on the street. Regardless of any commitment made by Twinlite or others, we know that up to 200 families in Tyrrelstown could face eviction, with no real protection. We know that tenants like those in Tyrrelstown are in danger across the State because of the lack of protection for tenants from vulture funds and the failure of the previous Government to implement a binding code of conduct for such groups in their dealings with tenants.

Despite the crisis which has been brewing for years, Fianna Fáil opposed the allowing of statements on housing today. It would have been more in the interests of the people if the two largest parties in the Dáil had come to an arrangement or cross-party agreement on the protections needed for tenants and those who will, undoubtedly, come after them should nothing be done. What is happening in Tyrrelstown and Blackrock must jolt the State to act to protect tenants. If their protection cannot be guaranteed, the State should intervene to take the homes into public ownership. NAMA should be compelled to stop further sell-offs of portfolios. We warned of the consequences at the time. We were right then and we are right now. We need

to enshrine the right to a home not only in the Constitution but also in our policy and laws to state housing is the priority, not the profits of developers and vulture funds. Even if we provide protections for families, we will still have a homelessness and housing crisis which has raged for the past five years and already claimed many victims. We need a Government that will prioritise housing and end the scandal of 1,800 children living in emergency accommodation. A Government with more interest in housing would build more than 28 council houses in a single year. It would not have cut the council construction budget by 80% and placed spin above real policy. That is what we have had, but what is the future for tenants? We should declare a housing emergency and any incoming Government should make it clear that we need to act immediately to deal with it.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I listened carefully to what the caretaker Minister had to say. He urged us all to deal with the facts and then conveniently ignored them. These are the facts.

According to the Dublin Regional Homeless Executive, the number of new families who have become homeless increased from 41 in December to 125 this year. The fact is that in such a short time the number of families experiencing homelessness has trebled. These shocking figures stand beside other equally harrowing facts.

Approximately 5,715 people across the country are homeless, of whom more than 1,800 are children. Between 2014 and 2015 there was a 43% increase in the number of people recorded as homeless. That figure does not capture the entirety of the phenomenon of the number of people sleeping on couches, in box rooms or staying with friends or the real number of rough sleepers.

Figures for 2015 show that there were 117,000 mortgages in arrears. The number of buy-to-let properties in mortgage arrears remains at over 30,000. These are the facts as we meet in the Thirty-second Dáil.

The Minister posed the question: what should we do? The first step is to recognise the reality and the fact that we have not just a housing emergency but a humanitarian crisis in our cities and towns and on the streets. The second point concerns the need to take responsibility for this because it happened on the watch of the Minister, Deputy Alan Kelly, and that of previous Administrations.

The third step involves understanding fully the role of the State in resolving the crisis because just as Fianna Fáil in previous Governments was happy to hand over authority and responsibility solely and exclusively to its friends who were developers, the previous Government played footsie and similarly handed over responsibility to private landlords. That must stop. There must be a real recognition that the State must lead in making an investment in the provision of social and affordable housing. Unless and until we have an Administration that recognises that simple fact, none of the other initiatives the Minister cited will solve the problem.

The cowardly manner in which the previous Government allowed the banks to ride roughshod over mortgage holders and those in mortgage distress was an outrage. We should say here loudly and clearly from the floor of the Thirty-second Dáil that repossessions and evictions are not sustainable solutions. We should agree that much, if we can, if nothing else.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Homelessness is not an accident; it is a symptom of a housing system that does not work. Crucially, it is important for us to recognise that it is the result of

decisions by Governments. All of the previous speakers mentioned that the number of families without a home was growing, but these families, if they are watching this debate, do not need words from us. What they need is action. They need to know what we intend to do is to put a roof over their heads.

I agree with the Minister. I have no desire to rerun the election campaign, but unless we name the causes of the crisis, we will not tackle them.

4 o'clock

Listening to Deputy Cowen, it is as if his party had not been in government for a long period. The dysfunctional housing system which exists in the State was created by Fianna Fáil. This is not my view, it is a fact. When Fianna Fáil took office in 1997, 28,000 households were on local authority housing lists. After a decade, the figure had quadrupled to 100,000. This happened because Fianna Fáil refused to invest sufficiently in social housing and refused to regulate the market. It did what it always does. It looked after the developers and the rest of us had to look after ourselves.

I agree with the Minister that Fine Gael and the Labour Party inherited a housing system in crisis. There is no dispute about this. What Deputies Enda Kenny and Joan Burton then did was to turn the crisis into a catastrophe. The Government cut social housing spending by €200 million, bringing local authority construction to a grinding halt. It cut rent supplement, ensuring a further wave of family homelessness. It passed the Land and Conveyancing Law Reform Act, which saw a tenfold increase in the number of court cases for repossessions before the courts. It then announced a housing plan which was badly designed, poorly funded and destined to fail. Every time I hear the Minister, Deputy Kelly, tell us this was the most ambitious social housing plan in the history of the State, I scratch my head, because anybody who knows anything about social housing policy in the State knows this is simply not true.

What are we going to do? We know the solutions to the crisis because they have been introduced previously. We know, for example, that we must have rent certainty and increases in rent supplement. We know we must stop evictions and have tighter regulation of the banks. We know we must increase emergency accommodation. Crucially, unless we have a significant increase above what is being proposed by the Government across the House in direct local authority provision of social housing, the crisis will get worse. What the families listening to us need is to hear how we will provide homes for those children who tonight will sleep in emergency accommodation. Nothing I heard from the Minister or the Taoiseach answered this question.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Byrne): The next slot is being shared by Deputies Ruth Coppinger and Bríd Smith.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I welcome tenants from the Tyrrelstown area who are here today to listen to the debate on housing and make their case for the Government to take action and intervene to prevent them effectively being made homeless. I object to the parameters of the debate. We are having discussions and pointless statements when we could be voting on motions to get the Minister, who is still being paid by the taxpayer, to take action. Why is this not being done? This is the most important issue in society and the country bar none. The caretaker Minister, Deputy Kelly, opened the debate. Despite the losses to the Labour Party in the general election, his demeanour has changed only slightly given the way he presented his opening remarks. However, I detect a change in Government policy, because it is talking about more

State intervention being necessary to kick-start housing. This in itself is a movement from the neoliberal perspective we have had in the House for the past five years. However, it has not outlined how this will happen, when it will happen and how much will be given to councils. This crisis has been brewing for years, as others have said, and for half of the Government's tenure, and it has not taken the decisive action needed. It is interesting that the Constitution is now being cited as a barrier to progress. The Constitution gives centrality to private property and is an impediment to sorting out the housing situation and keeping people in their homes. I guarantee that if the Minister triggered a referendum, people would turn out in their droves to change the relevant clauses in our Constitution.

Why did the Government not come to the House today to do things that do not require constitutional change, such as rent controls and emergency legislation? In the previous debate, the Anti-Austerity Alliance tabled motions and amendments to the Residential Tenancies Acts to prevent people being evicted on the basis of sale of a property. Now we have hundreds of tenants throughout the country facing eviction by vulture funds and many by private landlords as well. This must stop. We must stop the tide of homelessness. Nobody should be evicted because of the sale of a property.

In my remaining remarks I will focus on the Tyrrelstown situation which is huge in my constituency. My colleague, Deputy Mick Barry, will refer to Blackrock. The AAA-PBP has tabled a motion which states that 100 families are threatened by vulture funds with immediate eviction. These funds have been buying property on a large scale unhindered and encouraged by the Government, and it is now time for the Government to act. To be very clear, 100 families in Tyrrelstown would mean up to 200 adults and potentially 400 or 500 children leaving the area. It is completely untenable that people would be forced to move out of their community where they attend school, play GAA and take part in daily life. To give comfort to residents, the Government should state they should not leave their homes because of the whim of two developers who profited handsomely in the building of thousands of houses there. They absolutely must stay in their homes and fight this.

We need emergency legislation to give security of tenure to all tenants or home owners whose houses have been bought up by non-bank investment funds. We also need to get a commitment today that the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government and the Minister of Finance will meet tenants from Tyrrelstown, Blackrock and other areas who are immediately facing this situation to discuss how to keep people in their homes, which surely is a top priority. I ask the Minister to give this commitment today. Residents and tenants have ideas on how this could be done. The Government could commit to keeping people in their homes by acquiring these properties which are distressed or about to be sold and implementing an affordable mortgage scheme. Most of the tenants pay €1,400 or €1,500 in rent and would be well capable of paying mortgages which would be cheaper for them than the rent being charged by the developers. People who are renting must be able to continue to stay in their homes and rent them. A housing association could be established by the Government to see this is done.

The developers of this estate owe €42 million to NAMA and the State-owned AIB, which is twice what it would cost to acquire the houses. Why is this not being used as leverage by the Government to acquire these units, implement an affordable mortgage scheme and keep people renting in their homes? Will the Minister please agree to meet people and tell them not to leave their homes under pressure from two millionaires who live in a 60-acre estate and fly in and out of the area in helicopters? It is completely and utterly outrageous.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Byrne): If Deputies insist on going over time it will mean time is taken from other speakers in their party.

Deputy Bríd Smith: That is okay with me.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Show a bit of leeway.

Deputy Bríd Smith: I echo what has been said by Deputy Coppinger. What has happened in Tyrrelstown and Cork is a predictable outcome of the activities of NAMA and, I would argue, the Minister for Finance, Deputy Michael Noonan. The Government set out deliberately to attract corporate investment funds with tax incentives. The Sunday before the general election, *The Sunday Business Post* reported this was coming down the tracks and stated we would see an escalation and increase in pressure from these investment companies to retrieve money from the loans they bought. A huge number of loan portfolios were taken over by vulture corporate investment funds and a huge number of apartments have been gifted through real estate investment trusts, REITS. What we are witnessing is the corporatisation of landlordism in this country, and NAMA has done this in acting to offload as quickly as possible all it has on its loan book. We have evidence through freedom of information that Government officials met vulture funds no fewer than 65 times in 2013 and 2014. These meetings included direct meetings with the Taoiseach. Freedom of information requests reveal that these included companies like Apollo, Lone Star and Kennedy Wilson. What we are seeing in Tyrrelstown and in Cork will be repeated around the country as these vulture funds, which do not give a damn about ordinary people, like those sitting in the Visitors Gallery today, will try to retrieve the moneys they invested in a very quick and parasitic way.

NAMA itself is extremely corrupt. Many of its officials have joined these private funds or set up their own REITs to cash in on the frenzy to get rid of the property at the lowest price as quickly as possible and to use this to build up contracts to their own advantage. NAMA should and could have a social role but it has been completely minimised by its reliance on the private market to deliver houses, which is at the heart of the problem of homelessness and the housing crisis that we see in the State today. Effectively, the State has ended up funding private landlords, who buy up properties and then rent them back to the State, which then gives them over to people on the housing list at a very slow pace through HAPS and RAS. We are massaging the palms of the very wealthy corporate landlords in this country and paying for it through the taxpayer. NAMA is actually worsening the crisis.

What we need to argue for, as well as an emergency being declared in public housing, is that NAMA must be democratised and transformed into an agency that will drive social and affordable home-building and use its vast loans and billions in resources to conduct an audit of vacant properties as part of the 2016 census, to seek to acquire the tens of thousands of vacant properties and apartments for use as social and affordable houses to relieve the crisis in the short and medium term and in the long term to implement a plan of massive public investment, involving the councils, to build thousands of social and affordable homes, including Traveller-specific accommodation and accommodation for refugees and asylum-seekers. This also has to be linked to the notion of rent controls where the consumer price index should be backdated to 2011 levels and rents should be brought down to realistic, affordable levels for people in this country. That should be done immediately and rent controls should be realistically enforced, particularly in the cities of Dublin, Cork, Limerick and Galway. All this means that we have to redirect our funding, taking into account the €4.5 billion that NAMA has, to building public housing, to have a €2 billion investment from the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund, to be re-

22 March 2016

paid over time in income from social and affordable rents. As we will always say on this side of the House, we also need progressive taxation on wealth, including ending corporate taxation avoidance and using some of the €7 billion owed by Apple to the State to relieve the housing and homelessness crisis.

It is outrageous that we are talking about this a month after the election and that nothing has been, and nothing is being, done. I sense the frustration of the people in the Visitors Gallery and those in my community who are faced with the same sort of evictions, overcrowding and homelessness.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Catherine Byrne): The next grouping is Independents 4 Change. Deputy Wallace has ten minutes but Deputies Clare Daly and Joan Collins might like to speak. I call on Deputy Wallace.

Deputy Mick Wallace: I also want to avoid repeating what we have been saying here for the past five years and I want to look at what we should do now. We should learn from our mistakes over the past five years. I remember on 15 January 2014 having a serious argument with the Minister for Finance about inviting and encouraging the investment funds to avail of huge tracts of property in Ireland, having to pay no tax on it, no tax on their profits on the rental and no capital gains if they stayed for seven years. It was a crazy arrangement.

The idea that we now have a professional landlord and that everything will be cleaned up and it will be great for everybody does not make much sense if a person cannot afford to pay this new fancy landlord who is charging 40% more than was being charged before. The price has gone off the Richter scale. There are huge problems in every sector of housing and there are huge challenges for the next Government. We have to get over the idea that the State should not build local authority social housing. Doing this is a challenge. I noticed only two weeks ago that the British Shadow Chancellor recommended that Britain should now take a five-year exit from putting infrastructure money on the books and making it subject to the usual fiscal rules. Germany and France broke that rule in the past and got away with it. We need to borrow money on the markets at 1% and invest in local authority social housing. It is imperative that we do it and we should not have to use PPPs and pay 15% to do it. That is 15 times the money and it does not make sense. If Europe turned us down, given that we have a housing emergency, it would mean Europe just does not care about us anymore. It would not make any sense.

The private sector had been driven out of the market by NAMA and the banks conducting fire sales of assets and sites for less than half their value. One can say that no one knew the value of the assets. We have had that debate here several times but things do have value. A house has the value of what it cost to put there on the day it is sold. NAMA has been selling property for less than half of what it costs to build on that particular day. That, for my money, is bad business and I do not see how the State could have allowed it to happen. How in God's name did the Government allow Project Arrow to be sold last December by NAMA? Residential units in the Republic of Ireland were sold for peanuts. The only ones winning are the investment funds. The Irish people are paying the balance of the money that is missing and then the investment funds chase the individuals concerned for a second whammy. One could not make it up.

Let us say the EU gives us permission to break the fiscal rules for a five-year period. Will the next Government then be prepared to borrow in the region of €8 billion or €10 billion to invest in local authority social housing and how should we best go about it?

We have not got enough time to discuss the ins and outs of it but regarding Part V and the question of 10% versus 20%, I do not agree with Fianna Fáil's point. We will get nobody to build if we take 20% of units off them. I do not think they understand how the system works because when the builder provides Part V units, he gets only the agricultural land value for his site. If he pays in the region of €100,000 per unit for it, he loses that. If he loses it on 10%, fair enough, but if it is on 20%, we will not get him to build at all. I suggest that we need the State to buy out 20% of it from the builder. The Central Bank rules are solid. The idea that people would have to come up with 20% of the money to buy their house is not the craziest notion in the world and there would be fewer people running into trouble. However, it places a new obligation on the State to provide housing. We need to provide quality State housing and not ghettos, and there has to be a whole new way of thinking about how we build them, in terms of whether they will be fit for families. We have never built apartments in this country that were fit for families. The legislation before Christmas reducing the quality of the unit in order to entice the private sector in is not what is required. That was an own goal and is a crazy way to go. It will not help matters. That was not the big factor keeping the private sector out of the market.

We have to take a whole new approach. For starters, if the Central Bank rule is to stick, and I think it should, social housing will have to come to about 30%, up from between 10% and 15% over the years. I would argue that every development that goes up in Ireland today should have 30% social housing. The builder would provide 10% of it and the State would buy out 20% of it because we want to stop ghettoisation. This idea of building huge blocks of units that are all social is nonsense; it has not worked. We need to get away from that and we have to look at the type of unit we are building because we cannot cover the country in concrete. We will have to go down the apartment route for living space, for the long term rather than, as it is at present, for transitory purposes. People cannot raise a family in an apartment block in Ireland today; it just does not work.

If the State is prepared to borrow money at an affordable price and challenge Europe so that we can borrow money at a rate of 1%, the State would be able to go out there and build units, and buy 20% of all private developments where there was already a 10% social provision. As a kick-start, the 20,000 units that NAMA is supposed to provide, which are currently 90% private and 10% social, should be 50:50.

The biggest problem facing housing today is unaffordability. People will not be able to buy the apartments or houses that NAMA intends to build for the private sector. They say there will be an average selling price of €300,000. How many of those who are in trouble today with regard to keeping a roof over their heads will get the money to buy a unit for €300,000? Bugger all. Therefore, these units are not for those who most need them. It is outrageous that private housing will outnumber social housing by nine to one on land that the Irish people already own, which is NAMA's land.

At present, nobody in the private sector wants to build in Ireland. The banks would not even finance it. If I had a site tomorrow and I got planning permission for it, I would not get funding from a bank in Ireland for it because it is not attractive enough for banks. I recall that when the Government came to office five years ago it stated that it would set up a State investment bank that could do these things. Let the next Government do it. We need a functioning State investment bank that will lend to people to build.

