

Opinion & Analysis

A change in attitude is needed to fight climate change



JOHN GIBBONS

OPINION

We Irish see climate change as an academic problem rather than one we really have to address

IRISH PEOPLE regard climate change as the single most serious problem the world faces, well ahead of the global economic downturn or terrorism.

This is an unexpected finding of a major new survey of the EU's 27 member states, which was published last Thursday. The publication of the first Eurobarometer study on climate change marks its rapid rise from niche environmental issue to being at the heart of EU policy.

In total, 88 per cent of Irish people describe climate change as a serious problem. In countries such as Greece and Cyprus, which are already directly feeling its effects in the form of droughts and desertification, this rises to 95 per cent.

On the other hand, the UK rates international terrorism as a greater threat than climate change – a view only shared within the EU by Bulgaria and the Czech Republic. British public perception on climate change is coloured by the antipathetic attitude to the issue exhibited by large sections of its press, which are also hostile to the EU itself.

The survey asked people across the union

what steps they had taken to help fight climate change. Some 79 per cent of the Irish public say they separate most waste for recycling, in line with the European average. Where we score highly is that three in five Irish respondents claim to have cut down on disposable items, compared to an EU average of just 40 per cent. This may well be a legacy of the success of the Republic's plastic bag tax.

While Ireland does well on the simple steps to reduce our carbon footprint, we fall down badly when it comes to the bigger – and more painful – adjustments. For example, just 13 per cent of us say we are reducing car usage – barely half the EU average. Only one in 10 Irish people say they have bought a car that uses less fuel, again well below average.

However, the fieldwork for this study was carried out before the Government's new vehicle registration tax regime came into effect in July.

People remain reluctant to give up cheap flights. Across the EU, only one in eight people say they avoid taking short-haul flights where possible. In Ireland, this figure nosedives to just one in 16. In contrast, one in three Swedes

now avoids short-haul flying.

Curiously, while Irish people express confidence in their knowledge of the causes and consequences of climate change, when specifically questioned on the role of CO₂, our actual level of knowledge turns out to be among the worst in Europe. More Irish people agree with the false statement that "emission of CO₂ only has a marginal effect on climate change" than disagree.

Across the EU, an average of 76 per cent of people believe corporations and industry are not doing enough to fight climate change. Among Greeks, this rises to 97 per cent, but we Irish are at the other extreme. Just 62 per cent of us believe corporations aren't doing enough – the lowest figure in Europe.

Even more strikingly, while 67 per cent of overall respondents believe citizens themselves are not doing enough to tackle climate change, once again we Irish have the lowest score in the EU, with only 53 per cent feeling we ourselves should be doing more. An amazing 8 per cent of Irish people actually think we already do "too much". Clearly, some people believe all that is involved in tackling

climate chaos is rolling out the green wheelie-bin every week.

A strong majority of Europeans believe their national governments are not doing enough to tackle climate change. Again, Ireland is the odd one out. Just 48 per cent of Irish people believe our Government should be doing more (though this may reflect the presence of the Greens in Cabinet).

It's hard to escape the feeling, on scrutinising the Eurobarometer study, that we Irish see climate change more as an academic problem rather than one we are really going to have to address. For instance, when looking at those who regard it as a "very serious" problem, Ireland is fourth from the bottom. We also have a far higher number of "don't knows" than average across Europe.

Overall, this study reveals that Europeans are generally well informed about the issues and keen to do more, both personally and via their governments. Many people, however, are sitting on their hands, understandably reluctant to start making the hard choices unless and until they see others join in and take their fair share of the burden.

"The message is that a majority of Europeans support the EU's targets or wants us to do even more," said European commissioner for the environment Stavros Dimas. He is urging the EU to approve the European Commission's proposals on tackling climate change from January next.

January 2009 also sees the new US administration being sworn in. If the world's biggest polluter installs a presidency that continues the Bush doctrine of climate denial, the political climate for serious action in Brussels and elsewhere is likely to become distinctly chilly.

It's worth reflecting on what's at stake. Dr Richard Dixon of the WWF put it bluntly earlier this week when he said: "Apart from all-out nuclear war or an asteroid hitting the planet, there isn't anything bigger than climate change."

The survey, carried out by TNS, may be read online at http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_300_full_en.pdf John Gibbons is founder of Climatechange.ie and writes the blog, ThinkOrSwim.ie