

Call to form emergency coalition to counter virus threat

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intensive care unit beds. There are just 250 ICU beds in Irish hospitals with some reports putting the number as low as 237.

Expectations are that up to 50% of all cases could occur within three weeks of the virus spreading widely in the community, as warned by Irish and British chief medical officers this week.

Last night the HSE confirmed that there was one more case confirmed, bringing to 19 the total in the Republic, added to the seven in Northern Ireland.

The new infection was associated with travel from northern Italy, and the HSE is 'working rapidly' to identify any contacts he may have had to prevent further spread of the virus.

Another prominent Fianna Fáil TD, Niall Collins, backed Mr Lahart's call for a 'radical government'.

Mr Collins says that Fianna Fáil and other parties need to become 'radical or redundant' and he fears that a Fianna Fáil/Fine Gael/Green super

part at least, demands some kind of 'change' or 'difference'.

Mr Lahart was reported as being one of those who was critical of Mr Martin's negotiating tactics at a Fianna Fáil parliamentary party meeting during the week.

It is believed Mr Lahart advocated that Mr Martin consider talking to Sinn Féin. He did not demand that he go into government with Sinn Féin.

Mr Lahart is one of those Fianna Fáil TDs who believes that Fianna Fáil must not enter a government that continues the mistakes made by the previous administration in housing and health.

Therefore, he says, talks must not be rushed, but also that coronavirus demands a strong administration.

Mr Lahart continued: 'If we assume the Chinese authorities were not initially forthcoming as to its significance - and given the news this week that there are signs that it may have peaked in China and is beginning to taper off, then a six-month period of intensive response may be reasonably envisaged.

'Parties need time to negotiate and ultimately arrive at a workable, radical programme for government that can command the support of all their support bases and ultimately command Dáil support. That will take time and should be given time.'

Fianna Fáil TDs are increasingly concerned that a protracted negotiation period that ultimately leads them into coalition with Fine Gael will further damage the party.

Mr Lahart, who is likely to be in any Fianna Fáil Cabinet, is one of many who believes coronavirus requires a new government immediately.

'The developing need for a co-ordinated response to Covid-19 is becoming more apparent. There is no government department, by my reasoning, that doesn't have a role or function in relation to coronavirus. Brexit negotiations too and trade deals at EU level are reaching a vital juncture.'

'Therefore a temporary national government, under the D'Hondt method, representing each grouping in the Dáil, could be considered in the interim for a limited, finite, determined period. I foresee until September,' he said.

'That government's primary mandate is to deal with the measures required to contain, mitigate and ultimately handle a potentially full-blown coronavirus situation and handle vital issues of a national interest.'

Mr Lahart said: 'This would both ensure that political leadership, as well as public health expertise, was guaranteed to the public on foot of a mandate determined by proportionate Dáil num-

'Inaction will wipe out the centre in Irish politics'

coalition would lapse into 'torpor and inaction' that will 'ultimately wipe out the centre in Irish politics'.

Speaking exclusively to the Irish Mail on Sunday, Mr Lahart said that a 'national government could be formed under the national government D'Hondt method, specifically to deal with coronavirus.'

This would allocate seats at Cabinet and in other government positions in proportion to the number of seats each party has gained in the Dáil.'

Since Seán Ó Fearghail was elected Ceann Comhairle, Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin have the same number of seats - 37 each. Sinn Féin won the popular vote. Fine Gael has 35.

In a statement to the MoS last night, Mr Lahart, who is Fianna Fáil's front bench spokesman for Dublin, said: 'The current government does not have an authoritative mandate and is operating in a caretaking capacity - it doesn't have real, moral or political authority and it clearly does not have the confidence of a majority in Dáil Éireann.'

'Progress on inter-party talks is still at exploratory rather than negotiating phase and will remain necessarily tediously slow given the complexity of the result delivered by the electorate - the most complex since the foundation of the State - and one that, in

ITALIAN LINE-OUT!

THESE Italian rugby fans in Dublin yesterday said they were very disappointed the Ireland-Italy Six Nations rugby game scheduled for this weekend had been called off. The tourists flew in from Veneto which neighbours the northern province of Lombardy - the Department of Foreign Affairs has advised against travel to both regions. And the Italian government yesterday unveiled measures to quarantine the entire Lombardy region.

Meanwhile, cervical cancer campaigner Vicky Phelan - who has been advised to avoid large gatherings of people - yesterday supported calls by medics Prof John Crown and Sam McConkey for the St Patrick's Day parade to be postponed.

