

# Best tactic on Metro is to keep digging

**A** HUNDRED years ago this week, the first Ford Model T rolled off the production line and ushered in the century of the car. In its early days, the car faced stiff competition in the US from a well-established network of trams. By the early 1920s, practically every American city and town had at least one tram company.

Around this time a conspiracy of oil and motor industry interests led by General Motors got together to wreck the tram network. The group began secretly buying and then shutting down individual streetcar companies, thus tearing holes in the web of public transport. The plan worked: soon, people gave up on the fragmented tram services and the rest is history.

The great thing about history is that we can learn from it; Ireland's dependence on the private car is among the highest in Europe; between 1990 and 2005, Irish transport emissions shot up by more than 160 per cent. This is at a time when Ireland is bound under its Kyoto obligations to rapidly reduce its emissions intensity.

What's more, the Government's well-publicised target is a net year-on-year reduction of 3 per cent in overall emissions. However, new projections published today from the Environmental Protection Agency show transport sector emissions going in the opposite direction, and continuing to climb all the way to 2020.

When the Government's Transport 21 plan was rolled out in November 2005, then taoiseach Bertie Ahern described the €34 billion programme as "the most significant transport initiative in the history of this country". A key objective was to finally develop a cohesive public transport network.

As Ahern put it: "Dublin will get a genuinely integrated transport system." The cornerstone of this strategy is to develop Metro North and Metro West, along with a city centre interconnector. Thus Dublin would stand alongside virtually every other modern capital city in

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having joined-up public transport. Today, according to the Dublin Transportation Office some 60 per cent of journeys into the city between 7am and 10am are in private cars. In contrast, 85 per cent of journeys into the City of London are by public transport.

Thank goodness then for Transport 21. Admittedly, it's far from perfect, with a ludicrous €1.2 billion motorway from Dublin to Waterford (population barely 40,000). But no matter, at least our congested and rapidly growing capital will finally get a proper public transport system.

Or will it? Heavy hints have been dropped in recent days that the guts are to be pulled out of Transport 21. Not the motorway folly, of course, but the



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## OPINION

**Any cutback on building an integrated transport system in Dublin would end up being costly**

dismemberment of a desperately needed integrated Dublin public transport system. And if you think congestion is bad right now, the Central Statistics Office projects that by 2021, there will be over two million people in the greater Dublin area.

The Transport 21 plans include intensely detailed planning work that has been almost a decade in the making. Now the Department of Finance, with tenders about to be issued to major international contractors, has hinted darkly it may spike large swathes of the plan. The tendering process is so complex that no serious contractor would risk incurring the huge outlays involved in bidding on a dead duck.

Despite years of meticulous planning, Minister for Finance Brian Lenihan virtually gave it the political kiss of death when he said: "You can't just sign off on a project on the basis of a colourful brochure and a lot of publicity material."

When General Motors and its co-conspirators got together to wreck America's municipal tram system, they realised its strength was its interconnectedness. Knock a few lumps here and there out of the network and soon the public would abandon it in frustration. Their motive was, of course, their own narrow financial gain.

What excuses will the Sir Humphreys in Merrion Street offer if they choose to strangle at birth our last real chance of delivering a functioning public transport system that actually addresses the twin curses of gridlock and emissions? Doing nothing isn't quite the bargain it sounds. The Dublin Chamber of Commerce reckons car chaos is costing the city €2 billion a year. And that's before tens of millions more in annual EU fines for carbon emissions are factored in.

A proper public transport plan for Dublin will quickly pay for itself; a bonus is the possibility of much of the system being powered from a massive national programme of renewables in the next decade or two.

Oil prices shot back up this week to over \$130 a barrel, reminding us yet again that the era of cheap oil is gone forever. Forcing people to commute for several hours a day because of the lack of quality, high frequency public transport alternatives simply won't wash when they can no longer afford to buy the fuel.

When it comes to Metro North and West, sections of which are to go underground, it's time that the advice should read: when you're in a hole, start digging.

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