

Sirs - There is a popular saying that, when America sneezes, Britain catches a cold. This is meant to illustrate that developments across the Atlantic inevitably influence what happens in the UK eventually, and the same will probably apply between the UK and Ireland. It is in this latter context that, having spent the first 64 years of my life in England, I can reasonably anticipate that certain mistakes they've made will ultimately affect future policing issues over here, and no doubt you'll wish to avoid them if possible.

As always, those charged with laying down a blueprint for the future will need to ensure that staff who'll be instrumental in carrying it out are a) capable of doing so and b) can be relied upon to apply themselves fully to it. In my ten years living in the State I've become hugely respectful of the way a society that has been subjugated to another power for over six centuries has emerged with its language, culture and religion pretty much intact. In that, Ireland is unique but has not yet shaken off the negative effects that such oppression has left behind, some of them impacting on the way law enforcement is administered. Here in the rural heartland the word 'informer' is definitely still in use, whilst owing its roots to pre-1922 Ireland, but the message now needs to be got across that today's laws are those of the Irish people and not impositions from abroad (except the EU). The following are three examples of shortcomings in enforcement:-

- a) A statement was published in the Southern Star during 2016 that An Garda Siochana officers had detected some 28,000!! incidents of drivers using mobile phones whilst driving, and the practice had got to stop. The article's wording implied that no arrests had been made, nor penalties imposed. My own view of that particular law is that it is unnecessary, although I suspect it to be another piece of EU Nanny-stateism but, if it is to remain in force, then it should be applied. With an on-the-spot fine of €100, the 28,000 (if apprehended) would not only have had a point made, but would have contributed some €1.4 million towards Gardai costs.
- b) Admittedly by word of mouth, but from what I'd consider to be a reliable source, I was told of a local woman who'd been stopped no fewer than five times for having no driving licence. Each time she'd been told she must get one, but hadn't done so. My source claimed that she had insurance, which seems strange but, even if she'd somehow managed to acquire a policy, the absence of a valid licence would have rendered it invalid which, in turn, meant that she did NOT have insurance, thus putting other drivers and pedestrians at risk. The Gardai concerned should not have allowed her to continue.
- c) A number of fellow Brits have told me that local Gardai have told them their UK driving licences are valid over here and they do not need to be replaced with Irish ones. Whilst I'd agree that the entitlement to drive is, obviously, recognised by the Irish Government, the document itself is one of the few items of identification an individual can be expected to produce if requested. However, if the address shown is in the UK, all a Garda can deduce from it is a name, and any address supplied can be totally fictitious which leaves any follow up activity potentially fruitless.

Clearly, this sort of lack of diligence paints a ‘soft touch’ image of law enforcement in general which may, conceivably, stem from an historic sense of union against a common enemy, but, as Ireland prepares to enter its second century of independence, the lines of demarcation should now be clarified? Essentially, law enforcement cannot run with the hare but hunt with the hounds.

Fighting crime should be a community mission with public and Gardai working together to that end. However, and this is where UK experience comes into play, the often petty way in which police enforce motoring laws causes almost universal resentment, with the result that the younger generation refer to them as ‘Pigs’ and certainly wouldn’t help them in any way. Any fine, usually £60-100 plus points on the licence, will impact on the individual but, with most households having one or more drivers, any financial penalty will tend to have a wider effect and be resented by all members, whether they drive or not. Certainly in UK terms, with many more serious crimes not being acted upon, at least as far as the public is concerned, pursuit of the motorist is seen as more money orientated than protecting the public. The regular cry is ‘He wasn’t doing anybody any harm!’ or ‘Haven’t they got better things to do?’ and, with their Irish counterparts already needing some encouragement as above, I imagine any additional damage to their public persona will be best avoided.

Until advisory road signage can be made electronic and controlled remotely from a Control Centre, one has to acknowledge that many restrictions are only relevant in a worst case scenario, and thus enforcement at many times is unnecessary or, at best, needs to be applied selectively. For example, a 30kph speed limit may be perfectly appropriate near a school, but could easily be raised to 50kph outside entry and exit times, or 70kph at 0300 on a Sunday morning. Unfortunately, your British cousins will sometimes pounce on unsuspecting, but otherwise conscientious motorists in such areas to enhance their ‘clear up’ rates, or to train new recruits.

Speed cameras are now a familiar sight in lay-bys and the inevitable practice of headlight flashing to warn oncoming drivers has become the norm. However, these are vehicle mounted at present but, if Ireland takes the next step of stationary cameras, I foresee that, at best, the lenses will be sprayed with aerosol paint or, at worst, they’ll be seriously vandalised with insufficient officers to patrol them. Penalty notices will emanate from the Gardai, and severe resentment will be the result.

There is a lovely folk tale of a Priest falling foul of the authorities pre-1922, and being due to be transported by train up to Cork the next morning to be dealt with. Under cover of darkness some of the locals removed a section of track so that the train couldn't get through and he was rescued. That can be looked back on with fondness but there's no room for anarchy in the 21st Century. I hope the above may be useful.

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