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Oral Answers to Questions (Justice) – Rural Crime Unit: Role and Composition

Summary: On the subject of the prevalence of cattle thievery in the border region, Northern Ireland Justice Minister David Ford assures the Assembly that cross-border coordination will be sought with the Garda Síochána and the Irish Justice Minister to address this. Additionally, he warns that a “joined-up community effort” is required.

Mr Ford: The PSNI's rural crime unit was a central resource for identifying trends and patterns in rural crime. Information from the unit was used by police commanders to enhance the effectiveness of their operational tactics in preventing and detecting rural and agricultural crime. The work of the unit was supported by a dedicated data analyst, who was part-funded by my Department. Information provided by the analyst informed the work of the Rural Crime Partnership, a collaborative arrangement between my Department, the PSNI, NFU Mutual and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. I understand that, as part of the PSNI's termination of contracts for associate workers, the contract for this post was not renewed beyond 31 December 2014. While there is no longer a dedicated rural crime data analyst, I understand that the PSNI's statistics branch continues to produce detailed quarterly updates on agricultural and rural crime in Northern Ireland. This allows key stakeholders to continue to monitor trends in crime committed in rural settlements and agricultural crime and to allocate resources accordingly.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his response. Given the prevalence of rural crime and just after a week that saw another 13 cattle stolen in an area between Aughnacloy and Caledon, which, yet again, had a devastating impact on a farming family, and given that it appears that the contract for the data analyst post in the rural crime unit has not been renewed, will the Minister give serious consideration to renewing that important role?

Mr Ford: I accept that the data analyst performed an important role. The reality is that that work has been embedded within the PSNI statistics unit in a way that was not previously the case. When I became Minister a mere five and a half years ago, the definitions of "urban" and "rural" in PSNI terms appeared to depend whether one was in the Belfast subregion or beyond it. As a result, large

rural areas in places like Antrim, Lisburn and Ards were classified as urban, and major urban settlements in the rest of it — all but the city of Derry — were classified as rural. We have a much better analysis now. That is being embedded through the individual districts. Given the budget cuts that were being made and, frankly, the political will of some people to see the ending of those contracts, the reality is that it was not possible to retain that post. I do not see, in the financial difficulties, how it would be possible to reinstate it. The important issue is to see that the work is being done otherwise.

Mr Somerville: I thank the Minister for his answers. Newry, Armagh and Dungannon DARD veterinary offices all consistently report the highest number of stolen or missing cattle. The proximity of the border to each area is not a coincidence. Will the Minister support a National Crime Agency (NCA) investigation of these organised crime gangs?

Mr Ford: The Minister always supports the operational decisions of the NCA that best address its responsibilities, because he does not direct the NCA any more than he directs the PSNI what to do. However, a perfectly valid point has just been made: there is no doubt that the prevalence of cattle thefts is greatest in border areas of Northern Ireland and in border areas of the Republic. There is clearly an issue to be addressed there. I certainly believe that, as part of the ongoing work to address crime on a cross-border basis, good work is being done in a number of areas. I will happily draw the issue of cattle rustling to the attention of the police and the Garda Síochána when I next speak to them and, indeed, when I speak this week to the Irish Justice Minister at the organised crime cross-border seminar. But there are real issues, given the resources that are available, and other initiatives, including some run by PCSPs and so on to assist people with things like Farmwatch. It is not simply a matter of waiting for the formal agencies; there is also the issue of what can be done in partnership to fight those who engage in this crime.

Mr Byrne: Does the Minister recognise that this is a serious issue for the farming community? Many farmers who have suffered the rustling of cattle cannot get compensation, and there is no such thing as an adequate insurance policy for them. In his discussions with the Minister for Justice in the Republic, can he accentuate a sense of urgency? There is a fear that this is being allowed to slip.

Mr Ford: I certainly agree with Mr Byrne that this is an issue of significant concern to the families who suffer. Thefts of machinery and plant, particularly tractors, can also cause difficulties. A year or so ago, there was a slight upswing in my constituency in that kind of theft. I have been assured that the treatment of rural crime such as that is a priority in the border areas of Armagh and Tyrone that were highlighted earlier. However, there is also an issue of individual citizens doing what they can to protect their stock and of people being the eyes and ears of the community, contacting police if they have concerns and joining the likes of Farmwatch to help to keep tabs on what is happening. It is not an area in which we can simply depend on the two police services; it requires a joined-up community effort.

