

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COISTE UM ACHAINÍOCHA ÓN BPOBAL

COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC PETITIONS

Dé Céadaoin, 21 Samhain 2018

Wednesday, 21 November 2018

The Joint Committee met at 1.30 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Shane Cassells,	Senator Jerry Buttimer.
Deputy Eugene Murphy,	
Deputy Brendan Ryan,	

DEPUTY SEAN SHERLOCK IN THE CHAIR.

Business of Joint Committee

Chairman: Apologies have been received from Deputy Dara Murphy.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: And from Deputy Heydon. He may arrive late as he is attending another meeting.

Chairman: I thank the Senator.

I propose that we go into private session to deal with some matters before resuming in public session. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The joint committee went into private session at 1.35 p.m. and resumed in public session at 1.45 p.m.

Decisions on Public Petitions Received

Chairman: We are considering public petitions. The first petition for consideration is Petition No. P00028/18. We propose to forward a copy of the response from the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment to the petitioner and deem the petition inadmissible under Standing Order 111C(2)(b). Is that agreed? Agreed.

Next is Petition No. P00034/18. We propose to forward a copy of the reply from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection to the petitioner and close the petition. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The next petition for consideration is Petition No. P00035/18. We propose to forward a copy of the reply from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection to the petitioner and close the petition. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The final petition is Petition No. P00044/18 from Mr. Darryl O’Callaghan. This has been the source of some discussion. The petition concerns the official Dublin Christmas tree lighting ceremony, which is not going ahead. The petitioner states that there has been no crowd trouble in the past and he does not anticipate any in future. I note that when the committee was in private session committee members expressed some views on the matter. I will open the floor to Senator Buttimer.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Thank you for allowing us to speak on this, Chairman. We will keep the petition open and go back to the petitioner. The decision of Dublin City Council not to have an official Christmas lights ceremony in the capital city is unprecedented. I was in Cork last Sunday when we had 20,000 people at an event. It was well-managed, policed and stewarded. There were no issues of public health or safety. Everyone moved freely. There was good access to and egress from the event.

I know that Dublin will have Christmas lights, but is Dublin City Council really telling us that it cannot manage a crowd of people coming to the capital city? The council can manage throngs of people on St. Patrick’s Day for the capital parade. Is the council saying that people going to the Aviva Stadium or Croke Park cannot be managed? It is a disappointing decision. I think the council is having a laugh, to be honest, at the expense of people. I know there are lights but I would hope that Dublin City Council, through our intervention, will change tack.

The petitioner has made a clear point in the petition. I call on the committee to write back and engage with Dublin City Council. There are numerous locations where the council could hold an official switching-on ceremony. I am not from Dublin – I accept that – but having come from Cork last weekend where there was a wonderful atmosphere on a cold night I take the view there is no reason we cannot do the same in Dublin.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: I agree with the sentiments expressed by Senator Buttimer. I am a rural Deputy but I know people from rural areas who come to the city for the switching-on of the lights. The switching-on of Christmas lights, wherever it happens throughout the country, is a major occasion especially for the younger people. They love it and are excited by it.

What happened to problem-solving? The reply from the council states that the closure of the Luas cross-city service would have to take place if the lights were to be switched on at the usual venue. Why not move the venue? There are several venues around the area where the council could move the switching-on of the lights. We should praise Mr. O’Callaghan for bringing this to our attention. I hope there will be a change of heart. It is even a big event on television and gets considerable coverage. Let us hope there will be a change of heart.

Deputy Brendan Ryan: It is worth making public the text of the petition. The petitioner highlighted how the Christmas lights ceremony has been a long-held tradition in Dublin city and how it is loved by many. He pointed out that there has been no crowd trouble in the past and said he saw no reason to envisage any trouble at this ceremony in future. He also said the ceremony has become a part of Christmas for many people and it should stay that way for future generations.

