

Media letting itself down on Greens

Environmental policy must be assessed objectively and scientifically, not mediated through the distorting lenses of the Green Party and ENGOS



Open mic

by Michael Smith

Media traditionally missed the point of environmentalism

RTÉ and the Times have both dabbled with platforming climate sceptics down the years and failed to focus on the meaning of sustainability and the rudiments of a mainstream environmental agenda.

So: one obvious point about establishment environmental journalism is that it hasn't been environmental enough, certainly up to now.

But that's not really the point of this article which is to show that the media are failing just as significantly by not highlighting what should be the obvious minimum agenda, and the abject failures, of what most of the media see as the prime defenders of the environment, the Green Party.

Some history: Greens always seek ethical pass

Since as far back as 2007, Greens have been declaring that climate change was so important that ethically it justified their entry into and continuance in government, even if they had to compromise on other issues – like Bertie Ahern's dodginess, co-location of hospitals and the road through Tara, then; and

Varadkar, roads, CETA and LNG, now. Busy, guilty journalists give them a complimentary on ethics (even if we hear nothing on ethics from the Party itself now).

And they're not good on policy

The ethical pass is so comprehensive for the busy and guilty that it extends into a policy pass. Many commentators, who know nothing about the environmental agenda, assume the Greens are big policy wonks. The niceties, indeed the principles, of environmentalism are a bit off the track for journalists in RTE, the Irish Times and the Business Post. They don't want to do any research about whether the Greens have good policies or indeed how they did when they were in government from 2007-11 and they don't want to be mean to this new agenda and its largely modern leadership. So they assume the Greens are masters of policy. A profile of Eamon Ryan in the Business Post last year and the analysis by Harry McGee in the Irish Times on whether the Greens 'played senior hurling' in government, are probably the most egregious examples of this but it is ubiquitous and insidious.

If you have a reputation with the media for getting up early you can sleep until noon. The Greens were no good at policy when they were in government 2007-2011 and they are not good at it now. Of course most of the other parties are worse but the Green agenda is so important that that hardly can matter.

Environmental NGOs support the Greens

The media are not helped by the craven ineptitude of most environmental NGOs (ENGOS) who are the voices called upon to take the hardest line when there is debate on an environmental issue.

Instead the media should be looking at the Greens' environmental performance from first principles, in terms of their delivery on what they say is important. An objective exercise. Look at what they're doing on climate, biodiversity (plants and animals and their habitats) and planning. And air and water quality.

ENGOS endorsed the PFG despite omissions

When the Greens required an internal vote on the proposed Programme for Government last year An Taisce, the Environmental Pillar and Friends of the Earth called for the Greens to vote go into government.

An Taisce

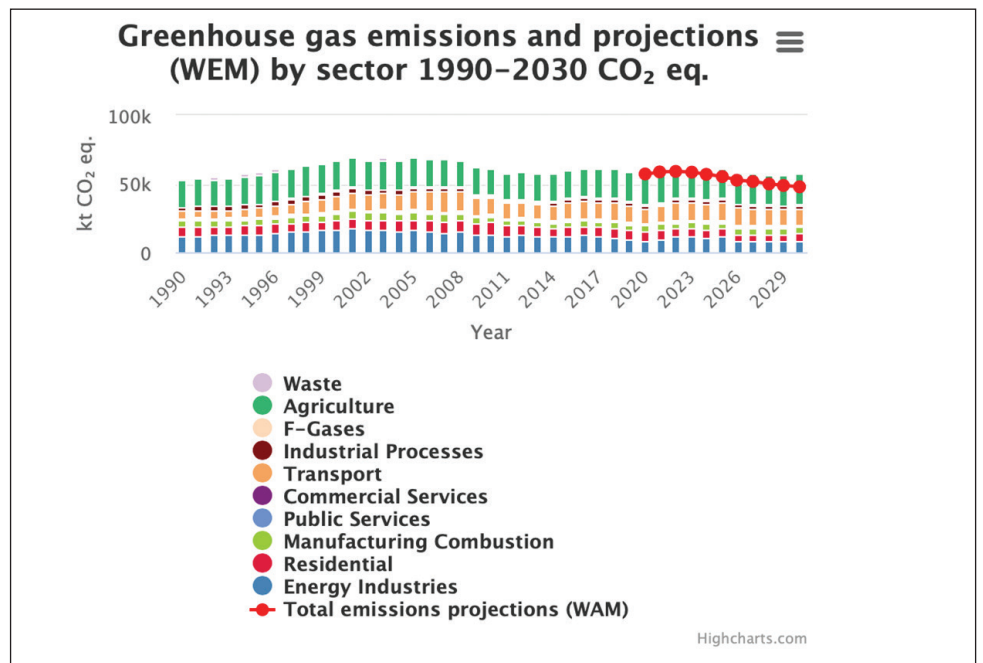
A statement from An Taisce said "The newly published Programme for Government has been welcomed by An Taisce as a significant breakthrough on climate and environmental action"

The statement ignored suspicious weakness in prescribing enforcement mechanisms generally. It overlooked the muddledness on biodiversity. An Taisce expressed no concern about its silence on planning: more specifically regionally-balanced development, high-rise, apartment sizes or one-off housing. Unlike other Green parties, interestingly the Irish Greens down the years, even in their constitution, seem never to have embraced the centrality – promoted by the UN – of sustainability and quality of life and the programme for government doesn't prioritise environmental indicators. An Taisce was not uneasy.

