



BRITISH-IRISH PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY

SIXTY-EIGHTH PLENARY SESSION

Monday 23 and Tuesday 24 March 2026, Tralee

Official Report

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**BRITISH-IRISH PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY
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Monday 23 March 2026

The Assembly sat at 9.35 am.

PLENARY BUSINESS

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

I call members to order. The Assembly is now in public session. First, I would like to remind everyone present to please turn off mobile phones and other electronic devices. I also ask Members, when they are invited to contribute from the floor, to clearly state their name and legislature. Finally, I remind Members that the proceedings of this Body do not attract parliamentary privilege.

PROGRAMME OF BUSINESS

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

I welcome you again to Tralee and to our 68th plenary session of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly. We last met in Weybridge, Surrey, in October 2025. I would like to welcome new Members as well as returning Members, and I look forward to engaging with you over the coming days. You have all had circulated to you an up-to-date list of BIPA membership. We have some substitutes in place for Members who were not able to attend—that was cleared at last night's meeting of the Steering Committee, which has been informed of and approved their participation in this plenary session.

We are delighted to be joined this morning by Minister Jack Chambers and by Kara Owen, British ambassador to Ireland, whose first engagement as ambassador-designate was at the Weybridge plenary. Kara, we thank you, along with Minister Chambers, for your presence here today and for all the work that Minister Chambers's department and team and the embassy do to support our work.

The programme of work has been adopted by the Steering Committee.

STRENGTHENING PARTNERSHIP: PROGRESS, SHARED AMBITION AND CROSS-BORDER CO-OPERATION

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

I now ask Co-Chairperson Gill to introduce Minister Jack Chambers.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

Thank you. I am pleased to welcome Jack Chambers TD, Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation. We are really looking forward to hearing your speech this morning.

Jack Chambers TD:

Thank you so much. I am delighted to be in the kingdom of Kerry. As people who know football will know, Kerry is still doing tremendously well in 2026. I am also delighted to be in the Rose Hotel, as the Rose of Tralee is an important cultural tradition for Ireland. It is wonderful to be here in County Kerry.

Co-Chairs, Members of the Assembly, distinguished guests, I acknowledge the support and breadth of representation from the Oireachtas, the United Kingdom Parliament, the Scottish Parliament, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Senedd Cymru, the High Court of Tynwald and the States of Guernsey and Jersey. I also acknowledge the presence of Minister Matthew Patrick and, as has been mentioned, the British ambassador.

This is an Assembly that embodies not only the richness of our parliamentary traditions, but the strong and lasting bonds of co-operation, shared history and mutual engagement that unite our institutions and our people across these islands. We meet today against a backdrop of considerable uncertainty. Conflict in the Middle East has led to a surge in oil and gas prices, and, so far, there has been no indication of an end to hostilities. The disruption caused by the conflict speaks to the discussions about power competition that took place at the World Economic Forum earlier this year. An unwelcome side-effect of that is that economic concerns have taken a back seat.

That is why engagements such as today's, when we take the opportunity to strengthen our relationships, deepen our economic ties and cultural connections, and reflect on the links that bind our societies, are so important. The Irish Government is fully committed to a strong British-Irish relationship. Over the past 18 months, we have had a very welcome reset and renewal of relations. That was demonstrated by the holding earlier this month of the second UK-Ireland summit. At last year's summit in Liverpool, the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister committed to meeting on an annual basis in order to monitor and drive further co-operation. With the holding of the second UK-Ireland summit, I am pleased to say that we have kept, and will continue to keep and deliver on, that promise.

The UK-Ireland 2030 joint statement that was agreed at last year's summit set out a clear foundation for a strengthened relationship. The second summit that was held earlier this month was an opportunity to take stock of those commitments and to continue to build on them.

The 2030 statement is the most ambitious and extensive engagement between our Governments in a generation. The joint work that it commits us to offers real economic and social benefits for citizens and builds upon the many rich strands of our relationship, including our trade, which is worth a remarkable €2.4 billion every week, as well as other meaningful and enduring connections between our people.

We have made significant progress in advancing the commitments laid out in the 2030 joint statement, including revising and renewing our memorandum of understanding on defence; work to advance electricity interconnection; and awarding funding for new cultural co-operation initiatives across 12 separate projects. In particular, the Ireland-UK memorandum of understanding on defence co-operation, agreed last week, adds an important dimension to our bilateral security co-operation at a time when Ireland is reflecting on broader security and defence issues in order to confront new threats and to protect the wellbeing of citizens and our economy.

We recognise, too, that our domestic priorities, from urgent delivery on critical infrastructure and clean power to investing in innovation and skills, are best achieved through effective co-operation, and we are committed to working to achieve them in the best interests of citizens across our islands. We are also committed to strengthening industrial and business partnerships, particularly on energy infrastructure, research and technology, to ensure that our businesses and citizens are equipped to transition to a high-skill, low-carbon economy.

Ireland has committed to an ambitious programme of reform as part of the better public services strategy. That work is led by my department, and it will modernise service delivery to support the integrated and digital delivery of public services, drive the responsible adoption of artificial intelligence and promote digital inclusion. As part of that work, Government departments in Ireland will be developing a life-events approach to service design that puts the user at the centre, as we work towards the target of 100 per cent online delivery of key public services by 2030.

A key part of seamless service integration is the development of a Government digital wallet for national and international use, which is aligned with the European Union digital wallet initiative. We very much welcome the UK Government's approach in exploring the potential of interoperability between our digital services and its own digital identity services. We have undertaken a proof-of-concept project to test technical interoperability in relation to services available to Irish citizens, who have the right to live, travel, work and study within the common travel area. That project has progressed really well, and has had a really successful technical outcome.

Of course, maintaining the public's trust in how we utilise personal data is a key priority of that work, and as part of our national data strategy, we have reflected on the innovative models that have been developed across our islands. We know that there is much that we can learn from each other, and our shared connections are as critical as ever.

The Irish Government's shared island initiative seeks to advance the co-operative frameworks established under the Good Friday Agreement by supporting

collaboration, strengthening connections and fostering mutual understanding among all communities and traditions on the island. The shared island approach is firmly embedded in Ireland's €275 billion national development plan, shaping how we plan for co-ordinated investment, enhanced connectivity and mutually beneficial development. Many practical, forward-looking projects are already under way, including new cross-border emergency management co-operation to strengthen flood response and the establishment of the Dublin to Derry air service, which is scheduled to begin in 2026.

Investment is progressing in new greenways and biodiversity initiatives, including the all-Ireland pollinator plan and the expansion of Creative Ireland cultural programmes fostering cross-border arts and community engagement. Together, such initiatives are demonstrating how co-operation can deliver real shared benefits for people and communities across our island.

Another example is the €1.1 billion cross-border PEACEPLUS programme, which supports shared peace, growth and prosperity on the island of Ireland. It is the largest Interreg programme in the European Union and, led by the Special EU Programmes Body, it is delivering transformative cross-border investment to support peace and prosperity in the North and border counties.

Successive peace programmes have been instrumental in driving community cohesion and cross-border collaboration since the 1990s and have been vital in supporting North-South co-operation, too, under the Good Friday Agreement. I know that all jurisdictions value that significant investment in mutual peace and prosperity. The PEACEPLUS-funded developing Irish Sea co-operation project is making a valuable contribution to developing intergovernmental co-operation between Ireland, Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland. By building on those good working relationships and growing the east-west link, the DISC project will deliver a strategy and action plan that will enhance that work.

The DISC project itself is a tangible example of bringing together a diverse coalition of partners, including the Southern Regional Assembly in Ireland, the Northern Ireland Executive Office, the Welsh Government and the Scottish Government. The work of the North South Ministerial Council is also crucial.

9.45 am

In January, I had a productive meeting at the Monaghan Peace Campus with my co-sponsor, Minister O'Dowd, accompanied by Minister Givan. We received a comprehensive update on the continued successful implementation of the PEACEPLUS programme. I am pleased to report that discussions have progressed on a successor peace programme for the post-2027 period. In March 2025, the Taoiseach and the United Kingdom Prime Minister issued a joint statement outlining their shared commitment to the successful delivery of PEACEPLUS and their agreement in principle to a successor programme. Provision is also being made for a successor PEACEPLUS programme in the European Union's draft European regional development fund regulation from 2028 to 2034. Officials North and South will continue to engage with the European Commission and the UK Government on the successor programme.

The growth of the all-Ireland economy has been one of the most tangible benefits of the peace process. InterTradeIreland puts total trade between Northern Ireland and Ireland in 2023 at approximately €15 billion, an increase of €3 billion from 2022. In 2024, cross-border trade in goods alone reached almost €11 billion, and Ireland and the UK enjoy a long-standing, mutually beneficial trade relationship that supports economic prosperity and job creation across these islands. The trade relationship is resilient, largely thanks to reliable supply chains, integrated markets, shared values and on-going collaboration, with numerous agreements underpinning our long-standing ties.

From an infrastructure perspective, as a Government, we are seeking to rebalance regulation overall in four key areas: legal reform, regulatory reform, delivery reform and building the case for infrastructure delivery. We had an excellent meeting with the British ambassador two weeks ago on how to learn from each other about how we rebalance process in the interests of delivery for citizens, whether that is on housing supply or the broader infrastructure objectives that we have across our two Governments. That is reflected in the wider work that the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach have committed to undertake over the coming months and years. Against a backdrop of global challenges, it is more important than ever that we continue to work together for shared future growth and prosperity through innovation, clean energy and vibrant people-to-people links, with our shared values at the core of that work.

As we look ahead, the continued co-operation among our institutions remains essential to addressing shared challenges and realising opportunities. The relationships represented in this Assembly and the practical partnerships developed across these islands demonstrate the value of sustained dialogue, mutual respect and collaborative work. I thank you for all the work that you do together as an Assembly. I also thank the various working groups and committees that underpin the depth of this relationship and the strength of the Assembly. I look forward to continued progress on all our collective efforts and to the discussion today. Thank you very much.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP): Thank you, Minister, for your interesting and insightful contribution. I now open it to the floor to ask the Minister questions.

Steve Aiken MLA: Minister, thank you very much indeed for your speech. We in the Northern Ireland Assembly in particular welcome very much the approach to improved interrelationships, North, South, east and west. I want to focus on one thing. You talked about interconnection, particularly the North-South interconnector, which is vital to make the integrated single electricity market work. Can you outline what progress has been made? I ask because we are not seeing very much progress from where we are sitting. Over to you.

Jack Chambers TD: It is a critical project from an Irish Government perspective. Minister Darragh O'Brien is seeking to accelerate the process. Obviously, there is a need across both Administrations to facilitate its progress from an infrastructure perspective.

The timeline is still to be determined in terms of the actual delivery, but it is one of the critical infrastructure projects that we are seeking to advance in relation to building a low-carbon economy and to ensure that we have energy security and

resilience. There is no definitive timeline in relation to construction and completion right now, but work is being done on it by the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment, under Minister O'Brien, and we are working with our Northern counterparts to see how it can be advanced quickly.

The Lord Dubs:

Thank you for your very positive statement. It is great to be in this part of Ireland—it is years since I was last on holiday here, so I am grateful to be here. That is a warm-up for my question.

You talked about co-operation between the British Government and the Irish Government. I wonder if I can take you outside your direct portfolio and discuss something that is the responsibility of both our Governments, which is what is happening in Gaza and, more generally, in Palestine. I think closer co-operation between the two Governments on that would be helpful and important, and I would like to make three specific points in that regard.

First, the Israeli Government is planning to extend its settlement policy, which it calls E1. That would pretty well make it impossible to have a two-state solution, because it would divide the West Bank in a way that would be damaging to further progress. Secondly, it would be a good idea if we actually imposed a ban on settlement trade in goods and services—after all, these are illegal settlements. Thirdly, we should renew our support for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East—UNRWA—which provides vital help, education and support for the people of Gaza.

Jack Chambers TD:

Thank you for your contribution, and welcome to County Kerry. As I said, my parents are from County Mayo, and anyone who knows football will know that we have great trauma in relation to this county when it comes to all things sport.

On your latter point, in terms of UNRWA, the Irish Government has actually gone beyond some of its obligations relating to UNRWA in providing additional support in recent times, led by the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and others. We have been unwavering in our support for UNRWA and the practical work that it does on the ground. I know that there has been uncertainty around some of its core funding from international sources, but we will continue to make the case for UNRWA and its work on the ground.

On the issue relating to trade, we are currently working on a relevant piece of legislation relating to our position on trade that we are seeking to draft within the context of the European trade frameworks—it is currently undergoing drafting by the Attorney General. We have been clear on aspects of the settlement policy that Israel is advancing and how it is undermining the potential for a two-state solution. Ireland has been consistent in its position relating to that and other matters in that conflict, both at the United Nations and elsewhere, including in the European Union.

You are right to say that the continuation of the settlement policy undermines the potential for a two-state solution and lasting peace. We need to continue to make

the case for a two-state solution and highlight the fact that the settlement policy undermines that.

The Lord Murphy:

I would like to touch on the common travel area. As you know, it has been a vital part of British-Irish relations ever since the foundation of this state, and was emphasised again in the Good Friday Agreement. However, it has increasingly been eroded in terms of the passport situation, because now, for example, you have to show your passport as you enter Ireland through an Irish airport—sometimes, that is the result of airlines changing their policy, but it does go against the spirit of the CTA. For example, you can travel from the North to the South without any difficulty at all, but you cannot do so from east to west, as it were. I would value your comments on that.

A related issue is that of the electronic travel authorisation system—ETA. When I was doing the review into the Windsor framework in Northern Ireland, I found that a lot of businesses in the hospitality and tourism industries were badly affected by the ETA, and the British Government—I am a member of the Labour Party, so I am talking about my own Government—still does not seem to understand the importance of looking at that issue again because of its importance to those sectors. I would be grateful for your views on that issue, and I urge you to keep pressing your counterparts in the British Government on it.

Jack Chambers TD:

Okay, I hear you on that. On your first point, I think that all of us who are travelling between the UK and Ireland have experienced the issue that you mention, particularly with regard to aviation. I do not have a view of the backdrop in relation to the consistency of how the CTA is being applied or not applied in the context of aviation. I would have to brief myself further to see whether airlines are following the spirit of what the CTA represents. I know that certain airlines have had that policy for years, and others have moved to force someone to have a passport if moving between Ireland and the UK for a particular transit. However, I will take that point away, and am happy to raise it in order to get further information on whether we can reapply the approach so that it is more consistent.

Similarly, the issue of the ETA has been raised consistently in the Dáil and the Seanad, and it is something that we will continue to engage with the British Government on.

Sinéad Gibney TD:

I want to pick up on your response to Lord Dubs. The legislation that you are referring to has been in the Houses of the Oireachtas for a number of years, in the shape of the Control of Economic Activity (Occupied Territories) Bill. We are 18 months on from an election campaign in which the Government promised in its manifesto to pass that bill, and I would like to understand where we are with regard to services. Goods and services were the intended format, but services seem to have been dropped.

Building on what Lord Dubs put forward, I would really like to understand how the Irish and UK Governments are working together in that area. To what extent are

discussions focused on the conflict and potential resolutions? What are we doing with regard to looking at any co-ordinated response from Ireland and the UK to what is happening?

Jack Chambers TD:

As you know, we had pre-legislative scrutiny of the bill and a report was produced. It is a complex drafting matter, and there is a particular legal concern relating to services, which has been articulated publicly. However, the drafting of the bill is progressing.

What we do not want to do is publish a piece of legislation that is not implementable or deliverable and which does not have a strong legal underpinning. That is the context in which the drafting is progressing under the Attorney General. When that process is concluded, the bill will enter into the joint Houses.

As has been said publicly, there is a particular concern relating to services. In all our international engagements in the EU, the UN and elsewhere, Ireland has taken a very strong and consistent position on the conflict in the Middle East. That forms part of our wider engagements.

Obviously, we want to work with the British Government as well on ultimately supporting peace and a two-state solution, which is our consistent position in all our international engagements.

Cathal Boylan MLA:

As an Armagh man, I hope to see Kerry up in Croke Park come July.

I want to touch on the all-island strategic rail review, which you mentioned in your presentation, and major infrastructure projects such as the work relating to the A5, which will drive the infrastructure programme forward and be major economic game-changers for this island. Can you give us your views on how we can work together and collaborate to ensure that elements of the rail review are delivered and that the likes of the A5 work are delivered? They represent big opportunities for us right across this island.

10.00 am

Jack Chambers TD:

On the A5, under our current national development plan, we are trying to progress and advance the projects concerning the two roads leading to the A5, which are the N2 and the Letterkenny trans-European transport network route—the TEN-T.

We are very committed to working with the Administration in the North and the British Government on the A5. That work is currently being undermined by a judicial review case, which has brought huge uncertainty for the project's timelines and its deliverability.

The fact that a critical infrastructure project such as the A5, which would have huge road safety benefits and provide regional connectivity and growth in the North, is being undermined by what I would say are vexatious environmental considerations speaks to a wider issue that we face across both Administrations. We need to learn from each other on that issue, so that we can reform and

rebalance the delivery of infrastructure and housing in the interests of the common good. The A5 is a good example of a project that is being undermined by a judicial process. We have managed similar projects in Ireland that have been undermined in a similar way. We are committed to working to ensure that the A5 project is delivered—we have made commitments on that as part of previous joint agreements between our two Administrations.

The all-island strategic rail review presents a long-term vision. The Belfast to Dublin corridor has received specific funding in recent years. At present, we are working with Irish Rail to consider how we can deliver some elements of existing projects in the national development plan. Minister Canney is working on elements of the western rail corridor. I realise that that does not relate specifically to your question, but the 10-year plan provides a blueprint for what more we can do in the long term to deliver rail.

The A5 is probably the most critical North-South road project, which would really enhance regional connectivity. We know what impact on economic development the absence of that road infrastructure is having on the north-west in particular, but the timeline is very much out of both Governments' hands.

Ruairí Ó Murchú TD:

Go raibh maith agat. Fáilte romhat, a Aire. I would echo what Alf Dubs and Sinéad Gibney said in relation to Gaza. We all accept that we are in a very dangerous and very much changed world. There has been a move away from multilateralism and international law, which we need to stand firmly against.

When it comes to Gaza, it is fair to say that the American Administration has given complete backing to the Israelis and that Benjamin Netanyahu has been absolutely consistent in ensuring that there will not be a two-state solution. Therefore, we must do whatever we can, however small, through the occupied territories bill—that is an absolute necessity. Many say that we need to go far further in relation to embargoes, and that we need to get to the position that we were in with the battle against apartheid in South Africa, in which a huge part was played by the international community. Along with many other aspects of the anti-apartheid struggle, that eventually made an awful lot of normal white South Africans feel that they had been made such pariahs that they demanded change. We definitely have to take action in that regard.

We all accept that, in the circumstances that we find ourselves in, as well as standing up for international law, it is an absolute necessity that regular people are looked after in relation to the cost of living crisis and, in particular, the crisis with regard to the cost of fuel. In the next period, no one in politics will have a conversation in which that is not mentioned.

When it comes to interactions between the Irish Government and the British Government, I welcome an awful lot of the work that has been done in the shared island unit. I am talking about not only the Narrow Water bridge project but the academic work that has been done to assess educational attainment across the island and the variations between North and South.

A huge amount of modelling work has been done, but my issue is that the Taoiseach has absolutely ensured that this never veers into constitutional

change. A conversation about constitutional change is happening, and I do not think that anybody is at risk from having the conversation—even those who are against the idea of Irish unity accept that it is a conversation piece and it is a possibility.

It is absolutely incumbent on the Irish Government to do the preparation work, and it is important that we utilise such modelling and have a forum to allow the real conversations to happen. There must be a proper conversation with the British Government about setting a referendum on Irish unity—it cannot be allowed to drift and drift. This idea that we wait until everybody gets on and there is some perfect utopia is the biggest obstacle to delivering on Irish unity.

Go raibh maith agaibh.

Jack Chambers TD:

You have made a number of points there. On your latter point, the shared island unit is about giving effect to the real opportunities that can arise in a way that builds cross-community support, without veering into a more divisive conversation. The work of the unit and the case that has been made around it are getting broad and collective engagement, and support for it is building. If the work of the shared island unit were to veer towards the conversation that you have referenced, that would potentially disrupt the support and the case that has been made for it.

The Taoiseach has sought to deal with the nuts and bolts and to put meat on the Good Friday Agreement through infrastructure, cultural ties and environmental objectives, to build a lot of shared opportunities. That builds the foundations for a better future across the island, which is reflected in the work of the shared island unit. If, tomorrow, that veered into what you want it to be, we could potentially fracture those who have a different view from their level of engagement with the shared island unit.

My position on unity is clear, but it is about making the case for that to others over time. The shared island unit has a different context, and it is about how we build across all those multiple policy areas—that did not happen in the past; there was not a mechanism to do that from the centre. Through funding and co-ordination, the unit has allowed that unified purpose to be developed without there being a constitutional context. Ultimately, it is about communities and their experience and ensuring that people see progress on jobs, prosperity and everything else on an all-island basis.

You will be aware that the Government is considering the cost of living carefully. The world is unpredictable and volatile, and we do not know the extent to which what is happening in the Middle East will continue, but I will say that we are cognisant of the real issues that people are facing presently. We will be going back to Dublin to discuss that later today, so we will set out further detail on that during the week.

The Irish Government is recognised internationally for how we have spoken up about Gaza and in relation to the conflict in the Middle East. Unfortunately, domestically, there is too much politicisation around the Irish Government's consistent and positive position in calling out the breaches of international law

and the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. I think that we all share a view on the promotion of peace and a two-state solution. The piece of legislation is being worked on, but it has to stand up to legal scrutiny. That is the context in which we are progressing that.

David Honeyford MLA:

I am an Alliance Party MLA.

I was concerned by your first response to Steve Aiken. I totally believe in the shared island approach; I talk about it all the time. We need to share this place and this island. However, people outside are hurting because of a war somewhere else, through their energy costs, which will drive the cost of everything. There is inflation on food and everything, and it will drive the cost of living higher.

We have one electricity market, but two separate systems, and the delay to the push to drive those two things and bring them together on an island, with basically a copper wire, is costing people in their pocket through those energy costs. We cannot deal with energy costs and the transition to renewables without that interconnector on this island and without being united, in a sense, through energy.

Excuse me if I am wrong, but the lack of a date sounded like a lack of progress, for one, but also a lack of attention being paid to this needing to be done, which is astounding.

Obviously, we have started to go ahead and build north, but this has got to be done. It has got to be prioritised and delivered to actually start to drive the price of energy down for ordinary people. We need to start to be energy efficient and sufficient on this island as one.

Jack Chambers TD:

I said that I do not have a definitive start date to give today. That was the only context, except to say that Minister O'Brien is working to advance the project as quickly as possible, and the Irish Government fully supports its delivery. I think that the question was about when exactly it is due to commence. I am saying that I do not have that definitive date today.

Under previous Governments, there were issues in relation to ambiguity about whether the project would be supported. We have been clear about wanting to advance it and get it delivered, and Minister O'Brien is working to do that and accelerate it. I simply do not have the specific date. I do not want to give an incorrect answer to that question. That is the basis on which I am responding.

Carolyn Thomas MS:

I am a member of the Welsh Parliament and I represent North Wales as an MS. I am interested in energy security, and I believe that there is an electricity interconnector between Wales and Ireland. When I last attended a meeting of our Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure Committee in Ireland, there were talks regarding developments at the ports in relation to having platforms to launch wind farms.

In Wales, planning permission has just been granted for another wind farm. I believe that this interconnector will help such that, when the wind blows in Wales, you will have power in Ireland, and vice versa. It is great that we can share that wonderful power.

In relation to your issue with ports and developing wind farms, are you having discussions with the Port of Mostyn in North Wales? It has such facilities and it now has planning permission to extend. Is that a possibility for you?

Another thing is that renewable energy prices are coupled to gas prices, although I guess that I have to raise that with Ed Miliband and the UK Government. We produce a lot of renewable energy in Wales and in the UK, and increasingly so, which is the way to go. However, we need to decouple that from expensive gas prices and really make the true transition away from fossil fuel.

Jack Chambers TD:

We are having a similar discussion at an EU level about how, with a much greater level of renewables coming on stream in the years ahead, we look at that in the context of the volatility of gas prices in the global market. Even in the past week alone, we have seen the impact of that. We have to advance in the context of the EU, but there is a similar issue across markets—whether that is the EU, the UK or other international markets—where being tied to gas prices has an impact on renewables.

Minister O'Brien is due to publish the new national ports policy. The last one was published in 2012 or 2013, when there was a very different context for the Irish economy and a different context around ambition on renewables and the scale of what is possible through our ports.

10.15 am

Ports are the great enablers for the low-carbon future, as you have said, and Ireland is looking to future proof port capacity to really deliver that renewable transition. That will also allow the wider co-operation on ports policy that is set out in the UK-Ireland joint statement to manifest. When published, the national ports policy will reflect a change that will give us the ability to do a lot more through some of our domestic ports to build the energy co-operation that you have referenced.

Some of this is connected to the question on the interconnector, which is one of the highest-priority transmission projects in the price review 6—PR6—which is the five-year ESB Networks investment plan. In the previous five years, there was a €6 billion cycle of investment; in the next five, there will be an €18 billion cycle of investment, which will underpin a transformation of our grid through various projects, including the North-South interconnector. I want to stress, in the context of this discussion, that PR6 prioritises that interconnector. However, as I said, the specific timeline depends on issues around land acquisition and some of the other barriers that exist in relation to other infrastructure projects. Those issues will dictate its broader delivery.

Sinéad McLaughlin MLA:

I want to go back to the shared island initiative. It has been really positive, but there is a view that co-operation is still a bit piecemeal and is really dependent on political will rather than being embedded in long-term planning. Do you think that the time has come for us to move into a more strategic, long-term framework for economic planning for the island, particularly with regard to infrastructure, research, education and regional development? Whatever the constitutional position of political parties, I think that there is an acceptance that we are moving towards a new island and we need to be prepared for it. However, I do not see the shared island initiative doing that long-term planning. Is now the time to do that?

Jack Chambers TD:

Narrow Water Bridge is an example of a strategic infrastructure project that is being delivered. Some of the research projects that have been announced in terms of north-south co-operation are strategic, too, as they involve building relationships and co-operation. What has happened between Queen's University Belfast and Dundalk Institute of Technology is strategic, and it represents long-term co-operation that builds the case for academic and research capacity on our island.

I could probably list 100-plus projects that are very strategic and are receiving attention, but they are not being done with the objective of creating division at the very start. If things are done in the context of a constitutional conversation, we immediately lose people in the room. What we are doing is making the case for co-operation without undermining that conversation from the get-go.

I do not accept your summation that the approach is not strategic, because I can pick multiple projects in nearly every area of policy where I have seen a transformation of approach across the board. In every department in the Irish Government, there is ongoing work to build co-operation in loads of different areas, including sport, culture, education, energy, security and so on. What is after happening in the past five years is unprecedented.

The infrastructure commitments that are being made in multiple areas, including transport, energy and so on, are strategic and have long-term impact. They make the case for all-island economic development and will enhance the growth and prosperity of everyone involved. If that is not strategic, what is? That is happening, even if some of it has happened organically, as in the case of Queens University Belfast and Dundalk Institute of Technology. Would that have happened 20 years ago? The fact that there is confidence in that being real shows what is happening on the island and how the shared island unit is having an impact for the long term. That has been welcomed by people with very different constitutional views.

Maurice Bradley MLA:

Minister, you briefly touched on the north-south interconnector, but, were the interconnector available tomorrow, is the infrastructure in place to take that to my constituency in the Causeway Coast and Glens area?

Turning to another point, what is the position of the Irish Government on international state-sponsored terrorism and the threat that that poses to an all-island economy, an all-Britain economy and a European economy? Do you have any thoughts on how we can deal with that emerging threat from the Middle East in particular?

I also have a question about Irish unity. You cannot take a million people into a room that they do not want to be in, but you can work with that million people and bring them with you. Forcing the issue is not the way to do it, so I agree with the assumption that you have made and the approach that you have presented.

Jack Chambers TD:

Thank you. As was mentioned earlier, the interconnector will build resilience and enhance energy security across the all-island energy market, ultimately removing the risk of the overdependence that exists in relation to our current grid capacity. The National Development Plan that we have published specifically calls out the need to build and strengthen the all-island economy in areas such as energy infrastructure in order to enhance the daily lives of the people you represent, the people I represent and everybody else.

I have set out the context at length. The shared island unit is about showing citizens in every community and from every background what is possible through co-operation, engagement, collaboration and honest intent in each of the policy areas.

In all our international engagements, the Irish Government has been clear about our support for international law and, in particular, for a de-escalation of what is happening in the Middle East, given the risk that that poses to the global economy, the potential impact if the situation cascades out of control and the lives that are being lost in the meantime.

I think that that answers your question.

Seán Crowe TD:

Go raibh maith agat. Fáilte roimh an gcruinniú.

Some of my colleagues have raised the issue of the Middle East and the frustration that a lot of us feel—I, for one, feel guilty about what is going on. I never thought that I would live to watch a genocide unfold in front of us. Unfortunately, we went through months of watching that happen in Gaza. A lot of people thought that the world would move to do something about what was happening, but it did not.

Colleagues have talked about some of the legislation that we have in that area, such as the Occupied Territories Bill, but there is also the Illegal Israeli Settlements Divestment Bill. Many of us are horrified by the idea of the facilitation of Israeli war bonds, and we will have an opportunity to talk about that on Tuesday. There is frustration about the delay in doing something substantial that would stop the horrors that are unfolding.

I have two questions in relation to health. I sit on the Good Friday Agreement committee, as do a number of colleagues here—Cormac Devlin is the chair of the

committee. At the moment, the committee is looking at the whole area of health. Again, I do not think that co-operation in health threatens anyone's constitutional view, but some of us see a missed opportunity to identify where the health services in the North and South can assist each other in providing treatment and medications that have been approved in one jurisdiction but not in the other. An agreement to provisionally extend treatment could be life changing for people who suffer from diseases and conditions that require prompt treatment.

I will give you an example. There is a young child in my constituency who has Duchenne muscular dystrophy, which affects young boys. They have a very limited life expectancy—it is a muscle-wasting disease that they die from—but there is a new drug available called Givinostat, which can prolong their life. The drug has been approved in the North, but the company is dragging its heels in relation to the South. The frustration is that there could be a family in the South—for instance, in Donegal, which is just a few miles away from the North—who need the drug to possibly save their child's life, but it is available only in the North and not in the South. The situation could be the same vice versa. The agreement that I mentioned is one way in which we could avoid patients having to travel up north. The family in my constituency has gone to the United States to try to get treatment for their child. That is one measure that we could look at and maybe fast track.

The other question relates to your own portfolio, Minister, and it is about digital patient records and the delay in that regard. During Covid, we came up with a patient identifier number nearly overnight, yet we are talking in terms of possibly years before we have that for digital records. A frustration of some of the groups, particularly in relation to cancer research, is about the sharing of information and the fact that there has been no patient identifier. Can anything at all be done to speed that up? It is holding back patients as well as both of our systems.

We should be co-operating much more in this area, but one of the difficulties is the lack of exchange of information. The people we talked to at Queen's University, who are dealing with cancer research in the South as well, said that digitalisation would be a game changer. I will give you an example. I go to St James's hospital. The St Luke's radiology centre is there, and just down the corridor is urology, but those two systems do not talk to each other at the moment. We are looking for a system that allows people to talk to one another, whether from north to south or from east to west.

I think that we all accept that progress needs to speed up. Whatever you or your department can do would be really helpful for everyone on the island of Ireland. Thank you.

Jack Chambers TD: Thanks, Deputy Crowe. I fully agree with your synopsis of electronic health records and that Ireland is far behind many countries when it comes to the digitalisation of healthcare in order to manage better patient outcomes. In addition, as our demographic shifts, there is huge potential in embedding digitalisation around people's personal patient journey as they transition through the health system. This Government has made the decision to put that work out to tender. It is due to go to tender shortly—in fact, the tendering process might already have commenced. It is a multibillion-euro digitalisation of

health project to transform our health system, which we have prioritised over other areas.

We have been clear in prioritising the digitalisation of our health system. I was a doctor, and I saw the interface of patient records, with files going up to my own height, which is clearly not sufficient for a modern health system. We are taking that leap, through a tendering process, so that we have full integration of records between community care and hospital care. The potential that that represents, particularly given the positive opportunities for using AI in healthcare, is limitless in the role that it can play in people's personal health journey.

10.30 am

We have a lot of north-south projects on health co-operation, which you are familiar with, particularly in the research area. Minister O'Dowd and I recently launched one involving co-operation on respiratory diseases and clean air. Further, a number of projects that are delivered through the PEACEPLUS programme have health co-operation at their core.

We also have the National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics, which assesses drugs. I know that Deputy McGreehan, Deputy O'Sullivan and others who are here have raised the issue of the authorisation of new drugs, and it is one that I am familiar with. There is a new agreement between the Irish Government and the pharmaceutical sector to replace the current arrangement. Partly, that relates to some of the new drugs that will come on stream, but the process has to reflect the wider economic evaluation on a case-by-case basis—that is the standard approach in any country for the authorisation of drugs, and new drugs in particular. I know that there is an issue around the fact that there are sometimes different points of authorisation on the island. I understand that, but, through the new framework agreement that we have with the pharmaceutical sector, a portion of the new spend on drugs is for orphan drugs. That will be combined with the assessment that is made by the National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics.

I share your view, because I think that, as we deliver electronic health records, there will be the potential, in the medium to long term, to make the health experience more seamless from a north-south perspective. In my engagement with the British ambassador, we spoke about how, as we digitise public services and empower people, we can align that with the spirit of the common travel area, for example, to ensure that citizens' interactions with public services across the islands are more seamless. That is something that I want to work on personally with the British Government, so that there is a more seamless delivery of services for everybody on our island and across our two islands. That is a really exciting opportunity for the future.

I hope that that answers your question.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

As the Minister has to leave shortly, I ask the next few people to be very succinct, so that, between us, we can try to get him out of here at the appropriate time.

We will take two questions at once: I invite Frances O'Grady and Erin McGreehan to ask their questions.

