

Appendix A

UI 5. 03.05.2011/13

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I am sure the Taoiseach will join me in commending the emergency services whose members spent last weekend fighting gorse fires that threatened farmland and family homes. I have no doubt their sterling work has saved lives. It is ironic that we see such work being done at a time when the public sector and public servants are under threat from the Taoiseach's Administration.

The Taoiseach mentioned the growth in exports. The Department of Finance, in its latest economic update for the European Commission, states starkly the Government has achieved a growth rate as near to zero as one could get. The unemployment rate is at crisis point, as the Taoiseach concedes, and the domestic economy is in a mess. We still pump expensive money into Anglo Irish Bank. Although the writing is on the wall and it is now very apparent the austerity approach is not working and will not work, the Government refuses to wake up and smell the coffee. The Taoiseach now tells us there will be a jobs initiative. The language being used in respect of the budget is interesting; we are told it will be fiscally neutral, or revenue neutral, and that there will also be counterbalancing measures to give it life. Will the Taoiseach shed some light on this? How does he propose to invest in a serious jobs strategy? What cutbacks or taxation increases does he envisage to facilitate the jobs initiative? If the Taoiseach wishes to talk about confidence and morale in the country, will he at some point consider that the economic strategy of cutbacks and deflation, so ably passed into his hands by the previous Administration, has not worked and will not?

The Taoiseach: I am sure the Deputy will join me in condemning what appears to be deliberate arson attacks by a person or persons unknown in various locations throughout the country. Vegetation was destroyed as a result of the frost last winter and the current dry weather, so with the strong breeze these fires have become quite dangerous. I spoke to the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government and he was in constant touch with the emergency officer in the Department and with the fire officers and emergency services in the counties affected. I commend the work of all involved in the emergency services, particularly on evacuating people to safety from houses in Donegal. I also commend the farming community for lending equipment such as slurry tanks and so forth to assist in putting out the fires. The emergency services also assisted with helicopters. In Ireland, people are accustomed to praying for fine weather or for rain according to the seasons. The rain that is threatened for the weekend might well be a benefit in quenching the fires that continue to burn at higher levels on our mountains.

The jobs initiative will be introduced by the Minister for Finance in the Dáil next Tuesday. It will be fiscally neutral. At a time such as this I would love to be in a position to reel out to the nation the benefit of what could be spent of the €3 billion commitment arising from the promissory note to Anglo Irish Bank and Irish Nationwide Building Society, INBS, for each of the next ten years, but that is the situation we are in. Given that constraint on the Government, the Minister for Finance will introduce a jobs initiative that will be fiscally neutral. He will point out how adjustments and payments can be made for the initiative. I hope that in the ensuing debate Members will dwell on the reality, and not theory, of what we can actually do. I hope the package being put together will bring about an understanding of our current position and the truth of the scale of the problem, but within that the opportunity for providing careers and employment, for taking on new workers and for retraining. All these areas will be covered in the Minister's statement on Tuesday and the House will have the opportunity to debate it in due course.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: In that reality, of course, the decision to pump those billions into Anglo Irish Bank, which the Taoiseach has supported, is not fiscally neutral. The Taoiseach said adjustments will be made. I discern from this that we face further cutbacks in order to give life to this jobs initiative. Can he confirm that? The Taoiseach appears to be hiding behind language. When all the evidence suggests that the deflationary cutback model

has failed and not proved to be a remedy for our unemployment problem, it is ironic that the Taoiseach would seek to introduce a jobs initiative based on that same deflationary approach.

The Taoiseach: I would not get carried away with what the Deputy discerns from my words. A total of €6 billion is being taken out of the economy in 2011 and obviously that is not all about growth and productivity. This is the first Government in the history of the State to initiate a serious, comprehensive analysis of how taxpayers' money is spent. That will conclude in September, when the Government and the people will know the true scale of the analysis. We are pursuing the elimination of waste, duplication and triplication. There has been allocations of money and nobody knows where it went; we are having difficulty tracing it. There are huge amounts in some Departments. All of this must be dealt with as it is important in the context of the Government and the Minister for Finance looking at the bigger picture and examining the efficiency of spending at the conclusion of the review in September.

The situation in which the country finds itself is challenging, but not hopeless. As a public representative I meet people throughout the country and they have a yearning to get through this recession. However, they want the truth about the scale of the reality we face so the Government can sort it out, and they are willing to help in that provided their contribution is recognised and is fair. When the Minister for Finance outlines the jobs initiative on Tuesday, the Government intends to stimulate the indigenous economy so it can complement what is happening in the export sector, where productivity is high and exports have been running a surplus for 21 months. The first semblance of external confidence is in that sector.

It is not the way one would wish to be in Government but that is the challenge we have accepted. We will meet it and overcome it by working with our people to come through this with a much leaner, more efficient process of doing business in Ireland. That message must be conveyed throughout the world for the benefit of everybody, both at home and abroad.

UI 8. 08.06.2011/03

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I am beginning to suspect that the ten years of the bailout agreement will have run out and the Taoiseach will still be coming in here telling us that he will do the business on the interest rate.

Deputy Pat Rabbitte: Deputy McDonald will still be making the same speeches.

An Ceann Comhairle: A supplementary question, please Deputy.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach continually refuses to deal with the issue of burden-sharing, an issue which he was very keen on during the election campaign. Last week, senior unsecured and unguaranteed bondholders in Anglo Irish Bank were paid in full for a bond of €200 million. At the same time, the Government was running around looking for €100 million in respect of the fair deal scheme to give some comfort to the elderly.

An Ceann Comhairle: A supplementary question, please Deputy.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: When will the penny drop with the Taoiseach and his colleagues that the issue of the private debt with which the State has been burdened must be dealt with? He correctly said that other member states act in their national interest.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy is over time.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Well done to the Taoiseach for figuring that out; the challenge for him is to act in the interest of this State and its citizens and so far, he and the Minister for Finance, Deputy Noonan, have abjectly failed in that task.

(Interruptions).

The Taoiseach: The Deputy can be assured that this Government will always act in the national interest and will never be afraid to say so. In that regard, the Minister for Finance has taken action in respect of subordinated bondholders. The Deputy will be aware of court actions, some of which are being withdrawn and some are still proceeding. What was not an area in which we could go before now has the capacity to yield substantial funding and savings in respect of burden-sharing. The Minister for Health has completed his analysis of the difficulties in respect of the fair deal scheme and will report to the House tomorrow.

UI 12. 05.07.2011/19

[continuing sparring b/w Hogan and Collins]

Deputy Phil Hogan: It is none of the Deputy's business how much will be spent because Fianna Fáil is not fielding a candidate.

Deputy Niall Collins: I did not interrupt the Minister. Am I in possession, Sir?

Deputy Paudie Coffey: Deputy Collins is in possession.

Deputy Niall Collins: I thank the Acting Chairman. The Minister voted down our Bill on personal and corporate donations, but will he bring in his own Bill in advance of the presidential election?

Deputy Phil Hogan: The Deputy has a brass neck talking about corporate donations after 14 years.

Deputy Niall Collins: The Minister is fund-raising to beat the band. I read somewhere that the Minister's party leader was over in Cricklewood in London hosting a fund-raiser there recently.

Deputy Phil Hogan: Yes. Is that illegal?

Deputy Niall Collins: He is fund-raising to beat the band. I am curious because he has produced legislation to limit fund-raising, yet at the same time he is merrily fund-raising on his way in advance of the presidential election.

Deputy Phil Hogan: We operate legally.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: The Deputy could teach us how.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Paudie Coffey): Deputies must address the Chair, not each other. Deputy Niall Collins has the floor.

Deputy Phil Hogan: I am sorry, Chairman, but it is hard to listen to that.

Deputy Niall Collins: We would like to see a level playing pitch. Our local authority members throughout the country have been mandated, where they feel they can, to offer a presidential nomination to people who request it. I think that is right. I do not think that local authority members should block anyone from participating in the democratic process.

The boundary commission will be established on similar lines to its predecessor in terms of its membership. Has any consideration been given to producing an interim report or will we just see a final report? As the Minister knows, constituency boundaries have been contentious during the years.

Deputy Phil Hogan: Look at Limerick.

Deputy Niall Collins: This issue has arisen in Leitrim and in my constituency. What was west Limerick is now part of Limerick, while another part went into north Kerry. The same applies to south Offaly, east Carlow and west Waterford which went in with Tipperary.

[...]

We will be opposing the Bill on a number of fronts. We will also be tabling a number of amendments, namely, on the number of Deputies, presidential election spending limits and the production of an interim report.

Deputy John Browne: I thank Deputy Niall Collins for sharing his time. The Bill gives us an opportunity to make some points about the boundary commission as well as commenting on the Minister's address. When it comes to the presidential election, I am sure the Minister will have to support Avril Doyle in my constituency. I am making a play for her here.

Deputy Olivia Mitchell: Thanks very much.

Deputy Phil Hogan: I am delighted to know the Deputy is crossing the floor.

Deputy John Browne: Knowing the former Deputy, Avril Doyle, I am sure she is well able to fight her own cause. [...]

UI 15. 14.07.2011/18

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Ministers have been working with their Departments in recent weeks to complete reviews of all expenditure under their auspices, including in bodies under their aegis. These reports are now being submitted to the steering committee for evaluation and finalised reports will be presented to the economic management council in September. The results of the comprehensive review process will then be brought before Government for consideration and decision in the budget and Estimates process later this year. The question of publication of the reviews will be considered in that context.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: We are pleased the Minister is in the Chamber to take our questions. The broad smile on his face suggests he is equally pleased to be here. [I know from the broad beam on your face that you're equally pleased to be here.] The Minister has made much of the promised spending review which, by definition, will be a comprehensive process. The Minister for Finance, Deputy Michael Noonan, has made clear that not alone will the Government seek to reach the target of €3.6 billion in cutbacks in the next budget, as required under the terms of the bailout deal, but may seek to secure savings of as much as €4 billion. In the interests of transparency, good decision-making and fair play, the Minister must publish the comprehensive spending review in full, as a single document. If the Government is asking people to shoulder the burden, to be patriotic in tolerating austerity and cutbacks, the very least to which the public and the Members of this House are entitled is full and frank information. It is very odd, given that his remit relates to transparency and reform, that the Minister would undertake such a comprehensive procedure only to shield it from the view and consideration of this House and of concerned groups and individuals. The response that it will be sent to a steering committee or sub-committee is not adequate; we take it as read that it will go through those machinations. Why can we not have sight of it in its entirety? It could be published on the Department's website, an innovation of which the Minister is rightly proud.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I thank the Deputy for her positive comments. In terms of transparency, it is constitutionally a matter for the Government to formulate the budget and to present it to the House. All of the documentation will eventually be published, but I want to allow the broadest possible discussion and analysis within the Cabinet. I have opened up the process to ensure it is not the routine salami-slicing affair and I hope significant new approaches will emerge from that. However, all of this must be analysed by Government. It would do damage to the decision-making process if every idea were put out there, even those never likely to be acceptable to Government, until the proper constitutional role of the Government itself to make decisions is determined. After that, all the presentations to my Department will be made available for consideration by Members opposite and others.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Government has indicated that in seeking to reach its target of €4 billion in cutbacks, income tax rates and social welfare payments will not be touched. This raises the question of where the reductions will be targeted, if the money is not coming from those sources. It is unacceptable for the Minister to say that the process of analysing expenditure should not be available to people beyond a narrow grouping around the Cabinet table. The Minister and other Government members have correctly said that it is essential that we consider all options and make the right decisions, driven by the principles of fair play and transparency. If the Minister is serious about that, it is incumbent on him to publish this document in full.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: The Deputy seems to be under something of a misapprehension. The comprehensive spending review is not a document but a process.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It could be presented in that format.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: It could not. It is a process, with submissions coming in and an analysis undertaken of those submissions. There is scope for external inputs. For example, I have sought views from the public and we are receiving many useful proposals from front line workers, people who know how savings and improvements can be made in their own workplace. All of this is feeding into the comprehensive review of expenditure. It is not a document being devised by some mastermind; it is a process. Constitutionally, all of this must be weighed up and decided upon by the elected Government. I want the process to be as open as possible. Ideas will be put out there, no doubt, in the course of that and I look forward to

interaction with the Oireachtas committees in this regard. However, the Government itself must be in a position to make rational decisions on the basis of all of the options available to it.

UI 17. 21.07.2011/22

Deputy Phil Hogan: Deputies Stanley and Catherine Murphy mentioned the roads funding. As stated motor tax and an Exchequer contribution are paid into the local government fund. The fund in the main funds the general purpose needs of local government through the general purpose grant allocations I make to individual local authorities. I also make an allocation to the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport to fund non-national roads. The amendment will now allow the Minister to expend the allocation on all roads and not just local roads or non-national roads and on public transport infrastructure generally. I remind the Deputy that the NRA is already administering the funds on behalf of the Department to the local authorities. The Deputies may not have known that.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I did.

Deputy Phil Hogan: I do not necessarily agree with the fact that it does, I just mention it. I will continue to provide significant general purpose grants to local authorities. It is a matter for the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport to decide how he will allocate his funds. Amendments I am introducing today to give effect to the Aarhus convention will allow considerably more participation, openness and transparency in planning and other matters pertaining to local government. I am sure the Deputies welcome that. Ireland is the only country in the European Union that had not signed up to the Aarhus convention and these amendments will ensure that we do.

On the local government fund, under a protocol arrangement between my Department and the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport an annual allocation is made to the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport will decide how he will allocate that. The amendment will allow the payment from the local government fund to be spread around various other road categories. Those were the principal issues mentioned.

Deputy Catherine Murphy spoke about waste to recovery. If she is against waste to recovery she is against EU law. In addition if she is against waste to recovery, she is in favour of landfill. I would have thought she would have had enough landfill developments in her constituency and would not want any more. She is asking me to ignore waste to recovery and she wants more landfill to ensure that she has more difficulties for her local communities in Naas, Kerdiffstown and everywhere else. She wants the taxpayer to pick up the tab if we are in breach of the EU landfill directive in 2013. If that is what she wants at least she is honest about it, but I am trying to ensure that the taxpayers and her constituents in Kildare North by this process will engage more in waste to recovery rather than in landfill.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: What are we recovering?

Deputy Phil Hogan: The issues we are bringing before the House today are largely technical amendments. Some sections of the Planning and Development Act 2010, which are not commenced, have been subject to a legal interpretation. Particularly regarding quarries, my Department has taken the opportunity to introduce a proper legal text so that when they do become part of a planning application they can be appropriately implemented.

UI 18. 20.09.2011/14

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: If we could have *una voce* that would be helpful.

Deputy Finian McGrath: Where is the Government, Deputy Buttimer?

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Where is Deputy Finian McGrath's part of the Opposition?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I wish to ask the Taoiseach about reports which emerged this morning regarding the entitlement of county managers of local authorities to payments of

€74,000 on retirement. I understand these payments come from the same severance under which the Government gifted €713,000 to Mr. Dermot McCarthy. I do not need to inform the Taoiseach that the people are suffering real hardship, not just in respect of the outworking of the policies of the previous Administration but also at the hands of his Government. I want him to give a guarantee to the people and this House that he will end the practice of making these outrageous payments. I also want him to explain to the House how it is that an outgoing Secretary General has walked away with such a bonanza and how it might be that, on his watch, managers in local authorities are set to do likewise.

The Taoiseach is aware of the position with regard to the unemployment figures. He is also aware that certain children have returned to school without being able to secure the services of special needs assistants and that there are people on hospital trolleys. However, his Administration, which was supposed to be about change and a new beginning, is standing over the outrage to which I refer. Will the Taoiseach explain how it is that Mr. McCarthy walked away with that cash and how it is that he proposes to reward the managers of local authorities in a similar fashion under the same scheme?

The Taoiseach: The terms of reference for the appointment of and the severance package relating to the person to whom the Deputy refers, namely, the former Secretary General at the Department of the Taoiseach who was also Secretary General to the Government, were set by the previous Administration. My term of office began this year. We have made a number of very significant changes already. The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform is committed to reviewing the terms of appointments for persons appointed to senior positions within the public service. I give the Deputy a commitment in that regard. As already stated, the Government has honoured the package put in place for the former Secretary General at my Department which was put in place by the previous Administration. As the Deputy is aware, the Government is also committed to the introduction of a single pension facility. Information relating to that matter will be published shortly and that information will contain further details of very significant reforms in this area.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: There the Taoiseach goes again. It happens on his watch but he is not accountable for it. He knows as well as I that under the pensions legislation it is at the discretion of Government to sign off on added years of service. He knows full well that had he wished to stop that payment to the outgoing Secretary General, he could have done so. The position is the same with regard to the outrageous payments to county and city managers to which I refer. The only conclusion at which we can arrive is that despite the rhetoric from him and his colleagues in Fine Gael and the Labour Party with regard to reform and change, they are, in fact, not serious about these matters. They will hammer clerical officers and ordinary working people. However, like their predecessors, they are unable and unwilling to go after those in the upper echelons of the public and civil service. They have made that abundantly clear. Shame on the Taoiseach and the Government — particularly as they are cooking up massive cutbacks that will hurt ordinary people — for being so coy and duplicitous in respect of the those in the upper echelons of the public and civil service. The Taoiseach should make a commitment to the House that no county or city manager will walk away with a payment of €74,000. He should not sell us that it is Fianna Fáil's fault. The Taoiseach is in charge now.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Hear, hear.

Deputy Michael Noonan: The Deputy still does not recognise the court.

The Taoiseach: It appears the Deputy is still being affected by the comfort she enjoyed during her party's recent meetings in the Shelbourne Hotel. She conveniently forgot to state that the Government changed the terms of reference in respect of the minimum wage and that, even with the constraints of the financial conditions imposed upon it——

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach should answer the question I asked in respect of pensions.

The Taoiseach: ——it reduced the level of PRSI relating to employers in order that they might retain their employees. She seems to forget that the Government reduced the level of VAT which applies to the hospitality sector and thereby provided a direct stimulus which had a positive effect for so many people on the lower end of the salary scale.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The Government paid Mr. Dermot McCarthy over €700,000.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy and her party colleges conveniently forgot all of those matters when, during their recent meetings, they looked out upon the sublimity of St. Stephen's Green.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: What about private pensions?

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The Taoiseach conveniently forgot about the working class when he was signing cheques for €700,000.

(Interruptions).

The Taoiseach: I can confirm that the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform will review the structures and conditions——

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: It is too late.

The Taoiseach: ——that apply to the types of appointments that have been mentioned.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: It is pointless.

The Taoiseach: I repeat that the conditions that apply to the person who has been mentioned were put in place by the previous Government. Commitments were given to that person upon his appointment for that purpose.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Commitments were given to lots of people, not least by the Taoiseach and his party. He can renege on them.

The Taoiseach: I reject completely the assertion that members of the Government suddenly no longer have the interests of the lower paid, the unemployed or those who are struggling at heart. We very much have those interests at heart. We will prove that as we continue to make changes to the disastrous situation into which this country was led by previous Governments.

UI 23. 12.10.2011/06

Deputy Clare Daly: The developments over the weekend at the Franco-German summit have raised the possibility of changes to the treaty and a consequential referendum here. I would like to put on record my disappointment with the Taoiseach's comments over the weekend that such a referendum would not be welcomed. I can fully understand that it would not be welcomed from his perspective because if there was such a referendum there is absolutely no doubt it would be defeated. It would give a chance to the Irish people to voice their opinions on an agenda of selling off State assets and the prospect of cuts of a billion euro to social welfare, which was announced today.

The Taoiseach: That was not announced today. There was conjecture in the newspapers about it. Where was the announcement made?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: He did not deny it.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It was well leaked.

Deputy Clare Daly: Let the jury pass judgment on that when it happens.

The Taoiseach: Where was the announcement made?

Deputy Clare Daly: The prospect is out there. We will wait and see.

Deputy Micheál Martin: *The Irish Times.*

Deputy Clare Daly: We will wait and see whether it materialises.

The Taoiseach: Excuse me, Deputy. When was the announcement made?

Deputy Clare Daly: Is the Taoiseach saying this will not happen?

Deputy Micheál Martin: Really.

The Taoiseach: Where was the announcement made?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Is it not going to happen?

Deputy Clare Daly: It is not going to happen. If the Taoiseach is denying the newspaper reports, I am delighted.

The Taoiseach: On a matter of clarification——

Deputy Clare Daly: Can I make my comments?

The Taoiseach: The Deputy said an announcement was made today.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach knows how it works.

Deputy Clare Daly: Yes. It appeared in the national newspapers——

Deputy Peter Mathews: Who knows where announcements may be?

The Taoiseach: Where was the announcement made?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Can we have some order, please?

Deputy Clare Daly: It appeared in today's national newspapers. If the Taoiseach is denying it, I am delighted.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy is always very clear in her comments. Where was the announcement made?

Deputy Clare Daly: *The Irish Times*.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Can we have some order, please? The Deputy has the floor.

Deputy Clare Daly: I thank the Acting Chairman.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for her clarity.

Deputy Clare Daly: I like the Taoiseach's diversionary tactics, but the reality is——

The Taoiseach: It was the Deputy who mentioned it.

Deputy Clare Daly: ——that people in this country are entitled to a referendum should changes be proposed to the treaty.

I also note the Taoiseach said he would not like to see a two-tier Europe. It is a bit late for that. He may aspire to sit there as an equal, and his chair might be the same size, but he is definitely not a member of the top table. The real divide in the eurozone is not between the big countries and the small countries, although that exists, but between the big transnational business interests and the ordinary people, no matter where they are, who are paying the price through austerity. What we really have here is a crisis of the economic system and a crisis of neoliberalism.

In July, the Taoiseach and the other eurozone leaders told us they had a package that would stabilise the Greek debt crisis and avert a default. Now the Council meeting has been delayed because the troika report is not ready; they have not decided what verdict will come from their visit. Incidentally, it is an important lesson for Irish people to consider what has been foisted on the Greek population through the additional austerity measures: a property tax, more public sector job losses on top of the plan to sack around 150,000 civil servants, draconian wage cuts and so on. These policies can only result in economic and social catastrophe. The Greek economy is contracting. The question the Taoiseach needs to ask is when will the lunacy stop. Austerity is not working in Greece. How will it yield different results in Portugal, Ireland or indeed Belgium, where the newspaper headlines this morning are about the Dexia bank crisis?

The only solution the eurozone leaders are putting forward is more of the same. The six-pack measures are an anti-democratic attempt to ram through, over citizens' heads, more vicious austerity. As other speakers observed, this approach ignores the reality that Greek debt is unsustainable and a default inevitable. Strategists close to the investment banks and other financial interests are clear on that point. The solution is not a recapitalisation which protects bondholders and speculators but rather genuine, democratic accountability and public ownership of the banks which gives citizens a proper say in how resources are invested. They must be invested in people, not profits and speculation.

UI 25. 19.10.2011/19

Deputy Willie O'Dea: Lo and behold what happened last weekend? The Keane report was published. I contacted all the constituents who had been in touch with me. I have a large file on the matter which is growing every week, the Government will be pleased to hear. I informed them about what was in the Keane report. Their reactions ranged from shock, dismay, disbelief and despair that eight months down the road we have a report that gives the banks an *à la carte* set of options. In other words, it suggests to the banks that since they are dealing with this problem all the time, it offers some other options if the banks are so minded to use them but, if they do not wish to use them, that is too bad. This is what the Keane report

amounts to in essence. It took two months and 22 people to do something which a one-man committee could have done in two hours. There is not one suggestion in the Keane report that I have not read in the various commentaries on mortgage arrears written by academics, journalists and so on. Some of the solutions were suggested to me in pubs in Limerick.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: In between rounds no doubt.

Deputy Willie O’Dea: I do not understand the point of the Keane report but I know what the Government’s reaction will involve: the setting up of another committee to kick the can further down the road and make people suffer more. This time it will be a 165 person committee; I presume the Ceann Comhairle is excluded. Now, the 165 man committee consisting of the Dáil is supposed to examine the report and come up with recommendations on the recommendations. When this process has been concluded, the Central Bank must go through it. No doubt it will have more recommendations to put on top of the existing recommendations. Then, Laurel and Hardy — I apologise, the Minister for Finance and the Minister for Justice and Equality — will examine it with their civil servants, amounting to a committee by another name. I presume they will have suggestions to add to the existing suggestions.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: Deputy O’Dea can make a decision at 3 a.m. just like that.

Deputy Willie O’Dea: There have been three reports after eight months. Deputy Lynch was a good person to stand up for the working class people who were struggling to pay their mortgages and to get by from week to week. She has forgotten her base. She went into Government like the rest of the Labour Party.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy has three minutes remaining.

Deputy Willie O’Dea: One word I have heard Ministers use consistently with regard to this problem is “urgent”. The word “urgent” is defined in any dictionary as compelling or requiring immediate action or attention. Apparently, that is not in the Government’s dictionary. All one finds in the Government’s dictionary is “interdepartmental committee” or “no definitive timeline”. The Government’s dictionary appears to be rather small and it is probably the only dictionary in the world where cleanliness is next to godliness. Everyone from former US President, Bill Clinton, the Financial Regulator, Matthew Elderfield, and the Governor of the Central Bank, Patrick Honohan, agree that flushing this problem out of the system is the *sine qua non* for economic recovery in this country. This problem must be tackled sooner or later and we call on the Government to tackle it sooner. If the Government has no interest in people who are suffering and trying to pay their mortgages and it wishes to prolong the agony, let us think of what is required to restore the economy and let us begin to dig ourselves out of the pit, however we got into it.

Since these promises were made, partly on the basis of which the Government was elected last February, several people have lost their homes, but that does not tell the whole story. Other people have moved from one category into another, namely, from the “saveable” category into the “beyond rescue” category. Others have moved into the “rent to mortgage” category where they will be permanent cottiers of the banks.

Deputy John Perry: That is the legacy Fianna Fáil bequeathed us.

Deputy Willie O’Dea: It is clear the Government must act, why put hundreds of thousands of innocent men, women and children through unnecessary suffering? Even if Deputy McGrath’s Bill was accepted by the Government and passed immediately, it would require the establishment of major infrastructure, as would the enactment of a Government Bill. In that case and based on the Government’s timetable, it will be the end of 2013 by the time this mechanism kicks in.

Deputy Ciarán Lynch: The Deputy is dead right. It should have been done two years ago.

Deputy Willie O’Dea: If Deputy Lynch is so concerned about the urgency of addressing the issue, why does he not recommend to his colleagues in government that they accept the Bill in order that we can at least begin the process now, rather than in 12, 14 or 15 months?

Deputy Ciarán Lynch: The previous Government should have acted two years ago.

Deputy Willie O’Dea: Do two wrongs make a right? That is what the Deputy appears to be arguing. The Government does not have a case. It is standing naked before the people it promised to assist. I can show Government Deputies my constituency files which note

people's remarks to me during the general election campaign that they would not vote for me but would vote for Fine Gael or the Labour Party because those parties would help them with their mortgages. The voters have been sadly disappointed.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: We told the truth.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: Unfortunately, all the indications are that people will remain disappointed and mortgages will not be the only issue they will be disappointed about in the next three or four years.

UI 26. 20.10.2011/08

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: For someone living in a house without insurance, it is no laughing matter.

Deputy Brian Hayes: The Deputy has lost it.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: However, to the Minister of State it is all a big joke. We were working day and night on this matter.

Deputy Brian Hayes: The Deputy is making a fool of himself.

Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor: He is wasting time.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: It has taken the Government months and the Minister of State does not have an answer for me today. In the event of the insurance companies now not providing insurance on a risk-management basis to the people, who according to the Minister of State's documentation should get it? What will the Government do next?

Deputy Brian Hayes: I know the Deputy enjoys this type of pantomime performance every so often since his very sharp exit from office and I know he is in difficulty for all kinds of reasons. However, it is not appropriate to turn this into some kind of plaything across the House.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: It is the Minister of State who is doing that.

Deputy Brian Hayes: His Government took no decision on this issue.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: We did. The Minister of State read out the Government decision. He should stop telling lies.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: One voice, please. Allow the Minister of State to continue.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: The Minister of State should stop telling lies.

Deputy Mary Mitchell O'Connor: The House should not accept unparliamentary language.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: The Minister of State is abusing the privilege of this House.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy, please.

UI 37. 14.12.2011/32

Deputy James Bannon: I want to put the record straight on the bin charges. They were introduced by those on the other side of the House when in government.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: They were introduced in 1983 by Fine Gael and Labour.

Deputy James Bannon: The Deputy will have her opportunity to speak. She left the meeting earlier today when we were discussing the septic tank charge.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I left it in good hands.

Deputy James Bannon: It is a bit rich of her to come in here and contradict me today. I note there is a spilt in the Technical Group but that is its own business. I agree with Deputy Mathews that we need more time for serious debate in the House, particularly in these extraordinary times, on issues that concern people. Politics is all about people, engaging with and listening to people and bringing forward policies in their best interest. Politicians are the servants of the people and are elected by them for their betterment.

I am annoyed and disgusted by the decision to guillotine this Bill. I have put this on the public record previously. The guillotine has precluded many Members from making a contribution on Committee Stage.

Deputy John Halligan: Yet the two Deputies are voting for it.

Deputy James Bannon: The same was the case with the Water Services (Amendment) Bill. I do not understand why we rush legislation in this House. While I am part of the Government side, I have made my views known at public parliamentary party meetings etc. This time, the lead-up to Christmas, is a most unfortunate time for dealing with these Bills.

The country is in a serious financial situation and we need to consider the contractual agreements to protect the very rich at the expense of the most vulnerable. I refer to the many politicians who have retired on extraordinarily high pensions. This has angered the public right across the country. We need to tackle the disgraceful pensions and we need legislation to lower them to an affordable level. These are extraordinary times and we need quick and drastic action.

Deputy Stanley referred to the Local Government Act 2000, which created well-paid positions within the public service. When I was honoured and delighted to be elected to Longford County Council in 1985, I worked in the best interest of the people, and I continue to do so as a Deputy. In 1985, there were three responsible people, the county manager, county engineer and county secretary. When one made representations on behalf of constituents at the time, one was told whether something was achievable. Nowadays, the directors of services and such staff are on huge salaries and one must wait months for a decision. This is because one's query goes around in circles beforehand. The concept of better local government has not worked for the betterment of the country.

We need to consider this matter. The Minister of State needs to consider those in mortgage arrears. Some sort of waiver scheme needs to be applied for them and those in the shared ownership scheme. The disabled and most vulnerable——

Deputy Joe Higgins: Voting for amendment No. 2 will be no problem to the Deputy.

Deputy James Bannon: ——have extra costs. While I will not vote against my Government, I plead with the Minister of State to consider the case of people with disabilities because they face hidden costs that able-bodied people do not. Some concessions should be made for them.

Will the owner or the occupier of a house be liable to the tax?

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd: The owner.

Deputy James Bannon: Who will collect it? We hear about agencies and quangos. Will collection be the responsibility of the local authority and will the funding collected go back into local communities to service them? Local authorities do a great amount of good work. Every day when we leave our houses——

Deputy Catherine Murphy: Did the Deputy read the Bill?

Deputy James Bannon: ——we see the extraordinary work done by local authorities. A percentage of the funding, if not all, should go to local authorities.

UI 41. 02.02.2012/03

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I raise the issue of exceptional needs payments, which I understand the Minister for Social Protection is proposing to cut as part of her continuing crusade against families on low incomes. The exceptional needs payment is, by definition, made to families with exceptional needs. Last year, almost 250,000 payments were made under this scheme. Throughout the Government's programme of austerity and its budget cuts, the Minister, Deputy Burton, reassured people that they could always go to their community welfare officers if they found themselves in dire need. Now, however, it seems the Government is intent on cutting even this safety net.

Does the Minister plan to take €8.5 million from some of the poorest families in the State and where does the Tánaiste suggest they go? Does he suggest they should simply present to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul? Is it now Government policy to slash basic entitlements for

those on low incomes, remove safety nets, wash its hands of responsibility and rely on organisations like the Society of St. Vincent de Paul to pick up the pieces?

The Tánaiste: Under the supplementary welfare allowance scheme, the Department of Social Protection may make single payments to help meet once off and exceptional essential expenditure which a person could not reasonably be expected to cover out of his or her weekly income. The Department spent approximately €63 million on these payments last year and made payments to 226,000 individual claimants. Budget 2012 requires savings of €8.5 million in this area. The exceptional needs payment has been in operation for some time and the guidelines covering its application have not been reviewed since 1995. The Minister, Deputy Burton, is changing the guidelines to reflect the current realities.

Among the changes she is making is the way in which exceptional needs payments are applied in different parts of the country. Exceptional needs payments made in some parts of the country do not apply elsewhere. One example which was highlighted in some of today's newspapers relates to payments made for communions and confirmations. Last year, 14,000 payments were made for communions and confirmations, amounting to a total of €3.4 million. The Minister's view, which I share, is that lavish expenditure has in some cases been associated with communions and confirmations. I am aware that many parishes and schools are anxious to get the costs associated with these events somewhat under control. As a result of that, she has decided to limit these payments to €110 in each case as part of the changes she is making to the guidelines. I hope that will help to limit the amount of expenditure in this area.

The application of these payments varies in parts of the country. In Sligo, Leitrim and Donegal, for example, only 25 payments were made last year in respect of communions and confirmations.

Deputy Robert Troy: They probably do not want people to make communion.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Tánaiste explained the issue in terms of changing the guidelines when the Government is introducing cutbacks. Increasingly, these payments are availed of not only by individuals and families on social welfare, but also the working poor and families who are finding it difficult to keep the ship afloat. Regardless of the Tánaiste's views of communion, confirmation or any other religious milestone in a citizen's life, a child has to be dressed for the occasion. He referenced those particular payments but the vast bulk of the exceptional payments relate to cookers, washing machines or energy bills that cannot be paid. There is an astonishing contrast between the €6 million in expenses, some of which is unvouched, that Members of the Dáil claim——

An Ceann Comhairle: Does the Deputy have a supplementary question?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: ——and a Government that proposes to take €8.5 million out of the pockets——

Deputy Noel Coonan: Sinn Féin MPs claim expenses in Westminster without attending.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: ——and off the backs of poor people.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: What about the MPs at Westminster who do not even attend and still take money?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Can I take it that the crusade of the Government and more astonishingly the Labour Party against people on low incomes——

An Ceann Comhairle: We are over time. Can the Deputy ask her supplementary question, please?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: ——is gathering pace? I want the Government to reverse that decision and inform the House——

Deputy Tom Hayes: What decision does the Deputy not want reversed?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: ——that it will not punish——

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: What about the £90,000 sterling a year?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: ——individuals and families who are only barely hanging on. I suggest to the Tánaiste that the people who put him in that seat opposite me——

An Ceann Comhairle: We are over time.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: ——expect him to do likewise.

A Deputy: I think Gerry wants to be an MP.

A Deputy: He could run for Europe.

The Tánaiste: I again repeat for Deputy McDonald what the Government has done for people on low incomes. In this year's budget there was no cut in the basic rates of social welfare for the first time in a number of years. Some 330,000 people on the lowest incomes were taken out of the universal social charge——

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: There was a cut to the contributory pension.

The Tánaiste: I ask the Deputy to listen.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy——

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Government has punished the single parents.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy McDonald was the very person who asked for silence. She should please let the Tánaiste reply.

The Tánaiste: I listened attentively to the Deputy's question and all I ask is that she listens to the reply.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please be seated. There is a time limit on this of one minute.

The Tánaiste: Some 330,000 people on the lowest incomes were taken out of the universal social charge net. The cut to the national minimum wage that was made by the previous Government was reversed by this Government, something Deputy McDonald said we would not do. We are dealing with special needs payments, which are once-off payments made by community welfare officers. The guidelines given to the community welfare officers governing those payments have not been changed since 1995. Even Deputy McDonald will acknowledge that much has changed since 1995. There are people who may be in need of special needs payments for one reason or another but cannot get them because the community welfare officers are operating on the basis of rules that are 17 years old. There are other cases where payments are being made in some parts of the country which I agree might be more appropriate where there is a greater level of need.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It is a cutback.

An Ceann Comhairle: We are over time.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy should not constantly be saying "cutbacks". This is about using the scarce public resources to the best effect to ensure the money we spend on people who are in need goes to those with the greatest need for it. From time to time it is necessary to change the way in which those moneys are spent to ensure they go to those in the greatest need. Nobody can argue that rules that are 17 years old need to be updated to reflect the times in which we are living so that those who are in the greatest need get the benefit from the exceptional needs payments.

UI 42. 09.02.2012/03

Deputy Joan Burton: [...]

