

Opinion & Analysis

Climate law must freeze out vested interests



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If business groups are not allowed a say, strong new measures can benefit the public and boost investment

THERE ARE any number of good reasons why Ireland should immediately enact strong legislation on climate change. To me, few are more persuasive than listening to Bill Cullen for just 10 minutes. The car tycoon-turned TV star has been a man on a mission recently. Somebody it seems, knocked the wheels off his beloved car business, and now Cullen's gonna make 'em pay.

He had a hilarious interlude on RTÉ's *Today with Pat Kenny* show earlier this week, though it's unclear how much of it was intentional. Cullen was fuming. The slump in car sales was, he said, "unsustainable". Not the crazy boom in car sales, mind, just the gravy train finally running out of track.

Yes, there is a bit of a global recession going on, Cullen admitted, but what had precipitated what he claims is a 65 per cent drop in new car sales in 2009 was changes in VRT rates (from last July, VRT rates were adjusted to favour vehicles with lower CO₂ emissions). And here's the rub. According to Cullen, "legislation on VRT collapsed new car prices, which collapsed used car prices, which means people can't get a good price for their second-hand car and they can't get the money to swap to buy it".

This amazing statement deserves parsing. By making fuel-efficient new cars cheaper, the Government has ruined the car industry! It's a line of logic straight from the works of Lewis Carroll. Cullen seems to believe the Government's job is to keep car prices high, presumably so that motor dealers' margins are protected. It's not easy to be both anti-consumer and anti-environmental in the

same breath, but he managed it. Later in the same interview, Cullen asserted that "BMW have the lowest CO₂ cars on the road". This is also bananas. But what has all this to do with the need for climate legislation in Ireland?

Cullen explains: "We only have two million cars on the road, we're one of the smallest markets in the world. Why cause all this grief just to get a cleaner atmosphere over Ireland?" We are already the EU's second worst per capita polluter. Using Cullen's logic, feel free to fly-tip your old fridge in the Wicklow mountains – as long as it's only a small fridge, of course. Cullen is entitled to defend his business. His intervention however illustrates a phenomenon that bedevils Irish politics and public life.

It's called "agency capture". This is how well-connected, vociferous groups take virtual control of departmental and public policy agendas. Some of this – like Cullen's radio interview – takes place in public, but much of the real dealing is done behind closed doors. The domination by farmers and doctors' groups of their respective policy agendas are cases in point. Unions, lobbyists, religious groups and high net worth individuals (especially those with access to the media) frequently "capture the agenda".

The net effect of this, says Joseph Curtin of the Institute of International and European Affairs, is that the common good is the big loser when special interests hold court. For Ireland, he argues, this manifests itself as "a congenital inability to think strategically".

The programme for government is being renegotiated over the summer. Climate

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change legislation is expected to be a key demand of Cullen's hated Greens. Encouragingly, the Oireachtas climate change committee has an all-party hue, with Fine Gael's Seán Barrett in the chair and Labour's Liz McManus its rapporteur on climate legislation, with a major report due by the autumn.

To at least have a Bill published ahead of the Copenhagen climate conference this December is vital to show Ireland is taking its obligations seriously, says Oisín Coghlan of Friends of the Earth. "I'm optimistic that there will be legislation. What's less clear is will it be strong enough or soon enough."

The 2007 programme for government promised the establishment of a Climate Change Commission, an expert body to provide independent advice and guidance and to firewall critical decision-making from special interest lobbying. Only climate

legislation can make this happen.

Rather than creating what might be seen as yet another quango, it may make more sense to beef up an existing body like Comhar, the sustainable development council, to take on this role. The UK led with a climate law last November. The Scottish parliament went one better last week, with the world's toughest target of 42 per cent emissions cuts by 2020. Two days later, climate legislation cleared the US House of Representatives.

Our climate measures are piecemeal. A strong climate law places them inside a clear, consistent framework and sends out a message to the public and private sectors that low emissions are the only game in town. This can transform investment and strategic thinking, positioning Ireland as a hub for the rapidly expanding green technology sector.

Nobel Prize-winning economist Paul Krugman this week accused those who opposed Obama's climate bill of treason. They were, he said, putting future generations in grave danger "simply because it's in their political interest to pretend there's nothing to worry about". Any of this ring a bell, Bill?

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