The response of the council is along the lines that there has been trouble managing large crowds attending lighting ceremonies. As Senator Buttimer has said, that is nonsense. Reference was made to the need to disrupt the Luas. That would be relevant if there were only one possible location in the great city of Dublin. I reckon it is not beyond Dublin City Council to come up with an alternative location. The petitioner deserves better than the response from the council. I think someone was asked to tick a box in responding to the committee, and that is unfortunate. There has been no serious consideration of the matter. We should write back and let the council know the strong views of the committee.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: In Dublin, our capital city, we have the Pride parade every June. The Dublin team has had four homecoming events in a row in Smithfield, a cobblestoned area, where the council has held the celebration of Dublin coming home with the Sam Maguire cup. We have had the Dublin Pride parade in Smithfield. It is a wonderful space and it could be used.

Like Deputy Ryan, I think the response of Dublin City Council has been lame. There is a tradition in almost every town and village in our country of an official switching-on. Are we really saying that Dublin City Council, which is responsible for the capital city, cannot manage the turning on of a Christmas tree event? Deputy Ryan made the point that there are several locations that could be used. We should respond to Dublin City Council and encourage the council to use the space in Smithfield. The square there has successfully held the Pride event and the Dublin GAA homecoming event. Surely there can be engagement with those who operate the Luas line on co-operation. I think Dublin City Council is having a laugh and being a little Scrooge-like. I hope those responsible in the council will rethink. Perhaps we might invite them to explain the rationale also.

Deputy Shane Cassells: I echo what my colleagues on the committee have said. It requires

a little imaginative thinking in the transportation department of the city council and liaising with Luas in holding a major event. There have been many changes in the co-ordination of public transport services. As a result, the number of lanes open for cars throughout the city has been reduced. It is not only a city event. It also involves people from neighbouring counties, including mine, who enjoy it. As I said, it requires a little imaginative thinking. As one moves from O'Connell Street by the GPO, it is clear lanes have been removed because of the Luas. The same applies at the traditional cross-section.

Deputy Brendan Ryan pointed to the language used by the petitioner in referring to long-held traditions within the city, many of which are eroding. O'Connell Street was a traditional venue, but we have seen the closure of Clerys. The long-held tradition of viewing its Christmas window is no more. We can go to the commercialised Grafton Street where those involved obviously no longer believes in Christmas because stores such as Brown Thomas simply have fancy dress mannequins in the window. Anyone would be forgiven for not knowing what season it is. It could be Easter for all we know. Obviously, the commercialisation of a Christian festival has been removed from the window. I would hate to see the State authorities participating by taking away any joy from the Christmas festivities.

Chairman: I think there is unanimity on this issue. We should keep Mr. Darryl O'Callaghan's petition open. I am getting a direction to the effect that we should correspond with Dublin City Council. I suggest we say to it that we do not accept the correspondence it has furnished to the committee. It states in it that the traditional location for the Christmas lights switching-on ceremony was on O'Connell Street. It seems it does not want to inconvenience people by asking the operator of the Luas cross-city line to stop operating it in order to accommodate the ceremony. Moreover, it seems there have been issues in managing the large crowds which have attended the lighting ceremony in recent years. The council has also stated it has created winter lights in Dublin city and brought Christmas lights and building projections to more locations and people than ever before. I think we all accept that the council is trying to do its best. Let us suppose I was a first, second, third or fourth generation Dubliner and going to see the switching on of the lights. It is a real family event, something that is synonymous with Dublin at Christmas time. It is firmly the view of the committee that some mechanism should be found to facilitate the process.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Could we include my suggestion that the council use the space in Smithfield as an alternative to O'Connell Street, notwithstanding the difficulties it has highlighted in its reply? Could we invite council representatives to come to Cork next year to look at how we successfully managed 20,000 people last Sunday?

Chairman: There is no cross-city Luas line in Cork.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Not yet.

Chairman: There are no cars in Cork either in that area, but sin scéal eile. It is clearly the view of the committee that it has been progressive in seeking to make suggestions. Senator Buttimer's suggestion is laudable and one that could be communicated to Dublin City Council. The petition remains open and we will correspond with the council. We thank the petitioner, Mr. Darryl O'Callaghan, for having the wherewithal to address the issue to us.

I propose that the committee adjourn until 1.30 p.m. on Wednesday, 5 December. I thank members for their attendance.

21 NOVEMBER 2018

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I wish to convey my apologies as I will be unable to attend that meeting as I will not be in the country.

The joint committee adjourned at 1.55 p.m. until 1.30 p m. on Wednesday, 5 December 2018.