

Opinion & Analysis

Seasonal salute to those making a difference



JOHN GIBBONS

A mix of new voices and seasoned campaigners – here is a list of people at the front line of the ecological crunch

THE YEAR ending was to have been the one when the world finally got to grips with climate change. Instead, post-Copenhagen, the global community “is left resembling an alcoholic who has decided to save up for a liver transplant rather than give up drink”, as a recent editorial in the *Guardian* newspaper put it dryly.

However, it’s Christmas Eve, and even this column has to take one week off every year to look on the positive side. And since my editor is probably off wrapping my present, this is the perfect opportunity to sneak in a non-peer-reviewed and entirely unscientific list of people who helped make a difference in 2009. Some will be offended at being omitted; others may well be offended at being included; apologies all round in advance.

Former president Mary Robinson is a significant new voice in the field. Her particular focus is on climate justice, meaning redressing the gross inequity whereby the world’s poor, who have contributed almost nothing to greenhouse gas emissions, are now bearing the brunt of the impacts.

As Ireland’s foremost climate expert and contributor to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)’s 2007 Fourth Assessment Report, Prof John Sweeney was entitled to a modest share of that year’s Nobel Peace Prize. Modest is a good description, too, of this self-effacing, committed scientist.

Prof Frank Convery, chairman of Comhar, Ireland’s sustainable development council, wants to know why are we still not subjecting all government policy to sustainability impact assessment. It’s a damn good question.

Friends of the Earth director Oisín Coghlan is one of the most effective environmental advocates and communicators, while for many, Duncan Stewart is the public face of environmentalism. His RTE programmes have raised awareness about energy efficiency and ecology. He is shocked and baffled at the misinformation being spread by a growing band of Irish so-called “climate sceptics”.

In the realm of domestic politics, the Greens, including Ministers John Gormley and Eamon Ryan and transport spokesman Ciarán Cuffe, have helped alter our disastrously unsustainable trajectory. While the electorate is unlikely to thank them for it, they have in fact succeeded in shifting environmentalism from the fringes to the very heart of the political process. A carbon tax and forthcoming climate legislation are among their stand-out achievements.

After a shaky start, the Labour Party has also found its voice, with Liz McManus proving an effective rapporteur for the Oireachtas Climate Change Committee and the party’s new MEP Nessa Childers engaged at a European level. While there are few signs of the environmental penny having dropped with either of our two main parties, Fine Gael’s Simon Coveney and Seán Barrett have distinguished themselves in this arena.

Author and economist David McWilliams underwent an epiphany of sorts this year as his television series brought him into direct contact with the ecological wreckage that, as he puts it, makes the global financial crisis look like small beer. Another notable Irish-based economist and author is Richard

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Douthwaite, co-founder of Feasta. He figured out years ahead of McWilliams that the economic model of relentless growth at all costs is a one-way ticket to collapse.

Contrast this with the recent statement from an ESRI economist explaining the economic “silver lining” of the disastrous November floods. Applying this parody of logic, Hurricane Katrina must have been a welcome economic boost to the builders and undertakers of Louisiana.

The Spirit of Ireland project, led by Graham O'Donnell and Prof Igor Shvets, this year offered an intriguing glimpse as to how our huge wind energy resources might best be harnessed. Its viability is uncertain, but hats off for their chutzpah.

Author and retired cardiologist, Prof Risteard Mulcahy, has an acute grasp of the approaching ecological crunch. He sees runaway population growth as the overarching crisis: “As long as our religious fundamentalists continue to oppose population control, I see no prospect of

avoiding nemesis,” he told me.

While religious environmental leadership has been almost non-existent, Columban Fr Seán McDonagh is a notable exception, having witnessed devastating deforestation at first hand. Tom Roche of Just Forests has been campaigning for two decades against forest destruction, and to highlight the use of illegally logged timber in Ireland.

Talking about life in a low-energy future is one thing, living it is quite another. Graham Strouts is among the pioneers in a new field known as permaculture who is now living “off grid” in rural Cork. Snigger if you wish; the skills he and others are developing may one day save many lives.

Coming to terms with rapidly unfolding change and overcoming inertia are some of our greatest challenges; Paula Downey and David Youell (dya.ie) are among an Irish vanguard of thinkers preparing in the broadest sense for the unfolding new realities.

Stop Climate Chaos, a broad coalition of NGOs, has battled to try to get public mobilisation; their recent march in Dublin attracted perhaps 400 people who are prepared to stand up and be counted in demanding a safer future. We can all do a lot better next year.

Sincere thanks to the many people who have helped in more ways than I can repay throughout 2009, and particularly to my wife and daughters, who have borne with uncommon grace the many demands this column places on family life.

John Gibbons blogs at www.thinkorswim.ie