The other matter I wanted to raise with the Minister, on which I argued tooth and nail in here with him and the then Minister of State, Paudie Coffey, is land-banking. My God, how big a

problem is this? It is crazy that the Minister has refused to do anything about it. His vacant site levy was a joke. A person who owned land and who had borrowed money for it did not have to pay the levy at all, and if he put a few horses on it, it was not even vacant. It was an absolute joke of an effort to deal with the issue of land-banking. Will the next Government have the appetite to do it? It is a no-brainer. It drives the cost of land up to an unbelievable degree. They are building three-bedroom houses 20 km from here today that will sell for €345,000. I can tell the Minister that if he travels 20 km outside any city in Italy, he can buy a house for less than half of that.

Is the Minister aware that if a house is sold in Ireland today for €300,000, more than 50% of this ends up in the State coffers? The high price of housing in Ireland has suited the State. It has not suited the Irish people. We need the next Government to take an honest approach to every aspect of housing.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: Market failure has been part of the housing story in Ireland not only in recent years but for many decades. The response to it has usually been large-scale building of local authority houses. It happened in the 1930s, it happened in the 1950s and it happened in the 1970s, although the quality of the housing stock in the 1970s in some cases was very questionable and the approach of delivering social housing in large enclaves was not one that we should repeat. We need to design sustainable communities from a financial, environmental and social point of view.

The Social Democrats produced a housing document, *Unlocking Affordable Housing*, during the election campaign. Our suggestions include having one Minister with responsibility for housing rather than a number of different Ministers. However, it needs to go beyond that. There is a great deal of fragmentation and a lack of co-ordination. We have a Housing Agency which gathers some of the statistics and a Housing Finance Agency which can find finance, but we really need to have a third tier - that is, where there is intervention by the State in co-ordinating delivery across the entire sector, whether it is through approved housing bodies, local authorities or private builders. Something we require - it is astonishing that we do not have this already - is a register of what land the State owns, because there is no such register of land across the various sectors. That is absolutely needed because it provides the opportunity to co-ordinate delivery.

I would agree with what Deputy Wallace said about not repeating the mistakes of the past by merely adopting a local authority response in one location. It has to be a socially sustainable response. There has to be mixed tenure. There must be a range of different housing types that deal with the entire life cycle so that people can rent or buy, or scale up or scale down as the size of their household changes. It is not a case of one size fits all, but we need to have a co-ordinated approach so that we can deliver in large conurbations. We need to build to scale in order to drive down the costs. We also need to introduce certainty into the system so that we have a sustainable response right through into the future, not just to get us out of this particular problem.

We need to build at cost, and that is about building on a much larger scale. We need not only to reduce the cost of rent but to reduce the cost of building social houses, and we need to reduce the cost of building houses both for sale and for rent in the private rented sector, but there needs to be State intervention. We also need to consider short-term responses that will get us to a stage at which supply starts to improve, and we should stop the nonsense of thinking that the housing assistance payment, HAP, and the rental accommodation scheme, RAS, are some sort

of sustainable response. Some of what has happened with regard to the HAP, which I have always called “hapless,” makes matters far worse. In fact, there are tenants who have to move out of their houses because they will not be given uplift in rent allowance due to the two-year rule but, essentially, they will get an increase if they rent a different property. That is pure bonkers in a situation in which it is not possible to find alternative accommodation.

Some of the housing associations, such as Respond, have recently put together a range of responses. The Irish Council for Social Housing catalogued the different measures that the various political parties and Independents suggested during the election campaign. There is an avenue that we could meaningfully explore over the next number of weeks whereby all parties and those who are non-aligned could come together to consider what kind of solutions could at least be examined, even in the context of putting a broad strategic framework in place.

According to the Housing Agency, we have twice the vacancy rate that would be normal in Europe. We have an 8% vacancy rate, and we need to understand why that is the case. Some of it could be due to impediments in the fair deal scheme. Over-the-shop accommodation that is under used could be brought back into play by way of fiscal initiatives, even if they are short-term. For example, term-limited tax credits for landlords who retain tenants with rent increases limited to the cost of living increases might be considered as a tool for driving rents down.

The Tyrellstown situation could be replicated elsewhere, unfortunately. I agree with some of the points made, such as that NAMA accelerated this. Government policy has dictated that NAMA off-load properties more quickly than originally intended and more or less invited the situation down on the residents of the homes. They have received legal advice at senior counsel level that the State could exercise a compulsory purchase order, CPO. The Government should explore this possibility in such scenarios so the State can intervene appropriately. Respond has examined this and has received advice that it is a workable option.

Some years ago, some of the tier 3 housing associations identified that a lot of money was available from the European Investment Bank that could have been invested. Some of us brought the idea to the floor of the House three or four years ago, when there was no shortage of funds. Approximately €500 million was available. All it required was that the State be co-guarantor in the context of delivering these houses. Had it been taken up at the time, houses would be ready for delivery by now. It was a viable solution that was not taken up.

Due to the borrowing restrictions that were imposed on us following the European fiscal compact, much of what must happen must be off balance sheet. Given that it was supposed to be the lender of last resort, it has become an impediment to delivering something that is critical in anybody’s life, namely, a secure place to live. We must take the housing first approach to homelessness. The Simon Community has advocated it and there is no other viable solution for delivering a response to homelessness in a particular category.

Children in primary schools have written proclamations outlining solutions for the future and the kind of country they want in the future. In almost every one of the proclamations I have seen, housing and homelessness has been highlighted as one of the issues which children see as a major issue. If children, who would not have the kind of expertise available to them that the Minister has had over recent years, can see this, it is amazing how the Government has not recognised the crisis. Somebody said here earlier that the crisis did not happen by accident, and I agree. Deliberate political policy got us into this mess and we must put our heads together. I have put some solutions on the table that could be considered as a response to it.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I welcome the opportunity to take part in this debate. The most serious issue facing the country is the lack of investment in our basic infrastructure, particularly during the past five years. Before that, we under invested in water, transport and the connected issue of housing. They go together, and whatever our approach and solution, it must join the dots regarding how we develop places for people to live which are connected, affordable and which build up communities. I will outline how we in the Green Party think we can build the right type of housing at the right cost using the right model and in the right place. We need to get all those right if we are to provide homes in which people can live and have satisfying lives.

Regarding place, we must be careful not to get into a numbers game regarding how many thousand houses we need to build. The numbers game went wrong in the early 2000s, when we were building 90,000 houses per year, but in the wrong places and without any consideration of a proper national spatial strategy which would have connected the houses to places where people were working, schools and shops, which would have developed what we need, namely, vibrant local communities. In this response to the housing crisis, let us take what is already in train, namely, the development of a national spatial strategy by the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, and put it centre stage in any programme for Government as the key first step in any new investment strategy we need to do to rebuild our country and provide a more secure economy and society for our people.

According to the planners, we need to reverse the trend over the past 50 years which has been towards a dispersed population with housing spread all over the country. This is very difficult to service with public and private services, such as electricity and broadband. We need to reverse the trend which saw the depopulation of our city centres and start building up our cities again as part of a proper national spatial strategy, not like the strategy in early 2002 in which we set out our infrastructure investment plan, followed it with a spatial plan which was not connected to it, and ignored the spatial plan with the decentralisation scheme and a free-for-all in planning. We must learn from this mistake.

If we are serious about getting planning right, we must bring life back into our city centres. We must reverse the depopulation of Cork city, which has decreased by 0.5% each year for the past 30 years. We must examine the situation in Limerick, where less than 3% of the population live in the city centre. If we get those cities right, they will be vibrant centres of economic development. People will live close to their work and will not have to travel. Deputy Wallace cited the cost of a house 20 km outside a city in Italy. If we keep building 20 km outside Dublin, we know for certain that those people will have to travel across a gridlocked M50 and it will not work. That is why we need to get housing in the right place to ensure people do not spend their entire lives driving and commuting but start having a better and more efficient quality of life, and a better environmental outcome will come with it.

We also need to get the type of housing we build right. The Minister's change of the standards, reversing a move to try to build proper housing in which families could live, was a retrograde step. In my local area, Clonskeagh, planning had been granted for a development on the Smurfit Paper Mills site. It was ready to go, but suddenly last month a new site notice was put up. Thanks to the Minister's weakening of the regulations, the developers are seeking new planning permission that would include an extra ten apartments and 27 car parking spaces. This type of place does not need the lower quality, box apartments. It needs high quality apartments in which people can live and raise families. By weakening the regulations, the Minister has reversed us to the poor legacy of previous Administrations which saw housing as all about making profits for developers rather than creating homes for people. We need to change this.

I also regret that the Minister is weakening the energy standards. We need to build carbon neutral houses with zero energy costs. That is possible, but not if we step back and start weakening regulations. That would be a fundamental mistake. While it might lead to a short-term gain in terms of decreasing the developer's immediate costs, the people who live in the apartment or the house for the next 20 or 30 years will curse the Minister forever and a day because they will have to pay more than they would have needed to pay if we had stuck to proper building standards.

I do not believe it is impossible for us to make sure buildings are provided at the right cost. I cite as an example a passive house that was built recently in Enniscorthy, County Wexford. This standard three-bedroom house of 1,100 sq. ft. is retailing at €170,000 at a zero energy cost for the house. Each year, the person who buys it will save money that would otherwise have been wasted on energy spending. An edition of a surveyor's magazine that was published recently showed how it is possible for us to build buildings inexpensively. I am sure every Deputy received a copy of it in his or her mailbox yesterday, just as I did. It shows how a typical semi-detached house of 1,200 sq. ft can be built for something like €250,000. To my mind, it is not impossible for us to build in a way that will be affordable for our people. If that is to happen, we need to provide the volume and the low-cost financing and get the planning, the model and the financing structure right.

I believe the fundamental mistake that was made in this regard by the outgoing Government was informed by an ideological position within the heart of the system. I am not the only person who thinks the Department of Finance did not believe in capital expenditure and cut it excessively. One of the IMF's main criticisms of the outgoing Government related to its excessive desire to cut capital expenditure.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: It wanted us to cut social welfare instead.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Line after line of the European Commission's country report last week emphasised the point that under-investment in capital expenditure is a weakness in, and a real threat to, the Irish economy. I can quote from the report if the Minister, Deputy Howlin, wishes.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I have read it well. I met them many times.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: According to the report, "the current levels of capital expenditure in Ireland are barely sufficient".

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry, Deputy, you are making a statement.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I am making a statement.

An Ceann Comhairle: You are not engaging in a conversation, please.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: No, it is a statement to the House, a Cheann Comhairle.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister, Deputy Howlin, might restrain himself as well.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I am telling the House what the European Commission is saying. According to the report I have mentioned, "the current levels of capital expenditure in Ireland are barely sufficient to replace the existing stock of public capital". It also points out that "net public investment ... was negative or close to zero in 2012 to 2014". I agree with other Depu-

ties who have said during this debate that the State needs to start spending on public housing. I believe we should heed the advice of the National Economic and Social Council by using the cost-rental model it is suggesting. Other countries, including Austria, are able to use future income streams from market rents accrued by the state or the housing association to raise funding outside the rules of the fiscal compact. That is what other countries do. I do not believe there is any reason we should not do it. It is going to require the State to start spending and to heed what has been said by the European Commission, the Nevin Economic Research Institute, IBEC and the IMF. They have said that the State has not invested enough money in its infrastructure over the last five years. That needs to change in the next Government and we should start by putting housing in the right place. We should build clean housing so that we save people money over the lifetime of the building. That is not impossible to do. We need to take NAMA and put it into a national housing authority. A site value taxation system that makes sense had been set up for this Government when it took office five years ago. It was ready to go. It provides an incentive for us to build, an environmental gain and some of the funding that the Minister says he needs to build infrastructure. I wish the Government had done what it said it would do in the programme for Government. If it had availed of the site value tax system that had been set up for it, rather than initiating a dumb property tax that is there just to raise revenue for the Department of Finance, we would not be in the same crisis we are in today. We should start by learning from that mistake and providing for a proper site value tax. The proceeds of that tax should be used to pay for the infrastructure that we badly need to build in this State.

Deputy Finian McGrath: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for the opportunity to speak during this important debate on housing and homelessness. I will begin by dealing with the reality of the situation on the ground, particularly in relation to families. People are looking for solutions. It is up to all of us to propose solutions in this debate. I have heard some good and sensible ideas so far in this debate. It would be sensible and practical to sit down and propose five concrete proposals to deal with the issues of housing and homelessness. Before we do this, we need to identify the situation on the ground on this issue. At the moment, there are 5,715 adults and children in emergency accommodation nationally, including 4,248 in Dublin. Some 38% of these people have never used homeless accommodation before. The number of families and children in these circumstances has doubled over the last year. There has been a 55% increase in homelessness in Dublin in the last year. Between 50 and 60 people are sleeping rough in Dublin on a nightly basis. Every three people who leave homelessness in Dublin on a daily basis are replaced by six people entering homelessness. There has been a fivefold increase in families becoming homeless in other counties like Kildare, Wicklow and Meath. The supply of private rental housing options in the region is at its lowest point in ten years. That is the situation on the ground.

I would like to set out what needs to be done immediately to respond to these issues. First, the Minister and the acting Government should consider bringing the rent supplement housing assistance payment into line with market rents. Second, we should restrict the flow into homelessness by investing more funding in prevention measures. We also need fast access to housing supports for people trapped in emergency accommodation. This is something we have seen. There are children in very bad conditions and families in hotels. Many children who are trying to go into their primary schools in the morning are coming out of hotel situations. We need to ensure there is a ministerial direction regarding social housing allocations of up to 50%. We need to increase to 20% the social housing allocation under Part V of the Planning and Development Act 2000. We need to prioritise programmes that will deliver housing stock quickly through the approved housing bodies of local authorities and thereby reduce housing waiting

lists. These are some of the many proposals that have been made by the organisations working in this area. I think they should be broadly adopted by the Members of the Oireachtas on an all-party basis. When we are talking about complex issues like homelessness, we also need to consider the issues of drugs, alcohol, mental health and the general health services. I suggest we should focus on harm reduction and medically supervised injecting centres. Finally, I would like to see the full implementation of the mental health strategy, *A Vision for Change*.

As I have said, homelessness is a very complex issue. As a former soup runner and volunteer with the Simon Community, I saw this many years ago at first hand. I remember the complex nature of the people who were homeless and the horrific situations in which many of them found themselves. When I was doing the soup run, I would often meet a gentle and kind homeless person who would refuse to go into a night shelter because of the threat of violence or intimidation. We need to focus on people who would rather stay in their own skip at night than go into a situation where there might be a threat of violence. We need to focus on this in the context of the points I have made about drugs, alcohol and mental health services. The plan to deal with the issues of housing and homelessness must be accompanied by a drugs plan, an alcohol plan and a mental health services plan. I think that is very important in this broader debate.

I would like to speak about the reality of what is happening in this country now. If we are to deal with the issues of housing and homelessness, every single Deputy in this House needs to be vigilant. Despite all the talk of the last six months, we still have high levels of unemployment in our society. People talk about unemployment going down to 9%, but 18%, 19% or 20% of people are unemployed in some streets in certain parts of my constituency. The high level of household, business and national debt is also an issue. We need to be vigilant and careful because we have a high level of sensitivity to external and internal shocks to our economy. It astounded me the other day to see some senior bankers getting further massive increases in their wages. We have to be vigilant in this regard in light of the weak profitability of the banking sector. Of course the other issue is that housing demand is outstripping supply at the moment. This is one of many challenges faced by our society. Too many challenges are faced by businesses that are trying to access credit. These are the types of small businesses that could take on one or two additional people. This is something on which we should focus in terms of the development of a national strategy to address high unemployment levels. There are approximately 200,000 small businesses in this State. If each one of them took on one additional person it would put a huge dent in the long-term unemployment problem.

As we have seen in recent days, vulture funds have purchased huge tranches of Irish debt at knock-down prices and are now swooping in to mop up these resources. This is linked to the housing and homelessness issue. Like many of my colleagues and others from among the different political parties, I believe the current housing situation should be declared a national emergency. I would also like to see the appointment of a Minister with responsibility for housing and homelessness. An Oireachtas committee on Dáil reform is to meet tomorrow. I would welcome a meeting of an Oireachtas sub-committee on housing and homelessness before any meeting on the Dáil reform issue. There should be cross-party support for a referendum on the right to a home before the end of 2017. I am not suggesting that all of my proposals be taken on board but I am sure four or five of the sensible solutions proposed from across the Chamber would have the support of many Members. It is important this is done.

We also learned in recent days that 200 people in the Cruise Park area of Tyrelstown are facing eviction following acquisition by Beltany Property Finance of a €89 million loan from

the Ulster Bank to certain developers. We are likely to see more of this into the future. What can we do about it? A practical response would be for the Dáil to amend the table in section 34 of the Residential Tenancies Act 2004 to prevent this. No constitutional bar would prevent the passage of a widely supported emergency amendment to that legislation while we await the formation of a new Government. This is another sensible solution.

