

Minister's u-turn on airport commitment



Senator John Minihan, inset, is disappointed that the Minister for Transport has no intention of honouring the commitment that the Cork Airport Authority will be debt-free.

'Culchie' Cork second best

WHAT a difference a day makes. Or should that be: What a difference a minister makes?

Politics is a tricky game — we see people come and go, that's the way the world works. Ministers, especially, know it and that's why ministers choose their words so carefully.

The people of Cork took great comfort from the words of the then Minister for Transport, Seamus Brennan, in 2004 during the debate on the break-up of Aer Rianta.

What would it mean for Cork Airport? Would it be truly independent? Would it be debt-free?

I listened closely to the words of the minister in the Seanad in the full knowledge that every word was carefully chosen.

What I heard was the explicit commitment Cork was waiting for.

"I am just leaving the existing debt where it is. It belongs with Dublin and nowhere else and I am not moving it. The debts belong in Dublin and will stay there. Does (anyone) believe I should leave Cork Airport to

By JOHN MINIHAN, Progressive Democrat Senator and candidate in Cork South Central

pay it off while still developing the airport? The burden of those debts must be lifted from their shoulders to allow them properly develop for the future," Minister Brennan stated.

Carefully chosen, but welcome words. Categorical reassurance.

Fast-forward to Tuesday last. Suspicions were growing that this categorical reassurance wasn't so categorical anymore. So, I decided to give the Minister for Transport, Martin Cullen, the opportunity to come into the Seanad once more and restate the commitment. Reassure, again, the people of Cork.

Regrettably, Minister Cullen was unavailable to come into the Seanad

to answer my questions. Not to worry, Minister of State Killeen was sent to deputise and provide the answers. Every last word carefully chosen and scrutinised by Minister Cullen's civil servants.

I stood up and posed my questions.

"Does the minister intend to honour the previous commitment to leave the Cork Airport Authority debt-free, or has he decided on an alternative structure? The people of Cork deserve a straight answer on the issue of Cork Airport," I said.

"Has the Minister for Transport instructed the board of Cork Airport Authority to accept an amount of debt for the terminal? If he has, how

much? If the Dublin Airport Authority has been informed that it now does not have to carry the full debt in respect of Cork Airport, the people of Cork would like to know. Is Dublin now only to pay percentage of the total cost?"

Straight questions, inviting straight answers.

Minister Killeen said: "At an early stage in the airport restructuring process, it was indicated that the intention was that both the independent Cork and Shannon airports would commence on a debt-free basis. However, that was always going to be subject to determining the optimum mechanisms for allocating airport assets among the three airports."

It was like hearing the ice beneath your feet starting to crack.

"Was." "Intention." "However."

I was disappointed. It appears clear that the Minister for Transport has no intention of honouring the commitment that the Cork Airport Authority will be debt-free and we are now in some type of bartering situation.

The people of Cork are

left wondering, "what has changed?"

Cork Airport's passenger figures are up 20%, and are heading to three million in 2006.

The airport already has higher charges than other airports, and if saddled with a significant portion of debt, will have to increase charges to service debt. Airlines will not open new routes. Existing routes will be threatened.

The minister could not even reassure me that the exact cost of the new terminal at Cork was known. How is the airport expected to proceed in this environment of uncertainty?

When Minister Brennan gave that commitment he also spoke of an unfortunate mentality that exists — a feeling that 'if one does not come from Dublin then somehow one cannot run an airport because one is some class of a Culchie who cannot make it happen', he said.

While that might be overstating it, I do know this much.

The needs of Cork do not receive the same hearing at Minister Cullen's desk as Dublin's do.

O'Shea on Monday

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It's Valentine's Day tomorrow, but Robert O'Shea finds it can be a difficult time for lovers...

Dear Emma,

My mam made me right you a card because you just moved next door.

Roses are Red, Violets are Blue, Sugar is Sweet, And so are U,

Your secret admirer

Dear Emma,

I'm in love. Hear me out. I know we don't see each other much any more (I see you!) and we hang around with different groups at school — you with your friends and me with Steve — but I'd like it if we got to know each other a bit better. Have you guessed who I am? Let's just say I could be the boy next door. Remember when I sent you a Valentine's just after you moved in? Do you still keep it?

Your secret admirer

Dearest Emma,

This is Tim from next door. I love you Emma. I don't know if you got my card from last year but you acted like you didn't so anyway, I love you. You are growing up to be a great beauty. And to think once you were such a tomboy and we used to pretend wrestle as kids before we had hormones. I'd love to pretend wrestle with you again, but not pretend. Please don't break my heart.

Your secret admirer

Dearest Emma,

I'm guessing you got my cards from the last two years and are ignoring me. Do you mock me with your friends? Is that why you giggle when I walk by? This only makes my love stronger.

Roses are Red, Violets are Blue, Sugar is Sweet, You have Wonderful Breasts.

Your secret admirer

Dearest Emma,

I have a new hobby. Birdwatching! You probably saw me using my binoculars from my bedroom window. By the way, you seem to be hanging around with Steve a lot these days. He was my best friend, Emma. We truly are star-crossed lovers, you fool.

Your secret admirer

Dearest Emma,

You may hear a few things when you return from college. Don't believe any of it. I was just helping your mother by bringing in the washing that day because it was starting to rain. But because she wasn't home I brought it into our house. I don't know anything about your panties going missing. And yes, I was found by your father in your bed-

room one day, but that was only because I was trying to return the panties.

Your secret admirer

Dearest Emma,

Glad to hear you got rid of Steve. He was no good for you. Who's Ian though?

I received the restraining order. Lesser love has survived distances greater than 50 yards. I will set a seat for you at dinner tonight. Can't my love be both creepy and pure?

Your secret admirer

My dear Emma,

Lengthening the restraining order to 100 yards has made my life a little difficult. When you visit your parents I have to move to the east side of the house for the entire length of your stay. Do you think you might move it back to 50 again?

Your secret admirer

Dear Emma and Ian,

Congratulations on your wedding. I was there in spirit. I was also there hiding in one of the confessional boxes. Please don't tell the police. You looked lovely in white. I had dreamed of the day for so long...

Your secret admirer

Dear Emma, Ian & George

So I guess this means that you slept with Ian! I forgive you. I'm still waiting for you: I look out my bedroom window across at your old bedroom. A large man sleeps in there. He moved in when your parents moved out.

Your secret admirer

Dear Emma, Ian, George & Amy,

Another little bundle of joy. I opened a bottle of champagne that day, I can tell you. And a bottle of vodka. And two bottles of gin. Happy Valentine.

P.S. It took me a while to find you after you moved. You never left a forwarding address, sillybilly.

Your secret admirer

Dear Emma, George & Amy,

So Ian finally left you. Can't say I'm too surprised. It's impossible to love two men at once, Emma. I was looking forward to committing adultery with you but now we're free to get married. When does the divorce come through?

Your secret admirer

Dear Emma, Steve, George & Amy,

So you bumped into Steve at the supermarket. And you fell in love all over again, he tells me. How wonderful. George is off to college soon, Steve said. The years pass so quickly.

"If one does not come from Dublin then somehow one cannot run an airport because one is some class of a Culchie who cannot make it happen."