Source: <http://data.niassembly.gov.uk/HansardXml/plenary-28-09-2015.pdf>

Tuesday 29 September 2015

Private Members' Business – City Deal for the North-West

Summary: During this session the Assembly agreed that the One Plan still provides a “valid and viable prospectus” for growth in the north-west region. Further, it was noted that Derry City and Strabane District Council will explore the possibility of a city deal for the council. In this discussion, Ms Michaela Boyle (MLA West Tyrone) highlighted the council’s ongoing co-operation with Donegal as a factor that would need to be considered, calling for cooperation with the Irish Government.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, Mr Deputy Speaker. I agree with much of what has been said today. However, like the Member opposite, given the size and rural dimension of the new Derry City and Strabane District Council area, with Strabane making up 37% of the population of that area, what would a City deal for a rural area look like? It should take into account the rural aspect, and any negotiations with government on any new powers to support economic growth and fiscal devolution should bring further opportunities for those living in rural areas, as not everyone lives in the city.

Any prospect of driving growth in the north-west should and would be welcomed. If the northwest were to get control over its finances, the city would thrive, but we do not want certain areas in that city to be left behind, particularly constituents, as the Member opposite said, who live in Strabane or in smaller towns and rural villages. They would have to be taken account of. How would the finances gained remain in the city, and how would that operate? It would need to be distributed fairly: we would need to ensure fairness of distribution in order for our towns and villages to survive and have power over their own economic growth.

A City deal has to have its citizens at the heart of it unless there are life changes and opportunities for the people to be involved in the process. We cannot allow more taxes to be put onto the people who, in return, receive much greater losses. Fiscal devolution will work only if people, communities and business are allowed to have their say on financial matters and, indeed, gain in that. As was said, a city deal does sound good, but there remain many challenges and questions that need to be answered. For example, how do we deal with the process of increased powers and who will reside over those powers?

I represent a border constituency, and any City deal would have to include Donegal as there already exists cooperation between our councils. I understand that, through the north-west gateway initiative, they are keen to achieve objectives with our Donegal colleagues. Many connections and linkages already exist between Derry, Strabane and Donegal, and everyone is interdependent. The radiotherapy unit at Altnagelvin is one great example. Even our previous Health Minister, Mr Poots, recognised its mutual benefits. That is relevant business for both Administrations on this island. Therefore, any benefit to the northwest will need the cooperation of the Irish Government, as that is vital to the success of a city deal for the north-west.

I support the motion. The positive outcomes of a city deal for the north-west within Derry City and Strabane District Council outweigh the negatives but we have to tread carefully. Businesses, elected representatives, citizens young and old having the power to set our own agenda over our own

economic growth is an opportunity to be creative and innovative with our future finances. This will allow the northwest to prosper and grow.

The potential of a city deal for future investment in infrastructure, health, housing, education, transport and the wider economy is a good deal. We have social value partnerships already leading the way to putting greater financial powers into the hands of local businesses and bodies. That has to be welcomed. I support the motion.

Source: <http://data.niassembly.gov.uk/HansardXml/plenary-29-09-2015.pdf>



Tuesday 29 September 2015

Seanad Éireann Order of Business – Capital Investment Plan 2016-2021

Summary: Following the announcement of the capital investment plan 2016-2021, Senator Ivana Bacik highlighted the need for cross-border cooperation with regard to the investment allocated to heritage and culture.

Ms Bacik: I welcome strongly today's announcement of a six-year capital investment plan that will extend from 2016 to 2021. I do not think there is any way to portray this as anything other than good news, no matter how the Opposition may try. A significant investment of €27 billion will be made over a six-year period. We are seeing really positive plans under a whole range of headings. In the transport area, the metro north project, which includes a link to the airport, and the cross-city Luas project will be developed. The importance of cross-Border co-operation is evident in the allocation of €31 million for heritage and cultural investment. We are seeing significant provision being made for demographic increases in the education sector, with 19,000 additional primary school places to be provided by 2018. Major investments are to be made in justice, housing and health as well. I do not think there is any way to portray this as anything other than good news. It is extremely welcome. I do not doubt that over the coming weeks, we will be in a position to tease out some of the detail of the capital investment plan and debate it further. This morning's announcement was accompanied by further good news on unemployment. It was announced today that the unemployment figure has decreased to 9.4%. As colleagues of mine have pointed out, there are 30,000 more people at work this year than there were this time last year. It is a very significant reduction. Of course we hope that trend will continue.