The Baroness O'Grady of Upper Holloway:

I suspect that the consensus in the room is that the latest US-Israeli offensive against Iran is bloody, reckless and flouts international law, but I wondered what your assessment is of the current position between the UK and Europe on defence, and of the scope for further co-operation.

Secondly, very briefly, if the war continues, the impact on working people across these islands could be profound. During the Covid pandemic, there was an expectation in the UK that the state would step in, and we negotiated the furlough scheme. Would you support the idea that our respective Governments need to get together in a room with the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, the Trades Union Congress and the Northern Ireland Committee of the congress and start planning in relation to the priorities of working people?

Erin McGreehan TD:

It is fantastic to be here in the lovely County Kerry.

As a TD from County Louth, I very much welcome your commitment to the PEACEPLUS programme. Also, I note that you have name-dropped a lot of County Louth projects, including the Narrow Water Bridge and the Queen's University and Dundalk Institute of Technology partnership. Those are huge projects for County Louth that will benefit people's lives dramatically and improve the quality of life and the economic outcomes for many people.

However, you also mentioned the existence in many guises of infrastructural deficits, which are a huge issue across the islands. We are living with the failure that arises from slow delivery. As the Minister will know very well, the efficiency and effectiveness of the process have been shown up for what they are. The process is litigious and expensive, and the delays are not only exhausting but expensive for ordinary people.

My question is this: what steps can both Governments—the Governments in the North and the South—take to overcome the legal and environmental challenges that are delaying these projects? What can be done to reform planning and to have processes that ensure timely delivery, while also, of course, promoting public interests, reducing costs, increasing delivery and improving quality of life?

Jack Chambers TD:

Thank you for the questions. On the first, there is wider and much more intense engagement happening between the British Government and the European Union on defence co-operation, as I think that you are aware. That has even been reflected in the memorandum of understanding with the Irish Government, which, in the past 10 days or so, has been updated in respect of subsea cables, maritime co-operation and the sharing of information in a world that is so uncertain. I think that that is welcome, and that co-operation will only deepen in the period ahead, particularly between the European Union and the UK. There has been a positive level of engagement on that.

As for your second question, when, in 2022, we had a crisis with inflation at 10 per cent, we stepped in and provided specific and targeted supports. Three

weeks ago, we said that we were not sure to what extent the current situation would represent a sustained, permanent shock from an energy perspective, and there is still economic evaluation on-going of the inflationary impact. That is reflected in our current position on the extent to which, and for how long, we will intervene. I suppose that a lot will depend on what happens in the Middle East over the coming weeks.

We all need to learn from one another with regard to the interventions that it is appropriate to make. In the first instance, those interventions should be targeted at those who are most in need—that should be the instinctive approach for any Government, and the extent to which the state steps in will depend on the scale and the depth of the shock, whether it is a temporary spike or shock or whether it is sustained and more permanent.

Obviously, there are also fiscal consequences in how we manage this. What happened in 2022 provides us with significant learning in that respect; my recollection is that the extent of the Irish Government's commitments was about €10 billion, all in, over a period of years. That shows the fiscal outlay involved in such interventions.

That is why we have to be careful and responsible with any interventions that we make today, because the global economy is also at risk from what is happening and what is manifesting from an energy perspective, which will have consequences for all fiscal and budgetary planning. We are carefully considering all of that at present.

Deputy McGreehan, you are absolutely right: there are multiple projects in your constituency and in the north-east, with research and collaboration happening in many areas. In Administrations in the UK and Ireland, but also in the European Union, process has overtaken progress in many instances. While the world is getting on with it—in parts of the United States, Asia and elsewhere, they are putting delivery first—in Ireland, the UK and across the EU, we have an excessively litigious system and process. That is why we are prioritising simplification when it comes to the European presidency.

We are taking our own steps domestically to cut out a lot of the process through our reforms to the infrastructure guidelines—indeed, the critical infrastructure bill is due to be published in the coming weeks—and there is also the work that we are doing to rebalance the incentives that exist around judicial reviews, where vexatious matters are superseding and blocking the public interest and the public necessity of delivering critical infrastructure.

That is what the Irish Government is putting forward, but there are opportunities for learnings around reforms, for example, that the British Government is similarly undertaking with regard to housing and infrastructure delivery in its economy. That will help both of us to reduce the time involved and bridge the infrastructure gap.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

I will take the last three questions now.

Senator Gerard Craughwell:

Minister, thank you for being here this morning and for your candid answers.

A shadow has hung over the island of Ireland and the UK since the Troubles in Northern Ireland, and that shadow is the need for answers for those who were affected by the Troubles. From my perspective, the legacy legislation that was planned in the UK seemed to hold those who wore a uniform to account in a way that set the bar higher than was the case for those who did not wear a uniform. Rather than trying to seek retribution against individuals who are now all men and women in their 60s and 70s, has the time come for some kind of truth committee, whereby one can tell one's story, provide answers for those who have been affected by the Troubles, and allow Ireland, Northern Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales to move on to the next stage and build closer relationships?

Sinéad Gibney TD:

Minister, you touched on AI in your exchange with Seán Crowe on health data. In Committee C, we are looking at AI in relation to trade and, specifically, small and medium-sized enterprises. On the governance of AI, given the presence of large tech firms that have their EMEA headquarters in Dublin, the decisions that are made by the Irish Government have ramifications globally, across Europe and certainly across these islands. I would argue that they have a disproportionate impact.

However, it seems that the Government is intent on supporting the EU digital omnibus package, which—despite what the Government says—is a form of deregulation. The Government is pursuing that under the banner of simplification and harmonisation, but it will pull back on the protections offered by the EU Artificial Intelligence Act before it is even implemented. Indeed, it will actually roll back protections that are currently provided under GDPR for data and privacy, which has huge implications for these islands. Will the Government continue to support the digital omnibus? Is the Government working with the UK Government to discuss how AI, online harms and the regulation of big tech can be better handled to provide protections for citizens?

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

Last but not least, we have Cormac Devlin.

Cormac Devlin TD:

Go raibh maith agat, Cathaoirleach. Thank you, Minister, for your responses and your attendance today. A wide range of issues have been presented. I will return to your portfolio and the infrastructure unit that you established in your department. You mentioned simplification and the infrastructure bill. Particularly with regard to projects such as the interconnector, the Narrow Water Bridge, the Ulster Canal and the A5, which have all been raised this morning, having engaged with your counterparts in the North and in England, what do you see as the top priorities for these two islands over the next number of years?

Jack Chambers TD:

Thank you all for your questions.

Senator Craughwell, over the past 18 months, there has been exceptional co-operation on legacy between the two Governments. We have a joint framework on legacy, which will now involve legislation by both Administrations. We need to see that delivered to provide justice for victims and families. Compared with where we were two to three years ago, what has been achieved in recent months is really positive, and we need to see that implemented now. The framework is a positive position, and it will be really important to see that delivered.

Deputy Gibney, on AI, the fact that we need a balance that includes protections is reflected in, for example, the document that I published on the adoption of AI in the public service. However, we also need to embrace the opportunities around AI and to balance ensuring that Europe allows for an innovative ecosystem for business and the delivery of public services. That means having a balance when it comes to regulation. We want to ensure that we have safety and protections, but there needs to be a balance in all elements of regulation for economies. That is why there are huge opportunities in healthcare, for example, as we digitise our health system.

10.45 am

We are supporting the respective simplification initiatives at an EU level and prioritising simplification as part of the European presidency to respond to the concerns on growth and investment within the European economy. There is a lot that we can simplify at home, but we also want to anchor protections in how we allow AI to be used in the wider economy. We need to ensure that we have protections around that. That work is on-going domestically and within the European Union.

The interconnector has been mentioned multiple times. It has been thought about for decades, and it needs to be advanced. It is in price review 6—PR6—which is the investment cycle that ESB Networks and EirGrid are advancing. It is critical to building a low-carbon economy and energy resilience.

Similarly, we need many of the transport projects that were mentioned, such as the A5. We also need to upgrade our ports to build the renewable capacity that is possible. Ensuring that the new national ports policy reflects the ambition on both islands will be important in giving effect to that.

It is not only about project-specific measures; it is also about making the case for reform. Ultimately, unless we reform the processes that underpin infrastructure delivery, we can have all the lists of projects in the world, but, because public administration has allowed process to become excessive and slow, delivery has been undermined in too many areas. That is the case in the EU, the UK and Ireland. Until we streamline and simplify process, those lists will continue to lengthen without being delivered. That is why I always make the case that, rather than having an expenditure discussion on who gets what, it is making the case for reform that will ultimately deliver more for our projects and those in Britain and elsewhere.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

Thank you very much for that, Minister. We respect the fact that you have given everyone who wanted to speak a chance even though you have to leave soon. I

am sure that everyone would agree that they have been given good answers to tough questions and that we should let the Minister get on to his next appointment. *[Applause.]*

Jack Chambers TD:

I thank everyone. We all come from different parties and different traditions, but we have a shared interest in making this Assembly work. I speak for everyone in the Dáil and the Seanad when I say that we appreciate all our colleagues and the work that you do in your respective committees. I appreciate the opportunity to engage and look forward to working with you on many of the issues and items that you have raised.

The sitting was suspended at 10.48 am.

The sitting was resumed at 11.25 am.

IRELAND, THE UK AND EUROPE

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

We are back in public session. We will now commence our debate on the motion on Ireland, the United Kingdom and Europe, as approved by the Steering Committee. The text is as follows:

That the Assembly takes note of the increased challenges of the international situation in the world and welcomes the efforts of Ireland, the UK and Europe to work together to meet these challenges.

No amendments to the motion have been received, and I call Senator Garret Kelleher to move it.

Senator Garret Kelleher:

Go raibh míle maith agat a Chomh-Chathaoirligh. A chairde, ba mhaith liom an rúin seo a mholadh a bhaineann le comhoibriú idir Éire agus an Ríocht Aontaithe ó thaobh cabhair a thabhairt do thíortha eile ar fud an domhain teacht ar réitigh shíochánta do choimhlintí idirnáisúnta.

(Translation) I thank you very much, Co-Chair. Friends, I support this motion between Ireland and the United Kingdom regarding providing assistance to other countries across the world to find peaceful resolutions to international conflicts.

Co-Chairs, notwithstanding the complexities of the historical relationship between Ireland and the United Kingdom, and as somebody who aspires to see a reunited but new Ireland in the not-so-distant future, I have to say that I am also a very proud European. As such, I feel that the continent of Europe will for ever be indebted to the United Kingdom for the role that it played in bringing the Second World War to an end and paving the way for a lasting peace and closer European integration.

Today, we face different challenges on the international stage. However, it is as important as ever to show strong international leadership when it comes to conflict resolution, and I feel that the history of Ireland and the United Kingdom in arriving at peace and resolving the conflict that existed on this island stands us in good stead when it comes to playing a positive role in assisting other countries. I would make particular reference to the situation in the Middle East, and especially to Gaza, which was referred to by Alf Dubs, Sinéad Gibney, Ruairí Ó Murchú and others in their earlier contributions.

At a time when the United Nations lacks a certain clout as a result of vetoes and is unable to progress along a road that the majority of member states in the General Assembly would wish to proceed along, when there are difficulties with the Security Council and when there is a lack of strong international and impartial leadership from the United States, I think it more important than ever for stronger leadership to come from Europe, and I would very much welcome closer co-operation between Ireland, the UK and the European Union in assisting with the resolution of conflicts internationally. Moreover, the area of energy security, which

was alluded to earlier, is an international geopolitical concern on which we need closer co-operation.

I would also mention some of the rhetoric that has recently emerged on Cuba. Together, we can play a positive role in de-escalating that situation and arriving at a positive long-term outcome.

I am very happy to move the motion, and I hope that it receives support. Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirligh.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Míle buíochas a Sheanadóir Ó Céileachair as ucht an rúin a mholadh agus as ucht do ráiteas ar an ábhar tábhachtach seo.

(Translation) I thank you Senator Kelleher for supporting this motion and for your statement on this important matter.

I now call on Members to make contributions. Again, as Gill Furniss said in the earlier session, Members should keep their contributions as succinct as possible to ensure that all those who wish to speak have that opportunity. It is important that we hear a wide range of views, as we had in our engagement with Minister Chambers.

I call Senator Craughwell.

11.30 am

Senator Gerard Craughwell:

Thank you very much indeed, a Chathaoirligh. The type of co-operation between Ireland, Europe and the UK that we are talking about requires a common strategy, if you want, in relation to defence of our islands. The Irish Government seems to be the outlier in respect to having published a national security strategy. We recently launched the maritime strategy—it was a bit odd to launch a strategy on a subsection of national security but not to have a national strategy. Do Members believe that the absence of a national security strategy in the Irish Republic is an impediment to driving forward the type of co-operation that we are talking about here?

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Gerard. I call Steve Aiken MLA.

Steve Aiken MLA:

Thank you very much indeed for chairing and bringing the motion before us.

I will probably be slightly controversial, but the issue that we have at the moment is security of these islands, and security of these islands is part of the wider European framework. One of the things that has kept us all safe is the North Atlantic Treaty Organization—indeed, it has kept Ireland safe for a very long period of time. Even though Ireland has not been a member of it, it has actually provided the security umbrella that you needed.

NATO is struggling at the moment because of the aforementioned United States, and I think that it is important that we address the elephant in the room: if we are

going to be serious about defending these islands, and particularly our seabed cables, communication links and way of life—for want of better terminology—we must have a grown-up discussion about security and defence.

I welcome, for one, the fact that conversations are already happening in the Republic of Ireland towards joining the Joint Expeditionary Force—the JEF—which I think is a good precursor to joining NATO. However, the answer that would get yourself defended and improve the defence of these islands is a rapid approach towards NATO. Until we address that issue, we are talking around it rather than to it.

I remember a very strong conversation that we had with the Finns, who said that there was no way that they were going to be in NATO—six months later, they were in, along with the Swedes. I do not want Ireland to be placed in the same situation that it only happens at the stage where it is under the same degree of threat. Prior planning prevents—you can fill in the rest yourselves.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Steve. I call Jim McMahon MP.

Jim McMahon MP:

Thank you. A lot of talk today has been, understandably, about the war in the Middle East and the humanitarian catastrophe that has taken place in Gaza, but we cannot take our eye off the war that is raging in Europe since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. I was there at the start of the month, visiting Odessa and Kyiv, and it is pretty clear that there is frustration that we are not doing enough to release frozen Russian assets to allow Ukraine to properly support—and, in the future, rebuild—itself. Also, even now, dual-use technology is used, where things such as washing machine components can be used for drone technology that is killing civilians in the cities and ports.

It strikes me that although we have done well with respect to stepping up and supporting Ukraine in the effort to defend itself, we are not doing enough to support it to win the peace and then rebuild. All the conversations that we are having today and will have tomorrow around food and energy security, our place in the world, the impact on working people and the shock to our economy are rooted in that global security. The truth is that nobody is secure unless we are all secure, and I think that we should not take our eye off that war raging in Europe.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Jim. I call Senator Conor Murphy.

Senator Conor Murphy:

Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirligh. To address the motion, I do not have a difficulty with our working together with Britain and Europe to meet the challenges, but we have to operate on the same set of rules and principles. That is about international law and support for multilateralism through organisations such as the United Nations. Unfortunately, we have seen both Britain and Europe depart from those.

Europe has very different standards in relation to Russia's aggression in Ukraine, Israel's aggression in Gaza and Palestine, and America's and Israel's aggression in Iran. If we want to get to a system where we have genuine co-operation with people to try to bring more stability to the world, then it has to be through that basis of respecting international law and supporting people who are daily under siege, occupation and attack, whatever part of the world that comes from. It is not just a case that it happens to be the ones that we like, as opposed to the ones that we disagree with; or ones whose assets we require, as opposed to people who have no assets at all.

Steve Aiken's point in relation to NATO clearly shows the danger of being dragged into military action, particularly for a country such as Ireland that has a very proud militarily neutral—not politically neutral—position, and which has a lot to offer the world from our own experience of colonialism and of repression in our own country, and also our experience of peace building, conflict resolution and respect for international law. You can see clearly the pressure that has been put on Britain by Trump in relation to Iran, which shows that if you are in NATO, regardless of whether you have any reservations about the military action that is being undertaken, you are part of the club and you are expected to play your part in that regard. From Ireland's perspective, there is a position of neutrality and of making a contribution in terms of peace building; respect for international law, multilateralism and conflict resolution is something that we should be part of.

The Western powers have a disastrous record, right across the world, and no more so than in the Middle East. It is absolutely disastrous—after coups, occupations, regime changes and bombardment of civilian populations—for people in the Western powers to think that we can provide the solutions to people whose lives we have destroyed for generations and generations, and who for generations have had assets stripped from them by Western powers. The United States in particular has a disastrous record in the Middle East and, in its most recent actions, it continues to make things worse.

There is space for co-operation by those who genuinely believe in the principles of international diplomacy, international law, peace building, protection of minorities and civilian populations, and protection of the rights of women and children who find themselves bearing the brunt of any military action. I would like us to be in that space. However, I have to say, I regret that I do not believe that the political leadership in Europe and Britain have adhered to those principles in recent times. That is an honest conversation that we need to have with both entities.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you, Conor. I call Lord Malcolm Bruce.

Lord Malcolm Bruce:

Thank you, co-chair.

I am a member of the International Relations and Defence Committee in the House of Lords. We are just about to sign off a report on British-American relations; although we have not published it yet—indeed, we have not finalised it—I think that it will state that the relationship has changed fundamentally and

that it is not going back. Not least, that is because the trends that have been amplified by President Trump have been apparent for a long period of time. Even if there is a change of administration, the situation will still be a disengagement from Europe and there will be a need for European security and defence to be more resilient and to be based here.

Picking up on what Steve Aiken said, I will not get involved in whether or not Ireland should join NATO, but I think that we need to accept—the UK needs to, as well—that we are actually at war with Russia. We are under attack from Russia and we need to have a capacity to defend ourselves against Russia, which we do not have at the moment. In that context, Ireland's maritime strategy reflects that. I accept that. It seems to me that the first priority for Ireland—the island and, if you like, the two countries that are responsible—is to ensure that we can defend our cables and our waters. It seems to me that it is a perfectly reasonable request that the Government of Ireland does more to contribute to that; that is a reasonable thing to expect. I imagine that it is a reasonable thing for the Irish public to want, too, because the consequences of the disruption of those cables would be pretty catastrophic. My point is that we need to work out how we can co-ordinate that.

I do not want to be accused of having a go only at the Irish: the UK has got an awful lot to do. We have made commitments about defence. We are catastrophically cutting our aid budget in a way that I find unacceptable, but we have not found any of the money yet to increase our defence spending. Our defence investment plan, which was supposed to be published last summer, has not appeared. The priorities have not appeared for what we are going to do and where we are going to get the money from. Everything is on hold.

We need to co-operate and co-ordinate. It seems to me that the one area in which Ireland and the UK absolutely can work together is marine defence of our offshore infrastructure, which we both have a mutual interest in. We both should be working together to defend it.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Malcolm. I call Deputy Séan Crowe.

Séan Crowe TD:

Go raibh maith agat. Just to follow on, maybe, from what I was saying earlier, I note that the motion talks about taking

“note of the ... international situation”.

The problem that I have with that is that it is almost passive. That probably sums up our approach to the conflict in Gaza, where we have stood back and noted, have been horrified and have wrung our hands, but we have not actually done anything. We have not followed up with action.

I think that the motion itself is just too passive. It is almost as if we are helpless, and there is nothing that we can do. However, there is a lot that we, in conjunction with our various jurisdictions, can do. There is a special economic relationship between Europe and Israel—that should not be happening. We have watched the genocide, and we have watched the war against children, and we are now seeing

a repeat of that in Lebanon. There are the rights and wrongs about the attack on Iran, but the big question is: who is next? Cuba has been mentioned—that seems to be next. As part of this pattern, Turkey was supposed to be next, too. Where would that bring us? The same countries that were first to say, “Oh—no migration. We don’t want anyone,” are the first to be dropping bombs on innocent women and children.

The motion talks about taking note of the situation, but is that enough? Is it enough just to note that a genocide happened in Gaza and that hundreds of thousands of innocent men, women and children were killed? Is it enough to note that the same thing is almost being repeated, with the blowing up of bridges and schools, the killing of medical personnel and so on? Is it enough just to note that that is happening? I do not think so, and I think that it is a shame on us all. As I said earlier, I actually go to bed feeling guilty about the things that are happening in the Middle East. I feel guilty, because maybe I do not speak up enough or say enough about many things.

The next one is Cuba—it has gone. People might say, “I didn’t agree with the regime in that country” and so on, but it has done a lot of positive things around the world, too. Cubans have helped facilitate conflict resolution; their doctors have been dealing with poverty; and they transformed their own country. Parking that, though, I have to ask the question: who is next? I just do not think that noting something is enough—I think that we need to say that something is wrong and that we need to do A, B and C in relation to it. We need to use our voice and say, “Stop. No more.”

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you, Séan. I call Deputy Sinéad Gibney.

Sinéad Gibney TD:

Thank you, Co-Chair. As others have mentioned, it is important that, when the motion talks about “increased challenges”, we recognise the specific role played by the European Union and the UK in those increased challenges and the contributions that we have made. I share others’ concerns that certainly the European Union has drifted from its origins as a peace project towards increased militarisation, to the point where even the multi-annual financial framework is being reshaped to favour defence in a way that will fundamentally shift how we support member states across the European Union and how we incentivise militarisation within them.

The language used in the motion of working together to meet challenges is welcome, and I do believe that we all need to work together. However, I do not believe that, at the moment, that is being done in a way that respects Ireland’s neutrality. Although the Irish Government says that it supports Irish neutrality, it has been chipping away at it in many different ways, including cosyng up to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, being more involved in EU battle groups and relaxing our airspace and airports to allow them to be used for military efforts, to the point that we have defence legislation coming through that will remove the triple lock. I appreciate that in the UK the triple lock refers to pensions; in Ireland,

it refers to our UN mandate to deploy troops for any peacekeeping efforts, and its removal will be the final nail in the coffin of Irish neutrality.

I believe that we must work together while protecting Ireland's neutrality. That is absolutely crucial for any response to the international challenges. Ireland punches above its weight with respect to diplomacy, human rights and peacekeeping—we have the longest unbroken record of peacekeeping of any nation in the world. The triple lock and our UN mandate for the deployment of troops were brought about in response to the entrenchment of Ireland into the European Union through the Nice and Lisbon treaties, when we knew that it would threaten our neutrality. We chose as a people to bake in the triple lock to protect that neutrality for exactly this time—which we saw coming—when we would be pulled further into conflict, further towards NATO and joint military and defence proposals across the European Union. We must retain that triple lock, because the value that we bring is diplomacy, social justice and human rights. I feel really strongly that, in working together, this Government is unfortunately failing to respect that neutrality.

11.45 am

Maurice Bradley MLA:

I will speak to the motion. In my opinion, Ireland is the Achilles heel of both Britain and the EU, not by being neutral but by being defenceless. I would welcome a conversation within Ireland itself on that subject. I believe that the future path of the EU is contradictory to Ireland's neutrality and that that should be a concern for everybody who lives on this island.

I believe that we must also have a conversation—I mentioned it earlier—on the increasing and emerging threat of international terrorism. As well as recognising and obeying international law, we should be promoting conflict resolution. I do not think that the motion is strong enough on those themes.

Liam Conlon MP:

I speak in support of the motion. I really welcome the principle of Ireland, the UK and Europe working much more closely together. From a British perspective, it is really positive that we have a Government with a much-changed attitude towards both Ireland and Europe. I think that Brexit was incredibly damaging for our relationships with our European neighbours and with Ireland—I think that we will look back on that time as a lost decade in many ways. I spoke in a debate in Parliament a couple of weeks ago to mark Brexit 10 years on, and it was far from a celebration. It was quite telling that not a single proponent of it turned up and bothered to speak in the debate—even the people who, for many years, proposed that as a solution to our problems are now unwilling to own it.

However, the issue is about not only security but economic co-operation and the people-to-people relationships that we need to secure, which many others have spoken about today, particularly in the context of an increasingly distant and erratic America.

Ruairí Ó Murchú TD:

I would like to back up several speakers who said that we probably need to be a bit stronger in relation to the wording of the motion. I accept that Donald Trump is not exactly going to take heed of a motion coming from BIPA, but we are as well to at least say things as they are.

Look—the fact is that he is engaged in something where, depending on where it goes, you could destabilise Iran, which is a country with 92 million people. As Seán Crowe said earlier, this is the guy who keeps talking about Europe and Britain needing to watch themselves in relation to immigration when, obviously, one of the biggest starters of a huge level of immigration across Europe in recent years was the war in Syria. An increased conflict throughout the Middle East and particularly in Iran will not help in relation to immigration. There is a need for calling that out.

There is a definite need to ask whether the current conflict has been embarked upon at the behest of Netanyahu and Israel, which particularly does not care that Iran is destabilised once it is weakened, in any way, shape or form. That has always been on the cards for Benjamin Netanyahu.

As Seán Crowe said, we do not know what is next in relation to Cuba or anywhere else. Whatever people's views are on those countries, America in particular—although you have your own history in relation to this—has not been able to engage in regime change in the recent past without a serious amount of blowback and negative impact, so it is vital that we call out where things are and where they should be. It is about our adherence to international law.

In relation to what was said earlier, it is fair to say that there have been issues with Ireland's defence capacity. An insufficient amount of resources has been put into that, whether from an assessment point of view or in relation to the defence forces. However, that is very different from Ireland leaving its position of neutrality and an independent foreign policy, which means that we have been seen as a fair arbiter throughout the world. I would like to think that we will eventually enter a time when peace building will be given a greater significance.

Donald Trump will eventually bite off more than he can chew, which will be unfortunate for a lot of us because of the impact that it will have. Maybe this current situation is it.

Naoise Ó Muirí TD:

I agree with Lord Bruce about the protection of the undersea infrastructure. We should co-operate more with the UK in that area because those are strategic economic assets and there is a strategic, long-term imperative for us to protect them together.

NATO has been mentioned a couple of times. I do not see any future for Ireland joining NATO—a military alliance. I do not see that in the offing. I agree with Ruairí Ó Murchú. We have a long history of diplomacy and independence. That is where Ireland can play a role in the long term. I do not see NATO being on the cards for us.

Lord Paul Murphy of Torfaen:

As we have been debating this morning, the President of the United States has called off strikes on Iran for the next five days on the basis of what he calls constructive talks with the Iranian Government. I am not sure that that will be successful but that is what has happened. Even though we perhaps jest at the fact that this organisation could not have an effect on what might happen in the next few weeks, the experience that Ireland and the United Kingdom have had in making peace can help towards European and British involvement in ensuring that diplomacy takes over, while remembering that the Iranian regime is one of the most brutal and distasteful in the world—we still have to consider that. Remember that we have a role to play. We ought to play it successfully in the weeks to come.

Some years ago, I tried to talk to the Palestinians about the Good Friday Agreement. They listened and were courteous but not much happened between them and the Israelis. It is a difficult problem but, nevertheless, diplomacy is better than war. We must use all our experience and our Governments to ensure that we get a diplomatic solution to the situation that we have seen over the past weeks. There is hope of that from this morning.

Conor Sheehan TD:

In general terms, I welcome the thrust of the motion, particularly in relation to respecting and advancing global multilateralism. I welcome the update on the memorandum, especially on maritime and cyber security.

To go back to something that Deputy Gibney said, I caution that the Irish Government does not have a mandate to remove the triple lock. It did not seek one in the election and it is clear from all the polling that has been done that a qualified majority of people support retaining the triple lock. It is an important part of our neutrality. The Irish Government needs to push more for the reform and expansion of the Security Council and for the removal of the veto that the permanent members have, particularly in relation to atrocities.

I will go back to what some of the other speakers said a minute ago in relation to where the motion could be stronger. I draw a parallel between the 2003 invasion of Iraq and what Donald Trump is doing at the moment in the Middle East. We all know the history of 2003 and the UK Government at the time.

The response from the European Union and most individual member states, with the exception of Spain, has been fairly muted, in the sense that there has been a recognition of what is happening but not a condemnation of it. I believe that we must be stronger and we must condemn. I am no supporter of the Iranian regime, and I would argue that there are no good guys here, but it is clear that Iran did not pose a threat in the way that has been portrayed. What Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu have been doing—and are pausing for five days—is very clearly illegal, and we should be able to unequivocally condemn it.

David Maxwell TD:

I support the motion. It says:

“the Assembly ... welcomes the efforts of Ireland, the UK and Europe to work together”.

That is it. We can get into the minutiae of what Ireland, the UK and the European Union are doing, but all we are saying is that we welcome the three areas working together. As Lord Murphy said, it is better to talk than to go to war.

I fully support the motion. As I said, if we want to go into the minutiae of what each country is doing, we can look at that and pick holes in it, but, overall, what my colleague has proposed is that we welcome talking and working together to try to arrive at an agreed solution, which is peace.

Erin McGreehan TD:

We are correct to recognise that we are living through a period of profound international uncertainty. In that environment, partnership between the UK, Ireland and Europe is not simply desirable but absolutely essential. I very much support the conversation around the close and practical co-operation between Ireland and the UK. We have to invest in strengthening our collective ability to respond to these shared challenges. That is the only way that we can get out of it successfully.

As we all know—we have commented on it—many of the international challenges are way beyond our reach and immediate control. We have to concentrate on and put our efforts into policies and projects that we can shape. One of those that has been mentioned relates to undersea cables. The threat of damage to them would have tangible negative outcomes for all of us in this room and all our constituents. Seventy-five per cent of the transatlantic subsea cables travel through or very close by Irish waters. If that is not a reason to co-operate and protect our shared assets, I do not know what is. In a volatile international environment, leadership means prioritising the things that are possible.

Ireland is a very proud neutral country, and we must have a mature conversation about what our neutrality means in 2026. There is a famous saying: you never step in the same river twice. Everything is always changing. We are in a changing Europe. Europe is at war, as other speakers have said. Defending ourselves; protecting our assets, infrastructure and country; and co-operating positively and proactively as good neighbours and partners certainly do not undermine our neutrality and our proud commitment to internationalism; rather, that protects our country, delivering protections for our citizens and our economy. A defenceless country is certainly not a neutral country, so I welcome the motion.

Noon

Martin Vickers MP:

I will make a few comments on what has been said so far. Seán Crowe referenced the fact that this is a passive motion, which, of course, it is. I suspect that, if it had been more direct in one way or the other, we would perhaps not feel able to approve it. I am certainly in favour of co-operation.

Liam Conlon referenced Brexit. Like 70 per cent of my constituents, I supported Brexit, and I would happily do so again if we were voting tomorrow. I recognise, of course, that that brought tensions with our relationship with our European neighbours. That is inevitable: divorce can always be difficult, to put it mildly.

Of course, we have to work together, and I fully support working more closely with Europe on trade, and I acknowledge that our economies are intertwined to a considerable extent. The reality is that, under Labour and Conservative Governments for the past 30 or 40 years, we have taken advantage of what was called the peace dividend and have not invested in our forces as much as we should have done. That was exposed very clearly in the past week or two, when we were struggling to defend our bases, most notably in Cyprus.

Lord Murphy spoke of our diplomatic role, and we clearly have such a role to play. The UK is a member of the Security Council, the G7 and so on, and we should use all our diplomatic levers as much as we can, but we must recognise our limited resources.

Jim McMahon referenced Ukraine, which, sadly, seems to have disappeared into the background since the Middle East conflict emerged. We have got to do all we can to support Ukraine. We talk about a coalition of the willing, but the amount of resource that we could deploy to act as some sort of peacekeeping force or whatever is limited.

We must be extremely careful because, certainly in relation to the wider Middle East conflict, we do not want to be drawn in any further than I mentioned a moment ago, which involves defending our bases there. The good news is that the Trump administration will not last forever, and we must work with our NATO allies and our European neighbours to ensure that we defend ourselves to the best of our ability and use the diplomatic levers that I mentioned to try to at least reduce the risk of conflict expanding.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin:

I welcome the fact that we are having a debate on the subject of this motion, because the international landscape is shifting beneath us all the time. The international order has been constantly tested, and I think it would have been unconscionable for this Assembly to meet and not have a discussion on the issue, as it is impacting on every one of us and on our constituents. Although, in the past, we had specific certainties about the land and the world that we live in, those certainties are no longer there, and we absolutely have to work cohesively and collectively, particularly in relation to maritime security and cyber security. We also need to work together on the global transition to clean energy, and in relation to international development and aid. The fact is that our security interests are interconnected and our vulnerabilities are absolutely shared, and because of that our responses must be collective.

Lord Murphy spoke about the potential for the Good Friday Agreement and all the work that went into that over years to be seen as some type of a road map for the way forward in relation to the Middle East. The Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade in Dublin has started that process. That has been welcomed, certainly by the Palestinian ambassador—I am not so sure about the Israeli

ambassador—but it is a piece of work that we have set ourselves and have commenced. I definitely think that our common perspectives and our work on that might help to give a transitional road map in that respect.

The Co-Chair (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Fiona. I think that we have covered everybody who offered to speak, and I want to thank all the contributors, obviously—[*Interruption.*] Oh, I see that David Rees, Member of the Senedd, wants to speak.

David Rees MS:

Thank you, Co-Chair. I have listened very carefully to what has been said. Looking at the motion, I think that the important words are those that refer to working in co-operation and collaboration. We must remember what Putin has done in Ukraine and what we are seeing Trump do elsewhere, whether it be in the Middle East or in Venezuela—and let us not forget that he has threatened Greenland, too. There was collaboration between the UK, Ireland and the EU in standing up to him on Greenland, which shows that that sort of thing can be done collectively by organisations.

However, this is not just about defence; there is also our work on sanctions and using the economic levers that we as nations have in these situations. We seem to have forgotten about sanctions; indeed, Trump is actually easing sanctions on Russia at this moment in time, because it suits his agenda to do so. It does not suit the world's agenda, because all we are doing is allowing Putin to build up his arms and his wealth again to use them in Ukraine.

Ukraine is one thing; there is also Moldova, which will be next. We might well talk about Lithuania and the Baltic states, but they are part of NATO, and Moldova is not. We must remember the nations that are under threat in Europe, too.