This is a retirement scheme which, as I am sure the Deputy will recall, was arranged and introduced by the late Brian Lenihan, with a retirement date of February 2012. What it means in practice is the bringing forward of retirements which would have been due to take place this year and next year of staff close to retirement age. It is different from a special scheme. It merely allows people to take advantage of the additional pension income they will derive as a consequence of taking retirement earlier, as set out by the Deputy's late colleague, Brian Lenihan, when Minister for Finance. Therefore, the Deputy's mystification about it now is a little odd. Perhaps he did not understand it at the time and that is the reason he is now befuddled.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: That is outrageous.

Deputy Michael McGrath: I am looking for information.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please.

Deputy Michael McGrath: Has the Minister got the numbers?

Deputy Joan Burton: In regard to my Department, and I speak for my other colleagues——

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I would say they are happy about that.

Deputy Joan Burton: —of course we have been aware of this scheme, we inherited it from your good selves, and in every Department planning has gone ahead to deal with this transition and transformation, which is also a critical element of the changes which are taking place under the Croke Park agreement. The Taoiseach correctly has asked for this to be formalised by bringing it for discussion before the Cabinet not only last week and on previous occasions but on doing so again next week now we have finally established the numbers. I remind Deputy McGrath that in the arrangements his party left us there was no requirement for advance indication of people's arrangements.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The Government has had 12 months to sort that out.

Deputy Niall Collins: What has it done in the past 11 months?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please.

Deputy Joan Burton: I think I speak for the other members of the Government when I say—
—

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I hope the Minister does.

Deputy Joan Burton: —that probably the most notable example of surprise was the notification one day of an option, which was perfectly exercisable by the individual concerned, as he was entitled to do under the arrangements and commitments the Deputy's party in government made in the context of the broader Croke Park agreement and other arrangements with public servants, when we heard that the director of the Office of Corporate Enforcement would avail of the provision, as he was entitled to, after due consideration. As to why Deputy Michael McGrath would be concerned—

Deputy Timmy Dooley: He is asking the questions. The Minister is supposed to be answering them.

Deputy Joan Burton: —and befuddled by arrangements his party put in place—

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Joan Burton: —leaves me slightly puzzled.

(Interruptions).

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please. I ask Members to have respect for the speaker. Deputy Michael McGrath has one minute to ask a supplementary.

Deputy Michael McGrath: That response is beyond belief.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Michael McGrath: The Minister was asked simple straightforward questions—

Deputy Alan Shatter: The Deputy had a bad time on "Morning Ireland" and he is continuing it here.

Deputy Michael McGrath: —about what the savings will be arising from the retirements that will take place at the end of this month. She gave no answer to any of those questions. That pretty well sums up the way this Government has handled this issue over the last number of months. The fact is that there was no preparation—

Deputy Finian McGrath: There was more fudging.

Deputy Michael McGrath: —no plans were put in place and with two weeks to go, the Government will consider formally establishing transition teams to manage an exodus of 7,000 to 8,000 public sector employees, which was known about 11 months ago today when the Minister came into office. That is the simple truth.

Deputy Tom Hayes: Michael, you will be not brought on to sub again if you keep going like that.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: We will have to see Tom do it.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Mattie will have to take over.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please.

Deputy Michael McGrath: The chorus is in fine form this morning.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: For who will Tom be subbing?

Deputy Michael McGrath: The very purpose of this scheme is to save money. I have asked the Minister again about this and we have asked the relevant Minister repeatedly about it but we have been unable to get basic financial information about the savings that will be achieved. What will be the gross savings on payroll in 2012? What will be the net savings,

taking into account all the issues I mentioned, and how much will be paid in lump sums in 2012? Surely we are entitled to get that basic information.

Deputy Joan Burton: Can I say to Deputy McGrath that the thing that surprised me most is the state that Fianna Fáil left the country in——

Deputy Timmy Dooley: After 11 months the Minister's surprise should have abated.

Deputy Joan Burton: ——and the lack of detailed arrangements its members left behind them.

Deputy Niall Collins: Can the Minister not answer the question?

Deputy Joan Burton: Perhaps, the party can reflect back in sorrow.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: They kept the CE schemes going.

Deputy Joan Burton: Perhaps Fianna Fáil is in reflection mode in sorrow and self-blame for what it did.

Deputy Niall Collins: The Minister is still in reflection mode.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: We had enough lectures from the Minister when she was over there. Can she answer the question?

Deputy Joan Burton: Let me say again in regard to the various Departments, as I think the Deputy will appreciate, this has been an ongoing matter of continuous discussion between individual Ministers and the Secretaries General of their Departments. I can speak for myself but I know I also speak for other Ministers.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The Minister is looking nervous about that.

Deputy Joan Burton: I have discussed this with my Secretary General on a weekly basis and we have had a group of very senior civil servants——

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Did the Minister ask Big Phil?

Deputy Joan Burton: ——in our Department. Can I just explain? In the Department of Social Protection we have taken in 1,700 new staff under the transformation programme, the former community welfare officers and the former FÁS employment staff.

Deputy Niall Collins: Will the Minister give us the figures and stop the waffle?

Deputy Joan Burton: We are also losing——

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Minister is going around the house now.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Did the Minister forget the question?

Deputy Joan Burton: I am giving Deputy Michael McGrath a serious answer to what I thought was a serious question. We are also losing somewhere in the region of 300 staff through advanced retirement. We have been engaged in continuous planning but what we did not know until last week, and I hope Deputy Michael McGrath will take this as an honest answer——

Deputy Timmy Dooley: As opposed to the other one.

Deputy Joan Burton: ——what I as a Minister and what the other Ministers did not know - while we could anticipate what the numbers would be like - and generally speaking we monitor them weekly, was the exact number until last week.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Can we have the figure for the savings? It is a simple question.

Deputy Joan Burton: Deputy Michael McGrath asked for a full financial analysis. That is being done at the moment. We have the internal figures but the Deputy should remember, and this is why he cannot be given a complete answer now——

Deputy Timmy Dooley: We are not getting any answer.

Deputy Niall Collins: The Minister is making it up as she goes along.

Deputy Joan Burton: I am sure he remembers the original scheme.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: You are winging it, Minister.

Deputy Joan Burton: The actual confirmation of the retirements does not happen until the actual retirement date arrives. We have a very good idea now of what is likely to happen——

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Tell us the good ideas.

Deputy Joan Burton: ——but what has happened on other occasions——

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Can the Minister give us an estimate?

Deputy Joan Burton: ——is that some people have not proceeded with their retirement. While unfortunately I cannot be exact, Deputy Michael McGrath will appreciate that my powers are limited to forecasting——

Deputy Niall Collins: The Minister is limited in a lot of ways.

Deputy Joan Burton: —in terms of an exact number.

Deputy Michael McGrath: Based on how many people have applied, what are the savings?

Deputy Joan Burton: Deputy McGrath asked for exact figures—

Deputy Michael McGrath: Based on how many have applied.

Deputy Joan Burton: —and I am telling him why I cannot be as exact as I would normally wish to be—

Deputy Timmy Dooley: You have not given any figure.

Deputy Niall Collins: Round them up or round them down but give us a number.

Deputy Michael McGrath: Does the Minister know how many have applied?

Deputy Niall Collins: Give us an idea. Give us a ballpark figure.

Deputy Joan Burton: —because I cannot foretell what will exactly happen on the last day of February.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Whatever about predicting the future, the Deputies opposite cannot remember the past.

(Interruptions.)

UI 43. 14.02.2012/03

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is difficult to get my head around the answer the Minister has given. If I understand her correctly, at the beginning of last year, there were 2,342 social workers and at the end of 2011 there were ten more. That is a net increase of ten but 71 will retire at the end of February, representing a reduction in the number of social workers. I am unsure whether the 60 that have been recruited and to which the Minister referred are in addition to the final 2010 figure.

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: Yes.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Okay. If one adds the increase of ten to the 60, that makes 70. However, with 71 to retire in February, that is a net decrease of one social worker. How on earth can the Minister claim this is meeting the recommendations of the Ryan report? More important, how can this possibly provide the required social work resources to meet the Children First guidelines which the Minister has committed to putting on a statutory footing? Peter McVerry has said that to bring us up to the number of social workers in Northern Ireland, which is by no means a beacon in this regard, we would need an extra 1,200 social workers. There seems to be no movement at all under the Minister's watch in terms of the net number of social workers available, although we need more.

Is there some massaging of the figures going on in terms of moving social workers from primary care teams and community preventative programmes into child protection? This seems utterly self-defeating and, ultimately, it will be more costly. Preventative social work should not lose out at the expense of social work further down the line. Clearly, prevention is even better than dealing with problems when they emerge.

There has been a failure to provide extra social work resources but we do not simply need more social workers. Once assessments are carried out we need a range of other resources which do not seem to be provided for in the budget in any way, including child care workers, family support workers, psychologists, occupational therapists and speech and language therapists. Where are the budget commitments to provide these resources? They will be necessary to put substance to the Children First guidelines and the Minister has stated she will put them on a statutory footing.

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: I reject Deputy Boyd Barrett's interpretation and I will give my reasons. For a start, there were 37 extra social workers working in child and family services during 2011. An additional 60 social workers have been recruited. As Minister I have ensured that the monetary provision for child and family services went up by €21 million or 4% this year compared to the previous budget. The previous Government reduced funding in this area by €14 million. I succeeded in maintaining the funding in a difficult situation and secured an

increase of €21 million or 4%. I reject what Deputy Boyd Barrett stated about there being fewer resources in this area.

Clearly, the situation regarding the recruitment of social workers and how they are deployed has been impacted by the difficult financial situation in which the HSE finds itself. I have stated again and again that the legacy I have inherited is completely unsatisfactory as is the way social work services have been run within the HSE. It is so unsatisfactory that I cannot compare work with like work throughout the country because the data have not been collected for previous years. The legacy is a complete failure to manage these services in the way they should have been managed and a failure to give the data we need to plan for them properly. However, this is being dealt with and this is why there is a strong programme of reform in this area, led by Gordon Jeyes, with a focus on priority cases coming to the duty teams. This is being managed by him and his team. We are gathering more data so that we can plan better. Just as important, we are reforming these services so that we will deliver them in a new place away from the HSE in a new child and family support agency.

This is a challenging environment. I agree with what Deputy Boyd Barrett says about the challenging environment and the numbers of families who find themselves under pressure. Issues of drug and alcohol addiction are seriously impacting on families and there is an increase in the number of children coming into care because of these problems.

UI 46. 28.02.2012/03

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The figure is 3% of the entirety of the public service. The Minister referred to the extent of the planning done to date and the advance notice given in respect of the incentivised retirement package.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: It is not incentivised.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It is, actually. One would not ordinarily see this type of exodus from the service without a clear incentive being in place.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I will explain it again.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I have not had sight of the individual sectoral reports that the Minister stated were on each Department's website, but I have with me the Civil Service sectoral plan. The contingency plans are contained in an appendix to the document, which can [4]be found on the Minister's departmental website. What is striking is the fact that the appendix is scant on detail. It repeatedly makes assertions that redeployment will be the first port of call, but that the Government will be seeking additional sanctioned posts. The appendix does not supply numbers in that regard. Commitments on protecting front line services are made. The Courts Service has helpfully stated that it hopes to keep the courts operational, yet it is losing nearly 60 personnel.

There is no evidence of the type of detailed, robust planning that the Minister claims has been under way for some time. Will he give the House a stronger sense of the planning in respect of the Courts Service and our health services? Some 500 mental health nurses are due to exit the system. Money has been ring-fenced for 400 new personnel, but that will leave us 100 short. This is the mathematics of it. There comes a point at which one cannot do more with less.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I will answer the last question first. The mathematics of it is that we are downsizing. It is a falsehood to claim that, after reducing the full quantum, one must add everyone back again. The idea is to do things better and more efficiently and to change work practices. This is the maths of it from the Government's perspective.

We have been involved in planning this process for each sector for months. For example, the Minister for Education and Skills laid out his plans in the House months ago and I have repeatedly heard spokespersons from the HSE outlining its detailed plans right down to hospital health care level.

The Deputy referred to advance notice. I sought three months notice from everyone who wanted to avail of it. People were not required to do so, but many did, which gave us a good idea of most of the numbers leaving so we could account for them. The Deputy is wrong, as

she knows, in regard to incentivised schemes. This is simply the playing out of the Financial Emergency Measures in the Public Interest Act 2009, which came into force in 2010. That Act provided for a grace period in which people could avail of their pre-cut retirement conditions, in other words, calculate their lump sums and pension rights based on their old salary levels. The Government is not providing an incentive. These are people who are approaching retirement and the previous Dáil enacted legislation to allow them to hold on to their pre-cut pensions and lump sums if they retired by a certain deadline. That deadline has now arrived and we are going to deal with the matter. They are not being incentivised by design nor are they part of a programme of targeting individual areas. The next phase of downsizing will certainly be targeted.

On the specific points raised by the Deputy regarding the Civil Service, the information is on the website. Local managers in Departments and offices are individually reporting to my Department and they have not signalled difficulties in respect of Civil Service provisions. It is important that local managers are allowed to manage. I do not sit in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform individually controlling and managing every local office of the public service.

Deputy Sean Fleming: The Minister stated that his workforce planning groups have been in operation for quite some time but when the Taoiseach indicated there was a need to appoint transition teams and drew staff from the planning groups for this purpose, he must not have been satisfied with them. Will the Minister explain why it was necessary to change the processes applying to the workforce planning groups?

He used a new phrase when he referred to the next phase of downsizing for the public service. He might like to elaborate on his comment because we have just completed the voluntary retirement scheme. He said it will be targeted. Will he confirm that it will not include a compulsory element?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It will be news to virtually all the retiring public servants that the incentivised exit mechanism was not in fact an incentive but we will agree to differ on the semantics of it.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Is that a question?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Minister stated that the objective is to downsize further. I ask him to explain what he means by that. I presume he is envisaging something that falls within the parameters of the Croke Park agreement. He might enlighten us in this regard. He also says the objective is to act more effectively and efficiently but his record to date has been purely about reducing headcount via an incentivised scheme for people to exit the service early. Nothing in the master plan or the planning, scant as it is, addresses the question of improving excellence in service provision or efficiency. The Minister is engaged in a crude cull.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: That was more a speech than a question but I will deal with the two points raised. On Deputy Fleming's questions, the workforce planning teams became transition teams and were augmented——

Deputy Sean Fleming: Same thing, new title.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: No, it was the critical final phase when the numbers were clear. As the Taoiseach rightly felt, we needed an even more proactive engagement and the workforce planning teams that had been established in every sector became transition teams and brought in additional expertise to ensure, as best we could, everything was running smoothly. We may face problems but I hope we do not because we have done everything that is humanly possible.

In regard to downsizing, we have set targets for reducing public sector numbers between now and 2015. It will be done within the umbrella of the Croke Park agreement, which means there will be no compulsory redundancies.

Deputy McDonald accused me of being fixated with numbers. I am fixated with two things, namely, restoring the economic sovereignty of our State, which is a job I have been given, and reforming the public service. That is why we have a Department dedicated to both economic management and political and Civil Service reform. We will do both and are in the process of doing both. In the first year we have achieved a remarkable amount.

UI 48.

01.03.2012/21

Deputy Joan Burton: Control savings are an estimate of the value of the various control activities across the Department's schemes. They represent an estimate of the value of prevented future social welfare expenditure on claims that would have been incurred if the control work had not been carried out. Control savings are used as a performance indicator for year-on-year activities. They do not include any cases of departmental or clerical error, or any case in which a customer voluntarily told the Department of a change in his or her means or circumstances that resulted in an adjustment of his or her rate of payment. The control savings target for 2012 is €645 million. A further target of reviewing 945,000 individual welfare claims has been set. These targets will be kept under review over the course of the year.

Actual moneys are recovered when the Department assesses overpayment in individual cases and subsequently recovers such debt. If, following a review of a claim in payment, it is confirmed that a client is receiving a payment to which he or she is not entitled, or is receiving a payment at a higher rate than that to which he or she is entitled, a deciding officer makes a revised decision on the entitlement. Deciding officers decide the effective date of a revised decision, having regard to the new facts or evidence and the circumstances of the case. This can result in an assessment of overpayment. In 2010, total overpayment amounted to €83.4 million, which represented 0.41% of total departmental expenditure. Overpayment arising from activity suspected of being fraudulent amounted to €25.9 million in 2010. The overpayment figures for 2011 will not be released until they have been audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Social welfare fraud undermines public confidence in the entire system. It is unfair to other recipients of social welfare payments, to businesses that are run on a legitimate basis and to taxpayers. The fraud initiative 2011-2013 sets out a range of actions to combat fraud and abuse of the social welfare system and to ensure public confidence and trust in the system. These actions will be reviewed periodically and updated, as required, given emerging trends.

As Minister, I am very conscious of the need to protect public money and I am determined to ensure that abuse of the system is prevented and is dealt with effectively when detected.

Deputy Barry Cowen: In 2010, the Department referred a total of 341 cases for legal proceedings under either social welfare or criminal justice legislation out of a total of 1.4 million people receiving payments. This represents 0.024% of claimants. Does the Minister accept, therefore, that the fraud statistics published by her Department are misleading in that they clearly imply an exorbitant level of fraud that is not statistically verifiable? The rhetoric and commentary in this regard is unfair, unjust and uncalled for. The people on the live register are hurting, not only financially but also mentally, in their efforts to maintain their family life and some form of normality against a backdrop of this cruel existence. This commentary and rhetoric must cease. I ask the Minister to comment on the fact that the numbers as issued by the Department are misleading.

Deputy Joan Burton: I am surprised by the Deputy's statement because in my experience, most people in receipt of a social welfare income are very anxious that the small number of people who are scamming the system should be stopped in so far as this is possible. I hear this from pensioners and from unemployed people. I hear concerns expressed about employers who may be employing people under the counter, as it were, and in the shadow economy. If the Deputy has not heard this same concerns expressed, then I am a little surprised, to be honest. Most people who are in receipt of social welfare payments are utterly honest and they receive no more nor no less than their entitlement. However, some people are claiming entitlements to which they are not properly entitled. I do not make any apology for the Government giving a high priority to ensuring that social welfare payments go to people who are entitled to those payments and not to people who have no entitlement or who may be involved in other activities.

The Deputy referred to cases being brought to court. This happens in a very small number of instances because prosecution is ultimately a matter for the Garda Síochána and the Director

of Public Prosecutions but there have been a number of cases, particularly involving people using multiple identities or submitting multiple claims for social welfare purposes. The courts have taken a very serious view in such cases of these activities.

Deputy Barry Cowen: I can only go by the statistical analysis and the information shows this percentage, 0.024%, of cases going through the legal process. Of course, abuse of the system cannot be condoned but I point out the fact that it is engaged in by only a minute percentage. This being the case — and given the confusion this figure has produced — has the Minister plans to create a more comprehensive and accurate detection system and also a system for publication regarding the various levels of savings made within the Department? This would avoid the confusion that a figure such as €645 million is an all-encompassing figure for fraud when this is not necessarily the case.

Deputy Joan Burton: I repeat that the figure of €645 million is the prevention of expenditure which would occur if checks and extensive checking were not undertaken to ensure that people were in receipt of the correct payments. The fraud initiative includes targeted reviews and examinations within areas which may be deemed to be a fraud risk. The most effective use of audit resources is to target at-risk areas. For instance, a targeted control project involving both former community welfare officers and social welfare inspectors took place in June 2011. Some 320 clients were visited, of whom 90 were called for further interview. A total of 43 clients had their payments suspended, 18 for non-attendance at interview, 16 for no longer being at the address stated and nine for non-compliance with requests to supply information. The savings generated in that case was €140,000. The Department of Social Protection, the Garda Síochána and the Revenue, co-operate in an investigation of those working on taxi ranks in order to identify people who are operating taxis who are not registered for PRSI or for taxation purposes and who may not be in possession of a valid taxi licence.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask for the Minister's co-operation as we have gone over time. I ask for brief questions from Deputies Daly, Ó Snodaigh and Wallace.

Deputy Clare Daly: The Minister would make Margaret Thatcher proud. Nobody is arguing that fraud should be tolerated but the Minister has elevated this issue to the extent that people who, through no fault of their own, may be in receipt of an inaccurate payment, are being demonised as people who are robbing the State, more or less. She speaks about protecting public money. It is also her duty to ensure that scarce resources and public workers are employed to the best effect. Her Department's staff are out investigating malicious complaints in many instances when there is a backlog of payments waiting for people who are entitled to social welfare payments. This is neither a protection nor a good use of public money.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The Comptroller and Auditor General said that the Department's current practice of including all overpayments arising from control activity as bankable savings, is questionable. I will explain that control savings are where there are no controls and no inspections. Michael Taft said it would be like the gardaí estimating the number of murders that might take place over time if there was no police force. The figure of €650 million is inaccurate whereas the €20 million or €26 million is probably more accurate. All fraud is wrong. If that figure of €26 million is correct or if the Minister believes there is more, why have no additional social welfare inspectors been employed?

Deputy Mick Wallace: I agree with the Minister that it is very important to tackle fraud. For example, if two blocklayers are pricing a 50 m wall and one of them is signing on the dole illegally then it is an unfair playing field. Because of the manner in which the figures were presented, the right-wing media is liable to use the figures in the manner in which they were presented sometimes in order to paint the wrong picture. This is what happened a few weeks ago.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call the Minister for a final reply.

Deputy Joan Burton: Deputy Ó Snodaigh's reference to the Garda Síochána is really important. We have all discussed that if there is an emphasis on community policing and if an estate is not allowed to be run down and if broken windows are repaired, then law-abiding

citizens are more confident that everything is being done properly. Is the Deputy now saying that extra policing resources are a waste of time——

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The Department should have more inspectors.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: No interruptions, please, Deputy.

Deputy Joan Burton: ——because that is exactly what——

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The Minister is not employing more social welfare inspectors.

Deputy Joan Burton: The Deputy's analogy is exactly the point about social welfare fraud. Deputy Wallace has said that if——

(Interruptions).

Deputy Joan Burton: ——an employer is competing with a business down the street which is employing people under the counter and in the shadow economy, that business has to compete against a business with an unfair advantage over a legitimate employer. There has to be some honesty in this regard. I repeat that the vast majority of people who have social welfare income support of any kind are paid exactly what they are entitled to, no more and no less. Thankfully, the vast majority of people are utterly honest. Does this mean that we should ignore people who are scamming or abusing the system? We have to maintain confidence in the system so that if people are scamming the system they are targeted. I put it to Deputy Daly that the best way to target fraud and abuse is to use good intelligence in order to identify high risk areas where there has been an identifiable risk of wrong. Ultimately, as the Department and the Revenue Commissioners roll out improvements in computer systems and the personal services card, we will be able to do a lot more checking and verification of identity at the point where people collect payments. We will also be able to match data so that if there is something onward, say, for instance it turns out that there are perhaps ten households claiming a payment of some kind from one address, this would suggest a possible audit would be required. This is modern auditing.

UI 52. 21.04.2011/04

Deputy Clare Daly: It is not good enough for the Tánaiste to leave open the question of when the McCarthy report may be discussed in the Chamber. I wish to take up his suggestion that we would discuss it, not at some eventual day when the Cabinet has discussed it, but immediately upon our return. Some 40,000 semi-State workers, of whom I am one——

Deputy Paul Kehoe: Is the Deputy double-jobbing?

Deputy Clare Daly: ——are trembling, having listened to the Minister with responsibility for public expenditure and reform, Deputy Brendan Howlin, on the radio this morning talking about his imminent decision to proceed with the sale of State assets, which is a threat to those workers.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Derek Keating: One person one job.

Deputy Clare Daly: I find it reprehensible——

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, you have just asked when the report will be debated.

Deputy Clare Daly: If I could speak without interruption I would ask that.

An Ceann Comhairle: You are asking it.

Deputy Clare Daly: What security will the Tánaiste give to those workers and their families and to the taxpayers that he will not stand over the butchery of our assets?

UI 53. 04.05.2011/03

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I do not need the Taoiseach——

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Fianna Fáil lost the election, remember that.

An Ceann Comhairle: Would Deputy Buttimer give the Deputy an opportunity?

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Well spotted.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Deputy Dooley has not spotted it all——

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: ——to tell me or, indeed, those who live in these appalling conditions about the record of the previous Administration.

I must say it is getting a little tedious in this House that when a straight question is put to the Taoiseach, he runs for cover behind the record of his predecessors. That is not acceptable. His answer in this House today will be cold comfort to those living in these Third World run-down conditions.

Deputy Noel Coonan: What did the previous Government do?

An Ceann Comhairle: A supplementary question please.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The fact is that Fine Gael, in government, has been quite satisfied——

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Fine Gael is in power now.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: ——to continue with the failed policies of those who it criticises, but it will not hold out any hope or any real alternative to the people who suffer from its collective view that it cushions the rich and punishes the poor.

An Ceann Comhairle: Could we have a question, please?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Tell me this. Will there be a social dividend from NAMA? If there are unfinished or unsold houses, how will the Government use these to address the housing crisis? Can some of the housing stock currently in NAMA be given to not-for-profit housing associations to relieve the waiting lists? Can the Taoiseach give an assurance on behalf of the Government that he will give more than lip-service, rhetoric or abuse towards these boys here on these benches——

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy McDonald, please.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: ——I think many on the Government benches are boys——

Deputy Dinny McGinley: Sinn Féin was going into the Seanad bed with them.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: Would the Ceann Comhairle ask the poodle to be quiet over there?

(Interruptions).

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: Put that poodle back in its box.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: ——and address the issues that affect people? I have asked the Taoiseach directly about these communities in Dublin and Limerick.

An Ceann Comhairle: Can I have a have a supplementary question?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I have asked him about NAMA. I would like answers to those questions——

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. We will get an answer now for her.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: ——rather than a ruaille buaille with Deputy Martin and the Taoiseach.

A Deputy: How would Deputy Martin feel about that?

Deputy Micheál Martin: It is not the big issue now. Housing is the issue.

The Taoiseach: Obviously, Deputy McDonald's leader is away canvassing in Northern Ireland.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: In Ireland.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: It is part of this island. It does not stop at Dundalk.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach to reply, please.

The Taoiseach: Neither does it stop at Fair Head.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: Maybe the Taoiseach would answer the question.

The Taoiseach: I listen to the same repetition from Deputy Ó Caoláin week after week.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: There will be repetition unless the Taoiseach gives his answer.

The Taoiseach: Let me tell Deputy McDonald something. I have been a public representative for many years. I know exactly the kind of conditions of which she speaks. On each occasion I must visit any constituency in an official capacity or, indeed, when I go to Britain or the United States, I make a point of dealing with those who look after the vulnerable in society, in the case of those who are abroad who are of an Irish Diaspora. Deputy McDonald should not

come into this House and assume that the Sinn Féin Party is the only one which has an interest in those who are underprivileged, deprived or disadvantaged.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: Would the Taoiseach answer the question?

(Interruptions).

The Taoiseach: It is beneath Deputy McDonald, coming in here from Cabra——

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: Dear God.

The Taoiseach: ——to lecture us as if she is the only one who understands these difficulties. Every Deputy in this House of all parties and none deals with this on a regular basis.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Fine Gael is running the country.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: They are in power.

(Interruptions).

The Taoiseach: Deputy McDonald asked me, in her first question, what the Government will do for the disadvantaged, and I will tell her again. The Government will deal with the challenges of the economic legacy it has inherited. The mandate which has been given is to sort out the public finances and deal with the issues with which those of whom she speaks must suffer as a consequence.

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: What about the NAMA problem?

The Taoiseach: In respect of her question on NAMA, the Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government with special responsibility for housing and planning, Deputy Penrose, has done a great deal of work in the short time that he has been appointed on an number of issues in so far as housing is concerned with the NAMA stock and he will report to the House on that in the not too distant future. From that point of view, [383]I expect there will be a social dividend. One cannot do it all over Ireland but one must start with some measure of facility provision for people who are disadvantaged.

UI 55. 11.05.2011/24

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I wish to share time with Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin. For the purposes of clarity it is only fair that I clarify a point. Deputy Sean Sherlock has stated the Fine Gael-Labour Party programme for Government was mandated by the House. It is more correct to say the Fine Gael-Labour Party programme for Government was mandated by Fine Gael and the Labour Party in this House.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: May I clarify the point?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I note the irony——

Deputy Sean Sherlock: Was it not put to a vote and passed by a majority of the House?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Yes. Not to split hairs, but it is a Fine Gael-Labour Party——

Deputy Sean Sherlock: With all due respect, that is what the Deputy is doing.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: With all due respect, I am not. For all the Minister of State's talk about innovation which is, naturally, welcome, this jobs initiative represents more of the same. It is most unambitious. There are 104,684 people jobless in Dublin alone and almost 500,000 throughout the State and the Government trumpets plans to spend paltry sums of money in response. Nero fiddles while Rome burns. As the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, Deputy Simon Coveney, stated, politics and government are about choices. The Government has made a choice. Fine Gael and the Labour Party have found up to €24 billion of taxpayers' money for Anglo Irish Bank, but they have refused to invest even a fraction of this sum in a meaningful job creation and stimulus package. We all acknowledge a stimulus is necessary to deliver jobs in the domestic economy, improve public service provision and protect those in need.

By the Government's own admission — it is almost a boast at this stage — this initiative is a modest proposal. The logic seems to be that this is a first instalment and that it is all we can afford at present. I question this logic. If the Government is insistent, as it is, on sinking the State's resources into toxic banking institutions; pursuing the IMF-EU bailout package, as it

is euphemistically called; and sucking billions of euro out of the domestic and real economy, how can it imagine for one second that in 12 or 18 months time it will be any more flathúlach or flush with money? Perhaps the real tragedy is that when the Government places job creation centre stage each time it comes to discuss job creation and providing a stimulus we continue to have the béal bocht. It will be the béal bocht because the Government has made other choices. Rather than provide a substantial stimulus, it chooses to invest more money in banks. Meaningful stimulus measures would not only put money back into the real economy, they would deliver a real social dividend in the longer term.

Yesterday the Minister for Finance, Deputy Michael Noonan, painted a picture of export-led recovery. He informed us this was in line with expectations. He knows full well that growth in the export sector has proved to be largely jobless. The truth is there will be no recovery, whatever about growth, without job creation. This means there is a need for a considered, intensive focus on the domestic economy, as well as substantial strategic investment. This initiative falls pitifully short of what is required. Also, it falls short in terms of the measures required to protect and create jobs in the private sector. Moreover, it ignores entirely the role of the State in tackling unemployment and boosting growth.

Although they are limited, I welcome the capital expenditure measures. Accelerating capital projects that are shovel-ready and labour intensive would create employment and deliver a social dividend. Unlike the Government, we sought an intensive focus on investment in this area, to which I have referred. We seek an investment of €1 billion of additional capital in infrastructural projects, €600 million in job creation and retention measures and €400 million in State child care services and the pre-education sector. Furthermore, we would target an additional €500 million towards families, making tax credits refundable and putting money back into people's pockets and, therefore, the real economy. These would be real, substantial cash investments. The money is available, but the choice has been made to dedicate the moneys elsewhere, not to provide a stimulus.

It is notable that the Government has resisted at all costs setting job creation targets. I heard one contributor suggest these would amount to nothing more than extravagant claims. Targets must be set since we need to set goals and benchmark achievements if we are serious about creating and retaining jobs.

The failure of Fine Gael and the Labour Party to include commercial semi-State bodies and local authorities in the labour activation measures is a missed opportunity. The number of unfinished apprenticeships represents one of the serious fall-outs for younger people following the collapse of the construction sector. However, the Government displays a limited world view and fails to recognise or harness the potential of the public sector or the commercial semi-State sector to address the problem. There is no reason these sectors cannot facilitate young apprentices to finish their training.

Last year the local government efficiency review group reported that staffing levels in local government had been reduced by 5,000 in the period between mid-2008 and early 2010. This represents a cut of 13% in the overall number of local government staff and staffing numbers have fallen again during the past 12 months.

Yesterday the Minister, Deputy Michael Noonan, promised a modest proposal to boost employment, with a focus on minor capital works, away from new build projects. However, no employment targets were set. Let us remember that not long ago Fine Gael promised voters a €7 billion investment in the State's water services, telecommunications infrastructure and energy industry. These investments have bitten the dust post the general election. No additional water infrastructural projects are included in the Government's proposals. It is satisfied, however, to impose a flat water tax of €175 on every household, but it will not invest additional resources in the State's water supply infrastructure and in the process create employment. The efficient supply of water to homes and industry is the responsibility of local authorities. Funding for maintaining and improving the water supply infrastructure comes from the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government. The relevant Ministers, Deputies Michael Noonan and Phil Hogan, are aware that Ireland lags behind its European counterparts in terms of its water systems. Despite this, there is to be no increase in the allocation of moneys to be spent on the water services investment programme which is

already limited in its scope and will tackle only a mere 3% of the national water infrastructure network. The net result of the Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Labour Party local government strategies is near nil investment, inadequate infrastructure and increased unemployment.

Some 2,000 public sector jobs have been cut in the first quarter of this year and a further 28,000 jobs are to go. That is some target. There is nothing like it mirrored in job creation. The Government could have ensured the employment of apprentices in public projects. It could make the employment of apprentices a condition in the awarding of public contracts to contractors to build public infrastructure. It could and should have done these things. However, it would require an actual investment in critical public infrastructure, something it is intent on shying away from. The Minister, Deputy Michael Noonan's promise of 1,000 specific skills long-term training places to be delivered by FÁS will stick in the craw of the unemployed in my constituency, a constituency which fought hard against FÁS's decisions to close two training centres, one in Jervis Street and the other in Cabra, one year and 18 months ago, respectively.

The approach to this initiative, as far as it relates to the public and semi-State sectors, is not so much labour intensive as Fine Gael intensive. The party's commitment to — for some it is almost an obsession — small government will drive down growth, deepen the recession and increase inequality. The Labour Party must step up to the plate and shout "Stop". The people cannot be asked to continually carry the can for bad banks and reckless lending practices by big financial institutions. The Government has a role to play in the creation and retention of jobs; we cannot afford to shy away from that fact. This Government has, however, shied away from it. That is a serious error and a missed opportunity.

UI 60. 08.06.2011/05

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I do not have any sense of urgency from the Taoiseach in regard to this matter. I never had him chalked down as the shy, retiring, shrinking violet type, so I do not think it was this that led to his failure to raise this matter directly with the British Prime Minister. The Taoiseach said he discussed the bigger implications of the bailout deal. Did he discuss the issue of burden sharing, which is the bigger issue here? The Taoiseach is reluctant, hesitant and slow to make any sort of measurable progress on the interest rate and he refuses, as I see it, to deal with the issue of burden sharing and the core issue of the unsustainability of the debt. All the while, cutbacks bite and people suffer. The Taoiseach knows this as well as I do.

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry, Deputy. This is Question Time.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach last week told Irish diplomatic staff to go back to their posts internationally and tell everybody the happy news — not — that the Irish people will continue to bail out bankers, speculators and people who gambled and lost. He was not shy about setting out that message — a bad message, as far as I am concerned.

At what point, then, does the Taoiseach engage the British Prime Minister and others, not just on the interest rate but on the issue of debt sustainability and the ESM? As he and I know, Europe clearly envisages debt restructuring, burden sharing and default post-2013. The danger for us, as the Taoiseach well knows, is that by the time 2013 comes around, the damage done, not just to the economy of this State but to its society and people, will be immense.

An Ceann Comhairle: This is Question Time. Will you pose a supplementary question?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It is not a time to be shy. When will the Taoiseach raise this with the British Prime Minister? Will he put the issues of burden sharing and debt on the agenda?

The Taoiseach: It is already on the agenda. The Government is in court over this because we have taken a decision that there should be burden sharing with subordinated bondholders. I discussed the question of other burden sharing with Mr. Trichet and, as we have two pillar banks in AIB and Bank of Ireland, the Government decided not to have burden sharing with senior bondholders there. The ECB recognised Ireland's position and confirmed that,

irrespective of downgrading or not, funding would continue to be made available. I pointed out at all the meetings I have had that Ireland was pursuing burden sharing with subordinated bondholders and there is considerable scope for further savings in that regard. As the Deputy knows, two court cases were taken, one of which has been withdrawn and I cannot give the Deputy confirmation on the second one as I am speaking here. The position in so far as Ireland is concerned is that we want to get on with meeting the conditions the country has signed up to in the IMF-EU bailout deal.

The Deputy referred to the decision of the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade to call together all of the ambassadors and diplomats from abroad, together with trade personnel, for what was a very successful occasion. Far from the Deputy's interpretation of it, the message was very clear, namely, this country is open for business, it continues to be an attractive location for foreign direct investment, it continues to have a serious potential in terms of further exports and it will not be changing its 12.5% corporate tax rate. That clear and positive message has gone out around the world.

