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Ireland challenges car dependency

Instead of continuing with the car-dominated policies of the past, Ireland has boldly prioritised public transport and active travel

► Ireland's 'celtic tiger' boom (between the mid-1990s and 2008) turned the Republic from one of the poorer western European countries to one of the wealthiest. In doing so it put a new car and a new house suddenly within reach of many more people. When the boom times ended a property bubble burst and Ireland was left with more sprawl (30% of the population live in one-off houses or ribbon developments), some of Europe's worst traffic congestion in Dublin, and a sense that the country had failed to sufficiently invest in its public transport infrastructure during the good times. The hangover from the boom years is now over and the Irish economy is on more of an even keel (with population and employment at record levels that are way beyond what was forecast). There's a desire to get it right this time, to show leadership on climate and to put Ireland more on a par with successful comparator small European nations where public transport infrastructure and provision is more comprehensive.

Cometh the hour cometh the man and determined but astute leadership is being given on transport by the Green Party's Eamon Ryan who has held the post of transport minister in a coalition government since September 2020. Ryan is clear that it's the end of the road for a car-dominated transport policy in Ireland and that a decisive shift to public transport and active travel is non-negotiable. But he also wants to bring people with him, given how people's fear of the unknown can

easily be used as rocket fuel for reactionary politics. He talks about helping people who are 'captive' motorists and are spending too much of their time in traffic jams instead of with their friends and families. He says he is not out to 'shame or price people off the roads' but to provide viable alternatives to car use.

As well as seeking to bring the public on side, the transport strategy attempts to co-design ways forward through working groups representing both private and public sector interests. It also roots transport policy in its contribution to a broad range of wider government objectives, such as putting 'town centres first' and supporting rural economies. Interestingly, it also covers topics that seem to be sidelined by the Department for Transport in England, like the role of parking.

What this looks like in practice is the Irish state backing transformational plans by local authorities for active travel (active travel spend is up from €23m in 2017 to €343m in 2023), road space reallocation and the implementation of enhanced networks of bus services which will benefit from more priority measures. Support for capacity building for local authorities to

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do this sits alongside the routing of more funding to those authorities that get on board with this new agenda. All of which is accompanied by significant investment in mass transit in Dublin and a positive mindset about the potential for rail reopenings across the island of Ireland.

One of the biggest successes for this new approach has been in rural areas where hitherto bus services have been decidedly patchy. Although almost 38% of the population live in a rural area, over 70% of those have limited or no public transport connections and almost 200 villages across Ireland were not served by regular public transport at all. 'Build it and they will come' doesn't always work for rural buses given that people have already planned their lives around the lack of bus services and cynicism about whether a new rural bus service is a gimmick that won't be around long. But, in Ireland, they have built it and people have come. The rebirth of the rural bus in Ireland is built on the firm foundations of careful planning and effective co-design which have underpinned the role of new 'Local Link' bus services and networks (alongside greater provision by state-owned Bus Éireann and existing commercial services often provided by long established SMEs). The National Transport Authority works with 15 regional Transport Coordination Units (TCUs) that administer and manage the Local Link services on behalf of the authority. Network redesigns have been rolled out based on regular interval, frequent services on core routes, coordinated with infill feeders (some of which are on a demand responsive basis).

Since the implementation of phase two of the project in 2023, 190 new towns and villages, 42 hospitals, and 34 higher education colleges have been connected by 120,000 more weekly kilometres of bus services. In one week, in June 2024, 95,000 passengers used these services (up from 6,000 passengers per week in 2018). Even its architects at the National Transport Authority have been surprised by the rate and extent of take up of these new services. Pent up demand from those who had been doing 'work arounds' because of the lack of a bus service, older and younger passengers (who can't or don't want to drive) and car-free tourism all appear to have played a part. Maybe too the fact that in Ireland the new bus services are seen as something provided by

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Transport minister Eamon Ryan, pictured last year at the launch of a new electric bus fleet for Athlone, County Westmeath

the Irish State and therefore there is more of a sense of permanence.

Moving from Ireland's countryside to its capital city, the pace of change is also picking up - as is the challenge for Eamon Ryan of taking people with him. Road pricing may be off the table but radically changing the balance of road use in the city centre is not. A new Dublin transport strategy aims to do just that. Even before this, if you spend any time in Dublin it won't be long before you see new, or under construction, active travel schemes. But, as has recently happened in New York (which stepped back from road pricing at the last moment), as implementation of the plan draws closer to sign off a reactionary crescendo is building with siren voices calling on Dublin City Council to water the plan down. Eamon Ryan is urging them to stand firm at what is a pivotal moment.

Alongside the hoped-for remaking of Dublin for people rather than predominantly for private vehicles, a step change in rail-based mass transit is also on its way. At present Dublin's rail and light rail provision has three

main elements - all with their own separate branding and identity. The DART (cross-city from North to South), LUAS (a tram system on east to west and north to south axes) and heavy rail commuter services. Of these the DART does a great job but is showing its age. LUAS is modern and smart whilst commuter rail services can be low frequency and provided by Japanese-built trains which haven't aged well for noise and vibration. Meanwhile Dublin's buses are a further separate entity. Fare integration between the networks is improving (but not fully there yet) and when you know the system you can play tunes on it to get to where you need to be.

The plan (in a nutshell) is to renew and extend DART (including transforming more existing heavy rail lines), keep expanding LUAS and add a new baby to the family - Ireland's first Metro, running from the airport to the city centre. You can see a lot of transit orientated development already if you ride the rails of Dublin's transport network, but the system expansions are predicated on a whole lot more. Meanwhile there are plans to keep

rolling out more bus priority corridors - which, alongside the greening of the bus fleet, and a network redesign, should be transformative.

Ireland has a good story to tell already on public transport and active travel. The current young generation is the first where there has been an increase in walking and cycling to school. Car use in absolute and modal share terms is falling whilst public transport use is at record levels. Small countries can do big things at a time when leadership and opportunity come together. That's where Ireland is right now. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

► For decades Jonathan Bray has been at the forefront of making progressive change happen on transport - from stopping the national roads programme in its tracks in the 1990s to getting buses back under public control in the 2020s. He is an advisor to the Welsh Government on bus franchising and an independent advisor. www.jonathan-bray.com