Consultation on the Statement of Strategy for Transport, Tourism and Sport.

Strategic Directions, High Level Goals and Objectives.

Current philosophy

As the old Irishism has it : “If you are wanting to go to Ballyporeen, you’d better not be starting from here”.

We are a small country on the edge of Europe saddled with a massive public debt and in hock to the European Central Bank. Our budgets have to be approved by the Troika.

An irresponsible view is that “bail-out” debt is actually not our problem : it is the ECB’s. We cannot be forced to pay except and until we want to, although not paying leads to more interest generated “debt”.

However, this could give us room for reappraisal. The whole thrust of economic development is based on expansion. Expansion of trade, industry, infrastructure, population, agriculture and many more parameters – but for what ?

What will our country be like in ten years’ time ? Will Global warming have really started to bite and will we be thanking our leaders for ignoring the environmental effects rather than the debt ?

Expansion

Without going into the future of capitalism perhaps the best thing to do is to look at Ireland as it is and ask whether “expansion” in the traditional sense is really a good thing.

Ireland is not densely populated, except in the Dublin area. Ireland has no industry to speak of, light industry yes, but volatile and subject to the vagaries of markets and new ways of doing business.

Ireland cannot feed itself on the current analysis of food balances as Ireland is dependent on imports for over 30% of the food intake. Perhaps the agricultural emphasis is wrong but expansion of the population places even more burden on the farmers.

Tourism brings in some 4% of the gross national product. A massive proportion for a small country. Listed as a favoured country by the USA, UK, Germany and France, there is definitely room for expansion of tourism, but what do the tourists come for ? If the country was industrialised, its vistas and spaces compromised, would it have the same appeal ?

Transport

Roads

The major inter-urban roads planned at the end of 2008 (Renewed Programme for Government and the Smart Economy Framework) and the major links between Dublin and regional cities are now in place and journey times have been reduced. There remain a few unresolved links such as those relating to Rosslare but taking Rosslare as a point in question : Rosslare is not a supportable political priority. It is currently working at capacity and the roads to it are working without hindrance.
There is no need to build a motorway to Rosslare. If the argument is “expansion” then Rosslare needs to have a completely new port built some 3km out to sea as the existing port cannot be “expanded”.

Given the fact that there would have to be a commitment to build such a port (which itself would have problems) before committing to any further infrastructure development, the further expansion of the N11 and the N25 have a questionable basis. Similar arguments apply elsewhere.

The strategic objective of the road transport network is to provide Ireland with a modern road system to “facilitate economic competitiveness”, is integrated with other modes of transport and promotes cooperation. This has to be seen against a massive carbon deficit accumulated by the road sector due to the use of fossil based fuels.

Future use of roads must incorporate new forms of propulsion that must be developed before any more roads are built. To continue expanding the use of diesel, petrol and gas is irresponsible.

The building of roads is a national endeavour, despite the emblazoning of the PPP banners beside the motorways, all these banners really say is that private enterprise made money out of the taxpayer who not only footed most of the bill but may be continuing to pay through tolls. So much for economic competitiveness.

Do we really have the money for any more roads that are nice but underutilised and which only invite further private vehicle sales expansion?

There is a point to be made in planning for and reserving corridors for potential new routes but this is a cruel way of planning as it places many landowners in a devalued limbo.

**The strategic direction here must be to row back investment and be selective about further roads programmes.**

**Public transport**

**Rail**

The quality of travel by rail has improved by many multiples in the last decade and travel by rail is now comfortable, convenient and fast. The numbers of people travelling has greatly increased to the point of overcrowding at times.

Rail travel is relatively clean in environmental terms (it is only cleaner than the alternatives) and can dramatically reduce reliance on road transport but only for passengers and only where there is an integrated road network to allow for access. Expansion of railway routes is notoriously difficult.

Freight on rail for Ireland is only feasible for one or two of the longer routes.

