

Shame of forgotten Irish

“Let me take you by the hand and lead you through the streets of London

I’ll show you something to make you change your mind.”

— **Streets of London, Ralph McTell**



WITH emigration declared a key cog in the so-called national recovery plan, Waterford TD John Deasy has warned that exporting our unemployment problem will result in an unknown number of shattered lives both at home and abroad.

Speaking during last Wednesday’s Finance Bill debate in the Dáil, Deputy Deasy referred to the previous weekend’s ‘Sunday Tribune’ article headlined: ‘Hundreds of poor Irish buried in mass graves in UK each year’. It concerned hundreds of impoverished Irish people, with no known family, who are buried in unmarked mass graves in London by the local councils.

“In the case of Southwark Council, half of the 50 people whose funerals are organised and funded by the borough are elderly Irish men,” he noted. “Each borough has slightly different procedures but the majority of those buried in paupers’ graves are laid to rest without anything to identify them and in graves with the remains of up to 25 other people. That is shocking.”

Mr Deasy, who studied at Erie University in Pennsylvania on a scholarship from St Augustine’s College, Dungarvan, continued: “I emigrated in 1986 and I witnessed the lives and hardship of people who, in many cases, have not returned to Ireland. It is important to accept in this Chamber the net effect of what has happened to our economy for many of the people who will not be returning.

“Some may think this is a slightly dramatic way of portraying the issue. Some people go abroad, they thrive, they learn new skills and they meet interesting people but many people do not do so well.

“One of my most vivid memories is being in the Rye River pub, off Jerome Avenue in the Bronx in 1987. It was 40°C outside and a line of middle-aged men were reading newspapers three days old and drinking pints of Guinness. Many told me they had not been back to Ireland in 20 years.”

Mr Deasy said that on Tuesday of this week he canvassed a rural part of Waterford, Stradbally, “and it was the issue on everyone’s tongue. They all talked about emigration, their children leaving and the safeguarding of small businesses.”

He continued: “In this Finance Bill, self-employed people are hit again. They will pay an additional 3% surcharge on income over €100,000. I want to address the treatment of self-

employed people. I have just received the back to education allowance figures for Waterford. In 2005 to 2006 there were 275 participants. In 2009 to 2010, there were 902 participants.

“How many of those are self-employed people? Not as many as there should be. If a self-employed person loses his or her job, he or she can apply for jobseeker’s allowance, which is means tested. However, if the spouse earns more than €400 per week, he or she does not qualify for the back to education allowance, work placements, retraining schemes or the back to work allowance.”

Making the point that “These people are leaving the system completely,” Mr Deasy said: “They have become statistics and are completely disenfranchised. They are the ones emigrating.

“If the percentage contribution for self-employed people is to be raised, at the very least they should be entitled to the basic facets of State retraining. They are the entrepreneurs and self-starters, the ones who have created jobs in this country.

“In many cases, they have never asked the State for assistance. If the rate of contribution increases for the self-employed, we must ensure these skilled entrepreneurs can get adequate retraining.

“As a State, we need to examine the question of self-employed workers generally, he stressed. “Many of these Irish men and women will not come back to Ireland unless we recognise their value, their skills and, most importantly, their needs.”

Mr Deasy has since contacted the Secretary General in the Department of Foreign Affairs, David Cooney, who – being the son of Irish emigrants to London himself – looked at the situation and agreed it was unacceptable.

He has now set a process in train whereby, at the very least, in the event of an Irish national’s death overseas, the Irish Embassy will be contacted to ensure every effort is made to locate and inform the individual’s relatives here at home.