

Seriousness of climate situation has yet to sink in nationally



It is tempting to imagine that a sea change in Ireland's on-again, off-again relationship with the reality of climate change has occurred in recent times, as extreme weather events have yet again battered our coastline, inundated farms and flooded urban areas, with the latest wave of damage running to more than €100 million.

Minister for Finance [Michael Noonan](#), visiting areas of [Limerick](#) hit by flooding, commented: "I think we all now believe in climate change . . . the defences that were here, with the new climates that we are having all around the world, are no longer adequate."

Next up was Minister for Public Expenditure [Brendan Howlin](#). "When calm is restored I think we have to do some serious thinking about long-term flood defences because clearly climate change is a reality."

Then [Brian Hayes](#), Minister of State for the Office of Public Works, said the OPW had identified some 250 at-risk locations for repeated flooding. The costs of trying to defend these locations, he warned, would run into "tens of billions of euros".

Meanwhile, Taoiseach Enda Kenny and Opposition leader Micheál Martin both agreed that climate change was indeed real. The one who doesn't seem to have got the memo was Minister for the Environment [Phil Hogan](#). As the storms rolled in and the flood waters rose higher, Hogan chose instead to join Minister for Agriculture [Simon Coveney](#) in celebrating securing a renewal of the environmental vandalism that will be Ireland's latest derogation from the EU nitrates directive.

"Whether we have scientific evidence or not in relation to climate change, it looks as if we're going to have these types of weather patterns in the future," said Hogan. This was about as close to uttering the "c" word as he has managed in 2½ years. And yes Minister, there is evidence alright, mountains – and lakes – of it, in fact.

Tipping point

Not everyone is so conflicted. The world is “perilously close” to a climate tipping point, IMF managing director [Christine Lagarde](#) warned recently.

With a culinary flourish, she added: “unless we take action, future generations will be roasted, toasted, fried and grilled”.

[RTÉ](#), the public service broadcaster with a budget in excess of €300 million, should have a team covering climate and environment with the depth and passion lavished on business or sports. Instead, it scrapped its solitary environment post.

Rosy future

The [Marian Finucane Show](#) on Sunday featured an economist gushing about the rosy future of improved labour market opportunities his three-year-old daughter would enjoy by the mid-2030s.

Meanwhile, the World Bank’s 2012 document *Turn Down the Heat* projects that global average temperatures will break the plus 2 degrees “point of no return” by the end of that decade. This locks us into a future of food and fresh water shortages, devastating and intensifying weather extremes, coastal inundation, desertification, ocean acidification and mass extinction events. This shocking reality has barely made a dent in our national discourse.

Quite how anyone imagines the global economy could survive such relentless disruption has become the question that dare not speak its name.

RTÉ’s failure on environmental reporting is a tragedy. The print media have hardly fared much better. RTÉ’s audience council is now inviting the public to comment on its communication of climate change. Submissions close next Monday.

Interestingly, Met Éireann’s head of forecasting, Dr [Gerry Fleming](#), pointedly avoided linking the ratcheting up of extreme weather events in [Ireland](#) to climate change, stating: “it’s our grandchildren or great grandchildren who will make that call”. His British counterpart, the Met Office’s chief scientist, Dame [Julia Slingo](#), had no such reservations. “All the evidence suggests there is a link to climate change . . . there is no evidence to counter the basic premise that a warmer world will lead to more intense daily and hourly rain events.”

The clamour for answers is gathering pace yet, oddly, the outrage is not being directed against the real enemy, an energy system utterly dependent on coal, oil and peat-burning. In our displaced fury, we are, Don Quixote-style, tilting instead at “ugly” windmills and pylons.

Amid the gloom, some positive news: An Taisce has just established a new climate change committee (disclosure: I’m a member) to take a more forceful approach to communicating this crisis and challenging Ireland’s dangerous do-nothing consensus.

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