

## **Ireland's infrastructure needs greater collaboration and vision**

**By Dr. Garry M. Keegan October 2021**

The purpose of this article is an endeavour to articulate my increased frustration with the approach to infrastructure development in Ireland. I believe its importance does not receive the attention it requires resulting in infrastructural deficits and associated problems.

What has prompted this intervention is recent reporting on possible power outages. We must realise there will for some time be a requirement for fossil fuels to generate electricity. Surely, there is an irony in not supporting the harvesting of natural resources off our own coastline while at the same time indicating part of the solution to our power shortages is grid links with France and the UK where nuclear power generation is prevalent (France 70%, U.K. 17%).

Therefore, Government policy at present is no new gas exploration in Irish waters, instead import nuclear power from abroad. Surely this position needs further thought.

Projected increased demand for electricity will not be met by new gas-powered generators connecting to the grid on time, exacerbated by the prevalence and requirements of new data centres. Meanwhile there is renewed reliability on the coal-fired generators at Moneypoint.

Approximately 60% of Ireland's electricity is generated from fossil fuels, the cost of which is susceptible to fluctuations of gas prices as an internationally traded commodity. Developing Irish natural gas resources would also reduce further dependence on international pricing and help reduce security of supply risks. The need to rapidly reduce our CO2 emissions have been compounded by the recent UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) global warning report and EU Climate Change legislation.

Of course, the roll-out of renewable and cleaner energy (on & offshore wind, solar, biogas, hydrogen) needs to be accelerated, supported by a more streamlined planning and consenting process which is robust and not susceptible to abuse, providing greater certainty and confidence.

Electricity availability concern is only the most recent issue of a continuum of infrastructure related problems coupled with no evidence of a sense of urgency or understanding. This is met with crisis management communications when something utterly predictable occurs such as plant breakdowns leading to water boil notices and water tankers on street corners, delays in roll-out of the rural broadband scheme and increased commuter congestion. Over 30 towns and villages have raw sewage outflows into Irish waterways. Sometimes when funding is available for new or the enhancement of existing water or waste treatment plants, the funds are diverted to deal with new emergencies borne out of aging and tired life-expired infrastructure.

Everyone, in their homes and businesses, needs and / or wants services, with a legitimate expectation and confidence such services will always be available at the push of a button or turning of a tap. However, even when public policy recognises and supports the requirement for the provision of certain services funded by the public or private purse, for example in the energy, water, wastewater, communications or transport space, host community acceptance remains a key constraint to infrastructure development. There continues to be active resistance, politically and within communities, to the inconvenience of short-, medium- or long-

term impacts associated with constructing necessary infrastructure. The country needs new 21<sup>st</sup> century infrastructure to meet the needs of a growing population; we need enhanced capacity in road, rail, ports and airports, water, waste treatment plants, electricity generation and transmission, fibre roll-out, not to mention what is required in housing and healthcare. There is also interdependence among infrastructures, for example new housing estates being refused planning due to absence of wastewater treatment plants or existing ones being at full capacity. The construction industry has told government that huge new investment in water is vital to achieving any substantial increase in housing supply. In some locations there is less than two years supply of serviced and zoned land available for development, and in some counties such zoned and serviced land is being de-zoned which is difficult to comprehend.

Housing policy for the short-, medium- and long-term cannot be successfully developed in an environment where industry is not allowed help to solve the problem where professional vision can contribute to realistic solutions. Short-term populist quick fixes will only lead to medium to long-term societal problems. Emphasis on self-build by local authorities will cost the country dearly. Rather than a society where a politician or political party is demonised for making a proper rather than populist decision, an independent mechanism needs to be established, where proper policies continue to be implemented irrespective of changing administrations.

Ireland will be left behind if procrastination by successive Governments can continue. Unfortunately, there are many examples of when there is proper public policy decision-making with the associated funding being made available, projects are encountering delays or costly alterations due to political populism. The manifestation of such short-term considerations translates to outdated, and sometimes crumbling infrastructure which will negatively impact future generations from a societal and economic viewpoint.

Ireland's planning system is broken, it needs to be fixed. Potential for planning issues with serious implications, need to be depleted if not eradicated. These include the Athenry Apple debacle, and more recently questions concerning Ireland's chances of securing the new Intel multi-billion micro-chip plant due to uncertainty concerning delays in the planning system due to judicial reviews, not to mention energy and water services availability concerns.

Let us not leave Ireland behind, we need to debate infrastructure requirements. I believe the greater common good must prevail while listening to and respecting host community concerns, and recognising environmental and climate change challenges, and obligations. To serve the national interest, I believe a constructive start to addressing this matter would be to convene, with at least some sense of urgency, a collaborative meaningful framework reflecting perspectives of public and private stakeholders, including relevant regulators, state-agencies and progressive sectoral business interests.

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