During the last Dáil I raised the issue of the €5 billion available from the credit unions for social housing. The credit union movement has surplus funds of up to €8 billion. There are 437 credit unions across this country. Many of us have met with them. They are ready to step up to the plate to assist families with housing problems. Another issue omitted from this debate is housing for disabled people. There are many people in our society who are disabled. We need to focus on their housing needs. There are many other ideas that need to be considered in the context of addressing the housing problem. Owing to a lack of supply, house prices in Dublin in particular are rapidly increasing, leading to an increase in homelessness.

We need an urgent change in the attitude of Government to social housing and a proper funding model. Capital for housing can be raised through off-balance sheet borrowing from non-government sources such as social investment bonds, banks, standard bonds, NAMA and Government sources such as the Housing Finance Agency and the European Investment Bank, with equity finance, real estate investment trusts also being part of the funding option model. Utilisation of these sources would not add to the national debt and they are sustainable through recession. We can increase our building capacity by getting all of the local authorities involved again; the establishment of new housing associations; and by increasing the building capacity of existing housing associations by way of amalgamations, co-operatives and partnerships.

Earlier, I referred to housing for the disabled. It is important disabled people are included in all of our plans, be that in regard to social housing or affordable housing. We also need to ensure that new housing projects for people with disabilities are located in mixed residential communities and dispersed appropriately so as to avoid clustering. It must be clearly demonstrated that there has been meaningful involvement of the resident and his or her family or advocate in the development of a housing proposal and evidence of a community living transition plan and personal care plan. It must be also demonstrated that care proposals are configured to support the individuals living in one home in the housing neighbourhood. These are options that could be considered.

As I said earlier, we have heard some good proposals today from colleagues from all sectors of society. A new Dáil has been elected and in the context of the many new Members here there is a great deal of fresh energy in the House. Let us take on board some of their ideas and get on with the job.

An Ceann Comhairle: We now move to the second round of contributions in respect of which Members have five minutes each.

Tánaiste and Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Joan Burton): I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this critical debate. In regard to Deputy Finian McGrath's contribution, the homeless figures are not static. For example, last year 2,000 people and families left homelessness but unfortunately other people have since become homeless. As the Minister, Deputy Kelly, said, 17,000 people will be housed through a variety of mechanisms. Also, on taking up the position of Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Kelly, took on board a very difficult situation. At that time, it was the policy of many

local authorities to board up houses. These became a blight on estates and resulted in huge anti-social problems, particularly in our cities and larger towns, and resulted in people not wanting to be housed in such estates. I am glad to say that since taking up the position of Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Kelly has tackled that problem, which is borne out in the table of figures which Deputies have in regard to the last two years.

I would like to make a couple of points in regard to the significance and importance of rent supplement and how important it is in terms of the State's involvement in the private rented sector. Many years ago, in the context of the casino capitalism model operated by Fianna Fáil at the height of the boom, social housing went out of fashion with local authorities and, in particular, the then Government. While some social housing continued to be built people did not want to live in the huge estates of yesteryear. I accept there was merit in that but the consequence was that social housing construction dried up. The crash then stopped it altogether.

Between rent supplement, the housing assistance payment and the rental accommodation scheme, the State effectively funds one third of the private rented sector. This year, the Government has provided €450 million for those schemes to support 98,000 households, which is almost 100,000 households. A key focus of the Government has been how it can make things better for families. The housing assistance payment, introduced in 2014-----

Deputy Seamus Healy: It is a disgrace.

Deputy Joan Burton: -----will be increasingly important in this context. The housing assistance payment will gradually replace rent supplement in the context of long term housing need.

Deputy Seamus Healy: The Government is paying on the double in that it is paying the local authority and the landlord.

An Ceann Comhairle: One speaker, Deputy Healy, please.

Deputy Joan Burton: Unlike in the case of rent supplement, a person can work full-time and still qualify for the housing assistance payment.

Deputy Seamus Healy: Shame on the Labour Party.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Will the Ceann Comhairle ask Deputy Healy to stop interrupting?

Deputy Joan Burton: A person is then in a differential rent situation such that if he or she is taking up employment he or she can calculate if there is any additional rent to be paid. This is a vital distinction. I share Deputy Finan McGrath's view that notwithstanding the fact that we have made huge strides in reducing unemployment, we still have far too many people unemployed. One of the inhibitions with rent supplement is the restriction in terms of the amount of employment a person can take up. Those people living in housing provided by local authorities that are operating HAP are effectively in a differential rent situation and are free to take up employment and thus calculate any additional rent payable.

Deputy Seamus Healy: The Government is paying on the double in that it is paying the local authority and the landlord.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Healy will have an opportunity to speak soon.

22 March 2016

Deputy Joan Burton: Helping people to return to work is the surest way of helping individuals and families to build financial independence and a better and more prosperous future for their families over time.

5 o'clock

My Department has been working closely with the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government and the local authorities to support the ongoing transfer of people with long-term housing need to the housing assistance payment, HAP. More than 7,700 people are in receipt of the payment and this number will increase significantly in the months and years ahead. I hope the Dublin local authorities, including Dublin City Council, will move strongly to give families options around HAP and, therefore, a significant opportunity and incentive to take on work. In the meantime, rent supplement will continue to play an essential role in supporting families and individuals. This year, the scheme will support 59,000 people at a cost of €267 million. Homes are being secured by families in receipt of the supplement.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Tánaiste should conclude.

Deputy Joan Burton: This is demonstrated by the fact that more than 20,000 rent supplement tenancies were awarded last year at an average of €1,600 a month. Where a family struggles to find or retain accommodation, the Department is actively helping them and awarding increased rent supplement to do so on a case-by-case basis.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Tánaiste. I am afraid her time is up.

Deputy Joan Burton: The targeted approach has assisted more than 7,100 people. We have also spent €1.4 million on 2,500 rent deposits over the past year. These facts are ignored frequently by people.

Deputy Seán Haughey: I congratulate the Ceann Comhairle on his election.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Seán Haughey: I was disappointed by the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government's contribution at the outset of the debate. It was unnecessarily combative and defensive, it hit all the wrong notes and it was not particularly constructive either. As an outsider looking in at the proceedings of the House over the past five years, I have watched the Minister blame everybody for the housing crisis except the Government. He blamed Fianna Fáil, but that wore a little thin and the electorate saw through that after a while. He blamed the local authorities and, most regrettably of all, he blamed the housing agencies and those at the coalface. We need a constructive debate. This is a new Dáil. Many constructive ideas have been outlined even in this limited debate. It is time to start again with the new ideas that are coming forward and all of us need to work together to solve this problem.

By Christmas 2015, in the Dublin regional homeless executive area, 466 families with 966 dependants were in hotels while 217 families with 443 dependants were in homeless accommodation, giving a total of 683 families with 1,409 dependants. Fr. Peter McVerry said that if this continues, 3,000 children will be in emergency accommodation by 2017. That is unacceptable. As a city councillor until recently, as was the case for many other public representatives, housing and homelessness was the major issue to be dealt with every day. We have had the ongoing problem of rough sleepers but, more recently, families have become homeless because

of increasing rents. People who never thought they would become homeless have suddenly found themselves in that position. Everyday life for such families is a struggle. First, in the Dublin area, they must register with the Dublin regional homeless executive in Parkgate Hall, which sometimes necessitates two bus journeys with entire families being dragged across the city. They have to live in one-room accommodation in hotels and they are often treated as second-class citizens in those hotels. Parents have to try to get to work and get their children to school while the children have to try to do their homework in these conditions. These children will have little opportunity unless we do something for them.

This is not acceptable. We need to declare a national emergency. A total of 130,000 households comprising 350,000 individuals are on our social housing lists. As an immediate step, the State needs to build more private social and affordable housing, a subject to which we need to return.

An Ceann Comhairle: That is a good point to end on.

Deputy John Curran: A consensus emerged among Members across all parties who contributed earlier that it would be useful to have a Minister for housing, and I concur with that. Flowing from that, one would hope there would be an all-party Oireachtas committee on housing. It would be great to put that infrastructure in place, but the project for that Minister and committee would be to adopt an all-party national housing strategy which would go beyond the lifetime of this Dáil. We need a clear road and a clear direction in order that we do not end up in a tit-for-tat with people saying, “You did this on your watch” or “We did that”, and so forth. There should be a much better defined approach for the future. That would serve the House well and, in particular, the people who elected us.

I would like our housing crisis to be acknowledged as a housing emergency, not because it is a play on words but because it would lend an urgency to the response that is required. Sometimes, looking on at these debates, the lack of urgency is notable. That urgency requires both short-term and long-term measures. There has been a great deal of comment on landbanks and construction and so forth, but before we even go there, we need to consider the position of those who are at risk of becoming homeless or who are losing their homes today. The Minister for Social Protection referred to rent supplement. Both I, as a person who deals with constituents, and the charities that deal with homelessness do not believe rent supplement is working as it should and that it is one of the causes of the emergency. Other issues revolve around receivers being appointed by banks, who are largely unregulated. A number of short-term measures need to be dealt with promptly.

I support the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government regarding one comment he made. He referred to the constitutional challenges in respect of housing. It is time there was a rebalancing of the Constitution in the context of property rights and so forth. We should, as an Oireachtas, consider a proper wording to bring to the people on a right to housing.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Hear, hear.

Deputy John Curran: A right to housing does not mean a key to a free house but it should underpin reasonableness and proportionate responses in what we do. If we went no further than putting that on the agenda and advancing that as a meaningful, all-party approach, that would have a significant impact on housing and homelessness and the approach and steps taken by the

next Government and future Governments.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: Many comments can be made about this housing crisis. The fact now that it is the norm to see people bedding down in doorways can only be described as blatant evidence that this crisis is a national emergency. This emergency affects children living in hotels, families, mothers and vulnerable people, and it has huge social and economic costs. These costs are a direct result failure of the State and the Fine Gael-Labour Party Government to acknowledge that this emergency exists and to do something about it. The housing spend per citizen by Dublin City Council illustrates the almost impossible struggle facing the council in its efforts to house people. For example, in 2016, the council has an overall budget of €803 million. The expectation is that the council will spend 35% of this on housing, which is its greatest expenditure. However, while this figure has been increased annually, only 100 family homes were built in 2015.

In the aftermath of the general election, we are in a political vacuum. Fine Gael is now saying it misjudged the mood of the people while, at the same time, Fianna Fáil acts as if it had no hand or part to play in creating this crisis. There is only one solution to this emergency, which is a State-led national social and affordable housing programme.

Deputy Seán Crowe: If we are to agree on anything today, we must accept that we are in the middle of a housing emergency. It is a housing crisis. We need to declare an emergency as that would necessitate an emergency response and appropriate emergency measures. It would be a good start if we were even to agree that much today. I agree with other speakers, as I think everyone would, that everyone has the right to a home and a roof over his or her head without discrimination. Everyone would accept this as a starting point of the debate.

Sinn Féin has proposed costed and detailed proposals which would impact immediately on the housing and homelessness crisis. However, I want to focus on one small area which does not require legislation. We need to tackle the current system under which homeless families and individuals have to self-accommodate. When an individual or family presents as homeless, they must contact their local authority. However, many are told that there is no accommodation available and that they should contact hotels or bed and breakfast accommodation. They cannot just make telephone calls but need to present in person. Many take buses and bring their children and life-long belongings with them to the accommodation which may be very far away. They are then told there is no accommodation and they must take the bus back and start again. If they are successful, they may obtain accommodation for two, three or four nights, but there is usually a difficulty coming up to the weekend. Once again, they have to restart the process. Children are somehow supposed to stay in accommodation during this whole process. Huge numbers of people could not find rooms last week because of St. Patrick's Day and Easter and some had to travel outside Dublin to find accommodation with their children. Homeless individuals and their families should not have to self-accommodate. We must urgently change that practice. The Minister is a caretaker Minister at this stage. He was talking about instructing local authorities at the stroke of a pen to adopt the position that they would take on the responsibility. It is not a huge task. It is something positive we can recommend today. The Minister might consider it.

Minister of State at the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation (Deputy Damien English): I am grateful for the opportunity to say a few words in the debate. I did not get a chance to listen to all speakers, but in terms of process, the idea today was to have statements and put forth everyone's ideas as a contribution to the debate. The Minister, Deputy Alan Kelly,

has been working hard in this area for the past couple of years and has managed, with the help of the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Brendan Howlin, and others, to ring-fence a pot of money of approximately €4 billion to tackle this issue, yet no one seems to acknowledge this. I wish we had had that €4 billion three or five years ago, but we did not. However, we now know that there is a pot of money of €4 billion, depending on whether whoever is in government wants to increase it, to work with and spend on solutions. Nevertheless - I accept that I did not hear all of the speeches - Deputy Barry Cowen seems to forget that the election is over. He came into the House ranting and raving rather than trying to calmly tease through ideas and solutions on which we could all work. That is what we are trying to do. On this side we accept that we did not get everything perfectly right. There would be no problem if we did. That is acknowledged by having this debate and in setting aside a sum of €4 billion. We know that there is a problem and we want to fix it. We have put forward various strategies that we think will help a great deal, including the social housing strategy and Construction 2020. They are strategies we believe have been worked out and will help. They might need to be fast-tracked or people might want to add to them, but they are strategies that are in place and already making some difference, albeit not enough and not quickly enough.

As the Minister says, the problem cannot be fixed overnight. There is no silver bullet. I have not heard here all of the solutions or of a silver bullet either. Everyone seems to agree that in terms of process, if today is taken as stage 1, the next stage after the Ceann Comhairle's committee meets tomorrow should be establishing a committee of the House on housing to match a potential housing Minister, depending on who is in government. Most people seem to agree with the concept of having a housing Minister with a particular brief to focus on this issue for a couple of years. A cross-party committee on housing could tease through all of ideas expressed today, good, bad or indifferent, and those expressed outside the House. Let us go through them to see which ones are realistic and those which cannot be implemented. In fairness, the Minister has said some of the ideas sound lovely, but they may not be capable of implementation. If it was possible to implement them, we might have tried them in the past. It may be that a cross-party committee could adopt the right tone and spirit. I have seen committees working very well, as Deputy Seán Crowe can attest. Let us tease through everyone's ideas and submit them to the next process which I hope will be a new Government with a dedicated Minister in a couple of weeks time or one month or however long it takes.

The Taoiseach outlined the Action Plan for Jobs process, at which most people laughed when it was first suggested in 2011 and which they said could not work. However, it did work because every Minister and Department bought into and contributed to it. The same logical approach can work in any Department. Certainly, it can work in tackling the housing crisis. I have been in other countries in Europe in the past year and a half where people have asked about the Action Plan for Jobs process and sought to copy it. We should use the same process in other Departments. Housing is an ideal issue to be addressed in this way. It involves a whole-of-government and an all-party approach to which everyone can contribute. For those who do not know, the Action Plan for Jobs process involved the carrying out of 300 or 400 actions every year to create jobs. The actions were set out, names were put beside them, a budget was provided and they had to happen. That is the only way we will tackle the housing crisis and all of us here can contribute. Everyone had a chance to contribute to the Action Plan for Jobs and add to it. Committees submitted ideas which were included. Deputy David Cullinane contributed reports that were included. Everyone contributed and it could be the same in this case. Today is stage 1. I hope we can soon establish a committee to take on the problems and subsequently have a Minister to drive progress. People must accept that there has been action and that there

has been change here. Money has been set aside. There is no point denying this and we must now work with it.

A blanket rent supplement increase is not going to work. I have seen it. I come from an area of County Meath in which it is needed, but it will not achieve the result people believe it will. The case-by-case approach being taken is working, but many people do not know that it is available. As always, Deputies have a job to do to get the word out that if a person is receipt of rent supplement and under pressure to pay an increased rent, he or she should come and talk to the authorities to see if a change can be negotiated before it is too late. Some people have left their houses before coming to us, which is too late. We need to get the word out.

We also need to take a serious look at the system of social housing delivery. The Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government has started a new pilot scheme which is similar to the one we have in education which involves a devolved grant. It allows local authorities to take a pot of money to deliver houses under a certain level. The pilot scheme should be enhanced and rolled out to a greater extent as it will help to drive and fast-track the delivery of housing. It should not take 18 to 24 months from the Department signing off on an amount of money for it to be spent. We need to find ways to fast-track the process.

These are some ideas. Everybody has ideas and the next process involves a committee to implement them. Deputies should note that the election is over and that it is now time work on what we can. It will only happen if there is a cross-party approach.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: There is a building crisis. All of us who have been elected to the Thirty-second Dáil must work together to see what we can do for those who need housing. To put matters in perspective, I note that birds have nests for their chicks, foxes have dens for their cubs and rabbits have burrows for their young and so forth. Families - parents - need warm, safe homes for their children. Whether it is to provide social housing or help people who are trying to build houses for themselves, we must do our best to ensure that happens.

A number of factors are militating against house building. Builders cannot access funding from banks. They will not provide it, even though they are owned, by and large, by the State. If builders get funding from other financial houses, interest of 12% is demanded of them. They cannot work like that. They tell me that their margins would be as low as 2%. To build a house in Kerry, the average cost is approximately €220,000. This means that a builder would only get €4,000 or €5,000 after taking all of the risk. He or she would have to pay tax out of that. It would not work.

