

## **THE CTC ANNUAL DINNER AND PRESENTATIONS**

### **Speech by Paul Priestly, Permanent Secretary to the Department for Regional Development, Northern Ireland (26 April 2008)**

Firstly may I offer the Minister, Conor Murphy's apologies that he is unable to be here with you this evening. He forgot that tonight is his wedding anniversary and his wife had arranged a weekend in Dublin! I'm afraid you've got me as a poor substitute

President, ladies and gentlemen, members and invited guests, I know that the Minister wanted to give a warm welcome to the Cyclists' Touring Club to Belfast for your Annual General Meeting. I understand that this is the first time in your 130 year history that the Annual General Meeting has been held in Belfast. The Minister hopes it will not be another 130 years before you are back!

In 1877, the year that the Cyclists' Touring Club was founded by Stanley Cotterell in Harrogate, A A Pope became the first manufacturer of bicycles in the United States. In Germany, Karl Benz built a motorised tricycle with a top speed of 7 mph. Eleven years later in 1888 John Boyd Dunlop patented his pneumatic bicycle tyre here in Belfast, and the rest, as they say, is history.

In the 1880s the streets belonged to the people. They were most definitely public areas to be enjoyed by all. With the advent of the bicycle and subsequently the motor car, the competition for road space between pedestrians, cyclists and motorised transport began. That competition still continues today.

At the start of the 20th century there were only 8,000 cars in Ireland and Britain. By the end of the century this had soared to 21 million. As we all know, the ever increasing impacts of motorised transport manifest themselves in congestion and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. These impacts affect our quality of life and the environment. In addition, the decrease in walking and cycling by the general population is having an adverse impact on the nation's health. This is not sustainable. That is why the Executive, and Conor Murphy in particular champions the sustainability agenda and that is why I am pleased to be here tonight to support cycling.

Having said this, Conor Murphy and the Department for Regional Development are also responsible for our roads. Very recently, the Executive approved a significant investment in strategic road improvements right across the North. These road improvements are vital to the economic prosperity of the region and will improve road safety. In championing sustainability the Executive is well aware that it needs to balance this objective with its economic and road safety objectives.

I understand that the Cyclists' Touring Club is the largest and longest established cycling organisation on these islands, with a local District Association of 300 members, with a similar group based in Dublin. This event provides a special opportunity for Belfast to recognise the 80 years of the Cyclists' Touring Club Belfast Group and their work for local cyclists. We need organisations like the Cyclists' Touring Club and Sustrans to keep cycling at the forefront of government thinking. Government needs to work with the voluntary sector for the benefit of everyone.

I am delighted to hear that your Annual General Meeting will be followed by a tour of the coasts of Antrim and Donegal. I hope the weather is kind and that you're able to enjoy the unspoilt views and beautiful scenery for which these two counties are famous.

My Department is responsible for the development of transportation policy and strategy here in the North.

Over the last 10 years cycling has become a key plank in our strategic thinking about the future of transport as we try to develop balanced transport strategies. There is good reason for this.

We all know that increasing use of the car, and motorised transport generally, has brought enormous social and economic benefits, including greater mobility and prosperity and an enhanced quality of life for many people. However, as I have said, there are costs arising from congestion and pollution. Unless it is checked, the anticipated growth in the use of the car will damage our towns and our countryside, our health and ultimately our economy.

Cycling can play a bigger role in our future transport strategies and has the potential to make a contribution to reversing current trends in traffic congestion carbon emissions. Importantly, it can have a positive impact on health by giving people the opportunity to exercise regularly.

In Northern Ireland we have tried to lay foundations for making cycling mainstream:-

- Ø through a visionary Regional Development Strategy;
- Ø through our Regional Transportation Strategy;
- Ø through the development of Transport Plans;
- Ø through robust planning policies; and
- Ø by investing in cycling measures on the ground.

We have a Cycling Strategy which identifies a range of measures to seek to improve the conditions for cyclists and attempts to establish a pro-cycling culture.

The Regional Transportation Strategy, recognised the role of cycling in our future transportation system and my Department has shown leadership in promoting the cycling agenda that we need to follow. However the public need to support our investment and leadership on this issue. And that is where organisations like the Cyclists' Touring Club can help us.

We monitor cycle usage annually and over the period 2000-2006 there have been some positive trends. There has been an overall increase of 26.3% in cycling trips across Northern Ireland, with an increase of 57% in Belfast. This is encouraging.

Through the work of my Department and other cycling stakeholders, coupled with the leadership demonstrated by Sustrans, we now have a National Cycle Network comprising of almost 1000km of 'on road cycle routes' and around 160Km of 'off road' cycle track. This is truly a great asset.

I have mentioned the future health impacts of a sedentary population. In particular, childhood obesity is becoming an issue. I am pleased to say my Department's Travelwise initiative encourages the use of sustainable transport modes such as cycling and walking to school. Since its launch in 2003 we have worked with over 100 schools and this is making a positive contribution.

In June of this year Conor Murphy will again be pleased to be a part of Bike Week to help promote the cycling agenda. He would encourage all local cyclists to support this event in some way.

Government has a responsibility to provide leadership, direction and commitment. We also share a broader responsibility with the wider public sector, business, the voluntary sector, communities and families to work together and make a real difference.

However, to make serious headway we need, as individuals, to have smarter lifestyles – and as Government, to be offering clear and consistent policies and messages.

We require organisations like CTC to be working on the ground with businesses and the general public to promote cycling. Persuading the public to cycle more and to abandon the car (at least for part of the time) is a goal yet to be achieved.

If we are to meet the challenges ahead we must continue to develop and improve sustainable transport modes. This will require a process of education, as well as the development and integration of public transport, cycling and walking infrastructure. We must remove the barriers that prevent people from making low carbon transport journeys.

Government can set an example. I can announce tonight that my Department is proposing to develop a cycle purchase scheme which we hope to roll out right across the Northern Ireland Civil Service. It is important for employers to encourage staff by providing appropriate incentives. We would encourage all employers across Northern Ireland to follow this example.

Almost 2 out of 3 people support priority for pedestrians and cyclists. Even car drivers are in favour. Nearly 3 out of 4 adults want to see fewer cars on the road. More than half of us say we could just as easily walk, cycle or travel by bus for many of our car journeys.

So we appear to be in a position where the vast majority of us believe sustainable transport measures are important and say we could easily switch. The question is, why aren't we?

There is a huge gap between what we say we want and what we do. We need to turn words into actions. One sobering statistic is that in the 1950s we cycled nearly four times as much as we do today.

President, ladies and gentlemen, members and invited guests, I am hugely impressed by the enthusiasm and dedication of everyone involved in cycling. On behalf of the Minister, may I wish you a successful and productive Annual General Meeting.

I would like to leave you with a thought from George Bernard Shaw which I think is very relevant to the transport challenges we face today. He said:-

“Progress is impossible without change, and those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything.”

I hope you enjoy your visit to Ireland and I wish you every success for the future.