Collaboration, therefore, means working together on every aspect in order to stop or hinder any thoughts or attempts by any superpower to impose itself on other nations. No one in this room, I think, will accept that what Trump has done is acceptable. For example, when it comes to destroying the regime in Iran, he actually has not done so—he was not even thinking about that. He wanted to get the regime changed, but he just stood back when thousands of young people were killed in Iran. He threatened and he talked, but he did not do anything. It was only when his own interests were under threat that he started to look at doing something.

As nations, we have to stand up and say, “That’s not the way we work. That’s not what we believe. Those are not our views or our principles.” It is best if we do that collectively; we cannot do it individually. The EU—and Europe as a whole—is a big bloc, and it contains many nations that will have a big say in this. Personally, I am very pleased that the UK Prime Minister did not go in initially, and I hope that he does not move towards doing so in any way. This action by Trump and the US—and the support for the Israeli Government and its actions—has put the whole world at risk, and we cannot allow things to escalate. Everything that we do together is important.

Are the words in the motion strong enough? Probably not, but they are about recognising that things are going on that we do not accept, and that we need to work collectively to solve those problems. That is what the motion is saying, so I support it. We need to ensure that we act as one against such threats.

The Co-Chair (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, David. I call Baroness O’Grady.

The Baroness O’Grady of Upper Holloway:

Thank you, Co-Chair. I just want to support those who have talked about the particular experience that Britain and Ireland have in peace building on the back of the Good Friday Agreement. I know that there are parliamentarians in this room who worked with civic society in Colombia, for example, and with our friends in South Africa, and it made a real difference. We should not forget the importance of that role.

My concern is that, if the motion is to have meaning, there has to be some clarity about our shared understanding of the root causes of the international challenges that we face. Some of those are obvious—economic inequality, for example. However, we must also discuss the rise of right-wing populism and the so-called strongman leader, who glorifies in machismo, ethnonationalism, state violence and war. Those are real issues that we have to address on our respective home fronts as well.

During the break, Paul Gillespie told me that 90 per cent of the online calls to violence during the Dublin riots originated in the UK and the US. Through anti-fascist work that I am involved in in Britain, I know all too well the importance of US money in the various so-called white Christian foundations and so on that are funding that divisiveness and hate within our communities.

I am interested in whether, as we did in relation to peace building, we could at least share between us lessons on building community resilience to the far right and to right-wing populism. I think there are a lot of lessons that we could share.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you, Frances. That concludes contributions from all who have offered to speak. We have heard wide and varied views, as we represent many jurisdictions, and many political parties from across the jurisdictions are represented here. A lot of very legitimate points have been made.

I will say that the motion was circulated in advance and, if people wanted to make amendments, they could have done so. However, no amendments were suggested. Obviously, it is not easy to draft a text that will take note and be representative of the overall collective view—I note that David Rees used the strong phrase “collective will” as well.

I put the motion to the Assembly. Is the motion agreed? It is agreed.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Assembly takes note of the increased challenges of the international situation in the world and welcomes the efforts of Ireland, the UK and Europe to work together to meet these challenges.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you, colleagues. Our clerks will arrange for the text of the resolution to be sent to the British and Irish Governments. Of course, I welcome the fact that there are representatives of different Government departments here. I know that they will take back to their ministers and their heads of Government the views, contributions and ideas that have been put forward today.

I do not think that, when we met in October 2021, we envisaged that we would have a war lasting more than four years in our own continent of Europe. That illustrates Erin McGreehan's point about the on-going changes that constantly occur.

I thank everyone for their exceptionally good and positive contributions, emphasising the desire of all of us, and of the people we represent, to have peace in the world.

We will now hear from Giedrius Drukteinis, Member of the Parliament of Lithuania and Vice President of the Baltic Assembly. We are grateful to him for joining us. We greatly value our connection with the Baltic Assembly and recognise the courage of the people of the Baltic states, who are on the front line of defending security and democracy. Our guest speaker will have heard comments in relation to the difficult position that the Baltic countries and other countries in the east of the European Union face in terms of the on-going attacks that they have suffered for a considerable length of time from a large neighbour to their east.

Giedrius Drukteinis, you are very welcome.

Giedrius Drukteinis:

Thank you very much.

Dear Co-Chairs, colleagues, distinguished friends of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, ladies and gentlemen, first of all, I must apologise for my harsh eastern European accent. Surprisingly, for the past two days here in Ireland, no matter whom I was addressing in English, everyone kindly asked me to repeat what I had just said. So, sorry about that. However, on a positive note, I also thought that perhaps the reason was that they enjoyed my accent so much that they wanted to hear me more, again and again. Anyway, back to the speech.

It is indeed a great privilege to address this honourable plenary session, and it is a great honour to be here today in Tralee representing the Baltic Assembly. I sincerely thank you for the invitation and for the growing co-operation between our organisations over the past years. The dialogue between the Baltic Assembly and BIPA has already proven to be valuable, and I am pretty confident that it will only deepen and bring tangible results in the future.

12.15 pm

Dear colleagues, the Baltic states—those three small states—have understood for a long time that cross-border co-operation is a geopolitical necessity. Our common history, our geography and our shared challenges have shown us that co-operation just makes us stronger. The Baltic Assembly plays a central role in that work, serving as a platform for bringing our Parliaments together in order to align policies, to launch joint initiatives and to respond collectively to regional and global challenges.

In reality, co-operation between our countries—Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia—delivers obvious and necessary results. One of the most recent, and notable, examples of our joint co-operation is the joint disconnection from the BRELL electricity grid. Just for context, I should explain that, for decades, the energy systems of the Baltic states were synchronised with the power systems of Russia and Belarus. Today, through co-ordinated political will and effort, we have made a complete transition to the European electricity network. That is a step that strengthens our energy independence and reinforces our overall security. We are getting not a drop of energy from Russia or Belarus—we are getting everything from Europe.

A more important example is our joint defence line initiative, which will strengthen our eastern borders. This co-ordinated effort to develop defensive infrastructure across our countries includes fortifications, mobility corridors and logistical support systems, with the aim of ensuring that our forces and those of our NATO allies can respond quickly and effectively in the event of crisis. By aligning planning standards and investments, we are creating a coherent defensive space instead of having fragmented national systems. In other words, we in the Baltics have realised for a long time that we are not separate, isolated countries; we are a part—an integral part, may I stress—of one united front. Whatever Russia does to, say, Estonia affects us immediately, and we will stand with it, or with Romania or any other country on the eastern border, because we consider that border to be a common front. That gives what I would call emotional confidence, because it means that, as the popular song goes, “You’ll never walk alone”. We are not walking alone any more.

We are also advancing co-operation through the Rail Baltica project, which will connect the Baltic states with the European rail network. Alongside that, we have the Via Baltica, which is a motorway connection, and the peculiar Velo Baltica, which provides a very nice infrastructure for those on bikes to travel from the northernmost part of Europe through the Baltic states to the southernmost part.

Although such connections are often discussed in terms of their importance to economic development and mobility, their importance to security and defence is equally significant. Rail Baltica is being built to the European standard gauge, which will allow for seamless movement across borders and will enable faster transport of military personnel, equipment and supplies from western Europe to the Baltic region. In a crisis, such mobility is obviously essential. By reducing logistical bottlenecks, Rail Baltica will directly contribute to collective defence and will reinforce the ability of NATO and EU partners to act together when it matters most.

Dear friends, our experience shows that mindful cross-border collaboration increases strength and builds resilience, and such lessons are relevant far beyond our region. However, our co-operation is shaped by a harsh reality. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine continues to define Europe's security landscape. For the Baltic states, this war is not distant; it is deeply personal, and it is just around the corner.

We know from our own history what occupation means; indeed, I spent 20 years of my youth under it. We understand what is at stake—Ukraine is defending its sovereignty and the principles on which Europe is built. Its fight is our fight. That is why the Baltic states have provided strong and consistent support to Ukraine, whether politically, militarily or on humanitarian matters. That support must continue with determination and urgency. Ukraine's victory is essential for the security of Europe. At the same time, this war reminds us that co-operation must go beyond words. It must lead to co-ordinated defence, shared capabilities and long-term commitments.

Dear colleagues, in concluding my long speech, I must urge that, in an increasingly complex and uncertain world, regional co-operation is non-negotiable. The partnership between the Baltic Assembly and BIPA is an important part of that effort. By sharing experiences and learning from each other, we can contribute to a stronger Europe, so please let us continue to build bridges across borders. Let us co-operate; let us work; let us stick together; let us turn co-operation into action; and let us stand united in support of Ukraine, in defence of our values and in pursuit of a secure and resilient Europe.

Thank you very much for your attention. [*Applause.*]

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD): Vice Chair of the Baltic Assembly, thank you very much for your address. There was exceptionally good content there and very strong messages for us all. You outlined the advances that you have made in the three small Baltic countries with regard to energy security, connectivity, and rail and roads. A particular phrase of yours struck me: in relation to Ukraine, you said, "Their fight is our fight" and that we need to protect the values that they are defending and our values across Europe.

We are delighted that you are with us today. Over the past few years, we have been developing a relationship with the Baltic Assembly and the Nordic Council. That is beneficial for us all. We wish you and your colleagues in the Baltic Assembly every success with your work in an area that we know brings huge challenges and places huge pressures on you. Thank you very much for your participation and your strong messages, which resonate with us all.

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

I am pleased to welcome Matthew Patrick MP, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. Minister, we give you a very warm welcome to the Assembly. We look forward to hearing your speech, and we are glad that you will be able to join us for lunch after your contribution.

When the Minister has concluded his contribution, he will take questions from colleagues. Minister, you are very welcome. [*Applause.*]

Matthew Patrick MP: It is great to follow the Vice Chair of the Baltic Assembly. That speech was excellent. It advocated for co-operation and togetherness in such a way that we would all be proud of making those remarks. Personally, I am very jealous that anyone asked him to repeat himself. Most politicians around the room would be lucky to be heard once, so we have some lessons to learn. [*Laughter.*]

Co-Chairs, distinguished Members, colleagues, friends, it is a privilege to address, for the first time, this Assembly—a body that for more than three decades has served as a vital link between the legislatures across our islands. I want to start by acknowledging the fantastic work of the BIPA Co-Chairs, Brendan Smith and Gill Furniss, as well as our Vice Co-Chairs, Dame Karen Bradley and Senator Conor Murphy. I know how much you and the Secretariat put into a packed plenary session such as today's, so I want to thank you. May I also say what a privilege it is to meet with so many elected members from across the eight legislatures.

In today's fast-paced and often online-first world, it is easy to lose sight of the importance of this—of building human connections. To have the opportunity to do that, and in such a picturesque setting as County Kerry, no less—the kingdom—is something that I really appreciate.

It is fair to say that, 36 years ago, when BIPA was founded, the political winds blew in a slightly different direction, and it is a testament to the vision of our Governments and our Parliaments that, back then, they recognised that we have common interests and shared futures. They created BIPA as a vehicle for us to collaborate.

Along with the British-Irish Council and the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference, BIPA has allowed us to get together and focus on shared priorities and concerns, to test one another's thinking and press for change where necessary, but also to discuss how we might work better together and to update each other on how we are delivering for our people. It is with that in mind that I would like to speak to you today under the broad theme of progress, something that I have been reflecting on since I first took up post in September last year.

I think that it is fair to say that progress is not always delivered by Governments. Yes, policy initiatives are important, but without people working every day on the ground to implement them, change simply does not happen. Since taking up this role, I have met with community leaders, chief executives, faith leaders and public service workers. From those conversations, I have learned an incredible amount

about Northern Ireland and just how much has changed in the 28 years since the Good Friday Agreement was signed.

Often, when we talk about progress in Northern Ireland and across these islands, we talk of great moments. We remember the G8 summit in Fermanagh in 2013, or Her late Majesty the Queen's state visit to Ireland in 2011. Those moments are undoubtedly symbolic, but it is the people doing extraordinary things, often unnoticed, every single day, who provide the substance that is progress.

In Tony Blair's final Labour Party conference speech in 2006, he said something that I think is relevant for this moment:

"Leaders lead, but in the end it's the people who deliver."

Today, and every day in the work that I do as a minister, I want to pay tribute to those people: the community leaders, the teachers, the business owners—those who take small, quiet daily steps to make progress possible. Our duty as representatives is to ensure that we are worthy of their efforts.

It is not just pragmatic but is also incumbent upon us to recognise that progress does not always happen in a simple or straightforward manner. The graph does not always move gradually upwards. There are setbacks. There are challenges along the way. However, in order to deliver change, people have to know that they are supported by the institutions and the structures that govern them.

The foundation of the progress that we are focusing on at this plenary is the relationship between our Governments. After the general election in 2024, we pledged to reset the relationship between the UK and Ireland, following years of tensions and disagreements over Brexit and legacy, and I am proud that we are delivering on that. Minister Jack Chambers, in his excellent remarks earlier, talked about the first ever UK-Ireland summit. There, the Prime Minister and Taoiseach Micheál Martin issued a joint statement that marked a turning point in bilateral relations and set out a joint vision of collaboration to 2030. While recognising that our duties as co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement will always be paramount, we have now made a commitment to enhance collaboration across a range of areas, including security, trade, climate and culture. I would go further than that, and note that the atmosphere is no longer one of co-operation; it is one of genuine partnership. We are working together more closely than ever because we recognise the challenges and our opportunities do not stop at any border, land or sea.

At the second UK-Ireland summit in Cork, Keir Starmer and Micheál Martin committed to accelerating development of key energy interconnectors—we heard questions about them earlier—which will build our grid capacity and enhance energy security. We have also made a landmark agreement between UK Research and Innovation and Research Ireland to enhance co-operation. We are collaborating to keep our seabed infrastructure secure. We have announced 12 collaborative partnerships that our leading cultural institutions will deliver together through the 2030 UK-Ireland cultural co-operation programme. By working together on everything from new technologies and seabed mapping to cultural exchange, we are ensuring the Irish Sea remains a bridge, not a barrier, to our collective success.

I mentioned earlier the Good Friday Agreement and the fact that Northern Ireland will always be a priority for both the UK and Irish Governments. Each of us here today knows that the non-linear nature of progress is perhaps most evident when it comes to dealing with the legacy of the Troubles. The UK Government accepts that there are no easy answers on legacy. We must be realistic. A solution that pleases everybody does not exist. For decades, it has proven difficult, if not impossible, to make progress in an area where there is not even shared agreement about what happened in the past, let alone what should be done about it. However, we are making headway. As demonstrated by the joint framework published by the UK and Irish Governments, we are working hand in hand to deliver a path forward that puts victims and survivors at its heart. That is possible only because of the bravery of the individuals who are willing to engage in difficult conversations, often revisiting some of their darkest moments, to help us move forward.

We are committed to a process that is human-rights compliant and that, crucially, can command the confidence of those that it affects most. That is important because victims and families deserve nothing less than the information that they have long sought and genuine acknowledgement of the suffering that they have endured.

12.30 pm

The joint framework, which was signed last September, also reaffirms the UK and Irish Governments' commitments to consider statements of acknowledgement. That is another important step in addressing past harms and facilitating reconciliation. Of course, it will be vital that both Governments are seen to fulfil the commitments that we have made in the joint framework. That is why the Secretary of State and I are so pleased to see the establishment of the Garda unit, as well as confirmation from Minister Helen McEntee that the Irish Government aims to publish a Heads of Bill that outlines co-operation with the Legacy Commission in the coming months.

Pursuing truth and reconciliation for past wrongs is one of the defining goals of this Government's work in Northern Ireland. However, we are equally focused on the present and the future and on ensuring that people in Northern Ireland can rely on good-quality public services. We are all grappling with the growing demand for core public services, from courtrooms to classrooms. This Government is a champion of devolution—we respect that public services are the Executive's responsibility. Given that respect for devolution, we want to do all that we can to help accelerate progress: bringing together experts, sharing best practices and strengthening links between ministers and officials of both Administrations.

Crucially, we are also providing the resources to support that work. I am proud that this Government has delivered a record £19.3 billion settlement, which is the largest in Northern Ireland's history. That represents 24 per cent higher spending per person than the UK average. In her spring statement, the Chancellor announced that almost £390 million in Barnett consequentials will be coming to Northern Ireland. Last month, the UK Government granted a £400 million reserve claim for this financial year on an exceptional basis in order to protect public

services, and it is all to be repaid over the next three years. What does that mean? It means more money in the system for the Executive to alleviate existing pressures and deliver better long-term public services for people in Northern Ireland.

However, our commitment to transformation does not end there. Alongside immediate financial support, we have invested £235 million into a transformation fund, £129 million of which has already been allocated to priority projects, and we are already seeing improvements. Projects include the expansion of primary care multidisciplinary teams, which means faster support and a quicker diagnosis for someone in Northern Ireland who goes to see their doctor. They will no longer be passed from pillar to post, waiting for a letter for another appointment and then a follow-up. They can see the person next door, who can help them with their immediate issue. That will mean a huge increase in the availability of such teams: only 8 per cent of general practitioner surgeries had that service in place previously, but we now see that it is in place at 60 per cent of GP surgeries because of that investment. Another project will provide additional training to more than 114 classroom assistants who attend to children with special education needs. It will support them to complete accredited SEN-specific training across the five further education colleges. Those are just a few of the investments that will make a real difference across Northern Ireland.

Improving public services matters and we remain committed to building a more shared future for Northern Ireland, too. Our Good Friday Agreement promise to support integrated education is testament to that. It is about doing our bit to help all children in Northern Ireland grow up in a more inclusive school environment, one which breaks down barriers and allows young people from all walks of life to be educated under one roof. Both of our Governments have a strong track record in supporting that cause, and I acknowledge the work of the Irish Government's reconciliation fund, which has provided support for integrated education. In the most recent spending review, we pledged a further £2 million of funding to support the integrated sector until 2029. We hope that, together with the Executive, we can continue to make progress in creating more opportunities for children to learn with, from and about one another. Ultimately—I mean no offence to anyone in this room—the future of Northern Ireland rests with its young people.

Beyond the education sector, we have introduced the connect fund, which is a new initiative that brings together third sector groups in Northern Ireland with counterparts in Great Britain. By supporting east-west civic relationships, from women's organisations to veteran groups, this fund proves that when we connect a community leader in Northern Ireland with one in Cardiff or Manchester, the whole of the United Kingdom benefits.

Just this month, we launched a new £1 million community partnership fund, which empowers established voluntary sector leaders to mentor smaller groups.

I am particularly proud of our new engagement for change fund, which is a three-year programme supporting women's participation in the forums of public debate, offering advocacy and leadership training, with a dedicated focus on removing the barriers that prevent women from entering public office and making decisions.

To circle back to my earlier point about progress, work like that matters not only because it improves services but because it supports a more reconciled society. Think of the teachers in the integrated schools and the shared schools. Each day, they do not just teach maths and English; they enable greater understanding and respect. They bring children from different backgrounds into the same room, proving that what we have in common is far greater than what divides us.

Look at the fantastic work that is being done by community and voluntary sectors. I think of a recent visit to RCITY, a youth-based organisation in Belfast that aims to develop leadership skills in young people living in areas of conflict. The organisers bridge divides on a daily basis, bringing young people together from across the peace lines. They did not wait for a political or policy breakthrough to build that friendship; they just got on with it.

Finally, I would like to touch on the area that tends to get the most focus when it comes to progress: economic growth. Northern Ireland's economy is currently one of the strongest in any part of the UK. Economic activity in Northern Ireland increased by 2.9 per cent in the year to the third quarter of 2025, and, in 2024, total sales by Northern Ireland businesses were estimated to be worth £109.3 billion. Within the UK, Northern Ireland continues to have the lowest unemployment rate and, last year, it saw the largest increase in the number of payrolled employees.

We are setting a bold new course for our national prosperity. With our modern industrial strategy, Invest 2035, we have a 10-year plan to supercharge eight high-growth sectors, from aerospace and life sciences to the digital frontier. Northern Ireland, with its unique strengths in agritech, fintech and the screen industries, is poised to take advantage of that.

We believe in the talent that exists right across the UK, which is why the Government is increasing research and development funding to £22.6 billion a year by the end of the decade. Through collaboration between the UK Government and the Northern Ireland Executive, we are positioning Northern Ireland as one of the best places in the world to do business. I was in Boston last week promoting Northern Ireland, and as someone there said to me, Northern Ireland is big enough to matter and small enough to care.

The Secretary of State and I are pulling every lever we have to champion Northern Ireland. It was on a Sunday last September that I got the call about the role that I am in, and I was on a plane to Belfast just four days later to attend the Department of Business and Trade's roadshow and talk about exporting opportunities for our business leaders in Northern Ireland. In that same month, the Ministry of Defence launched the industrial strategy for defence, including five growth deals with £250 million of funding to support them, and one of those deals is for Northern Ireland. I have been working with businesses big and small and with academics to make sure that that deal works as well as it can for Northern Ireland.

In my engagements across Northern Ireland, I have seen the entrepreneurial spirit in action. Just two weeks ago, I was in Derry/Londonderry to visit AwakenAngels, a co-operative that aims to connect women investors across the island of Ireland with a view to empowering female-led start-ups and businesses.

Just last week, while the Secretary of State was in Washington, I was in Boston to deepen high-value economic partnerships in life sciences, cybersecurity and green energy, positioning Northern Ireland as a primary global test bed for innovation and investment. Meeting with the chief executive officers of leading tech firms, including the Massachusetts Biotechnology Council, MassRobotics and Rapid7, I hammered home the message that doing business in Northern Ireland makes sense.

Companies in the US and across the globe can benefit from Northern Ireland's deep talent pool, ever-growing skills pipeline and lower research costs. Happily, I believe that that message is landing. More than 12,000 businesses in Northern Ireland exported over £13 billion worth of goods and £6 billion worth of services in 2024.

I would like to conclude by returning to my theme of progress and take you back to the visit I made to RCITY in Belfast. While I was there, I had a conversation with a young girl who told me that, when she mooted joining the programme, her father was bitterly against the idea. However, she went anyway. In making that decision, she stepped outside the boundaries of her community and embraced a new environment that ended up changing her life for the better. She showed great leadership.

That sort of thing might be unremarkable in other places, but in Northern Ireland it was quietly groundbreaking. What is better is that it has led to something bigger, because, once her father saw just how much she had gained from taking that step, he gladly sent her siblings to join her. That is what I mean when I talk about progress: citizens from every sector taking small but bold steps to build a better life for themselves and their families. I believe that it is our duty as leaders to create the space and means to allow them to do so.

As I hope that I have shown you in my speech today, the UK Government is backing Northern Ireland every step of the way. Working with the Executive, the Irish Government and friends across these islands, we will continue to do all that we can to deliver on the promise of the Good Friday Agreement.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD): Minister, thank you very much for your very comprehensive address dealing with Northern Ireland issues, with North/South issues and with east-west issues. I refer to the phrase that you used about how we have moved to "partnership" between Ireland and Britain on a lot of important issues across a number of sectors, and the obvious opportunities that will emerge from that partnership and co-operation to benefit communities throughout these islands.

A number of people wish to speak. We will take questions.

David Honeyford MLA. I appreciate what you have said, Minister, and I will quote a couple of bits. You said that people know that they will be "supported" by Government and that

"Northern Ireland will always be a priority".

However, I will give you an example of that not being the reality on the ground. Stepping Stones is a social enterprise within my constituency, which supports

young people and adults with additional needs into employment. It allows them to have a fulfilling life in a job, and provides wrap-around nurture and services. It is one of a lot of social enterprises and community people doing that. It was funded from ESF funding from Europe, which became shared prosperity funding. However, the local growth fund that is coming forward from the UK Government will see a 70/30 split between capital and resource. I will quote you, because you said that, “without people”, change cannot happen. However, the split in that fund means that, on 31 March, three-quarters of the staff that support those young people into employment will be made redundant. I welcome your words. However, I simply do not see those words in reality on the ground.

The priority for us is to have people in jobs, not to have capital investment. Honestly, the Government has been deaf to the need of the community in Northern Ireland to support people with additional needs and to give that wrap-around care and nurture. Even at this late stage, I appeal to you to listen and change the approach. We are not asking for more money; we are asking to be able to use money that has been ring fenced as capital resource, and to go back to the way it was so that we are supported and have people on the ground.

Matthew Patrick MP: Thank you, Mr Honeyford. I appreciate your challenge. It is important, because I want to get this right, and I cannot get it right unless people challenge me. I care enormously about this. I know how many brilliant charities are struggling at the moment. I know about the example that you raised and the important work that it does. I will never ignore the importance of that work.

I would like to say a few things, which I will try to keep brief. I do not think that it makes complete sense for charities on the ground to be reliant upon the UK Government for funding year after year. It is important that, where that can be funded directly through the Executive, it is.

We are also trying to create long-term growth, which really matters. If we can deliver the capital expenditure in order to drive growth and bring in taxes to fund these services, we will be in a good place. However, that does not solve the issue for your constituents or for that charity, and I hear you. I have sat down with CO3—Chief Officers Third Sector—the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action, and other charities, and I have heard directly about the impact of the issue.

My belief is that we will do what we can. Action in that regard does not involve saying, “This is tough, but, sorry, you’re on your own”; it is about standing by the decision that we have made as a Government, but working out how we can roll up our sleeves and help here. Just a couple of weeks ago, the Government, through Barnett consequential, put an additional £390 million into the Executive. I know that there are journalists here, so do not quote me on this, but I think that the shortfall is about £20 million in resource, and we have now put in £390 million.

However, it is not only about us saying, “Over to the Executive”. We spoke to the PEACEPLUS team. There is €30 million unspent in that programme. We brought the team into a meeting with NICVA and sat down with them to discuss what practical steps can be taken to enable the charity in your constituency and others to access some of those funds in a long-term way.

We are trying to be practical and resourceful from the place that we are in. That is a demonstration of our commitment to make it work.

I am happy to take a follow-up question.

12.45 pm

David Honeyford MLA:

Can I come back in?

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Keep it very short, if you can, please.

David Honeyford MLA:

We have one week to go. All of that is great in the longer term but there was no run-in for all those charities. They are losing people. We will lose our workforce. We will lose everything and will have to start from scratch. You are putting us way back. There is one week to go. If the funding change was suspended, even for a period of time to enable a transition, that would be fine.

Matthew Patrick MP:

When we spoke with the PEACEPLUS team, we also spoke with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government about the funding, structure and set-up. For one year, there will be a transition when, although the resource funding will be 30 per cent rather than 70 per cent, the previous programme will be continued. Some of the money will go to Go Succeed but some of it will be available for community groups.

We asked whether, in the event that PEACEPLUS funding could come in or the Executive was willing to put money into keeping such charities going, some of that funding could be front loaded to provide a greater cushion. The answer to that is yes. We are pursuing all those avenues.

You are clearly a powerful advocate for the charities in your patch. I really hear you, and I have heard from them directly. Thank you for raising the issue and challenging me.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

We have a large number of people offering, so I will have to group the questions three at a time. I again ask people to be succinct. We need questions for the Minister, not statements, please.

Sinéad McLaughlin MLA:

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, you talked about the reset and the new era of British-Irish relationships. I totally agree that we are on a different pathway now. That is to be welcomed. However, the elephant in the room is that relationships in the Northern Ireland Executive have probably never been quite as bad as they are now. We have a very unstable form of government.

Given the fact that the British and Irish Governments are co-guarantors of the agreement, do they not now have a responsibility to begin a structured conversation with all the parties about how the institutions can be reformed so

that we serve the public much better? We are losing the public's confidence in the Government in Northern Ireland. It is time that the British and Irish Governments accepted that challenge and reformed the institutions.

Senator Conor Murphy:

I have two quick questions. You mentioned the legacy process, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State. You said that it was complicated and one of the issues was that we could not find agreement among people. I remind you that we did find agreement in 2014 between all of the parties in the Executive and both Governments. The Conservative Government of the time walked away from it in an effort to shore up some defence of its personnel who had served in the North over the years.

Will the current Labour Government hold the line under the pressure that is undoubtedly coming from some sections of Parliament in relation to British Army personnel and genuinely propose a legacy process that is compliant with human rights protections and serves victims? The Irish Government has signed up to that. That is a big gamble from its perspective, given the rumblings in Parliament. Nonetheless, we wish to see it develop properly so that we have a genuine legacy process.

Speaking as a former finance minister in the North, we have a prospect of a three-year budget after many years of annual budgets, even with the shortfall that inevitably exists in relation to spending. I understand from a finance perspective how the figures are put out but the reality of increased costs, inflation and all the cost of living issues that have been hitting over the past number of years means that those high-level figures are often swamped by the cost of doing business.

However, the opportunity of a three-year budget is being held up by the DUP in the Executive, I am sad to say. It is an opportunity for transformative change. Can the British Government bring pressure to bear on the DUP to ensure that that three-year budget is agreed in the Executive and that we go forward with some genuinely supportive work in relation to what the Executive can do for public services, the community and voluntary sector, and infrastructure and economic development?

Senator Garret Kelleher:

Thank you for your contribution, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State. It is often said of a society that its true measure can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable, and I would like to refer to something that you said in your speech in relation to the joint framework that was signed in September, which was that it will be a path forward that has victims and survivors at its heart. Last month, I was at an event in Derry at which three survivors spoke. There was Raymond McCord, who lost his son to the loyalist paramilitaries; Kate Nash, a sister of William Nash, one of the Bloody Sunday victims, whose father was also shot; and Hugh McCormac, who was a victim of the Provisional IRA, having been shot a number of times in Belfast. The one thing that those victims from all sides had in common was that they felt let down, that they were not at the heart of the progress that is being made, that they were not being listened to and that their stories were being ignored.

I strongly feel that, for progress to be made and for people to believe in a more positive future, whatever that may be, we need to learn from the mistakes of the past and atone for the mistakes of the past where necessary. Therefore, I would like to hear more about the commitment that has been made to putting victims at the heart and the centre of progress. What exactly will that mean and how will that be done?

Matthew Patrick MP:

I will answer the questions in order, if that is okay.

Ms McLaughlin, thank you for your question on the reform of the institutions. We have had debates in Parliament about that issue—I was at a Westminster Hall debate on it recently—and the Secretary of State and I have conversations with parties to hear what they are advocating for. At the most recent debate on the issue, there was a sense that there could be some changes, but there was no sense of an agreement about what they might look like. The challenge that we put to people on this is that they must come together to have a conversation and agree a way forward.

The other thing, which I think that everyone would recognise, is that, however much one side might want to change it in one direction and the other side in another, I do not think that anyone sees that kind of change as a panacea or a silver bullet that will resolve the often long-standing issues that we face in public services and the economy. Although we absolutely listen to those views, and people certainly advocate for such reform, my focus is on having those conversations and listening, but also on ensuring that the focus on public services is paramount, because every day—today—someone needs to be able to get a doctor's appointment, have a school that works for their children, and so on. That is my focus, day in and day out.

Senator Murphy, you asked about two issues. First, will Labour hold the line? Yes, because this issue matters. I think that you mentioned that there is a risk for the Irish Government in doing what it did. I think that any moment of real progress requires someone to take a leap of faith and to try something new. It is totally possible for people to do what has been done before—sometimes that is very little, and sometimes that is kicking a can down the road. I think that we owe it to people to hold the line. We are running out of time to make progress on the issue. The Secretary of State, the Government and I are clear that the issue really matters, so we are certainly doing that.

You also mentioned the idea of a three-year budget. I think that that would be a good thing. We are supporting the Executive in every way that we can on that. There is the £400 million emergency support that is available now. Yes, that is repayable, but it is another important lever that can be used to support those conversations. We would certainly encourage the parties to set a budget by working together to do so.

Senator Kelleher, it was really powerful to hear about those three people whom you heard from, and I agree that the voices of victims and survivors are paramount. Making sure that there is a body within the commission that is advocating for them is part of what needs to be done, but the issue is about

listening to them. For me, it is also about advocating and elevating their voice in the conversation, because, if someone has been let down year after year—sometimes decade after decade—their voice will too often have been drowned out. I hope that, if you ever get the time to watch the UK Parliament channel, you will see that, when there are debates about the issue, the Secretary of State and I always ensure that the voices of victims and survivors come first. They are the people I talk about. I have sat down and met them during my six months in post, and they have told me some of the most powerful stories that I have ever heard. We take our responsibility to them very seriously.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Minister. I call Lord Alf Dubs.

The Lord Dubs:

Thank you, Co-Chair, and thank you, Minister—you have one of the best jobs in the British Government.

[*Inaudible.*]*—*the Northern Ireland Executive's commitment to integrated education. However, progress is still slow. At least one Minister in Belfast does not seem willing to move very quickly. Could you use your influence to get them to move more quickly? When the parents of children at a school want to integrate, it is not helpful if a Government Minister in Belfast stops it.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Alf. I call Steve Aiken MLA.

Steve Aiken MLA:

I have three very quick points. First, on the Windsor framework, Minister, we as a party—the Ulster Unionist Party—welcome the speed with which the UK and the EU are working more closely together. Two weeks ago, one question that we raised with the Prime Minister, and indeed with the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade of Ireland, was, with the Windsor framework agreement being as it is—we are waiting for the sanitary and phytosanitary agreement to be signed off in 2027—why can we not pause the Windsor framework agreement as a sign of good faith between the United Kingdom and European Union?

Secondly, I am very supportive of what you said about the industrial sector in Northern Ireland. However, you will be aware of the delays in the defence investment programme and of the shipbuilding issues that we are having with Navantia and Harland & Wolff. I would like you to assure us that that work is going ahead and is not being stalled by the Ministry of Defence.

Finally, Minister, I offer a piece of realism. With the Ulster Unionist Party, I have been involved in talks on legacy for well over 10 years. Every year, we have been told that the Irish Government will deliver on legacy, and it has not. When will the British Government actually stand up to the Irish Government and tell it to deliver what it was supposed to have delivered over the past decade?

Matthew Patrick MP:

I am so sorry. I did not catch your last question because I was busy making notes on your second question.

Steve Aiken MLA:

Okay. Allow me to say it again.

Matthew Patrick MP:

Please do. It is the second time that someone has been asked to repeat themselves.

Steve Aiken MLA:

It is great, is it not? It is a question about legacy. For 10 years, the Ulster Unionist Party has been raising that issue with the Irish Government and the British Government. At every point, the Irish Government has failed to deliver. When will the British Government actually stand up to the Irish Government and get it to deliver what it has promised for the past decade?

