

Educational Facilities In Limerick (One)

[By TOM TOBIN]

WE have to realise the fact, whether we like it or not, the Irish are NOT a vanishing race.

In the past many writers have presented a picture of this land which gave the impression that our numbers were falling with the passing of every day.

True to say that all too many continue to emigrate in search of employment or just to satisfy their own curiosity but we cannot overlook the fact that the population of this developing country of ours is well on the road to a considerable increase.

Stop awhile and look back on the tremendous development of Limerick and look to the future taking into account the plans already well advanced for further development. Our city presents what may well be termed the finest example of progressive development in the provinces of this nation. . . . And lest we overlook the all-important fact, this applies to the development of living conditions also.

Limerick has expanded very greatly during the past twenty years or so and this can be said of the housing schemes also. . . . And it can be accepted that nine out of ten of all new houses are occupied by young married couples who are rearing families and who are likely to go on giving new life to this ancient city.

A challenge

BUT there is a major draw-back to the continued development of Limerick — a problem that will have a serious effect within the next five or seven years unless immediate steps are taken to meet the challenge that faces every man and woman with an interest in the City of Limerick and in the future of the children being born in that city. I refer to the lack of educational opportunities.

Just what is the position? In a few words I would term it as—fourteen years behind the times. It may be much more out of date, it is hard to say with certainty. . . . But this much I can say following a survey that has proved most revealing—Limerick has failed and failed miserably to keep abreast of the increasing demand for adequate facilities for primary, secondary and university education.

It is correct to say that a good deal of progress has been made in meeting the increasing demands on primary schools. Almost every district in the city has been catered for and where there is a pressing need for greater accommodation at present, plans are well advanced for the provision of extensions or the erection of new buildings. But the trouble is that the authorities with some exceptions, of course, are not taking the long-term view in their planning with the result that by the time they have completed an extension or a new building to cope with increasing demands, they find that they have not built them big enough. Indeed, I have visited schools where it has been admitted that following an extension scheme, the demand for accommodation jumped so high that it was impossible to facilitate half the number.

Agitation

THERE is an important point which I would not like to overlook. . . . It is the cheese-paring that has

Too much cheese-paring by Department

gone on in the Department of Education. Of course, it is a well known fact now that the Government of Ireland, past and present, has been building our educational policy on a shoestring. This has been the case right from the birth of our State. It has only been through agitation on the part of the schools' authorities and on the part of the teachers that the Government has given any fair scope to our schools.

Indeed, I have no hesitation in stating here that it is a shocking state of affairs to find that all those connected in every way with the education of our children — the men and women of the future—have to beg their needs from a Government that seems to look upon the matter as something that can be left to the managers of the schools, to overcome their problems to the best of their ability. . . . and as cheaply as possible. Only in recent years has there been any reasonable effort made to tackle the problem of meeting the increasing demands for primary education and for replacing the old and inefficient systems of the past.

A quick solution

IT was Mr. Donogh O'Malley, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Finance who told me last week that there are ten new schools and two major improvement schemes in course of construction at present in Limerick City and County. In the last twelve months, eight new schools and four major improvement schemes were completed. A further nine new schools and eight improvement schemes are expected to be launched within the next twelve months. . . . The total cost of these projects will be just over £1,000,000.

This is welcome news for Limerick City and County, but it will not solve the problem. My impression is that the Department of Education sat back for far too long and watched progress pass them by. Had they been alert to developments in this country, they would have realised that with the development of every village, town and city would come the greater demand for educational facilities. We are told now that it is the intention of the Government to build 100 new schools and to carry out 50 major improvement schemes every year. . . . and we are told that every effort is being devoted to finding a quick solution to the whole problem. An experimental school—something that can be erected within a brief period is having the close attention of the Department at present and we are likely to hear a good deal about this in the future.

All too rarely

AS I have stated all this is good to learn but the question bothering hundreds of parents throughout this city is where will they find a place for their children in the schools of Limerick within the next week or so before the summer holidays or just afterwards. Only those who have lived through this experience can fully appreciate its seriousness. It just is not possible to walk along to the most convenient school and say, "I would like to send my child here." You may well consider yourself lucky if this happens. Oh yes, it happens all right, thanks to the foresight of some schools authorities, but unfortunately it happens all too rarely. There will be many little boys and girls who will have to wait another year before commencing their education because there will be no room for them. It is an old story now but the parents of Limerick will have to unite in their demand for a situation where no boy or girl will be sent home

because there is no room at the most convenient school.

