

**Frank McDonald** is Environment Editor of *The Irish Times*, author of *The Destruction of Dublin, Saving the City* and *The Construction of Dublin*, and joint author with James Nix of *Chaos at the Crossroads*.

# The road to God-knows-where **Frank McDonald**

RECEIVED IMAGES of Dublin, and of Ireland, in the international public consciousness are of a graceful Georgian city and a country replete with wild, beautiful landscapes. Among architects abroad, Dublin's recent success in pursuing an urban renewal agenda would also be known from the many awards for projects such as Temple Bar. There would also be a general awareness of the remarkable transformation of Ireland's economy over the past decade by the 'Celtic Tiger' boom, which has turned us—much to our own amazement—into the second wealthiest country in the world (measured on a per capita basis).

Nothing more graphically illustrates this metamorphosis than the figures for migration. During the bleak years of the 1980s, 40,000 people a year—including the best and brightest—were leaving the country to get jobs in Britain, continental Europe and the USA. Now, ironically, a greater number of immigrants enters Ireland every year from other European Union member states (notably Poland), as well as from Asia, Africa and Latin America. One recent survey found that no less than 167 languages are in daily use in Ireland today—truly amazing for an island at the edge of Europe.

### **Bursting at the seams**

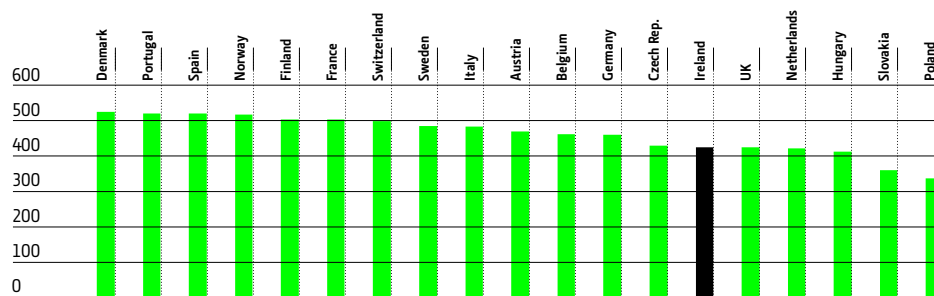
The State's population stands at 4.2 million, its highest level since 1861, with foreign nationals accounting for around 10% of the total. It has been rising by a record 2% per year since 2002, which is the largest growth rate in the EU and shows no signs of tailing off; according to projections, the population could exceed 5 million by 2020. But given that it has been on a steeply upward curve since the mid-1990s, this presented the Government with a unique opportunity to use population growth as an engine for sensible and forward-thinking spatial planning based on the principles of environmental sustainability and balanced regional development. That opportunity has been

squandered, and spectacularly so. Indeed, Ireland is on the way to becoming a city-state, with Dublin dominating everywhere else. Its capital has become an alarming example of the 21st century phenomenon of the 'metacity', with tentacles stretching out all over the province of Leinster—via the spokes of a Dublin-centred motorway network—and pieces of the city popping up on the outskirts of towns and villages within a radius of 80 to 100 kilometres. The increasingly European-style city centre, with its new apartment buildings, smart shops and cappuccino bars, is surrounded by a vast, sprawling North American-style 'edge city'.

Census 2006 confirmed Dublin's unrestrained sprawl and, more generally, the suburbanisation of Ireland at the expense of its cities. Indeed, its population statistics starkly illuminated the Government's *laissez faire* approach to regional planning and its abject failure to ensure that growth happens in an orderly way in the right places. Thus, Dublin has even been allowed to sprawl into parts of the province of Ulster. As the Central Statistics Office (CSO) noted in its own commentary, Cavan had the highest growth rate of the three Ulster counties, with 'the main stimulus coming from the south of the county which is within commuting distance of Dublin'.

Leinster's share of the State's overall population has continued to increase, largely fuelled by the sprawl of Dublin; it now accounts for just over 54% of the total. All of the counties in Leinster increased their populations between 2002 and 2006, in most cases by more than the national average rate of 8%. Over the past 10 years, as the CSO noted, three counties—Fingal, Meath and Kildare—accounted for nearly 30% of the 609,000 growth in the State's population. Fingal grew by an astonishing 22% over the past four years, with the largest increase (32%) in the Blakestown area of Blanchardstown, one of the three 'new towns' on the immediate outskirts of Dublin.

Figure 1  
Average housing stock per  
1,000 of population among the  
19 countries in the Euroconstruct  
network, 2005  
Source CSO: Central Statistics  
Office Ireland



Between them, Meath, Kildare and Wicklow registered an increase of 15% in the same period. The Midland Region, with an 11.5% rise, also comfortably exceeded the national average rate. As the CSO noted, its counties—Laois, Longford, Offaly and Westmeath—also form part of the wider Dublin commuter belt. By contrast, the capital's own population grew by just 5.6%, with the large increase in Fingal being offset by smaller increases in Dublin City (2%), Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown (1%) and South Dublin (3.4%). The main reasons for this sluggish performance were attributed by the CSO to 'the relatively low level of new housing and an ageing population'.

