



## **SPEECH ON CLIMATE CHANGE**

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**I am delighted to address this conference and I do so in the full knowledge that, in terms of public perception, the issue of Climate Change has been shouldered off the political map by the ongoing economic and fiscal crisis.**

**Here at home, our unemployment rate means that every three minutes someone is losing their job. Globally the aftershocks of a collapse in the banking system are still being felt. When there is such uncertainty about the future there is little public appetite for the consideration of the looming threat of global warming.**



**And yet in political terms, it is *the* challenge of our time. The signs and portents are evident particularly in the poorer parts of the world and we can prevaricate but we cannot ignore the task facing us.**

**Following Kyoto we now have the EU targets of 20% reduction in carbon emissions by 2020 currently being finalized. The likelihood is that, particularly with the new president coming into the White House, that bar in the further global negotiations will be raised to 30%.**

**For a country like ours that has seen boom and bust within a short span of years and that in the past found it convenient to ignore that pressing need for change, the inconvenient truth is that we now face an extraordinarily difficult challenge**



**The Labour Party set out the task in some detail in our general election manifesto. Our proposals included the publication of a Climate Change Bill setting out legally binding emission reductions targets in five yearly budgets, the establishment of a Departments of Energy, Climate Change and the Environment to drive the national strategy on Climate Change and establish a national forum on Climate Change including all relevant stakeholders.**

**We believe and continue to argue that - to be effective - public policy on Climate Change should be underpinned by legislation. We were the only party to take that position at that time and my resolve, as Energy spokesperson, has been strengthened, if anything, by the experience since the last general election.**



**Put simply a Climate Change Act would have benefits on a number of counts. Firstly it would ensure that Governments not only would have to set targets they would have to live up to them too. Secondly it would provide certainty across all sectors about what is to be done in relation to climate change.**

**This would influence investment in areas and generate sustainable jobs. Thirdly it would provide an opportunity to ground the debate in reality as opposed to in the rhetoric that so often colours discussion on the planet's future.**

**The chief economist of the International Energy Agency has described a widespread phenomenon relating to the Climate Change debate which has direct application to Ireland when he says, "We need to act. We are putting together a lot of targets, a lot of goals, meetings and so on but nothing is happening. We need action."**



**When the new Government formed it set up a new Cabinet sub committee on Climate Change which I welcome. The All Party Committee on Climate Change has been established and I welcome that too and I am an active participant.**

**But it seems to me that setting out the project on a legislative basis would transform our perspective. If we look at what has happened in Britain there is already a model for us. The first Climate Change law has just been passed and the UK has become the first country to set legally binding emissions targets and to establish the mechanisms to attain them. Interestingly it has been passed with overwhelming support in the parliament.**

**In my experience working on the Oireachtas All Party committee there has been a refreshing approach to consensus building which contrasts with the more**



**traditional adversarial divide between Government and Opposition so characteristic of our democratic discourse.**

**A recent example is the work done by the Committee in publishing our response to the EU proposals on the 2020 targets.**

**Between those who were anxious about the scale of change and its impact and those impatient at its limitations there was a willingness to compromise in order to maintain a unity of purpose because of the seriousness of the situation we find ourselves in.**

**I would hope that the same consensual approach would be adopted to the enactment of Climate Change legislation in the future. The Committee has spent a lot of our time assessing the progress of the Government's own programme on Climate Change with presentations from different departments and interested groups. What is very clear is**



**that the progress being made as at best uneven and at worst disappointing.**

**For example the forward looking vision of the ESB in embracing the transfer to renewables has encouraged the Government to increase the target from 32% to 40%. I welcome that but it highlights a danger that those who adopt a pro-active approach will end up carrying an unrealistic burden.**

**The bulk of carbon emissions result from Transport and Agriculture and the record of tackling with “the cars and cows” problem is grossly inadequate. I recognize that it is not easy. Ireland is a food producing country and the devastation caused by the change to biofuels in the developing world is a stern reminder that creating food scarcity has no part to play in sustainability. We grow grass and we grow cattle and so we have a methane problem**



**unique in Europe. Yet in countries like New Zealand and Australia there are new developments which are having an impact.**

**Agriculture, Transport, Environment and Energy - these are the key departments. Yet there is no evidence of any coherent approach between these four departments. It is a failing that we will live to regret if left unaddressed. Our view is that within Government close linkages between these departments is an imperative and that the strategy to tackle Climate Change needs to be driven by the Taoiseach and his department. This would require a new way of governance with departments relinquishing a certain silo mentality that they have in the interests of co-operation. It also calls for the leader of Government to become the key driver of a project that urgently needs new leadership.**



**One can argue that at a time of severe economic crisis it is inevitable that Climate Change will lose priority with any government. To that argument I can only say that we simply cannot accept the lack of co-ordination and the lack of leadership because the train is coming down the tracks and we do so at our peril. We also have a precedent.**

**In the past in good times and in bad times regardless of whatever Government was in power there was a strong proactive engagement by previous Taoisigh in relation to finding a solution to the conflict in Northern Ireland.**

**Superhuman efforts were made by Irish, British even American leaders to bring two communities into government and to end the violence. That kind of focus and commitment shown by our Taoisigh in the past needs to be replicated now that we all face this new global challenge.**



**We could start by having a formal Carbon Budget which we do not have. A Budget would set out the targets for each department and ministers. It would allocate resources on the basis of a strict plan of delivery. It would include taxation measures including a Carbon Levy. So far such a levy has put on the long finger. It is now promised for next year but according to the record its been promised before as far back as 2002 so I wouldn't hold my breath.**

**We need to have an update of the Climate Change Strategy and I hope that happens sooner rather than later. Certainly we on the Oireachtas committee will start the scrutiny required on this. But as importantly we need to see a change in the way that government departments work and how Ministers develop an integrated approach on Climate Change led from the top.**



**At local community level engagement in the strategy offers the best hope we have of harnessing the good will of individuals and families who want to be part of the solution, but who often feel the opportunities to assist in the project are closed to them. An example I would give is the relation to the recent Budget proper. The worst failing in my view – and there were many – was the fact that there was no economic stimulus package to combat the steep rise in unemployment. Even the IMF has urged such investment worldwide.**

**In Britain and in the US efforts are being made to stimulate job creation. We had an ideal opportunity in the Budget to do something. The Labour Party argued for a national insulation programme and a new school building programme to mop up a lot of unemployed construction workers now on the dole.**



**Such a programme would have had a significant impact on reducing Ireland's energy bill. In particular it would have supported the thousands of people struggling with fuel poverty and unable to keep warm this winter. This kind of measure is both environmentally and socially sustainable. It is also, regrettably, an opportunity lost.**