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Suggestion to bring realistic regional balance to the North West Region

The correct way to address any problem lies in the tried and tested steps of (1) identifying the problem, (2) proposing appropriate solutions based on the correct identification of the problem and (3) implementing those solutions. Where previously tried proposals have failed, they need to be critically analysed in order to ascertain whether they failed because they weren't correctly applied or because they were the wrong solutions in the first place.

The best approach to a problem like population decline and lack of economic activity in a Region is to look at the root causes of the problem, and not at any existing attempts by local or national government to address it. In our case in the NWRA Region, most of our problems relate to the fact that we follow a strong global trend of movement to cities. This stems from a decline in subsistence farming (leading to increased farm sizes and lower rural population density) and increased educational opportunities for young people. Many young people leave not because they have to, but because they want to, but this is rarely acknowledged. If you go to college and get a degree, would you come back to Ballaghaderreen to work in a factory or would you look for a career that matches your training and aspirations? The question that follows-on from that is whether politicians and Regional bodies are doing anything to attract the kind of industries to the region that well-qualified young people will want to work in. Are they helping create the conditions, including quality of life, that attract these industries and indeed the necessary staff, or are they beating the same old drum that has not worked up to now?

The market will do nothing to reverse the decline of rural Ireland; the State must intervene to divert resources that will help create employment and sustain society in rural areas. However these interventions must be sustainable; there is little point in subsidising industry in the west of Ireland if that industry will fail as soon as supports are removed. There is also the question of whether it is fair that taxpayers in cities (many of whom commute long distances and work long days for the reward of living in conditions that are cramped by comparison with the lifestyles we enjoy) should subsidise our lifestyle and our choices.

Industry requires a number of basic criteria to establish and survive in any area. Companies look above all for an available pool of workers at the right price point and with the necessary training and skills. They also look for good (and appropriate) communications and transport infrastructure, and sometimes raw materials where a manufacturing process is involved. However an often overlooked measure used by the HR Departments of corporations is what they call 'quality of life', a measure that is difficult to define but that essentially refers to their ability to persuade staff to either move to or stay in an area where they plan to locate. In the case of many hi-tech companies, this relates to culture and outdoor recreation, as well as the prevalence of amenities and services like restaurants, theatres, schools, etc. In essence, it would be difficult if not impossible to entice a 'Silicon Valley' type corporation to locate in a small town like Ballaghaderreen, but it might be persuaded to locate in Galway or Sligo.

It is arguable that the enticement of major employers to this region should focus mostly on Sligo and Galway, since a well-paid and interesting job in Sligo is of more value to someone around here than a low-paid job closer to home. A lot of people live within an easy commute of Sligo, when you consider the reality that is the daily lives of many people on the east coast, where people commute from Mullingar, Portlaoise and Dundalk to jobs in Dublin on a daily basis. This however is an approach that does not fit well with local politicians, who spend a lot of time lobbying in vain for jobs in their home patch but who could serve us better by taking a regional view. Despite this political stagnation, it is logical to suggest that the doubling of the size of Sligo over twenty or thirty years is an attainable objective.

The following is simply an attempt to get decision-makers to think outside the normal groupthink that has failed to address any of the problems of the North-West Region. While it could and would solve many problems in the North-West, and would kick-start economic development and the provision of infrastructure, it would be unpopular politically and could be rendered unworkable by TDs whose main agenda is of necessity getting themselves re-elected. The problems of the west are almost entirely of our own making, with our choice of representatives and their ineffective, populist policies and lack of vision at the root of most of our problems. Our favoured approach has always been the 'begging bowl' strategy, which is never going to provide anything except crumbs.

Saving the West, starting with Sligo

The 'First Programme for Economic Development' in 1958 proposed investment in a number of main centres of population, suggesting that this would create 'trickle-down' gains for rural areas. The initiative was challenged by James McDwyer in Donegal and by M. J. Costello, and their querying of what they saw as the abandonment of the West led ultimately to the 'Save the West' campaign.

In a sense, none of it made any difference, and the launch of a similar initiative – the 'Save Rural Ireland Alliance' in 2015 – achieved little either, other than to highlight the lack of progress over a fifty-seven year period. Apart from 'save the west' being a handy mantra for politicians, nobody has yet come up with a plan to reverse the decline of rural Ireland, and the current National Development Plan does little to address core issues either. This lack of focus on realistic solutions for the west is not the fault of the people who drafted the plan; it is entirely down to a lack of vision and leadership from the people that we elect and who are supposed to represent our best interests.