In respect of all of those who work for this country abroad, often in difficult circumstances, we appreciate the efforts they make and we appreciate the continuous commitment they show, beyond normal working hours, on a daily basis in giving evidence to other countries about Ireland's true position. We have been through adversity before and this is an economic challenge that we will get through. From that point of view, I differ entirely from the Deputy's interpretation of the outcome of the meeting at which she was not present.

UI 63. 15.06.2011/03

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach is accountable for his own promises and for the commitments he made. The assertion he has just made about Ministers in the former Government is a most reprehensible one. It is a low charge that has no substance, and he should withdraw it.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: Check the record.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The commitment of previous Ministers to Europe, during former Presidencies and over the past 12 months, has been extraordinary across the board.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: What about the attendance record at Council meetings?

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: That is the most ridiculous statement I have ever heard.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It was the Taoiseach who made the commitment to use his contacts and hold meetings with European leaders.

UI 71. 21.09.2011/12

Deputy Alan Shatter: I am pleased to inform the House that I will make my first visit to Irish troops serving overseas when I will accompany President McAleese on her official visit to Lebanon next month. The programme for the proposed visit which is being arranged by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade will include a visit to Camp Shamrock, the headquarters of the 104th Irish Battalion deployed with the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, otherwise known as UNIFIL. I am looking forward to accompanying the President on her visit to the camp and meeting Irish personnel, many of whom I met prior to their departure to Lebanon. The personnel have been deployed to UNIFIL in southern Lebanon since June this year and we will witness at first hand the dedication and professionalism of our military personnel serving with the mission.

A visit to Gaza is not included in the itinerary for the presidential visit.

Deputy Clare Daly: I am glad the Minister is to visit the troops in Lebanon, although I am not sure of the timescale for the visit. The purpose of the question was to make the point that, given that the Minister would be in the region, it would be an ideal opportunity to lead from the front and extend solidarity with the people of Gaza by attempting to incorporate a visit there. I would like the Minister to comment on this point. Earlier in the year a vessel on which

Irish citizens were travelling was sabotaged by Israel in attempting to bring aid to Gaza. It remains the case that 66% of the people in Gaza are food insecure, that 80% rely on foreign aid and that 300,000 people are living on less than \$1 a day. These figures have probably worsened dramatically since the start of the blockade of Gaza. Does the Minister not consider that in his role as Head of State of the Defence Forces he should use the opportunity presented by the visit to the region to attempt to make a visit to Gaza to extend solidarity? Will he respond specifically to this part of the question?

Deputy Alan Shatter: I thank the Deputy for her suggestion I am Head of State, but I have not yet been elevated to that particular post and do not anticipate ever seeking it or being elevated to it.

The visit has been specifically arranged to visit and talk to the troops in Camp Shamrock and to get a sense of the situation in the region in the context of the very important work they are doing. I note what the Deputy said about Gaza. The Palmer report published by the United Nations indicates that in the circumstances the Israeli naval blockade of the Gaza Strip is legal. It is, of course, a policy of the Government to encourage both Israel and the Palestinians to engage in comprehensive and constructive negotiations with a view to reaching a peace settlement which will facilitate an independent Palestine and an independent Israeli state in peace and security side by side. Unfortunately, the Deputy has a somewhat simplistic view of the complexities of the issues involved in regard to Gaza. I have very particular concerns about the impact on the population in Gaza of the regime which has taken over in Gaza. Hamas has subjected elements of the population to extraordinary restrictions, is responsible for a number of murders of Palestinians and for making it impossible for President Abbas to visit Gaza for fear of his own personal safety. Of course, while the peace process has been substantially stalled for some time, it is certainly not assisted by the reported rocket attacks that take place from Gaza into the State of Israel. The issues are a good deal more complex than the Deputy may wish to accept, but it is a particular concern of the Government that the peace process be reactivated and dialogue recommence with a view to facilitating an end to what is a very tragic and continuing conflict.

Deputy Clare Daly: Whatever is the Minister's official role, he has an important role to play in this situation. It is totally remiss of him not to take the opportunity when he is in the region to attempt to visit Gaza. If he is suggesting his schedule is so tight that he can only fit in a visit to Lebanon, that is one issue. However, he should consider my suggestion and if he plans to visit anywhere else, Gaza should be top of his list. I do not believe I have a simplistic view. The Minister's own view is partisan. Perhaps he might develop a better understanding of the situation and the plight of ordinary people if he were to take the trouble to take the not too large a step of paying a visit to view the situation in Gaza at first hand. He might then be better informed and able to come back and brief the House.

Deputy Alan Shatter: The Deputy is obviously unaware that I visited Gaza some three months after the last conflict which took place between Hamas and Israel, that I saw the nature of the difficulties in Gaza and that I am intimately aware of the complexity of the problem. It is a great pity in addressing the issues in the region she sees it all completely in black and white and is not prepared to engage in a manner which might genuinely contribute to the advancement of the peace process.

Deputy Clare Daly: The Minister was not in his current role at the time.

UI 78. 13.10.2011/05

Deputy Clare Daly: It is a fact that there cannot be economic recovery without job creation. In this debate a totally wrong premise is being repeatedly stated by the Government, which is that the State does not create jobs.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I did not state that.

Deputy Clare Daly: Your colleagues have done so repeatedly. I said "the Government".

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Deputy Richard Bruton stated it.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I did not state it.

Deputy Dara Murphy: I have never heard Deputy Richard Bruton state it.

Deputy Clare Daly: It is an absolute fallacy, repeated made by the larger party in government in particular.

In reality, the State is a key employer of more than 300,000 people in the public sector and 45,000 in semi-State bodies. It is a vital cog in job creation. There is no such thing as a non-strategic State asset in my opinion. All of these companies have historically played and at present play a vital role in our economic development in terms of providing relatively secure decent permanent employment, quality products and services, and regional development. In the company where I worked, Aer Lingus, we made the point that the taxation revenue from the workforce alone was greater than all of the tax generated from the farming community, and the role of this community is never disputed. The idea of selling a portion of these companies to raise funds to perhaps create jobs as the Minister stated is absolute nonsense.

In the first case, the Minister admitted his masters have not even given him permission to do this and to use the money to do so. Even if they had, it would be ridiculous because to use money to create jobs by a mechanism which inevitably leads to job losses, which privatisation always does — and one may change the label but selling a stake in State assets is privatisation — would be absolute lunacy. We very much reject the *à la carte* menu offered to us by the Minister of what type of privatisation we would like to see in the ESB, whether to sell off parts of it or a percentage of the whole. We reject any of these options. What the Minister is peddling is upside down economics. He should be investing in these companies as a key driver of economic growth and recovery.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Any idea where I would get the money?

Deputy Clare Daly: Yes, the Minister could use some of the private State pension funds which amount to approximately €120 billion——

Deputy John Deasy: The Deputy was opposed to the pension levy.

Deputy Clare Daly: ——and encourage investment of this money——

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Raid private funds?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy's time has expired.

Deputy Clare Daly: No, not raid them, give them a bond or guarantee.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: What?

Deputy Clare Daly: They would get more return on that for investing in Irish industry.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Force them——

Deputy Clare Daly: Rather than selling off sections of these companies——

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Where would we get the money?

Deputy Clare Daly: ——the Minister should be investing in the likes of the ESB. He should have a vision, like some of his predecessors——

Deputy Brendan Howlin: This is Darby O'Gill economics.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy is way over time.

Deputy Clare Daly: ——to develop projects like Ardnacrusha and employ 500 extra engineers to develop wave and wind power. We could be leaders in energy creation which would drive the economy. Instead the Minister is a disgrace to his founding fathers——

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Will the Deputy explain how will I pay for this?

Deputy Clare Daly: If the Ceann Comhairle gives me an extra ten minutes I will be happy to do so.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy is way over time and she is taking time from her other colleagues. There is just over six minutes remaining between the rest.

UI 79. 13.10.2011/17

Deputy Barry Cowen: I thank the Minister for her detailed answer. We know these cuts will start impinging greatly on the elderly. The cuts in the benefits package for fuel allowance will reduce payments to pensioners and other social welfare recipients by €20 a month and up to €35 in the winter months.

I welcome the Minister's comment that the price increase in electricity is to be absorbed by the Department and will not affect the household benefits package. However, she also stated that the cost of that in the past five years alone has doubled which means the benefit to the providers has also doubled; the suppliers' incomes and profits have doubled.

When these cuts came into effect some months ago we spoke about the Department's continued negotiations with the providers to get a discount and while that might be clouded by virtue of the increase not being passed on it should go even further. There should be a discount to this State for the amount of funding being put into that sector and it is only right and proper that they come back to us with a recommendation in that regard.

Deputy Joan Burton: I thank the Deputy for his support on this because the Department is a major purchaser of fuel in the sense of paying for people's fuel, electricity and gas bills but we do not get discounts. The view was taken quite a long time ago by the Competition Authority that the Department did not have status in regard to negotiation. We are currently negotiating it. However, it may be necessary to put it out to tender and in that way achieve a reduction because given all of the reductions other businesses have made, it is more than appropriate that the big utility companies should recognise the difficulty of the economic position the country finds itself in, step up to the plate and offer saving measures to the Department. It must be remembered that when we pay the fuel allowances, ESB bills and so on there is no bad debt experience. The big utility companies are in the newspapers every other week regarding their difficulty with bad debts. They do not experience that with the Department.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Three questions were tabled. I will come back to Deputy Cowen.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Is it not the case that the cuts to the fuel allowance the Minister is proposing and the cuts she has already indicated to the household benefits package are the sharp edge of an obscene attack on the most vulnerable sectors of our society and that despite soothing words about covering the cost of electricity and gas price increases the reality of these cuts is a matter of life and death for people? Is the Minister aware — I am sure she is — that there were 2,000 winter related deaths among elderly people, most of them pneumonia, colds and other winter related ailments? Is it not a fact that these cuts mean more people will die?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: How can that be justified when Ministers are earning €140,000 a year, gas company executives are earning €400,000 a year and ESB executives are earning €650,000 a year when we are talking about equality of pain? None of them will die because of any increased taxes but elderly people may die as a result of these cuts.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I urge the Minister to reverse these cuts and any thought of imposing cuts on fuel allowance.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Other Deputies wish to ask questions.

Deputy Joan Burton: The Deputy would be aware that in addition to the household benefits package and the fuel allowance, we have 1,000 community welfare officers employed whose job is to assist people who may have exceptional needs in regard to fuel payments. We employ 1,000 people to do that at very significant cost to the taxpayer and it surprises me that the Deputy would not acknowledge the work the community welfare officers do to assist very vulnerable people who may have exceptional needs.

If an elderly person has an illness such as pneumonia and is hospitalised I would seriously hope that a Deputy like Deputy Boyd Barrett would be aware of the work of the community welfare officers at local level because in the event of anybody who is dependent on social welfare becoming very ill it might be that they would need additional assistance in respect of fuel. As I stated earlier, however, the best way we can all help older people is to ensure that their houses are better insulated because many older people's houses suffer extreme heat loss. In addition, the utility companies should be giving us a discount. Eircom did that in that it no longer charges for the rental of the telephone.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: A Cheann Comhairle——

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: No, Deputy.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Come on.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Ó Snodaigh tabled a question. He is perfectly entitled to ask a question. We have very limited time.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I wish to ask two brief questions. First, given that this is a life and death issue — nearly 2,000 people died from cold last year — would the Minister not agree that before any cut was contemplated in the fuel allowance and the household benefits package the discount route should have been rigorously pursued? Second, is the Minister aware that a realisable discount of only 14% is all that is needed to cover the cost? That is realisable and it should have been the first route before any cut came in or was even contemplated.

Deputy Joan Burton: I very much share the Deputy's sentiments. I was in a particular difficulty in that a number of measures or savings in 2011 and future years were specified as part of budget 2011 but were not announced by the then Fianna Fáil Government at the time. They were specified and laid down when I came into office. They included a saving of €30 million in the energy and telephone elements of the household benefits package in 2011 and subsequent years. The specific way in which the saving was to be made was not specified. They also included the abolition of the smokeless fuel allowance with a saving of €7.7 million in 2011 and €17.5 million in subsequent years.

The numbers receiving fuel allowances are greater this year than was foreseen by Fianna Fáil when in Government last year. In addition, fuel prices have risen by 22%. I believe the discount route is the appropriate route to take. We may have to take other action because of legal difficulties but I have been working continuously on this issue. Eircom has given us some discount, by no longer charging the Department €2 per month in perpetuity for the rent of the telephone.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Will the Minister reverse the cuts if the Department gets the discount?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am running out of time. I want three brief questions from Deputies Cowen, Boyd Barrett and Ó Snodaigh.

Deputy Barry Cowen: The Minister said that the Competition Authority had problems with the issue of discounting. She repeated that there were legal difficulties in pursuing it. What had the Competition Authority to say about Eircom's acquiescence to the State's request? As Deputy Ó Snodaigh said, and I said it earlier, we asked the Minister to pursue this line some months ago and we want to see results in order to alleviate the threats that elderly people experience by virtue of these cuts.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: How can the Minister use the work of community welfare officers as a smokescreen for the substantial question that is being asked of her? If we have already had 2,000 winter related deaths, is it because the funds to procure fuel and electricity to provide warmth for elderly and vulnerable citizens are inadequate? Many of them would not have the confidence, knowledge or ability to contact a community welfare officer. The reality is that an unacceptable situation is now going to be made worse because of cuts to fuel allowance and household benefits package. More elderly and vulnerable people will die if we continue to cut the fuel allowance and other vital allowance for electricity and gas. That is not acceptable and I do not know how the Minister can justify it. Surely we can look to the well paid and the wealthy to bear this burden instead of putting it on the most vulnerable and elderly sections of our society where it will result in deaths.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I welcome the Minister's answer. Will she reverse the cuts if she achieves the discount? Will she change the law if there is a problem from the Competition Authority to allow the discount route to be pursued? We on this side of the House will support any measure that ensures that Government spending is effective and efficient and that the Department can gain the same benefits that other purchasers gain.

Deputy Joan Burton: On the energy side, the negotiations with the ESB are continuing. There were difficulties with the Competition Authority for a number of years. The core of the difficulty is that the Department is not recognised as a bulk purchaser. The contract for fuel supplies is deemed to be between the individual social welfare client, the pensioner or

whoever, and the energy company. If a view is taken that we are bulk purchasers and that we pay in bulk, there is the possibility of a discount. In regard to the charge for the telephone, it is a charge for an actual appliance but I am very grateful that Eircom recognised our argument. The legal route to avail of a discount may be to put the benefits out to tender and have a tender price that is negotiated downwards. If there is a benefit from that, it will be reflected ultimately in a better quality of service.

I wish to stress to Deputy Boyd Barrett that throughout the country, particularly in older local authority housing estates, insulating older houses and farm properties saves money and improves the quality of life. That is the reason that in the Jobs Initiative, my ministerial colleague, Deputy Pat Rabbitte has emphasised this.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We all agree with that idea but it does not justify the cuts.

Deputy Joan Burton: It is the most important thing that we should do but it will take time.

UI 82. 17.11.2011/03

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Later today the Government is set to announce the slashing of a further 14,500 staff from the public service. Has the Tánaiste, or the Government, given any consideration to the impact these cuts will have on frontline services which, as we speak, are already under immense pressure? Has the Tánaiste considered that his agenda, rather than delivering public service reform, will create a public service slum in this State?

When the Tánaiste came into office he pledged that the choices his Government would make would be fair. What we have seen is, on the one hand, 14,500 jobs to go, adding to the 450,000 people on the dole and, on the other hand, another senior civil servant about to walk away with a pension of €114,000 and a lump sum of €204,000. Where is the fairness in that?

We have already seen the scandal in which more than €8 million of taxpayers' money goes to the pensions of former Ministers, many of whom, such as the former leader of the Tánaiste's party, Dick Spring, are still in employment. We see the cronyism of the last Government continue. Twenty people with affiliations to Fine Gael or the Labour Party have been appointed to State boards since the Government took office. Five of the six judges appointed by Government on the Tánaiste's watch have political affiliations to Fine Gael or the Labour Party.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Not to yours, anyway.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: At the same time, the Government refuses to call for accountability at the very highest levels of the Civil Service and insists in continuing with the appointment of the outgoing Secretary General of the Department of Finance, Mr. Kevin Cardiff, to the European Court of Auditors.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I understand the Tánaiste's party has gone so far as to ask one of its elected officials to be silent in her criticism of that matter. How does the Tánaiste square that circle? Public service reform is not about slashing numbers in the service. More important, what has the Tánaiste to say to citizens who rely on public services and who do not, at this time, receive the services they require? What will the slashing of further resources from those services mean for them?

The Tánaiste: Deputy McDonald asked whether the Government had considered the impact of the reforms to frontline services which the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Brendan Howlin, will announce today. Yes, we have.

Her second question asked how we could square that circle. I will tell her how. This Government believes in public services. We need good, efficient and well-run public services in this country.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: That is why we are undertaking to reform our public services. Those reforms will be announced later today by the Minister. They will involve a reduction in the number of—

Deputy Billy Kelleher: Labour Party Deputies.

The Tánaiste: —public servants which will be done through the mechanisms provided for in the Croke Park agreement, in other words, by voluntary arrangements that have already been negotiated and provided for.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Which were opposed by the Tánaiste.

The Tánaiste: In addition to believing in public services we also respect public servants.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: What about the soldiers?

The Tánaiste: That is why it is so wrong for the Deputy to come to this House and name individual public servants who do not have the opportunity or the privilege she has of responding to those allegations.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Heads down, now.

The Tánaiste: That shows disrespect for our civil servants and I ask the Deputy to desist from doing this.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Do you want to talk about it among yourselves?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I, too, believe in public services and have the utmost respect for public servants. I also believe in the accountability of public services and the Civil Service at the highest leadership levels. I put the matter of his proposed appointment to the European Court of Auditors directly to the outgoing Secretary General from the Department of Finance, and he answered my question although the answers were not very convincing.

The Tánaiste cannot run away from the issue of high-level accountability if he is serious about reform. That is a fact.

A Deputy: You would not know much about that.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It might fit the Tánaiste better to demonstrate respect to the ordinary citizens of this State who rely on public services.

An Ceann Comhairle: Can we have a question, please?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Those public services require to be staffed adequately. The Tánaiste told me he has considered the consequences of the loss of a further 14,500 jobs. Those consequences will be diminished services that may be less efficient and may cause more hardship for citizens. How can a quality service be delivered to our people when there is to be such an exodus from the service? The Government's mantra has been "doing more with less" but if there are not adequate staffing levels it cannot deliver the service.

The Tánaiste: In the first place, there will be an adequate staffing level. I reiterate, the quality of the service to be delivered to the public has been at the centre of decisions on re-organisation and reform of our public services made by the Government and which will be announced later.

I do not believe that even Deputy McDonald would argue there is no need to reform our public services, in part for the reasons she stated. We need to have a more efficient public [5]service that delivers value for money and has accountability. We need change. Public services and the demands of the public for services change over time. There comes a time, therefore, when it is necessary to change the way in which public services are delivered and to change the institutional arrangements provided for them, along with the number and nature of the agencies in place for providing public services. All of that forms part of the package of reforms the Minister, Deputy Howlin, will announce later today. That is being done so that we can deliver better and more cost effective services to our public.

We also need accountability. We will have a considerably improved accountability. I reiterate, we must respect our public servants.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: We do respect them.

The Tánaiste: Our public servants do a good job. They have been the subject of ballyragging for far too long—

(Interruptions).

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Does the Tánaiste remember when he used to sit over there? Is that memory obliterated for him? Unbelievable.

The Tánaiste: —sometimes in the media. The Deputy cannot point to a single occasion during the time I sat on those benches when I attacked public servants, individually or generally. I respect public servants and the work they do. Members of this House should also show that respect.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Walking away with a big pension is a rare form of ballyragging.

The Tánaiste: What we need is a better, more efficient and focused public service and that is the nature of the reforms the Minister will announce today.

UI 86. 30.11.2011/17

Deputy Clare Daly: I need the Minister to explain the contradiction between the impression he gives about his dealings with NAMA and some possible outcome that he might acquire the properties permanently and the reality of government social housing policy which is, as Deputy Boyd Barrett said, one of long-term leasing where local authorities are required to enter into an arrangement to lease a property for ten or 20 years and, at the end of the period, to restore that property back to its own private owner. This is at the council's expense and the person living in that property is then homeless after ten or 20 years and has no right to buy it. The Minister stated he would like that to be the case. Is the Minister actively reviewing the existing arrangement for long-term leasing?

Deputy Phil Hogan: I am not in favour of the present model of leasing.

Deputy Clare Daly: That is excellent.

Deputy Phil Hogan: I am pleased the Deputy and I agree. This is the first time she has said something positive.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We are all on the same side now.

Deputy Phil Hogan: I welcome the Deputies to capitalism.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Minister is speaking of socialism.

UI 91. 15.12.2011/19

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: As the two questions are being taken together, I presume the Leas-Cheann Comhairle is giving the additional time, including for the Minister.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Indeed.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: The Minister's response was important and I hope we are not missing out on some of the detail.

I very much welcome the fact HIQA carried out this unannounced inspection in October last. I lay emphasis on the word "unannounced" because that is critical if we are to have the degree of oversight that is necessary to establish best standards and best practice in all situations.

I was disappointed with the HSE response which, in an effort to make excuses, stated that temporary management arrangements were place and that this had contributed to the situation in Gleann Álainn — an unfortunately named place in this situation. One must remember that the HIQA inspection was carried out within a week of reports being received on two of the residents having absconded having secured keys that belonged to one of the support staff. If that was a single incident, one might be able to wear the notion of temporary management arrangements, but there were 25 recorded incidents in the year preceding the inspection in October and a similar incident to that which gave rise to this unannounced inspection in October had taken place in September 2008. Had we temporary management arrangements in place then too? When does temporary management become an excuse? It is no excuse and no excuses are acceptable in this situation.

This is a facility that caters for up to seven girls. It is critical that we get it right in the interest of those girls who find themselves in this situation.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank Deputy Ó Caoláin.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: In my question, I asked particularly if the Minister will publish an implementation plan. That is critically important. It is not only about the issues highlighted by HIQA and that there have been repeat abscondments. There are also reports that some of the girls in the facility fear others because of bullying and intimidation. The capacity to contend with difficult circumstances that present themselves will vary. At all

times, we must be able to ensure that children in such circumstances can live without fear of any kind. I am particularly interested to know the Minister's plans and whether she will publish them.

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: I can only agree with most of the Deputy's points. What happened is unacceptable, as is the standard of management in the unit. However, the report found evidence of good relationships and warmth between the staff and children. The children told inspectors that their being placed in the unit was of benefit to them. They stated they had built positive relationships with individual members of the staff team. While we should not lose sight of that, we should certainly not underestimate in any way the seriousness of what has happened and the need to address it.

I have a lot of detail on the actions that are being taken to improve circumstances, including allowing for more immediate access to a psychologist for the children; very detailed management actions; new management in the centre; much more national oversight; the assignment of a senior manager to undertake the role of quality improvement and an implementation manager; reducing the number of young people being placed in the centre; and an independent review to investigate the incident with the keys and the absconding of the young people. Very detailed oversight is sought at present, which is absolutely correct.

If it helps the Deputy regarding the implementation plan, I will send him a detailed note on what is happening. When I receive the report from HIQA in January, I will be very happy to share it with the Deputies.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Unfortunately, the events in the report by HIQA into Gleann Álainn are not isolated. The report is consistent with other HIQA reports into the State's other two special care units. Just last week, HIQA published the report on Gleann Álainn finding it in a state of crisis. HIQA declared Ballydowd special care unit unfit for purpose in 2009. The HSE committed to closing it down, yet it remains open due to the increase in the number of children requiring access to special care units over the past year. HIQA found that Coovagh House in Limerick was in a state of crisis. What is the position in the State's special care units? [378] The position is stark and, unfortunately, is a very poor reflection on how the State is dealing with vulnerable children. The record has not been good. As a result of the passage of the Child Care (Amendment) Bill earlier this year, it is likely that pressures on the special care units and the number of people needing to access them will increase. Has there been an assessment by the Department of the likely increase in numbers? While I totally understand the need to be able to move on to high support units, I believe there will always be, unfortunately, a requirement for strong special care units and an effective service. Does the Minister intend to continue sending children abroad to gain access to special care units and services? How many children will be in this category in the coming year? It is not acceptable.

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: It is unfortunate that the previous Government neglected special care. There is a great deal of work to be done to address the deficits I have inherited; that is the reality. I am determined to address the deficits, however, because the needy group of young people in question deserves the very best the State can offer.

A recommendation was made to close the unit in Ballydowd. I visited the unit and the decision was reversed. Considerable improvements have been made in the unit, which currently has nine children. HIQA has inspected it recently and this will result in many improvements and good standards.

Gleann Álainn has five children. Therefore, 14 children are in the care of the State. That is the maximum number of places at present. We need approximately 34 places. There will be another five when Coovagh House reopens in January 2012. While there should not be a waiting list for special care, there is. This cannot be dealt with overnight.

A number of children are abroad in care placements. The number supplied to the Deputy previously, 31, is incorrect. The correct number, which I gave to the Deputy, was 15. This has risen to 17. Of those, eight are in a secure care placement under court order. The rest are in need of care.

The shortage of places in Ireland must be addressed, and I have outlined how this will be done. Some of the children in question require very specialist placement. We simply do not

have the sorts of therapeutic inpatient units that some of the children need given their range of sexual, behavioural and developmental problems. This is being dealt with.

It is reported that many of the children are doing extremely well in their placements. Eight of the 17 children abroad are in secure care placements and the others are in care placements. The total is 17, not 31. There are 14 places in Ireland at present but there is a need for approximately 34. An assessment has been carried out and there is a national plan to move towards 34 places. I am working on that and will be paying special attention to ensuring we have those places for children in Ireland. There will probably be a need for some placements in the near future for children with very specialist needs whom we simply do not have the resources to cater for.

Unfortunately, over the past ten years of the Celtic tiger, inpatient facilities were not made available for young people with mental health difficulties. They should have been. We are witnessing the deficit in this area and it affects children negatively.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: May I ask another question on this important matter?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We have greatly exceeded the time allowed.

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: If the Deputy would like to communicate with me on the matter, I will respond to him.

UI 101. 06.04.2011/24

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: [...]Members of the current Government voted against the calamitous EU-IMF bailout only four months ago, so what has changed so radically to make them renege on their recent promises?

Deputy Derek Nolan: A contract was entered into.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Does the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Deputy Eamon Gilmore, remember telling the people of this State the following?:

Labour's view is clear. This is a bad deal for Ireland. Because it is a bad deal for Ireland, we will vote against it here and, in the forthcoming election, we will seek a mandate to renegotiate it... Why are European banks being protected from losses in respect of senior bonds, while the Irish taxpayer is carrying the can? Europe made its contribution to the problem and must also make a contribution to the solution. It must do so because until there is a solution to the Irish crisis, there will be no overall solution to the euro crisis.

In support of the motion seeking a referendum on the bailout, I finish by quoting the words of the current Minister for Finance, Deputy Michael Noonan, who, when in Opposition, said of senior bondholders:

The Irish Government and the taxpayer has no liability whatsoever for these debts, but the bailout deal is now forcing them to accept liability because it puts this imposition on them. In the budget, the Minister for Finance reduced social welfare payments, punished the blind, disabled, widows, carers and the unemployed and he taxed the poorest at work, and for what? It was so that the taxpayer can take on liability for debts the country never incurred and arose from private arrangements between private institutions. What a disaster and an obscenity. How can the Government stand over it? How can our European colleagues stand over it?

With those words, the Minister for Finance put more succinctly than anyone else the case for a referendum on this deal.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: I wish to share time with Deputies Regina Doherty, Michael McNamara, Michael McCarthy and Derek Nolan.

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

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: The contribution from Deputy McDonald is notable in three ways. The first is in regard to what I thought was a somewhat sneering hope that everything the State is clinging to will collapse into chaos so we can then use that as some way of winning an argument. The security and stability of the State is in question — we know that as well as the Deputy. We understand that we have a responsibility to keep our banking system intact and to find a way to regain the sovereignty of the State.

The second way in which the contribution was notable was that at no time during its eight to ten minutes did I hear a single statement regarding what Sinn Féin would do differently. Nowhere did I hear the course of action it would undertake if it ever found itself in a position of authority.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I wish I had a few more minutes to do that.

Deputy Paschal Donohoe: That is a fact. In the eight to ten minute contribution, which I was happy to listen to, nowhere did I hear what Sinn Féin would do differently. As somebody from a party that had the misfortune to spend so long in Opposition, I can tell Sinn Féin that this kind of rhetoric will get it so far but it will not get it to where it needs to be, which is in a position to come up with a credible plan that people want to listen to and believe.

UI 104. 21.04.2011/04

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: [...]When will the revised memorandum of understanding be published? Will Members of this House see it in advance of the debate next week? Can the Tánaiste give any assurance, as the leader of the Labour Party, that he has not bought wholesale into the Fine Gael-led agenda of flogging the family silver to bail out the very wealthy?

Deputy Ray Butler: The Deputy is supposed to ask a question.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Butler should desist. I will deal with this matter.

Deputy Ray Butler: It is an absolute disgrace. Deputies are supposed to ask questions and receive answers.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Butler should address his remarks through the Chair.

A Deputy: Deputy Butler should take his beating.

Deputy Ray Butler: Deputy McDonald should have asked a question.

An Ceann Comhairle: If Deputy Butler does his job, I will do mine.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Ray Butler: We will be here for the next five years listening to waffle from Deputy McDonald.

Deputy Finian McGrath: The Deputy should get used to it.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: It is an absolute disgrace.

Deputy Joe Higgins: There will not be a dry day in the House.

The Tánaiste: The previous occasion on which Deputy McDonald accused me of performing a U-turn was in respect of the national minimum wage. She was wrong about that. She is wrong on this occasion with regard to the many more U-turns she is imagining——

Deputy Brendan Howlin: She is willingly wrong.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Will Deputy Howlin indicate if I am wrong with regard to the sale of State assets?

The Tánaiste: ——and attributing to the Government. The EU-IMF programme will be debated for two days in the House when it returns from the Easter recess. The memorandum of understanding will be published when it is completed. It has not yet been completed.

As stated earlier, we were presented with a report on the sale of State assets by the McCarthy group. That report will be considered by the Government and by individual Departments. If any decisions are made on foot of the report, they will be brought before the House.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: On a point of order——

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Higgins is next to contribute.

UI 105. 21.04.2011 06

Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children (Deputy Kathleen Lynch): I should start by noting my appreciation of the work that has been done by various Members of the Opposition in respect of this Bill, in which there is great interest. I wish to have recommitted amendment No. 7 because as Members will be aware, it was not dealt with on

Committee Stage and for something to be dealt with at a later Stage, it is normal practice to have it recommitted. As I am sure the Chair will advise, this basically means the debate will revert to Committee Stage in respect of this amendment.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is that agreed?

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: No. At the outset, I seek clarification. It would be remiss of me not to again reflect on the absence of the Minister. Perhaps the Minister is a little confused. I have absolutely no objection to the Minister of State, Deputy Kathleen Lynch, taking this Bill today as both she and her colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Shortall, are highly skilled elected representatives who are very informed on all that is taking place. However, it strikes me — and I do not mean to be humorous — that the Minister, Deputy Reilly, may simply have misunderstood what the Nurses and Midwives Bill was all about. Did he really feel that women in Labour had to take this legislation in its passage through this House? While I am sure he will answer this some day, I have no doubt this is somewhat appropriate.

[...]

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Amendment No. 14 has been ruled out of order as it involves a potential charge on the Exchequer.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin: I accept that ruling but there were two elements to amendment No. 14 and by looking back now, I think I should have broken it up.

In amendment No. 14, I sought four midwives to be provided for in that subsection. I then continued “including one who shall be a self-employed community midwife”. That latter point is lost on the basis of the numbers at the outset of my amendment. I do not wish to press it, but I ask the Minister of State to take on board that section 24(3)(b)(i) at the top of page 30 states “2 midwives, including one who may be a self-employed community midwife;”. I ask the Minister of State to reflect that the word “may” allows for it not to happen. I ask that be changed to “shall be a self-employed community midwife;”. I believe self-employed community midwives must be statutorily provided for in terms of access to the structures post this legislation.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I will ask the Minister of State to reflect on that but the amendment is out of order.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: It may be out of order but the Deputy’s point is valid and I will reflect upon it.

UI 111.15.06.2011/14

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Is it not the case that the Minister is trying to put a positive spin on what is an outrageous diktat from the IMF-EU to force working people in this country to work longer, harder and for less? Given that working class people, poor people, live shorter lives, this will disproportionately hit them and essentially work some people to death when they should have a few years to enjoy a dignified retirement.

Is not the least we could expect in such a serious matter, namely, raising the pension age, that the people would have a democratic say? Is it not extraordinary that in Slovenia on 5 June, a referendum was held on this matter and the people voted 72% against raising the pension age when their government planned to do the same as this one? Could we not have the same level of democracy on this key issue affecting ordinary people as the people of Slovenia had?

Italy has referendums on key and substantial issues of policy. One would not associate a country headed by Silvio Berlusconi with great levels of democracy but it has held referendums on serious and substantial issues and the government there has been defeated. Why can we not have a democratic say on this outrageous measure to force the people to work longer and harder for less?

Deputy Joan Burton: I do not know about the Deputy’s experiences but I frequently meet older people who would like the right to work longer. Happily, as a society, we are all living longer. In terms of the contribution and commitment of this State, everybody in work paying taxation and PRSI is contributing extensively to pensions. Some 280,000 people are on

contributory State pensions which cost €3.45 billion in 2010 while 97,000 people are on the non-contributory pension which cost almost €1 billion. The contributions of the citizens of this State through taxes and PRSI they pay to pensions is considerable.

As I said, the age profile of this State is changing. Happily, people are living longer and many want to work longer. Many people stay in education longer than people used to and their working lives are somewhat shorter than they used to be.

What we need is a level of flexibility and flexi-security to deal with the changing demographics and the changing nature of work and work patterns in this country while ensuring that when people retire as they get older, they have a State pension at a level which allows them to live in comfort and dignity.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Minister did not really answer the questions. Is it not the case that if we had a referendum on raising the State pension age, some would be in favour of it, as in Slovenia where 20% or so were in favour of it, and some would be against it, as in Slovenia where 72% were against it? Is it also not the case that if we had a referendum and people had a democratic say, we would get a similar result?

Given the physical nature of their jobs, manual workers are exhausted by the age of 65 and they would not wish to be forced to work longer. Can we have consultation on what is a very serious measure? Has the Minister costed this? If public sector workers, who will be paid at the top of the incremental scale, work longer, younger workers, who will come in at the lower end of the incremental scale, will not be coming in. Will it not cost the State money to force public sector workers to work longer?

Deputy Joan Burton: The discussions currently with public sector workers are under the aegis of the Croke Park Agreement and unless I am mistaken, workers and their representatives were voluntary participants in the Croke Park Agreement discussions and the structure and nature of that agreement. The State is an important and a critical employer in this country and it should be involved in negotiations with workers and their representatives.

The Deputy must recognise that those working on building sites for many years will probably not wish to do so when they are in their late 50s or early 60s. However, many members of my family were builders and builders labourers. My two uncles worked well into their 70s and nobody could stop them, even though we wanted to do so. I do not believe we should be overly prescriptive on how working class people live their lives.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It should be voluntary.

Deputy Joan Burton: Some people wish to work longer while some wish to retire earlier. There may be people who have no particular desire to work at all, although they would be few in number. We must provide a good system of pensions in retirement which, in particular, allow for the different types of lives people live. Women, for instance, often drop in and drop out of the labour force because they may take time out when rearing small children. Women and men also may take time out when caring for older relatives. The pension structures we are evolving must reflect the diversity and complexity of modern life and work patterns. That makes sense rather than representing a threat to people.

Deputy Joan Collins: Is the Minister saying she is carrying on the cuts Fianna Fáil introduced, because she has laid out the process since 2009? Is extending the age for the State pension reflective of quotes from people like Colm McCarthy of an *bord snip nua* who, in the *Irish Examiner* in July 2009, stated that people used to snuff it at 70 but they have now decided to snuff it at 80, 85 or 90 and that something has to give? Is this what the Minister is giving?

Deputy John Halligan: Is the Minister serious that people such as small farmers, who might work 70 to 90 hours per week, and shift workers, who might have been doing shift work for 20 to 40 years, want to work an extra year when they reach the age of 65? The Minister cannot seriously believe that. It comes down to having some type of dignity and quality of life at the end of one's working life.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy should ask a question.

