

Irish Daily Mail

COMMENT

Find a solution that puts passengers first

A NUMBER of Bus Éireann services have been cancelled since the beginning of this week. Among them was the last bus to Belfast – leaving intending passengers stranded in Dublin for hours.

Unions say there were 18 cancellations and they were the direct effect of the company's recent ban on overtime, which means that absences (such as those through illness) are harder to cover.

The company disputes that figure and cites other factors, such as a training course, as also having had an impact.

At this stage, therefore, it is impossible to apportion responsibility for these cancellations. What is clear, though, is that a number of passengers were badly inconvenienced, and that banning overtime has had some impact on the company's ability to run all scheduled services.

It is equally clear, of course, that Bus Éireann is losing millions of euro a year, and that – short of taxpayers ploughing further millions into the company – costs must be significantly reduced. If this does not happen, we were warned yesterday, Bus Éireann will simply collapse. Carrying on as before is therefore simply not an option.

What the travelling public need, then, is a plan: a simple, clear plan setting out the bus services that can be provided on behalf of taxpayers – whether those services are run by a State-owned company or contracted out to independent businesses is not the issue.

What matters most to passengers is not the name on the side of the bus, but that the bus departs and arrives as advertised. It is up to the Transport Minister, in conjunction with the National Transport Authority, to set out such a plan – and ensure, for the sake of the travelling public, that it is put in place before anyone else is left stranded in this way.

A major Garda coup

IN RECENT years, the gardaí have endured a number of significant criticisms, from the penalty points and whistleblower scandals to the actions of senior management.

Reforms, particularly in the way the force communicates with the public, are long overdue: failure to address these issues is, in fact, diminishing the work of the men and women in blue.

It is heartening, therefore, to be able to report today on another significant coup for the gardaí in their battle against organised crime – and the Kinahan cartel in particular.

This group has wreaked such mayhem and murder on our streets in recent years that its eradication must be the number-one priority for the force.

We should congratulate An Garda Síochána on its latest success, and make it clear that in pursuing this appalling group of criminals, officers have the unequivocal support – and gratitude – of the public.

Taylor-made solution

SO Katie Taylor, our country's most popular and decorated boxer, has been forced to cancel her forthcoming bout in Madison Square Garden.

Her promoter says this came about because of objections by Top Rank, the powerful rival promoter to which Irish boxer Michael Conlan is signed. Top Rank allegedly feared that Katie would take ticket sales from Conlan, who was fighting the night before. Her fight will have to be moved, probably to Washington DC – and almost certainly into a less prestigious night of pugilism.

It seems rather unfair that such a great national sporting hero as Katie should be treated in this fashion. Perhaps a better way to sort out the row would have been to put her and Conlan in the ring together – and let them settle it the old-fashioned way. Now there's a bout everyone would pay to see!

Imagine it was your child. Dead. Stolen from you. You can't find out why. Would you simply 'let it go'?

IMAGINE that you are the mother of a 19-year-old. Let's say your child is a girl. It's the weekend, a Friday night, and she has gone out with her friends. She has her own key, so you won't wait up for her. She's been to the same place lots of times before. She always enjoys herself and there's never a problem. You won't sleep, of course. Not properly. Not until you hear the key in the lock and your daughter coming up the stairs.

You and her father were thinking of going out yourselves the next night for a bite to eat, but you have decided that it will be 'mad' everywhere because it'll be Valentine's Day, and anyway, Gaybo has a special Late Late on to mark the day. It's on the front of the RTE Guide. So you'll stay in for that.

So you watch a bit more television with your husband, you have a cup of tea, and, around midnight, off the two of you go to bed.

Alarm

And you toss and turn. And you doze for a while. And then you wake again. You look at the clock: 2.30am. That's funny, you think, I never heard her come in. And you lie there for another few minutes. Then, because you can't settle, you get up, quietly open your bedroom door so as not to waken your husband, and, in your bare feet, pad along the landing to your daughter's bedroom, and gently open the door.

Fully expecting to be greeted with clothes strewn all over the chair or even on the floor, and her in a fast-asleep state under the covers, her blonde curls hanging like a curtain over her face, you are surprised to find a relatively tidy room – and an empty bed.

Alarm bells start to ring in your head. And as those alarm bells are silently ringing in the middle of the night, in your head, in your house in Fairview, Dublin, ambulance sirens are ringing for real just a short distance away in Artane.

And as you go to wake your husband, in the hope that he will tell you not to be silly, that she'll have gone somewhere with friends and that she'll be grand, in reality, that comforting fiction is as far from the truth as it is possible to be.

