

Opinion & Analysis

Green tenor of Obama's message rings true



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Barack Obama can be a credible US president on climate change. Why? Because, in a nutshell, he gets it

AS THEY depart office, all politicians fret about their legacy. George Walker Bush should have no concerns on that score.

In a recent US poll of 109 professional historians, 61 per cent ranked the outgoing president as the "worst ever". Some presidents have been knaves, others fools. Almost uniquely, Bush was both.

History may perhaps deliver its most damning of all epitaphs and Bush will simply be forgotten. "Glory is fleeting," quipped Napoleon, "but obscurity is forever."

Watching Barack Obama deliver his inaugural address on Tuesday, it is hard to fathom how the same political process that spawned the execrable two-term Bush presidency could redeem itself so absolutely in the elevation of this exceptional young outsider to the world's highest political office.

Amid the jubilation, his speech struck a sombre tone. Unlike his Irish counterparts, who desperately try to apportion blame for our current travails to external forces, Obama singled out "greed and irresponsibility on the part of some, but also our collective failure to make hard choices and prepare . . . for a new age".

Critically, he sees economic and environmental failures as inseparable and mutually reinforcing. Rather than cynically

dangling the baubles of economic growth and Coca Cola consumerism for all, Obama's offer to the developing world was framed in the language of sustainability: "We pledge to work alongside you to make your farms flourish and let clean waters flow."

In the same breath, he dared to suggest that Americans too would have to change, warning that they can no longer "consume the world's resources without regard to effect". It was a call for his compatriots to crawl from the ruins of an economy wrecked by easy credit and rapacious consumption.

But as the marching bands head home and the confetti is cleared from Pennsylvania Avenue, will such grand green notions actually survive in the harsh world of US realpolitik?

It's easy to be cynical, but I believe the cynics may be wrong. Last May, before he clinched the nomination, this column could confidently endorse Obama as the only credible, consistent candidate on climate. Why? Because, in a nutshell, he gets it.

From the still-smouldering ashes of the financial crisis springs the opportunity for a new start. Obama is promising to inject \$150 billion in clean energy projects over a 10-year period and, along the way, create five million new jobs. The new administration is

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planning to use environmental principles as the engine of economic renewal and to prove that a sustainable economy can generate jobs just as well as an unsustainable one.

Despite official neglect, the US clean energy sector has actually been one of the star performers. Last year it was worth \$25 billion, up from \$10 billion just four years earlier. In 2008 alone, 7,500 megawatts of wind power were added to the US grid – the equivalent output of eight large coal-fired plants.

This dynamic new sector has already created about half a million jobs. Ironically, the biggest threat it now faces is the

recession-driven collapse in oil prices.

Jimmy Carter's energy initiatives in the 1970s were wiped out by the double-whammy of ultra-cheap oil and the election in 1980 of a retired actor.

Among Ronald Reagan's first actions was the petty but potent symbolism of removing the solar panels installed by his predecessor on the White House roof. This pig-headedness was reprised precisely 20 years later, when Bush reneged on an election promise to regulate CO₂ as a pollutant. He then pulled the US out of the Kyoto Accord on climate change.

Seventy-six years ago another president, Franklin D Roosevelt, also found himself picking up the pieces after the plutocracy of robber barons and bankers had looted the US economy and plunged the country into the Great Depression.

Roosevelt set up the Works Progress Administration (WPA) as a means of getting the masses of unemployed back to work restoring and improving the country's infrastructure. Between 1935 and 1943 the WPA helped the country off its knees, employing over eight million people along the way.

The task facing Obama's administration is no less formidable. The threats this time are

both economic and existential, but the new president's firm commitment to "restore science to its rightful place" means we can expect rigorous analysis and honest debate to replace lazy hunches and neocon fantasies when informing environmental policy decisions.

The EU has ploughed a lonely furrow on global warming since that cold January day in 2001. As Fine Gael MEP Avril Doyle observed: "Bush dropped the ball completely . . . when he came to power". The EU's man in Washington, John Bruton, agrees the political will now exists for the US to restore its long-abandoned leadership role.

Just in time, too. Ironically, as one discredited buffoon shuffled off the US stage, another, Vaclav Klaus, had just assumed the role of EU president. The arrogant, idiocratic Czech president describes climate change as a myth and refuses to even fly the union flag from his office. Mercifully, he will be gone by July.

The Copenhagen Climate Conference, which is to draw up a new global framework to replace Kyoto, is now just 11 months away. For many, this is truly the last chance saloon on global warming. Never has the need for leadership been greater to endure what lies ahead. Cometh the hour, cometh Obama?