By Niamh Griffin

A LEADING virologist has said at least 6,000 people could fall severely or critically ill with Covid-19 here, but there are just 250 intensive care beds to treat them.

Added to this is the fear that up to half of all cases could occur within three weeks of the virus spreading widely in the community, as warned by both Irish and English medical experts this week.

Critically ill patients must be isolated and will desperately need artificial respiration machines. Up to 6% of Covid-19 patients meet these criteria and suffer with viral pneumonia.

Ulan Power, professor of molecular virology at Queen's University Belfast, said he expects Ireland to contain the virus more successfully than in

Plea for three infection centres to help cope

China due to being forewarned. But he stressed that the numbers will be something never seen before here.

He said: 'If my calculations are correct, at a 0.6% attack rate, the number of severe and critical patients in Ireland would be just under 6,000 total. However, the principal point is that would constitute extra ICU [intensive care unit] bed requirements in a health service that is already stretched.'

He said 'huge public health initiatives' were taken in China to contain the infection rate. This included closing whole cities, schools and limiting transport. The Irish Mail on Sunday put these figures to the Department of Health and HSE this weekend, but they did not address them and would not offer their own estimate of the number of severe or critical cases. Medical experts have long warned about shortages in the ICU area. In 2018, a Department of Health review found operations were not done due to a lack of intensive care beds. This winter it was clear there

were not even enough regular hospital beds for patients. On Friday, 359 patients on trolleys waited for a bed, according to the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, which yesterday said it welcomed the ending of an unofficial HSE recruitment freeze on nurses and midwives.

A hospital with an acceptable level of bed occupancy should top out at 85% of the beds filled, but Irish hospitals regularly run at 95% capacity or even 100%, according to a department reports.

Professor John Crown, oncology consultant: 'We have unprecedented small numbers of intensive care unit beds, intensive care unit doctors and specialists in every area. We tend



Up to 6,000 expected for

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to be at the bottom of the charts for all of these things.'

He said any health system would struggle to cope with a large influx of patients at one time, and added: 'I think we are quite vulnerable in that regard. If Covid-19 does get to a stage where there is a widespread clinical outbreak, our system will be in real trouble.'

He praised the public health measures already taken, but called for the authorities to go even further. Equally, Professor Michael O'Keefe, consultant at the Mater and Beacon private hospitals, warned there was a huge gap in public bed numbers. He recommended three large infection centres in the east, west and south, as hospitals won't cope.

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ULTAN POWER: 'We have not seen such numbers'



Fianna Fáil TD Niall Collins said that Fianna Fáil must be part of a 'radical' administration.

'Whatever coalition is formed it needs to be radical and confront without delay the problems facing the country in housing and health.'

'My fear is that a coalition with Fine Gael, as currently proposed,

Mr Lahart's proposal. Indeed some believed Mr Martin could use a national government to go into power with Sinn Féin and ultimately prepare Fianna Fáil members for such an administration.

'This ultimately gives Micheál Martin political cover for going into government with Sinn Féin,' said a Fianna Fáil source. 'It is



acute cases 250 ICU beds

arrangements' for critically ill patients. This could mean taking over emergency departments or even coronary care units and filling them with patients needing intensive care, he said.

Worryingly, British health authorities said this week that once the virus is widespread in the community, as many as 50% of sicknesses could occur within three weeks, with 95% over nine weeks.

Not all would require hospitalisation but even moderately ill people take up time between testing and treatment. Elderly people are particularly vulnerable with the over-80s more likely to die than middle-aged people,

based on the Chinese experience.

The potential surge also means a huge demand for mechanical ventilation, with the WHO saying a quarter of cases needed it, while the remainder need oxygen. The MoS asked the HSE and department how many hospitals have to help patients breathe, but they were not able to answer this week. HSE boss Paul Reid has said 25 new ICU beds will come on stream to deal with coronavirus at a cost of €20m, but his office could not yet say where these would be.

A spokeswoman for the department said yesterday: 'We have invested significantly this week to bring extra ICU beds into operation

and to allow further investment for the national isolation unit in the Mater. We will also keep the winter flu beds open. Isolation units have been identified across all our hospitals.'

She said the response remains in the 'containment phase' but cautioned the situation is evolving. Another flash-point is health staff. There are just 35 intensive care consultants in Ireland far below the recommended 82, according to the Irish Hospital Consultants Association. There is also the possibility of doctors and nurses becoming ill, or having to self-isolate after contact with Covid-19 patients. Sixty have already done so in Cork.

would wander back into inaction and the torpor of the past, and destroy both parties. Housing needs radical solutions.'

Mr Collins said that he is, for instance, not ideologically opposed to rent freezes.