Deputy John Halligan: Does the Minister really believe that? She will obviously say she does but is she seriously stating that when people at the lower and hardest end of the working scale, such as builders, labourers, small farmers and people on shift work, reach 65 years of

age they do not wish to spend more time with their families? The Minister is saying they want to work an extra year at their eight hour shift that starts at midnight or to go out on their farms to start work at five in the evening. Nobody in Ireland would believe that.

Deputy Joan Burton: Deputy Collins referred to people who are 90 years of age. The proposal is that in 2014 the standard pension age would become 66 years. The only person aged 90 I saw recently who is actively working was pretty impressive and is probably a strong recommendation for people remaining very active, but active in a way that is appropriate to their physical condition, age and inclinations. The critical issue is offering people opportunities and options.

This country has a good and solid old age pensions system which has evolved through collective social agreement between all the political parties and people of no political party over a long period. However, this country faces really serious demographic changes for which we must make provision. We are also in a desperate economic hole. The Government did not develop this economic hole, but we will not go into that at present. We must try to make the best possible use of resources. There are some people who wish to have the opportunity to work for longer. Deputies must also take account of women who might have a reduced number of working years due to their commitments to caring for young and older people. The pensions system must be designed for a wide range of people.

UI 115. 20.07.2011/15

Deputy Joan Burton: My Department will spend over €530 million in 2011 on the fuel scheme and the telephone, gas and electricity elements of the household benefits package which will benefit over 630,000 people. Difficult decisions have had to be made in the light of commitments made by the previous Government. Unfortunately, I am not in a position to reconsider the changes to the fuel allowance and household benefits package announced last week. From September, the fuel allowance is to be standardised at €20 per week, the current rate for the majority of customers, with no additional allowance payable to those living in a smokeless fuel area. The cost of the telephone allowance will be reduced following negotiations with Eircom which will ensure customers will receive €26.86 of value on their bills, at a cost to the State of €22.22 per month. The number of free units provided under the electricity and gas allowance scheme will be reduced to the level at the start of 2007 from 2,400 units to 1,800 per month. These three measures will generate savings of €17 million in 2011 and €65 million annually.

While we have had to implement these measures, the House should be aware that the savings were provided for last December in budget 2011 but were not specified or announced by the Government at the time. While, of course, we want to protect the basic social welfare payments which have very positive economic and social effects, regrettably there is an ongoing necessity to achieve savings owing to our commitments with the IMF-EU-ECB troika. There will be an ongoing necessity to curtail overall expenditure in 2012 and later years.

Energy poverty is a factor of income, energy prices and the thermal efficiency of the home. The most cost-effective means of protecting households from energy poverty is to reduce their consumption of energy through improving the thermal efficiency of the home. My colleague, the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, Deputy Rabbitte, and I are working towards this end.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The Minister's reply contains an amount of information but an amount of information is not contained in it. The Minister states €530 million will be expended this year, while the Estimates suggest a figure of €395 million; this is without taking into account the cut of €17 million which the Minister did not announce to the committee last week when we dealt with the issue. This is a time of rising prices and the Minister is cutting gas and electricity allowances by 20% and 25%, respectively, for pensioners in the main. In attempting to defend these indefensible cuts in recent days the Minister has repeatedly argued that 21% of those in receipt of the household benefits package

do not use all the units included in the allowance. Will she acknowledge that neither she nor the Department knows anything about the circumstances of these 21% of recipients or, in fact, in many instances, the circumstances of the remaining 79%? Will she admit she does not know who they are, whether they are the ones sitting in the dark and the cold, scrimping and scraping and afraid to turn on the light and use up their allowance in case they exceed it? This is especially pertinent, given the recent hard winters we have endured. Many of them may be in hospital or even on holidays abroad, but we do not know. The Minister is basing a cut on the 21% on whom she has no information as a result of which the remaining 79% of recipients who exhaust their full fuel allowance will now be hit by a 25% cut.

Deputy Joan Burton: In reply to the Deputy's first point and his justified concern about the rise in energy prices my Department supplies a number of units, in this case, 1,800. If the energy price changes and is increased, the Department will cover this increase. I reassure those in receipt of energy units under the household scheme that any rise in the cost of the units is covered by my Department. If there are exceptional needs, community welfare officers can provide additional specific exceptional needs payments for those who may have specific additional needs. I have also said that should there be a third bad or very cold winter — I hope [535]this will not happen — I will be open to considering, as was done by the previous Government last year, additional payments.

Total fuel allowance payments amount to €228 million, while the amount for electricity, telephone, TV licence and gas allowance payments comes to €367 million. The free travel allowance is a separate allowance and not under discussion, but the total amount comes to €74 million. I do not know from where the Deputy got his figures. Perhaps we might compare them. It may be that they relate to people in receipt of allowances as opposed to those in receipt of benefits who may be counted separately in a different part of the volume.

UI 116. 21.09.2011/08

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak on this important Bill amending the European Financial Stability Facility and the Euro Area Loan Facility. As the House knows, the Bill effectively facilitates the implementation of the agreement of eurozone Heads of Government last July. It is extremely important both to Ireland and to the eurozone, as we have seen in recent days and weeks, and also to the wider global economy. While I do not pretend it will solve all of our problems or that it will definitively put an end to the uncertainty that has plagued the eurozone, there is no doubt it will make a difference to Ireland and to the eurozone to some limited extent.

Until last March, it is fair to say Ireland was deadlocked in its negotiations on a reduction in the interest rate on our loan package. This was an extremely frustrating place for us to be and an extremely difficult one in terms of trying to ease the burden on Irish taxpayers. We were politically paralysed as a nation at that point, unable to achieve even the slightest degree of flexibility regarding the terms of the IMF-EU bailout programme. It has been my experience in recent months, as I have met counterparts from other Governments throughout the EU, that our reputation was in tatters, to put it mildly. Right across the EU and beyond, on a global basis, rightly or wrongly, we were regarded as being spendthrift, arrogant and as not having anything to contribute, which reflected extremely badly on us and on our ability to negotiate.

It is fair to say we have come a long way since then. In just over six months, the perception of Ireland has changed dramatically. The Government has managed to renegotiate some of the terms of the IMF-EU loan, enabling us, for example, to introduce the jobs budget. While some on the other side of the House may scoff at that, anybody who talks to retailers, particularly in the hospitality sector, including restaurants, pubs, hotels and so on, will almost unanimously say it has made a profound impact on their trade, and they welcome the measures introduced by the Government earlier in the year. These have boosted trade, in particular tourism over the summer months, whether Deputy Boyd Barrett likes to acknowledge it or not. I know it is difficult for him to acknowledge that anything at all that happens in this country is good but——

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Just look at Dún Laoghaire main street.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: ——hopefully, he will begin to see things in a slightly more positive light. Perhaps if he talks to retailers and business people in his constituency——

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I do.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: ——he might get a flavour of some of the good news that is happening in this country.

Furthermore, we have employed an all-of-government approach across every single Department to rebuilding our reputation across the European Union and globally, and this is bearing fruit. A contrast can be made with the kind of editorials and commentaries that were not merely common but were almost akin to a daily barrage towards the end of 2010 and the early part of 2011, in which analysts repeatedly condemned Ireland, which was regarded as one of the PIGS with no prospect of getting its house in order or correcting and balancing its budget. However, this viewpoint and prospective has changed dramatically. If one reads the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Financial Times* and all the euro-press in pretty much every member state — I do not know whether Deputy Boyd Barrett takes the time to do this——

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Yes, I do.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: ——there now is almost unanimous positive editorial comment on the progress this small island has made in just six months. It would be big of Deputy Boyd Barrett to even acknowledge this because the contrast is clear. I do not know whether he read the editorial in the *Financial Times* on 1 September stating:

Ireland has made “considerable progress” in extracting itself from the emergency that forced it ... to negotiate [the] €85bn international support package [last year]. ... Wage cuts and price deflation have restored Irish competitiveness.

While this may be bad news to Deputy Boyd Barrett, it is good news to the business world, to those who seek jobs and to those who wish to see this country recover. The view of the *Financial Times* constitutes just one example of how international commentary with regard to the global perception of Ireland has changed utterly, which is a positive development.

The latest phase in our negotiation has resulted in the Government achieving better terms for Ireland’s IMF loan. This is what this Bill will implement and I find it difficult to understand how any Member could object to that. The agreement of 21 July will result in a dramatic reduction in Ireland’s interest rate. At one point, while sitting in this Chamber only three or four months ago, I was told the Government could not even achieve a 1% reduction in the interest rate. While it now has achieved a reduction in the interest rate of nearly 3%, that does not appear to satisfy Deputy Boyd Barrett either. In addition, agreement has been reached to extend the maturity on Ireland’s loan repayments. This is good news for Ireland.

As I stated at the outset, it does not necessarily resolve the overall euro crisis for which I believe a much more radical solution is required. However, this Bill is good news in respect of our national self-interest and it behoves all Members to support it because it will deliver better terms and a lesser burden on the people. The difference between the Government and the line coming from the Opposition is that the former will tell the truth. It is clear that our recovery will not be painless and will not happen overnight. However, with a good deal of goodwill, skilled negotiation and realistic focus — not fanciful or fantastical demands — the Government will manage to improve the terms of its loan facility. It will continue to improve them and will ensure the burden on Irish people is lessened week by week and month by month. This is the Government’s task, which it is achieving, and hopefully at some point in the future Deputy Boyd Barrett might acknowledge this.

UI 119. 27.09.2011/14

The Taoiseach: I have rarely listened to such blather in all my life.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Hear, hear.

[...]

The Taoiseach: [...] It is completely irresponsible of the Deputy to say that there is neither depth nor substance in this——

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Taoiseach: ——when, speaking as Minister on this side of the House he said he had not read his brief and that he had no responsibility for taking €1 billion from geriatric people [...]

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach should withdraw his remark. He cannot keep deceiving the House on this matter. It is rubbish.

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: Some 113 reports.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I implemented.

The Taoiseach: ——to the programmes of Opposition parties. This party and the Labour Party have a programme for Government. It is very clear in respect of health and we intend to implement that over the lifetime of the Government. Even Deputy Martin will understand that, after six months, it is impossible to shift the leviathan that is the health service in a way that will answer all of the questions.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The sub-committee could meet at least once. It has not met.

The Taoiseach: The health committee meets on 5 October. We have a lot of committees to deal with and a lot of meetings to attend. This is a priority and the Minister for Health has been focused on that since his appointment and will continue to be so along with his two Ministers of State and the members of this committee as part of Government. Deputy Martin will have his opportunity to have his say here.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Too right. Address the record of Fianna Fáil.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Taoiseach is misleading the House in respect of the Travers report on the nursing homes issue. The €1 billion in question dated back to 1976. The Taoiseach told an untruth.

Deputy Pat Rabbitte: Deputy Martin took the file home. It went missing.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I appeared before an Oireachtas committee and was vindicated by it and the Travers report.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: The Deputy is not to blame for anything.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It is not good enough for the Taoiseach to keep bringing that matter back to the surface just to cover up his own inadequacies and his lack of substance as regards health policy.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: The Deputy abolished the health boards. He is blaming someone else.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I stand over my record in the Department of Health and Children fully, particularly in terms of the National Treatment Purchase Fund, heart disease, cancer and anything the Taoiseach would like to discuss.

An Ceann Comhairle: Could we get back to Question Time, please?

Deputy Micheál Martin: The fact that the sub-committee has not met once in the past six months is testimony to the Government's lack of urgency.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy stated on the public record that he took no responsibility for it.

An Ceann Comhairle: Could we get back to Question Time?

Deputy Micheál Martin: I apologise.

Deputy Pat Rabbitte: Deputy Martin commissioned 113 consultancy reports.

Deputy Micheál Martin: With the greatest of respect,——

Deputy Frances Fitzgerald: The Deputy promised fundamental reform.

The Taoiseach: Entirely blameless. He took no responsibility.

An Ceann Comhairle: Would Deputy Martin mind speaking through the Chair, please? He is inviting this sort of thing.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Ceann Comhairle should not justify the unacceptable interruptions by an unruly bunch across the floor of the House.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: I do not know how I will manage to answer them all in three minutes. The question in regard to the European semester is very much part of Government policy. We have supported it throughout the very complex negotiations at European Council level and as it passed through the European Parliament. I contend that if we had a mechanism, such as the European semester, in place during the past 14 years the profligacy and irresponsible expenditure of taxpayers' money that occurred here would not have happened—

Deputy Brian Hayes: Hear, hear.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: —and we would have a much more sustainable position with the result that the crisis in Ireland, probably, could have been averted. The Government and I are strong supporters and proponents of the European semester and we are already co-operating with that mechanism. The first review was at a Council meeting in September but I can clarify that.

Deputy Donnelly asked about fiscal consolidation and the creation of a European superstate. It is nobody's objective to create a European superstate and I do not believe it is the objective of the vast majority, if any, of the member states. There is a need for greater fiscal co-ordination and that is already happening. It is clear from the conclusions which have emerged from previous European Council meetings and the detail which has emerged from ECOFIN and the finance Ministers meetings at eurozone level that there is greater fiscal co-ordination. We support that and it is in our interest and in the interest of the proper functioning of the eurozone. I do not see that as a cause for concern or that automatically can lead to the assumption that everybody wants to create a European superstate because that is not the position.

From an Irish point of view, when we get into this type of discussion a certain concern is always raised on the issue of corporation tax. Perhaps that was at the back of the Deputy's mind when he asked that question. Our position is clear. The new Government, from March onwards, took a strong and robust position on defending our corporate tax rate. I believe our position has been vindicated and many European partners recognise that. It was never under attack.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I never——

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: I do not believe the Deputy participated in those debates at European Council level. The Taoiseach did participate and I assure the Deputy there were robust exchanges and huge pressure applied. When I visited Paris and Berlin on behalf of the Government very significant pressure was being applied. The Deputy is a little naive if that is his view.

Deputy Micheál Martin: What was the formula?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Jack Wall): Please, Deputy Martin.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: In regard to Deputy Wallace's point, is the article in today's edition of *The Guardian*?

Deputy Mick Wallace: No, it was in last week's edition.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: The nub of the issue is that it is the objective of the Government to reduce our overall debt burden. We have employed every mechanism available to us at this point. It is important to note — a point which is glossed over and is not alluded to by anybody on the Opposition benches — that the savings the State will incur by virtue of the renegotiation of the interest rate of our overall loan package amounts to €10 billion, which is not insignificant. It would be nice, perhaps occasionally, if Members of the Opposition would allude to any of the Government's successes on behalf of this country. Perhaps I am a little fanciful in believing that could ever happen.

Deputy Micheál Martin: This is akin to scoring goals from the sideline.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Jack Wall): Silence please.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: We have a common interest. I hope we have a common interest in achieving the best possible outcome for this State.

UI 132.

17.11.2011/17

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald asked the **Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform** if he will reconsider the programme for Government commitment to sell off commercial State assets taking into consideration that neither the IMF nor the EU have demanded the budgetary measure nor does the memorandum of understanding explicitly call for the privatisation of State assets. [35357/11]

Deputy Brendan Howlin: The position as understood by the Deputy is not correct. While the programme for Government provides for the sale of non-strategic State assets to part fund investment in key networks of the economy under the NewERA programme, the disposal of State assets is also a requirement under the external funding programme agreed with the European institutions and the International Monetary Fund.

The memorandum of understanding governing the programme commits the Government to consider options for an ambitious programme of asset disposals, based on the programme for Government and the report of the review group on state assets and liabilities. A draft programme of asset disposals must be prepared and submitted to the EU-IMF by end of this year for discussion with the troika in advance of final decisions being taken on the elements to be pursued. A final decision on the programme to be pursued will be made by Government, taking into account the outcome of discussions with the troika on the amount of proceeds to be generated and also on the use to which these proceeds can be put. However, at this point, I have no intention of reconsidering the programme for Government commitment in this area.

[79]**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** That is a great pity. We have debated this matter before and I believe the Minister is making a great mistake and that his thinking is short term. Should the Government proceed in these matters it will amount to a fire sale of valuable strategic assets. I am consistently baffled that the Minister describes the disposal of a 10% share of the ESB as playing with a non-strategic asset.

The Government has been invited to consider options. No obligation has been placed on the Government in the memorandum of understanding. Here is the thing — we met the troika and we put our concerns to them on this specific issue. I put it to them directly, asking whether they were a part of a discussion or a decision making process in respect of the semi-State companies and the ESB in particular. They informed me that they were not party to such a discussion and that it was not for them to advise, instruct or guide the Government on the matter. They told me clearly that the decision was taken by Fine Gael and the Labour Party — by the Government — independently and irrespective of the troika. For the purposes of clarity, will the Minister tell me who was right and who was wrong because I have conflicting versions of events now?

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I am unsure what the question is but I will tell the Deputy what happened. The original memorandum of understanding signed by the previous Government in December 2010 contained the following commitment:

Building on the forthcoming report of the Review Group on State Assets and Liabilities...State authorities will consult with the Commission Services on the results of this assessment with a view to setting appropriate targets for the possible privatisation of state-owned assets.

When we met the troika, they demanded a quantum of €5 billion. This was the figure they discussed with us. We refused to accept any quantum because the programme agreed between the two parties in government stated that we would seek to raise from the sale of State assets a sum of up to €2 billion to re-invest in job creation in the next generation of State investments. The Deputy is correct; the troika did not engage with us in terms of what we should sell.

Bluntly, there is enough oversight of what we do already without inviting them to do more. We examined the McCarthy report independently and called on every line Department to give us advices on it and my Department studied these. The settled view of Government was to move away from what was agreed in the programme for Government, that is, to break up the

ESB. That was what the Commission had been pushing for us to do for a long time. We are keen to keep the ESB as an integrated entity and instead sell a minority stakeholding. The Deputy referred to a percentage. We have decided on no percentage yet. We were discussing a quantum of money and it is invidious to start discussing the value of any percentage until we test the market. I have no difficulty with the Deputy criticising me; I could get used to it. However, she should wait until we do something. The Deputy is inclined to criticise before the action. It was suggested that we were not going to get the minimum wage reversed but then we did so. Then it was suggested that we would not be able to reduce the interest rate but then we did so. Let us see the “when” before we discuss fire sales. There will be no fire sales. Our commitment is only to sell State assets when the market conditions are right, when we can get a decent return for the State and when we can get good value.

UI 142. 01.02.2012/05

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: [...]

There are many different legal systems in the European Union, as the Deputies will know. Every member state has its own hierarchy of legislation. In some countries, the constitution can be changed by the parliament, but that is not the case here. In other countries, there are tiers of legislation, ranging from regulations to other measures, all with different levels of effect.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Will a future Oireachtas be able to repeal legislation and still remain compliant?

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: When Ireland signs up to international obligations, we transpose them into international law. That is what will be happening, in effect, in the fiscal responsibility Bill.

Deputy Micheál Martin: That is not——

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: Allow me to answer the Deputy’s question. If a Bill is repealed by the Parliament, we will no longer be in compliance with international law. There is no precedent for that in Ireland——

Deputy Micheál Martin: Therefore, we would not be complying with the treaty. How can the Government sign up to it in that case?

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: ——but on the basis that any legislation that passes through this House can be amended in future legislation, the power to make, repeal or amend legislation still rests with the Parliament. If the Parliament were to repeal the legislation, we would be in breach of international obligations.

Deputy Micheál Martin: How can we sign up to it then?

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: That is not the intent. As with any convention we have signed up to——

Deputy Micheál Martin: It is not any convention.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: If we legislate in this Parliament to sign up to a UN convention or other international treaty, we do so in order to comply with it. However, if a future Government chose to introduce amending legislation to renege on obligations, then it would be renegeing on obligations.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Therefore, it is not of a permanent or binding character.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: That is open to the Parliament. It would, however, be in breach of international obligations. The circumstances are exactly the same in respect of any other international treaty we sign up to, as Deputy Martin well knows.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The introduction of abortion——

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: He is long enough in this House to understand how legislation operates. At least, I hope he understands it.

Deputy Micheál Martin: There is a problem there and the Minister of State knows it.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Róisín Shortall): I would like to respond to the issues raised by Deputy Niall Collins regarding maternity services in Limerick. It has been pointed out to him in the House and in the media that the figures Dr. Gerry Burke used originally were not accurate. That has been accepted by most people and the Deputy should also be prepared to accept that the original figures were wrong. In addition, he is being disingenuous because Dr. Burke was contacted earlier to find out what he thought about the arrangements and he replied, "Overall, I am happy with what is being planned but some further work will need to be done". The Deputy, therefore, is aware of the situation.

Deputy Niall Collins: What about the 47.5 posts?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Michael McCarthy): The Minister of State without interruption.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Those figures were not accurate. People locally who care about the service are happy with what is being proposed.

Deputy Niall Collins: What is being proposed?

Deputy Róisín Shortall: The Deputy should have disclosed that when he was throwing around allegations.

Deputy Niall Collins: What is the Minister of State going to do about the vacancies?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Michael McCarthy): The Minister of State without interruption. Deputy Collins should refrain.

[697]Deputy James Reilly: There are not 47.5 posts vacant in maternity services.

Deputy Niall Collins: The number is 16.5 for maternity services.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: The figure is 16 and a number of the people will be replaced.

I would like to address the medical card issue. As I said on previous occasions, I am conscious of the serious difficulties that have resulted for many patients because of the centralisation of medical card services and the level of service provided in recent times has not been acceptable. A review of the services, processes and systems in the PCRS office is under way and we hope to have an outcome from that shortly. Notwithstanding that, I have visited the PCRS on four different occasions recently, as has the Minister. Senior officials from the HSE and the PCRS have been also called into the Department on a number of occasions. We have engaged closely with the HSE to address the current position, which I acknowledge is not acceptable.

Deputy John Browne: Nothing has changed.

Deputy Robert Troy: It has not improved.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: I would like an opportunity to outline the improvements that were initiated recently. The HSE has introduced a self-assessment system for all medical card holders aged over 66. The system is also being introduced for people under the age of 66 who received a medical card on the basis of means. We will have a system, therefore, under which people will be required to declare that their circumstances have not changed since they were awarded a medical card previously. It is a straightforward form and if they do that, the medical card will be renewed automatically on a self-assessment basis. In time, spot checks will be introduced but a self-assessment system has been put in place for more than 80% of people seeking medical card renewals.

The HSE is standardising eligibility periods from two to three years for people aged under 66 while the period is being extended to four years for people aged over 66. The executive is providing GPs with a facility to maintain the eligibility of vulnerable patients until their application has been completed.

The issue of staff was raised. An additional 20 staff were provided to the PCRS during January and this will greatly enhance the services available and enable the office to provide a better service to everybody. With regard to emergency medical cards, there is now a facility whereby GPs can have an urgent medical card issued without delay once they have validated the application. That service kicked in over the past few weeks. I was concerned that problems were emerging with the appeals system. However, additional staff were deployed in

the appeals office, which has given an undertaking that the backlog will be addressed in the next month.

While I do not dispute there have been serious difficulties, steps have been taken and I hope within the next few weeks to provide a full briefing to every Member of both Houses regarding those changes and regarding how they can interact more effectively with the PCRS to obtain details quickly regarding the concerns of their constituents.

UI 155. 25.05.2011/18

Deputy Joan Collins: [...] The amount this levy will raise could be raised by treating income from capital investments and rents in the same way as PAYE income. Having made such a start towards a fairer and more equitable way of dealing with the crisis, the Government might move on to the wealth tax and close off tax breaks that go overwhelmingly to the wealthy and use that money to create a real jobs stimulus package that will put billions of euro into creating jobs. That is the choice this Government has.

Deputy Joanna Tuffy: I was glad to hear Deputy Joan Collins's speech, where she said there should be no levy, and then argued in favour of a wealth tax. I am amazed at Deputies from the United Left Alliance opposing this levy. They are taking the same side as the right wing commentators, the managers and trustees of pension funds and Mr. Eddie Hobbs.

Deputy Joan Collins: I am taking the same side as my brother who works for Diageo.

Deputy Joanna Tuffy: I recommend Deputy Collins listens to an interview on "Today with Pat Kenny" with the economist Colm Rapple. Some of the points he made would make me believe that Deputy Collins should rethink her position on this particular wealth tax. He made the point that opposition to the levy is being stirred up because in principle it is a wealth tax. It is being opposed because it is a wealth tax, and the pensions industry is doing the stirring, even if it had a different position before, although I have spoken to people who work in the industry who tell me this is a fair tax.

It is 60 cent on €100, as pointed out by Colm Rapple. In April, the average managed fund went up by 7%. He said it was a tax on wealth and is relatively fair. He pointed out that 50% of workers are not in pension schemes — the low paid — and these are the very people who have been paying tax to fund the tax reliefs that have allowed some people to put these funds into pension funds. I asked a parliamentary question last week to find out how much tax was foregone for tax relief on these pension funds. In 2006-7, the figure was €3 billion. The 0.6%, the €470 million over four years, is a minuscule amount in comparison to the wealth that was put into these pension funds over the years.

With this levy, the more a person has, the more he will pay. Colm Rapple pointed out that 80% of the funds put into pension funds come from the wealthiest 20% in the country. There are those on middle incomes who have put money into these funds but these do not make up the bulk of those who pay into these funds and the tax foregone. All of us as taxpayers funded the tax breaks that allowed this wealth to be put into these pension funds.

Pat Kenny asked during the programme if people would not be taxed when they take the money from the pension fund when they retire and it was pointed out that is not generally the case and that average earners would not have paid tax on these pensions. A married couple with an income from a pension of €36,000 between them would not have paid any tax on the pension when they retired. This idea that it will hit people on low incomes is absolute rubbish. It is a disgrace the way Deputy Joan Collins and Deputy Joe Higgins have talked about raids on pension funds while, in the same breath, talking about the need for a wealth tax. Which tax on wealth will the Deputies favour? They will probably oppose a property tax. This is wealth — savings is wealth — that has been put away. Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan said this is a tax on prudence but this is a tax on wealth that was put away at the expense of the taxpayer, the 50% of people who do not have a pension scheme, who are mainly low paid workers and whom Deputy Collins should support. Many unemployed people who paid taxes over the years to help the State pay for the tax foregone will hopefully benefit from the jobs initiative.

Whatever criticism the Deputy has of the jobs initiative, that is fine but to argue against the pension levy leaves her with no credibility at all if she calls herself a socialist. One of the people who texted the radio programme claimed Colm Rapple was an old fashioned, unreconstructed socialist. That is what people used to say about Deputy Joe Higgins but now he is suddenly defending the pension funds industry.

The pension funds industry is not representative. Those who are stirring this up are not speaking for everyone who manages pension funds. I got a letter before Christmas from Owen Dwyer, a senior partner in Irish Pensions and Finance, who wrote to Deputies in November 2010 arguing against reducing tax relief on pensions while suggesting a levy on pension funds. I spoke to him today and he said in his opinion the levy was not a bad thing for people with personal, company or AVC pensions. He said it would have a greater impact on those with defined benefit pension schemes.

UI 163. 16.06.2011/07

Deputy Joe Higgins: On a point of order, I am not sure which amendment was being addressed by the Minister.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are on amendment No. 3.

Deputy Joan Burton: I was addressing the same amendment as the one in which Deputy Higgins called for a delay in reinstating the minimum wage.

Deputy Joe Higgins: The Minister was going completely off the wall with a diversionary tactic.

Deputy Arthur Spring: That is not fair.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Withdraw that.

Deputy Joe Higgins: We noted that the restoration of the minimum wage could have already been done through the Dáil.

Deputy Joan Burton: How?

Deputy Joe Higgins: It could have been done in an hour——

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: It could not.

Deputy Joe Higgins: ——by bringing a separate measure but the Government wanted to bring in the reactionary and regressive measure of increasing the pension age under a flag of convenience so that the Minister could hammer those Opposition Members who oppose it by pretending——

Deputy Joan Burton: Is that the amendment?

Deputy Joe Higgins: ——to say we are also opposing the restoration of the minimum wage. Her intentions are obvious and we should move on.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Wallace.

Deputy Joan Burton: On a point of order——

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Briefly.

Deputy Joan Burton: It is the Deputy who introduced the argument that the minimum wage should not have been addressed in this Bill. I repeat my opinion that he is far off the mark in trying to find specious arguments for not reinstating the minimum wage.

Deputy Joe Higgins: Rubbish.

Deputy Joan Burton: He wants to find specious arguments.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I must stop the Minister. We already had this debate.

Deputy Joe Higgins: Who believes that?

Deputy Joan Burton: Last night his colleague was attacking measures to reduce fraud.

UI 164. 22.06.2011/28

Deputy Gerry Adams: I asked the Taoiseach to make a statement in which he makes it clear that he will end this crisis——

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: Could we have some silence please? Thank you.
(*Interruptions*).

An Ceann Comhairle: When a Member is speaking I ask other Members to allow them speak.

The Taoiseach: Not every person who goes for treatment or to attend at facilities travels by ambulance. I met a woman recently who had breast cancer treatment. She had to travel by bus at 5 a.m.—

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: Answer the question.

Deputy Sandra McLellan: Answer the question.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputies.

The Taoiseach: —and she had to make a round trip of 180 km to Galway for a treatment lasting four minutes. In many cases there are clear inefficiencies in the way the service is being delivered. I confirm to the Deputy that no decision has been taken to withdraw transport facilities and these facilities will be maintained—

Deputy Sandra McLellan: It says it in the letter.

UI 165. 28.06.2011/09

Deputy Clare Daly: The question was tabled because many unsuccessful attempts have been made to obtain accurate information on the overall costs to the State of the two recent State visits. When questions were put to the Taoiseach he could only account for the cost to his Department and indicated that an estimate of the costs involved should be sought from each individual Department. One could be forgiven for concluding that the Government does not want to reveal the true figure. The figures provided by the Minister can now be added to those provided by other Departments.

I would be pleased if some overtime was generated for members of the Defence Forces as it would soften the blow that their pay packets have taken as a result of reductions in public sector pay. The Minister indicated his budget is sufficient to absorb the costs arising from the two unanticipated State visits. From which part of his Department's budget will these resources be taken?

The Minister also indicated that searches and surveillance were carried out at the request of the Garda Síochána. Were searches or surveillance carried out at the request of the United States authorities? If so, will the Minister indicate what was the cost of such activities?

Deputy Alan Shatter: Oh dear. Some of the Members who sit in the top rows in this Chamber can never quite get away from obsessing about countries that are supposed to be the enemy — if it is not Israel, it is the United States. No searches were carried out at the request of the United States. Ireland is a sovereign State and the United States does not request or direct the Defence Forces or Garda Síochána to do anything of any description. Any engagements of the Defence Forces were in the context of their assistance to the civil power and Garda Síochána.

The sad reality is that a substantial amount of public money was spent on two very successful visits as a consequence of the conduct of small groups who engaged in conduct which posed a serious risk to the success of the visits and safety of our visitors. If that had not been a concern, much of the money would have been saved. The Department of Defence and Defence Forces operate in a very careful and efficient manner and the funding that was used in the context of the visit with regard to the Department can be dealt with in the Defence Forces Estimate without any difficulty. It will not result in any cutback in services of any description, as provided by the Department.

Deputy Clare Daly: I am not satisfied with the Minister's reply. The figures he cited amount to slightly less than €2 million, a sum that cannot be ignored in the context of any Department's budget. The relevant moneys must have been pinpointed for use in another area. Where will the Department make up the deficit?

Deputy Alan Shatter: The Deputy has just added something in the region of €800,000 on to the figure I gave, which was €1.18 million. I do not quite see how €1.18 million comes to €2 million.

Deputy Clare Daly: I included the Minister's figure of €600,000.

Deputy Alan Shatter: In the context of the provision made available to the Department of Defence and Defence Forces, there is contained within it provision to deal with eventualities that may arise. Such eventualities may result either from the need to address difficulties created by subversive organisations on this island or dealing with visits from persons abroad for which special security arrangements are required. This is part and parcel of what is included in the Defence Forces Estimate. Given that the Defence Forces and Department of Defence operate in a very efficient manner, no difficulty arises for either the Department or Defence Forces out of either visit.

Deputy Clare Daly: I must correct the Minister. The two figures he provided —€1.18 million and €630,000 — add up to €1.8 million, which is closer to €2 million than €1 million.

UI 168. 14.07.2011/21

Deputy Brendan Howlin: In line with the programme for Government, a comprehensive review of expenditure is under way across all Departments with a focus on what services the public service should provide and also how these services can be best delivered. This review will undoubtedly lead to changes in the way in which some services are delivered. The Government will make decisions on the outcome of the review in the context of the Estimates and budget of 2012. In this context, outsourcing, in appropriate circumstances, is just one of the many options available. There are many public services where the use of outsourcing would not be appropriate or the most efficient or effective way of delivering the service, and, as such, we are fully aware of the need to consider all of the possible implications.

The Government is committed to compliance with the terms of the Public Service Agreement 2010-14. In an appendix to the agreement on service delivery options, it is recognised that some new or existing services will be provided on an outsourced basis. The appendix provides that, in advance of a decision being taken by management to proceed with outsourcing of an existing service, an evaluation will be undertaken with a view to determining whether the service can continue to be carried out in-house through service changes, having regard among other things to overall cost, quality of service, effectiveness and the public interest. In the event that management decides to proceed with outsourcing, commitments are given in relation to ongoing consultation with staff representatives and to job security and protection of employment terms of existing staff.

The Government's overall objective is to ensure that the cost of delivering public services is reduced further and that the public service becomes leaner, better integrated, more efficient and more effective. I am happy that the terms of the appendix to the Croke Park agreement will allow for efficient and effective delivery of public services, either directly or on an outsourced basis, while ensuring the concerns of public servants affected are taken into account.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I thank the Minister for that answer. This question is interesting because not long ago the Secretary General of the Minister's Department wrote a letter or a memorandum to heads of Departments urging them to do things that "go beyond the Croke Park agreement". Those of us here have not had sight of that correspondence although it is clear Martin Wall from *The Irish Times* had. I do not know the Minister's view on his senior staffer writing such a letter, and I wonder if the Minister has seen it, but it sounded alarm bells in my head that the proposition would be made from so senior a figure to move beyond the Croke Park agreement. We need an absolute assurance from the Government that insists on delivery in terms of the Croke Park agreement that it will respect the parameters of the Croke Park agreement. It appears from the correspondence from the Minister's Secretary General that that is not the case. Can the Minister give us some reassurance on that matter?

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I have indicated already that the Government has accepted the Croke Park agreement. We will live up to our side of it. As I have indicated to the House, there is conditionality in that regard. We want an array of options available to us to ensure the review is truly comprehensive. I want people to think outside the box with ideas that I am happy to bring to the unions and to the management. I have begun my discussions with the implementation group in the abstract in terms of saying we will engage with it in regard to the outcome of the comprehensive review of expenditure. I have a simple view on this matter. Every citizen of Ireland — public servant and private worker — has an interest in this country succeeding and we all have an interest in getting the best value we can for the tax we spend.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Minister has dodged the issue. I do not doubt his commitment to recovery but we understand the most senior official in the Minister's newly established Department has written to line Ministers——

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Secretaries General.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: ——suggesting that they cook up different proposals beyond the Croke Park agreement. Does the Minister not find that alarming, because I do? Would the Minister publish that memorandum or letter?

Deputy Brendan Howlin: The Deputy uses nice pejorative terms like “cook up”. The letter was to Secretaries General asking people to engage in the process in an open way. In the spirit of transparency, the Deputy asked me if I would publish the letters. I will. I will arrange within the next few days to have them put on my website for the Deputy to examine.

UI 169. 21.09.2011/03

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I find it astonishing that the Taoiseach would even suggest that the hundreds of thousands of people out of work do not wish to find employment. Given that he raised the issue of hourly payments, he might also reflect on the fact that no one sitting in this Chamber is on €9.50 per hour. If he takes a look around him——

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Neither are you.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: ——and tries to understand the cost of living in the real world, he might find the answer to that particular riddle.

The Taoiseach states that the unemployment figures are unacceptable; in that he is correct. What is even more unacceptable in the face of this unemployment crisis is to have a Government that sits on its hands. It talks big, it acts small.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Remarkable.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I do not accept the Taoiseach's position that he has had no contact with Aviva. He has passed the buck to IDA Ireland. Hundreds of jobs are now under threat. What will he do about it? It is not sufficient to pass the buck to another agency. If he is so appalled, so concerned to keep people in work and get them back to work, he should get cracking now and ensure those jobs in Aviva are secured. He should match his rhetoric with action.

A Deputy: What would you do?

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: There is rhetoric in training here now.

The Taoiseach: The Government has been cracking since we were appointed and given a mandate by the people.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Michael McGrath: The Taoiseach should crack down on the dole queues.

