

Opinion & Analysis

Supreme hour for climate change is looming



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As families in Ireland are finding, climate-driven devastation isn't just something that happens in faraway countries

AND SO, at last, to Copenhagen. For once, you can believe the hype: the UN COP15 climate conference that starts in the Danish capital on Monday is the most significant event to date of this young century. Its outcome will have consequences almost beyond measure in the decades ahead.

Success would be a vindication of human ingenuity and adaptability – the attributes that brought us such evolutionary success. Failure would condemn us to a trajectory that leads from climate chaos to economic disaster and towards the abyss this century.

Which path to choose? The route we opt for this month, we also choose for our children, and theirs. Although narrowing, we do still have choices. Few now believe this is a luxury that will be available to the next generation.

The challenge is on one level simple, yet almost overwhelming: humanity must engineer a massive phased withdrawal from the carbon economy. The roadblocks are everywhere, and they are manned by powerful vested interests and their PR shrills.

A virtual army of nearly 3,000 anti-climate lobbyists funded by the energy and mining industries work full time on Capitol Hill in Washington. Their mission: to buy and bully enough votes in the Senate to ensure the US again strangles an international climate treaty at birth. The media is infested with climate sceptics and blowhards incapable of telling scientific evidence from propaganda. These journalists are doing an immense disservice to

science, public policy and to their audiences.

How would we measure success in Copenhagen? First, the science bit. Global average temperatures have increased by 0.8 degrees since industrialisation began. This translates to a world that has become 6.5 per cent warmer. This is enough to cause severe localised climate disturbances in a highly sensitive system full of complex, poorly understood feedbacks. Worse, inertia in our climate system means we are now committed to at least another full degree of warming, no matter what. That brings humanity to within a whisker of the two-degree red line that scientists warn is the tipping point towards catastrophic runaway heating.

Human actions to date have led to the dumping of around 500 billion tonnes of carbon into the atmosphere. At most, we can perhaps afford to put up another 250 billion tonnes by 2050. Business-as-usual emissions will use up that entire "carbon quota" in a little over 20 years, and from there, the likelihood of disastrous systemic failure quickly moves from risk to near-certainty.

For Copenhagen to succeed, three key issues need to be resolved. First, by how much will developed countries commit to cut emissions? Second, what are the major developing countries, specifically China and India, prepared to do to limit their rapidly growing emissions? Third, poorer nations urgently need huge cash transfers for adaptation to climate impacts and to move

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towards low-carbon development. Where will this come from, and how will it be managed?

Sub-Saharan Africa is already reaping the climate whirlwind. Former president Mary Robinson recently spoke about Uganda, where droughts now follow floods in a chaotic cycle. Some 250 million Africans face severe shortages of potable water within a decade.

As families all over Ireland have discovered to their cost recently, climate-driven devastation isn't just something that happens in faraway countries, or at some time in the distant future. "I find myself thinking that my grandchildren will be in their 40s in 2050, and I don't know if it will be a liveable world," added Robinson. My children will be in their 40s then too. Meanwhile, the sceptics would have you believe some great "debate" is still raging. Somebody should tell Mary Robinson.

Others say that Ireland is so small, it

doesn't matter what we do. In fact, our annual emissions are the equivalent to the total carbon output of over 100 million people in the Third World. We're among the world's worst per capita polluters.

This month's budget will at last introduce a carbon tax, a small but significant step towards limiting emissions. But, as Labour's Liz McManus pointed out in the Dáil this week, the Government appears to be heading to Copenhagen without a Climate Bill.

Minister for the Environment John Gormley is committed to having such legislation on our statute books by next summer. Ideally this should create a high-level agency that co-ordinates climate change with renewable energy, all reporting directly to the Department of the Taoiseach.

The Government's Green Enterprise Strategy was launched in Dublin yesterday; it's a roadmap to a future built on the solid foundations of sustainability, well clear of the flood plains of cute hoorism. This Saturday, thousands are set to gather at Custom House Quay in Dublin for a march to the Dáil urging strong political action on climate change.

"I never understood why the environment should be a left-wing issue," says Denmark's climate minister, Connie Hedegaard. "In my view, there is nothing as core to conservative beliefs – that what you inherit you should pass on to the next generation."

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