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you, Steve. I call Ruairí Ó Murchú.

Ruairí Ó Murchú TD:

Go raibh maith agat. A number of issues were dealt with as regards a legacy approach that works for all. There is an issue with underfunding in relation to the Executive and ensuring that a system is in place that can deliver for people.

I will raise two specific issues that are impacting people on a cross-border basis. One issue that has been brought up by hauliers, who face added pressures at the minute, relates to the transport levy. My understanding is that that will need to be sorted at a British governmental level. It is literally costing them a tenner a day every time that they cross the border. We all know about the imposition and the administrative issues—it is a £300 fine if the levy is not complied with—so it is impacting hauliers greatly.

Another particular issue relates to remote working across north and south. Officially, it is not possible to do that. When PayPal closed down its office in Dundalk, those from the North, in order to work remotely, had to be set up in an entity called PayPal UK, because that was a requirement in law. The Taoiseach's office is looking at that, but the issue of cross-border remote working will probably remain dormant, which is probably a consequence of dealing with previous British Governments in relation to it, and it is impacting a significant number of people.

It goes without saying that, even based on what I said earlier, in the long term, we need the British Government to set a referendum date. However, I expect that an Irish Government would do a considerable amount of work beforehand and that it would ask the British Government specifically. I am just putting that on the record—I already know your answer.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Ruairí. I call Cormac Devlin.

Cormac Devlin TD:

Minister, thank you for your remarks and, in particular, those around legacy. I am the chair of the Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement

in the Oireachtas, and we are very keen to achieve progress on legacy. As other speakers have said, we have engaged with victims and heard the testimonies that you referred to in your remarks, and it is imperative that we see progress on the matter.

1.00 pm

I acknowledge your comments about the Heads of Bill that is coming before the Oireachtas and the establishment of the unit in An Garda Síochána to make progress on our side of that. There is a new relationship between the British and Irish Governments. We all want progress on that.

In relation to your enterprise piece for Northern Ireland, I note that, when you were in Boston last week, I was in Washington DC. Northern Ireland Bureau had a successful exhibition there to highlight the importance of trade and the economy in Northern Ireland.

I do not know whether you were here for them, but there were comments on the electronic travel authorisation system and the common travel area. Has that come across your desk over the past little while?

Matthew Patrick MP:

I think that there were five questions. This is a dangerous thing to say but, if I do not get to your question properly, please flag it and I will do my best to answer it again.

Lord Dubs, you started by saying that I have the best job in Government. I completely agree with you. I was appointed last September and a piece of my heart will be in Northern Ireland for the rest of my life.

Integrated education really matters. I mentioned in my remarks why I feel that. You want us to move faster and ensure that there is support in the Executive for that. I have engaged directly with the Minister of Education on integrated schools to ensure that the money that the UK Government is putting in makes the biggest impact that it can. I have spoken to him about key performance indicators and understand some of the challenges about having more integrated schools. I was also delighted to welcome him to an integrated school recently, and I was really impressed by the work that goes on there. Please rest assured that I work regularly with all Executive Ministers on a range of matters and with the Minister of Education on integrated schools.

Mr Aiken, you asked whether we could pause the Windsor framework agreement to deliver the SPS agreement. I would say no but delivering the SPS agreement as fast as we can is the important step that we need to take. We are in regular dialogue to ensure that that happens. As you said in your remarks, we all see the benefit of delivering it as soon as possible.

You mentioned defence. I assure you that we are working closely with all our partners to ensure that the investment is successful. I have met with many businesses large and small that operate in defence. If the past few weeks have not shown us how volatile the world is and how important the investment is, nothing will show us. It is incumbent on Government to ensure that the investment

that we have to make has an economic benefit to people in Northern Ireland. We are laser focused on that.

You mentioned getting the Irish Government's agreement on legacy. That is what the joint framework will help us to do. The establishment of that unit in the Garda is an important step forward, as is the legislation that will come through. Lots of people have felt for a long time that it has not been delivered. It is the unfinished business of the Good Friday Agreement. We have taken some important steps and are close to taking further ones, so I ask that you see that progress. I hope that you will be pleased with where it is going.

I apologise that I did not get everyone's name. I think that it was Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú who mentioned hauliers, remote working and a few other bits, but I did not catch everything, so you should feel free to jump in if I have not captured something. Lord Murphy is sitting right behind you. He addressed some of those points in a paper that he submitted to the Secretary of State. We accept those recommendations. We are looking at all possibilities to reduce friction, and we continue to monitor the matter.

You mentioned something about remote working that I did not totally catch, and I think that there might have been something else, so I apologise.

Ruairí Ó Murchú TD:

You know the point about transport. The one on remote working is straightforward. If you are living in the North, you are not allowed to remote work for a southern company. PayPal had to create an entity in the North to maintain employment with people. It is the same either way. It is an issue across every border but it is a particular problem on this island, so it needs to be addressed. It needs a bilateral agreement.

Matthew Patrick MP:

Thank you for sharing that.

There was a chair of the Good Friday Agreement. I think that it was Mr Devlin. Thank you for your points. Those about progress on legacy are really well made and important. I hope that, in the future, we will be able to look back at this moment and see the progress that has been made. That is important.

You mentioned the CTA, which upholds an important principle and underpins the Good Friday Agreement, so it matters enormously.

You also mentioned ETA, which a number of people have raised. The Home Office is monitoring the issue. Last week, I was in Boston. Around the world, tourists are quite au fait with filling in forms in order to go to certain places. Tourism is thriving, which is a good thing, but we are never complacent on that or any other issue, so we will keep an eye out. If anything comes across Mr Devlin's desk that he thinks is important for us to note, I ask him to raise that with me.

I hope that I have dealt with all the outstanding questions.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thanks, Minister. We have gone beyond our allotted time, and eight people would still like to ask a question. I will break them up into two groups. I ask for succinct questions, please.

Katrina Murray MP:

In her evidence last week to the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs, the Minister for Safeguarding and Violence Against Women and Girls referred to the fact that the rate of femicide—murder and domestic homicide—is higher in Northern Ireland than it is in Great Britain or Ireland, and higher than it is in many other parts of the world.

In a world where many of the sources of abuse are now in the online sphere, with the result that physical boundaries and borders are less important, cross-legislature work becomes much more vital. I know that that area is one that the Minister thinks is extremely important. Therefore, how can we all work in partnership to make women and girls safer?

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin:

I thank the Minister for his very positive speech, which was filled with ambition, vision and hope, and much of which we hope to realise. He mentioned AwakenAngels. The shared island unit gave significant funding, for a three-year period, to Women in Business Northern Ireland and the Network Ireland women's group to promote partnership around business opportunities for women on the island of Ireland. It would be great to see a similar type of business venture for businesses in general.

My key question is about integrated education, which is a subject that Lord Dubs has spoken about. I think that that process is going far too slowly. If we look at the figures for Educate Together, which I appreciate is different but is based on the same principle, we see that there are 120 Educate Together schools in the Republic of Ireland but only one in Northern Ireland. The 2022 legislation put more of an onus on Government, but until children are truly educated together, we will not achieve the people-to-people progress that the Minister referred to outwith the different frameworks in the agreement. I ask the Minister to look at that as a priority.

Cathy Bennett TD:

I thank the Minister for his presentation. I was delighted to hear him say that tourism is thriving. However, I feel that a lot more could be done—we could promote tourism on an all-island basis by encouraging people to come to Ireland to tour around the whole island. We are in the beautiful county of Kerry, which shows what can be done.

I want to mention the fact that tourism is lost in Northern Ireland because there is no rail network in the whole of the north-east. That needs to be addressed urgently in collaboration with the Government in the South.

Liam Conlon MP:

The Minister listed a number of announcements that were made at last week's UK-Ireland summit. I want to draw attention to another one, in relation to which I extend my thanks to many of the parties and Members in this room—the announcement of support for Philomena's law, which is a bill that I brought to Parliament last March.

There are 13,000 survivors of Ireland's mother and baby homes living in Britain today. The announcement that the Government made a few years ago, which included an apology and a redress scheme, was really welcome, but we noticed that the redress payments were counted as savings. As a result of that, thousands of women in Britain who accessed redress started to lose things such as pension credit, housing benefit and other means-tested benefits. It has taken a big effort to get to where we have got to. This is the first time ever in British law that a payment from a foreign Government has been ring fenced, and that has been reciprocated by the Irish Government. That demonstrates what is possible when Members in this room, from all parties and all chambers, work together and when both Governments work together.

There are other similar issues on which we can make significant progress, but I just wanted to put on record a huge thank you to both Governments and the many parties that worked hard to secure that.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Minister, I have to say that Norma Foley, who has responsibility in our state for that particular department, was very complimentary about your work in the House of Commons, and we want to affirm our appreciation of your work and the work of your colleagues in the House.

Matthew Patrick MP:

Ms Murray—it is nice not to have to call you “honourable friend”, as I have to in Parliament. I acknowledge your personal commitment to ending violence against women and girls—that is important, and I share it. On a range of issues, I have a great belief that the problems facing the world and society are large, while the sum total capacity of any Government to solve them is not so large. Therefore, the solution requires the efforts of all of us. That is why, in my speech, I did not talk about MPs, senators and ministers but instead talked about the people who work every day to make the necessary progress.

That being said, Minister Long and I discussed the violence against women and girls strategy. I am really proud of the Government's work in that space as well, which has involved ending nudification apps and addressing the other horrors that appear online. However, where possible, everyone, at every moment, must champion the ending of violence against women and girls. I know that you are a powerful advocate for that cause, so I certainly do not need to tell you about that.

Senator O'Loughlin, thanks for saying that my speech was positive. I think that I am quite a positive and optimistic person, so I was quite pleased about that. The point that you made about AwakenAngels was really well made, and my time with that group was brilliant. The work that people involved in the group do to mentor

each other and invest in one another—in terms of money, but also in terms of time and support—is great. Having visited the group in its environment, it comes as no surprise to learn that it outperforms male-led businesses quite substantially. That is not investment advice—you should speak to a financial adviser, not me—but the people I met were very impressive.

On integrated education, it is clear that demand for integrated education has outstripped provision—you can see that in various ways. I think that that says quite positive things about where the community wants to go. Obviously, there are challenges in education, and the Minister has to weigh up a range of issues, but, based on our joint visits, I am confident that he sees the benefit that integrated education can bring. We spoke to people from different backgrounds and communities who have forged deep, long-lasting friendships. To me, that matters. I will continue to work on my side and the Irish Government is doing work on its side, and I am sure that the Executive is pursuing that issue, too.

Deputy Bennett, you talked about all-island tourism. I am never going to say that we cannot do more, and I will work with anybody and everybody to promote tourism. I think that Northern Ireland is an amazing place and that Ireland is an amazing place. When I was in Boston last week, there was a high level of enthusiasm for the island of Ireland. Tourism is an important part of the economy of the island, and we will support it however we can. As I said previously, if you have a good idea, please flag it. I will always happily take good ideas forward and share them.

Liam Conlon, I just want to say thank you to you for your work on the issue. What you are doing is really important, and I think that you should be proud. You are making a huge difference with what you have achieved. As you stated, it demonstrates what can be achieved if we work collaboratively.

Senator Gerard Craughwell:

Minister, legacy issues have been raised on a number of occasions. This morning, I spoke about a truth forum, which relates to families and victims, and I now want to turn my attention to those who were loosely described as combatants during the Troubles in Northern Ireland, and that would include the security forces.

Many of those people are now suffering from what is titled “moral injury”. Moral injury manifests itself in drug addiction, drink and psychological issues. Clearly, the psychological services that are run by the national health service are not equipped to deal with such people. Does your Government have a plan to support the members of that group of people who now seek to work towards peace?

Finally, moral injury has a record of transcending three generations, and the quicker that it is dealt with, the quicker you can nip the issues in the bud.

1.15 pm

Seán Crowe TD:

Minister, another legacy issue is that of intergenerational poverty and unemployment. Recently, the Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement went to Belfast and visited the Protestant/unionist/loyalist

areas and some of the nationalist areas. We looked at homelessness and visited women's groups and youth groups. The common theme that was raised by a lot of the groups was that one of the things that was impacting them negatively, particularly around the social economy, was the loss of key jobs in that sector. They said that there were really positive results in relation to unemployment and so on, but that they were losing key staff and could not afford to do that. Again, that is one of those issues that the Government needs to clearly address. They acknowledged that there is a high level of investment in capital projects in the North, but they said that the issue of employment is still important, and they could not afford to lose those key members of staff.

I am sure that you are aware of the issue, but we were asked to raise it in any forum that we could, so I am raising it with you here this morning.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

I think that I have included everybody who offered to ask a question—some people withdrew their requests to speak.

Matthew Patrick MP:

There are just two questions to answer, and I think that my answers stand between everyone and lunch.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

There will be a photograph, too.

Matthew Patrick MP:

And a photograph—okay. I will never delay people from lunch—that is a personal commitment.

Senator Craughwell, on legacy, I mentioned how we are supporting people who have struggled following the Troubles. As a Government, we have invested enormous amounts in mental health services, and there is equivalent support going to the Executive in that regard. We have made investments in community groups—I mentioned RCITY, which brings young people together. I have heard from much older people who recognise the progress that has been made. Sometimes seeing something through someone else's eyes is the most powerful way of seeing it, and I feel that we have done that. The work that we are doing on legacy is another huge commitment that we are making to people.

Deputy Crowe, in relation to the issue of intergenerational unfairness and poverty, I think that the Government should make more of its lifting of the two-child cap—that is not just a political thing; it is a moral and economic thing. I understand that that move is being undertaken in Northern Ireland, too. For those who are not enmeshed in UK welfare policy, the two-child cap meant that people got no child support beyond their second child. Essentially, that punished the child, but I think it did more than that, because it punished society, and it punished all of us in the long term, because, if someone grows up in poverty, it is no good for them, for us, or for anybody. Therefore, lifting that cap in the UK and in Northern Ireland—where, I believe, more than 10,000 children will be lifted out of poverty—is something that we should all be proud of.

You also talked about the importance of jobs in alleviating poverty. The industrial strategy that I mentioned, which supports eight key sectors with huge amounts of investment, is a key part of that. However, we are doing much more than that. Our efforts also concern the city and growth deals, which involve the UK Government, the Executive and private businesses coming together to invest money and stimulate the economy in order to keep those important jobs. Providing good jobs that people can be proud of and which give them the ability to provide for themselves and their families and have a good life is a pretty good legacy to leave. That is what we are focused on.

I hope that I have answered everybody's questions. Thank you all so much for your engagement and your challenging questions. I am sticking around for lunch—I hear it is great—so, if you have not managed to challenge me so far, please come over and do so. It has been a pleasure to meet you all.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

A sincere thanks to you, Minister, for your comprehensive address at the outset, and for dealing comprehensively with a wide variety of questions.

Colleagues, please bear with us for two seconds. I am told that a group photograph will now be taken, so we should follow the photographer. After that, we will have lunch, and we are to be back here at 2.30 pm sharp. We are running a little late, and we do not want to start our afternoon session late, so I ask colleagues to come back on time. I encourage all of you to gather for the photograph now.

The sitting was suspended at 1.20 pm.

The sitting was resumed at 2.36 pm.

FOOD SECURITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

Order. We now move to item 6 on our agenda, food security and sustainability. Food security and sustainability was raised as a theme for discussion at our last plenary in Surrey, and I am pleased that today we will have this panel discussion. Food security and sustainability is both a domestic agricultural policy priority, supporting resilient food systems, and a shared global responsibility, shaped by international co-operation and geopolitical stability.

We will hear from the following contributors: Professor Frank O'Mara, who is the director of Teagasc; Dr Joanne Uí Chrualaoich, chief executive officer of Safefood; and Dominic Crowley, CEO of Concern Worldwide. Dr Majka Ryan, from the Kemmy Business School, University of Limerick, will moderate this discussion and bring valuable insights to the session. I now call on Dr Ryan to introduce the panel and commence the discussion. The floor is yours.

Dr Majka Ryan:

Thank you very much, and good afternoon, everyone. It is my great pleasure to welcome you to this panel discussion on food security and sustainability. My name is Majka, I am honoured to be here and to moderate the session. We have three wonderful experts here today with us, who are going to share their unique perspectives on one of the most urgent and complex challenges of our time. Our panellists, Joanne, Frank and Dominic, are experts in their fields, and they will today address some of the most looming questions that need our consideration. They are all going to introduce themselves in just a minute. After the brief opening remarks from each of the experts, we will move into a panel discussion and then we will have about 10 to 15 minutes for questions from the audience at the end. I look forward to this insightful exchange. We will start with Joanne, who will tell us a little bit about Safefood and the type of work that they do. Thank you very much, Joanne.

Dr Joanne Uí Chrualaoich:

Thank you, Majka. Hi, everyone, and thanks for the opportunity to address this forum. Safefood is one of the six implementation bodies set up under the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement. Our remit specifically is the promotion of food safety and public health nutrition, and also commissioning research in support of that agenda of promoting, on an all-island basis, safe, healthy food for the population.

In terms of our topic today of sustainability, I want to prompt some thinking around how we often think of sustainability purely through an environmental lens. In Safefood, we are very much working within communities. That individual family or community and societal level is an important factor in how we consider food sustainability. Similarly, the economic lens is another important lens to bring to it, but I will leave that one to Frank to deal with.

Our food producers are navigating a really volatile agri-food system—costs, the climate obligations, the market demands—but on the other hand, families across the island are weighing the price of milk against the electricity meter and making really difficult choices between convenience and safety and asking a fundamentally basic question: ‘Can we afford a healthy, culturally appropriate meal tonight?’

I want to talk to you a little bit about sustainability issues around that idea of food poverty. True food security requires that the production of food and the resilience around that meets with the household-level access to safe and nutritious food, and those things need to happen simultaneously. My focus is on the public health side of security and sustainability, nutrition, food safety and food poverty, and how, as an all-island body, Safefood helps us translate science into daily practice.

Our mandate is to promote food safety, provide nutritional advice across the island, and we build the evidence base and use that, hopefully, to influence you as policy makers in setting up systems that promote behaviour change towards more healthy choices for consumers and people across the food chain. And that matters because food security and secure systems are not just about how much food we produce; they are about how safely we produce it, how well we prepare it and whether households can eat safe, healthy food without pathogens and so on.

Food safety is often invisible until it is not, until an older person heating a ready meal because they had to get their food in individual portions does not heat it correctly and there is listeria, and that person suffers the consequences of that. This stuff is important at the macro level, but it is also really important at that micro individual level. We work across microbiology, chemistry, toxicology, food hypersensitivity and allergens, identifying what the priorities are, commissioning the research to better understand what the challenges are, and then translating that into practical advice and campaigns that people can act on.

We also work directly in communities, running community food initiatives. Food literacy is a significant problem, and understanding how to cook safe and healthy food. There is a wonderful example in Enniskillen of parents coming together to learn how to prepare food for their children, for toddlers, for that

stage where they are moving from pureed foods on to solid foods on to a more varied diet, and learning together with that nutritional advice support.

Nutrition is at the heart of sustainable food security, and if families can only afford low-nutrient calories—notice I did not say ‘ultra processed’, and I would be happy to be questioned on that—that is not food secure. That is calorie secure. Our nutrition directorate focuses on nutritional safety and communicating healthy eating practices—the everyday work that moves population diets at a societal level towards more sustainable healthy diets for the population and all the inherent health benefits that go with that.

The other topic I would like to put out there for the discussion is the idea of unsustainability of food waste. We know that about a third of the food that is produced ends up as food waste, and about 14 per cent of that is pre-retail, so it is not in the household. Again, that is another source of food literacy and waste reduction that will help with the sustainability agenda. Hopefully I have given you a flavour of what Safefood does, and a few things to prompt questions and ideas.

Dr Majka Ryan:

Thank you very much, Joanne. Frank, can I ask you to introduce yourself now? Thank you.

Professor Frank O’Mara:

Thank you, Majka. Good afternoon, everybody. It is a privilege to be here and have the opportunity to address this Assembly. I am the head of Teagasc, which is the state agency with responsibility for research, for education, and for advisory or extension activities in the agriculture and food sector. We have got 1,500 staff, we have seven research centres, seven colleges, and over 50 advisory offices throughout the country. We have a pretty wide and large footprint.

2.45 pm

In terms of providing advice to farmers, there are about 130,000-odd farmers in the country, and we provide advice, all our information, on our website, and our publications, our events, are free to everybody. About 40,000-odd farmers choose to have a contract with us for one-to-one services. While that is only about a third of the farmers, they would tend to be the bigger, more intensive farmers. Those farmers that have a contract with us for advice would farm about 60 per cent of the land of Ireland, they would own about 75 per cent of the dairy cows, they would have about 75 per cent of the tillage crops and about 50 per cent of the beef cattle herd in the country. We have a lot of touch points with farmers.

In our education service, we have about 4,000 learners. We train the farmers and horticulturists of the future. As I said, we have about 4,000 learners in our system, and there are different options—full-time college, part-time, distance education, all of that. We also collaborate a lot with the third-level sector here in Ireland and support them in delivery of agriculture-related courses. On our research side, we have research programmes going from soils, crops, livestock, food processing, health, the environment—obviously, hugely important—and also economics and social science. We cover everything, I suppose, in the agriculture and food space.

There are three ways that we seek to have impact. We are not an academic organisation; the Agriculture and Food Development Authority is our long name after Teagasc, which is a bit hard for some people to pronounce. We are there to develop the sector. We have impact through developing technologies and helping farmers or food companies to adopt or adapt those technologies. We provide policy support to Government, to people like yourselves, across the range of areas where we have expertise, and we build capacity for the sector for the future, whether that is the farmers and the horticulturists, or the around 60 PhD students finishing in our system—we do not graduate them ourselves, but they come through our system every year—that go into the industry.

Our strategy is focusing on improving the competitiveness and resilience of the sector. We are a small country, very export-orientated, so competitiveness is really important to our agriculture and food sector. We see all the shocks that hit the agriculture and food sector almost on a weekly or monthly basis now. A sector has to be resilient. We cannot stop these shocks, but the sector has to be able to cope with them, recover from them, adapt to them, and so on.

There are challenges that are currently at the top of our minds. If you had asked me a month ago of the challenges, I would not have included fertiliser and fuel, but they are now right up at the top of the agenda. We all know very well that 20 per cent of the world's oil goes through the Strait of Hormuz, but also 25 per cent to 30 per cent of the world's nitrogen fertiliser comes through that seaway. A prolonged disruption in that is very worrying for the world's food system. The areas that most rely on that fertiliser would be the countries in Asia, but it has impacts on the fertiliser market all around the world. Our farmers here, and, I am sure, across the islands here, have seen a fairly significant shift upwards in fertiliser price in the last few weeks, which is going to impact on their profitability.

And there is fuel. Obviously, agri-diesel has gone up probably 50 per cent in the last couple of weeks, and we are coming into the time of year when both fertiliser and fuel usage would be at their peak. It is big shock to the system in dealing with that. Obviously, we hope it will be a short war, but the more

damage that has been done or is being done to infrastructure, the knock-on and the long-term effects on the global food system will be bigger.

The other thing that is challenging for us is the productivity growth of the sector. Every industry has to grow its productivity if it is to survive. Is the productivity growth strong enough in our agriculture and food sectors? I do not mean production growth per se, I mean producing more from the same inputs, or getting more bang for our buck. The attractiveness of the sector is critical. The average age of farmers in Ireland—I am sure it is the same across all the countries represented here—is 59. It is increasing: 34 per cent of farmers are over the age of 60, and of those, four out of 10 do not have an identified successor. Let alone having passed over the baton, they do not even have an identified successor. So, I suppose the question is: who is going to be farming our land in 10 and 20 years' time, and what are they going to be doing on it? So, the attractiveness of the sector is very important.

The environment is obviously hugely important, and we all know the challenges around climate change, the challenges around water quality, biodiversity, air quality, and so on, and agriculture is at the centre of many of those. So, that is a big issue for us. We see the impacts of climate change also manifest themselves in droughts. We have had a very wet spring this year. We have seen new pests and diseases arriving on our shores. On the island, we have had our first cases of bluetongue. Avian influenza has become something that we have become used to, almost—it is a regular occurrence. And on the tillage sector, we have weeds now like blackgrass that nearly stop you producing cereals on that land, if it becomes infected with blackgrass. So, dealing with pests and diseases that are not traditional ones for us is certainly a big challenge.

Common agricultural policy reform obviously does not apply to everybody in the room now, but a lot of the supports are very similar. Last July, the Commission published their proposals around the multi-annual financial framework and the common agricultural policy, and the ring-fenced funding for CAP is only at about 80 per cent of the level of the previous round of CAP, and that is notwithstanding that we have had a period of significant inflation. I am just talking about the nominal value—80 per cent. Payments are hugely important for our farmers, they make up about 40 per cent of farm income. In some sectors and some regions, the beef sector in particular—dry stock—in the west of Ireland, it is nearer to 100 per cent of income. So, anything that impacts on those CAP payments will have big impacts on the incomes of farmers. They are all the challenges.

Notwithstanding that and loads of challenges, we still have a fantastic agriculture and food sector. Exports from Ireland reached almost €20 billion last

year, so there is an awful lot of people getting a very enjoyable living out of farming. I suppose the key to all those challenges that I mentioned is innovation, and that is the business that we are in: helping farmers and food companies to innovate, because it is that set of problems and challenges today. Ten years ago, it would have been a different set, but there would have still been challenges. In 10 years' time, there will be another set of challenges, I have no doubt, and the sector just has to keep innovating to keep up and keep ahead of those challenges.

Dr Majka Ryan:

Thank you very much, Frank, for those interesting remarks. Now we move on to Dominic Crowley from Concern Worldwide.

Mr Dominic Crowley:

Thanks, Majka, and thank you for the opportunity to speak to the meeting today. Concern is the largest humanitarian non-governmental organisation in Ireland. I have been working in the sector for just short of 40 years, and I have been the chief executive officer for the last two years. NGOs, as we call ourselves, are generally established during or in response to armed conflict, and Concern is typical of that. We were established in 1968 in response to the famine that was created from the Biafran war of succession, a war that killed 200,000 people, but is estimated to have caused 2 million deaths from starvation. That imbalance between the number of people killed in direct conflict and the number of people killed as a result of conflict is a stark, consistent reality of all the conflict contexts within which we work, and it is primarily in conflict contexts that we focus.

Concern responded to the evolving crisis in Biafra, and has continued to respond to crises caused by conflict, climate and food insecurity ever since. Our specific focus is on extreme poverty and the causes and consequences of that. Our longer term programming supports individuals and households to protect their assets and develop sustainable climate-adapted livelihoods. In addition to working with individuals and households, we work with community and civil society organisations, and, where possible, with Governments. And the important bit of that is the 'where possible', as in many of the contexts in which we are working, sovereignty is contested. You have de facto powers controlling large swathes of the country, and you very often have to work on both sides of the military divide or the conflict divide.

Our work tends to be around trying to strengthen health, education and food systems that underpin sustainable development, to build resilience to future shocks. When we talk about food security, and as Joanne has talked about food poverty, what we talk about is that we are trying to ensure that people can

access the nutritious food that they need. For it to be sustainable, the food has to be accessible, affordable and maintained, so the access to it is maintained, not just sporadic or episodic. Markets have to be stable and prices have to be affordable.

But the reality is that access in most of the contexts in which we work is consistently interrupted by conflict, climate or economic disruption. Globally, food security is disimproving. There is a very steady marked decline in food security. In 2014, there was a record low of 552 million people who were deemed to be hungry. By last year, this figure had risen to 673 million, that is 8.2 per cent of the world's population. The target for the second sustainable development goal was to reach zero hunger by 2030. Current projections suggest that that will only be reached in 2137, more than a century away.

Last week, the United Nations World Food Programme reported that the number of people facing acute levels of hunger—these are levels of hunger that can result in death—could reach record numbers by the end of this year. Forty-five million more people could fall into acute food insecurity if the middle east conflict does not end within the next three months, and if the price of oil remains above \$100 a barrel. This would be in addition to the 318 million people around the world who are already acutely food insecure, and that is a threefold increase on just five years ago.

The integrated phased food classification, the IPC, which is the global initiative that classifies the severity and magnitude of food security and malnutrition, estimates that nearly 0.25 million people in Gaza and Sudan are facing catastrophic or famine levels of under-nutrition and malnutrition. They have raised concerns in relation to the declining food security situation in Afghanistan, Yemen, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Haiti, Somalia, South Sudan and Ethiopia. The common factor linking all of those countries is conflict. Conflict is the single largest driver of food insecurity, forcing millions from their homes and cutting families off from land, markets and basic services. At the end of 2024, a record 123.2 million people were forcibly displaced, mostly within their own countries, and, for many of them, on more than one occasion. That is twice the level of displacement that we saw less than a decade ago. Conflict reshapes how food is produced, moved, sold and eaten. Until lasting peace is achieved, the systems people depend on for food will continue to unravel and sustainable food security will remain an aspiration.

If I can, I will just take a minute to conclude with remarks about the aid cuts that have affected the whole sector. Over the last 60 years that Concern has been in existence, we have grown with the support of donors, the public, philanthropies and the private sector. In 2024, we reached 27.3 million people, with programmes in 27 countries, and our budget was around €245 million. This

year, our opening budget is €165 million. I do not give those figures to say, 'Woe is me', I give those figures to reflect that these are cuts that are affecting the whole sector. Every NGO and every UN agency has been forced to close country programmes, cut staff and drastically reduce programmes. This means that although ever more people are in acute need, whether through conflict, climate change or displacement, or all three, they are increasingly unlikely to receive assistance. Our fear is that we are entering a period when people are going to be ever less food secure and living much less sustainable lives, and that not enough is being done to prevent this. Thank you.

3.00 pm

Dr Majka Ryan:

Thank you very much, Dominic. If you do not mind, I would like to stay with you for a minute. I will let you have a drink of water. I want to ask about that global conflict. We know that conflict and war are having a devastating effect on people's food security. How are recent escalations of hostilities in the middle east exacerbating this? We are all following the news and we hear what is happening, but, perhaps, is there anything that is not being reported?

Mr Dominic Crowley:

Thanks, Majka. The problem with the figures that I am citing, when you get into tens and hundreds and millions, is we almost become desensitised to them. We cannot get our heads around the sheer scale of suffering that is endured currently in far too many countries around the world.

The most recent fighting in Iran that has spilled out across the Gulf region is having an impact across all of the countries in which we work. I could talk specifically about Iran, Lebanon, Afghanistan and seven or eight other countries where we are already seeing the consequences of the lack of attention or the food price increases and the fuel increases that Frank has mentioned, but I will just focus on Sudan, because Sudan is the largest humanitarian crisis in the world today.

Three years of relentless conflict have impacted Sudan's agricultural sector. Farmland, livestock and factories have been damaged or destroyed. The average price of two key staple crops, wheat and sorghum, has increased by 400 per cent and 300 per cent respectively over the last three years. The main planting season is about to start, but more than half of Sudan's fertiliser is produced in the Gulf, and the Gulf accounts for a quarter of the world's nitrogen fertiliser production. I am looking to Frank for confirmation on that. The closure of the Strait of Hormuz will make fertiliser either inaccessible or unaffordable,

and it will reduce food production for this year across the countries in which we work.

Disruption of transit through the Strait of Hormuz will have a knock-on effect on the cost of food, fuel, shipping, transport, et cetera. And in the context in which aid has already been cut, it will make the delivery of programmes more expensive and reduce the scope of what we can deliver. This will have deadly consequences for the 21 million people in Sudan who are already acutely food insecure, who are already skipping meals and selling the few assets that they have to try to survive, and whose children are becoming increasingly malnourished. Starvation and destruction are widespread, and children and adults are beginning to die from hunger and hunger-related diseases.

The subject of this panel is food security and sustainability, but I want to take this opportunity to highlight three issues that illustrate how the conflict in Sudan is being prosecuted and that need to be challenged. Attacks on women and children and the use of rape as a weapon of war are common features of this conflict. A report released last year, in October, by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, analysed first-hand accounts of systematic brutality against civilians. Survivors and witnesses described the maiming of young children and the severe sexual violence against women. Last Friday, Eid al-Fitr saw a drone strike on a teaching hospital in El Daein, a town in East Darfur, that killed 64 people, including 13 children, two nurses and a doctor. This was yet another example of how violations of international law characterise this conflict and too many other conflicts around the world. Finally, the recently released report of the independent international fact-finding mission for Sudan, which was called 'Hallmarks of Genocide in El-Fasher' distressingly recounts the horrors of this conflict.

Upcoming meetings in Brussels and Berlin should be decisive moments for member states to commit to humanitarian diplomacy and the goal of securing a ceasefire and a durable political settlement. However, there are concerns that events in the Gulf may limit the bandwidth of key EU member states, the UK, and the members of the quad—Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and the United States—and therefore reduce focus on Sudan. Sudan is already a neglected crisis and, as Governments focus on the new Iran and Gulf conflict, I fear that it will slip ever further down the agenda. Thank you.

Dr Majka Ryan:

Thank you very much, Dominic, and thank you for the insightful remarks around the global context. Going back home right now and, again, still looking at the conflict and the shocks and resilience that, Frank, you mentioned as well, you mentioned the international conflict is driving up the prices of fuel and fertiliser,

directly affecting farmers. So, is current policy support sufficient to protect sustainable food production, or do we need a new approach?

Professor Frank O'Mara:

Thanks, Majka. At Teagasc, we do not really have an international remit as such, so my perspectives are from an Irish perspective. We are privileged to live in a part of the world where food security is not really an issue. In Ireland, we do import a lot of food, and we export a lot, obviously. We are part of the single market, which means we should not be looking at food security just from our own point of view, because food in the EU is as available to us as food in Wexford or Galway. So, food security per se is not a huge issue, but I suppose, from my perspective, Ireland makes, and should be making, a contribution to global food security, and we do that.

As I said, we do import quite a bit of food, but we export quite a bit. Protein is probably the nutrient that is the most expensive, the most challenging in diets. We recently looked at Irish land-based food production, and by that I mean dairy, beef, sheep, tillage, excluding the intensive sectors—pigs and poultry—and if you add up all the protein that we produce and divide it by the daily requirement of an adult for digestible protein, we produce about enough protein for 30 million people. That is even after you subtract the feed that we import into this country to allow our animals to grow and produce milk and meat. That is a big contribution to the world's food supply, and protecting that is important.