The Taoiseach: That is why we called back all the ambassadors and diplomatic personnel we have around the world. That is why the Tánaiste is in New York and the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, Deputy Richard Bruton, is in the United States. That is why we have had direct contact with business interests at home and abroad to rebuild this country's reputation, to tell people that we are open for business and that this Government is focused on making changes that will restore our country's finances and our people's good fortunes.

That is why, since this Government was appointed, IDA Ireland has approved 3,150 jobs. That is why I was in Wexford last weekend——

Deputy Micheál Martin: Is the Taoiseach claiming credit for that?

Deputy Timmy Dooley: They were in the pipeline before he got there.

The Taoiseach: ——both for the opening of the Coca-Cola plant, a €300 million investment, and to talk to enterprise and small indigenous business which is now employing unemployed people and is in the business of manufacturing and exporting.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: The Government has lost 30,000 jobs as a result of its jobs initiative.

Deputy Willie O’Dea: Yes, the country is minus 30,000 jobs.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: The Deputy should realise that this is not a laughing matter.

The Taoiseach: When she has the opportunity, I would like Deputy McDonald to outline her party’s economic strategy in the context of the creation of jobs.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: We would be more than happy to outline our position.

A Deputy: Burn the bondholders.

The Taoiseach: In so far as the Government is concerned, I want to see the maximum number in employment.

Deputy Willie O’Dea: Is there anyone who does not want that?

The Taoiseach: The focus of the Government will be on introducing a micro-finance and a partial loan guarantee scheme.

Deputy Willie O’Dea: A waste of time.

The Taoiseach: We are open to ideas that are credible — even those brought forward by Deputy McDonald’s party — to get people back to work.

UI 172. 12.10.2011/27

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Táim lán sásta deis a bheith agam caint san díospóireacht seo. There is something incredibly and predictably depressing in the Government’s position as articulated by the Minister of State, Deputy John Perry, this evening and by the Minister of State, Deputy Willie Penrose, last night. They tell us they want value for money — that is code for more cutbacks. They tell us they want to improve service provision — that is code for job losses. Finally, to beat Banagher and put the final gloss on it all, the Minister of State, Deputy Perry, tells us that in the face of cutbacks, the loss of services and an economic catastrophe, taking further pain will mean the community and voluntary sector and the communities it serves will emerge more resilient. It is mind-blowing stuff.

I cannot take seriously a Government or Minister who tells communities which are historically deprived and now under great pressure that more pain is good for them. Here is the newsflash — pain is not good; pain is bad. The suffering is real and the cutbacks are devastating services. We will oppose the Government amendment to our motion. It is a disgrace, with its laughable references to “reducing duplication” and streamlining. That undertaking is neither genuine nor credible. The amendment is simply code words and cover for the cuts that have been imposed and the further cuts that are proposed. The Government, by way of this amendment, brazenly abdicates its responsibility and hands it over to philanthropists and to corporate, private money. The amendment makes no reference and offers no commitment in respect of ring-fencing or protecting funding. That tells the tale in terms of the Government’s agenda.

The Minister of State, Deputy Penrose, told us last night that he cannot ring-fence moneys from the dormant accounts fund for the community and voluntary sector. He told us — and this is astonishing —“It must be stressed that moneys disbursed from the fund increase Government debt levels”. It is beyond my comprehension how any Minister, in particular a Labour Party Minister, can stand over that kind of mechanical, bean-counter response to the funding crisis in the community and voluntary sector. I hope the Minister understands that a simple amendment to the legislation could move the bulk of the dormant accounts fund liabilities off the State’s balance sheet. It is not rocket science. It can be done.

Politics is all about choices and for us in Sinn Féin it has to be about choices that are fair. The dormant accounts fund is made up of citizens' money. It makes sense, therefore, that that money be ring-fenced and put back into the communities where citizens live.

Last night the Minister, Deputy Penrose, mentioned philanthropy 15 times, and this Minister has done it again this evening. Fifteen times we were told that the philanthropists will come in and save the day but not once did he make a comment or recommendation or offer a view in respect of ongoing funding. I understand that Fine Gael has a slash and burn approach to this sector. Small government is what it does and it is pretty much every woman, man and child for themselves unless one is a political adviser to one of the bigwigs, and then it seems that money is not a problem. However, the Labour Party, whose members are not present, know full well the devastation facing communities the length and breadth of this State and they know that particularly here in Dublin because we meet the Labour Party TDs and Ministers at all of the community events, the public meetings and the forums. Yet, despite a long-term relationship with these groups, Labour Ministers are turning their backs on this sector and, in turn, on the communities they serve.

In my own constituency the Inner City Partnership was closed down last year and the Labour Ministers have done nothing to right that wrong. To add insult to injury, community development sector workers are being laid off across the board with few or no rights and entitlements and the mere discussion of the budget causes fear and uncertainty.

The irony is that many of those communities voted for Labour with an expectation that its members would stand up for their right to fair play and that they would protect them from the worse excesses of Fine Gael in Government but week after week Labour Ministers sit on the Government benches dogmatically enforcing what we all thought was Fine Gael policy. Labour in government has thus far failed spectacularly to protect the very people it purports to represent. It pursues an agenda of cuts at all costs while feathering its own nests with disgracefully high salaries but that seems to sit okay with them.

Deputy Michael McCarthy: The same as the Deputy's own salary.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order please.

A Deputy: He is back.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The community and voluntary sector steps in and intervenes where the Government has absented itself. The sole reason this sector is needed in the first instance is because the Government and the State have failed to protect the most vulnerable in our society. Inner city communities like the one I represent are facing a drugs crisis not seen since the 1980s. I hope the Deputies in this House realise that. As my colleagues have said, children routinely go to school hungry, some without books. Scores of women face the brutality of domestic violence. Young people are out of work. Men, women and children cannot use computers and have literacy issues. People wonder if they will ever work again, and the [503]numbers lost to suicide increase year on year but the Government's response to that is to give the community and voluntary sector a rap on the knuckles and to tell them, as the Minister of State, Deputy Penrose said, that they must adapt to the new economic realities. Do the Ministers of this Government and their backbenchers have any sense of adapting to the social realities in which our citizens live or do they even care any more? The Government wants community workers, the very people who commit their lives to fixing the State's failure to properly educate, to protect and to house its citizens, to spend their time targeting a more diverse range of supports and cultivating relationships with the business community. It is difficult to believe that in a number of short months the Labour Party in particular has become so distanced from the very communities that put its members on the Government benches.

The community and voluntary sector provides essential services that the State and the private sector have failed or are unwilling to deliver. More than 7,500 groups provide these services to our children, our elderly population and people with disabilities and ill health. Their work is heroic, and I salute them. Their work is patriotic, and I salute them all the more because these people are the champions of their communities. We make no apology to anybody in saying that we will stand shoulder to shoulder with them.

Deputy Dara Murphy: But not in Northern Ireland.

Deputy Michael McCarthy: Not in the North.

(Interruptions).

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order.

Deputy Dara Murphy: Shoulder to shoulder down here and cutting in the North. It is very hypocritical.

(Interruptions).

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Please, Deputies.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The challenge for Government, in addition to educating itself on the system of governance 100 miles up the road, is to put its money where its mouth is as regards this sector. The Minister of State said that he understands the sector and that he applauds it. He used the rhetoric but rhetoric will not cut it.

Deputy John Perry: It is not rhetoric. We know it. The Deputy is full of rhetoric.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The sector and the citizens will not be satisfied with crocodile tears or tea and sympathy. We want our funding. We want our services. We want the Minister to take his hands and his austerity off the necks of the people——

Deputy Dara Murphy: In the Republic only.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: ——of working class communities the length and breadth of this State.

UI 176. 26.10.2011/29

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am pleased to support the motion and compliment my colleagues in the Technical Group on bringing it forward. The Minister for Health, Deputy James Reilly, promised much as an Opposition spokesman. He travelled around the country, including to Clonmel hospital in my constituency, promising that everything would be fine. I sat with the Minister of State, Deputy Kathleen Lynch, on various committees in the last Dáil. I cannot believe the transformation in her. We had a difficult time in meeting her to discuss the situation at St. Michael's Hospital in Clonmel. Deputy Mick Wallace referred to St. Senan's Hospital in Wexford which the Minister of State promised would work out fine because patients would be accommodated in Waterford. She promised on that occasion that she would take us by bus to see the facility in Waterford. She promised she would take us to see facilities in the west. They were empty promises because that was two months ago. She told us something else which I will not describe but the Minister of State knows what I am talking about. She is trying to close a perfect facility in Clonmel. She pinched the patients.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: I am not trying to close it; I am closing it.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: That could be deemed to be harassment or victimisation. She told us the door was locked. We heard stories tonight of doors being locked and they should not be locked. The Minister of State proclaimed manna from heaven. The consultants in Clonmel and the staff in St. Michael's have been treated appallingly by gangsters in the Health Service Executive. I call them cowboys who have no respect for anybody or anything other than furthering their career. I cannot understand how the Minister can come into this Chamber and go to meetings and stand over their actions. I am talking about people like Mr. Healy——

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy should not name people outside the House.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: ——and not my colleague from south Tipperary.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: He does not have the right of reply. Deputy McGrath should not do that.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: He has the right to bully us and tell us one day when we questioned him about the reconfiguration announced by the Minister, Deputy Reilly——

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: The Deputy should not do that. He is here long enough.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: He would not accept our words because they are in charge.

The Minister, Deputy Reilly, promised many people that when he was in the Minister's office we would not get any more letters from the HSE saying, "Sorry, this is not a matter for the Minister, it is for the HSE", but slowly the letters are arriving. Nothing has changed. I am appalled at the Minister, Deputy Reilly, because he was a medical practitioner and an eminent

consultant and he should have known better than to promise that there would be no more people on trolleys and that everything would be proper. The Minister will have deaths on her conscience, and she knows that better than me, and what she is doing in Clonmel and throughout the country is outrageous.

We have seen this happen over the years from Monaghan to Sligo to Drogheda, and it is happening now in the mid-west. Nenagh hospital lost its services. The Minister told the psychiatric patients in Clonmel that they can go to Limerick and now they find they will have to go to Ennis. I heard one of the Minister of State's colleagues say here recently that there were no services in Ennis for themselves let alone to allow them take new people in from Tipperary. It is an outrageous scam and a scandal. The Minister sold a pup to the public.

I am appalled by the change of attitude on the part of the Minister of State. I am appalled because we blocked these doors one night to try to get a meeting with her. She begrudgingly had a meeting with us afterwards but she just trotted out the line of the officials, which was outrageous. The way they treated the staff in Clonmel is outrageous. They did not have any consultation or show respect or appreciation of staff. They told a senior eminent psychologist in my presence and that of my former colleague and the then Minister of State, Deputy John Moloney, that the place was a zoo. How dare they do that? Some of them were only a fine day in Clonmel. They came from a failed system in England and walked into jobs here. The same applies to most of the people in the Health Information and Quality Authority. We employ them and send them around the country to do the dirty work for senior Department officials. I am appalled by them because they have no respect for the staff or the people.

I am appalled also by the Minister, Deputy Reilly, but especially by the Minister of State, Deputy Lynch, because of the tirades we had to listen to in committee when she was a Deputy. She attacked the Ministers and was a champion of all the people who were depressed and downtrodden but the poacher has become the gamekeeper. She is presiding over the outrageous behaviour by HSE officials who are not fit to be employed and who are betraying democracy in this country, and they are doing so on fat salaries. They will not listen to elected representatives or anybody else.

The Minister of State, Deputy Lynch, should hang her head in shame and bring us on that tour to St. Senan's and to the west as she promised but like all the promises before the election and the snow that disappeared off the ditch last January, she thinks that we are fools and that we will go away, but, like Roscommon, those of us in Clonmel will not go away. The fight is not over. We will continue. The Minister of State can go back and pinch the patients, or pinch Deputy Healy and myself, but she will not make fools of us.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kathleen Lynch): Deputy McGrath should know better than to name people here knowing they have no right of reply while he has absolute privilege. Would the people who are quick to do that be as quick to do it outside this House?

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Of course I would.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: I doubt that very much.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I have already said that, and I do not want anyone outside this House named.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: The Leas-Cheann Comhairle should have stopped him.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I said that to him.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Send another letter to the consultant telling him he cannot get involved in——

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Please, Deputy. No more interruptions.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: The Deputy needs to behave himself.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: That is rich coming from the Minister of State.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: He is no longer in the position he used to hold. He should behave himself and have some manners.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I never pinched the patients. I might visit them but I would never do that to them.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Please, Deputy.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: Have some manners.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Minister should have some manners too, with respect.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: That is what this has boiled down to. In terms of A Vision for Change, which was published in 2006 by the previous Government and which everyone here welcomed with open arms——

Deputy Mattie McGrath: We have no problem with that.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: That is the problem. It was a good document and it is about——

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We were not here.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: Those of us who were here welcomed it with open arms. It is a good plan for the future of our mental health services.

Deputy Seamus Healy: If it is, it should be fully implemented.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: And not cherry-picked.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: The days of the big institution are gone. The days of being able to lock people away are gone.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: We all accept that.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: We need to deliver a proper mental health service in the community.

Deputy Seamus Healy: In accordance with A Vision for Change.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: Acute units should be used sparingly and for very short periods——

—

Deputy Seamus Healy: Absolutely, so why does the Minister want to close the one in Clonmel?

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: ——but it appears to me that those who came in here and welcomed A Vision for Change are typical of——

Deputy Mattie McGrath: No, all of it.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: I can hear Deputy McGrath saying that. He said he had no problem with A Vision for Change provided there is no change in my back yard.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It should not be cherry-picked by officials.

Deputy Seamus Healy: Implement it fully and we will support it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: Everyone's back yard is being changed.

Deputy Seamus Healy: No. You will not address that.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy, please. The Minister has the floor.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: What is going on in Clonmel is outrageous.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: The days of locking people away in institutions are gone——

Deputy Mattie McGrath: We accept that.

Deputy Seamus Healy: Absolutely.

[131]Deputy Kathleen Lynch: ——and we have to accept that.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: By closing St. Michael's and St. Luke's.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: We have to accept also that we can no longer dictate to people just because they have problems with their emotional well-being——

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Minister cannot pinch them either.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: ——and we intend to deliver a better service in a different environment. That is what will happen.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: To hell or to Connacht.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: As for the little tour Deputy McGrath wants to go on, no problem.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: When?

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: I did meet him, and he should not give the impression that I did not. I have met several groups since but Deputy McGrath was not present.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Thanks for the invitation.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: I welcome the opportunity to conclude this debate. There can be few more important issues that this House has to discuss than the reorganisation of our health care. I will start with the two greatest influences on that change this Government is introducing for the benefit of patients and not for any vested interests. First, we have a system

that is no longer able to deliver the level of service our citizens need, nor does it represent value for money. No one here would dispute that for a long time our health system, and I heard everyone present say it, has needed to change the way it provides its services to patients. The Government has a clear view on what needs to be done and is setting about doing it.

Second, the financial situation in which we find ourselves exercises and will continue to exercise considerable restraints on the options available to us. However, that will not stop the Government making the changes necessary for better and safer care.

In that context we must remodel our health service, and in particular our acute and emergency provision. It is extraordinary, therefore, that there should be demands to return to a system which has become clinically indefensible and continued provision of which, as my colleague, the Minister for Health, noted last night, is threatening to become untenable, unsustainable and irresponsible. The notion that we should continue on with that system or return to the old system defies logic.

The clinical evidence is clear. We cannot safely continue into the future providing complex care across a large number of facilities at very low volumes. We cannot safely provide complex emergency care in every hospital. Equally, we cannot continue to use our large hospitals for treatments which can and should be provided as close to our patients' communities as possible. We cannot continue to use major emergency resources for injuries and illnesses which can be dealt with in other settings.

The financial evidence is just as clear. We must see a better return in terms of patients outcome for our health spending. We must use new ways of measuring outputs and outcomes from our acute services. This process of using information better to manage our system is already well under way with the advent of the special delivery unit, SDU. The number of beds we have is not an output nor an outcome. The number of staff we have is not an output. What [132]matters is the number of patients treated and despite the reduction in funding, and I am glad to see Deputy McGrath has left the Chamber——

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Ta mé anseo.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy cannot speak unless he is in the chair.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: ——that our current loss of sovereignty has forced on us, activity in areas such as day cases continues to increase this year. We must, within the constraints we are under, do everything possible to get more treatment for more patients from the health budget. However, to maintain this process and, more importantly, to deliver safer care we need new approaches, new ways of doing things and new plans implemented. In this respect, we must implement A Vision for Change.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Fully deliver on it.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: This Government is delivering on these objectives in a planned and strategic manner, and will continue to do so. Difficult political decisions recognise the clinical realities that will produce better outcomes for patients. These include the reform of emergency departments; the changes in work practices and structures that are already producing a modern, highly trained, more efficient pre-hospital emergency service; the targeted reduction in waiting times through the special delivery unit, SDU, led initiatives and money-follows-the-patient funding, which many Deputies were asking about tonight; the consolidation of complex treatments in large hospitals to concentrate resources and skills to the benefit of patients; the strengthening of local systems to allow better access to day surgery, diagnostics and routine treatments in our patients' communities which will flow from the smaller hospital framework under development at the Government's request; the creation, as seen in Cork, of specialist elective facilities so the delivery of this treatment is not disrupted by the inevitable priority of emergency cases; and, above all, the provision of fair and equal access where our citizens need it through the creation of a system of universal health insurance.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Yesterday the Taoiseach promised he would make an honest man of the Tánaiste. Some would say he will have his work cut out for him given the number——

A Deputy: What about Gerry?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: ——of promises the Labour Party has broken since entering office. Before the election, the party was crystal clear. It promised not to cut child benefit, introduce student fees or increase the registration charge. It even attacked its buddies in Fine Gael for proposing a 2% increase in VAT, a tax which, as we all know, will hit the poorest hardest. In spite of adopting these positions, the Labour Party has U-turned.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: Sinn Féin U-turned on the bank guarantee.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: That is well recorded. The Tánaiste also promised an end to cronyism——

Deputy Colm Keaveney: Sinn Féin went from robbing the banks to bailing them out.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Labour Party promised an end to big pensions and salaries.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: Sinn Féin robbed the banks and it robbed the people.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It promised to protect the poor and to bring accountability to the top. It is in this critical test that the Government had its greatest failure. We saw yesterday that its proposed nominee to the European Court of Auditors has been rejected by a European Parliament committee. The Tánaiste should not have proceeded with that nomination and should now withdraw it. He should realise that the days in which a Government can remove or reward officials by automatically promoting them to top jobs in Europe need to be left behind.

An Ceann Comhairle: I remind the Deputy that we do not speak about people who are not present to defend themselves.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I have mentioned no name.

We need accountability at the top. I ask the Tánaiste whether he will recognise and accept this reality belatedly by withdrawing the nomination.

The Tánaiste: I am not quite sure which of the many accusations Deputy McDonald levelled is the question. I will not take any lecture on honesty from Sinn Féin.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: This Government promised——

(Interruptions).

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Has Deputy Ferris forgotten? Captain Nemo.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Martin Ferris: Did you sign out, Brendan?

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask the Tánaiste to proceed. There is a time limit on these questions.

The Tánaiste: This Government promised that it would get the country out of the economic hole in which it found itself. The country was broken when we entered Government on 9 March last. There were broken banks, broken public finances, a broken reputation and broken morale.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Broken promises.

The Tánaiste: We have worked every day to fix these problems. This is not the first time on which Deputy McDonald has accused the Government in the House of breaking promises. She claimed in the House that we broke our promise on restoring the minimum wage; she was wrong about that. She stated we would not renegotiate the deal with the European Union and IMF; she was wrong about that. She stated in the House we would not get the 1% reduction in the interest rate.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Greece.

The Tánaiste: She was wrong about that because we got a reduction of 2.5%, at a value of €10 billion to the country. Her accusation today that we have not delivered on political reform is also wrong. We cut the pay of Ministers, made cuts regarding the transport arrangements of Ministers and capped the salaries of public servants. We have changed the pension arrangements for top-level public servants and the arrangements for the appointment of top-

level civil servants through changes in the TLAC system. The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform announced last week the most comprehensive set of public service reforms we have seen in this country. Deputy Mary Lou McDonald was wrong about that too.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: On none of those issues has Deputy McDonald or anybody else making the aforementioned accusations admitted she was wrong. She will have to admit she was wrong in respect of some of the other allegations she levelled today.

Regarding the nominee to the European Court of Auditors, we were surprised by the vote taken at the committee meeting yesterday. We understand it did not reflect the discussion at the meeting. Mr. Cardiff is the Government's nominee. That remains the position and, as I understand it, a report from the committee will be considered at a plenary session of the European Parliament, at which session a decision will be made.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: If we are to understand the Tánaiste, despite his bluster and rhetoric——

(Interruptions).

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: If the Deputies do not mind——

Deputy Eric Byrne: We do mind.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: This is my opportunity to speak without interruption.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy McDonald without interruption, please.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Tánaiste's Government is the one that broke its own guidelines on capping pay for its special advisers. That is on the record. His Government still allows senior civil servants to walk away with bonanza pension pots. His Government, and he in particular, gets very rattled at the very prospect that a senior civil servant might be called to account in this Dáil. He claims his nominee remains the Government's nominee. That is not a credible position given the view taken by the budgetary committee in the European Parliament. More important, it is not a credible position on the part of a Government that proposes to introduce, in the short term, swingeing cuts affecting people on low and middle incomes.

An Ceann Comhairle: Could we have the Deputy's question now, please?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I ask the Tánaiste again whether he will pull the plug on the nomination. Will he live up to his promise of accountability within the public service? Will he allow the public to be confident that, at last, the political system will have one rule and one standard for all the people and not cosset those at the very top?

The Tánaiste: There is one rule that this Government applies, and it applies equally to everybody. That is why, from the very beginning of this Administration, we took unprecedented steps to cap the salaries of senior public servants and staff in the semi-State sector and to change the inherited arrangements pertaining to pensions and severance deals. From the very beginning of the life of the Government we took steps which had not been taken previously to [879]cap the pay of senior public servants and others in the semi-State sector and change the arrangements we had inherited in regard to pensions and severance deals.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: That was done by Fianna Fáil.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy keeps saying these things.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: They were paid off.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Tánaiste to continue, without interruption.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Of course, we did. It was the law.

The Tánaiste: They have been done by the Government. There is a rule regarding accountability, whereby people are called to account, but they are also given the opportunity to answer for themselves. I do not know if it is part of the culture of Sinn Féin——

Deputy Dinny McGinley: Like hell it is.

The Tánaiste: ——but it is something Deputy McDonald appears to find difficult to understand.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The individual in question was given an opportunity to defend himself in committee.

Deputy Eric Byrne: Play the man, not the ball.

The Tánaiste: If one makes an accusation against somebody——
Deputy Timmy Dooley: What about a former Ceann Comhairle?
The Tánaiste: ——one gives him or her an opportunity to respond.
Deputy Ruairí Quinn: That is something we do here.
The Tánaiste: It is something we do in committees of the House.
Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: We did that.
The Tánaiste: In regard to the nominee to the European Court of Auditors, a hearing took place yesterday at a budgetary committee of the European Parliament. I understand the nominee gave a strong performance.
Deputy Timmy Dooley: What did Nessa Childers think?
The Tánaiste: A vote was taken, but, according to the reports I have received, it did not appear to reflect the tone and content of the discussion that had taken place.
Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: They rejected him.
The Tánaiste: I do not know why that was. It is something we will have to consider. It is not unusual that committees take a vote. I understand the committee will make a report to the Parliament in plenary session. That report has not yet been made.
Deputy Timmy Dooley: The Tánaiste should listen to himself.
The Tánaiste: When it is made, the Parliament will make a decision in plenary session.
Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach certainly has his work cut out for him.

UI 183. 08.12.2011/17

Deputy Barry Cowen: [...] A previous Government fell after trying to introduce VAT on children's clothes and shoes. We have been reminded several times that the 2% increase in the higher rate of VAT is not applicable to children's clothes and shoes but hard pressed vulnerable families will have to contribute an extra €55, and €50 for additional children, to clothe their families. Will the real socialists in the Labour Party follow the lead of the late Mr. Jim Kemmy, who brought down a Government on this issue?
Deputy Joan Burton: Bertie Ahern retired from politics after destroying the country.
Deputy Barry Cowen: The budget and the Social Welfare Bill is not only anti-family, it is anti-women. Child benefits will be cut——
Deputy Joan Burton: He destroyed the country.
Deputy Barry Cowen: I am glad to see the Minister reciprocating the respect I showed by not interrupting her.
Deputy Michael McGrath: We do not share her negativity. The country has not been destroyed.
An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order.
Deputy Barry Cowen: From 2014 the one-parent family allowance will only be paid until the youngest child reaches the age of seven. Last year the Fine Gael finance spokesperson asked Mr. Brian Lenihan what he had against third children. What has the Minister against children over the age of seven?

UI 184. 08.12.2011/17

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: [...] When she was dreaming up these proposals, perhaps she was watching it, was operating under some false cloud and believed the false assumption put across in the programme that, in some way, everybody on disability is, and I use the term the Minister for Finance, Deputy Noonan, used, "wayward"— that they are wayward scroungers. If she had any understanding of disability, the Minister——
Deputy Joan Burton: The Deputy should not speak about people like that.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The Minister for Finance, Deputy Noonan, was the one who raised that.

Deputy Joan Burton: The Minister did not call——

Acting Chairman (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The speaker has the floor.

Deputy Joan Burton: ——people on welfare “scroungers”. The Deputy should withdraw that accusation.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Has the Minister quite finished?

Deputy Joan Burton: He never used the term “wayward” about anybody in any walk of life or in any situation. The Deputy should withdraw that.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The speaker has the floor.

Deputy Joan Burton: The Deputy should withdraw that accusation about the Minister.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: If the Minister would let me address her——

Deputy Joan Burton: The Deputy should withdraw that——

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I will not withdraw a remark made on “Prime Time” on RTE by the Minister for Finance, Deputy Noonan, who said——

Deputy Joan Burton: The Deputy should withdraw that.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The Minister should have it out with the Minister for Finance.

Deputy Joan Burton: The Deputy should withdraw that. It does not become him to tell lies in this House and attribute them to——

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I do not believe——

Deputy Joan Burton: The Deputy should withdraw that.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: If the Minister shut up for a second, I might do that.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Order, please. The speaker has the floor.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: If the Minister was not so ignorant, so impolite——

Acting Chairman (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Order, please.

Deputy Joan Burton: Is the Deputy man enough to withdraw it?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The speaker has the floor.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: ——and insulting, she might give me an opportunity to let her know that I do not believe anybody on social welfare is wayward or a scrounger.

Deputy Joan Burton: Is the Minister man enough to withdraw that?

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The Minister is the one who is declaring that.

Deputy Joan Burton: The Deputy should be man enough to withdraw that now. Is he a man or a mouse?

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Minister——

Deputy Joan Burton: Is he man enough to withdraw a false accusation?

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I withdraw nothing because I did not make that charge. The Minister made that charge. The Minister has no understanding of disability. She needs to get one of those hearing aids she is cutting from many people.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: In 2010——

Acting Chairman (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Excuse me, speaker. The speaker has the floor. There has been far too much disruption throughout his speech. Can we please proceed, without interruption?

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The truth hurts.

Deputy Joan Burton: On a point of order, the speaker should withdraw an accusation ascribing the use of the term “scrounger” to someone who is not in the House. It is a term I am sure he has never utilised. Sinn Féin is very good at this kind of language. Will the speaker withdraw an accusation in regard to a term which I am perfectly confident the Minister for Finance has not used? The Deputy should be man enough to withdraw the allegation.

He also ascribed another word to me which I have never used. Does the speaker accept that I have never used that word? Other people may use that word but I have never used it. I hope the speaker will take my assurance——

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I hope the Acting Chairman will credit me with some of the time the Minister is using from my slot.

Deputy Joan Burton: On a point of order——

Acting Chairman (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Deputy has made her point of order.

Deputy Joan Burton: On a point of order, in regard to the decorum——

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: It is not a point of order.

Deputy Joan Burton: ——of this House, it ill becomes Sinn Féin to use language which demeans people who have a disability. It ill becomes Sinn Féin to use that kind of language——

Acting Chairman (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): That is not a point of order.

Deputy Joan Burton: ——in this House.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): There have been too many interruptions during this contribution. The speaker has the floor. If he wishes to withdraw something, he can do so.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I will not withdraw something I did not say.

Deputy Joan Burton: During the time of the British this use of language was called felon-setting.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The speaker has the floor.

Deputy Joan Burton: This is what Deputy Ó Snodaigh is at and he should withdraw it and not take his example so much from the UK.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The Minister should sit down.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Deputy Ó Snodaigh, please proceed.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The Minister is losing the run of herself like she did with her proposals in the Social Welfare Bill and her true colours are starting to come out.

Deputy Ciarán Cannon: The Deputy's true colours are starting to come out.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Not my true colours. I am quoting the Minister for Finance, Deputy Noonan, and the Minister of State can listen to the tape.[...]

UI 187. 01.02.2012/05

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Before the last election Fine Gael and the Labour Party railed against the arrogance of the Fianna Fáil Government and promised more democracy and accountability, open government and to get Ireland working. Yet, one year on the Government is conspiring with EU leaders to deny people a vote on the treaty which will further and substantially dismantle democracy across Europe and lock the citizens of this country and the rest of Europe into a straitjacket of austerity and cutbacks, which would guarantee mass unemployment and emigration for at least a decade if not longer and from which we may never recover.

It is extraordinary to hear the Minister, Deputy Varadkar, talk about how the Irish public would not understand the provisions of the treaty and get caught up in extraneous issues. It is unbelievably insulting——

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: I think he was probably talking about the Deputy rather than the people of Ireland.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: ——and antidemocratic. What will the next move be? Will we do away with elections altogether because the people do not understand what the sages on the other side of the House do?

Let us be absolutely clear about the legal position, no matter how the Government twists and turns to try to get out of it. The treaty refers to permanent measures. Permanent means no government can change them. If that is not an infringement of the constitutional right of the citizens of the country to determine their social and economic future, I do not know what is. Permanent means permanent and that is what the Government proposes to lock us into.

It then tried to cover this with blather about jobs which people are desperate for. Please explain to me how, if it can impose, as the treaty will require, at least ten years of brutal

austerity to meet these targets, it can create jobs and growth? It is like saying one will save a drowning man while holding his head under water. People are being suffocated by austerity and cutbacks and are forced onto their backs by the burden of the casino gambling debts of toxic banks.

It is unbelievable. It is not just this economy that has been crushed by austerity. The economies of Germany and Europe are slowing down. Every forecaster, including the IMF and ESRI, says the economies in Europe and Ireland are slowing down. At what point does one realise it is not working and is strangling and crucifying our economy and the European economy?

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: Where do you propose the money comes from?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Put the people before the bankers and speculators. The Government should get our money back from them and invest in jobs and growth. If the Government will not listen to the people, the people had better start taking to the streets.

UI 194. 16.02.2012/03

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I want to raise with the Tánaiste the plight of the residents of Priory Hall. More than 250 residents are in temporary accommodation since they were evacuated by a court order on 14 October 2011, well over 100 days ago. Is the Tánaiste aware that, despite the fact the evacuated residents have been out of their homes for several months, his colleague, the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Hogan, still refuses to meet with them?

Will the Tánaiste agree that the plight of the residents has been compounded by a decision of the management of Dublin City Council to appeal the High Court ruling requiring the council to assist them with their emergency housing needs? That appeal is before the Supreme Court for mention this morning. The Tánaiste's party, and Fine Gael, have repeatedly and correctly criticised the policies and the neglect that led to the property bubble——

Deputy Ray Butler: Will Deputy McDonald name the Priory Hall developer?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: ——lax planning, building and fire safety regulations and enforcement.

Deputy Anthony Lawlor: Name the developer.

Deputy Michael McCarthy: Who was the developer?

Deputy Aodhán Ó Riordáin: Name him.

An Ceann Comhairle: Order, please.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Priory Hall evacuees were failed by the State on all these grounds.

Deputies: Name the developer.

An Ceann Comhairle: Would Members please respect the Deputy?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Does the Tánaiste recall that the reason the residents were evacuated was because Priory Hall did not comply with fire safety and was a danger to their lives? This week marks the 31st anniversary of the Stardust tragedy which should be a constant reminder to all of the terrible consequences of neglect of fire safety.

Deputy Finian McGrath: Hear, hear.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Will the Government take the Priority Hall matter in hand? Will the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Hogan, [4]meet with the residents? Will he help to co-ordinate the search for a solution involving all concerned — the Minister himself, the residents, Dublin City Council and the banks?

Deputies: And the developer.

The Tánaiste: The Priory Hall residents were failed in the first instance by a Sinn Féin developer.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: That is a disgrace. The developer is a political opponent of Sinn Féin. That is an absolute disgrace.

Deputy Brian Stanley: That is Sticky propaganda.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: The Tánaiste should withdraw that disgraceful remark.

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: Order. Will Deputy Mac Lochlainn resume his seat?

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: The Tánaiste should withdraw that remark. The developer is a political opponent of Sinn Féin. We stood against him over the years.

An Ceann Comhairle: Can I have a reply to the Deputy's question, Tánaiste?

The Tánaiste: I will not withdraw. The Priory Hall residents were failed by a developer who, when Sinn Féin was going respectable, put on an Armani suit, like so many others——

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Will you stop?

(Interruptions).

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: That is a disgrace. He is an opponent of Sinn Féin.

Deputy Brian Stanley: Hold on to your Sticky propaganda.

The Tánaiste: In this particular case, the developer in question constructed a development which has left these people out of their homes.

Deputy Martin Ferris: The Tánaiste's Dear Great Leader from North Korea has passed away.

Deputy Brian Stanley: That is a Sticky lie.

The Tánaiste: There is not one Member who does not feel the deepest sympathy for the residents in Priory Hall. A terrible thing happened there. People bought their homes with hard-earned money and invested their hopes and futures in that building only to discover it is not fit for purpose.

Efforts are being made by different people to find the best outcome for the households concerned. I met with the representatives of the residents, as did as my colleague, the Minister of State with responsibility for housing and planning, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan, who is working to find a solution to this problem.

Options on accommodation were discussed and assessed. Until there are final agreements, however, it is too early to say what the result will be without causing further confusion and anxiety. There are also Supreme Court proceedings, which as Deputy McDonald said, are up for mention today and the court will adjudicate on several issues. It would not be appropriate for me to comment further on that until the court finishes its business.

Dublin City Council sought an early hearing on the matter of its appeal to the Supreme Court against the order of the High Court that the council meets the cost of the alternative accommodation required for the evacuated residents. The issue in the appeal is whether the High Court was entitled to make orders under section 23 of the Fire Safety Act 1981 requiring the council to pay the costs incurred by the residents. The order to pay such costs has serious implications for the taxpayer and the city council in its role as a fire authority.

The overriding priority at Priory Hall is to ensure the best outcome of the households concerned and to facilitate as early as possible a return to their own homes. In this respect, it will be necessary to ensure these homes are made fit for purpose and the costs for doing so should fall where they should. The Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government has asked Dublin City Council to do all in its powers to achieve the objective and has asked his Department to continue to liaise with the council in this regard.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Tánaiste should know dodging answering questions with the kind of inaccurate waffle he delivered at the beginning of his response is unedifying.

Deputy Pat Deering: It is the truth.

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy is entitled to a reply.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It is a bit ironic that the man who lectures on respectability comes from an outfit that was very close to North Korea and was quite adept at running off dodgy fivers.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: What about Colombia?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Tánaiste might remember his own past too.

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: Can I have some order please for the Deputy?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Tánaiste did not answer the question as to why the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Hogan, refuses to meet with the Priory Hall residents.

Deputy Finian McGrath: He is dodging again.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Tánaiste claims there is a priority and an urgency around making these homes safe, with which I agree. However, there is no signal of urgency on the part of the Government. This contrasts sharply with the urgency with which it moved a statutory instrument to award over €17,000 extra to the Minister of State for housing and planning, [6]Deputy Jan O'Sullivan, for the glory of her attending Cabinet meetings which is actually part of her job description.

An Ceann Comhairle: Can I have your question Deputy as you are over time?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: What about Sinn Féin's Westminster expenses?

Deputy Michael McCarthy: What about Sinn Féin fund-raising?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Deputy Mac Lochlainn is quiet now.

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: Can I have your question Deputy as you are over time?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: You are quiet now, Pádraig.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: When will the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Hogan——

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: You are quiet now, Pádraig.

Deputy Emmet Stagg: They take the Queen's shilling all right.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Calm down, Jerry.

An Ceann Comhairle: Will the Sinn Féin Members give their deputy leader a chance?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: When will the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Hogan, meet with the residents concerned? What proactive strategy has the Government to address the issues at hand? Much as with the previous question on waste management in Dublin city, it is not acceptable for the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, Deputy Hogan, to take two steps back and wash his hands of these important matters. Can we have a straight answer to when he will meet with the Priory Hall residents?