Source: <https://www.kildarestreet.com/sendebates/?id=2015-09-29a.49&s=speaker%3A9#g57>

Tuesday 29 September 2015

Leader's Questions – UK Referendum on EU Membership

Taioseach Enda Kenny answered a series of questions relating to the UK referendum on the EU. Mr Kenny stressed that it is important for Ireland, the EU as a whole, and Northern Ireland that the UK remains in the EU. In her question to Mr Kenny, Ms Mary Lou McDonald stressed the importance Northern Ireland in Brexit considerations and exit strategies.

Mr Kenny: The place of the UK in the European Union is of real national importance for Ireland and is a strategic priority for the Government. We are, therefore, watching developments very closely, engaging with our counterparts and doing all we can to help to keep the United Kingdom in the European Union. When I met with Prime Minister Cameron in London on 18 June, we discussed his pledge to hold an in-out referendum on EU membership before the end of 2017, the general outline of his proposals for EU reform, the thinking around treaty change and other issues relating to the EU-UK relationship. We also discussed our specific concerns about the impact a change in the nature of the EU-UK relationship could have on economic and trade links between our two countries and on stability in Northern Ireland. As I described previously in the House, on 23 June, that meeting was both positive and constructive. The Prime Minister did not ask for any particular support in respect of any proposal. However, I made it clear to him how much value we attach to the fact that both our countries are members of the European Union. I said that, without necessarily agreeing on all points, Ireland will be as helpful as it can be in the negotiations.

The issue is obviously of great importance to the European Union as a whole and it arises frequently in discussions with my EU counterparts, as it did last weekend. At the European Council on 25 and 26 June, Prime Minister Cameron presented a brief outline of his thinking, following meetings with most of the leaders of the European Union. A lengthy debate did not take place at that meeting, but it was agreed that consultations would be undertaken to see how the issues might be progressed. At the October European Council meeting, which will be held on 15 and 16 October, President Tusk intends updating Heads of State and Government on the state of play of the technical work that has been under way in Brussels since the June discussion.

Prime Minister Cameron has informed his colleagues and partners of his intention to present his proposals after the European Council meeting in October. The arrangements for detailed discussions on these proposals have yet to be agreed, but it is expected that there will be further consideration by Heads of State or Government at the European Council meeting to be held in December. It is not clear at this stage whether the British reform proposals will require treaty change. We would in general have serious reservations about opening up the European Union treaties. However, the substance and scope of the proposals and what is eventually acceptable to all EU partners will need to be examined before the possible need for treaty change and the form of such change can be assessed.

I welcome the publication in June by the Joint Committee on European Union Affairs on the EU-UK relationship. It acknowledges that British membership is important not just for Ireland, but for the European Union as a whole. The report makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of the issues at stake and is a powerful symbol of the cross-party consensus that Ireland is best served by our closest neighbour and good friend remaining in the Union.

Departments, led by my Department, are also very much engaged on the matter and have been for some time. In May, a new division was established in my Department to focus specifically on relations between Ireland and Britain, including bilateral issues that arise in the context of the EU-UK debate. That division also has responsibility for Northern Ireland where, of course, the impact of a British exit would be most severely and acutely felt. Preparatory work has already been undertaken on questions that might arise for Ireland in the event of a possible British exit from the Union. Of course, in that hypothetical situation much would depend on future EU-UK arrangements.

I wish to emphasise that the main aspect of our work has been on examining how to support UK membership of the Union rather than on planning for its withdrawal. The Government fully recognises that the economic dimension is significant. We are in regular contact with business groups and other civil society organisations which appreciate directly how crucial common EU membership is for the Irish-British bilateral economic relationship. Further work is being undertaken to enhance that understanding, including research that the Department of Finance has commissioned from the Economic and Social Research Institute on macro-economic links between the United Kingdom and Ireland in the context of our joint membership of the European Union.

I would add that the Government will continue to seek to ensure that Irish perspectives and concerns are understood in the United Kingdom. Our position was set out once again in recent speeches in Britain by myself and by the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade. In my contribution to the British Irish Association in Cambridge earlier this month, I emphasised the importance of Britain's continuing membership of the European Union, including in the context of stability and prosperity on the island of Ireland. Our embassy in London is also very much engaged in public diplomacy on the issue. However, we are very clear that the final question will be exclusively for the electorate in the United Kingdom to decide [...]

Ms McDonald: Let me just probe this a little bit further with the Taoiseach. He referred to circumstances in which we can be helpful. He said we will try to be helpful. I find that a little worrying. Let me tell the Taoiseach why. The tenor and nature of the reservations of British Tories, UKIP and a variety of other political forces about the European Union have been very obvious for a long time, particularly in recent times. I say this as a person who herself believes the European project is on the wrong track and that the European Union is long overdue a radical reassessment and a radical overhaul. That is my position and that of Sinn Féin on these matters. Is the corollary of prioritising more competition not the downgrading of "social Europe" yet again?