Except for encouraging government to divert a small number of multinational companies into Mayo and other peripheral regions, the people who raised concerns in 1958 failed to reverse government policy on rural Ireland. Many of those industries were not sustainable and failed either to become embedded in localities or to create the necessary synergy to grow communities in the West. Some large industries were established but closed or moved away as the commercial landscape changed. Other industries that were built on protectionism or political connections also closed as the reasons for their success disappeared. In the worst affected areas in Sligo, Leitrim, Mayo, Roscommon and Donegal we are in arguably worse shape than we were in 1958, as the major employer of the time – the family farm – is losing numbers at an alarming rate. Additional issues around succession in agriculture suggest that this problem is worsening, and that the outcome is predictable given the demographic. Government, and indeed local politicians, seems unable or unwilling to act.

One economic factor that sustained many communities during the recent recession, and that was a mainstay of local small businesses was the income from the salaries of public servants employed locally. Even if other service businesses had cut back or ceased operating, incomes from state employees stayed more or less constant, and this income was largely spent locally and its multiplier effect kept many businesses and households afloat. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the salary cuts imposed on civil servants had an immediate impact on local communities, affecting discretionary spending and areas like farmers markets and local services for example.

In order to maintain or even reverse population decline in the Region, some fresh thinking has to be applied to a problem that has worsened because of lack of focus and even disinterest from the centre. There is little point in dropping small injections of funding into every small town and village and hoping to solve the problem by creating a few jobs here and there that have no sustainable base and that will disappear when the Leader or other funding

dries up. A selected number of centres have to be targeted with new initiatives, moving some of the centre of gravity away from the East coast and into western centres such as Cork, Limerick, Galway and Sligo.

The first three cities are already on a growth trajectory and simply require close shepherding and adequate infrastructure. Galway for instance has the capability of growing further as a centre of financial and medical technology industries, but traffic problems caused by the delay in building a bypass road are choking the city. Cork is growing, and Limerick is coming out of recession and should develop organically if carefully supported. In particular, the city's closeness to Shannon Airport and its easy access by road and rail from Dublin are assets that can be leveraged.

Sligo remains the centre that lacks critical mass in many respects. It has a poor road link to Dublin, particularly in the Longford area and in Carrick on Shannon, as well as a slow train service; the first of these is being addressed, albeit slowly, and the second may be looked at in the term of the current National Development Plan. The town has a port, but it is small and suffers from silting, and it doesn't provide easy access to any market destinations apart from Scotland. Sligo Institute of Technology is small by international standards with only 6,500 students, but it has several well-regarded departments and is a leader in distance learning. Sligo hospital is in many ways unfit for purpose.

Other quality of life factors in Sligo are good; the area is a tourism destination with attractive landscape and outdoor and cultural attractions. House prices represent good value when compared to the Capital; the median price for a 4-bedroom semi-detached home in quarter two of 2017 in Sligo was €177,000 compared to €440,000 in Dublin. Leitrim was even lower at €115,000, with Donegal at €135,000, Mayo at €140,000 and Roscommon at €99,000. (Source: quarterly report from Myhome.ie). The region has good beaches, and a well-established surfing culture that has spawned food businesses and other associated industries. A proposed greenway development from Enniskillen to Bellaghy with a possible extension to Athenry to connect with a national greenway network seems set to feed substantial numbers of tourists into the region but also to provide safe commuting and amenity use for families and individuals. The greenway will also connect with the mountain bike project in Coolaney, a perfect synergy for inclusive family recreation.

The weakest points in Sligo's future are low population numbers and the lack of well-paid jobs to sustain further generations and keep them in the area. These numbers will not grow to reach critical mass without a major intervention by central government.

Where can these jobs come from?

Making Sligo the administrative capital of Ireland

Ireland's civil service directly employs more than 35,000 staff, and 46% of these or 16,000 work in Dublin. They break down into grades as follows.

Numbers employed in Dublin estimated for grades below AP.

Number	Grade description	% of total	Numbers employed in Dublin
264	Gen Sec + Assistant Sec	0.7	

1189	Principal	3.3	
3424	Assistant Principal	9.7	
6217	Admin Officer + Higher Admin	17.5	547
5769	Executive Officer	16.3	2,653
1552	Staff Officer	4.4	714
11,632	Clerical	32.8	5351
5385	Other grades	15.2	2477
		Total	11,742

Most of the jobs from Admin Officer downwards are not location-specific and can in theory be done from anywhere. Current practice in government administration is to drive all enquiries to an online contact or to a telephone call centre operation; there is little face-to-face contact on clerical duties any more, and this trend towards centralised information provision is set to develop further in that direction. It would make sense therefore to relocate at least 10,000 jobs at this level across all departments to one location outside Dublin, and Sligo fits that proposal perfectly.

Removing 10,000 indoor administrative jobs from the centre of Dublin would also release approximately 150,000 sq m of office accommodation into a market that is experiencing severe shortages. It would also free up around 3,000 houses or apartments in the greater Dublin area, in a market that also has a scarcity of such accommodation.

