

Irish Daily Mail

COMMENT

If you can't explain, Mr Murphy, then go

THE matter of whether a Government minister is entitled to enlist the assistance of gardaí in order to get to a vital meeting is one that divides public opinion. While some members of the public will view it as an unacceptable example of the political elite taking liberties with the guardians of the peace, there is another body of opinion that might support the practice, viewing it simply as an act of co-operation between one arm of the State and the other.

At first glance there appears to be some justification for Minister Dara Murphy asking two on-duty gardaí to ferry him to Dublin Airport after his car broke down in Mitchelstown, Co. Cork, as he tried to make his early morning flight to Brussels.

In the face of public criticism he could argue that as a Government Minister, he had a duty to attend his high-level meeting in Brussels and was entitled to take all reasonable actions to secure that end.

But the problem is that the account that is emerging of Mr Murphy's official engagements somewhat undermines his insistence that he was under severe pressure to make his flight.

For it appears that his official engagement on the day of his arrival in Brussels was not an emergency at all but a meeting with the Irish ambassador that could have been deferred.

The main purpose of his visit – to meet EU ministers – was scheduled for the day after his arrival, giving him ample time to make alternative travel arrangements.

Even accepting that all flights to the European city were fully booked, there were many options available to the minister that didn't involve calling on the much-depleted ranks of the Garda.

He could have flown to London or Paris and taken an onward flight or train to his final destination, arriving in good time for Monday's critically important summit on the migrant crisis.

But there are other questions surrounding the incident that give rise for discomfort. The account the taxi driver gives of his dealings with the Junior Minister for European Affairs is at odds with the latter's version of events.

According to the taximan, the minister balked when he heard the price of the round trip to Dublin Airport while the minister insists that he was already installed in the Garda car when the taxi driver returned his call.

There is also the presence of his wife Tanya on the trip.

What possible role could she have to play if her husband is engaged on crucial ministerial business?

The various threads of this narrative – from the Garda escort to the conflicting version of events and the presence of Mrs Murphy on the trip – have disturbing echoes of the bad old days when high-handed ministers such as John O'Donoghue thought nothing of deploying the apparatus of State in their service.

That it occurred in the very week when reports emerged of the terror that exists in rural Ireland about violent crime and burglaries due to the lack of gardaí, squad cars and the closure of Garda stations adds insult to injury.

The minister's assurance that had a crime wave been unleashed, the Garda car would have turned around immediately and headed for the crime scene is a pathetic justification for his behaviour and only serves to make his explanation even more threadbare and unsatisfactory.

Unless Minister Murphy gives an immediate account of how he exhausted all travel options to Brussels and his reasons for diverting two gardaí from their normal business, then it is incumbent on the Government to tell him to leave office.

His policies might divide his flock in the US

SATURDAY DISPATCH



by Edward J Lordan

PONTIFICE Francisco is making his first visit to the United States this week, and it's a three-city whirlwind tour that's captured America's imagination. The Pope's six days in America are packed with speeches and events, with his 'Shepard One' plane whisking him between states and his modified Popemobile shuttling him between crowds. The trip has all the trappings of a U2 tour, including a 30-person entourage, massive crowds and exhaustive media coverage.

So, how are Americans responding? Well, it depends on who you ask.

One in five US citizens is Catholic, and 71 per cent of them approve of Francis's performance as Pontiff. That's a higher approval rating than that of any of his predecessors, but 18 points lower than it was a year ago.

The drop has been most significant among Catholic conservatives, reflecting some of the more controversial – and liberal – pronouncements from the Vatican over the last 18 months.

Americans have responded to the dichotomy in Francis's philosophy with a form of 'cafeteria Catholicism', cheering him on when they agree with his positions, and rejecting or ignoring his pronouncements when they disagree.

Traditional marriage? The darling of the right. Global warming? The hero of the left.

Most Americans do agree, however, that they are excited that he's in America. 'This is such a great opportunity for the United States,' says college professor Michael Boyle from Prospect Park, Pennsylvania.

'Pope Francis has brought new energy to the Church and it is great for our region to be a part of this experience.'

'With people coming from all over and the world watching, it truly will be an international event.'