As Hubert Fitzpatrick, director of the Irish Home Builders' Association, said: 'What is happening is that the failure to provide sufficient zoned and serviced lands in Dublin ... is creating a 'doughnut' effect, whereby increasing numbers of Dublin-based workers are being forced to move further and further from the city and inevitably rely in the main on car-based commuting'. This is the direct opposite of what was meant to happen under the 1999 Strategic Planning Guidelines for the Greater Dublin Area (GDA), which laid down a policy of consolidating the metropolitan area, with only limited growth envisaged for the major towns of its hinterland. That policy is now in tatters.

Nothing more graphically illustrates the Government's failure than the case of Gorey, in Co Wexford, 100km south of Dublin. Local councillors were allowed to get away with rezoning vast tracts of land around this planned 17th century market town for residential development aimed at long-distance commuters. As a result, Gorey's population soared by 44% between 1996 and 2002 and its outskirts recorded an even larger increase (53%) over the past four years. The local area plan concedes that at least 40% 'and possibly even as much as 70%' of the new residents commute to Dublin on a daily basis, mostly by car, making use of the much-improved

N11 national primary route.

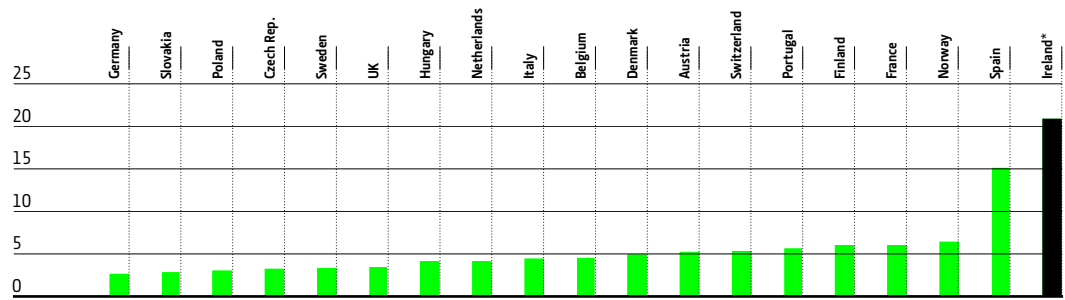
While this plan was being hatched, Martin Cullen—then Minister for the Environment—declined to use the powers available to him under the 2000 Planning Act to rescind it. In October 2005, after a sod-turning ceremony for the N11 Gorey bypass, Cullen—now wearing his hat as Minister for Transport—hailed it as one of the fastest growing towns in the south-east. 'The demographic change which Gorey has undergone has been immense. We in Government must respond to this change', he said. In effect, he was conceding that there had been a failure of political leadership to prevent the country being consumed by rampant unsustainable development.

### **Bowling alone**

Although Taoiseach Bertie Ahern once identified sustainable development as 'fundamental' to his vision of Ireland, the truth is neither he nor his Government has done anything to make it a reality on the ground. As a result, the nightmare scenario painted by Robert Putnam, in *Bowling Alone*, of community and even family life being eroded by long-distance commuting, has become a grim reality for many Irish people. Bertie Ahern is said to have read the book twice and even invited Putnam to speak at a Fianna Fáil parliamentary party 'think-in', but there is no evidence that this has had any impact on public policy, particularly the need to curb sprawl.

Even as Dublin's fringe areas experienced astounding rates of growth—54.6% in Ratoath, Co Meath, for example—older established suburbs saw their populations decline by between 8% and 16%, largely due to the effects of the 'empty nest' syndrome. The flight of younger people to outer suburban areas in search of affordable housing was mirrored by the Census returns for Cork, Limerick and Waterford. The populations of Cork City and Limerick City fell by 3.2% and 2.7% respec-

Figure 2  
Annual new dwelling completions  
per 1,000 of population among the  
19 countries in the Euroconstruct  
network, 2005  
Source CSO



tively, while Waterford City recorded a modest increase of 2.6%. Meanwhile, Co Cork (+11.4%) was the fastest growing county in Munster, followed by Co Waterford (+9.2%) and Co Limerick (+8.3%).

The most dreadful doughnut of all is Letterkenny, the largest town in Co Donegal. Its core population plummeted by nearly 23% since 2002 while surrounding rural areas recorded an aggregate increase of nearly 27%, with two townlands—Ballymacool and Corravaddy—turning in growth rates of 43% and 51% respectively. But then, Letterkenny is remarkable for barely having more than one coherent street even as the fields around it, up hills and down dales, were covered in concrete and tarmac. The county, once prized for its spectacular scenery, has become a byword for haphazard development, spreading like wildfire along its rugged coastline.