I know of a young man who wants to borrow €100,000 to build a house on his farm but the bank will only give him €180,000. He can do much of the work himself and fix the house up enough to have a kitchen, bathroom and bedroom as a start for himself and his wife. That is all he wants to do but if the bank keeps insisting that he must borrow €180,000, he does not have the income to ensure that he gets the mortgage. Issues such as this need to be addressed.

Many middle-income earners cannot get mortgages. If they do, they must pay €80,000 of the €220,000 in taxes, including VAT. This amount must be paid for throughout their mortgages, be they for 20, 25 or 30 years. There is also approximately €15,000 in development levies. Working together, the Government and local authorities must do something to address these issues.

The Minister needs to be more accurate in his language than when he announced €62.5

million for housing in the likes of Kerry in 2014. In 2013, €1.3 million was supposed to be made available for housing. After inquiring to see what had gone wrong, we found out that, although an announcement had been made, there were four stages of approval to go through before any house could be built. In Kerry, three local authority houses have been built in the past eight years. As to the four stages of approval, a design must first be sent to the Department for its agreement, which takes three or four months. The next stage involves design changes, which take three or four more months. The council's costings are then sent but the Department might not agree with them. One can never determine the cost until a project is put out to tender. People ask us where the €62.5 million has gone but it was never there. We have been held up in red tape because the Department insists on unreasonable requirements.

Some of the schemes, for example, the rental accommodation scheme, RAS, and long-term leasing, are not working because the caps are too low. In Killarney town where houses are like gold dust, rent has increased to €900 but the cap is somewhere around €600. People fear that they will be out on their ears because rents are increasing. This is a fact. We need to address the caps. If the Minister does not, many more people will become homeless in Kerry.

I thank the Ceann Comhairle, as I know that my time is up.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. Is Deputy Lawless sharing time with Deputy Jack Chambers or is he on his own?

Deputy James Lawless: I am on my own. In my first contribution in the House and as a fellow Kildare man, I congratulate the Ceann Comhairle on his role.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you.

Deputy James Lawless: I commend him on the diligence and professionalism he has displayed in office and I wish him well in his role.

A number of factors contribute to the housing crisis: purchase and rental affordability; availability; the backlog in social housing; and the lack of private home construction and supply across the board, which are functions of affordability. As a councillor until three weeks ago when I entered the Dáil, the single greatest issue being raised at my clinics on a daily basis was housing. People attended my clinics in a variety of situations but all had the common challenge of lacking a home or roof over their heads. Unfortunately, the only response that I could reasonably provide was that there was no supply, light at the end of the tunnel or stock to be allocated. Housing lists have extended from five years to six, seven or many more years. In some cases, we were fortunate enough to be able to assist a family in getting what was essentially a lucky break but a lucky break is not good enough for what is a basic requirement, namely, providing a family with a home. The majority of families in that situation do not get that lucky break. Indeed, they are sent back from clinics and the housing departments of local authorities to conditions in which they face homelessness or are on the verge of homelessness, staying with their families in overcrowded accommodation and sleeping on mattresses on kitchen floors in a form of hidden homelessness that is not reported in the statistics or on any planning radar. This is not good enough.

The housing assistance payment, HAP, and RAS are relatively useful in this situation but they have their difficulties, primarily because rents have soared to the extent that the RAS, in particular, does not cover anywhere near the full rent. Under-the-counter cash payments are being taken by landlords on top of RAS, leaving families bereft and living on the bread line. In

22 March 2016

my constituency of Kildare North in the commuter belt, rents are typically 30% to 40% higher than is covered by rent allowance.

A problem with HAP is that once a family has been accepted onto the scheme, it is deemed to have had its housing need met. This means that, at the stroke of a pen, the family is struck off the housing list after years of waiting and is effectively back to square one. This precludes many from taking up the option.

In County Kildare, 6,600 households are on the social housing list, comprising 19,000 individuals, making it the third largest waiting list in the country after the cities of Dublin and Cork. While there has been ongoing discussion on councils of money to be allocated from central government, it has not arrived. In fact, the number of social housing units completed in 2014 was just three per local authority. In 2015 and despite the alleged money coming through, only 28 social units were built by local authorities.

There is a significant problem with vacant and derelict properties across the State but this also presents an opportunity. The power under derelict sites legislation to sanction the owners of derelict properties and, in some cases, seize possession of those properties is only rarely exercised by the State. There appears to be a systemic reluctance to do so but vacant and derelict properties would present an opportunity to provide accommodation were the State only to intervene more proactively.

Commercial properties also present an opportunity. Many retail sector and high street buildings traditionally contained accommodation over their shops. This practice has declined in recent years but I call on the acting Government to examine concessions, perhaps by way of rates, to encourage retail outlets to create over-the-shop accommodation as well as in other fit parts of their properties. This would also provide a stimulus to the high street economy of our small towns and villages.

I will touch briefly on private market supply. There has been a major contraction in construction in the past five years and its costs have increased due to regulatory overheads. Before any construction cost is factored in, the regulatory cost of house building is €40,000 per unit more than it was previously.

Younger families, first-time buyers and expanding families have a particular difficulty with affordability in the private sector. Central Bank rules are forcing more households to remain in unaffordable rented accommodation, thereby reducing supply in the rental market and driving up rents while making no contribution to the goal of home ownership. Fianna Fáil is advocating a first-time buyers saving scheme with a 25% top-up to enable individuals to move towards deposits. It must be acknowledged that many couples and young families are paying significant rents while attempting to save for deposits and yet these factors are not always taken into account by banking rules.

I thank the Acting Chairman for the opportunity to contribute on this debate and I hope that these solutions are considered in a constructive fashion.

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Brendan Howlin): The housing supply crisis that we are experiencing is the last blow-back from the economic crash. It is often the sector that causes the crash that is the last to recover. Ultimately, the issues we face are manifest but very simple. An insufficient number of houses and apartments are being built. Last week's ESRI report confirms that but that is not to say we are not making progress on these

issues, particularly in areas for which the State has direct responsibility. We are tackling the rough sleeping problem and have recommenced social housing construction for the first time in many years.

There is a tendency to conflate various aspects of the housing issue. It is worthwhile separating them so we can focus and act on each to determine what we are doing about them. While the root cause of many of our problems is the lack of construction, it has different manifestations, each with its own complexities. Rough sleeping is the most tragic and visible manifestation of homelessness. When homelessness is mentioned, people's minds often turn automatically to the issue of rough sleepers. During the election campaign, I recall seeing an RTE programme on emergency accommodation but which featured rough sleepers. This thinking was also evident in *The Irish Times*. Homelessness and rough sleeping are not the same thing. This is a complex issue, as the death of five rough sleepers in Northern Ireland so far this year makes clear. I do not know what Sinn Féin has to say about that. Undoubtedly, it will be somebody else's fault and a further manifestation of a different attitude north and south of the Border. By contrast, the number of rough sleepers in Dublin has fallen by 46% in 12 months as a result of a 32% increase in funding for that particular aspect this year. The funding increased by 56% in two years. There is now a bed available in Dublin for anyone who chooses to use it. As Deputy Finian McGrath has said, each rough sleeper has a complex and individual case, as those of us who have dealt with individual cases know full well.

The emergency accommodation problem is the most obvious manifestation of the lack of supply in the housing market. Those who might otherwise be receiving social housing via a local authority or a rent supplement scheme find themselves in emergency accommodation in hotels or other temporary accommodation that is just not suitable. Again, this problem finds its root in the financial crash.

The very first priority for this Government when the economy began to recover was to recommence a social housing programme. Two years ago, we provided €2.2 billion in the budget. The first time we had money to spend, we spent it on social housing. Social Housing Strategy 2020, published in November 2014, was the major building block of our strategy. By 2020, the aim is to provide 35,000 additional social housing units through an investment of €3.8 billion as the Minister responsible for housing said. A further 75,000 households will have their needs met by local authorities through the leasing of private rented accommodation. Over 13,000 new social housing units and social rented dwellings were delivered last year. This represents an 86% increase on unit delivery over the previous year. NAMA delivered 2,000 social housing units on top of that.

In this year's budget, I increased the allocation for social housing by a further €125 million to €812 million, representing a 20% increase in the funding for social housing over that for the previous year. The funding provided this year will deliver a further increase in units of houses to meet social housing needs. The strategy will result in the giving of keys to 17,000 households. It will also contribute to the provision of over 5,000 new social housing units under the construction programme. In budget 2015, I announced the launch of the second phase of the Government's PPP programme to provide for €300 million of private investment in social housing to be delivered through the PPP system and with the aim of delivering another 15,000 social housing units.

I wish to pick up the three points made in what, by and large, has been a constructive debate. Deputy Eamon Ryan referred to not enough being spent on capital generally in the past five

years. We had no money and were obliged to prioritise. There was no money unless we took it from current spending, which is what the Commission wanted us to do according to reports. If we had cut social welfare, we could have had more money but that is not the choice we made.

Deputy Finian McGrath made a very valid point on there being money available from the European Investment Bank and elsewhere. It is not a question of there not being money available to borrow but of our not being able to spend it under the fiscal rules. From the sale of Bord Gáis Éireann, BGE, we have €300 million allocated for social housing but we are still looking for a vehicle allowing us to spend it on social housing within the fiscal rules. I hope there will be a consensus in the House on dealing with these challenges.

A very constructive point was made by Deputy John Curran. He referred to the absolute need to grasp one nettle, namely, the need to rebalance the constitutional rights of people who require housing with the constitutional right to own private property. That is one nettle that I hope this Dáil will tackle and put to the people.

Deputy David Cullinane: It was quite incredible to sit here and listen to some of the contributions from the Government, including the caretaker Minister and, in particular, the Taoiseach, during the past couple of hours. The Taoiseach said, quite rightly, that there are many people, including families, living in fear. They fear not having money to pay for the mortgage or rent and they fear losing their homes and becoming homeless. However, there was no realisation whatsoever among many of the Government representatives that the reason tens of thousands of families across the State are living in fear and are in desperate need is the absolute failure of the outgoing Government's housing strategy. Teachta English said we need to remain calm and that this debate should be calm. We are calm but, for heaven's sake, can we not just build the houses that people need? That is the solution. While we can talk continually, in respect of which I have heard about Oireachtas committees and the need to set up a Department and to have more dialogue to tease through the issues, people need a roof over their heads. We need to build housing. That is the solution and there is no other. We do not have enough housing to house our citizens, including families.

Before I came into the Dáil Chamber today, I received a telephone call from a family who are currently in bed and breakfast accommodation in Waterford city. They have two children, one is three and the other is 14 months. The mother is four months pregnant and unwell. The family are sleeping in bed and breakfast accommodation. They contacted the city and county council and were told by it that the solution was to put them into hostels, whereby the father would be put into one and the mother and the two children into a different one. That is the solution that has been given to many families across this State. Yesterday at my constituency office, I dealt with 34 cases involving families in need of housing. The story from them is the same, namely, that they cannot find rental accommodation where landlords will accept rent supplement or sign up to the RAS. Despite this, they are told this is the solution. I am sure that if I am receiving this much representation, then so too are the Minister, Deputy Howlin, other members of the outgoing Government and everybody else present. That is the absolute reality facing families. Therefore, I cannot understand all this talk about reform, setting up a Department of housing and an Oireachtas committee and engaging in more dialogue. We know what the problems and solutions are; what is lacking is political will from the outgoing Government. It must be said that this problem arose under Fianna Fáil in the first instance. The solution is to build homes.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: It is lamentable that we find ourselves here again speak-

ing about the homelessness and housing emergency. This incredibly important and urgent issue has been debated in this Chamber on many occasions. Solutions have been highlighted but, unfortunately, what was said appears to have fallen on deaf ears. The homelessness and housing emergency continues to spiral out of control and it is not just an issue relating to Dublin. According to recent reports, there are 1,012 individuals in need on Monaghan County Council's housing waiting list. That represents a considerably greater number of people desperately waiting for months, or even years, to have somewhere they can call home. Such a huge number on a small county's housing waiting list cannot come as a surprise to anyone, certainly not in this House, particularly when one considers that, during the lifetime of the previous Government, the local authority construction fund was cut by a colossal 80%. In addition, the previous Government failed to tackle the issue of unaffordable rents for five years. Recent research found that rents were, on average, 9% higher in 2015 compared with 2014. In County Monaghan they increased by 7.3% in the period in question, while the increase in County Cavan was a staggering 11.4%. The litany of failures goes on. The Government must stop paying lip service to the problem and ensure appropriate action is taken.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Is the Minister aware of the sheer scale and magnitude of the homelessness and housing crisis? Worse still, does he care about it? I say this for a particular reason. I am the former chairperson of Louth County Council's housing strategic policy committee, which invited the Minister several times to meet it to discuss the housing crisis in the county and on each occasion he turned down our invitation. Almost 5,000 people are on the housing waiting list in County Louth. Of these, almost 2,000 are on the waiting list in Drogheda alone and many of them have been waiting for up to nine years for a house. The county has 70 acres of land zoned for social housing, on which not one house has been built. The only solution which is one that requires political will is the roll-out of a State-wide, State-funded and State-led social housing building programme.

Deputy Seamus Healy: The previous Government, knowingly and deliberately, created and caused homelessness. I say this because the State owns Allied Irish Banks, Permanent TSB and the Educational Building Society. The Minister and current caretaker Administration are allowing these financial institutions to evict people from their homes. They can stop such evictions by telling the banks to stop causing homelessness. No legislation is required to do so because the Government, through the Ministers for the Environment, Community and Local Government and Finance, could issue a simple directive to stop financial institutions from making people homeless.

The National Asset Management Agency which is owned by the State is creating homelessness by evicting people and selling residences and apartments to vulture funds that are engaging in evictions. The State could also stop this practice by issuing a simple instruction to NAMA. I reiterate that the State is deliberately creating homelessness and should stop doing so immediately.

I will refer briefly to the Tánaiste's reference to the housing assistance payment. The HAP scheme is an outrageous rip-off of tenants, most, if not all, of whom must pay differential rent to their local authority and a top-up to their landlord, which is often as much as €50 per week. The scheme should be stopped immediately.

If we are to address the homelessness and housing crisis, the Government and the new Dáil must declare a housing emergency immediately. Otherwise, we will not be able to deal with the problem. The Government should also take up the offer made by the credit unions to provide

between €5 billion and €8 billion to help address the housing problem.

Deputy Mick Barry: I agree with the points made by Deputy Seamus Healy. I will make several points about the scandal that recently unfolded on the Eden estate in Blackrock in Cork city where tenants in 35 apartments received letters earlier this year terminating their leases and giving notice to quit. Many of them had lived in the properties in question for years. The letters were issued by Grant Thornton, the receiver in charge of 127 apartments on the estate, which was appointed by the State-owned IBRC in November 2010. This is the latest chapter in the saga of Anglo Irish Bank and the Irish Nationwide Building Society.

KPMG has been the Government appointed liquidator of IBRC since January 2013. As instructed by the Fine Gael-Labour Party Government, the liquidator's only interest is in maximising the financial return to the State from the carcasses of Anglo Irish Bank and the Irish Nationwide Building Society and it has no regard for the social impact of doing so. In this sense, it is an even more heartless and anti-social arm of the State than NAMA.

As of January 2016, IBRC had netted €2.1 billion from sales such as those envisaged on the Eden estate. This sum has not been used to address the housing crisis because most of it has been ring-fenced for distribution among IBRC's creditors which include Anglo Irish Bank subordinated bondholders. Some of the money is intended to be used for payment in full of "certain employee and pension claims prior to the date of liquidation". Does this include pension payments to former members of Anglo Irish Bank and Irish Nationwide Building Society management such as Mr. David Drumm and Mr. Michael Fingleton?

Deputy Regina Doherty: In the past five years the normal set-piece for me in debates such as this has been defending the position and actions of the Government in dealing with the issue under discussion. Since I am not the caretaker of anything other than perhaps my seat, I will take the opportunity to point to one or two issues that are causing difficulties with the Government's programme. In doing so I may agree with the points made by previous speakers. It is a pity the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government is not present. Perhaps the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Brendan Howlin, who is present will convey some of the points I raise to the Minister.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Of course, I will.

Deputy Regina Doherty: People who need to access rental or social welfare assistance from the Department must be on the housing list. Some 4,500 people are on the housing list in County Meath. The housing department of Meath County Council knows that the number of families seeking homes in the county is not 4,500. However, the requirement that those seeking rental assistance be on the housing list means that approximately 40% of those on the housing list in County Meath are not looking for houses. Will someone explain the logic of having a social welfare payment linked with the provision of housing by local authorities, given the absence of a direct link between them? I accept that some of those in receipt of housing assistance want homes, but I do not see any reason a person must be on the housing list to obtain a rental assistance payment.