Francis's US tour kicked off on Tuesday with his arrival at Andrews Airforce Base outside of Washington, DC. In the first of many unprecedented moments, President Barack Obama and his wife Michelle met him at the tarmac. Washington is a city that's accustomed to hosting dignitaries from around the globe, but the arrival of the worldwide leader of 1.2 billion Catholics has been hailed as something particularly special.

The Pope's advance team has been hyper-vigilant to every detail of the trip: Every back-drop, speech and meeting is highly scrutinised and fraught with meaning, and the schedule is a delicate balance of interaction with the most powerful and powerless segments of society.

Pope Francis's arrival at the White House, for example, did not include the customary 21-gun salute, in deference to the Pope's preference for avoiding trappings of power and his reputation as a man of peace. Details

like this make a difference.

Francis's first day in the US featured two firsts: the first time a canonisation Mass was held on American soil and the first time a pope addressed the United States Congress.

The much-anticipated speech before the American legislature reflected large, policy-related themes, including immigration, economic disparity and the death penalty.

The speech was more motivational than confrontational, but clearly resonated more with liberal lawmakers.

The Pope even took a moment to encourage legislators, who have become increasingly fractious in recent years, to work toward common goals and find areas of co-operation.

Predictably, the political response to the speech broke

Charisma, positivity and a caring social nous. That's why this papal visit is so special to Americans

along party lines. Both sides prefaced their remarks by declaring their excitement and gratitude for the Pope. Conservatives then emphasised their agreement with his pro-life sentiments, while liberals chose to talk about his comments on economic disparity.

THE Pontiff's morning among the most influential political leaders in the nation was brief: he declined their lunch offer so that he could lunch with 300 of the city's homeless in a tent outside St Patrick's Catholic Church. The symbolism was not lost on his flock, many of whom marvelled at his ability to 'walk the walk' by showing respect to Americans across

the economic spectrum.

The Pope's popularity, however, is part blessing, part curse. Tickets for every papal event are hard to come by, even when Francis appears in massive forums.

The largest public arena in the DC metro area is FedEx Park, home of the Washington Redskins football team and a stadium comparable to Croke Park, but the facility was not even considered for hosting the Pope's open-air appearance.

Instead, the Pontiff paraded around the national mall, a massive promenade stretching from the Lincoln Memorial to the Capitol building.

Francis's supporters have travelled from the far reaches of the country, and from many countries beyond, to be part of the event, but the sheer volume makes it impossible for 99.9 per

but Francis's humble humanitarian nature has united them



Positive vibes: Pope Francis greets children in Washington

cent of them to get anywhere near him.

It's not only the size of the crowds that are a challenge, it's the age of the participants.

As in many European nations, the Catholic population in the United States skews significantly older than the country's population in general. While the crowds for the events so far have been multi-generational, large groups of seniors create additional complications for everything from transportation to medical support.

The challenges are compounded by security issues. This month, Americans commemorated the 14th anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which centred on two of the three cities the Pope is visiting. Years after the attacks, many Americans still live in an ongoing low-level state of fear, which is heightened whenever large crowds of people gather for public events.

With the Pope's visit generating

some of the largest crowds in recent American history, federal, state and local government security officials are working to ensure the safety of everyone, particularly the Pontiff.

Their measures have sometimes tested the patience of residents in host cities who see some security measures as not only intrusive, but overzealous.

Along with security concerns, there is a second issue that hovers over the Pope's trip that cannot be ignored: the Church sex abuse scandal.

In a number of American archdioceses, the wounds from the Church administration's response to the sexual abuse crisis remain very fresh, and victims' rights groups were furious when the Pope used one of his initial speeches to praise American bishops for their 'courage' in handling the crisis.

From the nation's political centre, the Pontiff flew north to America's financial centre, New York, on Thurs-

day evening. This city does everything big: there are five times more Catholics in the New York City archdiocese than there are people in Dublin. It is also home to the United Nations, the perfect platform for the Pope to address the planet as a whole. His speech there yesterday was a worldwide event as well as a local one.