The Tánaiste: The Minister of State with responsibility for housing and planning, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan, has met with the residents of Priory Hall and is actively involved in dealing with this with Dublin City Council. She will meet again with the residents if that is necessary. The Government has considered the significantly difficult set of circumstances the residents of Priory Hall have found themselves in as a result of the appalling actions of the developer. That is where this problem——

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: As a result of no regulation.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: It was the developer.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: It is a disgrace.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: It was down to no regulation.

An Ceann Comhairle: Will Deputy Mac Lochlainn allow the answer to the question? We are over time as it is.

The Tánaiste: The Government will not carry the can for dodgy developers irrespective of with whom they have been associated.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: And neither will we.

The Tánaiste: Sinn Féin is closer to him than anyone in the Government.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Anthony McIntyre is his agent. Is he a friend of Sinn Féin?

An Ceann Comhairle: Would you stay quiet, please?

The Tánaiste: The residents in this estate have a significant problem that needs to be addressed. There is a court action which is related to it which must take its own course. In the meantime, the Minister of State with responsibility for housing and planning, Deputy Jan O'Sullivan, is dealing with this issue. She has met with the residents of Priory Hall and will

do so again. She is in touch with Dublin City Council on the issue. The Government will do everything it possibly can to get this issue resolved, the residents of Priory Hall back into their homes as quickly as possible——

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Except the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government will not meet the residents.

The Tánaiste: No, that is not the case.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Will you answer my question then?

The Tánaiste: Deputy McDonald seems to be more interested in what the Minister is doing than she is in the residents.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: The Government is interested in getting the residents of this estate back into their homes as quickly as possible. The Minister of State for housing and planning is dealing with that.

Deputy Finian McGrath: The residents want to meet the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government. That is the crux.

UI 201 **31.03.2011/20**

Deputy Pearse Doherty: [...]The Minister told us today that the stress tests do not cover these two banks, as we already know, but he went further and told us that if capital requirements are needed, the Government will look at options and it will minimise the exposure to the Irish taxpayer. That means that [91]there will be a minimum exposure, but there will still be exposure to the Irish taxpayer for a further capital requirement into these two banks. How the hell do Labour Party Members sit on those benches listening to the Minister tell the Irish people that he is committed to looking at putting more money into Anglo Irish Bank and Irish Nationwide Building Society? It is a ridiculous situation, and he has not even said in this Chamber that he will burn the senior unguaranteed bondholders in those institutions? Why is there no outcry, Joan? What has happened?

Deputy Joan Burton: Because you signed the guarantee.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Who has gagged you?

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, address your comments through the Chair.

Deputy Joan Burton: You were——

An Ceann Comhairle: Minister, refrain from encouraging him.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: We in Sinn Féin put down a Private Members' motion yesterday to scrap the universal social charge and replace it with the system that was in existence prior to the December budget. Everybody on that side, including Labour Party Members, voted to keep it there. They voted to keep the tax on the working poor. It would cost €420 million to revert to the old system. That is a great deal of money but it is a pittance compared to the money the Government has announced today that it will inject into these defunct banks.

UI 205. **24.05.2011/26**

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: [...]I find it rich to listen, not to Deputy Ó Caoláin, but to a Deputy who was a Minister of State when the Government allowed the Minister for Health and Children to distance herself so far from the Department that it was not merely at arm's length but out of her control. What we are looking at here must have been seen by the previous Government before it went out of office.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: We did not write the programme for Government. The Government wrote it. We do not mind being blamed for things we are responsible for.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: I find it difficult to listen to that kind of rhetoric——

Deputy Billy Kelleher: We had to listen to it for 14 years.

Deputy Kathleen Lynch: ——putting elderly people and their families under such pressure.

UI 206. 02.06.2011/04

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Watching the antics of this Government in recent times reminds me of “Fawly Towers”. The latest water charges episode has the Tánaiste and the Taoiseach cast as Manolos, claiming they know nothing.

Deputies: Manuel.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Or even Manuels.

Deputy Arthur Spring: Manolos are shoes.

An Ceann Comhairle: Can we proceed, please?

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: They still know nothing.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Whatever about the Tánaiste’s preference for footwear, when can we expect to see legislation on water charges, which the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government has stated will be imposed on households from 1 January? When can we expect to see legislation on the household charge, however it is defined, and will this be part of the budget or a stand-alone measure? I could ask how the Tánaiste expects people to pay these charges when record numbers are struggling with personal debt but that would be entirely out of order.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you so much.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The legislative programme envisages the electricity (transmission assets) Bill. This proposes to hand over ESB transmission assets. The Government has a copy of the Cahill report, which it has failed to publish. I understand the report states clearly that the handover would be expensive and damaging to the State. The report also outlines that the State should and can seek a derogation from the EU directive.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy McDonald is talking about the legislation.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I am asking about the legislation in the first instance and, second, whether the Government has sought a derogation from the directive and if the Tánaiste could publish the Cahill report.

The Tánaiste: I recommend that Deputy McDonald improve the quality of her television viewing. It is a sad life to be watching reruns of an old, outdated television series.

UI 210. 20.09.2011/18

An Ceann Comhairle: Does Deputy McDonald have a supplementary question?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I thought the Chair was not going to return to me.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: How could he forget the Deputy?

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: Deputy McDonald should not be like that.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy has a question.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach could have added to his list——

An Ceann Comhairle: A supplementary question, please, Deputy.

Deputy Pat Rabbitte: She should ask a question as these are questions to the Taoiseach.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: She should propose a question for answer by the Taoiseach.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I will move to use the interrogative case — the Taoiseach could have outlined that his comprehensive spending review is like a sword of Damocles hanging over the population headed up by the cutback Minister, Deputy Howlin.

An Ceann Comhairle: Can I have a question from the Deputy?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach could also concede, as others have suggested, that his strategy is failing in respect of people who are on the dole but he said he will not produce a revised programme for Government. I presume from that we will just have to put it together line by line, chapter by chapter, as he comes in here, fails the people——

An Ceann Comhairle: Can I have a question from the Deputy?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: ——and then points across the Chamber at Fianna Fáil.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: This is a political speech.

An Ceann Comhairle: Can I have a question from the Deputy?

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: There is a question in there somewhere.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: When will the Taoiseach give us concrete information on his plans for the commercial semi-States?

An Ceann Comhairle: I will take a final supplementary from Deputy Martin.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach has a long list of questions to deal with.

Deputy Michael Noonan: Micheál will deal with those.

UI. 215 20.10.201/03

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Yesterday, the Taoiseach ducked and dived as he tried to explain away the Government's inaction in respect of the 950 job losses at Aviva. Following yesterday's briefing, workers at Aviva are still in the dark and fearful for their jobs. It is not clear whether the redundancies will be voluntary or compulsory. The Government has done a great deal of talking about jobs but the only action we have seen is the closure of one company after another. Some 250 jobs at Pocket Kings and 175 jobs at Allied Logistics have been lost in Dublin. Some 700 jobs are under threat at MBNA in County Leitrim. Some 139 jobs were cut at Vodafone in Dundalk. Of course, 575 jobs at TalkTalk in Waterford are gone. We now have the situation with Aviva in Dublin, Cork and Galway. We did not get far with the Taoiseach yesterday.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: That is dangerous.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Perhaps the Tánaiste can enlighten the House on why the Government has not directly intervened with Aviva management. Why has it not moved to secure these jobs? Does it intend simply to let 1,000 jobs, and possibly more, haemorrhage from this economy with no Government response or action?

The Tánaiste: It is not true that the Government has not been dealing with the Aviva job situation. My principal concern is for the employees of Aviva who are facing the prospect of losing their jobs. It is a very big job loss. The way in which Aviva treated its employees yesterday was disgraceful.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: The manner in which the employees were called in, required not to talk to the press and then let back out again no wiser than they were when they went in is simply not acceptable.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: It is illegal.

The Tánaiste: The Minister, Deputy Bruton, has been dealing with the company on this issue. They have been engaging on a continuing basis to minimise the impact on jobs in Ireland. The Minister has met the company's European chief executive officer, Mr. Mayer, and its global chief executive officer, Mr. Moss. He has remained in regular contact with them throughout the process. At the direction of the Minister, Deputy Bruton, IDA Ireland has also engaged with the company to explore the potential for additional jobs growth over the coming period. The Government is engaging with Aviva with a view to minimising the number of job losses and exploring how extra jobs can be created. The affected workers have and will continue to have the support of the Government and the State agencies. Deputy McDonald's assertion that the Government is doing nothing about jobs is inaccurate. There is nothing the Government is doing more about than jobs.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: It is not making much of an impression.

The Tánaiste: That is why, for example, the Government is seeking to get additional investment and additional jobs in this country.

Deputy Robert Dowds: A good few jobs are coming to my constituency.

The Tánaiste: I went on a trade mission to Japan and Korea last week. We will meet officials from India this week. We are pursuing a strategy of attracting investment from Asia.

Deputy Barry Cowen: This is waffle.

The Tánaiste: We convened the successful Global Irish Economic Forum to bring together the many people who have goodwill towards Ireland. We hope they will be in a position to move investment decisions in Ireland's direction.

Deputy Willie O’Dea: Unemployment is rising.

The Tánaiste: We are very appreciative of the fact that President Clinton, who was at that event, is willing to convene a meeting of corporate leaders in the United States.

Deputy Finian McGrath: He was brought here by Denis O’Brien.

The Tánaiste: We hope that will bring about increased investment in jobs in this country.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: That is all very laudable.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: We thank the Deputy.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Government’s response to the loss of jobs at TalkTalk and Aviva has been milk and water, to say the least.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Why is Sinn Féin not raising the problems at Priory Hall?

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: The Deputy is a gurrrier. That is disgraceful.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Aithníonn ciaróg ciaróg eile.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It strikes me that if the Government is not in a position to protect existing jobs, its capacity to create new work has to be questioned. The Tánaiste correctly said the workers have been treated despicably by management. I am glad he acknowledged that. Their union, Unite, has made it clear that the workforce is willing to consider any other cost-cutting plans. In other words, the workers are prepared to fight for their jobs. There is no reciprocation on that matter from the Government.

An Ceann Comhairle: A question, please.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: A passive engagement from the Minister, Deputy Bruton, and others with management is not enough and neither is tea and sympathy for workers.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: How can engagement be passive?

Deputy Finian McGrath: Be quiet Jerry, or I will tell Denis O’Brien on you.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I want the Tánaiste to tell the House what precisely he, as Minister with responsibility for trade and investment, and his Government colleagues will do in the next 24 to 48 hours to ensure these jobs are not lost.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: I am glad the Deputy is interested in industrial relations.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy McDonald for her exceptional and unusual praise for the Government’s efforts to bring about investment and jobs.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Willie O’Dea: It was faint praise.

Deputy Barry Cowen: They will take all the praise they can get.

The Tánaiste: As I said, the Aviva workers who are quite rightly seeking to protect their jobs and minimise the job losses in the company have the full support of the Government.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: What does that mean?

The Tánaiste: It means the Minister, Deputy Bruton, who is directly responsible, is already engaging with the company.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: It means no jobs.

The Tánaiste: He has had a considerable amount of talk with that company.

Deputy Willie O’Dea: The talk is all one way.

The Tánaiste: The same can be said of the State agencies and that will continue.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Deputy O’Dea could not answer the questions he was asked on “Morning Ireland” this morning.

The Tánaiste: The strategy the Government is pursuing in the work it is doing is to increase investment in jobs in this country. We are pursuing that vigorous strategy everywhere we can. We want to attract investment into this country and create jobs. It is an unfortunate fact that from time to time, jobs will be lost in one company or another for a variety of reasons.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Is that the Tánaiste’s message to the Aviva workers?

The Tánaiste: No. The Deputy should not be smart about it.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I am not being smart. I am very angry about this.

Deputy Barry Cowen: The Tánaiste was smart enough for 14 years.

The Tánaiste: People losing their jobs is a very serious matter.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Absolutely.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Where is the task force?

The Tánaiste: People are very worried this morning about losing their jobs and the consequences for them.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: We need action, not engagement.

The Tánaiste: It needs to be taken a little more seriously than just the kind of political opportunism Deputy McDonald is engaged in.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: It needs to be taken more seriously by the Government.

The Tánaiste: The Government is in discussions with the company in question and those discussions will continue.

Deputy Ray Butler: This is Killinaskully politics from Sinn Féin.

The Tánaiste: The State agencies will continue to support the workers in the company.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: How can these jobs be saved?

The Tánaiste: I have given my views on how the company has handled the situation.

Deputy Barry Cowen: The Tánaiste has been too quiet, just as he has been at the Cabinet table.

The Tánaiste: We will do everything we can to minimise job losses in the company.

UI 224. 30.11.2011/05

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Lucinda Creighton): At least the Chamber has been enlightened. We now understand that Deputy Ross does not believe in European solidarity or in any of the positive solutions that may be put on the table next week.

Deputy Shane Ross: None of them were mentioned in the Taoiseach's speech.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It was baloney.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: If I understand him correctly, he wants the Taoiseach to oppose everything when he represents the Government in Brussels next week and to return home with nothing.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: He wants the Taoiseach to stand up for the country.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: That is Deputy Ross's solution. I am sorry to disappoint him by saying the Government intends to engage far more constructively and find a common solution to this European crisis. We are determined to solve the problems that are having direct impacts on our citizens.

I thank all the Deputies who have tried to engage constructively during this crucial debate. There is no doubt that the meetings which will take place next week will be of huge significance for our country, our citizens and, particularly, our currency. When I listen to Deputies on the other side of the House, I am sometimes led to believe that the eurozone is a foreign country that somehow does not have anything to do with this State or its citizens. Nobody seems to be interested in discussing the impact of the potential collapse of the currency.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Of course we are.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: They do not seem interested in the disastrous consequences that its collapse would have for this State and its citizens.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: That is not true.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: We are determined to find a clear path forward. As the Taoiseach has said, some proposals will be brought to the table next week for an initial discussion among heads of state and government. From that point on, there will be a long period during which states can outline their positions, make suggestions and express their views on how we should proceed. The first thing we intend to do is identify where exactly the challenges lie and what exactly we want to achieve. We will then embark on the process of trying to agree a way forward in the broad areas of economic governance and fiscal co-ordination.

The more important and immediate challenge is to identify a way of calming the turbulence in the markets that has affected our currency over recent months and has reached a worrying and alarming stage. Deputy Martin and others have suggested that the Government has not set out

a path or communicated its views. I know the Deputy's initial period in opposition was difficult——

Deputy Micheál Martin: No, it was not.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: ——because he was trying to play the statesman and work constructively with the Government.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I was not playing anything.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: It is clear that he has abandoned that approach and has resorted to opposition for opposition's sake.

Deputy Micheál Martin: This is a serious crisis.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: It is interesting that there has been more engagement from Sinn Féin——

Deputy Micheál Martin: Can the Deputy do better than that?

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: ——which seems to be providing the only real opposition in this House.

Deputy Micheál Martin: We are in a eurozone crisis.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: The only engagement on all aspects of European affairs, particularly in relation to the euro crisis, has come from Sinn Féin.

Deputy Micheál Martin: That is not true.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: A very good meeting of the Joint Committee on European Affairs took place yesterday. Less than 20 minutes ago, Deputy Martin referred to the committee as “nonsense”.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I did not.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: I would like to make an important point.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I certainly did not.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: You did.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Minister of State is playing politics.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: He said it was “nonsense”.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I said the Government's articulation of what happened was “nonsense”.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: That is precisely what the Deputy said on the record of this House.

Deputy Micheál Martin: This is pathetic.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: Perhaps the Deputy should keep an eye on his colleagues.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Minister of State should read the speeches I have made over the last six months.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: Yesterday's meeting of the Joint Committee on European Affairs lasted two hours. One Fianna Fáil Deputy showed up for about ten minutes. He made a fleeting contribution, which did not contain any constructive suggestions, before he left.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Where are all the Fine Gael Deputies today?

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: He did not stay for the rest of the debate.

Deputy Micheál Martin: This is silly stuff.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: Other Opposition Members, particularly Deputy Mac Lochlainn and Senator Reilly of Sinn Féin——

Deputy Micheál Martin: This is childish.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: ——engaged constructively in a meaningful discussion about the implications of the euro crisis and the need to find solutions.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Where are the Minister of State's colleagues?

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: We discussed potential solutions in detail. Deputy Martin's party was not even represented at the meeting. He would want to take a look inside——

Deputy Micheál Martin: With the greatest of respect, that is a pathetic response.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: It is not pathetic.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Government has not made any proposals with regard to the deep and profound crisis in the eurozone.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: If Deputy Martin respects the parliamentary procedures in this House——

Deputy Micheál Martin: I have been here for the last hour and a half to contribute as I do every time we discuss a summit or meeting.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: —and the committee system in the Oireachtas—

Deputy Micheál Martin: This is pathetic nonsense.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: —he might take a look at the structures in his own party.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Minister of State knows that Members have a lot going on in these Houses.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: The Deputy should start thinking—

Deputy Micheál Martin: There is a lot of activity in these Houses.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: —about how he can contribute constructively and positively to this debate.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Minister of State is playing silly and petty politics with a serious crisis.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: This is far too important to play petty politics with it.

Deputy Micheál Martin: That is what the Minister of State is doing.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: Deputy Martin likes to fling accusations across the floor of the House when he thinks somebody from the media might be present. He prefers to play to the gallery, rather than getting down to the nitty-gritty of working on constructive engagement—

Deputy Micheál Martin: We are trying to engage.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: —as we did at the Joint Committee on European Affairs yesterday.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I asked the Taoiseach to meet us, but he refused to do so on two occasions.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: The Deputy's party did not even bother to participate.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I am trying to be as constructive as I can. The Government will not meet us or tell us what is on the agenda. It will not tell us what is being proposed? How dare the Minister of State come in here and say no proposals are coming from this side of the House?

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: No proposals have been made.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I am fed up of being inside here and hearing nothing from the Government about anything to do with European affairs.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: Why does the Deputy not ask his spokespersons to attend committee meetings—

Deputy Micheál Martin: How dare the Minister of State come in here with that kind of nonsense?

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: —and participate in the detailed debates that happen?

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Do not mind committee meetings.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Government has told us nothing about what is going on. It told us nothing last month. It told us nothing the month before. It is pathetic nonsense.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: This is the House.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: Why do you not bother to talk to your Deputies and make sure they attend?

Deputy Micheál Martin: I am waiting for proposals.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask the Minister of State to address her remarks through the Chair.

Deputy Micheál Martin: This is not a Fine Gael meeting in Dublin 4.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Martin, please.

Deputy Micheál Martin: This is a serious Dáil session on the most important summit, potentially, in the history of the euro.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask the Minister of State to conclude her reply.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Minister of State is giving us this kind of pathetic nonsense.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: Here we go again with "pathetic nonsense".

Deputy Micheál Martin: That is what it is.

Deputy Phil Hogan: Deputy Martin never read his brief.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Come on now, Phil.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: Fianna Fáil cannot even be bothered to send Deputies to meetings of the Joint Committee on European Affairs.

Deputy Phil Hogan: Deputy Martin cost us a fortune when he failed to read his brief.

Deputy Dara Murphy: Fianna Fáil Ministers did not attend meetings they were supposed to attend when they were in government. Deputy Martin should not forget that.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Deputy is wrong.

Deputy Dara Murphy: No.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: He is not wrong.

Deputy Micheál Martin: According to an Austrian study, we had the fifth highest rate among the 27 member states over the last ten years.

Deputy Dara Murphy: Our reputation is being restored by the Taoiseach and his Ministers.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: We should not talk about the past.

Deputy Dara Murphy: It was damaged when Deputy Martin was in government.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: We are where we are.

Deputy Phil Hogan: Fair play.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The future is what is important.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: The bottom line is that this Government has a clear agenda. Our priority is to find a solution to the immediate crisis.

Deputy Micheál Martin: Thanks be to God.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: The Taoiseach brought our suggestions to the Chancellor in Berlin two weeks ago. He did likewise during his engagements with President Van Rompuy.

Deputy Micheál Martin: He has had no such engagements.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: I will do the same at next week's meeting of the General Affairs Council. Our number one focus and priority is to ensure there is a structured ECB intervention in order to provide a proper, meaningful and credible backstop to the major crisis that is swirling around us.

Deputy Micheál Martin: We have been telling you that in here for six months. I welcome the Government's belated conversion to our thinking.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: It is not a belated conversion.

Deputy Micheál Martin: It is.

Deputy Stephen S. Donnelly: Yes, it is.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: We have been working on this agenda——

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Minister of State should go back over her speeches.

[379]Deputy Lucinda Creighton: ——since the Government took office.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It is a last-minute job.

Deputy Phil Hogan: It is not.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The Minister of State should go back over her speeches for the past nine months and tell me how it is not a belated conversion.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: If Fianna Fáil Party Deputies engaged more in European affairs committee meetings, Deputy Martin would know exactly what the Government has done.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That concludes statements on the European Council meeting on 8 and 9 December 2011.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I have been saying this for the past six months in this Chamber and the Minister of State ridiculed me. Only a month ago, the Minister of State claimed we had made a great breakthrough.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: We seem to have touched a raw nerve on the other side of the House.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I want a debate but the Minister of State will not even take questions now.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please.

UI 225. 01.12.2011/10

Deputy Luke ‘Ming’ Flanagan: [...]I always understood that the Labour Party was a socialist party and the idea of socialism was that everyone is treated equally. It begs the question: what is equal about a situation where a poor child could potentially be left to die while a rich child gets to skip the queue? I cannot see how any socialist could stick by this form of socialism. It does not make sense, so I am left a little bit baffled on where socialism has gone, if it is about killing the poor and letting the rich live longer.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: The Deputy should read the programme for Government.

Deputy Luke ‘Ming’ Flanagan: The programme for Government is not socialist.

An Ceann Comhairle: We are using up time now.

Deputy Róisín Shortall: Never let facts get in the way of a good line.

UI. 226 07.12.2011/03

The Taoiseach: It is against the background of the country having to borrow almost €60 billion at exorbitant interest rates that we have been left in the position in which we find ourselves. That is a challenge with which we must deal. When I answered Deputy Micheál Martin’s question yesterday, I gave him the facts, as outlined in the budget. This measure is part of the troika agreement that the disability sector be looked at.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: What?

[3]Deputy Joan Burton: Yes. It is included in it.

The Taoiseach: It was included as part of the memorandum of understanding.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: On what page?

An Ceann Comhairle: Would Deputy Mattie McGrath mind?

The Taoiseach: Bhí an Teachta Mattie McGrath ag caint faoi shéarachas inné.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Agus beidh mé arís.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy has nothing to do with Leaders’ Questions. He should just stay quiet.

The Taoiseach: It is part of and a requirement of the IMF-EU memorandum of understanding. The IMF acknowledged that this issue would be very difficult. It is posing enormous difficulties for and exerting pressure on a particular segment of young people. It does not affect anyone currently in receipt of disability benefit. It is in respect of children who will reach the age of 16 years on and after 1 January. That cohort is affected. Yesterday Deputy Ray Butler brought to my attention — I do not know if he is in the House——

Deputy Ray Butler: I am here.

The Taoiseach: ——a case in his constituency in which a father was very upset at what was happening——

Deputy Finian McGrath: We are all aware of cases.

The Taoiseach: ——because his child had a particular difficulty. I telephoned him and his point was that his child wished to receive the allowance. Given the nature of the problem, his lifespan is undetermined, no more than for of any of us. This is a case on which the Government has listened to people in particular circumstances involving very sensitive issues. The Minister for Social Protection has asked the chairperson of the working group dealing with taxation and social welfare issues, Ms Ita Mangan, to look at the circumstances in which we find ourselves and report back to Government very quickly. This means that somebody who will be 16 years of age on 1 or 2 January will continue to be dealt with under the current system, in other words, he or she will continue to draw his or her disability allowance as heretofore pending a review of the issue by the chairperson of the working group dealing with taxation and social welfare issues. I have given this as an example of a Government that listens and is prepared to act where people point out that things are very serious.

Deputy Billy Kelleher: The Government has lost four backbenchers because it is not listening.

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Kelleher, your party leader does not need any help.

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan: A few Fianna Fáil backbenchers were lost.

A Deputy: More were lost under Mr. Brian Cowen.

Deputy Barry Cowen: Drop that.

Deputy Micheál Martin: With the greatest of respect, it is time for the Taoiseach to stop blaming everyone for decisions he is taking. The Taoiseach's answer this morning lacks credibility and is pathetic. This decision in respect of young people with disabilities has nothing to do with the troika.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Joan Burton: It is in the deal.

Deputy James Reilly: Hypocrisy.

Deputy Micheál Martin: The troika has made this clear time and time again. As for listening to people, we raised this matter yesterday. This cut——

UI. 229 **08.12.2011/17**

Deputy Joan Burton: [...] The initial crisis in Ireland was home-grown, caused in large part by a reckless Fianna Fail-led Government, with their greedy developer pals, reckless bankers and lame regulators.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: It is the Government's problem now.

Deputy Joan Burton: The home-grown problems have been made greatly more difficult by the global financial crisis and the euro crisis in particular. We have only a modest role as a country to play in resolving the euro crisis.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: That is not what the Deputies opposite told the Irish people before the general election when the Deputy Kenny ran off to meet Chancellor Merkel in Europe.

Deputy Joan Burton: The job of getting the books balanced is one which is definitely within our control. It is vital that this Government secures economic recovery in our country.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: There are two chances of that.

Deputy Joan Burton: To do this we must put the public finances back on a sustainable footing. We must bridge the gap between Government expenditure and revenue which is currently filled by borrowing. At present, there is a shortfall of €16 billion in the Government's finances. Unless the rate of borrowing is reduced, the burden of debt servicing will take up an increasing proportion of tax revenue. This would mean that expenditure on vital schemes and services such as those provided by the Department of Social Protection would become increasingly unsustainable.

The Government decided to make an adjustment of €3.8 billion between tax and spending in 2012. Of this, €1.4 billion is to come from day to day spending, including health, welfare and education. As the biggest spending Department, the Department of Social Protection must play its part in that adjustment. This Department currently accounts for approximately 40% of [253]all current government expenditure. This means that €4 in every €10 that the Government spends are spent on social protection. The reality is that it is not possible to stabilise and reduce public spending without any impact on my Department's budget.

However, despite the extremely challenging financial environment in which we find ourselves, the adjustment in social protection spending next year will be limited to €475 million or just over 2% of the Department's spend. This compares with a reduction of €810 million in 2010 and a reduction of €515 million in 2009 when the previous Government was in power.

Some on the Fianna Fáil benches have been critical of these measures and I can assure them these are not the measures I would have hoped to introduce in my first budget. However, let me be very clear, this Government has done more to protect the people who turn to the Department of Social Protection for help than its predecessor ever did.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: God help them.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Remember McCreevy's dirty dozen, lads.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Surely the Minister did not write that speech.

Deputy Joan Burton: We have also remembered those who are working on low incomes and not claiming social protection.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The Minister did not convince Deputy Patrick Nulty of that.

Deputy Joan Burton: They are equally entitled to be served by the attentions of this Government in helping to remove some of the burden of the universal social charge. We have minimised, in so far as is possible, the spending reduction in social protection because we recognise that people are totally dependent on the support provided by the State to enable them to eat, keep themselves warm, provide shelter for themselves and their families, and bring up the next generation of Irish workers and citizens.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: In poverty.

Deputy Joan Burton: There are many people who are new to need as a result of this deep and prolonged recession. On the outside they are coping but behind closed doors they are just about making ends meet.

A Deputy: The Minister is making it worse for them.

Deputy Joan Burton: I want to make sure that these people do not slide helplessly into a cycle of deprivation and long-term welfare dependency. I want to protect them from the worst consequences of this very deep recession by delivering on this Government's promise not to cut primary social welfare payments.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: But the Minister has cut them.

Deputy Joan Burton: I want to ensure that the communities they live in remain sustainable and welfare spending contributes to this by stimulating and supporting local economies. I want to make clear that the measures in this Bill follow very detailed analysis and discussions by both parties in government. Tough decisions had to be taken on where to reduce expenditure while trying to minimise the impact on those most in need.

Before I detail the areas where changes are being made, I will outline first the supports which are being fully maintained at their current levels, so as to provide reassurance to people who had been concerned that they might be cut. This Government has delivered on its promise not to cut primary social welfare rates. The personal rates of all weekly payments such as jobseeker's benefit and allowance, illness benefit, invalidity pension, disability allowance, blind pension, carer's benefit, carer's allowance, State pensions, widow's pensions and one parent family payment will not be reduced next year. In addition, increases which are paid for spouses and partners and dependent children are fully protected. Extra allowances which are paid to pensioners who live alone and those who are aged over 80 will continue at their current rates. The free travel scheme and free television licence will not change. The half-rate carers allowance scheme and the extra payment for caring for more than one person are retained as well as the respite care grant at its current value of €1,700 per annum.

I turn now to the question of supports for families. In 2011 supports for children and families account for 12% of total social welfare expenditure, or nearly €3 billion, of which €2 billion will go on child benefit. As we all know, the environment in which a child grows up is a major determinant of health and success in adulthood. Social protection resources must be targeted to ensure that those most in need of support receive it and to ensure the supports are used in the best way possible in the formative years.

The budgetary measures that directly affect child related payments are measured and the rates of payment continue to ensure that the needs of families are met. The standard rate of child benefit will remain unchanged at €140 per month. There will be no reduction in child benefit for the first and second child. Importantly for women, it remains a universal payment paid to the caring parent usually the mother.

I find it amazing that Sinn Féin is so critical of this measure when one considers child benefit in Northern Ireland is just €67.70 a month for the second and other children. I have a question for Deputy Gerry Adams.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: It would be a lot easier to ask David Cameron. You might get an answer from him.

Deputy Finian McGrath: Ask David Cameron and the Liberal Democrats.

Deputy Joan Burton: How can Sinn Féin stand over paying the woman in Newry €67.70—

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: It just shows your ignorance; you do not even know where the money comes from and who sets the rates.

Deputy Joan Burton: —for her second child—

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Ignorance is bliss. The problem is that you do not seem to understand.

Deputy Joan Burton: —while criticising this Government—

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I am criticising you for ignorance.

Deputy Joan Burton: —for maintaining the rate at €140 for both the first and second children. Let me remind you that in 2012—

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Who sets the rates and—

[255]**Deputy Joan Burton:** —the monthly rate for the third child in the Republic will be €148.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: —raises taxes? It is Westminster.

Deputy Joan Burton: It will be €160 for the fourth and each subsequent child. How come your party can manage to extract only €67.70 for the second child—

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: You have absolutely no idea what goes on.

Deputy Joan Burton: —from your paymasters in Westminster, whereas this Republic can still manage €140 despite being in a bailout programme?

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Good luck.

Deputy Joan Burton: Answer me that.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I have answered already but you will not listen. Your hearing aid is broken and you will not be able to get it replaced now.

Deputy Joan Burton: Why is the child living in Lifford less deserving than the child living in Strabane?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: You can claim £1 million on expenses and you are not even going over there.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Deputy Buttimer does not have a clue what he is talking about. Our only offices are constituency offices. If he wishes to debate it—

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We are not having a debate.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I would love if the Minister put the correct figures on the record.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Everybody wants to Chair the Dáil but I am chairing it at the moment.

Deputy Joan Burton: I appreciate that reductions in child benefit will be difficult for some families. However the provision of cash supports for children is only part of the solution to providing better long-term outcomes for our children. Ireland has comparatively generous child benefit rates but this does not guarantee that our children fare better when they become adults. We need to look at the way in which we use money to address these problems to find better and more sustainable outcomes for our children.

Since being appointed Minister for Social Protection in March this year, I have looked with fresh eyes at the existing social protection system. One of my key priorities has been to balance the books, in particular by starting to put the social insurance fund on a sustainable footing. The fund is expected to have a deficit of €1.9 billion this year and another €1.5 billion in 2012.

Rebates to employers and lump sums paid directly to employees are paid from the social insurance fund. I consider that the level of rebate of 60% is not sustainable in the current economic climate.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Joan Burton: I propose therefore to reduce the rebate to 15%. While this may cause difficulties for some employers it should be noted that redundancy rebate payments to employers are not common in many EU and other jurisdictions. In the UK, for example, the redundancy payment is funded 100% by the employer and there is no recovery from the State. Given the low level of employer PRSI payable in Ireland, I do not see why we should dip in

to a fund that is already in deficit to compensate often profitable companies for the cost of making their employees redundant in Ireland and, in some cases, transferring their employment abroad. We should spend our money on retaining jobs and not on incentivising redundancy.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Joan Burton: This is a change to which the country will have to adapt because it is what happens in countries such as Germany. We need to learn how to retain jobs rather than incentivising redundancy.

A core principle of sustainable social protection systems in advanced economies is that citizens receive benefits in proportion to their contributions. Some of the changes I will introduce today in the area of pensions put this principle into practice. Another principle is that we should gradually move towards a system where everyone should have an entitlement to one weekly income support payment only with no special arrangements or top-ups for particular groups. It is no longer possible to have a social welfare system where some people get more than one primary weekly payment if we want to avoid reducing the level of weekly payments generally. We have delivered on our promise to retain core rates, but we are discontinuing entitlements to certain concurrent payments whereby some people end up receiving more than one social welfare payment in a week.

Just over half the savings announced come from five main measures. I will reduce the rebate for companies which make staff redundant. The fuel allowance will in future be payable for 26 weeks, a reduction of six weeks.

Deputies: Shame.

Deputy Joan Burton: The level of the allowance and its duration have greatly increased during the past ten years. The scheme is unsustainable, given the increase in numbers and costs and the fiscal position of the State. Of course, we will still pay the fuel allowance for the coldest six months of the year——

Deputy Finian McGrath: How do you measure it?

Deputy Joan Burton: ——from mid-October to mid-April. It has always been the case, and will continue to be the case, that a person in difficulty with fuel or energy costs can go to their community welfare service. This service has been integrated into my Department and it is ready to assist people in difficulty.

I will reduce child benefit to €148 for the third child, while the rate for the fourth child will be reduced to €160.

Deputy Finian McGrath: Shame.

Deputy Joan Burton: I will increase the minimum contribution to rent or mortgage interest supplement by €6 a week for a single person and €11 week for a couple. Curtailing access to the mortgage interest supplement scheme is consistent with the Keane report on mortgage arrears. I am determined to get value for the €500 million which the Department spends on rent supplement each year.

The amount of earnings disregarded for the purposes of the one parent family payment means test will be reduced from €146.50 per week to €130 per week next year. There are a [257]number of other changes to the one parent family payment scheme. The scheme cost €1.1 billion in 2010, an increase from €751 million in 2005. Despite these significant levels of spending on one parent families, the results have been poor in terms of tackling poverty and providing for social inclusion.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: This will make it worse.

Deputy Joan Burton: The budget announcement included a number of other measures which are not provided for in the Bill. Some of these measures relate to non-statutory schemes and do not require legislative amendments. Other measures will be implemented through regulations and through legislation to be brought forward early in 2012.

In this regard, I specifically welcome the measures to broaden the PRSI base agreed in the budget by my colleague, the Minister for Finance, Deputy Michael Noonan. The revenues of more than €50 million to be raised from these measures will contribute to filling the €1.5 billion hole in the social insurance fund.

I also welcome the recognition by the Minister, Deputy Noonan, that absenteeism is a problem in the public and private sectors in Ireland. In 2012 I will bring forward proposals to deal with absenteeism in the public and private sectors. I will engage in discussions with all interested parties and stakeholders.

I will also introduce changes to community employment, CE, schemes. The number of CE schemes operating at present is more than 1,143 with 23,300 participants and an overall budget of €360 million. We will seek value for money reviews of schemes emphasising good outcomes and experience for participants. The national training fund will provide €4.2 million for training on CE in 2012. In addition, SOLAS will continue to provide access to its training programmes to CE participants. The Department for Social Protection will spend €977 million on employment supports including CE schemes in 2012, an increase from €882 million in 2011. This is an increase of €95 million in the budget for 2012. It is in this context that reforms of how labour market activation and labour market supports including CE are funded and managed are being examined.

Community employment schemes make an important and valuable contribution to social employment and the provision of training for unemployed persons.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: They cannot survive with these cuts.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Please allow the Minister to continue, without interruption.

Deputy Joan Burton: As Members are aware, many community employment schemes provide vital community services across the country.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: They cannot survive.

Deputy Gerald Nash: Let us hear what the Minister is saying.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: This is a nuke job.