Galway did rather better than the other cities, although the rapid growth in its population since 1991 moderated to 9.3% between 2002 and 2006; one of the reasons given was that many infill developments in city areas consisted of apartments catering for only one or two persons. And there's the nub. Unlike most of their European counterparts, Irish families still prefer our version of the Garden City ideal—two-storey houses with front and back gardens, generally built at 10 units per acre (24 per hectare) and laid out along grass-verged roads, with ample room for car parking; this has been the spatial norm for Ireland's suburbia from the 1960s onwards.

### **A prairie mentality**

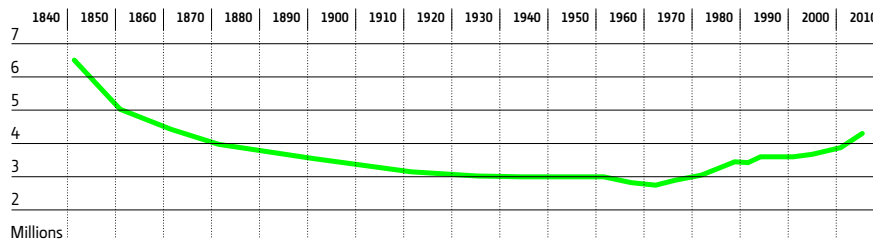
Things began to change, at least to some extent, after the adoption of new Residential Density Guidelines in 1999. New Dublin development areas such as Adamstown, Pelletstown and Stepside are radically different in form, consisting predominantly of apartment blocks

and, with the emphasis on creating mixed use, 'walkable neighbourhoods'. But their success is critically linked to the timely provision of good public transport, to give residents a credible alternative to cars. The viability of a metro, however, is questionable in a meta-city like Dublin—unless traditional suburban housing is replaced by much higher density development along the corridors it would serve.

In the meantime, Dublin and Ireland's smaller cities are faced with problem of 'stranded assets', particularly schools in established suburbs with ageing population profiles; even writer Roddy Doyle's alma mater, Greendale Community School in the older Dublin suburb of Kilbarrack, is threatened with closure. Conversely, schools in rapidly expanding areas are bursting at the seams or have yet to be built, at public expense. In the seaside settlement of Laytown, Co Meath, 'almost 100 children will have no school to go to in September', local Labour councillor Dominic Hannigan complained. 'Hundreds of people have to commute to work on crowded trains, roads and buses. This is affecting the quality of life for hard-working families. Sewerage and water facilities are creaking and there are few playgrounds and leisure facilities for our youth', he said. What the residents of Co Meath are offered in terms of transportation is another motorway—the M3—which would snake past the Hill of Tara, ancient seat of Ireland's high kings, and the more distant prospect of reinstating an old railway line linking Navan, the county's principal town, with Dublin. This is surely a case of 'putting the cart before the horse', ditching any notion of sustainable development.

Even more unsustainable—and uniquely Irish—is the sprawl of one-off houses throughout the countryside. Mainly urban-generated—UGH, to use Tom de Paor's apt acronym—these account for up to 40% of Ireland's record output of new housing, which is currently among the highest in Europe. This extraordinary

Figure 3  
Population 1841-2006 (26 Counties)  
Source CSO



phenomenon, which threatens to destroy the landscape and raw material of Irish tourism, is actually encouraged by official policy (the preposterously-titled *Sustainable Rural Housing Guidelines*), and panders to the interest of farmers in selling sites at a time of agricultural decline—no matter what environmental groups such as An Taisce have to say about it.

The colonisation of the countryside for housing is also driven by a false perception that land in Ireland is an unlimited resource. This prairie mentality is aggravated by a cultural attachment to the idea that every citizen, as John Waters put it, ‘had the right to nest where he pleased in a nest of his own designing’. The Irish Rural Dwellers Association has also argued that there is nothing wrong with reverting to the dispersed settlement pattern which existed on the island in pre-Famine times—ignoring the fact that very few people ventured far outside their own parishes until the development of the railways in the mid-19th century. Now, of course, they all have cars.

### **Running on empty**

Given the runaway suburbanisation we are witnessing today—including UGH—it is no wonder that Ireland has become one of the most car-dependent countries in the world. A report in 2000, *Transport Investment and Economic Development*, showed that the average car travels a distance of 24,400km per year—70% more than France or Germany, 50% more than Britain and 30% more than the USA. With rising prosperity, the number of cars went up by more than two-thirds from 939,022 in 1994 to 1,582,833 in 2004, while the number of trucks and commercial vehicles nearly doubled from 135,809 to 268,082, as more goods are being transported by road.

