

# **01.05.09 Speech by Éamon Ó Cuív, TD. Western Rail Corridor: Sustainable Regional Transport at a time of Economic Constraint**

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## **Western Rail Corridor: Sustainable Regional Transport at a time of Economic Constraint**

**Address by Éamon Ó Cuív TD, Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs**

**“Creating the kind of Ireland that we want”**

**Friday 1 May 2009 – 1.30pm**

A chairde

Ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil libh as an gcuireadh chun labhairt libh inniu faoin ról atá ag Bealach Iarnróid an Iarthair, go háirithe ag lagtrá eacnamúil, i gcothú agus i bhforbairt na tíre.

I am very much of the belief that in either times of economic constraint or plenty that we must approach all policy issues with the core question of what kind of Ireland do we want to live in?

What kind of Ireland do we want to live in?

Do we want rural decline and urban sprawl? Do we want people spending hours in cars to get to their place of work or education each day? I don't think that we want that kind of Ireland but we all have to ask ourselves what are we doing about it?

George Bernard Shaw once wrote:

“People are always blaming circumstances for being what they are. The people who get on in this world are the people who get up and look for the circumstances they want and if they can't find them, make them.”

The broad community campaign for the re-opening of the Western Rail Corridor could never be accused of blaming circumstances as they are. Neither could you be accused of expecting anyone to hand anything to out you.

We've come a long way from the great efforts that were made in the past to preserve the parts of the railway that were shut down. We probably would not be here this afternoon but for the foresight and dedication of the people involved, many of you who are here today. Even in past times of economic constraint you sought to create the circumstances that would bring about the kind of Ireland that we want. It brings to mind the words: “We cherish the past to awaken the future.”

Sadly, since the last Western Rail Conference, a man with a great legacy of seeking the circumstances that we want, former Minister Séamus Brennan, passed away last year. Séamus was a man who understood and lived the different lives of both the East Coast and the West Coast of Ireland. Séamus could see the benefits to the entire country in all regions of the country having good access to transport be it the LUAS or the Western Rail Corridor. Séamus has taken his leave of us, but he has left us with the legacy of his own support for the re-opening of the Western Rail Corridor.

A key Mayo man who passed this way before us and who pioneered regional development in this region at a time of economic constraint was Monsignor James Horan. The iconic campaign of Monsignor Horan for the airport at Knock and its success is an example of what can be achieved even in very lean times. Ireland West Airport, Knock also has a very significant contribution to make in creating the circumstances that will see the further re-opening of the railway north of Claremorris in the future.

At a time when Ireland and the world is at a crossroads I want to talk again about the pivotal point that is the “crossroads of Connacht.” The wider area around Knock airport needs to become a multi-modal crossroads. We need to take an integrated approach to the development of sustainable regional transport and the area around Knock airport is where the Western Rail Corridor, the N5 road from Westport and Castlebar and the north-south Atlantic Road Corridor intersect each other.

We need to grow Ireland West Airport, Knock for the benefit of its wide catchment area of the west, north-west, the midlands and border counties. As it stands, we should be looking seriously at Ireland West Airport, Knock as a site for developing major innovation initiatives. Developing sustainable enterprise and employment around the Knock airport area makes sense due to its location “at the crossroads of Connacht.”

We are committed to the decentralisation of my Department to Charlestown and this will build critical mass in the area. This kind of development in turn has a role to play in creating the circumstances for the re-awakening of the railway north of Claremorris to Collooney.

I would like to take the opportunity to pose a question and that is should we use the section of the railway line north of Claremorris as a walkway and cycleway while it is not open as railway? The Claremorris to Collooney stretch of the railway line will not start before 2014 and its use as a walkway and cycleway would solve a lot of encroachment issues in the meantime. It is something for us to think about.

Good quality infrastructure, with a mix of both rail and road transport provided in a balanced way across the country is essential if we are to halt both urban sprawl and rural decline. It is essential for creating the circumstances for the kind of Ireland that we want be it in times of economic constraint or plenty.

The re-opening of the Western Rail Corridor is very much part of Government policy for building the kind of Ireland that we want and indeed it is supported by a cross-section of

the parties in Dáil Éireann.

The re-opening of the Western Rail Corridor is not a Quixotic tale of a few wacky westerners playing around with a life-size train-set – rather it is a sub-set of dealing with the chaotic tailbacks around our cities that are the daily stories of AA Roadwatch. Transport 21 projects such as the re-opening of this existing piece of infrastructure, already in public ownership play a crucial role in building the kind of Ireland that we want.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh.

CRÍOCH