

Opinion & Analysis

Green issue gains support as political climate changes



**JOHN
GIBBONS**

If a cross-party approach to climate change emerges, will Irish politicians take a principled stand?

WISHFUL THINKING can be powerful, even intoxicating stuff. Back in 2001 at the height of the boom, Charlie McCreevy brazenly dismissed criticism emanating from the European Union that his pre-election budget was causing the Irish economy to dangerously overheat.

These European begrudgers were, he reassured us, simply jealous of Ireland and how we were rewriting the laws of economic gravity. After all, in McCreevyland, what goes up must surely just keep on climbing.

The puncturing of our economic bubble is a painful reminder of the hazards of hubris and the failure to plan ahead. The largely inept manner in which Brian Cowen and his Government have reacted to rapidly unravelling events in recent months suggests that they had actually ingested unsafe levels of their own McCreevy brand of PR guff.

When then British prime minister Harold Macmillan was asked what is most likely to blow a government off course, he replied: "Events, dear boy, events." One event that is unfolding at breakneck speed is the global energy crunch. As a recent report from the International Energy Agency put it: "Current global trends in energy supply, and consumption are patently unsustainable – environmentally, economically and socially."

The report warned that nothing short of an energy revolution would suffice to avert an imminent crash.

The British government has taken a surprising recent lead in this field with its establishment of a new department of energy and climate change. It is also enacting a Climate Act to put legal force on tough new targets to cut emissions by 80 per cent by 2050. This ambitious approach is likely to be mirrored by the incoming Obama administration in the United States.

"In tough times, some people ask whether we should retreat from our climate change objectives," said new UK climate minister, Ed Milliband. "Those who say we should row back misunderstand the relationship between the economic and environmental tasks we face."

The response from the Tory shadow climate secretary, Greg Clark, was instructive. Passing up the chance for a political cheap shot, he observed: "The choice between aggressive and ambitious action on carbon reduction and a successful, powerful economy is, in fact, not a choice at all – they are one and the same."

Many in attendance at a conference in Cork last weekend were left wondering if we had witnessed Labour's energy spokeswoman Liz

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McManus ushering in a new Irish cross-party approach to the climate crisis. Public policy on climate must, she told the Partnership for Change meeting, be underpinned by legislation.

McManus suggested the bipartisan approach successfully adopted by our political parties to the Northern Ireland peace process during the 1990s as the right model.

Even Fine Gael seemed keen to clamber aboard the new green machine. Its spokesman Simon Coveney said what he had heard at the meeting about the looming climate disaster had "sent shivers down my spine".

Coveney said that he, too, would support a Climate Change Act to make these commitments binding. Impressive, especially considering Fine Gael right now has no formal policy on climate change.

Was this outbreak of accord truly the signal that Ireland's politicians are at last ready to quit bickering and knuckle down to jointly tackle the existential climate challenge?

Maybe, maybe not. Within just a few days of Liz McManus's grand appeal for joint political resolve, party colleague Mary Upton had a statement out rubbishing the tax scheme to encourage more bicycle usage.

Another Labour TD Joanna Tuffy has embarrassed herself with her reflex dismissal of just about every environmental initiative proposed in the last 15 months, especially moves to phase in low-energy light bulbs. This initiative will at a stroke cut national residential electrical usage by 18 per cent. Will the real Labour policy please stand up?

We assume Minister for the Environment John Gormley would jump at the chance to enact climate legislation (Senator Ivana Bacik's Climate Protection Bill has been floating about for a year in search of a backer). So far, however there has been little political appetite on either side of the House for the pain such a move might entail.

If the near-hysterical tone of RTÉ Radio One's *Liveline* with Joe Duffy is truly a barometer of Irish public sentiment, you can understand the reluctance of politicians to fling themselves to the mercy of the mob by actually taking a principled stand on an issue with few votes in it.

And so the vested interests prevail. Minister for Agriculture Brendan Smith recently stated: "Climate change targets can't be allowed to damage Irish agriculture." This illustrates in a nutshell why we need to follow the UK lead and rescue climate change from the realm of ministerial whim and special interest group pleading and place it on a non-negotiable footing.

As Gormley prepares to head to Poznan in Poland for the next round of the critical UN climate conference, word has it that Taoiseach Brian Cowen is about to spring something big along the lines of a new "green tech" package, linking job creation with a major greening of the economy.

This is an echo of the environmental New Deal concept being floated by the UN to revive recession-hit states by retooling towards a low-emissions model. Cowen is in urgent need of a political makeover, climate change needs a people's champion. Could this be the start of a beautiful friendship?