The main concern that we have and that Europe has around food is that, first of all, Europe now looks at food very much in a different way. With all the conflict we have had in the world recently, and trade disruptions and so on, food production, food security is regarded as just that. It is very important for Europe to be secure in its food supply. The big concerns we have in Europe are that we do not produce enough protein for our livestock industries, and Europe has large livestock industries. We have to import a lot of protein, and that is a vulnerability to our systems, and it is the same in the UK. There has been a lot of effort to try to promote the growth of protein crops, and so we see things like peas and beans being subsidised for production. From our point of view, we have got to avoid overfeeding animals with protein. That is one of our vulnerabilities. The other is fertiliser. Europe imports a lot of fertiliser. In Ireland, we do not produce any artificial fertiliser. That is a vulnerability as well that we have. Addressing those two issues is going to be really important for Ireland to be able to continue to make our contribution to food security.

On whether policy is adequately managing the food system, I think we have a pretty good policy environment here in this country, but food production is a tough business. We have had a pretty good year in 2025 for most sectors

except tillage, so there was a good bit of cash to share around the various parts of the food chain. That is not always the case. We do see the primary producer as probably the one that generally suffers when food prices are low, and it is not an easy business to make a living in at times.

We have set up in Ireland here an agri-food regulator, whose job is to provide information on the various parts of the food chain and who is making what in that to ensure that there is fairness and balance throughout the food chain, but that is not an easy task.

Dr Majka Ryan:

Thank you very much, Frank. Moving on from the global and European and the food producing side, Joanne, looking at the impact on households, how should Governments and public bodies reshape the wider food environment to make healthy, safe and sustainable food choices the easy choices for households?

Dr Joanne Uí Chrualaoich:

Thanks, Majka. It is probably worth dwelling a little bit on what exactly we mean by the food environment, because we are used to thinking of environment in terms of a climate dimension, but the food environment is everything that surrounds getting to the point where people are making decisions about the food that they consume. So it is much more broad than a climate piece. We recently did a piece of work in Safefood looking at what people's food environment was. It was a consultative piece across the island in different demographics, in different communities. There was a really strong coherence around what people were telling us about the challenge of accessing healthy food, that the default options are often the unhealthy ones. I invite you all, the next time you are in a petrol station, to look for something healthy to eat, and you will struggle. We often talk about those foods that are high in fat, salt and sugar, and they are fairly ubiquitous there.

Another example is a woman in Cork city who had four fast-food takeaways within a five-minute walk of her front door but had to get a two-hour bus trip to get to a supermarket. So, what are you going to do? We need to make the environment easy for people to make the kind of choices that promote good health and longevity. There is carrot and there is stick, and what we know from the research is that regulations and legislation are so much more impactful than nudging people and behavioural change. It is not enough for people to know what they should be eating. There needs to be a barrier—a legislative or regulatory barrier. So, things like sugar taxes, and so on, are quite effective.

Dr Majka Ryan: Thank you very much, Joanne. I am conscious of time. According to our schedule, we only have 15 minutes left. So, I thank all the

speakers for their remarks and answering my questions, but now I open it to the floor. We welcome any questions.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

We already have a list, starting with Damien. Do go ahead.

Damien Egan MP:

Thank you very much. I am Damien Egan, I am a Member of Parliament representing a constituency in Bristol. We were touching earlier in the sessions this morning around conflict and international events. Obviously, we will all be thinking domestically about resilience, and food security is a huge part of that. It strikes me—I was born in Ireland, so I am a regular visitor—just seeing the different direction of Irish supermarkets. I am really only familiar with SuperValu, if I am honest. They have taken a different approach to the UK. In the UK, we have seen a big reduction in product ranges, and here it seems that is different. You see a lot more emphasis on local, and quality, although I accept that is subjective. So, I wanted to ask about resilience. How do you build that resilience, keeping competitive, as Frank was saying, but not losing, in the way that I feel we maybe have been losing, the quality and the range and local choice?

Dr Joanne Uí Chrualaoich:

There is a lot to unpack there. I am not entirely sure. I think the UK supermarket diversity was starting from a very high level. It would not be unusual for Tesco, for example, to have 80,000 different products, if I am remembering my stats correctly, in a given supermarket. I think maybe what is happening is that two different methods are moving towards a stasis in the middle somewhere. But I think you are right in that there has been a lot of conversation and a lot of emphasis on local provenance, on traceability, on origins, on knowing where your food comes from. From my perspective, that is all to be encouraged, in terms of it being a conversation, and a conversation about food and nutrition literacy, so I do not see a downside from that perspective. I do not know if there is an economic one, Frank.

3.15 pm

Professor Frank O'Mara:

Thanks for the question, Damien, and it is a good question. The whole consumer end of it, or the retail end, would not be an area where we have much expertise, so I am not going to talk too much about that, except to say that, I think, in Ireland, we have got very well balanced and strong local food markets. You go into most Irish provincial towns and you will find a food market on a

Saturday morning. You will find businesses servicing that local need. As well as that, you have a thriving supermarket sector. For whatever reason, our supermarkets are very keen to highlight the local dimension of what they are selling. You often see—as I am sure you do in the UK now—the picture of the farmer that produced the carrots, the burgers or whatever it is, to try to highlight that local link. So, we are super conscious, I suppose, in Ireland. Even though we export an awful lot of food, we are super conscious of buying local and supporting our local farmers, which is good.

In terms of resilience, I guess for us in Teagasc, in trying to make our agricultural sector more resilient, the thing we are constantly focused on is trying to make farmers more self-sufficient in terms of their two big inputs, which are feed and fertiliser. If you are a livestock farmer, we want to have a system where you can produce as much of the feed for the livestock from your grass platform as possible, and we are very successful here in Ireland with that. Typically, for a dairy cow in Ireland, about 80 per cent of her feed is grown on her own farm, and that is much higher than you would find in most other countries that have highly developed dairy industries.

On the other thing that I mentioned, the fertiliser, for many reasons, we have been trying to promote the benefits of clover, our multi-species swards, but particularly clover, because that fixes nitrogen from the atmosphere. We would say to dairy farmers, 'You can replace 40 per cent of your nitrogen fertiliser through a few kilos of clover seed.' A lot goes on in between, in terms of managing that, but that is good for economics, for profitability, it is very good for the self-sufficiency of your farm, and it is good for the environment. So that's the technology that we would be focusing on to try to make our systems more resilient for all these shocks that are coming at us. But farmers being financially resilient is the primary thing that will allow them to be resilient to all the other shocks.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

I have got 10 more speakers. I will try and fit you all in, if that is okay with you guys. If I can ask that you ask very succinct questions, and can I ask if you can give fairly succinct answers? I know it is a topic that is very wide. I am going to put you into threes, so if I call out three, and then you can pick them up as we go along. First of all, Cormac Devlin, with Rosie Wrighting and Jim McMahan.

Cormac Devlin TD:

Thank you very much, Co-Chair, and thank you to the panel. To Joanne first, please, in terms of the sugar tax, I would be interested to hear your perception of it, as it is a few years bedded in, and the impact of it.

Also, in terms of planning legislation, to the lady in Cork that you alluded to about the takeaways being so close, I know, when I was on the council, we looked at, through the development plans, trying to limit certain fast-food entities in certain areas of a town. I would just be interested in your take on that.

And then, to Frank, just in terms of the succession and encouragement of the next generation in farming, I suppose the appeal of other sectors is having a huge impact on rural communities. What can be done to incentivise that and to ask them to remain in farming? Because food security obviously starts and stops right there. Go raibh maith agat. Thank you.

Rosie Wrighting MP:

Two very quick questions, if that is okay. Dominic, first of all, thank you for bringing to light the issues that you raise. I went to Jordan last year, and one thing I took away, and was quite shocked about, is the difference in the UNRWA and UNHCR programmes and what they are prioritising. I understand cuts to world aid have hit massively, but what can we do with the aid that is there to make sure it is getting in the right places and being fed through the right channels?

And then to Frank, I represent some farmers in the midlands, and one thing they are very worried about is, with the change of the world trade order, how bilateral trade agreements are going to affect them. They want to make sure there is a level playing field. I wondered if a similar fear is being felt here, and what can be done.

Jim McMahon MP:

I am going to stand so I can see our friends in the corner. I also chair the Co-operative Party in the UK, and we exist to promote the formation of new co-operatives and the expansion of existing ones. I think particularly in agriculture and food, these are absolutely critical. We know that, in Ireland, the Co-operative Societies Bill will create a level playing field. In the UK, the Chancellor has committed to double the size of the co-operative economy too, and all that is good. But what practically can we do—and maybe it is linked to the question about new farming entrants—to promote the growth of new co-operatives right across the supply chain, from the production to the manufacture to the distribution and, of course, to the retail, so we have that end-to-end food security that has been talked about today?

Dr Joanne Uí Chrualaoich:

Apologies if I drop any, and remind me of them. Starting with the sugar tax, it has been proven to be really quite effective. Scotland are ahead of Ireland, but in both Scotland and Ireland we are seeing the dividends of that. It is a very

effective regulatory measure. It is not the only tool we have. There is a lot of active work in the space of food reformulation, so particularly in reducing salt—frozen pizzas and things like that, even bread has quite a high level of salt in it. That is an important piece that we can look at. You can look at the taxing, you can look at regulations around reformulation.

The new kid on the block in this space is the impact of digital marketing. Teenagers across the island of Ireland—and this is really quite a stark statistic—see advertising for an unhealthy food product once every four minutes when they are online. That is 15 times an hour. I see raised eyebrows around the room. It is really quite a lot. You have got to think of teenagers' developmental stage. A lot of this is coming from influencers. They feel they have a parasocial relationship with the influencers; they do not necessarily recognise it as marketing and advertising. We know that that results in them asking for more unhealthy food, and the risks associated with obesity and all that. There are different ways we need to come at this. A sugar tax is one of them, reformulation is another, and the new one that concerns me a lot is the digital marketing to children

In terms of your planning question, I am very conscious that Safefood sponsor departments in Belfast and Dublin, the departments of health, so I am conscious of not straying outside my lane a little bit. But I can tell you what the research and the evidence says. There is quite a fall-off on consumption of fast food based on distance from your closest fast food location. It is certainly something that planners and policy makers should be very actively looking at, I would suggest. They were mine.

Professor Frank O'Mara:

There are two questions, I think, there. I am going to take the second one first around the bilateral trade agreements. They are of a lot of concern to our farmers. And we are watching the UK, for meat and beef in particular—that is where most of the concern stems. The UK is the biggest market for Irish beef. Our farmers are worried about bilateral agreements. We have recently had the debate here, the ongoing debate, around Mercosur and that deal with the EU, and our farmers are very concerned about that.

The concerns stem from the cost of production in the countries the deals are done with. Europe is a high-cost area to produce, for many reasons, but that is the reality of it. But the other concern is the standard of production in some of the countries that deals might be done with. That is environmental standards, standards around labour law and animal welfare and so on. Farmers feel here—I am speaking, I guess, about what they would feel—that they have a lot of standards to meet in all those areas, and other countries maybe do not have as

high a level of standards, which allows them to produce cheaper, and yet they now have to compete with those. That is where the debate is around.

I suppose it is really important, in the trade deals, such as the Mercosur, on the standard of meat or whatever it is that is being imported here, that the rules around that are strictly enforced, and any market distortions are dealt with, and those kind of safeguards are built into the trade agreements. Farmers worry whether they are robust and strong enough, but it is going to be really important that they are properly implemented.

In terms of the succession question, we have just had a commission on generational renewal here, and that made lots of recommendations around what needed to be done, whether that was around things like how we can support that through our laws around tax, whether it is awareness building and advice around finance and so on. But I suppose from our perspective there are two things we can do. First, we can work to try to take the drudgery out of farming as much as possible through either technology or through making systems more simple, and so that is a direct role for ourselves as a research and advisory organisation.

Second, we have to face the reality that the family farm model that we have here is going to have a lot of part-time farmers in it. The scale of our farms in Ireland here, and indeed in many parts of the UK, is probably not big enough to be able to be viable as full-time businesses, given all the other opportunities that are available here for people to go into well-paid jobs. Again, it comes back to making sure that people can part-time farm, want to part-time farm, and get well rewarded for doing it. That goes back to having simple, easy-to-manage systems.

We obviously also support farming families in that discussion. For any of us, succession is a hugely personal thing, with difficult discussions. Often farmers are not the best at talking about things like that within the family setting. So, trying to facilitate those conversations that need to go on is a role that our advisers often play, because they are seen as trusted, neutral people. But also bringing the solicitor and the accountant into those conversations, because it is not just one person that can support that.

The last thing that we do, which I think is increasingly important, is to try to get non-traditional people into farming, people that do not have land, so creating access routes for people through shared farming or partnership to get involved in farming. And of course, the big elephant in the room: 16 per cent of farmers are women. Fifty per cent of the children of farmers are women, by and large, so there is an untapped resource there to try to get interested in farming. We do see greater interest in our own education courses. We have gone from about 14

per cent females getting awards in 2016-17 to about 28 per cent last year. The taboos or the glass ceilings for women in farming, I think, are increasingly going, and that is something that we very much encourage and support.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

I will get to my next three. I will call Garret Kelleher first, please.

Senator Garret Kelleher:

Thanks very much. I will be as quick as I can, Co-Chair. My question is to Dominic, and it is around your reference to the sustainable development goal on zero hunger by 2030. In actual fact, it is forecast that it will be 111 years from now, 2137, before we achieve that. Just a little bit more behind how that is arrived at. This question sounds woefully inadequate, but how can we, as policy makers, have some wins to make that goal more achievable?

3.30 pm

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

I have got Ruth Jones next.

Ruth Jones MP:

Thank you, Co-Chair. Ruth Jones, MP for Newport West and Islwyn. I am Chair of the Welsh Affairs Committee in Parliament. We recently published a report on Welsh agriculture and farming. It is similar to Ireland and very different to England in that England has large corporate areas, and the family farm in Wales is very important in terms of culture and heritage, but also resilience. Given the global situation, which you have highlighted very eloquently—just how difficult it is with the ever-changing situations here—what do we as legislators need to do to make an effective change to benefit our farmers, but also our communities?

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

Naoise Ó Muirí.

Naoise Ó Muirí:

Thank you very much, Co-Chair. My question is to Frank. You have already touched on fertiliser issues emerging now. It is pretty severe. The two sources, ammonium nitrate and protected urea, are both seriously disrupted now coming out of the Gulf. They also have a pretty severe energy footprint anyway in terms of how they are made. What is Teagasc saying in terms of a sustainable and maybe even an indigenous or an alternative to fertiliser in the medium term, so we can get away from that? Thanks.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

Ruth—sorry. We have had all three. Go ahead.

Mr Dominic Crowley:

Thank you. If I can, I will come back to the question from the previous round in relation to access of aid into Gaza. It is the sort of question I would prefer to have ducked, but, as you asked it, I do need to answer it. Anything that you say in relation to Gaza you will get condemned from one side or the other, or both sides at the same time. It is increasingly untenable that phones and cosmetics can be imported but medicines cannot. How do you get access to people who are in extremis when there is denial of the essentials to life being imported?

The direct sustained bombing may have reduced substantially, but it has not stopped completely. The decision to ban UNRWA and throw it out of Gaza and the West Bank technically is a violation of international law, but it is not being challenged, so there does not seem to be anything meaningful that can be done other than to sustain a presence, keep raising issues and keep trying to make a difference. Sorry, I do not have another answer than that for you.

In relation to SDG2, all of the SDGs are analysed through the United Nations, and achievement against the objectives is measured on an annual basis. Five or six years ago, there seemed to be some hope that some of the SDGs would be achieved. In the last few years, there seems to be a growing sense that very few of them will be. I think the one in relation to food security is probably the worst—the expectation of reaching zero hunger pushed out, as you say, by over 100 years. For me, the biggest single thing that would change food security would be an end to conflict. That is a bit aspirational, but that is the reality. Until we get on top of the—*[Interruption.]* I do not know if it is me or the microphone. Until we get on top of the persistence of conflict, I do not think we are going to achieve food security.

Professor Frank O'Mara:

I think there were two questions there. Again, taken in reverse order, in relation to fertiliser and a sustainable future for our agri industry, we cannot do without fertiliser. We would take a big hit in food production if we did not have fertiliser—so, starting from there, maybe. We can still do a lot, I think, to reduce our reliance on fertiliser.

The first thing is that most livestock farmers have a fantastic resource on their farms, it is their animal manures. Very often, it is seen as a headache and a nuisance, we have got to spread it and tanks are full, and all that, but it is a fantastic resource. It is about making best use of the animal manures on your

farm, or what is available on intensive farms, pigs and poultry, to come back to tillage farms, ideally. That is No. 1.

No. 2, in Ireland, the soil types that we have—it is the same in several other parts of the British isles as well—tend to be acidic: they need lime. We are not applying enough lime. The consequence of that is that you need more fertiliser to produce the same amount of grass or crops. Soil testing, seeing that your pH is right and applying appropriate lime, is trying to teach people how to suck eggs, but very often people have forgotten how to suck eggs, so we have to keep reminding them of that.

I mentioned earlier clover. The air is full of nitrogen—79 per cent or something of the air we breathe is nitrogen. Clover plants, or the microbes that are associated with clover, can take some of that nitrogen out of the atmosphere and convert it into fertiliser for the crops. We could replace a lot of the nitrogen fertiliser we use through greater use of clover. For the future, if we get an anaerobic digestion industry going here in Ireland, with significant scale and significant amounts of digestate, that again can be a very valuable manure for food production.

Going back to the family farming question, I think there is a range of things that Governments do, or they try to do, to support the family farm, whether it is through taxation measures or whether it is through supports that come through the common agricultural policy or equivalent schemes. I think those in particular, the common agricultural policy supports, are really vital for family farms. They do depend on it very much, and the Government is well aware of that. But the thing, in some ways, maybe, that is more important than all of that is that family farms are generally one-person operators—one-man or one-woman operators. They have to deal with an incredibly complex environment. They have to deal now with the consequences of a war in Iran, they have had to deal with tariffs, they have to be up to speed, they have to deal with bluetongue, they have to deal with grassweeds.

A huge amount of stuff comes at family farms, though, as I said, they are one-person operators. They do not have a, 'We will send that to the technology department' or 'We will send that to the finance department to see what to do with it.' They have got to figure all this out for themselves. Making sure that adequate supports are there available for these single-operator enterprises is, in my view, vital. Teagasc does that—I really believe in the mission of Teagasc in supporting those family farms. We are not the only people that do it; there are private consultants there that do a tremendous job as well. So, just making sure that there is a good support system available for your famers I think is incredibly important, whether that is delivered through a public body like Teagasc or the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise in the North of Ireland, or

Scotland's Rural College or whatever, or whether it is delivered through the private sector. Just make sure that it is there and accessible and affordable for your family farms, because you just cannot expect them to have the wherewithal to be able to deal with all the challenges that come at them.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

I have now got four left, so we will take it in a four. First of all, Gerard Craughwell, please.

Senator Gerard Craughwell:

Thank you very much, Chair. A very quick question. Mr Crowley, thank you for your presentation, and thank you for the work you do worldwide. I wonder whether the time has come for us to analyse the funding of NGOs, to make sure that the funding that goes out from Ireland goes to an organisation like your own, which has a fairly significant world footprint. Thank you.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

Sinéad Gibney.

Sinéad Gibney TD:

Thanks, Chair, and thanks to all the panel for really interesting contributions. You mentioned, Joanne, the digital marketing threats, I suppose, that are out there. I think there is a bigger question around misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, and how they are influencing the health space. I am curious about the role of a body like your own in that context where, increasingly, self-designated experts are providing their own public health advice, which, I believe, in many cases, is contra to what people should be receiving.

Just by way of an example, and a plug at the same time, you also referenced ultra-processed foods, and I brought to publication last year my late father's final book on this topic. Because a lot of people are talking about how bad ultra-processed foods are, without really understanding the Nova system on which it is based, which is a very shaky scientific approach. Unfortunately, the idea that we would ban ultra-processed foods, or root them out from our diets, is really not very practical in jurisdictions where, for example, up to 75 per cent of our caloric intake is coming from ultra-processed foods. *In Defence of Bread* is the name of the book, if anybody is interested in the topic. I am just keen to understand how it is possible now to cut through the online space. Do you support greater regulation of the tech space to help you to do that? Do you support, for example, platforms as publishers, whereby that misinformation can be flagged and effectively taken down? Thank you.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

Annabelle Ewing.

Annabelle Ewing MSP:

Thank you, Co-Chair, and thank you very much indeed to the panel. It was a very interesting presentation. My name is Annabelle Ewing, and I am the Deputy Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament. It was really a question to Mr Crowley. Obviously, his presentation was incredibly sobering about the catastrophe that is facing Sudan, and I just wondered two things. First, there are all these parliamentarians sitting here in this room, so what can each of us do to get Sudan up the agenda? And in his view, what does he think has to happen in Sudan for the world to act in the way that it needs to act? Thank you.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

Seán Crowe, please.

Seán Crowe TD:

Go raibh maith agat. Dominic reminded us again of the link between conflict, hunger and famine. You mentioned the war in Biafra; a lot of us of that age remember the sales of work and the start of organising with that. You mentioned Ethiopia, Eritrea and Sudan, and it has almost become a by-product of war, hunger and conflict and famine. But I suppose in relation to Gaza, what we have seen there is almost a weaponisation of food. We have seen that they turn on and turn off access to food, the use of tanks and tank shells as crowd control weapons, the use of cameras, the use of biometrics, the use of snipers, shooting people, starving people queueing up for food, and it has almost come to a new level. Is this the future? It is almost a Mad Max sort of scenario of starving people queueing up. And at the same time, I do not remember it happening at such a clinical level anywhere else. But it is probably going to happen, possibly, in Lebanon.

The other thing is that, just beside that, you had all the trucks with all the food in them, and the awful images of that. But also you had US aid rotting in warehouses. Is that still the case? Is that food still sitting there? There was talk of them burning and destroying the food. I just wonder if that is still the case. I suppose that is the big elephant in the room in relation to the fact that the USA have pulled out of it all—vaccination, food and so on. And the fact that we were making inroads into poverty, and now, instead of moving forward, we are actually falling back.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

I have just got one last person—Ruairí.

Ruairí Ó Murchú TD:

Go raibh maith agat. Initially, to Frank, I suppose that whole idea, and you have dealt with some of it, as regards sustainable farming, is obviously about supports and streamlining with farmers. Farmers constantly talk about the fact that they have to give the same information to multiple different entities—we could definitely make that a hell of a lot easier—while also dealing with the issues that they are facing from Mercosur right through. You already give some of the, I suppose, scientific options when we try and build in some sort of resilience, because we obviously have an industry and a system that is very open to the sort of shocks that we are seeing in relation to what is happening in the Strait of Hormuz at the minute.

Joanne, I remember going over and back in relation to the sugar tax at one stage, and I suppose a number of experts and advocates would have always said the issue is that with an awful lot of the big corporations, they find a way and a means to basically design around. They will introduce something else that is not technically sugar, but is not very good for you, so I suppose it is an ongoing battle.

I do not know where you start in relation to what Dominic spoke about, but the fact is you are in a world of might is right. It is the 1700s with better weapons; that is what you are dealing with at the minute. I know at times we concentrate in relation to Gaza, and as Seán says, we are now seeing what the Israelis are doing in Lebanon. But I suppose they have been able to do that without any sort of detrimental impact to them, so they will continue to do that. In Sudan, obviously weapons are being fed and games are being played by outside players as well, whether it is the United Arab Emirates or others, so we will see if we get a handle on that.

And then, even if we were not dealing with conflict, I would just ask about USAID and the fact that the Americans have set out to pull back on what was obviously a huge amount of the resources that were needed by the charity/NGO sector. While accepting all the lives that are being saved, I would imagine you would have always said the resources that are needed in relation to bringing about long and meaningful change are not there. So, we are way back from the place we even were. We are facing absolute desperation, and I suppose it is just making sure that enough people know this. It is very difficult to see hope at the moment.

3.45 pm

Professor Frank O'Mara:

I thought I had a few minutes to gather my thoughts, because there was only one question there for me. Ruairí, thanks for the question. As you said, I have dealt with some of those issues, but I might just take the minute to go back on the sustainability agenda, the environmental sustainability agenda in particular, because we have not covered that in a huge amount of detail. That is incredibly important. We are seeing the impact of climate change, but also, on the other side of that coin, we have very challenging targets to reach in terms of reducing emissions. On water quality, here in Ireland, we are well versed, and everybody is well aware of the importance of water quality and achieving high water quality to allow our derogation to be continued in the future. Biodiversity is another very challenging area.

Our predominant farming systems are grass-based livestock. We obviously have a bit of tillage and a bit of intensive pig and poultry, but for our grass-based livestock, whatever you say about it, we have some good strengths there in that the system is very circular, and by that I mean the manure that the animals produce goes back to the area where their feed came from. That is the natural feature of a grazing system. That is hugely important, and I suppose it is strong from the point of view of animal welfare—animals are out grazing, all of those things—and, as I said as well, most of the feed is produced on the farm itself. So, they are some of the strengths we have in our system. But we have those challenges of improving water quality and reducing emissions to deal with.

Our job, again, is to develop the technologies that would allow farmers to reduce emissions, improve water quality, and then help them to adopt or adapt those technologies. And there is a big role for regulators, for policy makers, because advice will only get you so far. I think, Joanne, you mentioned earlier that regulation has a very important role to play as well in that, and we have seen that journey. Somebody mentioned protected urea earlier as a type of fertiliser that we use. For instance, one of the regulations that has just come into effect this year is that the only type of urea that can be used in Ireland now is protected urea. So, we have gone through a good few years of advising farmers about its benefits, and now farmers are well used to it. Regulation can come in now and bring us the last step of the journey on that.

There is a lot of work to be done there. That is really the point I wanted to make, Ruairí, and it is certainly something that we are not ignoring. It is a really high priority for us to support farmers to adopt the technologies that are there that we know will improve the emissions situation or improve water quality.

Dr Joanne Uí Chrualaoich:

I will pick up there. To add to Sinéad's recommendation of the book, *In Defence of Bread*, and also its precursor, *Ever Seen a Fat Fox?*, they are really evidence-based and understandable. Because this stuff gets complicated very quickly, and I think that is what opens the door for misinformation to creep in. Also, the people who are peddling the misinformation tend to be 20, sexy, very attractive. Scientists are a wide church of people, but not all are in that category of 20-year-old gym bunnies. This is more than in the space of nutrition—we could talk about anti-vaxxers. But it is the credibility of science that is under threat, to a certain extent.

In terms of your specific question, yes, absolutely, legislation is a known driver of change in this area. The UK has, in January, introduced a ban on the marketing of unhealthy food, but brands are still allowed to advertise. So, to talk to the point around the sugar tax and the limitations and that organisations will find a way around it, you can still show the double arch and everybody instantly knows that is a Big Mac. So, we have to be very careful. It is not going to be an easy challenge for you guys to solve, but it certainly is something that is having an impact, because we know, just to repeat that statistic, that children see marketing for unhealthy foods once every four minutes. Tot that up over a year, that is 30,000 pieces of unhealthy food they are seeing, not recognising it as marketing, asking for these products and all the associated health risks that go with that.

Mr Dominic Crowley:

I was hoping I had got away quite lightly with the questions, but you have saved them all up and are bombarding me with them now. They could take days to answer, so when I run out of time, just stop me, please. Let me take each of them in turn. Gerard, your question about reviewing where Irish Aid money goes, it is a matter of constant review, it is a matter of constant audits, of reporting. I think it is quite rigorous. Irish Aid, like most other donors, tries to achieve a balance between the three primary pillars of aid delivery: the United Nations, international organisations like the International Committee of the Red Cross, and NGOs, and, obviously, an increasing focus on ensuring that local and national NGOs receive funding through one or all of those three mechanisms. So, it is an ongoing process. We would often ask for more money, and we are often told, 'We have to keep the balance', or, 'That is the budget and you are not getting any more'. But it is a work in progress for us.

Annabelle, I think it is really interesting, looking at the statements coming out of the UK Government now as they try to go from that 0.5 per cent of gross national income down to 0.3 per cent, having committed in law to go to 0.7 per

cent not that long ago. That level of reduction of UK aid is catastrophic, and if you talk to people who used to be in the Department for International Development, who are now in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, they would say that going from 0.7 to 0.5 was manageable; we just contracted. To go from 0.5 to 0.3, we have to shed huge areas of focus. Positively, I think the focus that Yvette Cooper has given to Sudan—she has spoken about it consistently—reflects a level of political interest. And similarly in Ireland, Micheál Martin's comments on Sudan and the pattern of atrocities that we have seen there are important, but that is not translating to media interest and it is not translating to public interest, and public interest is substantially led by what the media covers, I would suggest. So, we need to do more in that space, need to get more coverage, need to get more awareness, and need to get more empathy for what is actually happening. We were talking last night and saying that any time as an organisation we post anything, the level of vitriol that we get back is unbelievable, and that is common for every organisation.

Seán and Ruairí, you will both have heard me say these things before at Oireachtas committees. Seán, I will take your questions first. Is Gaza really a new level of horror or is it that it is being better reported than many of the instances of horror that we are seeing around the world? How many of you have read the international tribunal's report on genocide in El Fasher, where the RSF take the town and execute thousands of men and rape thousands of women? What we are seeing in Gaza is well covered, but it is not unique. It is horrific, but it is not unique, and we should avoid the presumption that there is something definingly different about the prosecution of the conflict in Gaza, because we see it time and again in conflict after conflict.

On aid rotting in warehouses, yes, I think I spoke about that in an Oireachtas meeting last year. That was a specific point in time when the USAID funding had stopped. Some of that food was destroyed, and it was particularly high-energy biscuits that were being used for acutely malnourished children that were destroyed. My recollection was that it was something like 40 metric tonnes. We have not seen that again. Again, for those of you who have heard me talk about this before, the reliance of the international humanitarian aid system on the US as an almost single point of funding has created a single point of weakness in the system. In the last few years, the US has provided between 40 per cent and 47 per cent of all humanitarian funding. Far too many member states have failed to meet that 0.7 per cent of GNI that all member states signed up to in 1970 in the UN. It is a global commitment that only three Scandinavian countries have met or surpassed. So there is that reliance on US funding to support the whole system. And when you get somebody like President Trump with an anti-aid agenda coming to power, the decision to cut the aid so catastrophically has almost brought us to a point of system failure in

certain countries. One of those countries, I would suggest, would be Sudan, where we are at the point of having to close 37 maternal and child health clinics—37 that provided not just health in areas where there was no other support, but also essential nutrition services for the growing levels of acute malnutrition, where the level of undernutrition in children under five is more than twice the level of the famine level that the IPC sets. What we are seeing is catastrophic failure.

We do need to acknowledge the role of the US, but also accept that, with the honourable exceptions of Ireland and Spain, which are the only two countries that increased their official development assistance budget this year, and a couple of the Scandinavian countries like Denmark and Norway that did not cut their aid, every other country has cut its aid budget. The decisions that have been made to cut aid to spend it on defence are particularly galling. My apologies to our UK Members in the room for that. That issue of pulling back, the issue of far too few countries providing an aid budget, is something we need to understand.

I was going to talk earlier about Lebanon. Just to be clear—because, Ruairí, I think you mentioned Lebanon—in the last two weeks, 1,000 people have been killed by the bombings in Lebanon, and a million people have been displaced within the country. That is in a country where a quarter of the population were already refugees from neighbouring countries. If that level of bombardment continues, the consequences will be worse than what we are seeing in Gaza. It has to be avoided.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

Thank you very much to the panel. That has been a very eye-opening, quite brutal and dreadful analysis, but thank you so much for putting us in that space. I think you were a bit on the back foot as well—you were not really expecting so many questions.

We will now convene for a 15-minute break, please. Do not be back any later than 4.15 pm, says Brendan. Thank you.

The sitting was suspended at 4 pm.

The sitting was resumed at 4.25 pm.

UNIVERSITY ENGAGEMENT

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

Order. We are now on to the last part of the day. This session is on university engagement. Today's proceedings will conclude with a fireside chat between Professor Maggie Cusack, president of Munster Technological University, and Professor John O'Halloran, president of University College Cork. This discussion will explore the roles of universities in regional growth, skills development and the importance of co-operation with institutions in the UK. Ms Rachel Power, head of communications in the office of president, MTU, will moderate this exchange. The team have to leave here no later than 5.20 pm so in any communication please be very brief. We also expect very brief answers from Professors Cusack and O'Halloran.

I call on Ms Power to commence the discussion.

Rachel Power:

Thank you, Co-Chairperson. Hello everyone. I am going to say a special hello to the left side of the room because they can see us now. Thank you for the invitation to speak with you about university engagement. We really appreciate the invitation and it has been a very interesting and very heartening to hear how you all work together. As you heard from the Co-Chairperson, I work in communications in Munster Technological University, which is a new university with campuses in Cork and Kerry. You may have noticed on your way in there were some road signs saying "WELCOME TO TRALEE – A UNIVERSITY TOWN". They were unveiled just last year and it is a real sign of how people in Kerry and Tralee have taken the new university to their heart and how everybody across the county and the wider region can really share in the pride of having a new university, which is a historic milestone for the county.

Today we are going to talk about university engagement with two presidents of universities. Professor Cusack is the inaugural president of Munster Technological University which was established in 2021. Professor O'Halloran is the president of UCC, which is based in Cork city and dates back to 1845. We will be drawing on their experience.

The format of this session is a fireside chat so it will be more conversational but we will be touching on some of the subjects many of you raised today and some of the topics that came up during the day. I will start by asking the presidents to introduce themselves and maybe tell you a bit about their personal and professional backgrounds, their ties to the UK and Ireland and maybe their

initial thoughts on collaboration in the university and higher education sector across the countries you represent. I will start with Professor Cusack.