Government Deputies defended the roll-out of the housing strategy last year and pointed to the allocation of €180 million. I note that Deputy Michael Healy-Rae announced that County Kerry had secured €62 million for housing. County Meath secured only €24 million, of which not a single cent has been spent. The four-stage process means that an application to build 76

houses that was approved last March is only now reaching the planning application and advertising process. Not one sod has been turned on the project and no contracts have been awarded. Only now, 13 months after the process started, is a planning application being submitted for the 76 houses, the reason being the four-stage approach to housing developments. It is frustrating that six months has been spent arguing with the Department about whether a central heating system or a back boiler will be installed in the new houses. For God's sake, is there no standard model in place? Such models were applied in the 1970s and 1980s and new models should be introduced for typical three and four bedroom semi-detached homes for particular types of family. The Department should pre-approve such models based on standard sizes, the use of square windows and the installation of a back boiler. Let us just build these houses.

While the single-stage process developed in the Department represents a good initiative, for some strange reason, it takes two steps forward and three backwards. Why develop a new initiative and then tie the hands of local authorities by applying a maximum expenditure limit of €2 million? We are doing precisely that by putting in place the maximum requirement of €2 million. Then in the case of any money over-spent by the authorities, it is up to them to find a solution. Departments and local authorities do not actively plan to over-spend. However, we have actually put a hindrance in front of them already by instructing them not to do this. It is as if there is a big neon sign stating that they should not go near this because if they make a mistake or if something goes overboard, then they will have to find the money and the Department will not bail them out.

Either we are in this crisis or emergency together and we are willing to pull together to build the houses which, the Members of the Opposition have rightly pointed out, we need, or we are not. Can we please take away the roadblocks that exist in the housing strategy? The strategy could work if it was simply allowed to work. Everyone in the Chamber today wants to build houses. The programme exists but there are some obvious reasons it is not working. Caretaker or no caretaker, can we get our act together and start doing it now please?

Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin: As this is my first opportunity to speak in this august Chamber, I wish to make note of the appreciation I have for the people who invested their trust and votes in me. I had been looking forward to the opportunity to wish the Ceann Comhairle, Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil, well. He is my constituency colleague and I was going to assure him that the constituency of Kildare South is in safe hands. However, I wish the Acting Chairman from Kildare North well.

Social stability is built from several basics, among which none is more important than having a roof over one's head. The housing crisis that has spiralled out of control in the past five years has many victims. First among these are the people who are homeless or who about to become homeless as a result of evictions, including 1,830 children, 884 families and 1,500 individuals. A total of 6,500 of these people are on the housing list in Kildare County Council and the figure is increasing by at least 100 every month. Next are those who are unable to save enough to get the 10% or 20% for a mortgage. This problem has been fuelled by high rents. For many young people starting out in life, owning a home is the first step in their future. However, under the previous Government, the dream of homeownership began slipping away from an entire generation. Under new Central Bank rules, more and more people are being frozen out of the credit market and are unable to get a mortgage to buy somewhere to truly call home. Of course, those parents who worry about whether their children will be able to find a home in their locality or community are victims as well. The previous Government did absolutely nothing to help first-time buyers who want to settle down in their home communities. Under

the Government, the number of homes being built slipped to below 10,000 per year, although 25,000 per year are needed.

Social housing construction has disappeared from 15,000 per year between 2007 and 2010 to 1,500 in the past four years. This is leading to soaring rents, putting even more pressure on young people struggling to save up for a deposit.

My party believes in home ownership. Owning a home is good for families, individuals and communities. It is imperative to introduce a new first-time buyer savings scheme to help young couples save for a deposit by topping up their savings account by 25%. The average tax component of a new house purchase is 40%. We need to address the high taxation on starter homes. It is essential to call on the Central Bank to include rent in the calculations to help these young people - indeed some are not so young - trying to make ends meet while saving towards a home. We will not allow home ownership to become the sole preserve of the few. Every hard-working individual and family deserve a chance to buy their own place and make a home. The current Government is happy to let that dream fade away for most people. Communities and families will suffer from that uncertainty.

The housing crisis is one of the biggest crises to face the State in recent history. We need a Government that understands the major consequences of homelessness for families and society. However, the current housing policy being pursued by the outgoing Government is not treating this crisis with the level of emergency or priority it requires. While the number of families becoming newly homeless is at record levels, more urgent and bolder actions are needed to keep families in their homes and provide secure accommodation to families who have already lost their homes. Like all Deputies in this Chamber, I am dealing with families on a day-to-day basis who are losing their homes through no fault of their own. These people have absolutely nowhere to turn. This morning in Newbridge I was dealing with a mother who has eight children. They have lost their home and the children are being farmed out to different families. Their mother is in a house on her own, apart from them. That is absolutely no way for a family to be in this day and age. I am also dealing with another family. When times were good they decided to buy out their local authority house. Unfortunately, when times became worse the banks moved in. The banks that are now taking that house are unwilling to do a deal with the local authority to buy it. Again, this case involves a mother and seven children. Under severe stress, her relationship with her partner broke up. She is left in this very difficult situation. Furthermore, her eldest daughter, who has two small children, lost her home and has had to come back to the family home. Now there are 13 adults living in a home and they are going to be made homeless.

We need a national building programme in which all primary stakeholders, including the Department, local authorities and the voluntary co-operative housing bodies, are given the resources and mandate to fast-track social home construction. They should be held to account if they do not succeed. We also need to consider providing for situations whereby the tenants of co-operative housing are allowed to buy their own homes. There is a stalemate situation at the moment. If they have the resources, the money should go into financing the transaction.

Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick: I welcome the opportunity to speak today on the issue of homelessness and housing. There is no doubt that this issue is one of the greatest challenges facing not only the Government but society as a whole.

There is no quick-fix solution. I strongly believe that this issue should not be used as a po-

litical football simply to score political points. We all need to work together to find a solution that will not only provide a short-term solution but also prove to be a long-term sustainable answer. It is clear that we now need a strategy to increase the supply of quality housing for a population that is increasing and an economy that is growing faster than any other in Europe.

I agree that it is simply not acceptable in 2016 to have families in emergency accommodation. A proper solution to the housing issue needs to be found and it must include home ownership, sustainable construction, social and affordable housing, protection for renters and addressing homelessness.

We also need to work more closely with people in local authorities who are at the coal-face dealing with these issues. This week I met Denis McArdle, a full-time housing officer in Louth County Council. He gave me an update on the current state of affairs in County Louth. In County Louth, the Simon Community has a total of 25 beds available, of which the council has an allocation of 14. The Gatehouse has a total of seven beds while Drogheda Homeless Aid has a capacity of 30 beds, of which eight are allocated to Louth County Council. In addition to these facilities, the council also has exclusive use of three bed and breakfast houses in Dundalk and five in Drogheda. I note that 12 new units are due to come on stream in the Linen Hall Street area of Dundalk soon. This is welcome news.

Louth County Council is one of the few authorities which has a 24-hour contact number for people at risk of homelessness. Officially, Louth does not have any people sleeping rough or homeless. I believe this is a result of the measures already mentioned and the good work of people like Denis McArdle and Joe McGuinness, the current director of services in Louth County Council. Denis McArdle and Joe McGuinness deal head-on with housing problems and homelessness on a daily basis. It is clear to me from speaking with such people that a workable and sustainable solution can be found if we work together. For example, a short-term temporary solution could be to use private accommodation to replace the expensive bed and breakfast accommodation and hotels. Not only would this prove a more cost-effective solution, it would also provide a better living standard for the families involved. It is estimated that this measure alone could save approximately €2,750 per family per month. Another measure worth investigating is a system whereby families could be encouraged or incentivised to rehouse family members who have found themselves in the unfortunate position of being homeless.

I imagine Members from all sides of the House will have further ideas on housing issues and I would welcome an opportunity to discuss them if it means we can improve the situation and improve the lives of our constituents. It is incumbent on us to act now. I know many people will highlight the problems in today's debate but that is not what we need.

6 o'clock

We need work together to find solutions. Solutions to the housing crisis can only be solutions if they prevent homelessness, eliminate the need to sleep rough, eliminate the need for long-term occupation of emergency accommodation, provide long-term housing solutions and ensure effective services.

I know from working with my party colleagues that Fine Gael has a sustainable solution which would provide long-term answers. This includes the delivery of 110,000 social houses by 2020, working with housing associations to provide a low-cost rental option for low-income families, increasing tax relief for landlords who accept rent supplement and HAP tenants, the

protection of renters, the introduction of a positive retention scheme to operate by 2017, an increase in the relevant notice period for compliant tenants in the event of rent increases or lease terminations, streamlining the powers of the Private Residential Tenancy Board and supporting the concept of home ownership through the tenant purchase scheme for social housing tenants.

It is critical that we do not make the same mistakes as the last Fianna Fáil Government when it comes to creating a sustainable construction industry. The people of this country have already paid a very high price for the mistakes and the boom-and-bust policies it pursued. To create a sustainable construction industry which will provide the necessary housing, Fine Gael proposes the following: annual housing output at sustainable levels of 25,000 by 2021; improving the availability of finance for new home construction with a €500 million joint venture to finance the building of 11,000 new homes through the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund; tackling the holding of land by developers by introducing a vacant site levy on serviced land in urban areas; streamlining the local planning process with “use it or lose it” planning permission; and amending the planning guidelines with respect to student accommodation to support the construction of on-campus or near-campus purpose-built student accommodation.

I would like to put on the record of the House my support for any measures that would improve the housing and homelessness issues, no matter from what side of the House they come. We must all work together to tackle these issues and, once and for all, eradicate housing issues and homelessness from Irish society.

Deputy John Lahart: Like a previous speaker, I want to take this opportunity, in my first contribution to the Dáil, to express my thanks to my constituents in Dublin South-West for electing me as their Deputy and putting their faith in me.

I would like to focus on certain issues. I have followed the debate. Many issues have been raised, and in the brief time allocated to me I would like to share some of my thoughts. I am thinking of some of the people who voted for me and whom I met during the campaign. A younger generation than me - namely, those aged 25 to 30 - would in previous times have left home and struck out for a final piece of independence by renting a place of their own. They cannot afford to do that now and there are obvious societal impacts. I think of those who traditionally expected to own their homes, such as public servants, white-collar workers, bank officials, nurses, teachers and gardaí. There is an emerging generation of people who can no longer aspire to that, something of which we have to be very mindful.

I think of those who sleep rough at home in overcrowded houses, bedding down on a sofa every evening, perhaps because they could not afford to pay the rent for previous homes and had to return to their family homes. I think of those in hostels, who are separated from partners, and those who spend their days keeping warm in hospitals, shopping malls and public libraries, to name just a few. I think of those on the housing list, as mentioned by previous speakers, for what seems like an eternity.

I think in particular, but not exclusively, of some separated people who have lost their homes, perhaps as a result of separation, and whose access to their children is, as a consequence, far from ideal. They often have to bring their children to their parents' homes during visiting periods. I think of families living in hotel rooms without an address to speak of, who are considered to have been accommodated by local authorities.

I know of a couple who have paid close to €150,000 in rent over the past 15 years. They

have fine secure jobs, but earn too much to avail of a council mortgage and not enough to avail of a bank mortgage. They have no capacity to save for a deposit, but have demonstrated a capacity to meet their rental commitments over a decade or more. I refer to them because their landlord, as is his or her entitlement, now wants to sell the house in which they live. There is nowhere for them to rent. Their children have been in local schools for the past number of years and, as a family, they have set down roots in their local community.

I think of the mental and psychological toll on families living in hotel rooms. There is a lack of personal, developmental and creative space and a lack of privacy or opportunity for private time. The psychological cost of the housing and homelessness crisis has never been fully counted, but I am convinced that it is a cost we will be paying for decades. The focus has been on building, which is correct, but we also need to focus on the need for proper interventions to be put in place for families and staff working behind counters who deal with these issues on a day-to-day basis and for whom it is also a very stressful occupation.

The outgoing Government lost the confidence of the people when it came to housing and homelessness, particularly in regard to the rental market and the provision of social housing. My constituency, Dublin South-West, is administered by South Dublin County Council. No social houses were built in 2014 and 2015. It is likely to be the second half of 2016 before any social houses are constructed. In this new fragmented Dáil, everyone elected must play his or her part in contributing to an end to the housing crisis. It is not good enough for people to sit on the ditch and pontificate but not participate. I do not think the electorate will easily forgive those who work in their interest alone and not in the national interest.

Fianna Fáil put forward two key points in its manifesto, among a wide range of proposals. One was to restore Part V of the Planning and Development Act 2000 in full and, in addition, put in place dedicated Part V teams in local authorities to ensure the scheme can be run.

I again refer to the couple I mentioned. One of the platforms of our manifesto was that if an individual can demonstrate that he or she has met rental payments over a period of time - in 65% of rent cases, rent payments are more expensive than mortgage repayments - that should be evidence that one is capable of repaying a mortgage.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Bernard J. Durkan): Deputies Gerry Adams and Louise O'Reilly are sharing time.

Deputy Gerry Adams: I welcome the opportunity to make a statement on housing today, although, as I said earlier, I am disappointed that this is as close as the Dáil will get to debating very topical issues at this time. The responsibility for this and the contrived impasse in the formation of a Government lies with the two conservative parties in the House.

Those in need of housing, in emergency accommodation, on hospital trolleys or on unacceptable waiting lists for operations are still in a precarious situation, and that is the legacy of the Government. The emergency crisis is a direct result of Government policy. Time and time again during the last Dáil, Sinn Féin and others warned the Government of the growing housing crisis. Today, families from Tyrrelstown protested at Leinster House. They have been forced into homelessness by the stroke of a pen from a vulture fund, yet the Government is doing nothing. Today's statements on housing and homelessness will not help a single one of the families in need. What they need are homes.

Sinn Féin has set out its stall. It is possible to deliver security and certainty for tenants and

22 March 2016

to support homeowners and buyers. It is possible to stop the profiteering of banks at the cost of mortgage holders. It is possible to ensure that a minimum of 4,000 of NAMA's 20,000 private homes are used for social housing. Most of all, it is possible to invest an additional €2.2 billion in housing to provide 36,500 new homes over the next five years. This Government decided otherwise. It decided it was better to give the money to the banks and to the golden circles.

Last year, five new council homes were built by Louth County Council. In 2014, four were built yet there are 5,000 people on the housing list. At the rate houses are being built it will take over 1,000 years to clear the housing list. That is an indictment of this Government and of past Governments. As the centenary of the 1916 Rising approaches, that is the scale of work required to tackle this emergency.

I commend the credit union initiative in offering €8 billion for investment in social and affordable housing, yet the Government has not agreed to it. The Minister might give an explanation as to the reason for that. The answer from my point of view is simple: the Government does not believe that citizens in this centenary year of the Rising have the right to a home.

Deputy Alan Kelly: That is not true.

Deputy Gerry Adams: This party believes that everyone has the right to a home. We are saying clearly that our plan is about ensuring that this right is realised. The Minister knows that he took the wrong decisions. If he and the Government had taken the right decisions it would have brought this crisis to an end.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: There are 9,000 people on the housing list in Fingal, 225 of whom are families. Some 185 of those families will sleep in emergency accommodation tonight.

I have been contacted by a young mother from Swords who has two children with special needs, one of whom has a service dog. That woman had to fight tooth and nail to get a service dog for her poor child. She is facing eviction in May and has nowhere to go. There is nowhere for her to rent and there is no emergency accommodation that will take her, her children and this vital service dog. This is Ireland in 2016, and it is not right.

I extend my support to the campaign spearheaded by Councillor Paul Donnelly in Tyrrelstown. While we welcome the news from the developer that there will be no evictions until the tenants have found alternative accommodation, we see now a shrinking rental sector with more tenants coming on stream. Those people will be competing now for accommodation with the young mother and her two children with special needs.

We have a caretaker Government and we need strong legislation to prevent more situations arising such as the one in Tyrrelstown. We cannot rely on the goodwill of so-called vulture capitalists. There are potentially tens of thousands of people in the same situation as the people in Tyrrelstown, and that will continue until we have the legislation in place to deal with it. It is not good enough for the Minister in charge to simply do nothing.

The heavy reliance of this caretaker Government on the private rental sector and the increase in rents, coupled with the decrease in rent allowance, has led to a sharp increase, especially in the towns of Balbriggan and Swords, in the number of families no longer able to bridge the gap between rent allowance and the rising cost of rents, so they find themselves at the mercy of the housing department in Fingal County Council. That situation continues in Fingal and throughout the country. We need action, not just debates. We do not need a trip to the twilight zone

courtesy of the Tánaiste speaking as if there was no crisis. In the real world, not the twilight zone where the caretaker Government lives, there is a very real crisis.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: This is a very important debate in which I will make a few salient points. As Members of the House all of us, regardless of our political parties, have been approached by people who are in severe difficulties in terms of housing accommodation. One of the key issues we must address is where there are properties for rent, and where there are properties for rent in some parts of our country, and certainly in County Louth, we should relax the rent cap on the families that would like to move into those properties. Specifically, we should target families currently in bed and breakfast accommodation. We could be paying €800 or €1,000 per week for families in bed and breakfast accommodation but why do we not increase the cap for families in such accommodation to allow them go into a rented house, which would cost between €1,000 and €1,200 per month? That is a rent per month versus a bed and breakfast cost per week. That is a simple sum we can all do, and we should do it right now.

