

# Hogan's U-turn on climate is short-sighted and damaging

JOHN GIBBONS

Mon, Nov 07, 2011

WILL THE real Phil Hogan please stand up? On June 16th last, responding in the Dáil to questions from Sinn Féin's Martin Ferris on whether climate change legislation was being "put on the long finger", the Minister for the Environment gave a response that left no one in the chamber in any doubt as to where he stood: "Climate change is widely recognised as the most fundamental and far-reaching environmental challenge to humanity, both globally and nationally."

When in opposition, Phil Hogan was even more passionate. In the Dáil last December, Hogan offered his strong support for then minister, John Gormley's carbon budget.

However, as a seasoned campaigner, Hogan warned Gormley there would be concerted attempts to wreck this critical legislation. "I know it was not easy for the ministers to pursue this matter through Cabinet because it is an area with many vested and conflicting interests." Fine Gael would be "as constructive as always in the climate change committee when the Bill comes before it".

Gormley was at the time under a ferocious two-fronted assault from the farming and business lobbies, specifically the Irish Farmers' Association and Irish Business and Employers Confederation. The Green Party's failure to get climate legislation enacted on their watch was, however, primarily down to their own lack of political nous.

Meanwhile, the Phil Hogan who understood not alone the gravity of the climate crisis, but was also wise to the spin and special pleading from an assortment of lobby groups, has vapourised, to be replaced by his Doppelgänger, Phil "the fixer" Hogan.

Early last month, Hogan and his senior officials took part in a behind-closed-doors briefing organised by Ibec. The meeting, according to Ibec chief Danny McCoy, was "a timely opportunity for our members to influence the development of a climate policy framework". Understandably, McCoy was "particularly pleased the Minister will be joining us". In private. No reporters, no notes. Oisín Coghlan of Friends of the Earth remarked at the time that Hogan was running the "Galway tent of climate politics".

The volte-face by Hogan has been stunning. His capitulation to special pleading by IFA/Ibec is testimony to the power of these unelected bodies in "shaping" legislation before it even reaches the public domain.

The damage from Hogan's apparent solo run may be far-reaching. Ireland's most senior climate scientist, Prof John Sweeney of NUI Maynooth, described it as "a really short-sighted decision, showing that political expediency, not vision, is driving policy in Ireland". Hogan has been "undermined by vested interest groups, this is all just rhetoric and hot air, he's simply kicking the ball down the road", Prof Sweeney said. He said Hogan's move would cost Ireland jobs and further damage our reputation.

One of the reasons Hogan proffered for walking away from Ireland's climate change commitments is his claim that "food security is being ignored". To grasp what an astonishingly uninformed statement this is, the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation reported recently that climate change posed "potentially catastrophic impacts on food production". The UN organisation called for urgent measures to mitigate climate change as the only way to ensure food security. In other words, the opposite to what Hogan says.

The spectre of climate disruption is no longer confined to far-away places. The growing impacts are hitting home here in Ireland, years ahead of projections. The upsurge in destructive weather events, including the recent massive flood that submerged parts of Dublin, are harbingers of a rapidly warming atmosphere. A

deluge of similar intensity in late summer would wipe out most of the Irish cereal harvest. “Food security” without climate stabilisation is oxymoronic.

On the same morning last week that Hogan’s bombshell was dropped, former president Mary Robinson was pointing out that, left unchecked, climate change could reduce global output by a ruinous 20 per cent. As the authoritative 2006 Stern report on climate economics argued, climate change is like a smouldering fire – the most costly and dangerous approach by far is to just ignore it. This “do nothing” agenda is promoted by an influential cabal of neoliberal economists who support economic growth at all costs.

Robinson also pointed out that emissions from developed countries like Ireland are already wreaking havoc in some of the poorest places on earth. Many Irish people would be horrified to think that one Minister was rewriting the programme for government to put special interests ahead of our moral, ethical and legal obligations. In climate change, as in politics, as we sow, so shall we reap.

---

John Gibbons is a specialist environmental writer and commentator. Twitter: @think\_or\_swim

© 2011 The Irish Times