

AFFAIRS OF THE NATION



GREAT GAS

IT MUST be a head-spinning time to work for Gas Networks Ireland (GNI), the semi-state company responsible for operating Ireland's fossil gas grid.

On the one hand, the Government announced in March that GNI would own a controversial new liquid natural gas (LNG) terminal in Kerry – an abrupt about-face on previous government policy that ruled out developing LNG infrastructure as Ireland pivots to clean, renewable energy.

On the other hand, GNI, under acting CEO Ronan Galwey, has been on a media blitz touting the green credentials of its, ahem, “renewables-ready” gas grid. The company is “committed to promoting sustainability across our business and in the communities where we operate”, according to an advertorial currently running on the *Irish Examiner* website.

GNI says it's on a journey to net zero, by



Ronan Galwey

some point decades into the future.

A separate advertorial on *TheJournal.ie* states that the gas network is “the heart of the Irish government's ambitious climate and energy targets to successfully transition to a carbon-neutral economy by 2050”. This “transformative journey” will see a fully decarbonised gas network by 2045, using “green hydrogen” and biomethane.

GNI is also running a radio ad campaign bigging up its success in renewables.

Given that it has been touting renewables for several years, what is notably missing from all this hype is any hard data on just how far along the road GNI really is.

Goldhawk understands that there is less than 1% renewable gas in Ireland's gas grid, so all the talk about renewable transition needs to be taken with a generous pinch of salt.

GNI claims that more than two-thirds of the gas grid will be powered by green hydrogen within two decades, with the balance sourced from biomethane.

A major scientific review found hydrogen to be completely unsuited for home heating. It is also extremely expensive to produce and difficult to store.

Hydrogen manufactured from renewable electricity may well have a limited role in directly fuelling power stations but GNI is surely aware that its own projections of hydrogen comprising the bulk of the national gas grid in the years ahead are just fanciful.

Cynics might suggest that ‘clean’ gas is more about corporate self-preservation than securing Ireland's renewable transition, since GNI's other ‘renewable’ gas, biomethane, is highly problematic from a climate standpoint.

The fact that GNI is also behind the importing of new sources of LNG, a potent greenhouse gas, further adds to the impression that the company is putting up a dense PR smokescreen to obscure the fact that the national gas grid is effectively already a stranded fossil fuel asset that may well be obsolete within the decade.

The reality is that Ireland's energy future will be powered by clean electricity, directly produced by wind and solar farms, backed up by batteries, with no useful role for gas, beyond a limited emergency reserve.

TODAY 33 Irish rivers are classified as “heavily modified water bodies” (HMWBs), meaning they are of minimal ecological value and so don't need to be counted against our EU targets on improving the ecological quality of our waterways. New Government plans will see an almost 15-fold increase, to 466, in the number of declared HMWBs. Rivers to be downgraded include the Liffey, Dodder, Lee, Boyne and Blackwater.

This move has the clear fingerprints of the rural Independent TDs, given that much of the damage to our waterways is from agricultural pollution and arterial drainage and dredging of rivers to protect farmland from flooding. It's truly an Irish solution to the pollution problem.



NORTH HOUSING CRISIS: DÉJÀ VU

THERE ARE about 13,000 people on the waiting list for social housing in Belfast. Those on the list are overwhelmingly concentrated in north and west Belfast and they are overwhelmingly nationalist.

There are obvious reasons for this. North and west Belfast have more concentrations of poverty and deprivation than elsewhere, with people unable to buy or rent appropriate accommodation. But there are also reasons that are not obvious to an outsider.

If you go to Google Maps and look up Alloo Street in north Belfast, you'll see a large area of white space adjacent to the street. In street view, you can see a 5m-high fence along one side of the street because Alloo Street is what's known as an interface.

Beside Alloo Street is Annalee Street, which is made up of newly built social housing – so new that the houses are not yet on online maps. People only moved into the new housing a few months ago. The houses were allocated on the usual points-based system, which resulted in a mix of Protestant and Catholic tenancies.

On May 21 a masked gang smashed the windows in the Catholics' houses with

masonry blocks. Some families with young children fled, others are hanging on in the hope that a static police presence will deter further attacks: more in hope than expectation.

As New York Yankees player Yogi Berra said: “It's déjà vu all over again.”

In 1969 Catholics' houses in both Annalee Street and Alloo Street were attacked, some were burnt, and the occupants fled. Their houses remained derelict for years.

In 1986 An attempt to repopulate the district failed. After serious sectarian rioting, a whole street of brand new houses planned for Catholic tenants had to be demolished because repeated attacks proved it was too dangerous to move in. The whole area was left as waste ground.

It seems that, after almost 40 years, the attempt to move in Catholic tenants has failed again.

It's a scenario repeated at various interfaces across north and west Belfast. Despite rapidly falling numbers of unionists, in north Belfast particularly, loyalist paramilitaries are determined “to hold the line” at interfaces to prevent nationalists moving into what have been traditionally unionist areas. Thus there are areas of vacant space on the Shankill side of the Falls/Shankill interface wall, at the Alliance Avenue/Ardoyne wall, and around the former British Army Girdwood barracks near Alloo Street and the newly rebuilt Annalee Street.

Derelict houses have been demolished over the years but there is no demand for new

unionist occupants. Unionists have tended to migrate to the outskirts of Belfast.

North and west Belfast have Sinn Féin MPs (John Finucane and Paul Maskey, respectively) and a majority of SF assembly members and councillors. Nevertheless, loyalist paramilitaries, mainly the UDA, have successfully prevented any movement beyond the lines the British Army established in north and west Belfast in August 1969, when they marched in to stop further loyalist destruction of Catholic districts.

As a result, the nationalist communities that elect those SF MPs, MLAs and councillors are squashed into heavily overcrowded districts, exerting ever greater pressure on local services such as schools and surgeries. Even if there was the money to build enough houses to satisfy the demand – which there isn't – there's nowhere safe to

locate new developments.

As the events of the last couple of weeks have shown, the unchanged sectarian geography of Belfast maintained by loyalist violence remains as big a problem as ever. It prevents a true reflection of the remarkable changes in the city's demography and electoral results.

Indeed, there is a school of thought which holds that the migration of unionists to the outskirts of Belfast has heightened tensions as loyalist paramilitaries feel threatened by the growing nationalist majority around them.

Satisfying housing demand in Belfast is a lot more complicated than in Dublin.



John Finucane