For, by now, as you pull on your dressing-gown and wander downstairs to put on the kettle, your daughter, your lovely, kind, happy-go-lucky teenager, is one of 14 or 15 injured and bewildered youngsters squeezed together into the back of an ambulance en route to whatever hospital still has the capacity to admit her. Other ambulances are similarly packed.

Your daughter's lovely face is covered in burns, those blonde curls are plastered to her head from the heat and the sweat and the fear, and there's an oxygen mask pinned to her face to help her breathe.

The pretty, pale blue blouse that she bought in Dunnes especially for tonight is now black from smoke and torn down one side from where someone else, desperate to escape from the flames, trampled all



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over her as she lay trapped on the ground.

As you now lift the teapot and pour the strong, black, comforting liquid into two mugs for yourself and your husband, your daughter is fighting for her life in the back of an ambulance.

As you move from the kitchen to the living room to sit down on the sofa and try to decide who, or where, to ring, she is being lifted on to a trolley in Dr Steevens' Hospital (the third hospital the ambulance driver had tried, the previous two were already full to capacity) and rushed along a corridor, all bright lights and rushing-around, uniform-clad personnel. But she's not aware of any of that.

For as you turn to your husband and tell him that you have a really bad feeling, that it's not like her, that this has never happened before, your daughter's life is ebbing away just a short distance away from you across the city.

Beloved

And now, as dawn starts to creep across the sky on the morning of February 14, 1981, and as you walk out to the hall to ring her friend's house in an attempt to find out what is happening, your beloved daughter's fight for life draws to a close. And she dies. Alone. Without anyone there who loves her.

And now, all these years later – 36, next month, to be precise – people have the audacity to tell you that you need to 'let it go', that it's 'a long time now', that continuing to look for answers 'won't bring her back'. That you don't really understand the details of what happened that night when the Stardust went up like a tinderbox.

But the thing is, you do understand. Oh, you might be well into your seventies now, but you're not senile and you're certainly not stupid.

You know what happened. Your daughter and 47 other youngsters went out on that Friday night. Just as they had done countless times before. But this time they never came home. So who was responsible for that?

It's been a rollercoaster ride for over three decades. Surely to God someone will be found accountable, you and the other parents believed in the early days, those

horrendous nightmare weeks and months, as you struggled through the fog of grief.

Forty-eight lives cannot be lost, 214 people cannot be injured, 11 young people cannot be disfigured or disabled forever, and countless others cannot be psychologically scarred for life without proper answers. That's not right.

Yes, an inquiry was established under Justice Ronan Keane shortly afterwards. But he said that the fire was caused by arson, that it was 'probably started deliberately'. Arson? By whose hand? Did he tell you that? No, he didn't.

Accusation

His focus was on a fire that he said had started in a seating area. And yet numerous people have spoken of seeing flames coming from the roof – early on, certainly before the alarm was raised.

That accusation of arson cast aspersions on every youngster there that night. Just like a few years later, when the Liverpool fans at Hillsborough were also smeared, accused of bringing that disaster on their own heads. But those relatives didn't give up. It took them 27 years, but they got justice in the end.

Just like the Bloody Sunday relatives. You felt such joy for them when you watched them all outside the Guildhall in Derry, back in the summer of 2010. Wow, you thought, looking at your daughter's photograph on the table beside the television, if only we could establish the truth.

It is, however, what has kept you going. You and your husband and the other parents and relatives. The search for the answer.

The findings of the independent examination by Paul Coffey in 2008 contradicted the arson theory and the public record was subsequently amended.

That was something.

But, here you now are, with what you and the other parents and survivors believe to be fresh and significant evidence. It's 2017. And you want a new inquiry. It's the only thing that will, in your eyes, finally get to that truth of what really happened that night. What – or who – was responsible for taking your girl away from you, for snuffing out her life before she had even turned 20?

A proper inquiry. With everything on the table. That's all you want. Surely, that's a fair enough exchange. Forty-eight lives were taken. None of them is coming back. Your own daughter would have been 55 now. Maybe even a young grandmother. But what she represents instead is something different, something tragic. A life not lived.

There are still so many questions. They go round and round in your head. There's not a day when you have peace. You can still picture her going out the door that night, you telling her that it was February, that she needed a heavier coat. And her laughing, her blonde curls falling to her shoulders, beautiful against the new, blue blouse.

'You'll catch your death,' you called after her. Imagine that. Imagine that those were your last words to her.

So, no, 36 years on, you're not prepared to 'let it go'. Why should you? Forty-eight lives were lost. Your daughter among them. Don't all of those lost youngsters deserve the truth?