Deputy Joan Burton: In addition, there are community and voluntary sponsoring organisations which receive funding from a multiplicity of State agencies and which will be examined in terms of their ability to continue programmes with funding from the Department of Social Protection. The Department will be working closely with the Department of Education and Skills with a view to providing training for community employment scheme participants.

It is welcome that my ministerial colleague, Deputy Brendan Howlin, has allocated another €20 million for activation measures to help to get people back to work and educational training, including a planned programme for people with disabilities. As the Government signalled yesterday, I will be proposing an amendment on Committee Stage to withdraw sections 8 to 10, inclusive, of the Bill.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: They should not have been included in the first place.

Deputy Joan Burton: These are the measures I had proposed to reform disability allowance and domiciliary care allowance. I am sorry if these proposals caused anxiety among people with disabilities and their families. I have listened, in particular, to the concerns of families with severely disabled children and asked a barrister, Ms Ita Mangan, who chairs the advisory group on tax and social welfare issues and her committee's group to carry out a review of domiciliary care allowance and disability allowance with reference to children and young adults.

I will now outline the main provisions of the Bill. Section 3 provides for the abolition of entitlement to payment of disablement benefit in the case of assessments of loss of faculty amounting to less than 15%, with effect from the beginning of January 2012.

Section 4 provides for discontinuing the entitlement to payment of a half-rate qualified child increase where the spouse, civil partner or cohabitant of the beneficiary has a weekly income in excess of a prescribed amount of €400 in the case of new claimants of carer's benefit, the State pension — contributory, the State pension — transition, and invalidity pension, with effect from the beginning of July 2012. The section also extends the reference to the spouse of the beneficiary. Existing claimants in receipt of half-rate qualified child increase will not be affected.

Section 5 provides that the implementation of certain provisions of Schedule 6 to the Social Welfare (Consolidation) Act 2005, relating to changes in the entitlement conditions for the

State pension — contributory — and the State pension — transition, with effect from 6 April 2012, will not apply to existing recipients of these pensions.

Section 6 provides for increasing the number of qualifying contributions required to qualify for widow-widower's and surviving civil partner's contributory pension. Existing pensioners will not be affected by these changes. I will be proposing an amendment on Committee Stage to change this section to increase the number of paid PRSI contributions required to qualify for these pensions from 156 to 260 from December 2013.

Section 7 provides for the discontinuance, with effect from January 2012, of the transitional measures which enable the one-parent family payment to continue to be paid for a period of up to six months where a claimant's weekly earnings exceed €425. Existing OPFP recipients who are benefiting from these transitional measures at the beginning of January 2012 will continue to receive the transitional payment for the unexpired balance of the six month period.

As I said, I will be proposing an amendment on Committee Stage to withdraw sections 8 to 10, inclusive, of the Bill.

Section 11 provides for the discontinuance of the payment of the grant for multiple births under the child benefit scheme with effect from 1 January 2012. It also provides for the phased alignment of the different rates of monthly child benefit payable, according to family size, into a single rate. The rates payable to the third and subsequent qualified children will be reduced with effect from 1 January 2012 and further reduced from 1 January 2013, when there will be a single rate of €140 for each qualified child.

Section 12 reduces the period for backdating claims to long-term contributory pensions such as the contributory State pension and other payments from up to 12 months before the claim was made to six months. The new backdating arrangements will apply to claims for such payments made from the beginning of April 2012.

Section 13 amends the rules relating to the assessment of means for certain social assistance payments, including the abolition of the income disregard for income from employment by the HSE as a home help in the case of all social assistance payment schemes, and increasing the proportion of income from farming and fishing assessed as means from 70% to 85% for the purposes of the farm assist and jobseeker's allowance schemes. These amendments apply to new and existing claimants of the relevant schemes with effect from 1 January 2012.

Section 14 provides that for the purposes of calculating means for the one parent family payment, the weekly earnings disregard is being decreased from €146.50 over a five year period to the same rate as for job seekers. The annual reductions in the weekly disregard will apply both to new and existing OPFP claimants.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: That will drive single mums out of work.

Deputy Joan Burton: If we achieve economic recovery, we will, I hope in a year or two, be able to review all of these changes. I have no difficulty in giving that undertaking on behalf of the Government.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: If we do not, we are banjaxed. Did the Minister see the growth projections?

Deputy Joan Burton: We will then be able to increase the disregards for those on jobseeker's allowance and bring both into alignment. It is just not affordable in the context of the resources available to the Government.

Section 15 provides for amendments to the Redundancy Payments Act 1967 by way of a reduction from 60% to 15% in the rebates paid to employers from the social insurance fund. This reduction will apply in the case of rebates paid to employers on or after 1 January 2012 in respect of the statutory redundancy lump sum payments made to employees made redundant on or after 1 January 2012.

I have stated I will be introducing a number of amendments on Committee Stage. These include changes to PRSI by extension of the liability for share-based remuneration and the abolition of employer PRSI relief on employee pension contributions. They will also include changes to discontinue, for new claimants, entitlement to receive a weekly social welfare payment where a person is also participating in a community employment scheme.

The transition to a more balanced budget cannot be made without reductions in social welfare spending. It is not possible to stabilise and reduce public spending without there being an impact on the Department's budget. If we do not make these changes now, we risk making the economic situation far worse for everyone, including welfare recipients, in the long term. We have done our best to protect the most vulnerable members of society by maintaining the primary weekly social welfare rates and the main child benefit rates in order that people can have confidence and an assurance about their primary weekly or monthly social welfare income. That is also important in terms of the power of the social welfare spend which accounts for 40% of all Government expenditure in every town and village.

Even after these savings, the Government will spend €20.5 billion on social protection measures in 2012. This sends a strong signal that the Government places a great value on the role of welfare payments in protecting citizens at this extraordinarily difficult time. I am saying this in terms of how the overall budget affects those on low incomes.

Earlier in the year I reinstated the minimum wage specifically for people on low incomes to protect them. This House must have regard to working families, with members going out and working every day while receiving very low incomes. That is why the Government has emphasised the reduction in the universal social charge for families on very low incomes. We must protect people on social welfare but we must also provide for elements within the social welfare budget, particularly areas like community employment, with which I have had a very long involvement.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Why did the Minister cut it then?

Deputy Joan Burton: We must find a transition to work.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Minister is cutting the grant

Deputy Joan Burton: We must find arrangements for people to transit to work——

Deputy Finian McGrath: The Minister should check out Leaders' Questions. Check the record.

Deputy Joan Burton: ——as well as education and training. I am inundated by people who want places in training and education.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Why was the training cut?

Deputy Joan Burton: One day the recession will end and we want the people who, unfortunately, are currently dependent on social welfare because they cannot find a job in this very difficult recession, caused by the banking collapse——

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Minister is throwing people off community employment schemes.

Deputy Joan Burton: We want more people on those schemes. The Deputy knows that in May there was nobody on the Tús scheme, and there are now several thousand people on it.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: That came from the last Government.

Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil: Who introduced that?

Deputy Joan Burton: I have liaised with Deputies on all sides of the House to ensure people got an opportunity——

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Bad and all as it was, it can get credit for something.

Deputy Joan Burton: People have taken it up, and since July the national internship JobBridge scheme has been operating. I am happy to say that 3,000 people who would otherwise be on the unemployment register are now getting valuable experience.

Deputy Luke 'Ming' Flanagan: Only 420,000 to go.

Deputy Joan Burton: The feedback has been very good. We have a difficult job to do and we have inherited vast numbers of our people being unemployed. We have to remember the people working on low incomes and look after them——

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Are they being put off community employment?

Deputy Joan Burton: ——as well as giving hope and a pathway to recovery to people and their families which are currently suffering the worst effects of the worst depression this country has ever had, thanks to the unfortunate bank guarantee and the ruination delivered to this country by greedy bankers and developers, as well as those in the main Opposition party.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I am glad the Government has clarified that any choices to privatise will be Government choices and are not being foisted upon it by the troika. The Minister said from the get-go that the sale of semi-State assets would refer to those that are non-strategic but he has failed consistently to offer a definition as to what differentiates a non-strategic from a strategic asset. We know he intends to sell off a stake in the ESB, and the speculation around the likes of Bord Gáis leads me to wonder whether the Government has given any meaningful consideration to or has any understanding of what are strategic assets for the State. Those assets, as the Minister is aware, are self-financing and return dividends [426]consistently. The Minister states that the troika views an ambitious privatisation programme as a structural reform to improve efficiency but the decisions taken by his own Government fly in the face of that analysis. How does the Minister propose to deal with the issue of water infrastructure? He is dealing with it wrongly in my view in respect of charges but structurally he has opted for a commercial semi-State structure. He is doing that because he knows from past experience that approach works. ESB and Bord Gáis have delivered first class infrastructure. The Minister has never given any rational explanation as to how, from his viewpoint, the part privatisation of these assets gives us any kind of medium or long-term advantage. Also, the Minister used the term “a sizeable amount of proceeds”. What is a sizeable amount of proceeds?

Deputy Brendan Howlin: The Deputy has asked a number of questions and made a number of assertions again. She fundamentally misunderstands, maybe deliberately or maybe not, the Government intention in this regard. We negotiated the programme for Government against the backdrop, as I indicated to Deputy Wallace, of the incredible shortage of capital for investment in new jobs in this economy. We debated how we could have access to it, and the NewERA concept from Fine Gael was to look at what they did in the early years of the State. The originator of that idea came from the ICTU, at least that is what they told us when we met them in advance. That was their concept. It was to see how we could use resources by amalgamating the resources of the semi-State companies. The NewERA entity is a progression on that. I do not suggest that ICTU would support it but the idea would be to examine how we could hand over some of the current semi-State organisations and use the capital asset value derived from that to invest in the next generation of State jobs.

It is not a contradiction to seek resources, for example, to invest in the new Irish water company, Water Ireland because, we hope it will be the next Bord na Móna in terms of being a job creator to provide sustainable water, ensure communities can thrive and so on. Many good ideas will be presented when we have access to money. There will not be a fire sale.

The Deputy opposite in particular loves announcing the bad news such that we were not going to be able to reduce the interest on our borrowings or maintain the minimum wage and that we would not be able to do anything, but we have done all these things. When the time is right we will sell non-strategic assets and use the proceeds derived to grow the next generation of jobs. That is the ambition we have.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Does Deputy McDonald want to ask another question?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The mind boggles — I do not know where to start.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Very briefly, please, Deputy.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I will boil it down to one issue. The Minister said that he will have permission to use “a sizeable amount of the proceeds”. Those were his words. The troika was notably guarded when asked about that. What does a sizeable amount mean? Does it mean 50% or 80% of the proceeds, or does the Minister know the percentage?

Deputy Brendan Howlin: In truth, we have not fixed on an actual percentage because it is a matter of ongoing discussions. We have not fixed on the full quantum nor on the percentage that can be used for job creation as that is a matter of ongoing discussions.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: How can the Minister be so sure that it will be sizeable?

Deputy Brendan Howlin: We have agreed on the word “sizeable”. That is what I have just indicated.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The troika did not utter the word “sizeable”, just to be clear on that.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: No, it did not, but in my discussions with the troika I proffered several words and that was a word we agreed we would use.

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Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I would like to paint the picture from the perspective of Donegal. Along with the Minister’s colleague, Senator Jimmy Harte, I attended a meeting not so long ago where the array of community employment projects in the county came together. It was a very well run meeting organised by SIPTU. Everybody outlined what their project does in their community, and why their services are so vital to their community. Some of the participants then talked about what community employment meant to them.

I would like to get the Minister’s attention when her colleague is finished speaking to her.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: I am listening to the Deputy.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy, please.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I would like to get the Minister’s attention because I want to hear her clearly what I am about to say.

Deputy Joan Burton: I can hear him clearly. He should not get too excited.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I thank the Minister for giving me her attention. A couple of years ago, about 8,000 people were on the live register in Donegal. Today there are almost 23,000 people on the register. Again, Leas-Cheann Comhairle, can I ask for the Minister’s attention?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I want the noise level down. I hope everybody is listening to everybody. That is my fervent wish.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: That is fine. These are precious opportunities to address the Minister.

Deputy Joan Burton: What was the date of the meeting in Donegal? That is what I was talking about.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I will e-mail the Minister the dates.

Deputy Joan Burton: The Deputy can give it to me. He was at the meeting so he must remember. When was it?

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: The Minister should not be so pedantic.

Deputy Joan Burton: I just would like to know the date. It is a reasonable request.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Who can recite their entire diary over the past 30 days? Can the Minister tell me every meeting she has attended in the past 30 days?

Deputy Joan Burton: The Deputy should tell us the dates.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: She should not be so silly.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy only has three minutes. Let us have order please.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I would like an extra minute due to interruptions. Now that I have the Minister’s attention, I tell her that there were 8,000 people on the live register in Donegal but today there are around 23,000 people on the register. Emigration is a big issue in our county. Thousands of our young people across the county have emigrated. When unemployment has trebled in a county that has historically suffered from disadvantage, then how in the name of God can the Minister possibly justify cutting community employment schemes? She should double or treble the contribution towards these projects. These projects are on the front line and they deal with the devastation that has been caused.

The reason I wanted the Minister’s attention is that she was such a passionate opponent of what the last Government did. I remember her being so prominent on the television. I used to watch her at home on news reports as one of the leading voices against the impact of what has happened. How can she possibly stand over cutting the funds to community employment in a county like Donegal, not to mind the other disadvantaged areas of the State? How can she possibly stand over cutting projects that provide support to young people, the elderly, crèches, community resource centres and tidy towns committees? This is the thread that holds our

communities together. At a time when we face such economic hardship, some of the few good news stories come from such people in those centres. They are the “can do” people who are rolling up their sleeves and meeting the demands the Government makes of them in respect of local leadership and positivity. The very people who are providing that leadership in local communities are seeing these cuts.

I am happy to provide the Minister with the details of the meeting after my contribution. I will send her an e-mail about it. I ask the Minister to become again the woman, the leader she was before she assumed her position last February. I ask her to look into her heart, to remember what she has stood for all her life. I reiterate what I have said before that I do not presume to be a better person than the Minister nor do I consider myself to be a more decent person than her. I do not believe that I care more about these issues than the Minister does. However, she needs to prove me right. She needs to put it into action. She knows the impact of this crisis on communities which have been historically disadvantaged and which suffer from unemployment and all the resultant challenges. I ask her not to take from those at the front line; please do not undermine the morale and spirit of those local leaders whom we need to help get this country back on top again. That is my appeal to the Minister and I thank her for giving me her attention.

UI 242. 23.02.2012/03

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: “Labour is opposed to short termist privatisation of key State assets”.

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: Well said.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: “Labour is committed to the concept of public enterprise and is determined to ensure that semi-State companies play a full role in the recovery of the Irish economy”.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: When you were blowing them up, we were supporting them.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I am glad the Tánaiste’s backbenchers recognise those quotes which, of course, are taken from the Labour Party election manifesto. They formed the basis on which the Labour Party was given its electoral mandate almost one year ago. Two Labour Party Ministers are now presiding over the sell-off of key elements of Ireland’s energy companies, possibly Coillte and the remaining State stake in Aer Lingus.

The Government’s record in the past year has been deplorable. It has cut teachers from schools, nurses from hospitals, social welfare payments and community employment schemes.

Deputy James Bannon: What is Sinn Féin doing in the North?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Government is now turning its gaze to the family silver.

Deputy Tom Hayes: The Deputy’s party is in government in Belfast.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: “It is a sad day for the Irish people and a tragedy for the Labour Party.” These are the words of Mr. Jack O’Connor, president of SIPTU and one of the Tánaiste’s own. They reflect the disappointment of many who voted for the Labour Party in the general election. Why is the Labour Party proposing this sell-off? Why are successful, self-financing State companies, such a positive in the economy, to be disposed of? How can the Labour Party claim that infrastructure, particularly energy infrastructure, is anything but strategic, necessary and a vital lever for the State and the Government in the economic recovery we all wish to see?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for reading the Labour Party’s policy. I hope she will do so repeatedly.

Deputy Barry Cowen: It would be better if the Tánaiste implemented it.

The Tánaiste: I always welcome it, as repetition is the greatest form of flattery. The Government is committed to ensuring a strong role for the State sector in our economic recovery. That is why we have decided to adopt a single portfolio approach under the new economic and recovery agency for all State companies. Things never stay the same and should not always stay the same.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Quite right. The Labour Party moves from one side of the House to the other.

The Tánaiste: We all talk about change; we have to harness the resources of the State to attract investment and jobs into the country. The biggest tragedy is not what was issued by the SIPTU press office yesterday, rather it is that there are 438,000 out of work.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The Government is adding to the number.

Deputy Seán Crowe: Eamon Thatcher.

The Tánaiste: The Government is determined to get the people in question back to work. We have seen, even in the course of the last week, a number of positive initiatives in this regard.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Enough of the press statements; we need action.

The Tánaiste: There was the jobs announcement by PayPal and commitments by people abroad to invest in this country. We have decided and negotiated with the troika to put an arrangement in place, whereby proceeds from the sale of State assets may be used——

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: To pay debts.

The Tánaiste: ——for investment in the economy to create jobs and bring about economic recovery. That is the prudent approach to adopt.

With regard to the energy sector, the arrangements proposed will not involve the disposal of strategic networks. They will result in greater competition in the sector which will benefit consumers who are paying high prices for electricity and gas. We will use the proceeds from the sale of State assets to invest in the economy and create more jobs to get the 438,000 people who are out of work back to work.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The expression is imitation, not repetition, is the sincerest form of flattery. That being the case, Fine Gael has been mightily flattered by the Tánaiste and his party in government. All the credit for the goals scored accrues to Fine Gael and the troika, in that order. The Tánaiste says he is concerned to invest in the economy and wants a finance stream to invest in job creatopm. That is good. He knows as well as I do that there are many alternative streams which can be tapped for that purpose. The National Pension Reserve Fund should not be used to prop up zombie banks.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: It is not.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It should be used to fund job creation initiatives and provide a stimulus. The Tánaiste says consumers will win from the privatisations, but that is not the case. Historically, it has never been the case in previous bouts of privatisation. The Tánaiste knows as well as I do that these policy decisions are indefensible, short-term and reckless.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Rubbish.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The troika originally wanted a figure of €2 billion. The Government conceded a figure of €3 billion and tried to dress it up as a negotiating victory. The Tánaiste knows that these self-financing valuable assets must be held in the ownership of the State, as that is the only way a consistent dividend can be delivered for citizens and the economy in the long term.

Deputy Éamon Gilmore, Tánaiste, leader of the Labour Party——

Deputy Brendan Howlin: This is your life.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: ——has said nothing stays the same. Apparently, not for him.

Deputy Dara Murphy: The Deputy might put us all on a black list.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Will the Tánaiste defend, on the basis of the Labour Party manifesto, the way his Ministers propose to engage in a fire sale of the family silver?

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Rubbish.

The Tánaiste: Deputy Mary Lou McDonald is wrong.

Deputy Dara Murphy: Again.

The Tánaiste: There is no fire sale and will not be. Any disposal of State assets will be undertaken on the basis of the country obtaining the best value for money and the best deal possible.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: That cannot happen now.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy is wrong in what the troika asked for. She says it asked for a figure of €2 billion. It asked for and expected a figure of €5 billion. It did so because those on the other side of the House had agreed to a package with such a figure included.

Deputy Dara Calleary: We have heard all this before.

The Tánaiste: The leader of Fianna Fáil, on radio this morning, accused two of my colleagues of telling barefaced lies.

Deputy Seamus Healy: And the Tánaiste, too.

The Tánaiste: He went on to suggest the McCarthy report followed on the arrival of the troika.

Deputy Barry Cowen: That is wrong. He did not say that.

The Tánaiste: That is not the case. The McCarthy report——

Deputy Barry Cowen: It was commissioned by this side.

The Tánaiste: ——which contains a reference to the figure of €5 billion already established by the Fianna Fáil-led Government——

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Never mind Fianna Fáil. The Tánaiste should speak for the Labour Party and the Government.

The Tánaiste: Let me give the facts.

(Interruptions).

The Tánaiste: Fianna Fáil Deputies come into the House and either deliberately make things up or simply do not inform themselves.

Deputy Barry Cowen: Is this Fine Gael or the Labour Party? Is NewEra the new Labour Party?

The Tánaiste: In June 2010, long before the troika had arrived on the scene, the Fianna Fáil-led Government commissioned the McCarthy report.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I did not ask when the report had been commissioned; I asked about the sale of State assets.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy said——

Deputy Tom Hayes: Deputy Cowen should check it out with Brian before making statements. He should give him a ring and he will tell the Deputy about it.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, please.

Deputy Barry Cowen: I do not know Deputy Tom Hayes's brother. I am sure he is a nice man.

The Tánaiste: I am answering Deputy McDonald's question. She stated that the troika looked for €2 billion and we settled for €3 billion. The troika looked for €5 billion because Fianna Fáil had agreed €5 billion. We have succeeded in two respects. There will be a target of €3 billion and €1 billion of that will be used for reinvestment in the economy to create jobs and get people back to work. Those are the facts.

UI 250. 21.03.2012/16

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I join previous speakers in paying tribute to the late Jim Stynes who was a sporting hero, an Irish hero and a great Dubliner. I am sure that the thoughts, sympathies and solidarity of the Members of these Houses are with his family at what must be a very difficult time for them.

There are ten days left before the deadline and just over 80% of households have not paid the household charge. It is fair to state that the Government's handling of this issue has been shambolic. It is also fair to state that its desperation is evident, particularly when one considers the increasingly shrill tones used by Ministers in trying to frighten citizens into paying the charge. I put it to the Government that it should stop trying to bully the electorate and should instead try listening to it for a change. The reality is that in the context of this issue — as was the case with the DEIS schools — the Government has got it wrong.

It is not simply a matter of the way in which this issue has been handled. People know that the household charge is unfair, unjust and should be withdrawn. SIPTU, UNITE, the CPSU, the Dublin Council of Trade Unions and others have called for this tax to be scrapped. Will the

Government face facts? Will the Tánaiste inform me whether it is really intended to bring hundreds of thousands of citizens before the courts in respect of this issue, particularly when not a single banker has been jailed for causing the crisis in which we currently find ourselves? It is not a case of extending the deadline and neither is this a controversy with regard to whether the charge can be paid in a local post office. Will the Tánaiste accept that this unfair and unjust charge has failed and that it should be scrapped?

The Tánaiste: No, the charge will not be scrapped. It will be replaced by a property tax. The preparatory work in respect of the introduction of such a tax is under way.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: People will be obliged to pay out even more money when that tax comes into being.

The Tánaiste: I look forward to hearing from the Deputy about Sinn Féin's proposals for a property tax. Information in that regard would be very helpful in the context of the discussions in which we are involved.

Deputy Tom Hayes: Sinn Féin is against a property tax.

The Tánaiste: The Government is not in the business of bullying anybody. However, we do want to be straight with people. Deputy McDonald, her party and those others who are campaigning against the household charge should do likewise. There is no point in misleading people into believing that the charge will not have to be paid, that it will be wished away or that it will be made to vanish. Households are required to pay the charge. If it is not paid, the normal penalties and interest charges that apply in respect of unpaid taxes will come into play. Those such as Sinn Féin and others who are encouraging people not to pay the charge are simply misleading them. As a result, households will incur increasing debts. That is not fair on the households concerned. It is fair enough if individuals adopt a political position of opposing the charge. Members can oppose it in the House and so on. However, Sinn Féin and others are going to great lengths to encourage and advise people not to pay the charge.

Deputy John Halligan: People are making up their own minds. It is an unjust charge.

The Tánaiste: Such people are being misled and, as a result, households will find themselves in greater debt than should be the case.

Deputy Joe Higgins: That is just what the Tánaiste and his colleagues did in the 1980s.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Exactly.

Deputy Finian McGrath: Be radical or redundant.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Far from misleading people in respect of the matters to which the Tánaiste refers, we have clearly stated that the Government intends to levy this tax and that it will pursue people for fines and penalties. We also understand that it will introduce amending legislation to coerce the public into paying such penalties by making attachment orders to their wages or welfare payments.

Deputy Robert Dowds: What Sinn Féin expects them to pay in the North is far more substantial.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The honest thing to say is that there are people who simply do not have the €100 required to pay the charge. There are others who will not pay the charge because they view it — quite correctly — as a flat and unjust tax. It is also honest to say that the Tánaiste is standing over something which he knows, in his gut, is unfair.

An Ceann Comhairle: A question, please.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: This charge has been delivered in a shambolic way and people have responded accordingly. It strikes me that the sensible and equitable thing for the Government to do at this juncture would be to admit — as it has done previously — that it made a mistake and withdraw this charge and the threats to the effect that people will be pursued, either through the courts or via attachment orders, in respect of the charge. Such a move would be the stuff of honesty.

The Tánaiste: Deputy McDonald has a hard neck. The equivalent charge in Northern Ireland is ten to 15 times the equivalent of that which applies in this jurisdiction.

Deputy Robert Dowds: Hear, hear.

Deputy Brian Stanley: That money is for services.

The Tánaiste: The household charge in the city of Derry is €1,500.

Deputy Colm Keaveney: No.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Eric Byrne: Those in Sinn Féin did not pay the charge up there either.

The Tánaiste: Deputy McDonald should explain how it is acceptable that households on the part of the island governed and administered by her party should pay €1,500, while directly across the Border in Donegal——

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The systems are not comparable.

The Tánaiste: Of course.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Did the Tánaiste——

(Interruptions).

The Tánaiste: That is for sure. They certainly are not comparable. There is no comparison between the €1,500 charge which applies in Derry and the €100 charge which obtains in Donegal.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: That is pathetic.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The only difference is that next year the Government will be charging people a property tax of €1,000.

The Tánaiste: It is the height of hypocrisy for the Deputy to come before the House and utter all sorts of hyperbole about hundreds of thousands of people being taken to court, coerced, etc.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Tánaiste should tell me that I am wrong. He should indicate that people will not be taken to court.

The Tánaiste: Hundreds of thousands of people are not going to be taken to court and everybody knows that. If the charge is not paid by the deadline, however, people will incur penalties and interest. The latter is normal in respect of unpaid tax. The Deputy's party should not——

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: How will all this money be collected?

The Tánaiste: ——be encouraging people not to pay the charge because that will simply place them in a position where they will——

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: We are simply following the Tánaiste's lead from the past.

The Tánaiste: ——incur penalties and additional interest.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: We are inspired by the Tánaiste.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The Tánaiste used to do that kind of thing quite regularly.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Robert Dowds: Did those in Sinn Féin pay their bin charges?

Deputy Eric Byrne: They are very good at wearing dark uniforms.

UI 273. 12.10.2011/04

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Will we have the review in advance of the budget?

The Taoiseach: Yes.

Deputy Micheál Martin: What about the presidential election?

Deputy Pat Rabbitte: That will be before the budget.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The election that Deputy Martin's party does not care about.

Deputy Robert Troy: Neither does Fine Gael judging by its choice of candidate.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: The presidential election will be before the budget.

Deputy Micheál Martin: I meant how the publication of the review will fit in with the presidential election.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Thank you, gentlemen.

I understand we will have sight of the Keane report some time around now.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Yes.

The Taoiseach: Yes, it is on its way.

Deputy Pat Rabbitte: Deputy McDonald cannot wait to get her hands on it.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The 100,000 people, both in families and individually, in mortgage distress need to know the Taoiseach will do much more than simply issue guidelines for the banks. I hope this report's recommendations will be ambitious and creative. Earlier, the Taoiseach said two days would be assigned for a debate on this report next week. How much time will be given over those two days?

Deputy Pat Rabbitte: As much time as Deputy McDonald wants.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Will the Minister for Finance be available throughout all the debate and participate in a question-and-answer session?

Deputy Emmet Stagg: How much time would Deputy McDonald like?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Two days would be a start.

The Taoiseach: The economic management council established the Keane group to examine the issue of mortgage distress and repayment difficulties. It was requested that its report would contain recommendations as distinct from theories as to how to deal with these issues. The Deputy can read the report in a few minutes.

As I already said, this report will not be the repository of all wisdom on this issue. The debate will take place next Tuesday and Thursday and the House will sit late on both occasions. We will accede to further requests for more time. I want every Member to have his or her say about cases involving constituents because each circumstance will be different. Every Member is aware of the distress and the anxiety for those caught in this bind. We want to ensure the debate is as comprehensive and as inclusive as possible.

I have asked the Chief Whip to be as flúirseach with his time as is possible. We will have a comprehensive debate on Tuesday and, again, on Thursday with the House sitting late on both occasions. Taking into account Deputy Michael McGrath's Debt Settlement and Mortgage Resolution Office Bill, every Member will have his or her say on this matter.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Will the Minister for Finance be present for the debate?

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Several Ministers will be present.

The Taoiseach: Yes, the Minister will be here.

UI 274. 12.10.2011/06

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I propose to share time with Deputies Clare Daly and Shane Ross. Is it not time to admit that the routine of being the best boy in the European class is not working? The mounting evidence, whether in Greece, the latest figures on Irish bond yields, the downgrading of Irish growth forecasts or the growing awareness that the European economy will contract, means that this is not working. No matter how much the Taoiseach submits, promises to be the best boy and imposes austerity, it is not working.

Is the postponement of the European Council meeting not symbolic of what is going on in the EU? Chancellor Merkel and President Sarkozy postponed the meeting so they can hatch a plan that suits their interests. President Barroso, who is an unelected Commissioner, orders the Taoiseach to Brussels to tell him what they have decided.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: The meeting was scheduled before they met. That is the Deputy's conspiracy theory out the window.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The European Council meeting will just be a rubber stamp for what they have decided, which is that they want the power to ram more austerity — more economic shock therapy — down our throats and those of other European states. It seems the only thing the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste are worried about is that the people of this country might have a say about that. They are not worried about the fact the European leaders want more power to ram austerity down the throats of workers, the vulnerable and the poor, they are not worried about the fact they are demanding the sale of our State assets, but they are desperately worried that there might be a referendum in which the people of this country would have some say, because they know that if there was the people would say "No".

The Taoiseach: That is rubbish. We want to use the decision the people made when they had their say already — to use the tools we have.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Taoiseach had his chance to speak.

This strategy is shameful and humiliating. It might be forgivable if the strategy of the EU, the ICB and the IMF was showing any sign at all of working, but it is not working. This week we saw all the evidence. The austerity in Greece is crucifying its economy. Its growth has collapsed and because of this, its unsustainable debt is even more unsustainable and unpayable. Because of this, the contagion will spread to France and across the rest of Europe. More bank bailouts will be required for the big European banks and therefore more austerity will be required as ordinary people in Europe are expected to pay for it. This will result in further contraction of the European economy, and the Government's hopes of an export-led recovery will disappear like snow off a rope. The markets are now saying that is what they think will happen. The Government's beloved markets are saying that Ireland cannot have the growth it hoped for because the European economy is going to contract due to the continued policy of austerity and bank bailouts.

There is a contrast to all this, as we have said over and over for the last few months, and that is what is happening in Greece. The Greek people have fought back and, as a result, the bondholders did get burnt, to the tune of 20%. They got what we did not get. It might be a 50% burning of the bondholders. Today, they got their €8 billion, even though they did not implement the austerity measures because of the Greek resistance.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy is eating into his colleagues' time.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We submit and impose shock therapy and we get nothing, while the Greeks, because they resist, get something. Is it not time to stand up and say "No"[427]to this economic madness? We should do what the people in Greece and in Wall Street are doing, which is to protest and resist and demand a strategy that puts jobs and economic growth first.

Deputy Lucinda Creighton: So protest. There is nothing stopping the Deputy from protesting.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy is worried about his re-election.

UI 281. 09.12.2011/05

Deputy Catherine Byrne: [...]Earlier, Deputy Ó Cuív referred to getting things wrong. Many things were got wrong in the past number of years. He told us we should go home and clear our consciences. I have a clear conscience and I will face into the Christmas season with a clear conscience. There is only one person to whom I need to confess, and that person is not in this Chamber or on this earth.

Deputy Barry Cowen: Deputy Byrne is a brave woman.

Deputy John Halligan: Children's allowance to 140,000 families has been cut. Will the Deputy confess to them?

Deputy Catherine Byrne: I have not interrupted anyone in the Chamber on any occasion.

Deputy John Halligan: The Deputy is welcome to interrupt me when I am speaking.

Deputy Catherine Byrne: I do not need to.

UI. 282 09.12.2011/05

Deputy Joan Burton: [...]Last year, a family with three children would have had a cut in its child benefit of €10 per month, while someone in receipt of a jobseeker's payment would have lost €8 per week. This is not happening this year and I hope this will allow people to spend with confidence——

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It is happening under the radar.

Deputy Joan Burton: No Deputy McGrath, it is not.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It is, of course.

Deputy Joan Burton: There is no cut——

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: The Minister is more ready for doom and gloom than was the case last year.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Deputy Healy-Rae should have a bit of manners.

Deputy Joan Burton: There is no cut——

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It is dressed up.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I apologise to the Minister, Deputy Howlin, but she interrupted me.

Deputy Joan Burton: —— in the primary rate and that is the important issue. The cumulative effect of the measures in the last two budgets were that, for instance, families lost €8 last year in respect of the basic weekly rate——

Deputy Robert Troy: The Minister promised to reverse that measure.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: The Minister is here to discuss this year's budget.

Deputy Joan Burton: —— last year and €8.30 the year before. This is the first time in three years——

Deputy Robert Troy: But the Minister promised to reverse it.

Deputy Joan Burton: —— the basic rates have not been cut. I am proud to have achieved no cut in the basic rates——

Deputy Mattie McGrath: There have been heaps of cuts.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Only because of the climb-down on disability.

Deputy Joan Burton: ——for the first time in three years.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: There have been 14 dirty cuts.

Deputy Joan Burton: Deputy Ó Snodaigh spoke about——

Deputy Robert Troy: How did the budget affect the Minister? It did not.

Deputy Joan Burton: ——the great things that happened in the North. I noted with interest and draw Members' attention to a statement from Alex Maskey welcoming an announcement on fuel allowance by the Deputy First Minister, Mr. Martin McGuinness and the First Minister, Mr. Peter Robinson.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: This debate is on the South, not the North.

Deputy Joan Burton: This is north of the Border. The statement noted: "The extra fuel payment will go to approximately 250,000 ... people. Those suffering from cancer, those in receipt of Pension Credit will receive a one off payment of £100."

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Very good.

Deputy Joan Burton: It went on to state, "Those in receipt of Income Support, Employment Support Allowance (income related) and those in receipt of Job Seekers Allowance will receive [a payment of] £75."

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Very good. I thank the Minister for commending it.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Is the Deputy happy with it?

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I am not happy with it. We would love it to be more.

Deputy Joan Burton: The Sinn Féin Members might note that——

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Members are debating the real world here in the South.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Members are dealing with the Irish budget.

Deputy Joan Burton: May I state, in respect of Deputy Ó Snodaigh——

Deputy Mattie McGrath: This is the Irish budget, not the British budget.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Deputy Mattie McGrath should have a bit of manners.

Deputy Joan Burton: Deputy Mattie McGrath should note this country——

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: This country is the Thirty-two Counties but the Minister should go on.

Deputy Shane McEntee: I agree with that one.

Deputy Joan Burton: ——is in a programme of structural adjustment into which his former party drove it.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Yes.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: And the Minister promised to put it right.

Deputy Joan Burton: And yet, north of the Border——

Deputy Mattie McGrath: She is going a bad way about it. The Government is in a haze or a fog.

Deputy Joan Burton: ——Sinn Féin has made a press announcement regarding an increase in the fuel allowance of £100 for the entire winter——

Deputy Mattie McGrath: €120.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: What was there before it?

Deputy Joan Burton: —and £75 for people in receipt of jobseeker's payments.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Is the Deputy happy with that?

Deputy Joan Burton: Sinn Féin is boasting north of the Border—

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The rest comes from Westminster. We are not happy—

Deputy Joan Burton: —of its achievements.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Peter Mathews): Members, excuse me—

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Sinn Féin is obliged to administer—

Deputy Barry Cowen: Is Deputy Howlin happy with the six week reduction?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Peter Mathews): Excuse me, this is not a brawl; this is a debate.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: We know that.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: That is a debate. It is an exchange.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Peter Mathews): Can we calm it all down please?

Deputy Joan Burton: My point is that Sinn Féin is in government in the North of Ireland—

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Without fiscal powers.

Deputy Joan Burton: —and that party should not shed crocodile tears in the Republic when in the North, it is part of an Executive overseeing—

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Without fiscal powers.

Deputy Joan Burton: —much more savage reductions and a much lesser level of income—

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Does the Minister remember the ignorance argument yesterday?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Peter Mathews): Deputy Ó Snodaigh, please.