Many of Ireland’s lines are single track which hampers any form of expansion. Dualling of the track has massive complications in terms of land available, bridges, tunnels, embankments and stations all of which are costly to adapt.
Ireland once had a comprehensive local network of small railways which were torn up as being uneconomic but in environmental terms these lines, built to grade, were a severe loss and there is an argument that they should, where possible, be resurrected.

The LUAS is a mixed blessing since much of what it does could have been done by bus and it can be an unpleasant experience, when crowded, to the extent that it has had to have security provided. Until the LUAS can be extended to the Airport, it will remain anomalous.

The DART performs well for Dublin and has had the effect of extending the commuter belt into Wicklow and out to Howth.

The current upgrading of stock and track and the electrification programmes are laudable and must be properly supported but more thought must be given to the ways of managing the network and accommodating more passengers by use of longer trains and platforms and dualling where feasible.

Road (Bus)

In many ways the long distance bus is the most promising means of transport for the future. Competitive with rail when operating at 60% of capacity and yet able to get to town centres not served by rail and able to service wide areas accessible only by road, the only drawback is the diesel engine in its current form.

The size of the average bus provides a platform for a range of new propulsion systems or adapted and cleaned up older ones. Electric, fuel cell, hydrogen and scrubbed conventional propulsion systems can be mounted on a bus where there is neither space nor carrying capacity on light personal transport.

Where then are the provisions for the bus termini and intermediate stops? Rudimentary open shelters and lay-bys have only recently appeared in sporadic provision. A frequent target for mindless vandalism in the past, such shelters are now sufficiently frequented that they are surviving better.

The provision of adequate stopping facilities should be a national priority. In many cases a lay-by has been provided that can only take one bus, yet sometimes two or three buses on different services arrive at the same time (deliberately in the case of feeders) leaving the late comers out in the road blocking all traffic

A new fleet subsidy should be instigated to encourage bus companies to upgrade and utilise the latest and cleanest technology.

Around town the buses are indispensible but again their propulsion systems have to be upgraded or changed in the future and some can be changed (electrical) now.
Road (Bicycle)

Many cities in Europe (and partially in Dublin) now make proper provision for the bicycle, to the extent of creating complete cycle roads (which can be quite dangerous at crossings) and these have reduced overall congestion. There are still problems but the benefits are manifest.

The bicycle however tends to be seasonal and in the autumn and winter, cycle traffic drops off markedly.

In the countryside, the bicycle is a hazardous form of transport and there are frequently no road edge margins for refuge. Only the generally considerate behaviour of car drivers and truck drivers keeps cyclists safe. Strangely the converse is often not the case, with cyclists not pulling over after a tail-back has formed behind them. Some education is needed.

Cycling on country roads at night is suicidal.

The use of the bicycle has to be compared with the use of bikes up to the 60’s and 70’s when roads were not crowded, speeds were lower and the sight of bikes was normal on the roads. People were able to cycle great distances safely whereas such endeavours now are occasionally seen but are rare.

Various tourist pamphlets announce that “it is possible” to travel by bicycle from one place to another but the risks are not explained and this is irresponsible.

There has to be much greater provision for transport by bicycle by means of creating proper lanes for bikes throughout major routes and towns.

Road (Walking)

Insufficient attention is paid to the pedestrian. The cities and towns are fine but the freedom to walk the roads that was once the lifeblood of many rural communities has all but disappeared.

The rural roads are so dangerous for pedestrians that many people lacking motorised transport are marooned or take their lives in their hands to venture out. This is the same problem that meets the cyclist and yet there are verges that can be cut back and paved sufficiently for walkers at no great cost.

From a tourist point of view some agencies advertise routes such as “coastal routes” for walkers which are nothing more than encouraging walkers to walk on roads that are lethal for them.

The sad thing is that in many cases the routes suggested would be brilliant if they were made safe for the tourist walker.

Local Authorities should be encouraged to make provision for walkers on all local roads.
Air travel

Not to be ignored for an island, Ireland has actually had an enormous influence on European travel through Ryanair but this has a lesser impact on the island itself.

