

IS LEITRIM POOR?

James Wrynn

MANY PEOPLE in Ireland have an impression that Leitrim is the poorest county in Ireland. In fact, it is an impression we ourselves in Leitrim often encourage with a view to leveraging financial resources from central government and other funding agencies. Myles na gCopalleen (Flann O'Brien) in his famous 1941 book, *An Béal Bocht/The Poor Mouth*, parodied the poverty pleading strands of Kerry Gaeltacht literature. Perhaps, if he were writing today, he might draw on the poverty pleading of Leitrim.

But are we really poor? Poverty can be viewed in absolute or relative terms. No poverty in Ireland of any kind compares to the absolute poverty of groups in war-torn Syria or Yemen. The poverty of rural and city slum-dwelling, living conditions in parts of South America is shocking. These are examples of absolute poverty, but in reasonably developed countries feelings of poverty often depend, not on outright deprivation, but on whether you are looking up or looking down.

In the late 1980s, when I was doing some work in the European Parliament, I brought a group of MEPs to look at the difficulties and poverty of farming in Leitrim. Before we got to our first port of call, the Model Farm in Ballinamore, the Dutch were aghast at the miserable state of the road from Dublin and particularly the stretch from Dromod to Ballinamore, a famine relief construction showing its origins. As the day wore on, the Portuguese scratched their heads and wondered where were the poverty stricken farmers. All they saw was a tractor and car in every farmyard visited, unheard of on small farms on the scrubby hills of Portugal.

We all know that the population of Leitrim declined from about 150,000 prior to the Famine to around 25,000 in the 1990s, the worst decline of any county in Ireland. Such a dramatic fall is surely a sign of consistent economic failure and probable poverty. We had our own specially designed, local tyrant, Lord Leitrim, to blame for being one of the baddies in the 19th century that included so much population decline. However, as Fiona Slevin points out in her measured biography of Lord Leitrim, he actually had some good points. For example, in his early years he sought to improve farming methods, if in a tyrannical way, and he railed

against the ineffectiveness of British policy during the Famine. But generally speaking, Lord Leitrim was a pretty awful creature and is a handy target of abuse. But let's not be selective. We don't emphasise to the same degree the part of that catastrophe of population decline that happened in the more recent period under the first forty years of native government from the 1920s to the 1960s, when the population of Leitrim fell from 64,000 to 25,000.

So how does Leitrim stand today? There are 195 countries in the world and Ireland is in the top ten in terms of income per person. That's a pretty good place to be even if you are the poorest part of it. But of course we are not the poorest part of this rich republic of twenty-six counties. In fact, Leitrim is 14th by county from the top in terms of income per person. That is 14th from the top of the twenty-six, and it actually means we are more or less in the middle.

The quality of our everyday lives is not only determined by income, important as it is. Just as poverty includes economic poverty, poverty of opportunity and poverty of the capacity to lead a fulfilled life, a good life includes more than economic opportunity. In many ways, life in Leitrim measures up on these wider dimensions. Nothing determines our life chances more than education. Leitrim has the highest rate of participation in third level education in Ireland with sixty percent of Leaving Certificate students going to college. That is important wealth and a tribute to the ambition of students and parents and the quality of our teachers and schools in Leitrim.

Séan O'Casey, the dramatist, was a great advocate of not just a decent wage for all, but of a full life for all. One way in which he made the point was by his famous comment, 'There should be not just a loaf, but a vase of flowers on every table'.

There is a great richness in social and cultural life in Leitrim that includes All-Ireland winning drama, choirs, The Joe Mooney Summer School, the Glens Centre activity in Manorhamilton and a range of other interest groups and activities in almost every parish in Leitrim. Leitrim may not win football All-Irelands but the twenty four GAA clubs in the county are an amazing example of recreation provision through local voluntary activity involving huge numbers of young and old, male and female. All of these and other similar activities are the petals on the flowers of O'Casey's vase.

County Councils in Ireland have long been the butt of fun and abuse. Leitrim County Council is no perfect model of good local government. Planning regulation during the Celtic Tiger marred many of our villages and towns

and while it is no excuse, Leitrim County Council had company in every county in Ireland in the matter. We can speculate on a broader national and cultural malaise in relation to societal values in this regard.

But in many areas our Council has been outstanding and is an exemplar to other counties. Our towns and villages face challenges of retail decline, but the Council has been assiduous in improving the physical appearance of every one of our towns and villages by the under-grounding of all telephone and electrical cabling. There is a planned programme of playground provision across the county which is well advanced.

Our library service is excellent with participation and use by the people of the county above average in Ireland. The County Arts Programme, the Dock in Carrick and the direct support for local arts and cultural activities are the envy of many larger, wealthier counties.

Of course Leitrim is no paradise. There are problems of individual and family poverty. There is isolation and loneliness, partly because of our thin population. As mentioned earlier, town and village decline is a major challenge. Unemployment is still too high. Generating good local employment is difficult.

But, initiatives by: *the Hub* in Drumshanbo, by large indigenous companies like *VistaMed* with over 400 employees, *Jetwash* in Carrigallen with 62 employees, *Merenda* in Manorhamilton with 20 employees, *ICS Furniture* in Dromod with 18 employees and smaller companies like *Stephen Egan Furniture*, indicate a vibrancy in job creation.

There are many others as well.

In the midst of the excellent and not so excellent, Leitrim people are critically proud of their traditions, but are not paralysed by them. We are equally critically open to change and we display a tolerance and ease with diversity which have a comfortable home in Leitrim.

Leitrim is a county of richness in its broadest sense.

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