

Opinion & Analysis

Real environmental action will be intrusive and ugly



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The environmental movement is now finding itself having to deal with consequences of its own success

BE CAREFUL what you wish for. The environmental movement has for decades been rightly warning that if we don't stop burning fossil fuels, pretty soon we will have pushed global climate systems into full-scale collapse.

And the message has, at last, begun to get through. Barack Obama's embrace of the "Green New Deal" is proof positive that this shift is for real. Even the corporate sector has mostly stopped whingeing and is saddling up to seize emerging commercial opportunities.

So at last, environmentalists, governments and big business are in agreement. Can we now kick on in earnest to tackle climate change in the few short years we may still have for the task? Well, not exactly.

Take the Severn estuary between England and Wales. Plans are afoot to harness its powerful tides to drive turbines capable of generating up to 8.6GW of clean electricity. That's enough to replace eight dirty coal or peat-burning stations, more power, in fact, than is needed to run Ireland's entire electrical grid.

But rather than dancing in the streets, environmentalists are instead hopping with rage. The reason? The proposed €25 billion Severn estuary project would permanently

flood 190sq km of pristine habitat that is winter home to thousands of migrating birds.

You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs, and the same applies to any large-scale engineering project, however carbon-friendly its final result may be. And this is the nub of the problem. After decades in the cheap seats, the environmental movement is now finding itself having to come to terms with the consequences of its success.

To see just what a thorny crown this can be, consider environmental attorney, Robert Kennedy jnr, who famously excoriated the Bush regime's environmental record. Greenpeace recently picketed his Massachusetts home to protest against Kennedy's opposition to the construction of offshore wind turbines, which apparently spoil the view from his veranda. Kennedy, they howl, is a hypocrite.

The uncomfortable fact remains that if green rhetoric is to be translated into action sufficient to shift radically entire societies away from fossil fuel dependence, this will not just entail cute little backyard windmills and allotments. They will instead be capital intensive, intrusive and ugly mega-projects.

Actions on this scale are certain to stir up fierce opposition, both from Nimbys and from

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genuine environmentalists concerned about their immediate locality. "Environmentalists will inevitably find themselves on the barricades defending the natural world from other environmentalists intent on generating clean energy," says author Fred Pearse.

Minister for the Environment John Gormley marked Earth Day yesterday by saying: "Some small gestures made by lots of people can and will make a difference." Is this in fact true? What happens if we take the Minister at his word and everyone makes some small steps; say, switching to low-energy lightbulbs and cutting down on flying?

The cumulative effect of all these small actions will, in the words of one of the world's

foremost environmental scientists, James Lovelock, be worse than useless. The road to climate hell is, he suggested during a public interview in UCD last week, paved with wishy-washy green good intentions.

Chief among these in his view are wind turbines. Lovelock argues instead in favour of nuclear energy on a massive scale as the only possible way to decarbonise rapidly the world in time to head off climate system failure. Nuclear power is of course anathema to most environmentalists, while wind, at least in Ireland, holds some promise.

Desperate times may, however, require desperate measures. If you were given the choice between the theoretical risks of a nuclear accident and the near certainty of being left sitting in the dark with no water, sanitation or fuel as our electrical grid faltered, how would you then weigh those relative risks?

Lovelock is also sceptical of the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports, arguing that the science has been fudged to make it politically palatable. IPCC modelling on rising sea levels has been shown to be hopelessly optimistic. Rather than incremental increases in temperature and sea levels, the world will, Lovelock

predicts, shortly "flip" to a hotter state, up to four degrees warmer than at present.

Four degrees would profoundly limit life on Earth. Forget the recession: the emphasis will be on survival. Lovelock believes our numbers will have fallen back to a billion or fewer by 2100. This process will be wrenching, but Ireland's geography and low population density mean we are better equipped than most to weather the coming storm.

However tempting it may be to dismiss Lovelock as just an elderly curmudgeon, Prof Bob Watson, former chairman of the IPCC, essentially endorsed Lovelock's analysis when he recently warned that humanity needs to brace for four degrees of heating this century.

Lovelock was 21 when war last reached Britain. He reckons many environmentalists are now trapped in the role of 1930s appeasers, peddling the message that solving the climate crisis can be done without great personal sacrifice. Many greens will be stung by his sentiments, but I believe there is genuine kindness behind his cruel words.

Winston Churchill left the public with no illusions as to the scale of the challenge ahead when, in 1940, he said: "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat." How's that for a slogan for the local elections in June?