

## AFFAIRS OF THE NATION



## ROAD TO GOD KNOWS WHERE

IT'S HARD to find anything that unites the political parties north and south but a love of new roads is one such unifier.

This national obsession was celebrated recently when Leo Varadkar, Micheál Martin and Eamon Ryan announced a €1bn hamper of goodies to reward the return of the Stormont Executive. The package included an eye-watering €600m donation towards a new road from Aughnacloy to Derry. Rail transport got just €12.5m.

This long-planned road project is invariably described as an “upgrade” or “dualling” of the A5. This is bizarre. The proposal is to build a brand new motorway next to the existing A5 for €1.9bn – a figure that keeps rising. It’s a bit like telling people you’re retrofitting your home when in fact you’re building a mansion next door.



Lorna Bogue

The motorway plan is a political prestige project originally cooked up as one of the deals to buy off opposition to the Good Friday Agreement. In 2007 Bertie Ahern’s government pledged to fund half the cost of the road, with the promise it would cut 20 minutes off the drive from Dublin to Derry.

Opposition to the road coalesced under the Alternative A5 Alliance, a cross-community group that stalled the project with an environmental challenge in Belfast High Court in 2013. Funding from Dublin had already fallen through following the economic crash.

A decade later, political support and media cheerleading for the new road has drowned out opposition. Recent media coverage makes no mention of climate or of any argument against this project, which has been reframed around road safety following the tragic deaths of almost 50 people on the road since 2007.

Discourse has become toxic, with objectors accused of having blood on their hands. “A5 OBJECTIONS COSTS LIVES!” declares a Sinn Féin poster, while Tyrone MLA Daniel McCrossan of the SDLP has repeatedly tried to portray the Alternative A5 Alliance as shadowy, telling the *Irish News* in 2022 that the group was “anonymous”. In the article’s next paragraph, the anonymous group’s anonymous chairperson, Hamilton Hassard, pointed out: “We’re in the public domain. I have been on television a couple of times. We’ve been three or four times in the High Court and won our case.”

In truth, the main reason the A5 is danger-

ous is because for 17 years the promise of the new road has prevented any improvements being made to the old one.

The same self-fulfilling prophecy is at work with the proposed M20 between Cork and Limerick, according to Cork city councillor Lorna Bogue, formerly of the Green Party. Bogue is now leader of An Rabharta Glas, the only party on the island Goldhawk could find that opposes the new A5.

As well as ripping up hundreds of hectares of countryside, the motorway would put more cars on the road, increase emissions and help lock in car dependency. More cars on the roads overall means more road deaths, as well as excess deaths from air pollution and climate chaos.

The existing A5 can be made safer with overtaking lanes, hard shoulders and by-passes. And if the governments north and south want to leave a real legacy for this island, they could invest in railway – for example, reopening the old Derry to Portadown line via Omagh.

**MICHAEL O’LEARY** is supposedly a PR genius, but a recent series of opinion polls that Ryanair conducted on X crashed and burned. Each poll began with an attack on the Dublin Airport passenger cap, followed by the question: “Ireland, is this what you voted for?” In one of them, 66% of respondents voted Yes, ie that the passenger cap is what they voted for.

Ryanair deleted that poll and ran another. This time 55% gave the answer Micky wasn’t looking for.

*Bullies don’t always get their way.*



## DUP ANTI-CASEMENT LINE ‘SECTARIAN’

ALLIANCE leader Naomi Long told the BBC last weekend that opposition to the development of a stadium at Casement Park “smacks of sectarianism”. That’s putting it mildly. The saga has been unfolding for over a decade. Sectarianism runs through it like a slogan through a stick of rock. At its heart is deep DUP antagonism to the GAA and everything it stands for. Any manifestation of Irishness incenses the DUP so the whole GAA culture inflames the party’s opposition.

About 16 km outside Belfast, just off the M1, lies the derelict Long Kesh/Maze site. It’s one of the largest development areas in the north, 347 acres, which in 2011 was planned to undergo a £300m transformation including a state-of-the-art multi-purpose stadium that GAA, soccer and rugby would share. But in 2013, following opposition in the DUP from Sammy Wilson among others, then first minister Peter Robinson wrote from his holiday home in Florida to Sinn Féin’s Martin McGuinness and pulled the plug.

The DUP objectors claimed the site would

become “a shrine to terrorism” because a peace and conflict resolution centre was to be built in the complex, formerly the Maze prison. While most of the prison had been demolished, some parts, including the hospital wing where H-block hunger strikers died, are listed buildings and have been retained. The DUP feared it would become a republican tourist attraction and a location for commemorations.

In response to Robinson reneging on the development, McGuinness said he would not agree to further development of any kind on the site. Since both first and deputy first ministers must agree on all projects, the site has remained vacant until today.

The money for the multi-purpose Casement stadium was divided among rugby, soccer and GAA but, while the other sports spent their cash upgrading existing stadia, the GAA ran into planning obstacles in west Belfast.

In the decade or so since, after the financial crash and high inflation, the cost has ballooned, some say to £300m, and is being used as a pretext to prevent the redevelopment of Casement. The DUP is lobbying the British government not to provide its share of the finances, citing widespread unionist opposition – which indeed there is.

Nevertheless, unionists seem to forget that funding for Casement was part of the joint UK-Ireland bid for the 2028 Euros, which includes the Aviva Stadium and Everton’s as yet uncompleted Bramley-Moore Dock

in Liverpool, planned to seat 53,000 and estimated to cost £740m. That stadium, along with the other seven in England and Wales, have all received government money.

It’s difficult to see on what basis Casement can be refused – other than caving in to anti-GAA sectarianism. Northern secretary Chris Heaton-Harris last year gave a public commitment to funding Casement. “We’ll get the money, don’t you worry.”

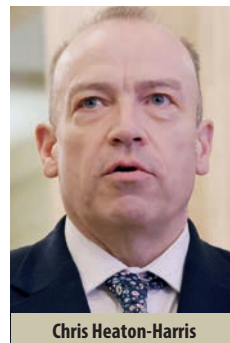
The FA announced: “High-capacity, world-famous football grounds and state-of-the-art new venues will provide the platform for the biggest and most commercially successful Euros ever, making us a low risk, high-reward host.”

The spin-off for the north would be huge – estimates for greater Belfast suggest a £30m share of the £2.6bn projected income for Britain and Ireland. Long-term benefits include using Casement for major pop concerts

since the north has no such venue and the GAA said the stadium will be available for international soccer and rugby matches.

Unionists pooh-pooh all that. They deny people would travel to west Belfast. Some football managers are now claiming, with no evidence, that soccer would be denied future funding, even though Euro funds are separate. The extreme position is that they’d rather have no games in the north if they’re in Casement.

The British have a choice to make. Abide by the terms of their joint bid with Dublin or cave into unionist sectarianism.



Chris Heaton-Harris