The second action we must do is look again at the room to rent scheme. Currently, a person living alone who has a room to rent can rent it to relations but not to a family member. The rent is paid for that. The person can get that income and if they are on certain basic social welfare benefits it does not affect that income.

We need to think outside the box. If we are spending €452 million per year on rent subsidies and other ways of supporting families, why do we not relax the rules for the room to rent scheme and include, first, where couples are living in such accommodation and second, ensure that where people are on benefits other than basic social welfare benefits, the income they get would not be counted against their tax liability.

We should look again at the question of family members. If there is space in the family home, in theory the family member could move back in. They are currently excluded from that. I do not understand why we should not consider that as an option and see what happens.

Another basic point is that there are shops and other businesses in the centre of our towns and cities which have all the services including sewage, water and lighting, yet nobody is living over those shops. Those of us who have an interest in history and read the 1911 census will know that in our town centres hundreds of people were living in those accommodation areas at that time. There is nobody living in them now. We should consider introducing a new exceptional scheme for town centres and designate those areas to allow for the people who own those properties to be either grant-aided or write off the cost of bringing up that accommodation to a liveable condition. Alternatively, the income they would get from such properties could be tax free for a period of time. Living over a shop would not suit everybody and it certainly does not suit families with young children but it would suit a significant number of people.

A category not often mentioned is the single male who generally comes to my clinic who is separated and has been living in appalling accommodation, perhaps shared accommodation in some cases, with other people who are single in terms of their living conditions. Many of them are in their 40s and 50s; some of them are in their 60s. Some of them have other problems also. Other Members mentioned drug and alcohol problems, which is a significant issue in our community.

There is also the question of those with mental health issues. I have people who suffer from significant mental health issues come to my clinic who cannot get accommodation. They are

living difficult and stressful lives. If we look at those areas we would be able to facilitate that category of person in terms of providing accommodation.

We must think outside the box. This debate is an example of us all working together to get the best ideas from all sides of the House to ensure that the families and individuals we want to help most can be helped. We should break all the rules because it does not make sense to be spending a fortune on accommodation in bed and breakfast facilities and hotels when for less than the money we pay for that family in a month they would have a house with two or three bedrooms.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I, too, am delighted to speak in this debate but as many previous speakers stated, and I compliment the new Members on their maiden speeches, it is a time-wasting exercise because it will not rehouse any person who is not already housed.

I am glad the caretaker Minister is in the Chamber. If he built anything near the number of houses he promised, announced and turned sods, the housing crisis, certainly in some parts of the country, would be halved. It was all announcements and no action. That is what happened with the previous Government. It was about spin and everything else, but it forgot about the people. Fr. Peter McVerry, for whom many people have great respect, stated recently that from January to October 2015 the number of families in emergency accommodation rose from 401 to 774. This is an increase of 93%. Where are we going? This was last year, when we were here rubbing our hands and the Minister was making announcements all over the place and turning sods and God knows what. During the same time period, the number of children in those families in emergency care rose from 865 to 1,638, which was an increase of 90%. In 2016, when we have all the hoo-hurrah commemorating what went on in 1916, we allowed this to happen under the watch of the previous Government. The people have spoken and have dealt with this.

I listened to the caretaker Minister, Deputy Howlin, who was one of the management team who did not have money for this or for that. He and the Minister, Deputy Michael Noonan, should have called in the banks and told them in some way to stop the cruelty, repossession, torture and terror. People got rich through expelling people from their homes, terrorising them in their homes and evictions. They are the vulture companies which exploited the entire situation, the repossession companies, the county registrars and county sheriffs. It is disgusting behaviour and this industry has become very lucrative with those involved resorting to all types of tactics. I attended some of the scenes myself. They employed force, with balaclavas and dogs crawling across fields to terrorise widow women and other people. This went on under the previous Government's watch and is still going on. It is going on now, which is why it is so important to have a Government soon because there is a free for all with no one to stop them or say anything to them. It has become a very lucrative business and industry. I call it blood money because it is nothing short of it. It is disgusting and depraved activity, preying on ordinary people who housed themselves and who might have invested a few bob in their businesses. Some of them had their homes paid for and mortgage dealt with, but remortgaged a small amount to keep a business afloat in challenging times. This is the thanks they are getting from the banks which the country bailed out and for which the people are paying. We must rein in the banks and NAMA. Whatever new Government is there must deal with this, otherwise it will be banished as well.

I agree wholeheartedly with the former Minister of State, Deputy O'Dowd. Town centres are dying. On O'Connell Street in Clonmel three families live above their business premises. I would go one step further in the regeneration scheme Deputy O'Dowd mentioned. Make town

centres alive again with people living in them, and encourage people who have shops closed five or ten years to reconvert them to living accommodation without huge punitive charges. We would gain two things. We would have accommodation for some of the people mentioned, including families and single people, and we would regenerate town centres. It is not rocket science. The voluntary housing sector has a huge role to play. The Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government had a dedicated section to deal with it, but An Bord Snip decided to get rid of it. It was too efficient. It was a dedicated section to deal with voluntary groups, of which I am a member. Now, one must deal with seven aspects of the Department in various towns throughout the country. It is a closed shop. We have too much talk and too much paper being passed and no houses being built.

Recently I spoke to a businessman in Clonmel who wanted to convert his failed business into apartments. He went to the bank manager with his accountant but was told it would not be viable to do it because of the charges for the change of use, charges for parking spaces, the punitive charges by local authorities and the Government and VAT. A total of 62% of the investment would be in charges and it would not be viable so he could not get a bank loan. We need to look at these crippling situations of bureaucracy. We also need to help our local authorities. They are no longer fit for purpose to deliver housing. It is a sad indictment that in the 1950s and 1960s we could build thousands of houses every year, but last year we only had five built in County Tipperary, from where the Minister with responsibility for the environment comes. This tells us what type of a Minister he was. Never mind the rest of the country, because if he could not do it at home he could not do it anywhere else. He would rather speak about it, spin it and hype it. When all-party committees went to him he insulted half of the members with arrogance and by not listening to them. The voluntary sector can play a huge role here and we need to think outside the box and rein in the likes of Carlyle investments, which are terrorising people and causing suicides in my county and elsewhere throughout the country. We need to rein in the vile vulture funds before we do anything else.

Deputy Sean Fleming: I appreciate the opportunity to speak in the debate. There has been much talk about the serious state of the housing situation in Ireland and homelessness. I have a very simple view on this matter. This is a national emergency and anyone who thinks otherwise is only skirting around the edges. We can talk all day about all of the bits and pieces causing the problem, but until we face up to the reality that we have a national emergency on our hands we will not deal with it adequately.

A few years ago in difficult times when the economy was in a very tightened economic situation our Government and the most recent Government brought in various legislation called Financial Emergency Measures in the Public Interest Acts. The time has now come for the same serious approach to be taken to the housing situation. We need new legislation in the form of the financial emergency measures in the public interest housing Bill 2016. This is what is necessary and anything less is not adequate.

We can talk about all the various issues and I will put very simply some of the issues that must be grasped which have not been dealt with. On my way home this evening I could call to Portlaoise and meet 300 people looking for social housing, but within an hour I could identify 300 vacant houses. Before I got to Portlaoise I could stop in Monasterevin where I could identify 70 people looking for social housing and 70 vacant houses. I could call to Portarlinton and identify 100 people on the housing list and at the same time identify 100 vacant houses. In some areas there is a shortage of houses, but in those parts of the country where there are vacant houses the State has failed to match them with the people who require social housing. It makes

22 March 2016

no sense in some of these areas to have people homeless when there are hundreds of vacant houses. It became very clear to me when I was canvassing last July, August and September and met so many people on the housing list and then turned a corner and saw 20 empty housing units.

There is a variety of reasons they are empty, many of which have to do with the hold the financial institutions have on the housing market. We know they are not letting people get onto the property ladder. The former Governor of the Central Bank, Professor Honohan, had proposals to make it very difficult for people to overborrow, but he did not take into account how people could put together a deposit if they are paying rent which is more than a mortgage repayment would be. It is illogical. The banks are delaying the sales of houses because they know prices are increasing. I know of houses which could have been sold last year at a €20,000 profit, but people are holding on to them for an increased profit. We need financial emergency measures in the public interest housing legislation to deal with this emergency.

Deputy Jack Chambers: Today, many residents from Tyrrelstown in my constituency of Dublin West protested outside the Dáil and sat in the Gallery. They fear they will be the next families to lose their homes. Last night, I attended a public meeting with Deputies and councillors from other parties in the constituency and canvassed many of the homes involved. The people there fear they will be the next homeless statistic.

According to the statistics, more than 1,800 families were homeless at the beginning of this year. When the children's rights referendum passed in November 2012, the Taoiseach stated it would help make childhood a good, secure and loving space for all our children. This is an incredible claim when we examine the rapidly deteriorating situation today, because homeless children are being denied a proper childhood. I have been contacted by teachers in schools throughout Dublin West, from where two out of every five homeless families come, who tell me of the devastating impact losing a family home has on a child's ability to learn and interact with other pupils.

We must increase rent supplement and end the banks' veto powers on dealing with arrears cases. I heard the Tánaiste earlier trying to defend her stubborn approach to rent supplement. It has driven the wave of homelessness in this country over the last couple of years and she should be ashamed of her legacy in what she called the Department of Social Protection. We must ensure that NAMA, one of the biggest asset management companies in Europe, delivers more social housing to finally become part of the solution to the housing crisis. A number of options now need to be looked at in the market.

This Government allowed all the assets and distressed property loan books to be swallowed up by big fund buyers. It stopped individuals participating, not allowing any bite-sized opportunities. I see that in my own constituency, with portfolios coming up for sale that have hundreds of apartments in them, as well as big commercial assets. The tenants or housing co-operatives cannot participate and are at the mercy of the buyer, whether that is a long-term investor or those just out to make a turn on a distressed book. That is not a sustainable way to run our housing policy.

These tenants, too, may get swallowed up by big funds, as is happening in Tyrrelstown. This swallowing-up approach to sales by NAMA needs to be stopped. Many of the initiatives proposed by my own party, Fianna Fáil, are eminently achievable and will undo much of the damage caused by five years of inactivity, apathy and incompetence by the outgoing Govern-

ment in this area. Proper implementation of a real plan can end the wave of homelessness hitting this city and this country, so that the fear and uncertainty facing residents like those in Tyrrellstown do not become commonplace.

An Ceann Comhairle: I congratulate Deputy Chambers on his maiden speech. This will certainly not be Deputy Durkan's maiden contribution in this house.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: I will take this opportunity to congratulate the Ceann Comhairle on his election to that particular office. I have no doubt that he will do the job in a way that will be exemplary and I look forward to working with him.

The housing situation is exactly as has been described on all sides of the House. The problem is that everybody seems to be able to attribute it to a particular issue. I want to point out one thing: this issue did not arise in the past five years. It did not even arise in the past ten years. The housing situation we now face in this country has its origins about 19 years ago, when the Government of the day decided to shift the responsibility from the local authorities and hand it over to the private rental sector to provide housing for the people who would ordinarily be on the local authority housing list. It was deemed to be a great idea. At the same time, the notion was fed into the public arena that really Irish people should not be so preoccupied with home ownership, that we should be more continental in our approach and that the way of the future was to rent a property instead of the conventional way of building local authority houses and offering loans to people who could buy their own houses.

As the Ceann Comhairle knows, in County Kildare we have approximately 6,500 people on the list. It must be more than that, actually, because there were 6,500 people on the list five years ago. I cannot understand how they have remained that way ever since and I know they have not. We have gone away completely from the conventional methods that were proven to be helpful in dealing with the housing situation. The local authority loans are long since gone. When a person who was on a local authority housing list was eligible or below a certain income level, they could apply for a local authority loan. Young civil servants, teachers, nurses and gardaí always got local authority loans. Where are they gone now? They are finished; there are no loans available. The formula used to be two and a half times a person's income, as the Ceann Comhairle might remember.

When the shift took place 20 years ago, property prices went mad, to such an extent that nobody could buy a house anymore except by borrowing multiples of what they would be entitled to on the basis of previous criteria. It was a sad thing and it did irreparable damage. It hugely increased the price of property and created a situation where people had to pay up to 50% of their available income to pay their mortgage. That is crazy stuff. That is how we have arrived at the situation we are in now, where banks and lending agencies are moving on people. It is utterly ridiculous. The Ceann Comhairle and I have seen situations where people were awarded loans that we would not have granted them under any circumstances. It was just ridiculous. All of these people are now being forced onto the housing list; the local authority is no longer building and has not done so for a number of years.

Incidentally, I and everybody else in this House who was in the business at the time managed to rescue people who were homeless right in the middle of the boom. There were so many houses around at the time that it was possible to rejig the situation and help them out, but plenty of people were homeless at that time and the situation has got much worse. I would agree entirely with those who say we need to focus on the housing issue in a more serious way than we

have done. Remember, the money has been provided; almost €4 billion has been provided by the last Government. It is already in place and is there for drawing down by the local authorities, but it is not possible to do it in the time in which we would like to see it done.

Some kind of an emergency must be declared in order to try to introduce legislation that will bring about a rapid improvement of the situation within three to six months. If that does not happen, I can say from my experience of this business that we will see a further escalation in the homelessness situation. It does not matter what Government is in power – unless something is done to focus on that particular issue in the shortest possible time, the situation will get immeasurably worse. When it does, all of politics, and all colours and shades in this House, will suffer. For my tuppence worth in this situation, I would strongly urge that whoever is in government would recognise the need to focus immediately on introducing emergency legislation. This has been done in other countries and it was done after the Second World War. It had to be done in an emergency situation. It can be done now, it just requires us to take the matter by the scruff of the neck and introduce the necessary legislation.

An Ceann Comhairle: We move to Deputies Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire and John Brady. Both are making their inaugural address and are very welcome.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Comhghairdeas leat, a Cheann Comhairle, faoin ról nua. Ar an gcéad dul síos, gabhaim buíochas le muintir Chorcaigh Theas-Lár as an deis a thabhairt dom bheith mar ionadaí acu. Two and a half minutes is not much time by any measure, but particularly to try to do justice to many of the complaints, fears, concerns and frustrations on the issue of housing that my constituents sent me here to convey.

Rent is rising faster in Cork than in Dublin now agus feicimid go bhfuil lucht caipitil ag baint leasa as sin anois, mar shampla, in Eden sa Charraig Dhubh agus in áiteanna eile go luath. There are inadequate protections for tenants, which requires urgent legislation to stop families being thrown out on our streets. The increasing numbers on our streets, sleeping rough and the utterly unacceptable number of people living in hostels, hotels and Travelodges by way of supposedly emergency accommodation is an ongoing scandal.

There are aspects of the housing crisis that are not being discussed, difficult though that may be to believe. The housing crisis does not stop at the front door. The lack of social housing is causing overcrowding on an outrageous level, with seven and eight-person households in two-bedroom flats. It is now so commonplace to have three generations under the one roof as to be unremarkable. We hear a lot about bad landlords, but the biggest landlord in Ireland is the State and it is failing. There are thousands of households living in conditions of the most brutal damp and cold. They have blackened, wet walls, rotting doors hanging from hinges, and roofs and eaves practically heaving with neglect, letting water into the house. There are houses and flats that have seen barely any significant maintenance for 30 or 40 years. Even among those who are housed, there is squalor. There is no question in my mind that this is affecting the health and well-being of thousands of families in social housing in a very serious way, particularly the elderly, the very young and those with respiratory diseases. This is a direct result of the massive cuts to funding to local government for over ten years now. Níl an Rialtas seo tar éis na ceachtanna a fhoghlaim ón stair. Tá an ghéarchéim thithíochta mar thoradh ar an easpa thithíocht sóisialta. The Government's housing policy has cut Part V to ribbons and it is over-reliant on the private rental sector to meet social housing need. Only a substantial housing building programme will deliver a solution to our crisis and the Government's programme is a triumph of spin over substance.

Deputy John Brady: Homelessness is not just a blight on those left behind by society due to substance abuse, mental illness or tragic personal loss. For years legislators have failed these people, leaving the responsibility of care in the hands of hard-pressed volunteer organisations whose resources were cut in the fire storm of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Labour austerity.

Today homelessness affects thousands of children and their parents, many of whom are in full-time employment but have been forced onto the streets due to the spiralling uncontrolled rents and a catalogue of pitiful policy failures. One hundred years on from the Easter Rising of 1916, there are nearly 6,000 people in emergency accommodation of whom 1,830 of them are children. In my own constituency of Wicklow-East Carlow, 146 families, including 240 children, presented as homeless in 2015. This is certainly not the republic envisaged by the men and women of 1916.

In the Circuit Court in Wicklow, yesterday 68 families faced eviction from their homes by financial institutions that we bailed out to the tune of €64 million, and in some cases we actually own. They feel helpless in the hands of a system that treats them as no more than a statistic, a system which sees them as an inconvenience and an embarrassing reminder of the incompetence of a Government which put banks, financiers, developers and corporations ahead of the people they are sworn to represent. The situation in which these families and thousands more like them across the country find themselves is a direct and shocking consequence of Government ignorance, Government failure and Government indifference.