Until the Celtic Tiger era, Ireland’s oil consumption per capita was below the EU average. But for every 1% increase in economic growth, oil use has gone

# Population 4,234,925

## Highest since 1861

## Increase of 317,722 since 2002

## Highest increase in EU

## 50% increase since 1961 (2.8m)

Census 2006

up by 2%—largely as a result of the explosion in car numbers and road traffic generally since the mid-1990s. Oil accounts for more than 57% of our overall energy consumption—much higher than the EU average. Greenhouse gas emissions from the transport sector have risen by 144% between 1990 and 2004, making our Kyoto target even more difficult to meet. And with the Government investing €30 million *per week* in motorways and other major roads, we are being locked into a US-style reliance on imported oil.

### **Apocalypse now?**

What is to be done? Well, some of us were naïve enough to think that it was on the way to being sorted back in 1986 at the Dublin Crisis Conference. At the time, practically every element of public policy was pointing in the wrong direction. Most appallingly, the inner city was being evacuated and carved up for roads, and the prospect of it accommodating even an extra 10,000 people was written off by the planners. But the conference’s agenda of repopulating the urban core and improving public transport, rather than merely roads, soon became part of public policy. Most hearteningly of all, the number of inner city dwellers now stands at nearly 115,000—up from 75,000 in 1991.

The real problem is that the Government does not recognise the asset value of cities, either in its *National Spatial Strategy*, published in 2002, or its ‘decen-

Figure 4  
 Components of Population Change  
 Census periods 1926-2006  
 Source CSO

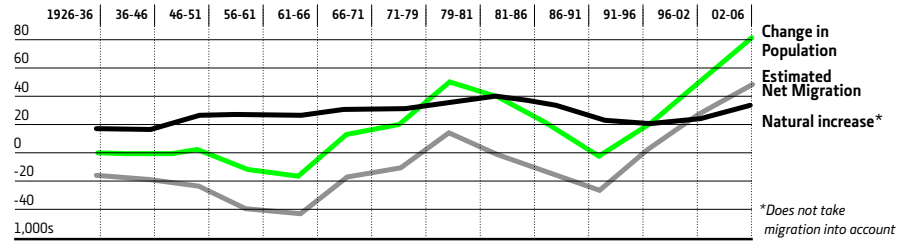


Figure 5  
 Percentage change in the population  
 of electoral divisions, 2002-2006  
 Source CSO

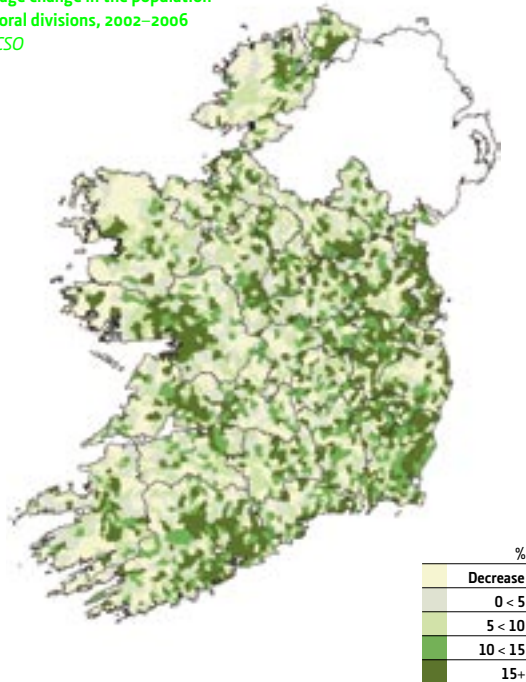


Figure 6  
 Percentage change in the population  
 of electoral divisions within Dublin,  
 2002-2006  
 Source CSO



tralisation’ programme, promulgated in 2003. Under this crackpot programme, 10,300 public servants were to be relocated from Dublin to 53 places spread over 25 counties. Of the 920 who were to be sent to Cork, not one was to go to the city; they were to be dispersed to Clonakilty, Kanturk, Macroom, Mallow, Mitchelstown and Youghal. What chance then that Cork City Council would be able to realise its vision of developing the redundant docklands along the River Lee, just as Dublin is doing along the River Liffey?

The Government’s failure to recognise Ireland’s need for a real counterweight to Dublin’s dominance is its most grievous error of all. It could have embraced Dr Edward Walsh’s concept of an Atlantic Technology Corridor linking Galway, Limerick/Shannon and Cork, but it shamelessly shirked that challenge. Instead, everything is being left to the market to decide—whether it’s the explosive growth of new suburbs or the pock-marking of rural landscapes with UGH. In 10 years’ time, the country will be well and truly ruined, and we as a people will be consumed with regret at having allowed Ireland to be turned into a free-fire development zone, a sort of mountainy version of Flanders.