'If a way can be found to freeze rents, then I'm all for it,' said Mr Collins. 'We've been advised it is a fundamental threat to property

rents. We all need to look at radical ways at getting around this. We can't just be captured by the civil service and manipulated into repetition of mistakes.'

Sinn Féin's Eoin Ó Broin said he agreed with Mr Lahart's contention that it is not acceptable to say that the country must wait months or weeks for a government.

'Backbench Fianna Fáil TDs are

looking at what happened, for example, to John Curran out here in Dublin Mid-West. He lost his seat because several thousand former Fianna Fáil voters voted for Sinn Féin. One of the key issues for

those voters was housing, either for themselves or their kids.'

'The idea that you would put Fine Gael, with Leo Varadkar, Simon Harris and Eoghan Murphy back in government... if anybody says the

We can stop it in its tracks... with decisive action

CONFIRMATION, on Thursday night, that a man in Cork had contracted Covid-19 'from the community' told us something we ought to have already known: the virus is here and spreading in a similar way to many other countries.

But it is prudent to approach a significant outbreak with caution, particularly in the early stages and in the absence of full information about how the disease progresses.

One might be tempted to treat this epidemic as if it were similar to the winter flu, just more difficult. But we follow the data when tracking winter flu and we should do the same on Covid-19, treating the numbers in their own right.

The rate of growth of the virus enables us to project what would happen if it spreads unchecked. In many countries the number of cases is increasing at a rate of 30% or 50% a day. If the virus continued to grow unchecked it would overwhelm our hospitals very quickly.

A key feature of coronavirus is that, in the absence of adequate treatments or vaccines, many of which require intensive care, the overall mortality rate will be much higher than it would otherwise be.

And the fact that those likely to be worst affected may have weaker immune systems and may be older that does not diminish the importance of the measures that should be taken. So it is surely advisable to inform the public as much as possible about how to stay healthy.

According to the World Health Organisation, the virus can be stopped in its tracks with aggressive action, as was undertaken in China, Japan and Singapore. Clearly, in more authoritarian regimes this is more achievable, and in a liberal democracy it is more challenging.

The crucial part is in adopting early measures which stem the initial rise of the outbreak. One 2007 study from University of Michigan Center for the History of Medicine



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and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention looked at 43 large cities that carried out some combination of interventions during the 1918 Spanish flu. This included isolating the ill or those suspected of being ill in hospitals or at home, banning public gatherings, in some cases, shutting down roads and railways and closing schools. They found that school closing turned out to be one of the most effective measures

'School closing was the most effective'

against the spread. It explicitly stated that cities that acted fast, for lengthy periods, and included school closing and at least one other intervention saw the lowest death rates.

There may be strong economic and political motives to avoid hard measures, but we also need to understand we cannot also risk disruption as a consequence of the crisis. Although the mortality rate is low, in the absence of treatments and vaccines, hospitalisation rates are high and it may take a number of weeks for patients to recover. An important difference between Japan and South Korea and other countries is their relatively high proportion of available hospital beds, three- to four-times the available hospital beds as European countries.

Other countries have already had to take extreme measures. Iran, for example, has already released 54,000 prisoners as it could not contain the virus in

prisons. I'm not suggesting we do that here, but the scale of the crisis can be limited by taking precautionary measures early which stem the growth of the virus and help to identify cases before they spread too widely.

According to the WHO: 'It is worth trying to slow the pace of the outbreak with measures to keep the number of patients from overwhelming local hospitals'. This means considering pausing mass gatherings and shutting schools at the outset.

As we saw in Italy and China, the activity of the initial cases can create a surge of geographically concentrated cases. Smaller countries with overstretched hospitals will be vulnerable.

Politicians need to be front and centre in taking decisions where required. The decisions about mass gatherings or closing schools are not for the HSE. These are political decisions based on priorities between healthcare and the economy.

On a personal level, one thing I have realised is how one's formative experiences are embedded. I feel perhaps too strongly about the risk of a pandemic. The assurances that only those with weak immune systems and the elderly will suffer fall deaf on my ears. As an asthmatic child I remember frequently my grandmother telling me to 'slow down and stop running'. She was right of course because I'd frequently have to use a nebuliser.

Her love, of course, was conflicted by her own anxiety. That was, as I was frequently told as early as six, born out of losing her mother and baby sister in the 1918 Spanish flu.

policies that government would deliver on housing will be any different from what we've had over the last three decades... I don't think so,' he said.

'Coronavirus is only one problem we have. We need a government now. I do not accept that it should take weeks and weeks of policy discussion to form a government.'

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