All of this has been described as a national emergency, a national crisis. This is true, but let nobody be under any illusion. It is a damn shame on this House and on all those who occupied the Government benches over the past ten years. Nero fiddled while Rome burned but the Minister and his colleagues in government have gone one step further by throwing petrol on the flames.

The implementation of the Land and Conveyancing Law Reform Act 2013 is now facilitating the repossession of family homes forcing ever more families onto the streets. The priority of this caretaker Government and whatever new Government is put in place should be to protect the family home and stop more families becoming statistics. This can only be done by reforming the Land and Conveyancing Law Reform Act 2013, as was proposed by Sinn Féin in 2014.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Brady's contribution is appreciated. Deputy Broughan has five minutes.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: I would like to share time with Deputy Joan Collins, if that is agreeable to the House.

An Ceann Comhairle: Agreed.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: I listened carefully today to the speeches of the Minister and the Taoiseach on housing. I note the Taoiseach talked about this new housing initiative and dramatic moves that we could take. Of course, it has to be asked why we did not end homelessness in the 31st Dáil and why we did not proceed with fairly dramatic attempts to increase the supply of social housing. That is an unanswerable question. It is related to the disastrous economic policies which were followed over the past five years by the Fine Gael-Labour Government.

I proposed a Department of housing 18 or 20 years ago because in some respects we have

22 March 2016

always had some kind of housing crisis. We have always been short of social housing, particularly in the Dublin area, especially after the Ahern-Haughey Administrations stopped the production of large-scale social housing and left us with the kind of situation which emerged from the crash of 2008 where we simply did not have the supply of housing coming forward, and we have never recovered that. The very least we need is a Department of housing.

Many Deputies referred to the most recent data from the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, with 500 families and 1,600 children in this city living in hotel rooms tonight under all kinds of difficult circumstances. It is intolerable. The Minister had the chance on many occasions to simply end homelessness by taking the necessary dramatic steps which he refused to take. It is very much a Dublin-oriented situation. This House has failed the people of Dublin, particularly those who have depended on social housing, and has simply ignored the needs of this region.

I have called repeatedly, as the Minister will be aware, for us to have FEMPI-type legislation in this area. As the Ceann Comhairle will be aware, we were prepared to come in here at all hours in the 30th Dáil to introduce all kinds of legislation to shore up banks, to protect banks, to protect bottom lines, to reward bondholders, etc., all of which I opposed consistently all the way through. The Minister had the opportunity, as the Taoiseach had, to have taken similar steps in housing, but the Minister has refused to do so. The Minister could have taken over all empty NAMA properties and all hoarded building land, and made those properties available while starting an immediate large building programme.

We heard earlier today some criticism of large social housing estates in the Dublin region. It has to be said though that, generally speaking, until we had very bad architecture in the 1980s those estates worked very well. In fact, they are the backbone of my constituency. They are the homes of the people who sent me and the other four Deputies of Dublin Bay North to this House. We need to build like that again. We need, in my constituency alone, two or three parishes of social housing amounting to 10,000 or 15,000 units. We need it yesterday but, unfortunately, the outgoing Minister has not delivered in that regard.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank Deputy Broughan. He is leaving very little time for his colleague, Deputy Joan Collins, but she has the floor.

Deputy Thomas P. Broughan: Sorry.

Deputy Joan Collins: As I do not have too much time, I will cut to the chase. We know exactly the reason this debate is being held today in the Dáil. We know that the housing crisis continued under the Minister's watch although I would agree entirely that this started under the Government of Fianna Fáil. It is the result of a neoliberal politics which depended on developers to build homes and that proved unsustainable.

Everybody has been getting these e-mails from Focus Ireland, Simon and the housing and homeless campaign. They all are saying the same things they were saying a year and a half ago, that we need to call a housing emergency. That must be called today. I would like to hear the Minister say at the end of this debate that we have a national emergency, that we will bring in necessary emergency legislation on housing and that we will sit down immediately with the credit unions to talk to them about the €3 billion to €5 billion they are prepared to put into local authority housing. The Minister should not shake his head. There is €5 billion sitting there waiting to be handed to the Government to do this.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I would take it anytime.

Deputy Joan Collins: Where there is a will there is a way. If the Minister wanted to, he would have sorted that out and that funding would have been invested in local authority housing. It is outrageous. People on the doorsteps are saying they cannot understand a Government that is facing a housing crisis and will not deal with this. The Minister has stated he has all the money to build the housing but we have not seen local authority housing built.

We asked the Minister to bring in greater security of tenure for tenants. We have asked him to put a cap on the rents. We have asked him to sell rented accommodation with sitting tenants. We have asked him to ensure the banks bring in more mortgage-to-rent. Only 147 mortgages that are in distress have been brought into the mortgage-to-rent scheme.

This is a disaster. If there was a tsunami here a year and a half ago or three years ago, we would be looking at emergency funding being put in to rebuild society. We need our society rebuilt and an emergency needs to be called from today. I want to hear the Minister being more positive when he responds to the debate.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: Ar an gcéad dul síos, déanaim comhghairdeas leatsa, a Cheann Comhairle, ar do phost nua. Tá súil agam go mbeidh téarma an-mhaith agat. Tá an-áthas orm a bheith anseo arís do mo dhara théarma agus táim fíorbhuíoch de mhuintir Chiarraí as ucht an seans a thabhairt dom leanúint ar aghaidh le mo chuid oibre.

This is a positive discussion today as we hear from all sides of the House on how we can best tackle this issue. It is important that we would listen to each other, which is something that certainly does not happen enough in this House. Some positive suggestions were made. I also remind Deputies that while it is all well and good to come here and throw stones at the Government for not doing enough, everybody here has an obligation, given that they have the opportunity to try to govern, have an input and do what they can for their constituents. It is not good enough for people to come to the House, criticise repeatedly and then run away and abdicate responsibility at the first opportunity to govern. I do not understand the mindset. It is letting down one's constituents. We all have a responsibility to do what we can here, to do our best, and to contribute to the Government. Those who choose not to do it should bear in mind, next time they are criticising, that they are choosing not to participate in government.

A huge number of measures must be taken to address the problem. An extension of the 9% VAT rate to residential construction activity would help, as a cog in what must be a very large wheel. In my constituency, Kerry, I have seen how much the 9% VAT rate has helped as a stimulus to labour-intensive jobs, particularly in the tourist industry. There is a major opportunity for us to apply it to construction as a stimulus to increase supply and reduce the cost of housing. It would also create much employment. It must be examined. I have been calling for it over several years, and the Department of Finance responds that it could lead to tax avoidance. However, given that it is very difficult to avoid taxation, it is not a good enough answer. There is leeway to do it, and it must be considered.

Last November, I proposed a rental renovation scheme in writing to the Department. It is similar to Deputy Fergus O'Dowd's suggestion earlier today. I will give an example. Say John's parents passed away several years ago and the house they left him is in a state of disrepair and needs an investment of €15,000 to €20,000 to bring it up to a habitable standard. Because John cannot afford to do it, and cannot get a bank loan, a housing unit is sitting idle

and rotting. A family nearby is threatened with homelessness because they cannot afford their rent and the council has identified that there is a housing need in the area. John goes to the council, which confirms this, and he gets a contractor to estimate the cost of bringing the house up to a habitable standard. The council would provide grant aid to do so, on the basis that John will make the house available to the council for a certain duration in lieu of rent, after which he would receive rent for it. There are thousands of units all over rural and urban Ireland that would fit this category, including old shop units in town centres that could be converted to residential use. It would benefit the tenant, who would have secure, affordable accommodation. It would benefit the owner, given that what was a rotting house would be made habitable and, in a few years' time, would start generating rent. It would benefit the localities because what was a derelict house would look well. It would benefit builders by creating employment. It would benefit the State and local authorities, which would house people on their housing lists. The Department must examine this proposal. Perhaps it is not perfect and needs to be tweaked. There is room for such a scheme as a cog in a very large wheel of measures.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Katherine Zappone. You are very welcome to the Lower House.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: Thank you, a Cheann Comhairle, and congratulations on your election. Thank you for chairing the House without fear or favour, as you promised.

Dublin South-West, like many places in Ireland, suffers from a chronic shortage of social and affordable housing. A total of 291 people are registered as homeless with South Dublin County Council, not including the 64 families living in temporary accommodation or the 81 families in hotels. While it is not always apparent in statistics, many Deputies have identified the level of hidden homelessness of those who, while they have a roof over their heads, are living in overcrowded and cramped conditions. Like other Deputies, I have met such families. I recently met a family in Tallaght who have three generations, ten people, living in a small three-bedroom home. Many families and households are forced to accommodate extended family members or friends, turning their sitting rooms into living accommodation. One constituent told me that a neighbour and her child were moving from sofa to sofa to sofa, staying with anyone who would accommodate them.

I strongly agree that we need a whole-Parliament approach and a plan to address the crisis in housing supply and family homelessness, and that we need to move swiftly towards forming a functioning Government to provide immediate medium- and long-term solutions. All of us, with the Government or as part of the Government, can come together to end family homelessness and support all our citizens in securing a home for themselves. There is no reason we cannot do it if our political will is rooted in our soul.

One of the most urgent issues we must address is the protection of tenants' rights in cases in which lenders, often banks owned by the Irish people, are repossessing buy-to-let landlords. A lack of legal clarity in this area allows unscrupulous receivers to evict tenants with only days to find another home. This growing phenomenon may account for up to half of the recent cases of family homelessness. According to Focus Ireland, such evictions have become the single largest contributor to family homelessness, and the situation must be addressed without delay. We must raise rent supplement levels in a systematic, policy-based way rather than a case-by-case basis to enable people to access housing in the private sector. Now that we have introduced the 24-month rent freeze legislation, the argument that this would raise overall rents is no longer valid.

It is equally important that we urgently address the widespread practice of landlords of rent supplement recipients demanding top-up payments from their tenants. This must be terminated by creating a more serious offence for landlords who accept top-ups, rather than penalising the rent supplement recipient, who is in a more vulnerable situation.

Other Deputies have referred to the over-reliance on the private sector for social housing. Social housing delivery is a key factor in the ongoing crisis. The commitment of successive Governments to neoliberal dogma resulted in an inability to recognise the flawed logic that the private sector would deliver a sufficient quantity of social housing. This model has, instead, produced the lowest supply when the needs for social housing are the highest. We need, instead, a reliable stream of social and affordable housing constructed with State leadership and involvement.

We need a State agency to drive solutions on housing supply. Although NAMA has been suggested for this role, it does not have the expertise and skills needed, and we need to examine other options. One of the issues a State agency should examine is the cost of building. Many other Deputies have referred to it, as did the Minister in his remarks. It has been dubbed the single biggest barrier to housing supply. If this barrier could be reduced or removed, we would be a long way down the path towards resolving the housing shortage.

The Central Bank rules will effectively cap house prices, which is a principle we must defend to avoid yet another housing bubble. However, if we cap prices, we must also consider capping the cost of building. If the balance between cost and profits is not in line, it will lead to the end of our construction industry.

We must reform the private rental sector. My last Seanad Bill was an effort to do so, and I look forward to resurrecting it in some form in order to address the terms of renting for tenants and landlords in the private sector. The recent highlighting of the actions of vulture funds demonstrates how vital it is that current landlords remain in the sector and, equally important, that more landlords enter the market, but only those who respect the rights of tenants to have security of tenure and certainty of rent in their homes.

One of the most fundamental solutions, which could cement and underpin all other solutions, is the inclusion in our Constitution of the right to housing, accommodation or shelter. While it might include a public debate on Article 43, to which the Minister referred, on the right to property, I am talking about inserting a new article rather than amending an existing one.

7 o'clock

For a people and a nation whose culture has been shaped by the seanfhocal, that we live in one another's shelter, I think in 2016 a constitutional referendum for a right to a home would demonstrate a way to tap into our ethical fibre to solve the homelessness and shelterlessness crisis.

An Ceann Comhairle: I am due to call the Minister, Deputy Kelly, at 7.10 p.m., but if I do so I will leave two Deputies unable to contribute to this debate. I know the Deputies in question have been here for quite some time. I propose that with the agreement of the Minister and the willingness of the House, we will continue for an extra ten minutes to accommodate every Deputy who has offered. We are taking a bit of a liberty in so doing, but I take it that the House is in agreement with the proposal. Is that agreed? Agreed. I ask the remaining speakers to stay strictly within the time limits. The next two speakers, Deputies Funchion and Quinlivan, are

making their maiden contributions. They are very welcome.

Deputy Kathleen Funchion: I am glad to get an opportunity to speak on such an important issue for the constituency of Carlow-Kilkenny. I was first elected to local government in 2009. In my time in local and national politics, housing has been one of the single biggest issues facing my constituency. It is not surprising that there is a housing crisis, given that little social housing has been constructed in recent years and that those in mortgage distress have been abandoned by the Government and its predecessors. Some 26 social houses have been constructed in Kilkenny since 2009 even though there are 2,800 people on the housing list in the county. The three emergency accommodation facilities in the county are all full at present and have waiting lists. These statistics do not take account of the number of families sleeping in overcrowded situations on sitting room floors or in unsuitable accommodation. There is just one emergency facility in Carlow. It is a facility for men. There is no emergency accommodation facility for women.

Many Deputies have offered stories of people who are facing eviction or are living in bed and breakfasts or hotels. We have to remember that real people, who are living with the daily realities of life in hotel rooms with their children, are behind all the stories we hear. I do not think we should forget that these people did not envisage this type of life for them and their families. They are living with a sense of hopelessness as they wonder how this has become the reality of their lives in 2016. It is clear that people have been failed miserably by the Government. Anyone in these circumstances who is listening to this debate is looking for solutions and answers. There is a responsibility on us to provide them. When Sinn Féin published its proposals regarding the housing and homelessness crisis last week, it emphasised the need for long-term and short-term approaches to it. One does not need much commonsense to realise that we need to start building social housing as part of a long-term approach. We also need to come up with short-term solutions to assist those who are dealing with the realities of bed and breakfast and hotel environments. Last week, my party made the case for a complete overhaul of the rent supplement scheme in conjunction with rent regulation measures. I will conclude by emphasising that coming up with constructive solutions and ensuring they are implemented should be a key element of a debate such as this one. Such an approach would offer real hope to families that are facing into another night in hotels and bed and breakfasts.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: It would be remiss of me to speak without congratulating my local GAA team, Na Piarasigh, on its recent victory in the all-Ireland senior club hurling final. I have to mention that Na Piarasigh is the first Limerick team to achieve such a victory.

Deputy Alan Kelly: That needs to be recorded.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: As a newly elected Deputy, I regret that today's discussion on housing and homelessness will not lead to any action. Nobody who is homeless tonight will get a house on foot of what we have been doing in this House today. I agree with Deputy O'Brien's suggestion that the Dáil should sit for three days this week, but that is not happening, unfortunately.

The Moyross area of my constituency of Limerick City was once distinguished for having some of the finest public housing in the State in terms of design, comfort and overall quality. The neighbouring area of Ballynanty, where I was born and raised, was another area well known for good housing and a strong sense of community. Unfortunately, many of the houses in Moyross have been demolished as part of the so-called Limerick regeneration programme.

Incidentally, and by way of tragic irony, this programme has been responsible for the demolition of many more houses than it has built. I cite these examples as testimony of the fact that in much poorer times, this State was able to provide houses and homes for most of its citizens. In years gone by, the State had a clear policy of providing public housing. The rate of homelessness in this State is truly appalling. We know many of those affected by this crisis because we grew up with them or went to school with them. Some of them are friends of ours. The failure of the State to provide adequate housing for its people has been accompanied by a failure to resource homelessness services properly. As a result, more and more people are living on our streets or wherever they can find shelter. All of this is happening in a supposedly modern and civilised European democracy.

The dire situation around housing and homelessness must be one of the major priorities of this Dáil and any incoming Government. The need to begin building houses on a scale that is adequate to meet the crisis that exists is of crucial importance. My party has published properly researched and costed proposals to deal with this crisis. Our policy could deliver 100,000 new social and affordable houses, deliver security and certainty for tenants and support home owners and buyers. All of us should be open to serious suggestions on how to deal with this crisis. In this context, I believe the recent offer made by the Irish League of Credit Unions to establish a housing fund of more than €5 billion is worthy of serious consideration. There has been an over-reliance on the private sector to provide housing on the scale needed. This has resulted in the State almost retiring from the direct provision of housing. This ideologically-driven approach has proved disastrous. It has failed to provide the required amount of housing and has driven up prices in the private rental sector to an extent that leaves many people unable to avail of this option. The housing and homelessness crisis is nothing short of a national scandal. If we fail to tackle it as public representatives, and if the current charade of political posturing for short-term gain continues, we will do a grave disservice to those who have placed their trust in us.