Professor Maggie Cusack:

Good afternoon everyone. I am president of Munster Technological University and I am absolutely delighted to be here this afternoon. I am, as Rachel said, inaugural president of MTU. MTU came into being when two institutes of technology were brought together in January 2021. You can probably hear from my accent I am not from the south-west of Ireland. I was born in Glasgow and brought up in inner-city Glasgow. I am really passionate about education and its power to transform lives. I personally benefitted from going through a system when there was a political will to really make it work and I went from an inner-city in Glasgow on to the University of Glasgow and did my degree in science there. I did a PhD at the University of Liverpool and then spent quite a few years at the University of Glasgow, an ancient university, and led out on multidisciplinary research. I had an industrial PhD. I was born in Glasgow but I am the first generation abroad. My dad was from Mayo and my mum's family were from Donegal. Glasgow I know is sometimes described as east Donegal, so I was very much brought up in an Irish family and one where there was a real faith in education. I moved to Ireland to take up this role because I was so excited about seeing a government investing in education and investing in people. That is why am here.

Rachel was saying Munster Technological University has campuses in Cork and Kerry. We have two here in Tralee and in Cork we have a campus out to the west of the city and two campuses in the city centre. They are the Cork School of Music, which is the largest conservatoire in Ireland, and the Crawford College of Art and Design. Then out in the port in Ringaskiddy we have a campus which is the National Maritime College of Ireland. I was really delighted to host some members of Committee A just a few weeks ago in February and I hope everyone enjoyed that visit and saw the state-of-the-art facilities there. We are an island nation. Obviously the maritime economy, our security and our renewable energy are fundamentally important and the skills base are all there. We are really grateful for all the thinking and planning that went into building that national facility.

4.30 pm

I have been busy over the last few years building the new university. There is strong history and foundations from the institutes of technology. There were five technological universities formed within four years and they have a really clear raison d'être. Their remit is really to serve their region. We are really clear we are here to serve the region, the people in the region as well as the employers

and the industry there. We do that by being globally competitive in everything we do, never just looking down locally but making sure our research is globally competitive and everything we do by way of our research. We are busy going through all the business of establishing our faculties and all of our structures. When you are building a new university all the day-to-day business continues. Our students come along and they are educated and all the research continues. We engage with industry and that is a real strength of the technological universities in that our courses are coproduced with employers, our students have placements and they have really high employability when they graduate.

That is a little bit about me. As for the scale of the university, we have about 18,000 students and 2,000 staff. We have a real range in our offering and not just in terms of the subject offering. We would never attempt to be completely comprehensive as that is not what we are about as a technological university but we have a real range in our offering from apprenticeships, craft apprenticeships to your degree, your honours degree all the way to masters and PhDs. Something John and I are really proud of is the fact that the two universities – the much older and more established UCC and the modern technological university – really collaborate well. John and I meet regularly and we really understand lots more can be achieved by having that collaboration. I will stop there and let John say a few words.

Professor John O’Halloran:

Thank you and good afternoon everybody. It is a pleasure to be with you. Just to reinforce what Maggie said, we are interested in supporting learners. Institutions are important but it is the learner who matters as well as the pathway we can provide. I am saying that as a first-generation graduate. My father was a carpenter. I would not have gone to university had it not been for the grants the state provided, which is something I am really grateful for but it has also made me not lose sight of the importance of access, which is really important for me personally.

Let us go right back through the history – 180 years. In 1844, which is an important time in Irish history because of the Irish famine, we built a university. That is what happens in this country. Queen Victoria was probably coming down to MTU because she never visited Cork. She drove past the university and waved at the campus on her way to Killarney. We were called Queen Victoria university and to this day there are still a lot of artifacts in my office from Queen Victoria’s time. On the very first day 115 students were registered - all men and no women. The first registered student was the son of a surgeon who was about to be appointed. The second was a gentleman from Lincolnshire. You might ask why Lincolnshire. We believe it has probably got to do with George Boole. George Boole was our very first professor of mathematics. He came

from Lincolnshire and we believe George had a relative who came with him to attend the university. George Boole, as some of you may know, was an extraordinary person. He would not have got a job in either institution today because of the qualifications we require. He was aged about 20, he spoke eight different languages, his father was a shoemaker and he came to Cork because the university wanted him. We appointed him as a professor of mathematics. Most people do not talk about his wife. He married Mary Everest, the great-granddaughter of George Everest, after whom the mountain is named. Boole wrote a very famous book called *The Laws of Thought*. What are the laws of thought? The laws of thought are influencing every single device that every one of you has in your pocket. He wrote it and it sat for 90 years until Claude Shannon at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology said this was a very interesting piece of work. That was Boolean logic. All of you on your kettles at home have ones and zeroes and every switch you have has a one and a zero. That is Boolean logic – the way switches move through systems today. Roll on about 170 years and two years ago the great-grandson of George Boole and Mary Everest won a Nobel Prize. Geoff Hinton won a Nobel Prize for his work on artificial intelligence. We heard about a bit about AI earlier. You may or may not know that Geoff resigned from Google because he was really concerned about some of the algorithms he developed.

Going back to my institution, it is a university rather like Maggie's. It is in the centre of Cork city. We have a number of smaller campuses across the city. We have 26,000 students and are the second-largest research-intensive university in the country. We have got a bit better at the diversity as it is 65% female today, which we are really proud of. I am not saying that about this room but that is another day's work. We have 5,000 international students from 140 countries across the world so we enjoy an amazing diversity that is really important to me. I am a professor of ecology and zoology and the central axiom in that is that diversity begets stability. The greater diversity we can have in our world the better it is.

I have had the privilege of spending time working in the UK. I see our Welsh Parliament colleague is not here but I spent two years in wonderful Cardiff at the university. I did my postdoctoral work there. As an ornithologist I was vice-president of the British Trust for Ornithology for nigh on ten years. One of the great privileges for me was to work with the Royal Society and in particular the special programme promoting science for women there. It is the L'Oréal programme, which some of you may be aware of. The L'Oréal cosmetics company invests an enormous amount of resources in promoting STEM for women. I have also been involved in higher education in the United Kingdom for a considerable period as a member of the board of Advance HE, with HE meaning higher education. It supports the training and development of faculty

and at the presidential and vice-presidential level. I have also taken programmes there.

The final piece for me is one I take huge pride in. Our university is ranked No. 2 in the world for sustainability and earlier last year I got a call from the United Nations from Jeffrey Sachs, who reports directly to António Guterres, who we heard about earlier. He asked me would UCC lead an Irish network for sustainable development solutions. I said yes on the condition we would do it jointly with Queen's University Belfast. In the same way as we have Co-Chairpersons here my colleague Ian Greer and I co-chair a network of all the higher education institutions, including Maggie's, to enable us to focus on sustainable development. We are really privileged in our roles to meet incredibly talented people every day. Universities are about ideas, talent and opportunity. I am certainly proud to lead my institution and to have the opportunity to be with you here.

Rachel Power:

Thanks, Professor O'Halloran. You mentioned Queen Victoria driving straight past UCC on her way to Killarney.

Professor John O'Halloran:

Yes.

Rachel Power:

One person who did make a stop was Queen Elizabeth II a few years ago.

Professor John O'Halloran:

She did.

Rachel Power:

Earlier this month Prime Minister Keir Starmer and the Taoiseach Micheál Martin were there for the UK-Ireland Summit.

Professor John O'Halloran:

At Tyndall, yes.

Rachel Power:

Do you want to tell us a little about that and especially the research that was discussed during that visit?

Professor John O'Halloran:

Yes. As you referenced, the Tyndall National Institute is a Ireland's largest research institute. It is a semiconductor institute. We have got 600 researchers and we will be doubling the size of it very shortly as we have already secured the funding to do that. It was set up 40 years ago. For those wondering what a semiconductor is – I used to count myself among you – every single device, including phones and cars have these chips. You will remember the CHIPS Act people were concerned about during Covid and Taiwan producing 98% of the world's chips. We now need technologies developed in other parts of the world, including Britain and Ireland.

As you mentioned, Queen Elizabeth visited Tyndall when she visited Cork and had a wonderful visit, but last week I had the privilege of hosting the Taoiseach and Kier Starmer at the exact same location. It was an amazing collection of talent both prime ministers brought with them. There was a business meeting, which was really important. The evening before we met in one of our buildings in the main, downtown campus in our executive education area and the following day we visited Tyndall. Tyndall, as I said, deals with semiconductors. They walked through the place where you get these tiny things, some of which are even less thick than a hair, which make up some of these semiconductors and little chips that go into phones. There was an amazing moment captured by The Irish Times of me, Kier Starmer, the Taoiseach, Willian Scanlon and others and these two amazing researchers, one of whom is based in Tyndall and one based in Imperial College London. To see the dynamic going on between those two researchers was quite fantastic. In fact, I would love to be part of the research group with these two amazing women, these two early-career women who are developing the most front end of technology that can only be observed through an electron microscope. They were showing the Prime Minister some of these semiconductor devices.

Also at that event, UK Research and Innovation, UKRI, together with Research Ireland, the Irish research agency, signed an MOU to strengthen our relationships between the United Kingdom and Ireland in terms of research. It was just a real privilege to see what the government can do in investment in research but also how two governments doing joint projects makes a huge impact on inspiring the next generation of technologies, but also the next generation of people.

Rachel Power:

Thanks, Professor O'Halloran. Professor Cusack, you mentioned NMCI. NMCI is the National Maritime College of Ireland. It is based in Ringaskiddy in Cork Harbour and is one of MTU's campuses. You mentioned you had Committee A

visit a couple of weeks ago. This morning the Minister, Jack Chambers, mentioned the government is about to publish a national ports policy and that was in the context of renewables, maritime safety, marine safety and those questions came from the floor as well this morning. What are your thoughts on that in the context, maybe, of collaboration between the countries' representatives and at the further and higher education level as well?

Professor Maggie Cusack:

Thank you, Rachel. Yes, I mentioned we were really delighted to mention some members of BIPA Committee A to the National Maritime College of Ireland back in February. For those who were able to visit, you could not help but be impressed by the state-of-the-art facilities there. There is everyone being trained who is going offshore and everyone who works offshore coming back to be reskilled and upskilled. Then, of course, I am talking about the breadth of the university so with all the full research strength of the university we had really interesting discussions on some of the research going on by way of our cybersecurity, our renewable energy and our data security. It was all really important. I am mindful of course the Irish Government has just recently launched the National Maritime Security Strategy and at NMCI we are involved in a major European project, VIGIMARE. That project is really looking at how we can strengthen Europe's critical undersea infrastructure. That research project takes real-world scenarios, takes the data from those and sets up different scenarios to really test how we are positioned to make sure we can maintain a really strong position with virtual control rooms, etc. The outcomes from that project will support the new focus of the European Maritime Safety Agency, MSA, on making sure we protect our data and our energy.

Professor O'Halloran was talking about the UK-Ireland Summit with Prime Minister Starmer and the Taoiseach. There was a joint statement and in it they spoke of the theme of shared prosperity, shared seas and shared ties. I think the point on the shared seas is clearly a really vital asset in terms of our security but also our path to a decarbonised future. There are really important research areas there and huge opportunities for collaboration between Ireland and the UK to make sure we stay ahead of research in those fundamentally important areas.

Rachel Power:

Thanks, Professor Cusack. I want to make sure there is time for questions from the floor so I will just ask one last question of you both. At this Assembly last year – the 67th plenary session – there was an address by the Minister, James Lawless, who is the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. During that session there were a lot of questions about

the differences between the CAO and systems like UCAS and also Erasmus+ and Horizon funding, as well as the differences and also maybe some challenges and opportunities in those areas. I wanted to ask you both, starting with you, Professor Cusack, what your experience of transnational co-operation has been at undergraduate level right up to postgraduate and research level. I mean from the initial stages of trying to access university and then right up to PhDs and research. How do you think that collaboration could be improved?

4.45 pm

Professor Maggie Cusack:

The endeavours of a university are really broad-based so we can think about undergraduate degrees, postgraduate ones, PhDs and research beyond. Professor O'Halloran mentioned the MOU signed between UKRI and Research Ireland. I was really heartened to see that being signed because with the UK now being an associate member of Horizon there is huge potential there for research collaboration and academics and researchers are great at collaborating. If schemes are in place to support it we will find a way to ensure the correct complementarity comes together, so I am really heartened at that.

I think with Research Ireland having just launched its new strategy which really speaks to the whole ecosystem of research, from very applied research all the way over to blue skies, that sits really well and gives me huge hope. Likewise with postgraduate research and PhDs the barriers are probably lower and it probably becomes more challenging, perhaps when you come down to undergraduates, just because we have different systems. Scotland has a different system to England - as education is devolved - as well as to Ireland. We can think of how it seems from a candidate's perspective. I have just completed my education at school and I have put my offers in. What is the timing for different offers and results becoming available? Any way we can look at it from the potential student's perspective to see how we can remove hurdles would be really helpful for that exchange and free flow of movement.

Professor John O'Halloran:

Maggie has covered a lot there. Just to give an idea of the scale of UCC, our turnover is about €600 million a year. That is what we spend. Of that, €140 million is competitively-won research grants. It is a very significant sum and of that a significant proportion is Horizon grants and we have a significant number of Horizon partners in the United Kingdom, as you might hope and expect. Obviously, that waned a little post Brexit but now of course it is getting better again. Just to build on what Maggie said, the other element is that both we and MTU are involved in European university programmes. This is an initiative developed by President Macron of France. In it there are groups of universities

and up to ten universities in ten different states are connected with each other. We happen to be part of one called UNIC, which is led by a university in Rotterdam, made up of second cities and port cities. By connecting in those networks we can also connect UK partners in, so we have our own networks within the European community but then we can connect UK partners into that.

On the A-levels, in my previous role as registrar of UCC we worked very hard to make sure the A-level equivalencies are available to people who want to apply for positions in our universities. It always surprises me how few come, if I am honest. For those of you who are not in this part of the world, the annual fee a student pays in Ireland for university is just over €3,000 per annum. If you measure that against the £9,300 or £9,400 in the United Kingdom you might have expected there would be a flood of people coming to Ireland because with the single market you are still allowed have the same registration, but it never happened. That kind of surprised me and maybe there is something culturally in there which we do not fully understand. You might expect, because it was cheaper and easier to do, that you might be able to do it but that did not actually happen, so what we are trying to do is unblock any of the barriers. The barriers might have been A-level equivalencies and other things and we have worked on that to try to enable those opportunities. Coming back to the central point I made, it is about learners and how we create the best pathways for those learners who ultimately become researchers, faculty, teachers and citizens.

Rachel Power:

Did you want to come back in there, Professor Cusack?

Professor Maggie Cusack:

I was just noting those fees were for English students.

Professor John O'Halloran:

The Scottish ones are different, yes.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

All right. I have got one question up to now, from Conor Sheehan TD.

Conor Sheehan TD

Thank you very much, Co-Chairperson. I just wanted to ask something following the signing of the MOU a couple of weeks ago. I really welcomed that as it is really good news. For us as an Assembly, what barriers remain? Are they to do with intellectual property and the framework around that? Are all the funding cycles now synced? How do we work to put political pressure on to ease the remaining difficulties there in terms of the UK post Brexit aligning with us and

our research frameworks, and vice versa? I would welcome the panel's comments on that.

Rachel Power:

Professor O'Halloran?

Professor John O'Halloran:

Thank you very much, it is a really good question. There are some barriers though not too many. Research is about people, talent and money at the simplest level, with the talent being ideas. All you want to do is get some smart people in the room, wherever they are from, to work together. It is about anything that can enable movement of people. The Government recently announced a programme for global talent, for example – bringing people into Ireland to support other researchers who are here.

Some of the biggest barriers today include the proportion of overhead that comes to a university. To explain what that means, if you are running a business today and you want a piece of work done, you typically have an overhead of somewhere between 60% to 100%. It is in order to pay for your lights, your bills, your buildings and all that. At UCC our overhead we can glean from research agencies varies from 19% to 40% so the average is close to about 23%. What that means is we do not cover the full cost of research through any grant, actually. The EU is a bit better. The EU is 40%. One of the first steps would be to ensure the research overhead enables full costing of research to be undertaken. On IP we have made good progress, though I think there is still more work to be done.

The issue of visas is really important. There is a lot of stickiness in visas at the moment everywhere. To give you an idea of the 5,000 international students we have, India, China and the US are the top three countries. Their worth to the Irish economy through our institution and Trinity, UCD and the University of Limerick is close to €800 million a year. We found the resourcing of some of the people processing the visas – some of them are being sent out for processing by other agents and some are done by the embassies themselves and that is causing huge stickiness. I know it is awful when I use these words but if you are in the marketplace of recruiting international students, if X can offer a place in ten minutes or 24 hours to you with a visa it is very simple, actually. That is the first point. The second point on visas is the Irish Government is really good in that after you have graduated you can stay on for two years if you have come from any area. It is what is called a stay back visa for two years to work in a company. However, if you are interested in innovation you cannot. Why? It is because innovators work for themselves and do not have an employer. We are probably talking about 50 to 100 people here. You have seen the Collison

brothers talking about Ireland trying to build up an innovation economy. We can only do that if we remove some of the stickiness. There are lots of good things happening and I would not like to say there are not but there is some stickiness still in the system.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

Ruth Jones MP, please.

Ruth Jones MP:

In the UK we know universities are shrinking at the moment and we are losing jobs in quite significant numbers, as you have highlighted, because of the visa situation and the change in the rules and regulations. You talk about the stickiness and we are having knock-on effects within our semiconductor industry. We have got a cluster in my patch and certainly it is very much about how we retain that because once we have lost the innovative voices and they have gone away we are not getting them back. I wondered if you had any ideas on that.

Professor John O'Halloran:

I think the key here is to make it easy for people. People are trying to move from one country to another. Most people in this room, I am sure, have moved places but if you are at an advanced stage of your career you may have a family and other people around you. What we have been seeking support for is incoming sabbaticals so we can get people to come in – it could be into the UK - and get a feel for it but they are being paid by their own institutions. Build up relationships and everything else will happen after that. We have just got to make it so there is less friction. That is probably the easiest way to describe it. I hope that helps answer it anyway.

Rachel Power:

Professor Cusack?

Professor Maggie Cusack:

Just to answer that specific question from Ruth Jones, something came into my mind there with one of the European schemes, the Marie Skłodowska-Curie scheme. I was involved with that when I was at the University of Glasgow and then the University of Stirling. It was attracting really competitive high-calibre researchers in to work with you and then they were supported when they went back to their home country. There was funding there to allow that research to continue, so there are different ways you can build in that stickiness. You have to remove the friction; it is simple.

John and I were speaking at a Skill Ireland event just a few weeks ago and on the innovation piece, there is so much innovation, entrepreneurship and fantastic ideas and if we are really talking about growing new companies and being strong by growing indigenous companies then that piece on innovation seems like an obvious starting point for where you would remove that barrier and allow people to stay here and become established and make best use of the really good schemes that are already in place like Enterprise Ireland's New Frontiers and things. If you exclude one group of innovators there that is an obvious loss, so a multi-pronged approach would be needed.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

Erin McGreehan TD.

Erin McGreehan TD:

Thank you very much. You are all very welcome. I am the chair of the Oireachtas further and higher education committee so this is a hugely important issue for me. We all know universities are absolutely central to our regional economic growth and development. Similar to John and Maggie, I am the first generation to have gone to university, got the degree and been able to move on with a career and a profession, as opposed to the rest of family. I am really lucky that I was able to get a hold of that so like you I am passionate about education and opening it up to as many people as possible.

It is so important our two islands work together. We have so much in common in so many ways. If we work together it will allow the two islands to compete successfully. Our talent pool is quite large. If we combine our capabilities and talents we can be very strong together.

I have a few questions, if you will forgive me Co-Chairperson. I am from Dundalk and the partnership between DKIT and Queen's University Belfast is a huge win for our entire region. However, John mentioned the lack of students coming over from the UK or down from the North. The legislation we hope to bring through the Oireachtas in the coming months will be breaking down those jurisdictional differences between UCAS and the CAO and look at how we can make sure we are looking at this more objectively. From an all-island point of view it is quite historic as it is the first legislation that will physically break down those jurisdictional barriers. How do you see that as an ancillary benefits to your universities? Cork and Dundalk are not in competition with each other and we have an awful lot to offer.

My second question is how does our traditional university sector move with an increasingly changing environment? How are we creating the workers for the future? I hear talk about our arts courses changing or even being depleted

because they are not being utilised or they need to be amended. How do we make sure the universities are dynamic enough to change fast enough to keep up with a changing society?

My last question is what single policy reform you think would strengthen the collaboration between our higher education systems east and west and north and south.

Professor John O'Halloran:

Do you want to kick off, Maggie?

Professor Maggie Cusack:

Thank you, Erin, for those. I will take them in the order you presented them. DKIT is an institute of technology, for those who are unaware. It became a university campus or university college of Queen's and it is momentous as far as I am concerned. I thought there is a moment in history and lots of things have to shift there. I really welcome that because I am of the view we should be entirely comfortable that they are all different universities and institutes of learning and we should all be comfortable that we are all providing different things in the whole ecosystem. Anything that can be done to smooth the way for movement around the psychology of that is really important. When people see positive movements there I think that builds momentum across the entire island and helps with collaborations with the UK as well, so breaking down the jurisdictions is something I would really welcome.

5.00 pm

On universities evolving, universities always evolve. Universities stand for hundreds of years and people come and go and companies come and go and universities continue, so I think we are really good at evolving. Think about what happened during Covid and how everyone had to absolutely pivot and do all our teaching and research in a different way, but we continued on. Every now and again we will have a shock or a really severe shock which means we now have to sit up, pay attention and do things in a different way and that evolution moves from a slow rate to something that is extremely rapid. I am confident universities will be fine there. We are mindful of the rate of change and as we all know the rate of technological change is something we have never witnessed before.

Certainly I can speak for MTU. We work really closely with employers and that involvement is throughout everything we do. We have the first idea of a new degree and the employers are there and we make sure we have advisory groups all the way through as we progress through. Our students are out then on work placement and there is a really healthy relationship where companies would be coming to us and telling us we need to be going in this direction, that

this is where they are going in a few years and asking how are we going to make sure we are providing the skills they need. I am confident about that skills pipeline and universities are used to being agile and we will continue in that.

As for policy reform, we can all be really proud of the fact that in Ireland we have the highest proportion of university graduates. That is fantastic and something to be proud of but we should challenge ourselves to ask why we do not work towards having the world's best universities. It is not just good enough to be at university, let us make sure we fund them properly because that is when you have the absolute cutting edge of research and that is where we continue to innovate and that all feeds back in so we can make sure the students going through the door into first year are having research-informed education that is absolutely cutting-edge. I think our daughters and sons deserve nothing less, so anything you can do to help there would be greatly appreciated.

Professor John O'Halloran:

Go raibh maith agat, a Erin, as na ceisteanna sin.

(Translation) Thank you, Erin, for those questions.

I will take them in the same order. Any opportunity that increases access to students, whatever that looks like, whatever structural reform enables that, I fully support. The same as Maggie, I think everybody in this room should be proud of the extent of participation. It is the highest in the OECD with graduates - Ireland is the highest. In my institution 24% of our students come from non-traditional backgrounds. That means non-CAO people. These are people from disadvantaged backgrounds, mature students and a whole range of other circumstances. The other important thing is it is not just about letting them in. Some 95% of them progress, so we are giving the opportunity for someone to really change their life, as I experienced myself. As Maggie says, it is about anything that will help the system and diversity is good in the system. Last Friday I hosted a group from Arizona State University who want to come and set up a research campus in Ireland. Why? It is because the talent is here. That is why they are coming. That is why Queen's University Belfast is coming down to Dundalk. It wants talent. It wants talented staff and talented students and equal and opposite, the talent flows both ways.

On the environment and the universities, I will talk about arts courses because I think it is really important and I am a great personal believer in data. We have four colleges in our university, namely, the college of business and law, the college of science, engineering and food science, the college of medicine and health and the college of arts, Celtic studies and social sciences. The employment rate of our graduates overall is 95%. There is no difference in the

employment rate of an arts graduate and a business graduate and in fact it is slightly higher in the case of an arts graduate. We have that data, so let us deal with facts. There has been some media coverage about restructuring of some of the arts programmes, particularly regarding my colleagues in the University of Galway. That is the normal evolution that happens in a programme. You want to make sure the programmes are fit for purpose. We are also looking at our arts programme. The very first act I took as president was to appoint 12 faculty to the arts college because I fundamentally believe that as humans we cannot function without understanding the humanities and arts.

In relation to the future, I am not sure about the fast piece. There is a great phrase, which is “If you want to go fast, go alone, if you want to go far, go together”. UCC has been around 180 years. This State is around 100 years. I know the UK has been around much longer than that but fast does not necessarily mean good so I think we have to be reflective and considered. There is a big agenda item I am facing and challenging myself and my team with at the moment. If you have not read this book you might get it for yourself or a friend; it is called *The 100-Year Life*. I have challenged everyone on my leadership team to read it. It was written by a wonderful woman who works in Imperial College London. She is a psychologist and has been a speaker at Davos. It is called *The 100-Year Life* because if you are lucky enough, like I am, to have children over 50% or 60% of them are going to live to 100 years old. How are you going to work for 50 or 60 years? How are you going to pay your pension? How are you going to upskill, reskill and reimagine your career? As institutions we are constantly navigating that changing dynamic because we have to. As Maggie has said – I think you get a sense of our friendship but also the real connection between our institutions because that is what it is about, actually. It is about trying to create a dynamic system where a students are at the centre. Fast is important in that we should be agile, but not to the detriment of other things.

On policy reform, this is my last plea. It might surprise my colleagues from the other island, the rest of the islands, the North, Wales, Scotland and England that our Government, quite rightly, gives people pay awards but I do not get the money for those pay awards. By law I am obliged to pay an increase in people’s salaries but I do not get the pay award. Then I would be in front of another Oireachtas committee asking my why I have not balanced my budget, so there is a bit of a problem with funding the future. We talk about funding the future but we have not done it. Yes, there has been significant progress, yes, there has been movement on the €307 million, which you will be familiar with, Erin, and funding the future has come some distance but we have got to go the full distance and the pay awards are the single factor. I met my leadership team last week and I am trying to balance my budget by next September and I do not

know how I am going to do it, but I will do it because I have to do it but I do not think that is a good way to operate because it is incredibly successful and we are changing lives every single day.

For those of you may be a bit like me and did not come from a background that was privileged I will tell one last story which has been life-changing for me. Erin, you have walked on our campus. It has a beautiful old quadrangle and one morning at 9.30 am I walked out and met a person who brushed against me and rather awkwardly said to me "It is unusual to see somebody wearing a tie around here". I am sure you have all had some experience in public of people rubbing up against you and I had no idea what was coming next. We have big walls around our campus. The person asked me "Where can I learn to read?". This person came into a research-intensive institution of 26,000 students and 3,500 staff and walked through the forbidding gates and walls and asked "Where can I learn to read?". How courageous of them. Fantastic. Equally though, it says something about my colleagues and the institution that the person had the confidence to come in through those forbidding walls and know somebody was going to listen to them. We brought them off and supported them. I want everybody in the room who is involved in supporting any aspect of education to take pride in that because you have created that atmosphere. Much as I would criticise all the funding bits, what is happening is amazing, what you are doing is amazing and please continue to support it.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

Lord Murphy, please.

The Lord Murphy:

Thank you very much, Co-Chairperson. About 60 years ago when I was applying to go to university I was able, through UCCA in Wales, to apply to Queen's University Belfast and to Trinity College Dublin. I went to neither but I could have done. Some 60 years later I could apply, if I was that young, to go to Queen's University Belfast but could I apply to go to any Irish university? It might be more difficult because I would be living in Britain but if I am living on the island of Ireland I should be able to go to any university on the island north or south. I put that in the context that, 30 years ago when I was dealing with the Good Friday Agreement, strand 2 of that agreement was talking about North-South co-operation and 30 years on we have done very little to encourage people to become undergraduates either side of that border. I think that is frankly shocking because with all the talk we have -and rightly so - of international students and all the rest of it, the island of Ireland is still divided, effectively, as far as undergraduates are concerned when applying from one side of the border or another. Or am I wrong?

Professor John O'Halloran:

First of all, you are never too old to go to university, so do not ever give up on that. That is the first thing. We always welcome everybody. I would not say you are wrong but I think there is a culture. I have the data in front of me and for 2024 there were 105 candidates with 19 accepted across 13 different programmes, including medicine and dentistry.

The Lord Murphy:

How many?

Professor John O'Halloran:

Very few. There were 105.

The Lord Murphy:

That is nothing.

Professor John O'Halloran:

It is nothing, I agree with you, but that is why I raised the question at the beginning. I do not understand why when the fees are so much lower, so I think there is something deep culturally here that perhaps we do not fully understand but our doors are open – I am sure Professor Cusack would say no different – to any learner because that is our responsibility and it is our desire to get talent from wherever it comes from. I think we need to work through what that looks like and try to understand it more deeply but structurally there is no reason you or anybody else could not come from any part of this island to any of our institutions.

The Lord Murphy:

But it does not happen.

Professor John O'Halloran:

It does not happen but it is a good question and I do not know the answer.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

Damien Egan MP, please.

Damien Egan MP:

Thank you. I was trying to get my sister to do a degree in Ireland to save her money but there was the draw of London and lots of different reasons. Building on Erin's points about looking into the future, if you were to be pushed a little bit

and had your crystal balls out what subjects and fields do you think might be developing for the new economy?

If I may, and I think this is one more for you, John, there is a problem in the UK on some campuses with antisemitism. I have seen reports around UCC and I am wondering if you could reflect on if there have been any challenges around antisemitism on campuses.

Professor John O'Halloran:

Okay, so the first question was on-----

Professor Maggie Cusack:

It was about evolving areas.

Damien Egan MP:

It was the future of work and then if you did have to get your crystal ball, where do you think things are heading to.

Professor John O'Halloran:

First of all, we need fundamental knowledge but we have to develop the other skills that are necessary – those transversal skills like critical thinking, understanding what truth is, what fact is and what fiction is. We have got to give a bunch of skills, which are what I called life-wide skills. We talk about lifelong learning but I talk about life-wide learning and wide means those dimensions that give people the capacity to be good communicators, to be critical in their thinking but also looking and seeking knowledge. I think the knowledge piece will remain regardless, but how that is delivered and developed will be really interesting and different. Where I am sitting at the moment I would say that in medicine, for example, we are going to see a greater amount of AI. We are going to see engineering. I was just in Arizona State University and another university in Chicago is now teaching engineering and medicine together because a lot of our bodies are biomechanics, so how do we make sure all those things function? What I am pointing to is greater interdisciplinarity but you cannot have interdisciplinarity without having good disciplines. You have to have solid disciplines and then you get interdisciplinarity and people working together. AI will be important but I think there is a bit of overhyping of AI, if I am honest. Young people, and not-so-young people like me, use AI as a tool but we need to be able to critically analyse those. There is a bit of hype over accountancy and people saying accounting jobs do not exist but I do not accept that. We will always need people to make financial decisions and in fact financial literacy is probably in decline so maybe we need to work on that.

Going back to *The 100-Year Life*, we have to co-construct with our learners. What we do – and I am sure we are no different to lots of institutions in this – is every programme has an advisory board from the industry and society, whatever that society might be and it might be a social work society or it might be others, to help us construct a curriculum that is meaningful for the life ahead. However, we have got to avoid fads. The fad risk is that you go up and down and you bounce around, but we will not do that. I do not know if that is answering you. It is quite complicated but I would say there will be some really new and exciting opportunities. I am a professor of zoology and ecology. When I started university in 1979 zoology was one discipline and now we have a whole range of subdivisions of biology which were unimaginable at that time so we should never close off the opportunity.

The final piece is maybe connecting a little more with business - medicine and dentistry are practices but they are also businesses – and a whole range of other questions. I hope that answers that question.

5.15 pm

On the second question, I should never say never but I have never encountered antisemitism on my campus. I have encountered racism and we have zero tolerance for it. I just launched a new policy on racism and reduction of racism. We had a serious incident at the beginning of term last year and I personally phoned the person. I got a bit of criticism from my colleagues for doing it but I wanted to assure the person who was subject to the racist attack that it would be dealt with at the highest level, and it was. We have to be consistently vigilant, but on antisemitism, no.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

I have got three last speakers so I am going to-----

Professor John O'Halloran:

I think Maggie wants to come in there.

Professor Maggie Cusack:

Can I just make a-----

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

Can I remind you that time is getting on?

Professor Maggie Cusack:

Okay, we will go on to the other questions then. Keep going, it is okay.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

Are you sure?

Professor Maggie Cusack:

I will get the other ones.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

I have got three speakers. They are Steve Aiken MLA, Sinéad McLaughlin MLA and Ruairí Ó Murchú TD. Please ask very brief questions because we have to get the people away from here shortly.

Steve Aiken MLA:

I will indeed. First of all a declaration of interest that I really enjoyed my visit down to Cobh and I would be delighted to go again at any time.

Professor Maggie Cusack:

You are very welcome.

Steve Aiken MLA:

My second declaration of interest is I used to be the chief executive at Dublin City University and the question is to do with A-levels and AS-levels. You may not be aware that in Northern Ireland we are about to get rid of AS-levels. One of the issues is some of the grades that are required to go to universities in the Republic of Ireland are at such a high level to meet the necessary scores that some of the students could be going to Cambridge, St. Andrew's, Imperial or some other place called Oxford, though I do not really know where that is. How can that possibly be realistic? That is for all members from all communities in Northern Ireland. They just do not want to go to Irish universities because of the grades issue.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

Can I take Sinéad McLaughlin please?

Sinéad McLaughlin MLA:

I will follow on from that because there is a mismatch on the grades issue and that prevents a lot of people staying on the island. Collectively this is a problem for us all, North and South. Too many of our young people are leaving this island and going to work and study elsewhere and they do not return. That is a real problem if we want to grow our economy and move forward because these are our future workers and our future professors in our universities. It is an issue we should be tackling together to keep as many of our talented young people

on this island. There is a problem particularly in the North because we have made a political decision to cap our student numbers and therefore more of our young people are leaving and more of our talent is leaving. Instead of going to Professor O'Halloran's university they are going to Liverpool and elsewhere and we do not get them back and that is a real burden on our economy.

I represent the city of Derry and our key priority in Derry is to grow our university. We have the smallest university provision of any city on these islands. We are the fourth city on this island and we have only 6,500 higher education students because we have been politically starved of students. Professor O'Halloran and Professor Cusack's universities do a wonderful job in academic terms but you are the engines of our economy. You attract foreign investors and you are the innovators and the entrepreneurs. You build them and drive them and if you do not have them you do not have very much to sell anywhere.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

Ruairí Ó Murchú.

