

Following Taoiseach's prevarication on university . . .

Angered by Taoiseach Bertie Ahern's prevarication on the subject when he visited here last Friday, straight-talking City Councillor Mary Roche has demanded immediate and robust action towards having WIT upgraded to university status.

She urged all public bodies and interested groups in the region to lobby the Taoiseach, Education Minister Mary Hanafin and their local TDs on the issue "today". Metaphorically speaking, she said tomorrow will be too late – the boat will have sailed.

Speaking on the subject after he opened the Edmund Rice Heritage Centre in Barrack St., Mr. Ahern refused to give any commitment on delivery of the university. All he would say was that a decision would be made as soon as possible but Waterford's case could not be taken in isolation and knock-on effects for other regions and Institutes of Technology would have to be taken into account.

In other words, after all the years of campaigning and expectation, there are little grounds for optimism in the matter.

The subject was discussed at Monday night's City Council meeting at which it was decided to ask Minister Hanafin to publish the Port report which has been on her desk since last July and which is believed to support the case for a university.

But in a statement afterwards Cllr. Roche said that was not enough. Time was of the essence because the decision was about to be made and it was essential that the united voice of the south east was heard in support of a case that had clearly been established.

She said the academic and regional arguments had been accepted and as a region now we could not be denied a university because of "some perceived knock-on effects" that the government did not want to deal with.

She insisted: "What we must demand is that the government – who we know is discussing the issue currently – must trigger Section 9 of the University Act 1997 and set in motion the process whereby WIT can be designated as a university as quickly as possible".

The argument had been won, she stated. The region's entitlement had been established and we could not be made to suffer "this injustice" any longer. She said the government must be mature enough to deal with any knock-on effect and get its house in order on the issue. "We cannot wait any longer – we demand that Section 9 be triggered now", she thundered.

She called on all the city-wide and regional bodies who already had their shoulder to the wheel on the issue to become even more vocal and visible now, while government consideration of the matter was ongoing.

Waterford and the south east could not afford to pay the price for the government failing to get its house in order. "The potential damage to the system is not an issue for us; we cannot be expected to continue to suffer actual damage because of some potential knock-on effects. The academic argument is over. The regional argument is over. We should all be demanding that Section 9 is triggered now, starting the designation process".

Finally, she warned that all the government's investment in Waterford as a Gateway City and regional capital would be wasted if it could not reach its full potential and a university was critical – it would be a catalyst – towards that end.

Differences

Meanwhile, at Monday night's meeting, differences of opinion arose when the councillors debated the best campaign methods, **writes David McDonnell.**

Sinn Féin's David Cullinane alleged that there was "political muddling" of the issue. He said: "This decision should have been based on the merits of the application. Based on its merits, the institute's proposal is rock solid. What has become clear over recent days is the emergence of university politics and national politics in determining this decision. If you look at what the Taoiseach and the Minister have said, it's clear that the Port Report is being used as a fudge given the main issue at stake."

Cllr. Joe Kelly added: "Other universities are just looking after their own patch by keeping Waterford down. People say that if WIT gets university status then there will be a queue behind it from other institutes. I have no problem if other institutes meet the same high standards that WIT has to become a university."

Cllr. Davy Walsh called for a public forum, where all local representatives and bodies including WIT's governing body, the South East Regional Authority and SIPTU could "send out a united voice." He added that councillors in Waterford County, Kilkenny, Wexford and South Tipperary also had a role to play and that a delegation from the region should be sent to Dublin.

This position was backed by Cllr. Hilary Quinlan who said: "Like with the radiotherapy issue, we should call on all the relevant authorities. Let's go to Dublin on this one."

Caution

Cllr. Tom Cunningham however urged a more cautious approach and said that the government's handling of the public backlash against the discontinuing of the Shannon-London route last year had shown its willingness to disregard popular protests.

He added: "There is no point having a public forum and listening to the sound of our own voices. The WIT case is well made. We have constantly put it on every agenda. There is not a person in the city that has not heard our stance.

"In the short term, I believe we need a connected, planned, coordinated response rather than a political reaction. A political reaction is understandable but might not serve us as well.

"We have to be practical about this. I think it's slightly naïve if we think that our deputation is going to have the desired effect in isolation. I believe it is significant that the Institute has yet to issue a statement on the issue and I consider it appropriate that we consult the views of all concerned. Then the Corporate Policy Group of this Council might meet to decide upon a course of action in determining our position."

City Manager, Michael Walsh, said while everybody present was supportive of the push for university status, it was worth taking stock in terms of other interested parties.

Cllr. Davy Daniels asked Mayor Mary O'Halloran if the Taoiseach had given any indication on the matter during their discussion last week.

The Mayor responded that both she and the City Manager had pushed Mr. Ahern strongly on the subject. She said that although the Taoiseach listened very sympathetically, he did not give any assurances.