In the run-up to the New York visit, Manhattan – an island which is choked with vehicles and people on the best of days – was a series of closed thoroughfares and snarled traffic. Francis may be the fifth pontiff to visit New York City, but his visit is an entirely new experience for many people in the region. 'I think it's great that this pope has chosen now to visit the United States,' gushes lifelong Catholic Barbara Hennessy of nearby West Caldwell, New Jersey, who feels that Francis provides a much-needed antidote to the political bombast of an election

season. 'He's going to re-invigorate the Catholic Church in the United States,' she says.

Washington DC and New York City represent America's political and economic capitals; the Pontiff's third destination represents America's history. Dublin has the GPO and Kilmainham Gaol, Philadelphia offers Independence Hall and The Liberty Bell. The city is the birthplace of the nation and contains some of the most important historical sites in the country.

The Pope's visit is the highlight of a five-day World Meeting of Families in Philadelphia – an enormous gathering of experts and researchers, clerics and laymen, all exploring the Church's interpretation of the umbrella concept of 'family'.

The subject is not without controversy, with breakout groups covering topics ranging from economic disparity to LGBT issues, and women's rights to abortion. The city's role in

planning the conference has been rocky, at best.

Initial excitement about the Pope's visit quickly gave way to grumbling as plans were released piecemeal, sometimes including contradictory information. For a two-month period, city officials stressed the possible delays and security measures so much that projected attendance began to dwindle.

In recent weeks, the city and conference officials have reversed course, stressing ease of access as they try to regenerate enthusiasm and boost attendance. There is also the issue of footing the bill: Local taxpayers have raised concerns about the amount of civic money involved in what is, essentially, a religious activity.

The Pope's visit is also one of the final events in the second term of Philadelphia mayor Michael Nutter, who has assured citizens that no city money will be used to support the conference or the Pope's visit. His estimate of \$12.5million to cover the city's cost for police, fire protection and other city services has been met with suspicion.

Finally, when it comes to Philadelphia, there is the less-than-warm relationship between Pope Francis and his Philadelphia host, Archbishop Charles Chaput.

Francis's open mind toward the Church's role in the world stands in stark contrast to the traditionalist views of the Philadelphia archbishop – one of the most conservative leaders in the American church.

Chaput has publicly supported the visit, but his enthusiasm appears tepid and the weekend temperature between the two men may be chilly.

This papal visit here has inspired a burst of entrepreneurial enthusiasm that has very little to do with religion. Free tickets to papal events are being offered on eBay for \$500. Homeowners who long ago rented out their Philadelphia city-centre houses to out-of-towners have taken their windfalls and fled the city for the week. Restaurateurs and hoteliers in Philadelphia expect a lucrative weekend but are concerned that officials' contradictory messages may keep the faithful from making the pilgrimage.

THE number and variety of items bearing Francis's image are a testament to creativity, if not taste: posters ('Tour de Francis'), bobbleheads (\$25) and bumper stickers ('Proud Catholic Capitalist'). Then there's a Pope toaster that burns the Pontiff's image into a slice of bread, and a life-size stand-up cardboard Pope that sells for \$160 (perfect for selfies.)

And then, there's the party. The Philadelphia Brewery Company has introduced a new beer called 'Holy Wooder' (a nod to the local pronunciation of 'water') to commemorate the weekend, and a consortium of 20 bars in the middle of the city have announced a 'Pope crawl', with proceeds promised to a food bank.

Zoe Farqhar, a local college student, captures the spirit of the bacchanal: 'I'm planning to go because I want to celebrate this pope in particular. I'm not Catholic so the Pope has never been a huge part of my life, but Pope Francis is the 'pope of the people' and my values and beliefs resonate well with what he teaches.... I'm not sure if any other pope would inspire people to go on bar crawls much like Pope Francis has.'

Meanwhile, the other major religion in the region, American football, has been tied in to the Pope's visit as well. Philadelphia's hometown team, the Eagles, is off to a dismal 0-2 start, and desperate fans are hoping that the Pope can lay his hands on players and help change the team's fortunes. Should they win tomorrow, Philadelphians feel, the Pope will have truly performed a miracle.

**Edward J Lordan is professor of communication studies at West Chester University, Pennsylvania*