With regard to the issue raised concerning migration and welfare, it is scarcely surprising to say it is code for a sort of little-England, small-minded, *in extremis* and xenophobic view of migrants who come to Britain or any other part of the Union. This has been made all the more acute by the trauma in Syria and elsewhere and the resulting refugee crisis. I would be very worried if the Taoiseach were considering even for a second being helpful to a British Tory Government set on dismantling social protections, such as they are within the European Union, and placing even greater emphasis on and according greater supremacy to competition, competition law and the forces of the market or, in many cases, the forces of the jungle. I would be very worried if he were in any way proposing to give succour to a British Tory Government that wished to roll back the tide. What was the term that Mr. Cameron used? Was it "an influx of persons seeking to get into Britain"? His rhetoric was ugly on the issue of migration only very recently.

Deputy Kenny is, of course, Taoiseach but he is also the leader of Fine Gael. He has a particular worldview and much of his outlook is shared with the British Tories. The Tories, however, are not elected in any part of Ireland, as the Taoiseach is well aware. Certainly, this jurisdiction and its Taoiseach should not be party to any rowing back of social protection or social provision, much less playing into the hands of a xenophobic outlook in respect of migration.

Rather than having a generalised, bland or abstract perspective on what the British may or may not be looking for, we and the Government should have a very strong view on what we believe should be prioritised by way of reform at EU level. More to the point, the Taoiseach should know and be prepared to state very publicly on the floor of the Dáil those places to which he will not go to mollify or curry favour with Mr. David Cameron and his Tory colleagues.

The Taoiseach refers to the North almost as an afterthought in this debate. He says he is worried about the stability of the North. That is fair enough but the truth is that, in terms of our national interest and the interest of Ireland, the biggest dilemma and biggest potential problem for us consequent to any Brexit is the North. That is not a minor detail. In my view, it ought to be the centrepiece of the Taoiseach's and our concerns for any British exit strategy. In the Taoiseach's conversations with Mr. Cameron, has he asked him about this referendum and the North? Has he put it to Mr. Cameron that the people of the North and the others who live on the island of Ireland need to determine for themselves whether the North stays or goes in terms of EU membership? The Taoiseach will know that, in Scotland, First Minister Nicola Sturgeon has made clear that the Scottish would regard it as their right to have Scotland decide on its membership, or otherwise, of the European Union. Equally — I am sure the Taoiseach shares this view — it is a matter for the people in the North of Ireland to make that call. While that call is so significant in terms of trade, agriculture, PEACE funding and supports, as referred to, it represents, in a much more fundamental way, big stuff for Ireland because its economy, in the medium and longer terms, will grow and develop at its optimum rate and in the best way on an all-island basis.

In responding to this matter so far, the Taoiseach has expressed concerns for Ireland, by which I presume he means this jurisdiction. By saying "our relationship with Britain ", I presume he is referring to this jurisdiction again. The North is almost a separate consideration. That is the wrong way to go about this. The Taoiseach says that Mr. Cameron has spoken to some leaders about his proposals. I doubt that Mr. Cameron has been as coy with the Taoiseach as the Taoiseach is being with us in terms of setting out precisely what he has in mind. Can the Taoiseach reassure us that he is not being quite so coy in return and that he will defend the national interest, prioritise the issue of the North and the right of its people to set its course and decide in their own right on whether it should be in the Union, and not allow a decision by England, led by Tories or anybody else, to be imposed on them, or us, as an island people? [...]

Mr Kenny: For us, Northern Ireland is not an afterthought and far be it from Deputy McDonald to assume that. When Ireland held the EU Presidency at the start of 2013, we had personnel from Northern Ireland based in Brussels so that they were fully acquainted with what was happening. The issues were being discussed on the basis of an all-island economy.

We are very supportive of the British Government's move to give authority to the Northern Ireland Assembly to reduce corporation tax and make us more compatible as an island entity. We have been clear about that.

I have spoken to Prime Minister Cameron about the referendum but I do not know the question he is going to ask. I know the general nature of the question but not how it will be phrased. We have pointed out the impact of Britain leaving the European Union on both the Republic and Northern Ireland. Mr. Cameron is well aware of that.

Source: <https://www.kildarestreet.com/debates/?id=2015-09-29a.213&s=brexit#g281>