Cheese-paring

ALL primary schools are the property of the State and managed by the local clergy. Many will be quick to point out that it is not easy to get the Department to sanction a proposal for a new school or the extension of an old one and it is no secret that it is all too common to find that even when sanction is granted the delay is far too great. . . . And there is yet another form of cheese-paring. I refer to the slashing of the requirements as stated by the local manager. To illustrate the point, let me tell you the story of an application made by one of our most progressive primary schools. For obvious reasons, I will not mention the name of the school.

Centred in a rapidly developing district, the authorities were told that the size of the building asked for would be far too large and appeared to be unnecessary. Accordingly, it was reduced in size to what the Department felt would meet the needs of the area. That was some few years ago. . . . a very short time ago, in fact. Now, the position is that the school is far too small to meet the demands of the district and a very large extension is urgently needed.

The same

THE authorities concerned foresaw this before the first sod was turned. Time after time, the point was made to the Department and time after time, it was rejected. Now the extension will cost a great deal more than the additional rooms would have had they been included as originally requested when the proposals were sent to the Department. This is not an isolated case and because of such a policy (in the past, if not to-day) far too many children cannot get into the schools nearest their homes and have to travel the length of the city to find accommodation—and even then their parents consider they are fortunate.

I visited Sexton Street C.B.S., which is regarded as one of the most progressive in this city. Right now a huge building scheme is well under way which will cost in the region of £200,000, but odd as it may seem even when this is ready for occupation, it will not be able to accommodate all the boys wishing to become pupils. The fact is it will replace the old building which has been condemned leaving the position, where accommodation is concerned, more or less the same.

The goal

THERE are some 1,100 boys attending this school, which is divided into junior and senior primary sections. . . . housed in 23 rooms and all of them full to the limit. I was told that their greatest problem has been and will continue to be—lack of sufficient accommodation for all those anxious to attend. But there is an interesting angle here. Sexton Street C.B.S., both primary and secondary, have been progressing with an eye to increasing demands and while they are not in a position to meet these demands just now, they are striving towards that goal. They may well succeed where the primary school is concerned but it seems unlikely in the case of the secondary school.

Across the city at St. Munchin's C.B.S., at Hassett's Cross, the roll-call is for 635 boys. There has been a steady increase there since its opening little over ten

years ago and indications are that the numbers will go on increasing over the next five to ten years.

St. Munchin's C.B.S. like so many more of our schools is located right in the centre of a growing area. Mayorstone and Grey Stones continue to expand and a very large scheme of houses is under construction in the Caher-davin area while plans are in hand for yet another scheme in the Meelick area.

These will provide an additional 500 houses, at least, and on a conservative estimate, this will mean an additional 1,000 boys seeking accommodation at schools in the area within the next five to seven years.

The green light

AS matters stand, the C.B.S. at Hassett's Cross is finding it difficult to accommodate all those who wish to be admitted there. There are eleven classrooms within the building but these are not sufficient to cater for the 635 boys attending the school. The library and the doctor's room are being used as classrooms. Fortunately, the Brothers have been given the green light by the Department of Education to go on with the erection of three additional classrooms and an assembly hall which will ease the problem very considerably.

One of the outstanding features of the C.B.S. is the fact that they do everything in their power to take in every boy who wishes it. St. Munchin's can claim that they have not turned away any boy seeking admittance and if this should ever happen, it will be strictly because there is no room for any more. Boys go to St. Munchin's after their First Holy Communion, and having finished their primary education, have the opportunity of going to the new secondary school on the N.C. Road.

Not the ideal solution

ALL over the city primary schools are finding it difficult to meet the demands of an increasing school-going population. . . . They are doing everything possible to relieve the pressure but without the urgent attention of the Department of Education there is no hope of this. Some of the convents and indeed, this can be said of all others, are very slow to turn a child away and even though they are overcrowded already, they squeeze in a few more. This may well solve the problem of finding a place for the child but it is not the ideal solution. Classes are growing too big and the child cannot get the attention he or she deserves—something which can be detrimental to the child's future. Here again the Department can help by granting permission for the reduction of classes and the provision of more accommodation.

The position of the primary schools generally in Limerick calls for a complete survey by the Department and, indeed, this may well be brought about if the local authorities press the Department in every way possible. The solution to this problem can be found if the Government is serious about its proposals to improve educational facilities generally. . . . The system is there and can be put into operation. Every primary school seeking additional accommodation must get it quickly and without cheese-paring if our children are to get the education which is their right.

There is hope for the little ones of the primary schools of Limerick. . . . but the position of the secondary schools does not improve without a new approach by the Government. However, this is another matter which I will deal with next week.