Deputy Joan Burton: —for people who are in need of social protection and support. I simply make this point to highlight the figures over which Deputy Ó Snodaigh's party—

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The Minister is misleading on the point because she is not explaining the background behind it—

Deputy Joan Burton: —in government in the North is presiding. I wish to refer to community—

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: —and the fact that we do not have fiscal powers.

Deputy Joan Burton: The truth hurts.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I know the truth hurts. However the truth is—

Deputy Joan Burton: Sinn Féin takes the allowances from Westminster but is unable to influence the paymasters or chooses not to.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The truth is that Westminster sets the rates, not the Executive.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Peter Mathews): Deputy Ó Snodaigh, please.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The Minister is trying to encourage me to enter debate with her.

Deputy Joan Burton: Westminster may set the rate but Sinn Féin chooses not to go there. It takes the money—

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I have absolutely no problem debating this issue with the Minister at any stage in this Chamber, if she wishes.

Deputy Joan Burton: —but does not turn up to make the arguments for its constituents. That is what Sinn Féin is doing.

Deputy Barry Cowen: I ask the Acting Chairman whether Members can deal with the Social Welfare Bill.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Peter Mathews): Correct, yes.

Deputy Joan Burton: I refer to the community employment schemes.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The Minister may wish to give way.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Peter Mathews): Members, please.

Deputy Joan Burton: Many Members have expressed an interest in the community employment schemes. Deputies on all sides of the House value the importance of community employment schemes and the good work they do---

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Tá an ceart ag an Aire.

Deputy Joan Burton: —in communities throughout the country in every town, village and city. In January, the community employment schemes, together with the labour services side of FÁS, will move from being under the aegis of the old FÁS organisation and will come under the remit of the Department of Social Protection. I wish to send out a message of reassurance in this regard. When the community employment schemes come under the aegis of the Department of Social Protection, there will be a review by the officials who deal with such schemes.

Deputy Barry Cowen: Another pause button.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Maith an bhean. Well done.

Deputy Joan Burton: They will meet representatives of all the community employment schemes and will go through their budgets with them to achieve two objectives. The first and most important objective is to ensure that the people who participate in community employment schemes get a quality experience, including appropriate training, which will enable them to be of service to their community and to get a job, which I acknowledge is extremely difficult in the current jobs market. As for the second objective, I note many Members present are business people. When these schemes come under the aegis of the Department of Social Protection, it is reasonable for my Department to see their accounts and to ascertain their costs.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Yes.

Deputy Joan Burton: There is nothing revolutionary about that.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: No.

Deputy Joan Burton: As Minister, I give a commitment in this House that schemes which provide value for money and a quality experience for the participants do not have anything to fear in respect of such a review.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: One hopes not.

Deputy Joan Burton: I repeat to Deputy Mattie McGrath that the community employment schemes will come into the Department's ambit on 1 January.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I know that.

Deputy Joan Burton: As Members are aware, they are administered at present in the old FÁS under the aegis of the Department of Education and Skills. I have much personal experience of working with—

Deputy Mattie McGrath: They are in limbo at present.

Deputy Joan Burton: —community employment schemes.

Deputy Barry Cowen: They are worried.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: They are in limbo.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: No, they are not. They only are worried about the mischief the Deputy is making.

Deputy Brendan Griffin: What reform was effected by the Deputies opposite for the past 14 years? Reform is difficult.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: They are in limbo at present.

Deputy Joan Burton: Deputy Mattie McGrath has a lot of involvement in community employment schemes in County Tipperary, just as has Deputy Eric Byrne in Dublin South-Central and just as have I in my constituency.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: All Members are involved in them.

Deputy Joan Burton: All I can say is the good work being done by community schemes is valued both by me and by every other Member in the House.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I accept that.

Deputy Shane McEntee: Hear, hear.

Deputy Joan Burton: There will be a review process and I can give an undertaking that I wish to see more people having an opportunity to participate in community employment—

Deputy Mattie McGrath: They cannot if the grants are not available.

Deputy Shane McEntee: Grants again.

Deputy Joan Burton: Deputy McGrath should note the current conditions can be quite restrictive.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Does this mean the Minister is withdrawing the proposals contained in her document—

Deputy Joan Burton: No, there is a—

Deputy Dessie Ellis: — of a cut from €1,500 to €500?

Deputy Joan Burton: Sorry, Deputy—

Deputy Barry Cowen: There could be another pause.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: The Minister should address this issue and not throw it to another Department.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Peter Mathews): Deputy Ellis should make his remarks through the Chair please.

Deputy Joan Burton: I am happy to tell Deputy Ellis about the amount of money being spent. Maybe the Deputy will go out and tell some of the people—

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I am waiting to tell them.

Deputy Joan Burton: —he knows in community employment the amount of money being spent overall on employment support measures.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Cad a dhéanfaimid feasta gan adhmad?

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Will the Minister withdraw what is contained in this document?

Deputy Joan Burton: No.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Why not?

Deputy Joan Burton: The amount of money being spent on employment support measures is being increased—

Deputy Dessie Ellis: It is a training budget

Acting Chairman (Deputy Peter Mathews): I remind Members to make their remarks through the Chair.

Deputy Joan Burton: —by €95 million.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: It is not clear.

Deputy Joan Burton: The overall level of spending on employment supports is being increased by €95 million.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: The Minister is saying she will address this in January, that she will speak to those involved in the different schemes in January.

Deputy Joan Burton: I am happy to say—

Deputy Dessie Ellis: How will she get around to all of those in January?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Peter Mathews): Deputy Ellis, please, I am standing.

Deputy Shane McEntee: Forget about the grants.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Peter Mathews): Deputies, please.

Deputy Shane McEntee: That is what broke the country, there were too many of them.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: This is a very important issue.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Peter Mathews): Deputy please, I am standing.

Deputy Joan Burton: Yes.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Does the Minister think the people are coming here to march without reason? Is that what the Minister is saying? They have seen this in the Minister's document.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Peter Mathews): Deputy Ellis, the Minister has the floor.

Deputy Joan Burton: The Minister, Deputy Howlin, has provided an extra €20 million for an activation fund increase as well as €4.2 million in regard to a training fund, but what we require is a review—

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Is the materials grants going up or down?

Deputy Joan Burton: —and community employment schemes should not be threatened—

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Why did you not do the review before the budget?

Deputy Barry Cowen: On a point of order—

Acting Chairman (Deputy Peter Mathews): I have to put the question to the House.

Deputy Barry Cowen: Before the Acting Chairman puts the question, may I ask for clarification on what the Ministers had to say on this?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Peter Mathews): No.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: We have to get clarification on this.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: That is not a point of order.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: We need clarification on this——

Deputy Barry Cowen: We need clarification before the question is put to the House.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: ——because it is not clear. This is a training budget.

Deputy Barry Cowen: The Minister has not mentioned it as an amendment.

(Interruptions).

Acting Chairman (Deputy Peter Mathews): I cannot hear six voices at the same time. What is the Deputy's question?

Deputy Barry Cowen: When Minister said there is increased funding for activation measures, is she saying there is no cut in the materials grant for CE schemes, or is she saying there is an improvement?

Deputy Dessie Ellis: It is going ahead.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: We have to know that.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Peter Mathews): That is a matter for Committee Stage.

Deputy Barry Cowen: We have got no clarification on other activation measures.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Barry Cowen: I accept there may well be, but the Minister can clarify that elsewhere.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Peter Mathews): Can we have some order?

Deputy Dessie Ellis: It is not in the Bill but it is set out in writing in this document. It is clearly set out in the budget fact sheet. It is on Minister's budget fact sheet.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Peter Mathews): Deputy Ellis, please.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Dessie Ellis: This will have a devastating effect in my area. This will cripple CE schemes in my area.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: And every area of the country.

Deputy Joan Burton: No.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: It will. In January if there is no clarification on where these people stand——

Acting Chairman (Deputy Peter Mathews): Members, please.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: What kind of Christmas will these people have with them having to wait until January——

Deputy Barry Cowen: The Minister may have to reprint the leaflets.

Deputy Joan Burton: There will be a review.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: The Minister needs to reprint this document.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Minister of State, Deputy McEntee, is doing that all day. He has said too much already.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Peter Mathews): I am putting the question.

Deputy Barry Cowen: So there has been a pause again. Is that it?

Deputy Brendan Howlin: No.

Deputy Joan Burton: No, there has not. There will be a review.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I resent it being said that the troika is being blamed for the planned cuts in disability allowance. I resent anyone saying that the troika is responsible for those.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Peter Mathews): Deputy Ellis, please.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: The Minister made these decisions. She withdrew that decision. She should not blame the troika.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Peter Mathews): Deputy Ellis, please.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Government has nowhere to hide, and it cannot hide behind the troika either.

Deputy Joan Burton: Are the Deputies all in favour of it now?

Deputy Dessie Ellis: No. I welcome the fact that it has been withdrawn.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Peter Mathews): There is a certain decorum——

Deputy Dessie Ellis: ——but the Minister was the one who stood up and blamed the troika. The Minister did it.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy McDonald. Can you hear me, Deputy?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I could not hear the Ceann Comhairle.

An Ceann Comhairle: It is difficult, I know that.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I have raised this matter with the Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Ruairí Quinn, and it was also raised with the Taoiseach yesterday. I hope it will be a case of third time lucky today. The Tánaiste claims wrongly that the budget was balanced, that it does not have negative consequences for women and children, in particular, and that the pupil-teacher ratio is left untouched. However, when one drills down into the detail of this nasty budget, one discovers that 428 teaching posts, in the most disadvantaged schools in the most disadvantaged communities across the State, are to be cut.

I understand the Minister, Deputy Quinn, has explained this away with the rationale that he does not have a magic wand. The Tánaiste has said that where measures have unforeseen consequences, the Government has shown willingness to reconsider them. This vicious cut has foreseen, predictable consequences for children living in the inner city of Dublin, in Cork, Inishowen, Limerick, Waterford — places the Tánaiste knows full well have suffered the consequences of intergenerational poverty, unemployment and a plague of drug misuse.

An Ceann Comhairle: Does the Deputy have a question?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I ask the Tánaiste, on the basis of his position in Government, but particularly as leader of the Labour Party, to tell the Dáil that he will have this cut reversed. I ask him, as leader of a party which I understood was wedded to a notion of equality, as leader of a party which has elected representatives in many of the constituencies and communities that will be devastated by this cut, to tell the Dail that he will reconsider this measure, not by offering alleviation measures but by actually reversing the cut.

The Tánaiste: To correct Deputy McDonald, the pupil-teacher ratio in primary schools has not been increased.

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: Will Deputies wait to hear the Tánaiste's reply?

Deputy Finian McGrath: He is misleading the Dáil.

The Tánaiste: It is remarkable that the best the Opposition can do in attacking the budget is to make things up.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Niall Collins: How can you say that with a straight face?

The Tánaiste: The pupil-teacher ratio has not been changed in the budget. What the Deputy is referring to is a situation of legacy posts in a number of schools. The Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Quinn, is very well aware that some schools will be particularly impacted by the withdrawal of legacy disadvantaged posts. For that reason, he met with a group of school principals on Tuesday in order to hear their concerns directly about the impact of this measure on their schools. He has confirmed that a number of posts will be made available for alleviation measures for the schools most affected by the changes set out in the budget announcement.

The Minister has undertaken, as part of the existing alleviation measures, to ensure that DEIS band one junior schools will be placed on a staffing schedule based on an average of one teacher for 20 pupils. This will enable them to continue to have smaller class sizes for the youngest children starting school. Thirty-two schools that have legacy posts which provide for one teacher for every 15 pupils in junior classes only will now have a staffing schedule that operates on the basis of an average of one teacher per 18 junior pupils. The special position of DEIS schools will also be recognised in an adjustment to the general allocation model which is used to allocate learning and language support teaching posts to schools.

All schools will be notified in January 2012, three months earlier than normal, of their staffing entitlements under the new arrangement, including any alleviation measures that may apply. This will allow schools to plan for the school year beginning in September next year. The removal of the legacy posts, which will be managed as sensitively as possible given current constraints, means the resources available for DEIS schools can be spread evenly so

that all children in these schools are treated equally and equitably. The Government's protection of disadvantaged schools is underlined by the maintenance of €13 million in enhanced funding for DEIS schools and €2 million in school book funding for those schools. All of these areas have been protected from reductions in expenditure for 2012. In addition, €26 million is being provided for the home-school community liaison scheme.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Tánaiste accused me of making things up. I wonder whether, when the principals came to meet his colleague, the latter equally told them that they were making things up when they set out in graphic detail, I am sure, the consequences of moving a pupil-teacher ratio of 15:1 to one of 22:1 as was then envisaged. Even the response the Tánaiste has just given indicates that teaching posts will be lost and that children who rely, in the first instance at primary school level, on direct intervention and small class size to have a chance, not just in educational terms but in social and life terms, will be compromised by his Government.

An Ceann Comhairle: Question, please.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Tánaiste says these are legacy posts. I ask him not to come in here and insult the intelligence of the Dáil or the intelligence of the general public with that type of connivance. What will his legacy to the education of these children be?

An Ceann Comhairle: Will the Deputy put a question?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I find it deeply ironic that the Labour Party in government seeks to sabotage the work done by a previous Minister for Education of that party. I have to say, Eamon Gilmore, you are some piece of work to talk about equality.

(Interruptions).

A Deputy: You are not bad yourself, Mary.

An Ceann Comhairle: We normally address Members as either Minister or Deputy.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It is a perverse logic articulated by the Tánaiste today that we must have an equality in deprivation.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy is over time. This is Leaders' Questions.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: There is a reason that these particular schools were allocated a preferential pupil-teacher ratio.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy may not have heard me; she is over time.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: All of the documentation reflects the fact that this size of class is working for children who need a greater level of support.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, will you please put your question?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: How can the Tánaiste, with any honour — how can he, as leader of the Labour Party, with any honour — say to the children of Sheriff Street, East Wall, or the Inishowen peninsula——

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy must put her question. We are not making statements. Does the Deputy hear me?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: ——that these are legacy matters? That is some legacy for the Tánaiste.

An Ceann Comhairle: I do not know what the supplementary question is.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Tánaiste knows full well.

(Interruptions).

The Tánaiste: I think Deputy McDonald is either hard of hearing or is simply heedless.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Pardon me?

A Deputy: We have the answer now.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: It is all a great laugh. Cuts in disadvantaged areas are all great fun.

The Tánaiste: It is fair enough of Deputy McDonald to raise the issue in the House——

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I thank the Tánaiste.

The Tánaiste: ——of the pupil-teacher ratio and the allocation of teachers in disadvantaged schools. However, it is a bit nonsensical that when I give an answer and explain what is being done, she then comes back at me with the same rant she would have given as if I had not given the answer in the first place.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: What the Tánaiste is proposing is inadequate——

The Tánaiste: I ask the Deputy to please listen.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Reverse the cut.

The Tánaiste: There is an important quality in the work we do as public representatives and that is to have an ability and a capacity to listen. In this case that is a capacity that the Government and, in particular, the Minister for Education and Skills, exercised. When the issue of the way in which the reduction in teacher numbers in disadvantaged schools was going to have an impact was raised with him, he met directly with the principals of the schools and he heard directly from them what the impact would be in their individual schools and he asked for that to be set out in greater detail. In response, he has made it clear, as I have said, not that the pupil-teacher ratio in schools will be 22:1, as Deputy McDonald has asserted; he has made it clear that he will ensure that the DEIS band one junior schools will be placed on a staffing schedule based on an average of one teacher per 20 pupils. He has made it clear that in the case of the 32 schools where there are legacy posts for less than that at the moment, that measures will be taken to ensure the pupil-teacher ratio will be less than that. He has made it clear that the special position of DEIS schools will be recognised in the adjustments of the general allocation model which is the method used in his Department to allocate teachers to schools, to reflect the disadvantaged nature of some schools. In order to avoid practical problems, he intends that the allocations will be made in January 2012 which is much earlier than is usually the case so that any difficulties identified in individual schools as regards the allocation of teachers, there will be plenty of time before these come into effect in September.

Neither I nor the Labour Party need any lecture from Deputy McDonald about the protection of pupils and the protection of the pupil-teacher ratio, either generally in the primary education sector or particularly in the area of disadvantaged schools——

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It seems you do.

The Tánaiste: The position of pupils in disadvantaged schools, their special needs and requirements, the additional resources required in disadvantaged schools——

Deputy Mattie McGrath: What about small schools? What about the two, three and four-teacher schools?

An Ceann Comhairle: This is Leaders' Questions, Deputy.

The Tánaiste: ——will continue to be recognised by this Government, will be addressed by the Minister for Education and Skills and we will listen. I assure the Deputy that on this matter, the Minister for Education and Skills will pay far more attention to the reasoned cases which are made to him by the principals——

Deputy Mattie McGrath: What about the two, three and four-teacher schools?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy should please be quiet.

The Tánaiste: ——of the schools than to some kind of a political rant from the Deputy on the floor of the House.

UI 288. 12.01.2012/07

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I am sure we all remember when the budget was announced in the House. We were told that one of its greatest achievements was that the pupil-teacher ratio had not been affected. That was the stuff of smoke and mirrors because in significant ways the pupil-teacher ratio in schools had been adversely affected in respect of the provision of guidance counsellors, proposed staffing schedules for rural schools and some of the most disadvantaged schools across the State. The two Ministers present know we should not be having this debate. No one on either side of the House should be present to debate this matter because at this time there should be no question of dismantling the guidance teacher provision. There should be no question of undermining rural schools, but, above all, there should be no question of damaging or disrupting the DEIS system.

In the Minister's comments last night and the amendment tabled by the Government I notice that those responsible are quick enough to give themselves a pat on the back for their

achievements in government in the 1990s with the Breaking the Cycle and other programmes to which the amendment refers. I have no difficulty with this.

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: That is because we ran the economy smartly. We planned the service and delivered it.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Government deserves credit for what it did during that time under the stewardship, in particular, of Niamh Breathnach when she was Minister, but it must be said the Minister is prepared to undermine these very achievements. He said there were no cutbacks in the DEIS programme. He is dancing on the head of pin.

Deputy Ruairí Quinn: The Deputy and her party would know all about that.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Minister tells us that he wants to address the issue of posts pre the DEIS programme. He also told us last night that the retention of pre-DEIS programme posts was a concessionary measure. His language in the course of the debate in recent weeks has been extremely revealing in the sense that there are legacy issues at play. The Minister knows them well — the legacies of deprivation, drug abuse in many inner city communities and inequality — and that if we are worth our salt on either side of this House, we will address them without being in fear of the troika or anyone else.

The term “concessionary” is most illuminating. I say to the Minister and his colleagues: we seek no concessions for children. The Minister is offering them no concessions. The motion and our fight to protect DEIS programme posts are based on a simple recognition of the rights of child citizens who are bright, able and live in communities with challenges that leave them vulnerable. It may bore the Minister’s colleague, Deputy Jim Daly, that the terms “vulnerable” and “disadvantaged” are used. He objected to them. I am sorry if it upsets or bores him, but that is the reality for many of the people I am proud to represent in this House. The Minister has informed the House that 60% of disadvantaged children are not in DEIS schools. That is fine. He has also informed us that “there is no monopoly of disadvantage”. He should not attempt to use such perverse logic to justify the cut of 482 DEIS programme posts. I find it appalling that he would even come to the Chamber and suggest when we are considering children’s life opportunities and education that we try to consider or articulate a hierarchy in respect of there being a monopoly of disadvantage. No child thinks in that way. The Minister of State, Deputy Sherlock, commended his Labour Party colleagues on the backbenches for educating him on the realities of the cutbacks proposed in DEIS schools. I do not know how one should take this, but it seems strange.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: The Deputy is talking about the use of language, but she has played around with it herself.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: When we tabled the motion, we actively encouraged parents and teachers to lobby Government backbenchers but, in particular, Labour Party Deputies. I am pleased to see that teachers, parents and communities have mobilised strongly on the issue. At the time of the general election the line was that one should put the Labour Party in government to remove the sharp edges off Fine Gael. It now turns out that in reality, parents and teachers in disadvantaged areas are called upon to put the fire under the Labour Party backbenchers to rein in their own Minister. This is a very strange turn of events. The Minister promised a review and his colleagues seem to be delighted with this. We do not want a review; we want the Minister to reverse these cuts. I take it from listening to his colleagues on the Labour Party and, indeed, the Fine Gael benches, that they are assuming a review will result in a reversal of the cuts. The Minister has not made that commitment. He has told the House he will look at each school individually, that he will examine each school in depth. That is what he has told the House. My colleagues have already made the very reasonable point that this level of analysis and investigation ought to have been carried out before the Minister announced he would axe these teaching posts. However, in announcing his review, he has not even set out the parameters of it. What precisely will be measured? When he says he will look at each school individually, what exactly does that mean? How does he address the real concern among very many communities and teachers that favour might be given to one school or one community and withheld from another? I think the Minister’s review is an admission that he has got this wrong and I do not think he needs me to tell him. The review may, I hope, be his [561]political way of getting out of this situation and reversing his

decision. I hope this is the case. However, I cannot stand here confidently today and say that this is so.

When the vote on this motion is called, I appeal to Members on all sides and in particular, to Labour Party Deputies, who have stated clearly their commitment to quality education and equality of opportunity and outcome for our children. I appeal to them, those who see the good sense, the logic and the decency of the Sinn Féin motion, to support our position. I ask them to examine and consider very carefully whether the Minister's review will deliver. They seem to think so. I do not know whether the Minister has said privately to his own backbenchers that this is a manoeuvre or a staging post for a reversal. I do not know if that is the case. What I do know is that what the Minister needs to do is to tell this House that he will not go ahead with these cuts. It is as simple as that. I daresay that those Labour Party Deputies, in particular, and, indeed, Fine Gael Deputies, who are now applauding the Minister for his review, will look at him rather differently if his review comes back and the decision is that it has been examined and that they are going ahead to axe these hundreds of teaching posts. I urge Deputies to err on the side of caution, support the motion that supports children, that supports schools and which, with no apology, asserts that each of our children deserves and will be given equality of opportunity, particularly our kids in disadvantaged areas.

UI 291. 24.01.2012/09

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Neither I nor my officials have received a request to make an exception to the current annual pay rate of €200,000, established for Secretaries General in Departments generally in regard to the appointment of a Secretary General to the Department Finance.

The Deputy will be aware that the rates for new appointments as Secretary General in respect of all Departments were reduced following my review of salary rates for public servants in June of last year. Following my review the Government accepted my proposal to establish a pay ceiling of €200,000 for appointments to the most senior positions in the public service. The annual rate of €200,000 established for the Secretary General in the Department of Finance reflects the key role and responsibilities that post holds in the public service and represents an appropriate balance between the need identified following my review to moderate salaries in senior public service posts while maintaining remuneration rates that will attract and fairly remunerate the necessary skills and experience to support the restoration of our economic sovereignty.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Above all else what has astonished me most about the Minister, as a Minister with responsibility for reform, is the dogged manner in which he has defended very high pay rates in the public sector. The ESRI, the OECD and others were quoted earlier by Deputy Stephen Donnelly. The Minister will probably also be aware of a 2011 document published by the IPA. Not alone does it reflect that we have run away rates for those in the upper echelons but it also reflects that the pay gap between the higher levels and the lower levels within the public sector are enormous and much greater than within the EU-15. I do not believe the Minister is serious about tackling very high pay. A Secretary General should not earn €200,000 at a time when the State is insolvent, we are all in crisis and we are told that we are all in this together.

I am glad the Minister has confirmed that in this instance he will not breach the pay ceiling, albeit hugely high, in respect of the replacement in the Department of Finance. The Minister will have to forgive me because my confidence in his commitment to this issue was shattered by the fact that we discovered, courtesy of the Freedom of Information Act, that in respect of his own adviser, the Minister had sought to break the pay ceiling he proposed be established. He has come into this House to defend very high pay levels. He has repeatedly quoted that the salaries of Secretaries General have fallen from €285,000 to €200,000, while not reflecting the scandal that they were on €285,000 to begin with. He has told us that he is all in favour of dealing with runaway pay rates for those in the upper echelons, yet he by his own actions has defied that.

When the issue of pay in the public service is raised, I want to it to be clear that I and others do not refer to clerical officers or young teachers. The Minister knows precisely to whom we refer.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: The Deputy obviously believes there is political capital in touting out the notion of I somehow defend top level pay when the truth by any objective criterion, is that nobody has reduced top level pay more than I have in one year. No Minister with responsibility for the public service has ever reduced top level pay across the public service more than I have. The Deputy knows she is talking poppycock in relation to that.

Unlike the Deputy opposite, I am a passionate supporter of the public service. The Deputy wants public service pay rates to be reduced to some low average so that we do not actually attract the expertise we need. That flies in the face of all the expert analysis of failure that has occurred. If the Deputy reads any of the objective analysis of the Department of Finance by Nyberg or anybody else, she will see that they state that there was a critical lack of experts and expertise. People say we need more economists, lawyers and legal experts within the public service but she would have all of those driven out of the public service to allow us, I suppose, buy them in from the private sector because that is the only way we could do it, and thereby dumb down the public service. I will not do that. That is not the view of this Government, but we will moderate all salaries, and we have taken a significant step towards starting that in a way that has not happened ever before. There is no thinking about that. That is a fact. We have reduced the top level of pay, maintained public services and not had strikes in a way that has not been done previously. There is more work to be done in this area, as I indicated in my reply to Deputy Donnelly, but Deputy McDonald might be slightly gracious occasionally in acknowledging the work done to date in this regard.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Has Deputy McDonald a brief question?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I do not accept the Minister's L'Oreal defence of overpaid public servants that somehow they are worth it.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: That is another sound bite.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It must be borne in mind that these are the very characters who were being paid huge sums of money when this State was sleep-walking into the crisis in which we find ourselves. I am glad the Minister has clarified the matter and I take it the incoming Secretary General for the Department of Finance will not be another case study in breaking the Minister's own pay ceilings.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: There is an implication in the very nature of the question, namely, if the Minister had been requested to increase the salary, that I had been so requested. There [429]was not a request, and it will fall within the pay norms. I did not get a chance to talk about my special adviser, which the Deputy has raised now in three extraneous questions, but I hope we will reach the question so that I can answer that too.

UI. 293 **26.01.2012/03**

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Today the Tánaiste intends ramming the Water Services (Amendment) Bill 2011, or the septic tank Bill as it is known, through the House, a measure that will impose great hardship on citizens. The use of the guillotine to rush this measure through is cynical. The Tánaiste said he was open to constructive suggestions in respect of any proposals, but in this case he is rushing the legislation through without having taken or considered the very constructive and fair amendments tabled by Members. I am aware that what is happening today stems from a failure of successive Governments involving Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Labour Party to comply with the 1975 EU directive. Unfortunately, what the Dáil is telling rural Ireland today is that it is the people who will pay for the failure of politics. This legislation should not go through without the full standards by which septic tanks will be assessed being agreed, published and understood, because in its absence, fear and panic has spread throughout rural Ireland.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Hear, hear.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: People fear they will be faced with bills of several thousand euro they simply cannot meet.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Can we have order for the speaker, please?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Like the Tánaiste, I support any measure that means individuals and families, as he has just stated, can see their way beyond hardship and debt.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Will the Deputy please put a question?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: This particular measure, however, advanced in the manner it has been, not only causes the fear of further debt but will bring home that reality. How can the Tánaiste defend rushing the legislation through without publishing the standards by which septic tanks will be judged——

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy, please.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: ——and, crucially, without offering reassurance to families and individuals that there will be a fully funded grants scheme to support those families who have to make repair works to their septic tanks?

(Interruptions).

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Mattie is off.

The Tánaiste: It is a pity that Deputy McDonald does not have the good grace, as Deputy Ó Cuív did, at least to acknowledge that the Government is dealing with a real issue that families are concerned about which is the problem of mortgage debt. Previously, she claimed the Government was doing nothing about the mortgage problem and on the day that we are doing just that, she does not have the good grace at least to acknowledge that. Instead, she has [5]to spend the morning trying to find an issue on which she can criticise the Government. Deputy McDonald said the Government is rushing this measure and we are not giving Members an opportunity to debate it in detail.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Deputy is right.

The Tánaiste: The committee which debated the Bill finished three hours early.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: That was because the amendments were ruled out of order.

The Tánaiste: Three extra hours were available during which all these detailed issues could have been raised.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Look, I have the fiver.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Will the Deputy please resume his seat?

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Deputy Mattie McGrath is a clown.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Michael Noonan: There is no circus without a clown.

The Tánaiste: This issue——

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Just one moment, please. I want no more of this farce. It is a disgrace.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: This is the national Parliament.

The Tánaiste: This issue dates back to 2009 and was not dealt with by the previous Government. Now, there is a 3 February deadline within which the Water Services (Amendment) Bill must be enacted. The country is facing possible fines, including a lump sum penalty of €2.7 million and a daily fine of more than €26,000 if the legislation is not enacted and a way to deal with septic tanks is not found.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: When?

The Tánaiste: The Government is proposing a reasonable measure, a once-off registration charge of €50. There will also be an inspection regime that will be reasonable. We have an example of how the inspection regime has operated in County Cavan where it operates in a reasonable way. The legislation is not being rushed. Plenty of time has been provided to debate it. It must be enacted by 3 March.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Some in the House might find this a source of comedy. I remind Members that many people watching us whom we represent do not find it funny at all.

Deputy Emmet Stagg: That is Tea Party rubbish.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: There is no one who does not accept that we must guard the quality of our water supply and that we need a proper inspection regime. That is not the issue. The registration fee is not what is causing the difficulty. The problem lies with the legislation

the Government is rushing through. The Government has failed to accept amendments from Sinn Féin and others. The legislation is explicit that a fine of up to €5,000 can be levied. There can be no fudging on this as it is there in black and white. However, it is the absence of a series of standards for septic tanks that causes deep concern, as well as the fact that, should a household be faced with undertaking significant works to bring a septic tank up to standard, the Government is making no commitment to families the length and breadth of the country that there will be a helping hand for them.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy is over time.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: There is little point in giving with one hand and taking with the other. I will always acknowledge any effort to assist families in financial distress and will read carefully the Government's proposals which I acknowledge. However, I put it to the Tánaiste that it is deeply unfair of the Government to put through this legislation without being absolutely clear on what standards will be applied. Will there be a grants scheme? Will there be assistance for families where in order to protect the water table and the quality of water they must upgrade their system? The least those living in rural Ireland should expect from the Government is help and assistance in this matter.

Deputy Pat Rabbitte: The Deputy is on both sides of the argument.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It is not sufficient to simply rush the legislation through the House.

The Tánaiste: Let us discuss the issue of fairness. Certainly, it is not fair that taxpayers are facing a daily fine after 3 February because of the failure of a previous Government to deal with issue since 2009. It must be and is being dealt with.

The Deputy is confusing what is included in primary legislation and the detailed regulations to be made subsequently in secondary legislation. The inspection regime for septic tanks will operate under the Environmental Protection Agency which has considerable experience of inspections and environmental controls and does its work in a reasonable way. What is included in the legislation is not unfair, but what is unfair is the approach being taken by some Members who are frightening elderly people, in particular, by suggesting they will be caught with——

(Interruptions).

Deputy Brendan Howlin: They have base motives.

The Tánaiste: They are using the legislation to whip up fears for political advantage.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The Tánaiste is good at working the fear factor himself.

The Tánaiste: As everyone knows, the legislation must be put in place by 3 February.

(Interruptions).

The Tánaiste: The charge is reasonable and the inspection regime that will apply——

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: What about grants?

The Tánaiste: ——under the Environmental Protection Agency will also be reasonable.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: We do not know what it will be.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Will the Tánaiste define the word “reasonable”?

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Deputy Mattie McGrath should stop shouting people down.

The Tánaiste: In the meantime, I urge Deputies not to whip up fears among people who have nothing to fear from the legislation.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Answer the question.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: May I have an answer to my question on a grants scheme?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please. Does Deputy Joe Higgins have a question?

Deputy Martin Ferris: We did not get an answer to the question.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Will the Deputy please resume his seat?

Deputy Martin Ferris: Who will pay for the work supposed to be carried out on septic tanks? It is another charge on——

(Interruptions).

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy, I want to say something.

Deputy Martin Ferris: The Minister did not say who would pay for any remedial works required. We are all in favour of having a proper water system. The Tánaiste must answer the question about those who cannot afford to pay for remedial works.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy is out of order. Will he please sit down?

Deputy Martin Ferris: The Tánaiste did not answer the question——

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I have something to say.

Deputy Martin Ferris: ——about who would pay for the remedial works. Will it be the responsibility of——

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: If the Deputy does not resume his seat, he will have to leave the House.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: He did not answer the question.

UI 299. 28.02.2012/06

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: In the case of both the ESB and Bord Gáis Éireann, the workforce holds shares so, with that in mind, I was curious to hear the Minister had not spoken to the trade unions. He might do that with some urgency because the employees will have a view on all of this.

The Minister repeatedly made a claim today that the sell-off of these assets is somehow a pathway to enhanced competitiveness and reduced prices. I am sure he is as aware as I am that the history of deregulation of the energy sector in this small island has never resulted in a dip in prices. In fact, we moved rather spectacularly from having very low energy prices to now having among the highest across Europe. It probably makes a good sound bite for the Minister in selling this fire sale but I do not think it is an argument he can substantiate.

The Minister said he will raise €3 billion. Notwithstanding giving us figures down to the cent, he must have some sense of the individual value of these assets. I put it to him that there is a reason these assets are attractive to put on the market and bidders will be interested in them. It is because they generate very significant revenue.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: It is very hard to take lectures about sound bites from Deputy McDonald. She is the master.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I take that as it is intended.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I say that as a compliment. She used four sound bites in the question, including representing it all as a fire sale when not only the decision but the memorandum of understanding with the troika makes it crystal clear there will not be a fire sale. If we do not get a fair price for these, we will not sell them. It is as simple as that, so that will ensure there will not be.

I refer to the other point Deputy McDonald made and all these things one cannot let go, because she throws these things in as almost the truth, and this is the notion that this is deregulation. It is anything but deregulation of the energy market.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I did not say that.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: We want to achieve real and better competition in the energy market.

I refer to the notion that it is somehow a bad thing to get a good price for them and that we will get a good price for them because they are valuable assets. Of course, we want to get the best price because we need to pay down some of the State's debt. That is not a bad thing of itself, that is, to take some of the terrible burden of debt off the Irish taxpayer. We also want to get some access to money to invest in the productive economy. We have got a very good deal where one third of the total asset sales can be used for that purpose.

Deputy Mick Wallace: The Minister told us there will not be a fire sale. He said he will get full value for the State. Would he agree that is not likely to happen in the next two or three years given that the price of everything has gone so low? It beggars belief for him to think he can get real value for this in the next two or three years. Will there be a detailed cost benefit analysis to weigh selling State assets against the long-term costs to the economy, society and the environment? That would be interesting.

The Minister said there is no great strategic value to the State's holding of 25% but we must remember that the staff hold 15% and, combined, at 40% it is the largest stake by far.

Deputy Clare Daly: The question asked about the criteria used by the Minister in proceeding with the sell-off. Why did he think it unnecessary to examine fully each State asset in terms of the social, economic and environmental value? I refer in particular to public forests, which could be managed in a way that is of enormous benefit to citizens in this country. I ask the Minister to comment on why we have 11,000 people employed in forestry when a country half our size, Switzerland, has 120,000 people employed in forestry. Why is he not analysing our State assets in this way?

Deputy Brendan Howlin: That is worthy of a long debate and the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine would be delighted to have it. The percentage of land under forest in Switzerland is of a different magnitude to the percentage under forest in Ireland, if the Deputy had not noticed. We need more forestry and this Government has given clear attention to it in the programme for Government. Managing forests means harvesting the crop in the public interest. There is a difference in the decision. We will consider the Coillte proposal because other proposals have been made for the use of the forest. The Minister is examining these and we will make the best strategic decision for the Irish economy.

The questions of Deputy Wallace are like saying that we should ignore the current economic crisis. We must map our way out of it with every tool available. It has long been said that austerity alone is not a strategy, a criticism with which I agree. It must be part of the strategy because the only people who will give us money have attached conditions to the money. That is why we must achieve the deficit reduction target. There is no gainsaying that and anyone who understands economics understands that. We must also have a growth strategy and utilising some of the assets to invest in the productive economy is part of that strategy. There are other elements, such as the development of the NewERA entity and the strategic investment fund, to which we have committed €250 million from the National Pensions Reserve Fund, NPRF. We will leverage that to €1 billion for investment in job creation and we also want to use the residual part of the NPRF. I had a discussion on the use of other pension funds. We want to release that because of the €70 billion in pension funds, only 2% is used in the productive economy. There will be a range of initiatives to leverage further investment for a growth strategy to mirror the strategy of balancing books.