

COMMENT & OPINION

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Motorway madness will define an era

Joe Horgan

IT COULD be that it will come to be the symbol of the much vaunted and now possibly ailing, Celtic Tiger. Forget the Bertie Bowl, Bertie's plan to build a sports stadium, that even his ally Michael McDowell dismissed as something worthy of a dictator.

Forget the huge houses with the numerous bathrooms. Forget the SUVs and the blonde ambitious drivers. Forget the nannies and the au pairs. Forget the Irish as the absentee landlords of eastern Europe. Forget the mindless excess. Forget the overthrow of the Church by the new religion, shopping. Forget all of that. The defining symbol of this age will surely be the M3 motorway through Tara. That is the thing that future generations will look back on as encapsulating Ireland in these days.

The M3 was back in the news again recently as the Minister for the Environment imposed a temporary preservation order on a prehistoric fort the motorway is about to go through. It was the first sign that having the Greens in power might actually make a difference. What it will mean in the long run is another matter but it at least suggests that, despite his protestations to the contrary, the Minister does indeed have the power to act. What is most striking about this motorway though is not the voices from around the world opposing it.

Nor the underhand, archotypically Fianna Fail manner, in which it was signed off by the outgoing Minister as his last act before handing over to the Greens. Nor is it the realisation that the National Roads Authority is almost a government within a government. Nor is it even the courage and fortitude of those people, many of them local, that continue to do everything they can to stop it against what seems to be overwhelming odds.

None of these are the most striking aspects of this motorway. What is the most telling thing of all about the M3 is merely the fact that it is going ahead at all. What kind of society even considers that it is a good thing to build a motorway through such an

area as the Hill of Tara. What kind of country even looks at this place and decides that a motorway through a landscape drenched in history a place of integral significance to the very sense of what this nation is, is something even worth considering. Even after all that has been done here this step is still astonishing. Even after selling off a corner of Mayo to the multi-national Shell and imprisoning the locals who fought against it. Even after selling the iconic Old Head of Kinsale to an exclusive British consortium and allowing locals to be banished from access to it. Even after all of these petty but fundamental abuses the very credence given to the notion of this motorway is still astonishing.

Even when it is clear that there is an absence of decency in Irish politics this project is a new low. Even as government minister after government minister speaks out in favour of a clearly dubious Taoiseach this motorway carries its own stench. Whilst politicians line up to back Bertie, debasing politics, government and Fianna Fail in one fell swoop with their words, this road presides over all with its baseness. Even a ruling political culture that questions not the details of Bertie's bizarre financial dealings but the very fact that he should be questioned about them stinks a little bit more on account of this motorway

The Cork poet Theo Dorgan once said that what disheartened him most about modern Ireland was the realisation that he had once lived in a Republic but now lived in an economy. It is the economy that has been the sole reason supporters of the motorway have given for its construction. The economy, something which seems to exist independently of the nation, is being adversely affected by the fact that the suburban satellites serving Dublin cannot access the workplaces of Dublin quickly enough. So the argument is that the motorway will not improve the lives of weary commuters but will increase the efficiency of the endlessly churning, endlessly demanding market place that modern Ireland has chained itself to.

What appears to me the fundamental question here is not one of routes or one of preservation orders on particular monuments. What the only issue really is one of what collective mind thought this motorway acceptable in the first place. What this motorway does is tell us quite clearly about the values that are prevalent in modern Ireland and looking closely at that I'd challenge anyone to say that it looks like something to be proud of.

