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The Pat Kenny Show ---Pat Kenny and Joan Burton

PK. Good afternoon

JB. Good afternoon, Pat

PK. So you're getting your constituency a maternity hospital, it would appear.

JB. Well, I think the women of Dublin and the women of Ireland are going to get three fabulous maternity hospitals with hundreds of years service to women and babies in Ireland and each of them is actually going to get a new hospital over a period of time and I think that is really, really good. It's something as Tanaiste I've taken a special interest in. Later today, the Economic Management Committee will be meeting the government to have a look at the capital programme plans and specifically as we have to look at transport over the next five to ten years we'll be looking at maternity hospitals as well. In relation to the Rotunda, the Rotunda was going to go to the Mater, but when the Childrens' Hospital was allocated to James's, the Coombe is now going to fit with James's which I think is very good for the Coombe and is a good decision so I think about a year ago the people in the Rotunda approached Blanchardstown to see if there was an interest in moving out there so I've been aware of the discussions or evaluations and considerations in the Department of Health and the recommendations...

PK. So where will the children who are born to mothers in Dublin's north inner city, who typically would have gone to the Rotunda, where will they go now? Will they go now rather to St. Vincent's Hospital, to the National Maternity Hospital, which will be there, will they go down to the river, if you like...?

JB. I expect it's going to be a choice and it might be in the end because of the National Childrens' Hospital and the Coombe being on the James's site that that might be the favoured location for people from the city centre. The problem, Pat, as you know, and I know, is that we have fantastic staff working in the maternity services but they are incredibly cramped-each of those three hospitals-and if you go to maternity hospitals to visit people say in a maternity hospital abroad or indeed even in the North, the amount of space by comparison...The other thing as well is that going back to these three locations, they actually cover as it were the whole of the city and particularly the outer areas of the city on both the south, north and west side, where the vast majority of the babies...

PK. OK. This is an argument that I was actually offering about the Childrens' Hospital and this is where the babies and the children... Is Blanchardstown suitable for a maternity hospital but not suitable for the Childrens' Hospital?

JB. Well, that was the decision that Minister Reilly, when he was Minister for Health came to. I don't think...

PK. No, no. Hang on a second. The first decision was the Mater which to the dogs on the street was grossly unsuitable..

JB.-absolutely-

PK. ..and that was shot down. We now have the extraordinary situation evolving in St. James's Hospital where not alone..it was already headed up, I suppose, that we would have a maternity hospital, a tertiary adult hospital and we would have the Childrens' Hospital on a very crowded site, no matter what they say, with incredible traffic problems.

JB. Well..

PK. ...with people being shipped in and bussed in, or whatever it is, even to build the place.

JB. Well, my own personal preference and I never made a secret of it, would have been somewhere in the M50 ambit. There were suggestions, if you remember, around Tallaght. There were suggestions around Blanchardstown. There were suggestions around a site north of Beaumont. In the end the decision was made and the medical advice of the senior medical people involved favoured James's and yesterday Minister Varadkar reiterated his support for that decision. Now it's due to go to planning in the not too distant future. There will also be a secondary Childrens' Hospital applied for, for Blanchardstown and one for Tallaght at the same time that the main application...

PK. But is that not just a political stroke to say, "Look, don't worry, we know in our bones that James's is all wrong for the Children's Hospital, but here's a sop, here's one for Tallaght, here's one for Blanchardstown. They'll be kind of minor injuries clinics or something like that, but you're getting your kids' hospitals out there...

JB. Well, in all honesty, I have had a look at the proposals for James's and the way they have configured the site in the proposals and actually I think they have done an extremely good job. Now obviously, it's to go to planning. We have to see what the planning process throws up. At this point in time, to be honest, Pat, I would actually like to see the Childrens' Hospital start building as soon as possible. We've allocated very significant amounts of money to it and, to be honest, it's something that as a country we need for all our children, but I think the new design of the hospital is extremely exciting and, as soon planning is agreed..

PK. It's in the wrong place, isn't it?

JB. Well, as I said, I think that argument as this point is over. The Minister indicated yesterday, having looked at it all over the last year, he's happy with the site and what I'm anxious to do is to make progress in relation to both the Childrens' Hospitals and the three maternity hospitals. I think that will be very good for both, particularly for mothers...

PK. You need very skilled people to work in these hospitals..

JB. Yes

PK. ...in the maternity hospitals and in the Childrens' Hospital and they've got to be able to have accommodation. They've got to have public transport if they live close enough or they have to have parking for their cars if they're in, you know, unsocial hours and all the rest. The notion, and it's an intriguing one, of the consultants, the well-paid, well-educated consultants coming in by bus to St. James's Hospital is an intriguing one for me and...

JB. Well, particularly in terms of James's, you actually have the Luas going through the James's campus—the Red Line Luas..

PK. How many consultants live in Tallaght or indeed in Dublin's inner city? I'm just thinking of the destinations of the Red Line.

JB. Well, I think..

PK...because they won't be, they'll have their private car parking. No, I mean these are the people who were pushing, the medical professionals at the higher levels, were pushing for this and they don't envisage that they will be coming to work on the Luas.

JB. Well, I think that if Dublin as a city is to continue to prosper and to grow.. I was out at Intel the other morning having a look at the developments that have taken place there and talking to the American Chamber of Commerce and a critical issue to make Dublin an even more vibrant, more economically successful city, is to actually address public transport issues. In London, for instance, or in Paris, a consultant, who might be even better paid than some of the Irish consultants, they use public transport, so perhaps that's a kind of a change of habit. I would think, as well, that the younger consultants, it isn't anything like the same problem, but we do need a much stronger transport plan for Dublin.

