

# Opinion & Analysis

## Bellamy 'Late Late' let-off a disservice to climate issue



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It is a pity that excellent Labour Party proposals on climate change were followed by a careless airing on RTÉ of sceptic David Bellamy's views

**T**HE WORD catastrophe has its origins in ancient Greece, meaning literally to overturn. In modern usage, it signifies a sudden collapse leading to irreversible ruin. It is not, therefore, a word that should normally be applied to, for instance, Kelly Brook being voted off *The X Factor*.

Labour Party leader Eamon Gilmore uses language more precisely than most, so when two weeks ago he warned of a looming climate catastrophe, you might have expected people to sit up and take notice.

That injunction was issued as Gilmore unveiled Labour's Climate Change Bill 2009. Running to 36 sections and the fruit of months of work, the Bill seeks to put tackling climate change on a statutory footing. "We have been living in the carbon equivalent of a property bubble," Gilmore said at the press launch of the Bill, which is being formally moved in the Dáil this morning.

The Bill owes much to similar work by the British government, which last year established a new department of energy and climate change and is now in the process of enacting a Climate Act.

What about the recession – surely we can't afford to be fixing climate with our economy banjaxed? US President Barack Obama's

approach is that the two crises are intertwined, and can only be tackled together. He sees clean energy and green-collar employment as the means of restarting the US economy on a new course.

This analysis doesn't appear to be shared around the newsdesks of Dublin, given the almost total media silence after the launch of Labour's Climate Change Bill (other than a brief report in this newspaper on the day of the launch).

Labour's energy spokeswoman Liz McManus admits to being disappointed, but not surprised by the (non-) reaction. "It's very hard to engage people on this issue when they're worried about their jobs." The very phrase climate change, she admits, "seems to bring down the shutters over their eyes". She strongly shares Obama's view that greening the economy can deliver jobs at the same time as charting a sustainable path for the future.

Where Labour's Bill goes further than its UK equivalent is that it charges the Taoiseach with personal responsibility for setting binding carbon emissions cuts. It proposes doing this by setting five-year carbon budgets, in much the way that the Department of Finance sets fiscal budgets.

If, for example, the Department of

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Agriculture fails to deliver emissions reductions in its sector, the Minister can be held to account as if they had overrun their budgetary allocation. This may sound like a technicality, but it's absolutely crucial if we are to make the radical emissions reductions we are already irrevocably signed up to via our binding EU and Kyoto commitments.

Only a law will show that Ireland is actually serious about taking on climate change, according to Friends of the Earth director Oisín Coughlan. "We've talked about tackling climate change for 10 years while emissions kept rising. A law sends the message that finally we're going to take action."

In what could be viewed as a somewhat

optimistic assessment, Gilmore says: "Politically, everyone is signed up for the need to address climate change." What is certain is that the scientific consensus on this issue is overwhelming. Equally certain is that an ecological crash would be infinitely more serious than even the very worst case scenario for the current financial crisis.

Gilmore's confidence about everyone being signed up to take on the existential challenge of the climate crisis might have been dented had he tuned into RTÉ's *Late Late Show* just 10 days after announcing his Bill. The show, broadcast on January 23rd last, featured a lengthy interview with botanist and climate sceptic David Bellamy in which he was given a more or less free run to deliver a disjointed yet damning series of slanders on the global scientific consensus on causes, effects and threats posed by global warming.

We've known for a century that atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) levels are the primary determinant of the Earth's temperature. A doubling of atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> levels would lead to cataclysmic global temperature increases of 5-6 degrees.

Nonsense, thundered Bellamy, it's all to do with sun spots. Furthermore, he asserted: "If we actually wanted to double the amount of

CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere . . . we couldn't actually do it . . . and that would put the temperature up by at most two degrees centigrade." This is another egregious whopper that, incredibly, also went unchallenged.

Quite apart from personally rewriting the laws of physics, Bellamy also contradicts himself. In 1992, for instance, he was "convinced that the continued emission of CO<sub>2</sub> at current rates could result in dramatic and devastating climate change in all regions of the world". He further described those attempting to obstruct efforts to tackle global warming as "criminals".

Bellamy's anti-scientific bluster has been repeatedly exposed when challenged, but the chat show format meant he received little more than a belly-tickle on RTÉ's flagship programme. A spokesman told me the show "is confident that a balanced interview was achieved one-on-one with Pat Kenny". The host, he added, "made it clear to viewers that Bellamy's opinions on global warming were at best controversial".

"In the case of global warming and climate change, RTÉ has repeatedly engaged with this complicated topic over all its platforms."

But how many of those are watched by nearly 700,000 viewers?