

What's the Big Idea?

by George Lightbourn

“Education and a real commitment to high-tech education trumps infrastructure.” That proclamation from Governor Doyle summarized the lessons learned from their recent visit to Ireland by Governor Doyle, Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett and a handful of business leaders.

The delegation from Wisconsin was the latest entourage poking around Ireland looking for the secret to the economic success of the “Celtic Tiger.” There is good reason to pay attention to Ireland. In the late 1980s the Irish economy was an absolute bottom-feeder among European nations. Per capita incomes were just 69% of the European average. By 2003 the picture had completely reversed. Irish incomes were 36% above the European average. The success was reflected, not just in more wealth, but also in greatly lowered unemployment and a reversal in the out-migration Ireland experienced in the 1980s.

So there was Governor Doyle and his traveling party, careening down the Irish byways in search of the secrets to economic turnaround – and they found them. The value of this type of excursion (other than the availability of Guinness and Powers) is being able to escape the day-to-day issues and consider the big picture. Governor Doyle’s statement about education trumping infrastructure reflected that type of big picture thinking.

For Wisconsin, the timing of the trip seemed ideal since the Governor was scheduled to give his “State of the State” address just days after his return. This should have been the perfect venue to roll out some visionary thinking. It should have been.

But in the afterglow of the Irish trip, none of the Irish ideas made it into the Governor’s speech. Instead, the speech contained a necklace of initiatives that seemed designed to shore up the Democratic base. In other words, it was about what would be expected from a Democratic governor in an election year. The centerpiece of the speech was dubbed the “Affordability Agenda,” a string of subsidies for health care, education and heating bills. If there was any doubt the speech was an election kick-off, it pushed for something called a living wage tax credit and finished with a little bashing of everybody’s favorite punching bag – Wal-Mart.

We expect politicians to do things like shore up their base. We expect Governors to provide leadership. Leadership entails laying out bold, radical, fresh ideas that transcend the ideological labels. For example, we recall the odd alliance between Tommy Thompson and Polly Williams in crafting Milwaukee’s parental choice program. The type of policy magic that grew out of the Conservative Republican working with the inner-city Democrat has yielded an initiative that today is benefiting 15,000 Milwaukee students. That was the type of magic that might have come from the Irish experience.

Based on the Irish experience, Governor Doyle might have laid out a vision for Wisconsin that included the following elements, all of which require getting rid of business as usual:

- High stakes testing – Irish students know from the time they enter school that a learning certificate test is awaiting them. How well they do on that test determines what educational options are available to them.
- Educational Bureaucracy – Irish schools are way behind their American counterparts in the amount of support services they provide. Irish schools spend their money in the classroom, not in offices.
- Teacher compensation – Irish teachers are well compensated. A teacher in Ireland can expect a starting salary of \$40,000. This undoubtedly enhances the pool of students opting to become teachers.
- University Curriculum – Irish universities have aligned their curricula to the needs of private sector high-growth industries. This is a clear indication that they understand the link between education and the economy.

There are other features of the Irish economy that bear watching. For example, Ireland has learned that tax rates matter. As a result, corporate taxes are considerably below those of their European counterparts. Also, the process to site a business, including the permitting, has been made simple and fast.

If the trip to Ireland is to pay off, these are the type of ideas we need to see coming out of the East Wing of the Capitol. These are the type of ideas that will truly lead to an economically healthier Wisconsin. If we don't see these kinds of ideas coming from the East Wing, then the Governor's Irish trip will be marked by a few photographs and recollections of stories told in pubs.