Ruairí Ó Murchú TD:

Go raibh maith agat. It has already been said there are issues and obstacles. They may be cultural, we have heard about grades and there are even timing issues but the cost of accommodation is an issue even for people travelling within the state at the point in time. There are a number of cross-border issues, and this goes right into apprenticeships and award recognition that really needs to be dealt with somewhere at a table. It has already been said that the DKIT and Queen's University Belfast partnership is brilliant stuff. My big fear was the regional development centre in Dundalk that does spectacular work, us not being part of a technological university and being left out of it until we got this, which is obviously a better solution. That at least means that piece was sorted.

To follow up, I can understand what was said about the visa issue and the outsourcing. The other fear I have on that is because of the underfunding of the university sector there is at times a run to try to get those from abroad. Obviously we want that but we also need to make sure we deliver enough even from a workforce planning point of view. That is absolutely vital. You mentioned the connection with employers is vital but it is about making sure we have all those pathways. They have improved a lot and the PLC scenario is one I have seen with people close enough to me who would not necessarily have got the leaving certificate results but who were able to get into further education colleges and from there to jump in. It is absolutely brilliant. I would ask the question then about those with disabilities being facilitated.

The last thing, because I know everybody has not heard enough from me today, is something I will just throw out, in fairness - because I am not sure this was meant in relation to the comment about antisemitism - but college campuses will always be places where there will be protests.

Professor John O'Halloran:

Absolutely.

Ruairí Ó Murchú TD:

But I would want to separate antisemitism which is racist and which is wrong versus people having a right to protest against what an Israeli Government is doing at this point in time.

Professor Maggie Cusack:

Could I pick up on the international piece? Then John could take the CAO just because of time.

It is really important to make the point about international students that we are universities as in universal and it is really important all our students have that opportunity to really exchange with students from different parts of the world. That is fundamentally important, as is home students having the opportunity to travel and exchange as well. It is really important to state that and not simply to associate international students with funding. Likewise with research, we are talking about diversity and stability. You bring people with different perspectives and then you start to have better answers to whatever questions you are looking at so it is a really important point when we are talking about the international aspect.

Visas and accommodation are real issues. John and I do well in our roles but we cannot fix all those. We need help so we can do our part and we are not responsible for those but we do everything we possibly can. We could attract larger numbers of international students and researchers if it was easier to secure accommodation and have visas. It is as simple as that. The technological universities president spoke specifically about student accommodation at the joint committee Erin chairs and I said there that it was the biggest challenge our students are facing, and that is a fact. We have got students in long traffic queues commuting for hours. They are doing everything we do not want them to do by way of sustainability, university experience and campus experience because of that one issue, so you are absolutely right to raise that. We would do anything we can to make sure that issue could be moved on.

The other issues all really relate to the CAO. John, do you want to come in?

Professor John O'Halloran:

Yes. I would like to comment on the protest. I am one of three university presidents who had a protest on my campus. For 14 weeks over 100 people were staying overnight. It was fantastically organised. We simply said to them "Stay within the law and within our values and that is fine". What happens is they get infiltrated by people who are not part of the student body and it is the only time in my life I have felt unsafe at work. Two people were arrested carrying knives coming into a building I was in. They were not students. I 100% agree with you that university campuses should be places where everything is pushed back and challenged but what we must not tolerate is people who bring violence to it.

Ruairí Ó Murchú TD:

It is against the law.

Professor John O'Halloran:

Pardon me.

Ruairí Ó Murchú TD:

But they have broken the law.

Professor John O'Halloran:

Yes, so they get hijacked and I think it is really important we do not let that happen.

Thank you for raising the accommodation issue. I can tell you in UCC we charge below the market rate. There is a block of accommodation in the city of Cork that today is only 60% occupied because the price is too high, so there is a problem with the cost of living and with the cost of accommodation and we have to crack that somehow. Putting in more beds where they already exist may not always be the solution. I also think the term student accommodation is used rather loosely. When I look at our student body – and I am sure it is no different for Maggie – it is a mixture of researchers, staff, postgraduates and undergraduates, all of whom have complex needs. We need a fairly mature conversation about accommodation. My understanding is the Minister is launching a new policy this week so let us see. We will do our utmost to support that.

In relation to Coleraine, I call it Coleraine because I was there in my very first student—

Sinéad McLaughlin MLA:

The Magee campus in Derry.

Professor John O'Halloran:

My very first visit to Northern Ireland was in 1983 as a student. I went to Coleraine. What was the campus called then? I should remember. What you have raised is a really important point about the economic impact. We have measured the economic impact of University College Cork. It is €1.3 billion a year or €3.2 billion a day. That is the economic impact. What we have got to try to do is create economic enterprise around Derry and other major cities to enable people to have a decent living. Coming right back to when we were talking about Prime Minister Starmer and the Taoiseach last Friday, Seagate, which you are probably familiar with was there. It employs thousands of people and has some of the most advanced semiconductor technology in the world. That is what we need more of. Tyndall will not be found wanting to collaborate with people in that part of the world to help build capacity. That is how we can do it. Let us not worry about where people are. There are logistical issues then about taxation on two different sides of the border for the employees but we have to work and support those kinds of communities.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

That is it then. Thank you very much, all three of you. You have been really fabulous. *[Applause.]*

Before I adjourn I have some information for you. I thank our guest speakers and Members for their stimulating contributions to this whole plenary session. Members, I conclude our programme of business for today but I want to announce to you there will be a reception in the Kerry suite at 7.30 pm followed by dinner in the Park restaurant at 8 pm. We meet here tomorrow at 9.30 am. Those on the Steering Committee are asked to attend at 9.15 am for a brief meeting.

Before I adjourn our proceedings for the day I have some observations. Colleagues will know there will be elections to the Scottish and Welsh Parliaments in May where several of our colleagues in the Assembly will be candidates. I think they have mostly gone. The great Annabelle Ewing MSP has led the Scottish Parliament delegation to this Assembly with grace and style as Deputy Presiding Officer. She has made a huge contribution to our work and to the standing of the Assembly at Holyrood and has been a valued member of the Steering Committee. Last month she hosted a very productive Steering Committee meeting at Holyrood. Annabelle, we thank you for your contribution to the Assembly and we wish you all the very best for the future. *[Applause.]*

Adjourned at 5.28 pm.

Tuesday 24 March 2026

The Assembly met at 9.34 am.

PROGRESS ON COMMITTEE WORK

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen—I am now Brendan Smith for this bit. I welcome you all as we begin our second day of deliberation, and I look forward to the remainder of the Assembly and to having further interesting engagement.

This morning, we will hear progress reports from representatives of Committees A, B, C and D. That will be followed by a presentation from two young people, Anna McWey and Mateusz Polinski, who were participants in the first ever Ireland-UK Youth Forum, which was held in Dublin in January. The forum highlighted the vital role of young people in shaping the future of co-operation between Ireland and the United Kingdom. Our session today will conclude with an address from Professor Andrew Cottey, the Jean Monnet chair in European political integration at University College Cork. There will then be a debate on a motion on international issues.

As you know, work has been taking place on the redevelopment of the Assembly's website. That work was recently completed, and I am pleased to say that the new website was launched last Friday, 20 March. The launch of our new website represents an important step forward in how we communicate, connect and share knowledge with our stakeholders and across our jurisdictions. I thank everybody who was involved in that. In particular, I thank the Houses of the Oireachtas and the UK Parliament delegation, which co-funded the project. Our developer, 2able, has done a marvellous job in designing and building the site, and Tim West, the former media officer at the UK Parliament, masterminded the Assembly's rebranding from start to finish. Please explore and enjoy the new site and feed back any observations that you have to the clerks.

COMMITTEE A

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

We will now hear an update on the work of Committee A from Steve Aiken MLA.

Steve Aiken MLA:

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Committee A has had a productive set of meetings. As a declaration of interest, I note that I used to sit on Committee B, and the work of Committee A builds on the work that Committee B did last year.

At our meeting in Weybridge in October, the Committee chose the theme of British-Irish co-operation and maritime security. As many of you will know, that is now a particularly apposite topic. The theme builds on the work of the previous Committee B and involved work on defence co-operation, looking in particular at the security of subsea infrastructure such as subsea cables, gas pipelines and other infrastructure that is built for offshore wind energy.

To date, the Committee has had two meetings and one visit. In January, we had a productive meeting at the National Maritime College of Ireland in Cork, at which we met a range of stakeholders from government, academia and industry, including representatives from the Irish Naval Service. After the visit, we went to Dublin, where we had the opportunity to talk to officials from the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport, the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment and the National Cyber Security Centre, as well as with industry players such as EirGrid and Aqua Comms. The themes that we explored included preparations to respond to a crisis incident and the timelines for repairs to be initiated. It was quite a sobering meeting, because we realised that some of the timelines for putting key cables back into play could be up to six months.

So far, we have had a promising start. Even since our last meeting, which was in January, several events have underlined the topicality of the chosen inquiry topic. On 25 February, the Irish Minister for Defence, Helen McEntee, launched Ireland's first ever national maritime security strategy. On 26 February, with Queen's University Belfast and the Council on Geostrategy, I hosted a conference in Belfast between the UK and Ireland on maritime security co-operation. The conference also included members from the Naval Service, the Royal Navy and industry—it was a high-level meeting.

At the Ireland-UK summit in Cork, the Secretary of State for Defence, John Healey, and minister McEntee signed a refreshed memorandum of understanding to enhance bilateral defence co-operation, particularly with regard to the airspace and sea space around the Republic of Ireland and the extended exclusive economic zone.

The momentum of co-operation in this area is welcome, and we believe that our work has already shown the potential for Committee A to make some useful recommendations. We are planning to have further engagements between now and the summer to advance the report. We will take further briefings from the Irish Department of Defence in the context of the recently approved national maritime strategy.

A rapporteur from the Committee—I think that it will be Barry Tumelty—will attend the Valentia Island Subsea Cable Symposium in April. We are scheduling

a visit to Westminster to meet a range of stakeholders from the UK. We are also exploring options for going to NATO to see what is going on, particularly in the Baltic, where a lot of lessons should be identified, particularly for the Committee.

Committee A has a busy programme of work ahead. Our aim is to complete our work and produce our report by the latter part of 2027.

Thank you very much indeed.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

Thank you, Steve. Unfortunately, the Chair, Senator Niall Blaney, sent his apologies, so thank you for doing that for him.

COMMITTEE B

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

We will now hear an update on the work of Committee B from Ruairí Ó M—I am not good at this.

Ruairí Ó Murchú TD:

That is fine. It is pronounced Ó Murchú.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

The Chair, Darren Millar, has sent his apologies.

Ruairí Ó Murchú TD:

Since the first meeting of Committee B—the Committee on Climate, Energy, Science and Technology—at the BIPA plenary in Surrey last October, it has made a start on its inaugural inquiry on the role of nuclear power in future energy security. As people can imagine, the starting point for the topic is quite distinct in each jurisdiction. Nuclear power generation is prohibited under legislation in Ireland, whereas, in Britain, the Government is aiming to increase its nuclear capacity over the next 25 years to help to guarantee its energy security.

The Committee's first evidence session took place in the Oireachtas in Dublin just over a month ago. During the engagement, the Committee met a variety of witnesses, including representatives from EirGrid, which is Ireland's state-owned transmission system operator; representatives from the Irish Academy of Engineering, which is an all-Ireland think tank on matters involving engineering and technology; and representatives from the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment. It would be fair to say that the department said that it would need a mandate even to make any effort to look into the matter, and it

does not believe that it has such a mandate at the moment, due to the legislation in Ireland.

We also met academics Dr Paul Deane and Emeritus Professor Barry McMullin, who are experts in the fields of clean energy futures and engineering and computing respectively, and representatives from 18for0, which is an Irish voluntary advocacy organisation that promotes evidence-based consideration of nuclear energy as part of a net zero electricity system.

The discussion covered several areas relating to Ireland's current energy landscape and how the introduction of nuclear power generation could potentially fit into Ireland's energy landscape, with witnesses expressing various views on its feasibility and effectiveness compared with other forms of energy generation.

There was a fair amount of discussion about general infrastructure relating to renewables, particularly wind power, and the point was made that we are not where we should be in that regard. Even some of the proponents of small nuclear reactors—I think that “small modular reactors” is the term that is used—said that an awful lot of this is at a very early stage and that there is an opportunity to witness such reactors as they are rolled out in other parts of the world before making any determination. In Ireland, there is obviously huge unease that goes back to Chernobyl, Fukushima and the issues that we would have had with Sellafield.

Members of the Committee were particularly struck by the enthusiasm of all witnesses present to participate in an open discussion and exploration of the potential of future nuclear power generation in Ireland. That was even the case among witnesses who expressed greater caution regarding the potential use of nuclear power generation in Ireland. Most of the witnesses were keen to remain throughout the day to observe the evidence that was presented by other groups. Many also expressed the fact that they welcomed open discussion of the topic, given that nuclear energy generation is not a topic that is subject to frequent open and informed discussion in Ireland.

The Committee has discussed a number of potential next steps for its current inquiry. Members have agreed that, in further evidence sessions of the Committee, we would like to learn more about social and public attitudes on nuclear power, to get a further breakdown of the costs involved in establishing nuclear power facilities and to learn more about the improvements in the safety and waste disposal of nuclear power facilities. It would be fair to say that it would be good just to have an assessment of the safety and waste disposal of such facilities.

The Committee's next evidence session will take place in Britain in the early summer, with the location and details of the session still to be decided. We hope to present an interim report at the next plenary on the findings from our inquiry visits so far.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

Thank you, Ruairí.

COMMITTEE C

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

We will now hear updates from the Chair of Committee C, Sinéad Gibney.

Sinéad Gibney TD:

Thank you, Co-Chair. Committee C has met twice since we were last in plenary. That was, first, to agree the scope for our inquiry, which is on artificial intelligence, with a focus on the difference in AI competency between small to medium-sized enterprises and larger firms, and trying to map out the impact of that, and bringing into it the governance, ethics and rights issues that AI raises in society. The second meeting was more recent, just at the beginning of this month.

We have what is, in essence, a watching brief on the Windsor framework, and we met InterTradeIreland earlier this month to hear about the impact of the Windsor framework on cross-border trade. We had a really interesting update from them, and we will continue to connect with them. They are ramping up activities at the moment, with greater awareness campaigns across the island on cross-border trade.

9.45 am

We have had some issues around quorum. We had to shift our first online meeting, because we did not make quorum. We also had a trip planned to Brussels for an evidence session on the inquiry. We had lined up a great agenda in Brussels, but, unfortunately, although we did just make quorum, I did not feel that it was justified to travel with such a small number of people, so we will take that trip later in the year, in October. Meanwhile, we will have a session in London in June—we are just finalising the date for that. We will hear from industry and governance experts on AI in London, and we will essentially retain that agenda in Brussels when we go over there in October.

That is about it. Thank you.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

Thank you, Sinéad.

COMMITTEE D

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

We will now hear updates from the Chair of Committee D, Lord Dubs.

The Lord Dubs:

Thank you, Co-Chair. Committee D is continuing something that we began before the new responsibilities of the Committees were organised. We are doing that in agreement with Committee C, so thank you very much for that.

We are looking at the tension, particularly in tourist areas, between local residents who want housing and the pressure of tourism in terms of Airbnb, second homes and so on. In case you are in any doubt about that, you may have seen in the papers over recent months reports of demonstrations in Barcelona, Mallorca and the Canary Islands, all involving local people protesting that they are not getting a fair share of access to housing because of tourism. So, I think that we have got the right issue.

If I had any doubts about that, that changed when I was at an event where I was sitting opposite an MP who I did not know—I do now—who is from Cornwall. He asked me about BIPA and what we are doing, and I explained. He said that the issue that Committee D is looking at is absolutely the biggest political issue in Cornwall, and it goes across party lines. He is very anxious that we should co-operate with him, which we shall do.

We took evidence in Derry a few weeks ago. We have taken evidence in the past in Wales, and we will now go to Cornwall to have a look at the area, which I think represents the biggest tension between local residents and tourism. We will see what comes out of that. I am grateful to the Committee.

We had only a bit of a quorum once, but, at the last meeting in Derry, we had a very full quorum, so whoever cracked the whip did it very effectively. Thank you.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

Thank you.

VOICES FROM THE IRELAND-UK YOUTH FORUM

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP): We will move on to the voices from the Ireland-UK Youth Forum. We will hear from Anna McWey and Mateusz Polinski, two young participants in the first-ever Ireland-UK Youth Forum, which was held in Dublin in January. The Ireland-UK Youth Forum represents an important milestone in cross-border youth participation, offering young people a platform to voice their views and reach consensus on issues that matter to them. Building on the momentum of January's forum, the presentation today also reflects the forum's core purpose of strengthening connections as well as identifying shared challenges and opportunities shaping the future of young people.

Hello, and welcome.

Mateusz Polinski: Dia daoibh, gach duine—good morning, everyone. Thank you for inviting us here today to talk about the Ireland-UK Youth Forum and the discussions that emerged from it. It is a privilege to be here with you. My name is Mateusz—or Matty, which is easier. I am a member of the National Youth Assembly, and I am also a student of planning and environmental policy at University College Dublin. I ask my colleague Anna to introduce herself.

Anna McWey: Hello, everyone. My name is Anna McWey, and I am from County Laois. I represented Jigsaw on the Irish National Youth Assembly at the Ireland-UK Youth Forum. There were many good outcomes from that session, which we will go through today.

Mateusz Polinski: The inaugural Ireland-UK Youth Forum took place on 21 January 2026 at Iveagh house in Dublin, which is a lovely venue. It brought together 58 young people, aged 16 to 24, from Ireland, England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Participants were drawn from youth organisations and established participation structures, such as the National Youth Assembly, across the United Kingdom and Ireland. The event was jointly led by Ireland's Department of Children, Disability and Equality and the United Kingdom's Department for Culture, Media and Sport, with the programme having been thoughtfully co-designed by a youth advisory group representing each of the five jurisdictions.

The forum provided a structured opportunity for young people to share their experiences, identify shared challenges and develop recommendations for their Governments, which is a very formal way of saying that we had a lot to say and we made sure that it was heard. On the day, we were joined by senior decision makers, including the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Norma Foley, and the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Helen McEntee, as well as the British ambassador to Ireland, Kara Owen. Having that level of leadership in the

room ensured that young people's voices were heard directly at a senior political and diplomatic level, not filtered by adults' email chains, and that we had real conversations on change for the future.

The Ireland-UK Youth Forum was designed to be a safe and supportive setting where young people feel entirely comfortable expressing their views freely. We ensured that participation was not restricted to a single format or communication style, providing multiple accessible channels for young people to contribute their insights and opinions. The entire methodology for the design and facilitation of the youth forum was co-developed by the youth advisory group, which shaped the structure and approach for the day. Discussion themes were selected by the participants themselves, guaranteeing that all voices were actively welcomed and included. Throughout the day, the young people collaborated in mixed-nation groups, which helped to promote shared learning and a valuable exchange of ideas, thoughts and perspectives. Towards the end of the day, those from each jurisdiction met to focus on issues that were specific to their own nation.

The youth advisory group launched in early 2025, and it brings together two people from each nation. Monthly meetings become a space for lively debate and building the youth forum's agenda—real youth input. On forum day, YAG members led the sessions and set the tone. Their input was felt everywhere, from panel discussions to the opening of the event. Strategic back-up came from a high-level reference group and a working group that handled logistics. The result was a gathering that proved that youth power is real and that the future looks bright in our hands.

Through the facilitated discussions, delegates identified four key issues that affect young people across the five jurisdictions: the cost of living; education; culture, diversity and equality; and mental health and access to healthcare.

I will start with the recommendations that we developed on the cost of living. We recommended that Governments co-create clear, accessible information with young people on cost of living support, ensuring that it is shared in trusted spaces and that it effectively signposts the available services. We recommended that free, nutritious school meals be provided to all children and young people across the UK and Ireland, inclusive of dietary, religious and cultural needs, because young people cannot learn when they are hungry. Practical and trustworthy financial education should be introduced in schools and youth settings, alongside accessible online resources to help young people to understand taxation, banking and responsible investment, so that they can make informed financial decisions.

The forum raised education as a topic of importance. We, as young people, call for the UK and Irish Governments to ensure that there is funding for specialised roles to assess young people with learning difficulties while ensuring that they are sensitively involved in the process. We also call for the introduction of a policy to standardise youth voice and participation cross-nationally and for every young person to have a quality experience of the system, both within and outside education. We want the national curriculum to be co-designed with young people, with a change in the resources for education facilities, and we want to have a voice on issues such as how we are assessed.

We also want our Governments to allocate increased funding to multi-activity clubs, as well as to spaces for programmes in areas such as music and art that are geared towards those in older age groups, who are often overlooked. Those things would decrease loneliness and antisocial behaviour considerably.

Anna McWey: I will discuss the three other themes that were addressed by young people at the forum: culture, diversity and equality. It was clear that every young person in the room believed that inclusion must move beyond words and into action across the whole of the UK and Ireland. Governments must work alongside young people to co-create diverse resources and opportunities that meet the needs of everyone, including families who are living in poverty. We must ensure that the support reflects the reality of the community that it serves, and we believe that young people must be involved genuinely in the decisions that shape their lives.

Too often, engagement stops at consultation. We are calling for the Irish and UK Governments to do more to actively co-create policy with young people and to fully uphold article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Education also plays a powerful role in building understanding, so we are asking for the development of an education framework that teaches young people about the positive contributions made by different cultures, which will help to challenge misinformation. Furthermore, inclusion must extend to communication and accessibility. Introducing compulsory sign language education from the first year of school to the first national examinations would promote inclusion, broaden communication and help to build a more accessible society for everyone.

A fourth key area of discussion was mental health and access to healthcare. As young people, we are asking for prevention, not just crisis response. Mental health education must begin early in schools across the UK and Ireland, as that will help to normalise conversations, reduce stigma and clearly signpost where and how to access support. However, education alone is not enough. Services must also be expanded and updated, so that every young person can access local, timely care, including support for complex and less-understood conditions.

We also discussed the need to properly fund and staff health services and to improve pay and conditions, as well as the provision of targeted support for those who are entering the profession. Finally, we are calling for mandatory mental health first aid training for teachers and youth workers, starting at university level.

At the end of the day, delegates met other young people from within their jurisdictions to reflect on the main concerns that they shared locally. Many themes were raised by all five jurisdictions, such as unequal access to third-level education and the need for better support for neurodivergent learners; provision and funding for special educational needs; the ending of violence against women and girls; the link between poverty and education; affordable housing for young people; youth homelessness; and gender equality and diversity, especially in education. Across all jurisdictions, the cost of transport and access to transport was a huge shared concern.

10.00 am

I would just like to mention the main topic areas raised by each jurisdiction. Young people in Northern Ireland identified a set of strongly connected priorities centred on mental health education, inclusion and public services. The most consistent concern was access to timely, specialist and age-appropriate healthcare, particularly in mental health and neurodevelopmental services.

Irish young people highlighted an interconnected set of concerns focused on education reform, access to housing and transport, youth services, inclusion, and future social cohesion. Affordability and access to opportunities were also discussed. Those young people also felt the need for a college fee cap, more affordable higher and further education, and improved student accommodation.

In Scotland, young people focused on mental health, consistency in education, youth services, participation, and cost of living pressures. Mental health was a clear priority, with strong calls for early intervention; better access to services for young people with complex and additional needs; improved training for those working with young people; and a much stronger, community-based process. Particular emphasis was placed on improving the transition between child and adult services.

Welsh young people prioritised inclusion, mental health, poverty, and access to opportunities. There was a strong and distinctive call for British Sign Language to be taught in schools, with young people viewing that as a practical way of promoting equality, reducing ableism and strengthening inclusion across communities. They also highlighted the importance of protecting the Welsh language and culture through education and Welsh-medium pathways.

In England, young people highlighted concerns about education and skills, access to public services, the cost of living, and the need for better national and local youth policy. A key issue that was raised was the current system of tuition fees and maintenance loans, which young people viewed as being, all too often, unfair and as making them overly dependent on parental income, particularly when families are supporting more than one student.

The outcomes and connections that were created at the event showcased the value of listening to the youth voice. As Trevor Noah has said,

“We tell people to follow their dreams, but you can only dream of what you can imagine and, depending on where you come from, your imagination can be quite limited.”

On behalf of Mateusz, myself and all the delegates, I would like to thank the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly for inviting us to discuss the first Ireland-UK Youth Forum in the hope that our words will be turned into actions. Thank you. [*Applause.*]

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

Thank you very much, Anna and Mateusz.

Anna and Mateusz have asked not to be asked questions, but members are all welcome to make observations about what they have just heard.

The Hon Juan Watterson SHK:

I am Juan Watterson, Speaker of the House of Keys on the Isle of Man. I want to commend you both for a fantastic presentation.

I am not asking for a response to this just now, but perhaps you can tell me later whether you have some form of output from the day that you had. Was there any report or transcript? After all, there were so many issues in there that— [*Interruption.*] Ah, brilliant—I see that you are holding up a report. Would you mind ensuring that the clerks get that, so that it can be circulated, given the number of issues that there are to pick up?

The particular issue that struck me was mental health awareness training for youth workers. In Tynwald—the Parliament of the Isle of Man—I have been making sure that we roll that out to members. It has really transformed how they have done some of their casework, and I would heartily encourage other jurisdictions to provide mental health first aid training to members to help them in that respect.

I will limit my comments to that, but I also noted your remark about being able to dream only what you can imagine. I shall take those words away and hand

them back to the Institute of Chartered Accountants, where I was trained. Thank you.

Ruth Jones MP:

I want to thank Anna and Matty very much for their presentation. I found it really interesting to hear what you had to say to a room of what I am sure from your perspective is—shall we say—mature people. It has been really helpful to get that fresh experience.

I am not going to ask you any questions, but I was interested in Anna McWey's comments about the lack of housing, because I worry that young people—certainly those in the UK—are getting lost in the statistics, because they are sofa surfing. As a result of that, a lot of young people are not actually being included in the statistics. I think that the situation with housing—or the lack of it—for young people is much worse, and I am really glad that you have picked up on that. Thank you very much.

Jim McMahon MP:

Thank you, Matty and Anna. That was an extremely good presentation.

In 2017, I was selected for a private member's bill. I took that back to my town of Oldham, where the youth council chose votes at 16 as the topic of the bill. That led to the establishment of an all-party parliamentary group on votes at 16. We got it into the Labour Party manifesto, and there is now a bill passing through Parliament that will introduce the right for 16 and 17-year-olds to vote in general elections across the United Kingdom and, of course, in devolved elections in Northern Ireland.

Given the insight that you have on politics—every issue that you raised is politics in the end; all roads lead to politics—I wonder whether there is an appetite in Ireland for votes at 16 and 17. The hurdle here is much higher, because any constitutional change in Ireland requires a referendum whereas, in the UK, it does not; we can do it via Parliament.

If we were able to capture the insight and knowledge that you have and to share it with the wider public, a lot more people would be convinced about votes at 16 in the way that I was back in 2017.

Ruairí Ó Murchú TD:

Go raibh maith agaibh. Thanks a million, Mateusz and Anna.

I will not ask a question, but it will sound very much like a question. I am very interested in how the groups were selected because, in an awful lot of cases—I get it—only the willing show up and speak. When forums are put together,

whether locally or on a wider level, you probably have a considerable amount of middle-class people and not a huge amount who come from working-class areas. That can be an issue.

As much as the talk about disability rights, inclusion and the need for mental health services was all positive, I find it hard to believe that you would have a conversation with a group of people and not have immigration come up. Any time that I meet any kids, whether at primary school, secondary school or beyond, it is one of the first issues that come up. I will be honest: it comes up an awful lot but probably in a better way than it did a year or a year and a half ago, but it is an issue.

I would be interested to see the ins and outs of all that was spoken about. However, fair play to you—it is absolutely worth doing. The big thing that Anna spoke about is having real communication and being able to get access to real information.

Tess White MSP:

That was excellent. I realise that you are not answering questions. Two things resonated with me.

The first related to free school meals. BIPA is about connecting the dots. One thing that I have really valued from BIPA is that we learn something when we are here and our shared learning takes us forward. On school meals, you talked about performance. Yesterday, we had an excellent presentation from the universities in relation to food. I am going to make a change, because we talked about saying not “ultra-processed food” but “low-nutrition food”. You talked about mental health. As I mentioned to the universities after their presentation, food is very important for performance, but the question is whether there is a link between food, what students and children take in and mental health. The “Aha!” moment for me yesterday was about the importance of gut health. You are nodding your head. That resonated.

The second thing that resonated with me was the recommendation on sign language. In the Scottish Parliament, I am on the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee. We have just finished an inquiry into British Sign Language. On the point about inclusion, one of the things that we noticed was that millions of pounds are being spent, and rightly so, in Scotland on Gaelic—or, as you say here, Gaeilge—but BSL is the poor relative. One of the reasons for that is that Gaelic provision is driven centrally but BSL provision is up to the different local councils. Your point about mandating schools to have sign language as part of the curriculum is really refreshing. Thank you for that. It might also be useful to look at the BSL report from the Scottish Parliament.

Sinéad Gibney TD:

Thanks so much, co-chair, and thank you to Matty and Anna for a really interesting contribution. I listened to what was said about the Children's Rights Alliance report card this morning, and I have to say that there is a lot of echoing of the messages that you guys are putting out there about curriculum development, but also about housing being the thing that is affecting so many young people in so many difficult ways.

On Jim McMahon's comments, a few months ago, we in the Social Democrats put forward a bill in the Dáil to reduce the voting age. A lot of the parties in the Dáil have campaigned on that, and it is one of the issues that could be pushed further. There are definitely members of the Government parties with a huge interest in the issue. We in the Social Democrats feel very passionately that the voting age should be lowered. You can pay taxes at 16, so you should be able to vote at 16—so keep doing what you are doing. It was great to hear from you this morning. Thank you.

Damien Egan MP:

What shone out to me was what was said about financial education, which often gets missed—particularly, I imagine, in relation to families and children of families with lower-income backgrounds. Educators should address that. We have been talking about that for decades, but it never quite happens. Therefore, financial education and investments are an issue. When you make good decisions early in life, it really helps. Sometimes, when you get older, you realise that you should have been doing something completely different. So, thank you for talking about that; it is very interesting. It is clear that the mental health thread is running through most jurisdictions, so congratulations on your work.

Baroness Healy of Primrose Hill:

Thank you both very much; it was so interesting. I am a member of the House of Lords, and we have just published a report on the need for media literacy, not just for children but for adults. I was very interested to hear that you want a revised curriculum. There is a need to teach media literacy from a really early age, to build resilience from when people are young up to going to university and so on, because young people are under such pressure nowadays. I presume that that came up a lot in your discussions on mental health, financial literacy and accessing services. Good luck with all your work. Thank you.

Connétable David Johnson:

I will pick up on an observation from one of the other speakers. In Jersey, we have a voting age of 16, and, with an election on the horizon, I can tell you that,

on doorsteps, you get a harder time from that age group than from anyone else. We also have the Jersey Youth Assembly, which has certainly gathered momentum during the past four-year period of office. We had the meeting of the public assembly only a matter of weeks ago. States members are invited and a couple of ministers are invited to answer questions. There has been momentum in pushing that forward, and I therefore encourage you to very much do the same and nobble your MPs or whatever, if you can. Thank you.

Rosie Wrighting MP:

Thank you, Matty and Anna—that was fantastic. I was elected at 26, so I definitely know how difficult it can be, as a young person, to talk about politics. I am the youngest woman in the House of Commons, and I speak quite a lot about generational inequalities. This is the first generation whose living standards are lower than those of our parents, so, although youth voices in politics have always been important, they are now critical to highlight what our generation has been through. I am really glad to follow on from Jim McMahon mentioning the voting age. It is really important for you to look at that.

I have jotted down two other things, which are really topical in UK politics at the moment. First, on social media for under-16s, we are the first generation who grew up online, so our voices are really important to shape the debate that is going to happen across the western world. Secondly, there is the issue of student finance, which you picked up on. You guys have a really important role to play, because you could potentially look across the different islands at different student finance models. That would provide a really valuable viewpoint for your work.

In politics, especially when you are young, there is a pressure to feel like you need to be talking about what the older adults are talking about. However, we do not, because we have been through things that are very unique, and if we will not highlight them, no one else will.

10.15 am

David Rees MS:

Thanks, Matty and Anna. I am David Rees from the Welsh Parliament. Wales has voting at 16 for both local council elections and the Welsh Parliament elections in May—so, 16 and 17-year-olds vote in our elections—and we have the Welsh Youth Parliament as well. I am sure that some of the delegates will have met Welsh Youth Parliament delegates. We also have joint meetings where the Welsh Youth Parliament and the Senedd sit together for some sessions, and the topics that you have raised, Anna and Mateusz, are very much what we discuss, too.

You highlighted that you had two ministers and the UK ambassador at your event; it is about getting the actions done for what you discuss, because if we do not do that, you will get fed up and say that you are not being listened to again. My observation is not to you but to my colleagues; this is about ensuring that you are listened to and looking at what actions we can take from the reports and at what can be implemented so that we encourage young people and say to them that they are making a difference—that we are doing something because of what they have said. My colleagues will have a big role in doing that. So, thank you for your work, and keep going.

The Hon Juan Watterson SHK:

For those of you who are looking at voting at 16, the Isle of Man is celebrating 20 years of having voting at 16, so if you are looking for a bit of research and some of the history on that over the past three elections, we can certainly give you some good statistics.

We also have a Youth Select Committee, which is a far smaller body than the one that is being talked about today. It was given the opportunity to come up with a report on a subject of its choice, which—to pick up on the earlier comment—was housing. Housing was the thing that the committee thought was most important to people in that generation. To pick up again on an earlier point about ensuring that that work is meaningful, just last month, I moved the report in Tynwald on behalf of the Youth Select Committee and all its recommendations were adopted, so they are now Tynwald policy. Again, that is an example of where the youth committee can really draw a line from the work that it has done to its being adopted as good policy.