Deputy John Paul Phelan: I will try to keep my contribution as close to five minutes as I can. I welcome most of the speeches I have heard so far in this evening's debate. I have tried to follow as much of it as possible. There have been some good contributions. I would particularly like to mention my constituency colleague, Deputy Funchion. I congratulate her on her maiden comments in the Dáil Chamber. I have been a bit bemused this evening by the constant harping from Sinn Féin about the issue of three generations of a family living in one house. As someone who grew up in a particularly small house where three generations lived, I resent the implication that there is something wrong with a scenario in which three generations are living under one roof. If people decide to do that-----

Deputy John Brady: It is not by choice.

Deputy John Paul Phelan: I grew up in a particular situation. My parents were not able to build a house until 25 years after they got married. They eventually left our uncle in the house in which we all used to live along with a grand-aunt. It was just that they were not able to afford to do it. I do not think it is the case that there is something automatically wrong with three generations living under the same roof. I think the way it was said was probably accidental.

Deputy John Brady: They are being forced to do it. It is not by choice.

Deputy John Paul Phelan: I was particularly struck by Deputy Wallace's contribution. I rarely agree with him on anything, but I would say that most of what he said tonight was on

the money, if Deputies will pardon the unfortunate expression. He spoke about the importance of the creation of a national investment bank, or some similar initiative, to fund housing. In fairness, some of the Sinn Féin speakers mentioned the offer that has been made by the Irish League of Credit Unions. I agree that we need to do something imaginative to tackle this crisis. When I listened to the contributions made by Fianna Fáil speakers earlier, I thought to myself that they have learned nothing from what has happened over the last ten years. Our economic collapse was intrinsically linked to construction. Housing construction was just a part of that; commercial construction was the biggest part of it.

I listened to new Fianna Fáil Deputies criticising NAMA, which was established by the late Brian Lenihan specifically to be independent of politics and government, and advocating that politics and government should somehow get involved in it. They criticised the independence of the Central Bank in establishing rules for deposits. One thing that struck me during Deputy Wallace's contribution earlier was the support he expressed for those rules. The failure to require a certain level of deposits was a glaring factor in the spiralling house prices that led up to the crisis. It is remarkable that Fianna Fáil Deputies have spoken this evening about pursuing a policy of increasing the Part V requirement to 25% once more.

Deputy Mick Wallace is correct that if this were increased to 20% it would remove the incentive for private developers to get involved in construction again. Many of my friends, who like me are in their mid to late thirties at this stage, are tradespeople and are now living in Australia, New Zealand and Canada because of the collapse in our housing construction market. That the people who drove that sector off the cliff are now putting forward proposals that were part of the problem in the first instance beggars belief. Some of the other proposals put forward tonight are, at least, different. I heard Deputy Griffin's comments in regard to what he called the "rental renovation scheme". I also heard Deputy Sean Fleming's contribution earlier, in which he spoke about vacant units in Portlaoise and Monasterevin. Deputies McGuinness and Funchion would be familiar with Kilkenny and, in particular, the area stretching from Grai-guenamanagh to Callan, including the city. There are very few habitable vacant units there, whether private or public.

Deputy John McGuinness: Deputy Phelan was a very poor candidate.

Deputy John Paul Phelan: There are many vacant units that are not habitable, which some sort of scheme along the lines proposed by Deputy Griffin could make habitable. I can assure Deputy McGuinness that I canvassed as far as I was allowed by my superiors in the party. That type of imaginative proposal would benefit the centre of villages, such as Goresbridge and so on in the Kilkenny constituency which are, to a large extent, derelict.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy must conclude.

Deputy John Paul Phelan: Those buildings should be adapted to ensure that some dent is made in our housing lists.

An Ceann Comhairle: I now invite Deputy Catherine Connolly to make her maiden speech to the House.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Comhghairdeas leat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ní bhfuair mé deis é sin a rá ar an gcéad lá. Guím gach rath ort. An méid sin ráite, ní dóigh liom go mbeidh an tAire sásta leis an méid atá le rá agam, ach feicfidh.

The arrogance of the Minister, Deputy Kelly, the Tánaiste and the Taoiseach is incredible in the context of the serious housing crisis in this country. There is growing consensus here today that it is a national emergency. The Minister's arrogance is matched only by the magnitude of his failure to realise the role he played in the creation of the housing crisis, his failure to learn from his mistakes and his failure and that of the Government to apologise. This housing crisis is not inevitable. Yes, there are problems with land banks and credit facilities but the primary problem is that local authorities have not been funded to build one social house. Taking Galway city as a microcosm, there are 72,000 people in Galway city. There are 15,000 people on the waiting list there, some of them since 2002.

On the eve of St. Patrick's Day there were 268 homeless people in the city of the tribes. The reason for this is the failure since 2009 to build one social house. That the Minister's response to this is not that the Government did not do its job but to blame the local authorities and city managers is appalling. Land was purchased and zoned residential but no money was provided by this Government or the previous Government for the construction of one social house. Inevitably, we have a housing crisis in Galway. On top of that the policy of the Government in terms of the housing assistance payment has copperfastened the most fundamental change in housing policy since the foundation of the State. Up to the introduction of this policy people on the waiting list could be assured that once they did their time they would get social housing. This is no longer the case. The housing assistance payment policy copperfastens the private market.

Deputy David Cullinane: Hear, hear.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: A tenant or housing applicant, on becoming involved in this scheme, is removed from the waiting list and considered to be adequately housed. This was mentioned earlier by one or two Members but it has not been mentioned thus far by anybody from the caretaker Government. There has been a fundamental change in housing policy but this Government has not learned anything, in particular, that the private market cannot provide. Yes, there is an important role for the private market but it cannot provide homes for our people. That is the role of Government through the local authorities.

Members on this side of the House have been accused of ranting and raving, conflating issues and of trading on people's fears. We were also accused more recently of throwing stones. I am here as a rational woman. There is a housing crisis that is being created deliberately as a spin-off from Government policy, which is to rely on the private market. I would be delighted to work with whatever Government is chosen. We must build social housing and do so rapidly.

We need an immediate audit of all local authorities in regard to what land is zoned residential, how quickly social housing can be built and how much money is required to do so. We also need clarity on the land aggregation scheme. Land was purchased at high market values, in respect of which we are now paying a fortune in terms of interest. Some of that land was transferred to Dublin through the land aggregation scheme. There has been no mention of that today. Where is that land? How much was transferred? What did it cost to transfer and when will it be returned to the local authorities?

Deputy John McGuinness: I congratulate Deputy Ó Feargháil on his election as Ceann Comhairle and wish him well in his new role and in his efforts in terms of the reform of how we do our work in this House. I know he will do a fine job.

I also congratulate all of the new Deputies who contributed to the debates today, particularly

my colleague from Kilkenny city, Deputy Funchion. I have no doubt that all of what was said today was said to bring to the attention of Government the crisis that exists in most cities, towns and counties throughout this country. I only hope that there will be a Government response to what was said. I have listened carefully to previous similar debates. It is as if we are speaking in a vacuum here in that we say sincerely what we mean and we ask for action but we get nothing. People looking in at this debate and, I am sure, reports in the media tomorrow on television and radio will be to the effect that this was just another example of a talking shop. If one wanted a good example of why the Dáil needs to be reformed what happened today is a good one. There are 158 Members of the Dáil, all of whom are well paid to do a job. We had several debates squeezed into one day today, with some Deputies who wished to speak not given an opportunity to do so. That is not the way to do business. Whether a caretaker Government or not, respect should be shown for every elected Member in this House.

I commend some of the fine contributions made in the course of today's debates. It was suggested that a new agency be established to deal with the housing crisis. The county councils, county managers and directors of services are all well paid and should know the number of houses that are vacant in their own jurisdictions. It is wrong for Deputy Phelan to say that within the area about which he spoke there are no houses that are vacant. There are houses that have been vacant for seven years.

Deputy John Paul Phelan: I did not say that, I said they were not habitable.

Deputy John McGuinness: Within 100 hundred yards of my office there are two locations within one housing estate on which significant amounts of money was spent by the HSE on the upgrade of houses through Respond. Those houses remain vacant to this day despite the fact that the county manager and the housing officer were made aware of the fact that they are vacant. In Kilkenny city there are at least 12 individuals, intellectually disabled, living in the Aspect Hotel because of the failure of politics and policy in this area. One young lady has been living in that hotel for five months without being offered a local authority house or any other accommodation. During the last two months, there were 52 court cases to evict people and families from their homes. I attended those court cases, where I watched the legal representatives from both sides giving the nod to each other while the judge nodded through the eviction order. That is an absolute disgrace because it simply means people are being thrown out of their homes and on to the waiting lists. The banks, in which we have shares and one of which we own, forced those evictions and if we are going to do anything for those in this situation, we should immediately stop the banks from evicting people. We have moved way past moral hazard, which is the usual nonsense that is thrown around. The banks will have to be told to stop. They are contributing to a crisis to which the Government does not seem to have the answers. Yet, the answer is simple. Houses that require extensions should be extended to keep families in their homes, while vacant houses should be refurbished. They seem to fall through the cracks with county managers and senior executives not wanting to know anything about them. Families should be assisted to remain in their homes. In addition, unfinished estates should be finished to ensure units are coming onto the market, thereby providing a solution to some of the cases on the housing lists.

The debate will be judged on the fine contributions that were made. Those on the housing lists and those who are being chucked out of their houses will look to the Government for solutions. It is about time the Minister made impositions on those who are well paid to work for the salaries they are getting and to bring forward imaginative plans in each local authority area.

Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government (Deputy Alan Kelly): I congratulate the Ceann Comhairle on his elevation.

I thank all Deputies who are present. Some of them have been here for a long period. A total of 11 Members remain, which reflects their priorities and those of others in the context of this debate. I congratulate all those who made contributions, most of which were constructive, and, in particular, those who made their maiden speeches.

Increasing housing supply, both public and private, is a huge challenge. A whole-of-government approach to build at scale brings with it key questions in respect of viability and construction costs, the potential for households to meet asking prices and secure debt and the ability of builders to secure the necessary equity and finance. In terms of meeting the 25,000-units-per-year housing target, we are coming from a low base and progress is slow. However, output increased from 8,000 house completions in 2013 to 11,000 in 2014 and 12,500 in 2015. There is obviously much greater potential with increased numbers of planning permissions approved and more than 17,400 hectares of land available for residential development.

I introduced a range of measures, including: reforming Part V to balance viability and social delivery; retrospectively applying reduced development contributions; implementing a targeted development contribution rebate scheme in Dublin and Cork; introducing a vacant site levy - to which I will return; streamlining the process for strategic development zones, SDZs; and providing for development contribution rebates for residential developments. A view was expressed during the debate to the effect that the planning system needs to be changed to facilitate housing development. There is, however, planning permission for more than 20,000 units in Dublin right now, where planning is not an issue. If we are to be honest and open about this matter, we all need to reflect on that fact. Why are those planning permissions not being used?

The Social Housing Strategy 2020, which was published in November 2014, has returned the State to a central role in the provision of social housing but this has taken time. Earlier this year, I published the first annual social housing output statement, which was independently produced by the Housing Agency, and I ask every Member who has contributed to the debate to read that document. I do not say this for any political purpose but the statement outlines the facts about where we stand. I have also published documents on the number of keys we have provided to people to date this year and in 2015. In addition, the spending allocations for every local authority up to 2017 are on the record. For example, Galway City Council has been given €28 million while Louth County Council has been allocated €57 million. Each local authority has been given a substantial amount.

In 2015, more than 13,000 new social housing units were delivered under the programme, an 86% increase on 2014, with 17,000 to be delivered in 2016. In excess of 450 housing staff were sanctioned for recruitment by local authorities, while 2,700 vacant social housing units were brought back into use. Vacancy rates fell to 1% in Dublin city and funding was approved and sites selected for the construction of 5,000 new social housing units. There was a 10% increase in exits from homelessness year on year and a 46% decrease in the number of rough sleepers on the streets of Dublin following the work of the Homeless Summit. To better protect renters, the Residential Tenancies (Amendment) Act 2015 provides for an increased rent review period from one to two years, increased notice periods for rent reviews and greater protections for both tenants and landlords. This will lead to great stability.

As I said in my opening remarks, homelessness presents great challenges. The root cause

of the increased numbers of families and individuals in homelessness is supply. While we are working on increasing supply, the measures to deal with the immediate effects are identified in the implementation plan on the State's response to homelessness. More than 2,000 families have been brought through homelessness and out the other side. Let us not forget that because good work is being done by many people working in these services. The Alice Leahy Trust and others have raised the issue of relationship breakdown, which is becoming an increasing factor in homelessness. This is not a political issue. The percentage of people getting into difficulty because the level of relationship breakdown is increasing all the time and we all need to reflect on that.

I have taken a number of successful actions including reforms to the private rental sector to provide rent certainty for tenants. Under the tenancy sustainment initiative, the rent supplement normally allowable to be granted to approximately 7,000 clients has been increased. I issued a direction in January 2015, which requires key local authorities to allocate at least 50% of tenancies to homeless and other vulnerable households. The most critical action I initiated was the rapid delivery of more than 500 housing units in Dublin. Anyone who is interested in this issue should visit those units before our next debate, regardless of who is in government.

I would like to respond to some of the comments made by Members. A new national agency to supply housing was proposed. While the idea may have merit, it could take years to develop and those years would be lost to the delivery of housing. Furthermore, the State has the Housing Agency, the Housing Finance Agency, NAMA, the Department and 31 separate local authorities. There has been a massive reorganisation of the housing section within the Department during the past year. I would, therefore, question the proposal on that basis.

Similarly, Sinn Féin's policy proposals have merit in certain instances but I acknowledge the honesty of the party's housing document which they published during the election campaign. On page 15 it states, "The delivery of our plan is slower [...] reflecting [...] the need for planning and design [...] and [...] the restriction of funding [in the first couple of years]". This acknowledges that it takes time to build houses. As has been pointed out in the House repeatedly, homelessness is a serious issue in the North. Unfortunately, there was bad news there again in respect of the first three months of this year.

Many political parties have put forward the idea of appointing a housing Minister. I support the idea in principle. However, such a Minister should have policy oversight over NAMA and influence over taxation and social protection measures. If that did not happen, I would not support such a proposal because I know what it is like to be in that position where one does not control all the levers.

Deputies Cowen and Danny Healy-Rae made an assertion about local authority structures in respect of the drawdown of funding. I have amended those structures and removed much of the red tape such that local authorities now have discretion and also devolved funding in respect of a certain scale of development. I hope Members will welcome that but there must be accountability for the expenditure of public money. I am sure the former Chairman of the Committee of Public Accounts will agree. We cannot accept everything just at the stroke of a pen.

Deputy John McGuinness: The Minister would not allow us to inspect the accounts of local authorities.

Deputy Alan Kelly: We cannot have a situation where there is no analysis of this. We have

to analyse how public money is being spent. However, changes have been made which need time to bed down. Once they are bedded down, they will be shown to have worked.

I acknowledge the support of Deputies from a number of political backgrounds. I ask the House to support what I said in my opening statement. We must look at the Constitution and the need to rebalance the property rights of individuals *vis-à-vis* the common good in order to address the issues we face today. I outlined earlier that I tried to make a number of changes but was hit every time by constitutional issues. If we are going to really deal with issues such as those relating to Tyrrelstown, we may have to examine the Constitution. I am not saying we have all the answers but let us have an open and frank discussion as to whether the common good is proportionately being achieved in view of the constitutional position.

In the context of a number of the points made on Tyrrelstown, Fingal County Council and Prosper Fingal Housing Association have been in contact and have been working on trying to purchase those units. I do not want to get into too much detail on that but the fact is that activity did take place. It is not like they did not try. I want that on the record. The chief executive did that with his own councillors.

Part V should not be increased back to 20%, which would make construction unviable. I am surprised that I find myself in agreement with Deputy Wallace and disagreeing with a number of other Members on that. The issue of credit unions has been raised by a number of people. I met the credit unions and the Department has corresponded with them. The fact is that they have to go through a regulatory process and then come back with their proposals. I am waiting for them to come back to me - or whomever is Minister in the future - with those proposals. I expect the person who is in office to welcome them with open arms. It would be a very positive development. Despite assertions in the House, my Department does not control all the levers in respect of that. We have a regulatory process for a reason.

In case we do not get to debate this again while I am in office, I note that whoever takes over the role will have everything outlined to him or her in respect of our plans, policy changes, targets and what has been provided. An up-to-date report will be given to the Minister and I will even speak to him or her when he or she is in place. I want to see somebody who made a contribution to the debate here today come and take over the role in an honest way and actually put up or shut up. Some people believe they have the policies that will in some way miraculously fix these things in a short period. All of these issues are complex and intertwined and they will take years to address. When I am sitting on the Opposition benches, I will provide constructive criticism where necessary but I know this is not something a magic wand can fix overnight. Somebody is going to find that out when he or she takes this chair in the coming weeks or months.

Message from Seanad

An Ceann Comhairle: Seanad Éireann has passed the Criminal Justice (Spent Convictions and Certain Disclosures) Bill 2012, without amendment.

Written Answers follow Adjournment.

The Dáil adjourned at 7.35 p.m. until 2.30 p.m. on Wednesday, 6 April 2016.