There is a cost benefit to accommodating staff in lower cost accommodation than the centre of Dublin. The opportunity cost in freeing up buildings like Agriculture House and the Department of Transport in Kildare Street for instance is significant.

Why one location, and why not scatter these jobs widely?

Previous attempts at decentralising government jobs have ignored a number of critical issues, as follows:

1. Moving out of Dublin for work reasons is a one-way street for home-owners. A civil servant who has established themselves on the property ladder in Dublin is often reluctant to move because a subsequent move back to the Capital would be impossible. While moving down the country is financially attractive, it tends to lose that attraction if a move back to Dublin is contemplated at some point, as in the case of a promotion.
2. Civil servants tend to seek promotional opportunities across all departments, not just the one they work in. This is uncomplicated when all departments are located close to each other, but more complex when it involves moving between locations that are in some cases more than 200 Km apart. Moving away from Dublin to a location that has a single government department is probably a bad career move.
3. There can be a significant synergy between government departments where they are located close together, or on one campus. Security, service and supply contracts can be operated at significant savings, as can purchasing of goods and supplies. One large campus would be an attractive market for supplier companies, compared to scattered locations.

The scattering of decentralised government functions across a range of locations in previous decentralisation initiatives has tended to be related to political expediency and not any logical plan around restructuring of services. In fact, logic was often the last criterion used to locate decentralised departments. Ministers and individual TDs with an eye on the next election have dictated the location of decentralised offices, with no thought as to the rationality of any such moves. The net result has been the creation of career backwaters in many cases as well as a sizeable rump of staff in departments who have refused to move, creating problems with accommodation and management of services. It has also resulted in functions that should have been retained in the Capital being diverted to unsuitable locations. In the case of Irish Aid for instance, this function was relocated to Limerick when logic should

have dictated that it stay close to the embassy belt in Dublin – Irish Aid was probably the last government department that should have been considered for relocation.

Should entire departments be relocated to Sligo, or just the ‘back-office’ element?

The initial phase of the project should involve only the back-office grades, but the ultimate target should be the relocation of all government departments to Sligo. The proposal is not unusual in international government circles; Capital cities are not necessarily the largest cities in a given country. The Hague is not the largest city in the Netherlands; its 474,292 population is just over half that of Amsterdam at 741,636. Canberra has a population of 390,000 compared to Sydney’s 5,370,000. Washington DC has 703,608 residents compared to 8,550,000 in New York City and over 4,000,000 in Los Angeles. Ottawa has just 812,129 residents compared to Toronto’s 5,429,524; Canada’s capital city ranks just sixth in population numbers in the country.

There is no requirement to retain anything other than a small secretariat from each government in Dublin, essentially just a Ministerial office and a core staff. All the actual productive work of the Departments could be carried out in Sligo.

Benefits to the region:

Apart from the injection of 10,000 well-paid jobs, this initiative would have a huge spin-off effect for the hinterland. Thousands of new homes would be required within an approximately 50 Km radius of the centre of Sligo, and a major programme of office building would be required to facilitate the government departments. Additional schools, a new Regional hospital, an upgrade of Sligo IT to University status would be likely outcomes, as would a vast improvement in road and rail links with Dublin. A similar or greater number of service jobs would result from the multiplier effect of the spending of these salaries in the local economy. The improvement in status and image of Sligo would put an increased focus on the region from other industries seeking a European base, and improved facilities would play a part in increasing tourism revenue. Quality of life would also be improved for existing residents, many of whom would now have a real choice as to whether to stay or leave.

Could it work?

In an ideal world, this would work and would be a simple project that would simply require some high-quality planning. The net cost to the exchequer would not necessarily be significant if the project was developed over a ten-year timeframe. Disposals of expensive accommodation in Dublin would easily cover the cost of providing new facilities in Sligo, and the links to Dublin are already in plan and would just need to be brought forward. Private capital would pick up the need for housing and commercial development associated with the move, and indeed would happily fund the development of office accommodation on a PPP basis. The project would reverse the decline in the Region and would kick-start growth in the private sector within a 60 to 70km radius of Sligo centre.

Would it work? Threats to the success of such a strategy.

The biggest impediment to the success of a strategy like this is politics. If this plan was tabled in government, local politicians all over Ireland would immediately start to fight for a ‘share of the cake’ for their regions, as we saw when decentralisation was first mooted in Ireland. Any dilution of the initiative, by moving one or two other departments to Cork or Waterford to help a TD or Minister get re-elected, would dilute the project and render it unworkable.

The RSES is a good place to start with some 'blue-sky thinking' on this issue. At the very least, this proposal should be included in the final draft of the RSES and debated in the NWRA chamber.

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