We also have—as they do in Wales, I think—junior Tynwald, where the opportunity is given not only to move motions but to have a question time at the start, where young people get to question ministers in the Government about issues that are affecting them. They get to put their own questions down.

Those are all really useful tools. For those who were at the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association conference in Cardiff last year, we had a great exposition of the Welsh experience on the matter. However, youth Parliaments and youth select committees are all fantastic tools in general. We in the Isle of Man, like in parts of Ireland, have a brain drain: people go away as they want to see the big wide world and then do not always come back, or do so far later in life. This is very much about the mantra, “If you give young people a say, you give them a reason to stay.” We should all take that on board.

Senator Gerard Craughwell:

It was a wonderful presentation. I have just two things to say.

Voting at 16 came before the Senate about four or five years ago, and it struck terror in the hearts of my party colleagues. I emigrated at 15 and worked in a pub in London; we have nothing to fear from young people and everything to gain by bringing you on side—I think that it would revolutionise Irish politics. I am delighted that my colleagues from the other jurisdictions are talking about voting at 16. If it comes back, I will support it, and I am 72, so there you go.

On the issue of school meals, it is interesting that a piece of work on school meals was done by a group at the Stripe Young Scientist & Technology Exhibition in Dublin this year—which I would recommend that everybody visits when it comes in January. The conclusion was that we in Ireland are wasting a fortune on school meals that are not being consumed, particularly in middle-class areas. The kids complained about the size of the portion—we were giving the same portion size to a child in junior infants as we were giving to a child in sixth class. It made absolutely no sense.

I asked my grandchildren whether they eat the school meal; they said, “You must be joking, granddad. I bring my lunch with me.” I think that we would be far better off to analyse the areas that are most in need and to ensure that good, nutritious food is delivered to those areas—maybe let off the middle-class that can well afford it. I am glad that you brought up the issue. The study from the young scientist exhibition, particularly in the area of school meals, is a lesson for all of us.

Thank you very much for your presentation today; I will now go back to my 72-year-old slumber.

The Lord Dubs: Thank you for the interesting presentations. You have given us a lot of food for thought; we must go away and ponder what you have said.

I will make a couple of points. One is about 16-year-olds having the vote. I fully support that, but we must make sure that the turnout does not fall off. The turnout of those aged 18 to 24 in England is a bit lower than it is for other age groups. We have to make sure that the success of letting young people have the vote at 16 is not marred by a lower turnout. We all—you as well as we—have to work hard on doing that.

On refugees and mental health, my experience of talking to young people in schools in England is that they are very positive about refugees—much more positive than the older population is. In fact, when I have talked to schools about refugees and the situation in Calais and so on, sometimes it is all I can do to stop young people going off to volunteer and help in the refugee camps—or what is left of them—in northern France. Young people are giving us a better example of how to deal with the situation of asylum seekers and refugees than the population as a whole is. That is great.

I did some work on the mental health of young refugees. There is a need for support. It is a complicated issue because, certainly in England, there is a patchwork of support: some local authorities are good at providing mental health support for newcomers; others are not as good as that.

One important lesson that I learned is that we must not patronise people. One Syrian refugee said, "I don't want to be a mental health problem, I want to play football and enjoy myself. Stop treating me as a mental health issue." There is a tendency to overdo that. On the other hand, it is important that local authorities, in particular, should be supportive of young people who arrive in their area, for whom they have a responsibility as regards giving them mental health support. It is a real issue. However, I welcome the fact that, generally, young people are very supportive of newcomers into our communities.

Senator Garret Kelleher: I will pick up on two points that have been discussed. The first is voting at 16. We have an old Irish saying, or a seanfhocal, as we call it: mol an óige agus tiocfaidh sí, which means to praise the youth and they will flourish.

The way that things are at the moment with voting for those aged 18 plus, disproportionate emphasis is probably placed on people in the older demographics because, by virtue of the nature of politics, you chase the votes and there tends to be higher turnout in the higher voting age groups. That is why, if that is a road that you are going to go down, Alf Dubs's point is very good. I would be interested to hear the experiences of Jim McMahon and Juan Watterson, because the Isle of Man has had its voting age at 16 for the past 20 years. I will follow up with them on that. If the voting age is lowered to 16, there is automatically more emphasis on young people: they have more skin in the game and politicians have to embark on policies that are popular with and will deliver in a meaningful way for young people.

My second point is in relation to hot school meals. I accept some of what Senator Craughwell said: the system that was introduced in Ireland is imperfect. He is right that there is waste, but I disagree with the point that you need to focus on certain areas. You cannot say that children in school X are all from a certain socioeconomic group, so they do not need hot school meals. We need to work on that. One of my colleagues in Seanad Éireann, Linda Nelson-Murray, has done a survey on it. Co-operation and learning from other jurisdictions about what has gone right and wrong with things such as hot school meals programmes will inform us on how best that can be improved. I would be very interested in reading your report, Mateusz Polinski and Anna McWey, and I thank you for your positive contributions. Go raibh míle maith agaibh.

Deputy Chris Blin: I am based in Guernsey. We also have a voting age of 16 and we have had our elections relatively recently, in June. What we noticed is that 4.34 per cent of the electorate were in the 16-year-old category, which was a first. There was a lot of apathy around this election—I am sure that that is not only the case in the Channel Islands. People are kind of fed up and sick and tired of things, and some were not even willing to vote. However, that figure of 4.34 per cent represented almost an increase.

The other interesting thing was that the campaign mostly took place on media such as TikTok, so there was huge support for female candidates in terms of votes, and a huge increase in the participation of the 16-year-old cohort. There was also huge interest among young people in schools, which was a real change. It has led to a bit of freshness, and I think that there is now a lot more interest among the youth. That reflects what Mateusz and Anna have said, and I think that the statistics that we have seen will be reflected in the coming elections on other islands, such as Jersey.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP): We have time for one more contribution.

The Rt Hon Lord Bruce of Bennachie: We have heard an interesting range of comments and representations. I will just note that the House of Lords has a schools outreach programme called Learn with the Lords, which takes place online and physically in schools. I recommend it to parliamentarians, although I am sure that you all do the same sort of thing. I find that the programme enables really valuable engagement because, although the idea is that you are supposed to go and talk to pupils about the work of Parliament, the questions that you get are about almost everything else. I think that those of us who have taken part have found it really valuable. The simple fact is that we just need to talk to each other and explain our views. We might agree or we might not agree, but at least we will understand where people are coming from.

On a separate point, related to something that Tess White mentioned, I set up the all-party group on deafness in the House of Commons and we campaigned for British Sign Language recognition, subtitles and so on. We have made a lot of progress, but, as Tess said, the spoken languages are given quite a lot of support and have their own channels on television and all kinds of other things, whereas British Sign Language is very much a poor relation—there is no BSL channel, for instance. BSL users are spread out geographically, while Gaelic speakers tend to be concentrated in certain areas, which means that it is much easier for them to get attention.

I mention that to demonstrate that we need to campaign and engage with people, and to stress that, where people are dispersed, their voice is reduced

and, where people are together, their voice is amplified. Obviously, having a forum such as the one that Mateusz and Anna have talked about is one way of amplifying people's voices.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP): Well, I think that we should give Mateusz and Anna another round of applause. [*Applause.*] I thank both of you for joining us today. It must have been quite a terrifying experience to face all these people, but I can assure you that we have all heard your voices. I have made lots of notes, and I am sure that others have, too. You are our future. It would be great to see you in one of our Parliaments at some point, so keep on going, because you are really doing your own training to become representatives of your people. You are doing a great job.

Anna McWey: Just to add, our report follows what was discussed by the National Youth Assembly of Ireland, so it covers anything that was mentioned by any delegate at the forum, including the issues of migration, voting at 16 and the others that you have mentioned. The four recommendations that we discussed are what the young people voted for as their main issues of concern—that is how the process works at the assembly.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP): We will finish there, and I will close by saying that it is good for you to keep on talking to us. We need to speak together more because you are the future and we need you to be equipped with the skills to run countries. I think that you will be great.

We will now adjourn for coffee until 10.45. Mateusz and Anna, you are very welcome to come for coffee and mingle, or not—whatever you want to do. Thank you, everybody. See you no later than 10.45.

The sitting was suspended at 10.29 am.

The sitting was resumed at 11.04 am.

INTERNATIONAL ISSUES

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Order, please. Ciúnas, más é bhur dtoil é. We are now back in session. Given the pace of international developments, this morning's discussion of international issues is timely. I welcome Professor Andrew Cottey, whose remarks will give context to and frame the debate. Professor Cottey is the EU Jean Monnet chair in European political integration at the department of government and politics at University College Cork. I welcome Andrew to make his contribution now.

Professor Andrew Cottey:

Good morning, and thank you for the invitation to contribute to your discussion. As you will know, in the context of the recent Ireland-UK summit in Cork, the two countries signed a memorandum of understanding on defence and security co-operation, updating the previous agreement of 2015. Your meeting thus provides an opportunity both to take stock of the relationship and to consider how it may develop in the future. I will make some remarks on the context of all that and explain why I think defence and security co-operation makes sense for both countries.

Ireland and the United Kingdom, of course, have different national security policies, and Ireland's military neutrality and the UK's membership of NATO are both long-standing policies. Each policy has deeply embedded domestic support and is unlikely to change. Despite the differences in national approaches to security and defence, I would argue that the United Kingdom and Ireland have much in common, including their values and security interests. Both countries are long-standing democracies that have an interest in defending their own democracy against external threats and supporting democracy and human rights internationally. Both countries have an obvious interest in the security and stability of the European continent writ large. Both countries are long-standing members of the United Nations and have an interest in maintaining the basic principles of the UN: in particular, respect for the sovereignty of states and the non-use of force in international relations.

The common values and interests of Ireland and the United Kingdom can be seen very clearly in their response to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine since 2022. Both countries have stood fully with Ukraine, both as a matter of principle and as providers of practical support to Ukraine. While there are sometimes important differences of perspective between Ireland and the

UK, as over Israel's war in Gaza, such differences do not negate the larger point that the two countries share common values and common interests.

Relations between Ireland and the UK should also be considered in the context of wider international developments, two of which are central. First, since 2022—although arguably earlier—Russia's behaviour has become more threatening. That includes not only Russia's war against Ukraine but Russian air and naval activity in various parts of Europe, including the seas and skies surrounding Ireland and the United Kingdom. It also includes dangerous and concerning activities relating to maritime infrastructure, cyber incidents originating from Russia and other elements of what is described as Russia's shadow, or hybrid, war, such as sabotage activities and assassinations.

Secondly, since the first presidency of Donald Trump, and in particular since Mr Trump's return as American President in January 2025, the US has become increasingly unreliable as a partner and an ally for European democracies such as the United Kingdom and Ireland. That includes not only doubts about the US commitment to NATO and to long-standing trade policies but the possibility that the US may itself be a central cause of instability in the international system.

Against the background of those two developments—a more threatening Russia and a less reliable America—there is a strong case that European democracies, such as Ireland and the United Kingdom, need to work together more closely to defend their common values and interests. Such co-operation takes place in the European Union and in NATO, as well as in more ad hoc multilateral frameworks, some of which both Ireland and the UK participate in, such as the Ukraine coalition of the willing. Such co-operation also takes place bilaterally in relationships such as that between Ireland and the UK.

Strategic geography provides a further impetus for Ireland-UK security and defence co-operation. The seas and airspace surrounding Ireland and the UK are large, and much of them are international waters and international airspace. No single state can provide security and defence in this combined sea-air space. That is a challenge that inevitably requires co-operation, which points to UK-Ireland co-operation and co-operation with other states in the wider region, including the Nordic states, the Netherlands and France. In this large sea space and airspace, there is a need for information sharing, communication, operational co-operation between navies and shared emergency planning. All of that should have an Ireland-UK dimension, but it should also include other bilateral relationships and more ad hoc multilateral frameworks. The recently updated Ireland-UK memorandum of understanding on defence and security co-operation, which I referred to at the beginning, points in exactly that direction.

Security and defence co-operation between the United Kingdom and Ireland should also be viewed in the context of the longer-term historical relationship between the two countries. From that perspective, the development of bilateral security and defence co-operation may be viewed as part of a larger process of the normalisation of relations between the two countries. Security and defence co-operation is a normal thing that would be expected between friendly neighbours. The historical normalisation of relations between Ireland and the United Kingdom is obviously a long-term process that has played out since Irish independence in 1921, with many complexities and ups and downs over the past century. I would argue that security and defence co-operation may be viewed both as part of and contributing to the historical normalisation of relations between the two countries.

An additional factor is democratic legitimacy and the importance of transparency. If defence and security policies, including defence and security relations with other states, are to be viable, they need domestic support and legitimacy. That requires open public debate about these issues in Parliaments and parliamentary Committees, as well as in the media and in society more broadly. It also requires transparency from Governments about the policies they are pursuing. From that perspective, it is thus very welcome that the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly is paying attention to security and defence issues across our shared islands and contributing to debates about what the Governments in Dublin and London should be doing in this policy space. Thank you very much for the opportunity to contribute to this meeting, and I look forward to listening to your discussions.

The Co-Chairman (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Andrew.

Andrew is available to take questions from colleagues, but we are running into time constraints, as people have to get to the airport. We have on our agenda a motion that has been approved by the Steering Committee, the text of which is,

“That the Assembly takes note of the international situation.”

The motion was circulated to Members in advance, and no amendments to it were tabled by the deadline of Sunday afternoon. I ask Dame Karen Bradley MP to move the motion. We can take the motion together with the agreement of the plenary, along with questions to Andrew as well. I am conscious of time. If that is agreed, Karen will move the motion.

11.15 am

Dame Karen Bradley MP: I beg to move,

That the Assembly takes note of the international situation.

I apologise that I was not here yesterday morning, because I know that there was a big debate about a lot of international issues, particularly those relating to Ukraine and the middle east. I want to start by saying that they are not the only conflicts. Much of the world is feeling left behind because it feels like those are the only conflicts that the west is talking about. Look at what is happening in Sudan, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda, and at the Venezuela issue—I know that it has had a little bit of focus recently and that there have been some changes, but it is still a big problem in central and South America. The situation in Haiti is a massive issue in the Caribbean; it is affecting so many countries there, and there is a lot of migration and concern. We should all have Cuba on our radar, as I suspect it is next in the line for action from the unreliable President Trump. Let us not forget about the situation in Myanmar. At the Inter-Parliamentary Union, we regularly meet Opposition Members of Parliament from Myanmar who come to talk to us about the situation in their country. At the Council of Europe, there is always an awful lot of discussion about Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as the situation in Georgia. That is just a handful of the many conflicts around the world.

I thank Andrew for his comments. I want to ask him about the threats to democracy. We should all be aware of them and working to counter them, because anti-democratic movements are growing and state actors are involved, particularly on social media, in trying to disrupt democracy. In the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy in the UK Parliament, we have been looking at the role that state actors are playing in trying to disrupt our political systems. So much of what you see on social media is basically saying to people what they wanted to hear but did not feel that anyone was ever going to say. If these actors say something controversial and clickbaity, then people say, “Oh yes—that’s what I think. It’s okay to think it now because it’s on social media.” But these accounts are not real—they are bots from Iran, Russia, China and North Korea.

I want to ask Professor Andrew Cottey whether he has any comments on what we can do actively to help to protect democracy. How can we work together to do that? The threat to democracy and the threat to our values is absolutely critical at the moment, and I fear that it is a losing battle unless we can find some way of dealing with it.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Karen. I call Steve Aiken MLA.

Steve Aiken MLA:

Thank you very much for calling me, and I thank Andrew very much indeed for his presentation. I would like to make a declaration of interest: I am a former naval person, and I am very aware of what is in the water off the east and west coasts of Ireland.

I have two points to make on the presentation. Every time we talk about what we are going to do and how we are going to build up better relationships between countries, anybody sitting outside says that the obvious answer is NATO—the only way Ireland is ever going to get access to all the databases it needs is through NATO, the only way it is ever going to get the training it needs is through NATO, and the only way it is going to get security of its airspace, sea space and the rest of it from multiple actors is through NATO. The issue is that we do not have much of the Royal Navy or Royal Air Force left and trying to depend on something that is not likely to be there is going to be a critical issue. The answer to that, again, is NATO. What must we foster in the debate in the Republic of Ireland for people to start seeing the realism of what is required, and particularly for them to see themselves being integrated in and a part of the wider European Union structure?

My second question is a bit of a teaser. We are in this very bizarre situation where the Irish Government are taking the United Kingdom to court over legacy issues for things that the British Army may or may not have done, while at the same time asking for the Royal Air Force and the Royal Navy to protect their sea space and airspace with an expectation that they will actually turn up. What do you think the degree of that hypocrisy is likely to lead to, particularly among people who will look at it from a realist perspective?

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Steve. I call Senator Gerard Craughwell.

Senator Gerard Craughwell:

Thank you very much, Co-Chairman. I thank the professor for kicking the relationship between Ireland and the UK out into the middle of the floor—that was a most wonderful breath of fresh air. Many of my colleagues from Ireland will talk about the great neutral state of Ireland, and they will in some way tie the triple lock into that nonsense, but they are totally unrelated. We are not neutral; we are militarily unaligned. As Steve Aiken has just pointed out, NATO protects our sky and our sea, yet we talk about neutrality.

The memorandum of understanding that has been signed off needs to be debated in Parliament, and we need to take a more realistic view of our defence. Ireland is a tiny little island sitting on the periphery of Europe. It is the weak link in Europe, and it is time we admitted that to ourselves. Whether we

like it or not, we are freeloading on the generosity of others. Steve Aiken put it very well: the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force are depleted now because of their lack of investment in defence. In Ireland, we are clapping ourselves on the back because we are spending a few pennies more than we did before on defence.

In the world we now live in, particularly where the two islands are concerned, what we need to do is concentrate on the things we can achieve. In the Republic of Ireland, we can up our game in cyber-security. We are never going to have fighter jets, no matter how much we might like them, because it would take about 10 years to get them up and running. In our naval service, we have two ships—in fact, we have one ship, or we might say one and a half ships—that are capable of taking care of the Atlantic and one, which is a rather small device, for the Irish sea.

We should be exploiting drone technology, and I would be interested in Professor Andrew's view on that. There is a company in Shannon manufacturing drones that could have sight of the undersea cables 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and working with the UK, we would be able to intercept any rogues.

I want to put it out there that we are militarily non-aligned and that the triple lock is a nonsense. Would you go to the estate next door and ask the people there whether you can leave your kids out to play? It is a nonsense. It is time we grew up as a mature estate and had a far more open, transparent and paid-for relationship with the UK.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

I call Lord Bew.

The Lord Bew:

Thank you, Co-Chair, and thank you, professor. Professor, you talked about transparency, and I declare an interest: I have been talking about transparency in the UK Parliament on this issue, and it is a double transparency. It is a debate that is not just in front of the Irish people but in front of the British people. How would you assess the level of transparency? Gerard talked about co-operation and mentioned cyber as well as the sea and the skies. What is your assessment, professor, of where we are on cyber matters, but above all how transparent we are being in Dublin and London?

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

I call Lord Bruce.

The Lord Bruce: Thank you very much, and I thank the professor for his very succinct analysis of where we are and where we are heading.

I want to pick up on Karen's point: conflicts are everywhere, and there is a concern that we are focused on our backyard and other people are feeling neglected. I have been involved with Myanmar, which is a really bloody, nasty and vicious war. The situation in Armenia and Azerbaijan is getting better—one is democratic and the other is not, but at least they are moving to peace. There was a piece in *The Times* today suggesting that Donald Trump wants to do a deal with the Castro family, so that his friends can invest in Cuba—and there will be no truck with democracy, thank you very much. That is what he is about: he is about destroying democracy, not sustaining it, and we should be real about that.

On the UK-Ireland relationship, what practical co-operation would be the most valuable? I notice that the defence budget of the Republic of Ireland is 0.6% of GDP, and the UK defence budget is 2.6% of GDP, which we think is way below what it needs to be. On the other hand, the aid budget in the Republic of Ireland is 0.56% of GDP, whereas in the UK our aid budget is about to drop below 0.3% of GDP. It may therefore be that the Irish can shame us into improving our aid support, and we can shame the Irish into improving their defence investment. What is the most practical, useful, mutually beneficial and relevant element of increased expenditure by Ireland?

I take the point that was made about fighter planes. As a footnote to that, I notice that Japan is again expressing concern that the UK has not got the money to fulfil the fighter jet project with Italy, and there is also concern in Australia that we may not have the money to fulfil the submarine contract. We have commitments, and I am not suggesting that those commitments are not real, but without the money behind them, they are not going to happen, so we have all got to step up to the plate.

The final thing I want to say is that we are out of this war and we are not going to be dragged into it, as was said yesterday. Russia has every capacity of looking at Ireland as the weak link and targeting it in various different ways, so at what point will the people of Ireland say, "Actually, we would like that big umbrella, please"? I leave that debate to the people of Ireland, but I think it is a real one.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Lord Bruce. I call Sinéad Gibney.

Sinéad Gibney TD:

Thank you, Co-Chair. The Irish people are very proud of our peacekeeping tradition, and a crucial and integral part of that is the triple lock. As I mentioned yesterday, it was part of the Nice and Lisbon treaty negotiations, but it cemented what had already been a tradition of only ever engaging in peacekeeping with the UN helmets and blue berets. To suggest that the triple lock is a nonsense and that Irish neutrality is not connected to it is really problematic because, without it, we will retreat to regional blocs and end up engaging in peace enforcement, which is not peacekeeping and does not have the consent of all parties.

The European Union was founded as a peace project, and we have lost sight of that. Further to Karen's questions about pushing back on misinformation, what it is best for the European Union to do right now is to continue our investment in social and cohesion funding and not be drawn towards the military spend, which seems to be the direction of travel, because our best fightback against Russian disinformation is a strong democracy. It is a strong social and cohesive European Union, where people feel the value of their membership. The more arms that we build and put into the world, the more people will die. Peace, and peace achieved through peaceful means, must remain our focus. Our neutrality is an absolutely integral part of that.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

I call Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú. Ruairí, más é do thoil é.

Ruairí Ó Murchú TD:

Go raibh maith agat agus go raibh maith agaibh as achan rud atá deanta agaibh tríd an deireadh seachtaine.

I would like to thank Brendan and Gill. This has been an absolutely fabulous event, and I am completely shocked that you have not curtailed my speaking time at this stage, but I do appreciate it.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

We are true democrats.

Ruairí Ó Murchú TD:

Exactly.

I would like to back up what Sinéad said. We must accept where the Irish people stand on this issue: it is about us having an independent foreign policy and military neutrality. We have a long history of peacekeeping. It is about being a fair arbiter. The history of peacebuilding on this island must be sold on a wider

level. We must also accept the dangers that we may fall into. I think Paul Bew said it straight: Donald Trump is not a guy who is generally in favour of democracy, and we have all heard of very suspicious trades being made around some major decisions by the regime. I believe he was led by the nose into following Israel, and to a degree, he has bitten off more than he can chew and is now desperately trying to remove himself from that circumstance. I have no doubt that there are terrible things in the future for the likes of Cuba.

11.30 am

I accept what Steve Aiken says: the Irish state has underinvested in everything related to defence and security. That must be rectified. I do not think there is any circumstance in which Ireland is going to be a military superpower, and we should not aim to be one. Also, the undersea cables are not necessarily our undersea cables; they are global infrastructure. Obviously, they relate to America, and obviously, they relate to Europe more widely, but it is an absolute necessity that we protect them so that we can protect ourselves, particularly from hybrid and cyber-attacks. To say anything else would be madness. However, that does not mean that we have to ensconce ourselves in relation to power blocs. Unfortunately, we are in an age of empires, but hopefully sense will prevail in the near future. I am very interested in how the midterms in America go and whether the President is going to do anything beyond what a sensible ruler might do.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Míle buíochas Ruairí. I call Baroness O'Grady.

The Baroness O'Grady of Upper Holloway:

Thanks, Co-Chair. I thank the professor very much for his introduction to the discussion. I think it goes without saying that there is clear political appetite for closer co-operation, whatever form that takes, between the UK and Ireland and between the UK and the EU. That is the direction of travel in an age of strongman leaders seeking to dominate the world.

I want to make a point about popular appetite and consent for defence strategy and military engagement. It is very clear that the UK Government took the right decision not to get dragged into the offensive against Iran—in fact, you could feel others in the political space making screeching U-turns and re-positionings on the subject when it became clear that the Government's position was very much in tune with popular feeling. Frankly, I suspect that a lot of people put Trump and Putin in the same box nowadays and see them as very unpredictable and unsafe leaders.

It is worth considering popular appetite and consent, particularly given that populations are still facing real cost of living pressures. Frankly, the latest polls I saw suggest that President Trump does not have the support of his own population for the current offensive, let alone anybody else. It also raises questions for the UK: if we are to increase our defence budget, how can we do so in a way that does not impact people's public services and standard of living? There lie the beginnings of an interesting discussion about alternative vehicles for raising those funds. There has been some discussion about bonds and so on. I guess I am a little cautious—we have just heard from the younger generation about where popular appetite is on this agenda.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

I call Lord Dubs.

The Lord Dubs:

Thank you, Co-Chair, and thank you, professor, for setting the scene so well. We would love to debate the details for longer than we have the time to do. I also thank Karen Bradley. I am tempted, but I will resist the temptation, to follow up her comments on some of those country issues, including those relating to Myanmar and Sudan.

I want to make two points only. The first concerns the dangerous situation in the middle east, particularly in Palestine, Iran and Lebanon. It will lead to a movement of refugees towards Europe. If the situation continues, then it will be quite a large movement, and we should all be adjusting ourselves and thinking about how we will handle it. As far as the UK is concerned, we must handle it in co-operation with other European countries; we cannot do this on our own. We should begin to move towards an agreed framework as to how we will handle this movement of refugees, particularly if it proceeds on the scale that is likely.

My second point is about Palestine. The professor suggested that there was a difference of view between the UK and Ireland. I hope that is lessening a bit with the passage of time, but unless we take firm, agreed action to bring all possible pressure to bear on the Israeli Government, then there will never be a Palestinian state. If the development of settlements splits the Palestinian state and makes it impossible to have an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, then the project is doomed. We have to be absolutely resolute in conjunction with other countries. We—Britain and Ireland—have to be absolutely resolute in resisting what the Israeli Government are doing. We must be very firm in stating that a Palestinian state is something we believe in and that we want to do everything possible to ensure that it will be an effective state.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Alf. I call Deputy Seán Crowe.

Seán Crowe TD:

Andrew, we spoke yesterday about the middle east and what I described as the unprovoked war. Negotiations were ongoing, and we were told by the Omani Foreign Minister that there was a lot of movement in relation to the nuclear deal, the same nuclear deal that Trump had torn up, and then they bombed a school and its schoolchildren, and 150 people were killed. That is the backdrop. We do not know whether this conflict is going to continue—every day in Trump's world is different in relation to it.

Who is next for conflict? There was talk of Turkey being next. Turkey is a NATO country, so what happens then? I am no fan of Erdoğan and his regime, particularly given their history of dealing with the Kurdish people and their action on democracy and judges. There are all sorts of justifications—if you aren't really concerned about loss of life and civilians, you could probably bomb anywhere in that general region. Do you think it is likely that the Turkish are next, Andrew? Are we overexaggerating?

As Ruairí said, it is almost accepted now that these undersea cables are going to be targeted and that we have to protect them and so on, but as Ruairí said, those cables are going to the States. If there is an attack by Russia on those cables, how will Trump and America react? Everyone seems to be accepting the idea that it is inevitably going to happen.

I take what people are saying about Irish neutrality: I agree that we should have our own defence forces, navy, radar and so on, and it has not happened so far. Maybe we are the weak outlier in Europe, but we are not a weak outlier in the minds of everyone. We have invaded no one. We have tried to help people. We have a long history of wearing the blue helmets and being helpful around the world, so we have good standing with people internationally.

Someone made the point about the war being unprovoked. Britain decided that it would not get involved in the conflict, but I have an image of aeroplanes being loaded up with huge bombs. Is that not being involved—to allow American aeroplanes to load bombs on board? We cannot really say much either, because Shannon airport is used almost as a rite of passage for soldiers going to various wars around the world. On the one hand, people are saying that they are not going to get involved, yet bombs are being loaded on to aircraft at a UK airbase. They are saying it is for defensive purposes, but I do not really get that. I am sorry—I am all over the place this morning.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

I call David Rees MS.

David Rees MS:

Thank you, Co-Chair. I am not going to speak for long. I just have a quick question. Yesterday and today, we have discussed the issues relating to the conflicts around the world and how the US President has taken us into the very controversial and very scary world we are now living in and what the implications are for the people we represent. One of my fears is that people keep saying, "He's only there for three more years", but what are the long-term implications of his actions, particularly for the American people? How are the American public going to treat their relationships in the future? Are they going to get used to the concept of a strong individual character as US President who will work for them and ignore world peace and world implications? Cuba is an example of what could happen next, but there are other examples. He has threatened Greenland, he has taunted Canada and he has taunted Mexico. What are the American public going to do? If we cannot change the perceptions of the American public, and they end up putting another person of the same ilk back in, what will happen beyond the three more years of Trump's presidency? That is, if Trump does not get a third term, and I hope he does not get back in. There are so many people saying that he is only there for three more years, but what beyond the three years, and what is happening to the perceptions and views of the American public in that time? Perhaps, Andrew, you could give us an idea of the longer-term picture for America's relationships. Nations in Europe may have to start looking at different relationships for security.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, David. Could I ask Andrew to come back to the podium to make a few comments and respond to some of the queries put to him?

Professor Andrew Cottey:

Thank you. As you probably know, academics can sometimes give you long-winded lectures, so I am going to try to do the opposite of that. My apologies—there were a lot of points, and I will not get to them all but just take a few.

On democracy, I would like to highlight two things. First, we must keep using whatever frameworks we have to reinforce the norms of democracy and what they involve. The second thing, which is maybe more concrete, concerns education. If part of the threat to democracy is social media, disinformation, bots and all that kind of stuff, having an educated public that can almost inoculate itself against those threats is really important. Finland is usually cited as a world

leader in that. School-aged children in Finland, even primary-school-aged children, are getting education on that kind of stuff.

In my view, the likelihood of Ireland joining NATO is very low, and there is almost no debate on that here in Ireland. One can have whatever views one has. What I would say is that Ireland does have a partnership with NATO, and it seems to me that there is scope for strengthening that on the issues of airspace, communication, seas and so on. I think that is one way forward.

I was asked about the most valuable things that can be done on defence by Ireland and through the UK-Ireland relationship. I would emphasise the navy. Think about Ireland historically: it is an island, but it is notable that the army has been by far the largest feature of the Irish Defence Forces, and Ireland has sometimes been described as sea blind. I would emphasise developing naval capabilities and technologies such as drones, particularly undersea drones. To bang the drum for my university, University College Cork, as well as the other Irish universities, there are a lot of people doing excellent research on technologies that have relevance for this kind of thing.

11.45 am

The debate on transparency is under-developed—certainly here in the Republic, but maybe also in the UK. I will give one concrete example, although I am sure that most of you, if not all, are familiar with it: there is a secret air defence agreement between the United Kingdom and Ireland dating from the 1950s, and the Governments in both Dublin and London are extremely wary of talking about it or anything relating to it. That maybe relates to when there was some reportage on it and some opinion poll work on it in *The Irish Times* about four or five years ago. That opinion poll work indicated that the Irish public was not unhappy with that agreement, even though it was undeclared. In some ways, the Irish public might perhaps be ahead of the political class on that.

I have one other broader point on popular consent. A few decades back, an academic did an analysis of American public opinion on international issues, including those on security and defence. The title was “The Pretty Prudent Public”, and the basic argument was that if you went into the detail of public opinion, you would find that people are quite pragmatic. I would argue that you would see that maybe on the air defence example that I mentioned. There is a pragmatic centre ground on many of these issues in both Ireland and the United Kingdom. I will stop there, with apologies for not responding to all the issues raised.

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

Thank you very much, Andrew. We appreciate it. Is the motion agreed? Agreed.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Assembly takes note of the international situation.

ADJOURNMENT

The Co-Chairperson (Brendan Smith TD):

We have had a very worthwhile discussion with a broad range of views, and like all our debates over the past few days, I suppose we could have done with more time, but very good contributions were made, and the debate has been worthwhile. Our clerks will arrange for the text of this resolution to be sent to both the British and Irish Governments.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

I hope you have all had a fantastic time. I certainly have had a fantastic time. It is only my second time out, so it has been good to meet people again and get used to everyone's names. I really want to pay tribute to the wonderful Amanda, who has really worked hard to make sure that everything is right, and Aisling, who has been an absolute star. Of course, I must mention Martyn, who has been our very fabulous Clerk for such a long time. I know that we are going to miss him. Tess will also be leaving her post as a parliamentarian tomorrow. Let us not forget Veronica and Mark Sullivan. We have had a great time, and I thank you for coming—see you in Sheffield in October.

I now call Alf Dubs.

The Lord Dubs:

Thank you, Co-Chair—mind you, you have said what I was going to say, by and large.

We have had a great plenary, and I would like to repeat something I said some time ago. No disrespect to the Council of Europe, the OSCE and others, but this is my preferred organisation for international co-operation between the British Parliament and the Irish Parliament. It is better than the other forums for international co-operation. The evidence from our deliberations is clear.

I want to say one other thing. I know, Co-Chair, at dinner last night, you said goodbye to people who are not standing again. I am going to use my words carefully, but there are colleagues who may have different political views from mine who are going to be facing some possibly very tough elections. Party politics apart, I wish them good luck—I hope that will not be misunderstood by my Labour party colleagues—because we do not like losing friends we have worked with, even if the electoral process is going to cause damage to some of

them. I hope to see you again, but good luck if I do not see you again, and safe travel home.

The Co-Chairperson (Gill Furniss MP):

I thank Professor Andrew Cottey for all the work he has done with us today, because he has been very insightful. I am sure we will be asking him questions again, although let us hope that things work out the way we would like them to and we do not have to.

The plenary session now stands adjourned. I invite you all to a buffet lunch in the park restaurant. I wish you all safe and pleasant journeys home. For those of us who are contesting elections in May, I wish you good campaigns, and I hope that whatever the outcome, we will meet again on the other side. Thank you all.

Adjourned at 11.51 am.