PK. All of the Childrens' Hospitals that we looked at in the course of the run-up to this, they all said, I think it was several in America, who had to increase their parking dramatically.. you know, they designed a thousand car-parking spaces, now they have three thousand car-parking spaces, because, you know, everyone knows who's ever had a really sick child, you don't bring them, you know, on the bus.

JB. ..and, I mean, in James's that is..

PK. You have to book, according to them, when your child is getting sick, you can book a place. How do you know when your child is getting sick? You have to book your parking in advance.

JB. Well, in a childrens' hospital you have a fair number of children who have either chronic conditions or a condition that's going to be treated for maybe a year, maybe three years, and in that case there is an amount of predictability about the appointments that the children make and I agree with you, very few people are going to take a small sick child, a baby in particular,

on public transport, particularly in the winter months. I don't think that's realistic. I think people will always opt to get the family car as close as possible and have parking, but they have undertaken to have that as part of the project, but..

PK. ..but not enough. Now we've added the maternity hospital to the mix, which was always going to be in the mix. We have hospitals, and we know medical needs keep on increasing with an ageing population but also with the sophistication of medical treatments. That applies as much to children as it does to adults. I mean, the need is going to grow and grow and grow and the site is constricted.

JB. But the Master of the Coombe was there yesterday and she was extremely pleased with the co-location. She was absolutely pleased with the co-location and I have to say, in relation to the whole of the north, north-east side, Blanchardstown is ideally located to service what is a huge area and also, as we develop improvements in maternity hospitals, and we have hospital groups, it will allow for instance the Rotunda being based on the edge of the west side of the city and Blanchardstown to, for instance, link in to other hospitals like Cavan and that would be very important in terms of providing continuous levels of expertise..

PK. Brian, Athlone, says, "Just as well those of us outside Dublin never get sick or have children."

JB. Remember that, in relation, particularly to the Connolly site, you're talking about the Connolly site, as with any of the M50 sites, basically being within a hour and a half of towns like Athlone, Mullingar, Kilkenny and, in fact, if you were to...

PK. Why did the government set its face about doing something that would only serve a particular cohort? I know they say, you know, if you've got cancer, if you've got a life-threatening illness, you don't really care where you're being treated as long as you get the best treatment, but still in terms of access, and I'm thinking of...you have a child in hospital, maybe mother or father is staying with the child in the room but then all the other siblings want to come and visit and they're all supposed to pay top dollar to Iarnrod Eireann to get the train because taking the car is going to be an impossibility. You know, there's a lot of stuff..

JB. I think, Pat, that we have to focus on the fact that we have been talking as a country about having a top of the range new childrens' hospital for maybe getting on for two decades. We've provided the funding and to be perfectly honest, I just want to see the hospital going ahead..

PK. ..even in the wrong place?

JB. Well..

PK. ..even though your own preference was for Blanchardstown?

JB. I think the design though that has come forward in relation to the hospital now is actually a really, really good design and far superior to anything I saw previously on the Mater campus.

PK. Tanaiste, you grew up near the area. I'm sure you are familiar. You crossed the river from time to time up around Rialto..

JB. I lived in Rialto Cottages and I know it..

PK ..and absolutely how congested it is..

JB. Yeah, I accept that, because of the development of public transport and some appropriate parking facilities, I do actually think the issues can be addressed. Yes, the consultants may be a bit discommoded that they are going to use public transport but how does a consultant in New York go to work, in London, in Paris, I mean, that's an experience that all of us are going to have to get used to.

PK. OK. Liam says, "This is one of the worst decisions... to have the Childrens' Hospital at St. James's. Imagine trying to get to a 9 am appointment there on an awful wet November morning. Blanchardstown or Tallaght the obvious choice to all except a few politicians and consultants. It would have suited everyone, Dublin and country people alike."

JB. Well, bear in mind that the bulk of the discussion and the argument was among the people with the medical expertise. In fairness to the politicians, the issue was to find the location that was the most strongly recommended by the people with the medical expertise. Now you can quibble with that, but that's the way the decision was arrived at and that's the way James Reilly, who was then the Minister for Health, made his recommendation to the Cabinet. Obviously, in that case there was a discussion, but his advice and the medical advice to the Cabinet, prevailed. The decision is made and can I just say we really do need to move on with it.

PK. What happens, though, if you're frustrated by the planners?

JB. Well..

PK. Suppose, it's, "We told you so. We warned you and yet you persisted. I mean, that won't be good for the government.

JB. Well, all I can say is that they appear to be very, very confident that they have addressed the planning issues.

PK.have the same level of confidence that they had in the Mater?

JB. Well, I have to say, in the context of Georgian Dublin, I was always dubious and doubtful that the Mater one was going to pass muster and there was a whole series of very detailed advice from people who had great understanding of the relationship of Georgian Dublin, the skyline and so on to the site of the Mater.

PK. "Is Pat Kenny such a snob? My husband is a hospital consultant who uses the Red Line Luas to get to work."

JB. Good for him

PK. Thirteen year old motorbike, but there you go, which broke down on me yesterday, as it happens but that's another story.

JB. I sold mine a long time ago. I used to ride a Honda 60 out and back to UCD but I think I've left those days behind. I prefer to walk.