Currently the island is well served by airports except in the South East where Waterford airport is struggling.

The consensus is that Waterford airport is in the wrong place. The main SE airport should be in somewhere like Mullinavat where it would have mainline rail and motorway linkage and would have a greater hinterland. Waterford airport is out on a limb.

Dublin airport has no dedicated rail or tram link into the city and is reliant on private transport or bus to bring passengers to and fro. Cork is the same.

Currently the target of many environmentalists, air travel is too costly in terms of CO2 emissions and the whole jet engine development programme world-wide is being devoted to cleaning up the act. There is a potential for a 50% reduction on current output for no loss of power but this still has to be proven and then introduced. Air travel will be the bad boy of air pollution for the next two decades.

Despite phenomenal advances in aircraft design and management in the past decades, the industry seems unwilling to try to embrace more radical approaches such as lighter than air assistance, solar recharge, longer runways, Jetstream route diversions and others. Parabolic flightpath trajectories are desirable but often ignored both for practical and casual reasons but should be emphasised.

Air travel and the logistics of air travel need to be carefully appraised and some radical decisions made with an environmental as well as a practical bias.
Tourism

Attraction

Why do tourists come to Ireland? The answers are various but in general they come to experience something different, be it scenery, humour, way of life, food, history or many more parameters but the one thing that Ireland has is that it is relatively under-populated.

Most tourists come from crowded places and are seeking space. They do not come to see Wind Turbines or motorways.

Many come to learn. Many come to discover where ancestors came from.

Once we start to destroy the attractions we are in danger of scaring tourists away. We have to be very careful to preserve the most sensitive scenery from development that scars it (including roads), in destroying the seat of humour in the average small town: the pub, in cutting off people in the countryside, in adopting too much “continental” cuisine and keeping on the traditional by emphasising the quality of our basic foods (eg boiled ham, colcannon, crubeens, etc) and in not be letting our history disappear before our eyes.

History is a problem. We have seen how only in recent years the real stories of the “Great War” and the Second World War and the amazing Irish contributions in both have come out and many of the myths of our 1916 uprising have been dispelled. Conversely this has created an even greater and more interesting narrative.

However the same sort of denial that pervaded the decades also affected our attitude to “the English” in general and thus to the many ruinous tower houses and even churches and especially great mansions dotted around the countryside. The attitude of “let it crumble, it was built by the oppressors” is still prevalent.

This attitude must be faced down: history is history (hopefully factual) not politically manipulated fairy stories.

We are losing the evidence of our history at an alarming rate. Money needs to be channelled (perhaps via the Heritage Council but certainly via LEADER) towards some urgent conservation and restoration or we will have less and less to show and talk about.

In general most tourists get a good experience but some object to the Disneyesque fare that is dished out to them, especially when it is unnecessary. Tourists should not be taken for fools and it has to be remembered that if they do get put off, they will put off many more when they go home.

The message then is to preserve what we have and not spoil it, to guard against over-expansion and to tell the truth. To welcome people naturally and not in a forced manner.
Sport

One of the most exciting sports in the world is hurling. If hurling was to take off worldwide, it would beat soccer hands down. The GAA has not done well in spreading the sport but it would take only a little more emphasis and demonstration and above all screen time on foreign channels to promote it to the extent that new clubs might be set up in foreign countries.

Nobody could dream of a better ambassador for Ireland than a unique sport.

In general, sport is well catered for but some sports such as swimming are heavily Dublin oriented and more full size (50m minimum) pools for training are required in the regions.

We score well above our weight in rugby, boxing, show-jumping, and have had success in running and cycling in the past and we are now beginning to find success in cricket. This shows that the facilities are there even if in some cases they are rudimentary.

For a small country we are competitive and although this spirit needs to be nurtured, most of us simply enjoy our sports. It is the enjoyment that is the most important aspect and that is something that cannot really be “invested in” except by showing continued excited media coverage and by the often colourful private sponsorship that is a feature of our sports.