

Funding increase flew in face of all evidence

What was the basis of the decision to reward repeated IGB failures



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THE Irish Greyhound Board, or Bord na gCon, always seems mired in one controversy or another and so it is no surprise that the sport's reputation has suffered badly. What was a surprise, however, was the decision of the government to increase the IGB's funding in last month's Budget.

Ireland has a traditional affinity with greyhound racing and it is estimated that it supports around 10,000 jobs. The current CEO, Geraldine Larkin, is only four months in the job and has shown signs that she has grasped the task ahead of her by taking difficult decisions, such as selling the iconic track in Harold's Cross.

Having said that, the level of waste and excess that the IGB was involved in is staggering. Even allowing for the recession, the scale and speed of the decline in the industry has been dramatic. Between 2006 and 2013, revenue declined from €63.5m to €28.2m; in 2006 Tote receipts were just over €50m, compared to €20.9m last year; attendance at meetings for 2007 was just short of 1.3m but by 2013 that halved to 687,510; and, most alarming of all is that between 2006 and 2013 debt rose from €11.2m to €21.8m.

Tom Hayes, junior minister in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, brought in a firm of consultants, Indecon, to look at aspects of the IGB. The report, published last July, was damning. Across every aspect of the industry, alarming deficiencies were found. Apart from the financial collapse, Indecon also noted problems with governance, doping control, animal welfare and breeding.

The new CEO has said she is committed to turning the IGB around and to growing the sport again in Ireland, and has outlined plans to implement many of Indecon's recommendations.

But the sins of the past should not be so easily forgiven - it is important to remember that the IGB receives significant public funding through the Horse and Greyhound Racing Fund. That level of funding has been steadily decreasing from its peak in 2008 of €15.257m to €10.8m this year but the report notes that "support from the Irish Exchequer has fallen at a much slower rate than the turnover from racing facilities".

But this is Ireland and so, despite overwhelming evidence that this is a sport and a governing body in crisis and in need of serious reform, the government did not just decide to halt the slide in public funding but it actually committed to providing an additional €1.2m a year for the next three years to the IGB. By any standards, the arrogance of this is breathtaking. Have we not reached a point yet where the IGB must now clearly show it can finally bring an end to years of failure before it is considered worthy of even more taxpayers' money? Even with optimism under the new management, what was the basis of the government's decision to reward its repeated failures?

During a recent Dáil committee hearing, several TDs and senators were hugely critical of IGB.

"The industry got €103.4m to invest, yet it has still managed to find itself in a dire financial position," said Fianna Fáil's éamon Ó Cuív. "No doubt the downturn in the economy will be cited for that, but many businesses that should have been more directly affected by the downturn have survived much better than Bord na gCon." He later added: "Financial losses are

one thing, but such losses allied to a total loss of faith in the integrity of the industry is something else entirely."

Senator Denis Landy of Labour went further: "I bring everything down to basics, and the basics are that people will not go to dog racing any more because of the doping." Senator Brian Ó Domhnaill of Fianna Fáil said: "The question we need to consider today is whether we are obtaining value for money. Is the corporate governance in the organisation receiving this funding up to scratch? Is the money being spent by the taxpayer bringing an output for the taxpayer? The simple answer to that question is 'No'."

This is just a sample of the political establishment's view of the industry as expressed in one committee meeting with the IGB's top officials. But perhaps the most damning news of all came from a report looking at the development of the greyhound racing stadium in Limerick which was published by the Comptroller and Auditor General and which goes a long way to explaining just how the IGB's debt grew to over €22m.

The IGB purchased a site in 2005 for €1.02m and spent another €935,000 on site development and design. This was despite the fact that a consultant's report had highlighted access issues, a report which it now appears was not presented to the Board. The project had to be abandoned and the site is now worth €150,000. A new site was purchased for €3.4m in 2008, and ultimately developed. The final cost of the stadium project was €21m.

The report notes: "Had better analysis and more soundly based assumptions been used, it is likely that the analysis would have indicated that the development of the Limerick stadium was, at best, a marginal commercial proposition."

There may be a time when the IGB deserves increased public funding, but, on all available evidence, that time is certainly not now.

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