Friends of the Earth

Friends of the Earth claimed "This Programme for Government is our best chance of faster and fairer climate action over the next 5 years".

A Statement from its Director Oisín Coughlan in August 2020 noted: "the Programme for Government promised to introduce a law very similar to what we've been asking for, with legally binding five year targets. Not only that



but it promised to end new licenses [sic] for offshore gas exploration and formulate a policy to prevent the import of fracked gas via LNG terminals. It promised a just transition for peat and coal workers and support for community scale solar and other renewable energy projects. There was good news on the transport front too - with a commitment to a 2:1 ratio of investment in public transport over roads. Plus €1 million euro a day for cycling and walking infrastructure".

On banning new fossil fuel projects, according to Kate Ruddock, Coughlan's Deputy Director at Friends of the Earth:

"Ireland is setting out its stall to become a world leader in the global struggle to phase out fossil fuels. First we banned fracking and divested our sovereign wealth fund, now we have commitments to end support for LNG infrastructure, no importation of fracked gas and an end to licences for offshore oil and gas drilling".

ENGOS got it wrong on the Programme for Government

LNG/fracking

But LNG and fracking have not been extirpated: an LNG application has been lodged for Shannon and it may well use fracked fuel.

The fossil-fuel lobby is preparing the terrain by rabidly spreading misinformation about the risks of blackouts due to inadequate renewable backup when there is windless, sunless weather. Eirgrid is panicky.

Fossil-fuel extraction

Meanwhile the Programme for Government's ban on fossil-fuel prospecting does not in fact affect existing licences. So Providence Resources is desperately fundraising to bring in gas from its Barryroe field, off Cork, allegedly

one of the largest undeveloped oil and gas discoveries in offshore Europe. Providence has stated that Barryroe could yield 350 million barrels of oil equivalent, enough to supply all the Republic's needs for almost a decade at current consumption including 5.9 billion cubic metres of gas. British explorer Europa Oil and Gas is readying a revised farm-out programme targeting development partners for its gas assets near the Corrib field off the west coast. The Greens are too legally unimaginative – and deferential to the conservative Attorney General - to have found a way to ban existing exploration licences.

Key journalists effectively endorsed the PFG

For example Harry McGee wrote in the Irish Times that what has emerged has been a document that chimes with most of the 17 demands the Greens had presented to their coalition partners.

How McGee called it

"The 7 per cent reduction in emissions is conceded. So too is a ban on fossil fuel exploration, on the Liquid Natural Gas terminal on the Shannon Estuary, on the importation of fracking gas. An astonishing 20 per cent of the transport budget (€360 million a year) will go to walking and cycling while two-thirds of the rest will go to public transport. Abolishing Shannon LNG would have been huge for members who came in through Extinction Rebellion. The 7 per cent figure is also a big ticket item, as are the, frankly, breath-taking concessions from the two motorway champions – Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael".

Harry is obviously sympathetic to the Greens and he has been the Irish Times go-to guy on them, but he is damningly wrong in this gushing assessment.

Emissions

The 7% reduction is not guaranteed or likely;

there is no ban on fossil fuel exploration except prospectively, the LNG on the Shannon is proceeding with the likely importation of fracked gas.

Transportation

The 2:1 ratio of public transport to roads is fragile and the Greens are reported as having lost their battle for it in the recently-published National Development Plan. Sadly nobody believes their bleating that their outmanoeuvring now does not presage the reality later: many believe they will just be outmanoeuvred at every turn like they were in 2007-11.

The media after Government-formation

Having plumped for the benefits of the programme the media are loth to waiver as they wait to gauge its implementation. “The climate Bill is a vindication of the party’s decision to go into government”, squeaked the Irish Times in an editorial in March.

More recently, the Irish Times’ cautious political editor Pat Leahy wrote in July: “The Green Party finishes a year in government with its climate action agenda well under way. If you had told Green members a year ago that by now they would have got a strong climate Act on the statute books, massive investment in cycling and walking infrastructure and a host of other wins – such as a White Paper to end direct provision – they would have jumped at it”.

It’s an under-nuanced view of the green agenda, which aims to save the planet including its climate and its biodiversity. It’s unusually important since their loss anyone who cares to notice – and most don’t - can see, poses existential threats to humans.

But Leahy fails to recognise that an Act is only important insofar as it yields results – the all-important target of 7% annual emissions reduction.

Let’s just take a minute to knock his thinking on its head. We can do it by looking at what the Greens did in Government 2007-2011 and by looking at that other pillar of environmental legislation, the planning regime.

Results, not just laws and regulations, needed

When justifying their time in government 2007-11 the Greens turn the discussion to the initiatives they introduced on planning, air and water and biodiversity but most of them – economic measures, which are easier to guarantee, being an exception – were not implemented. That’s always been the case with the environmental agenda – adding to the edifice of law or regulation, as the Greens in government certainly did, is no good if you don’t implement it.

Greens’ failure on climate targets 2007-11

As to Climate, over the

three-and-a-half years the Greens didn’t achieve the 3% promised annual carbon cuts they – naively non-bindingly – agreed in their 2007 programme for government. This was despite an imploding economy. Greenhouse-gas-emission growth in Ireland 2007-2011 in percentages were -.86 in 2007, -.35 in 2008, -5.76 in 2009 and -.35 in 2010. They left office in January 2011, with a weak climate bill they had just begun to push still unenacted.

GDP growth 2007-2011 in percentages was 5.5 in 2007 (the Greens served in government for only the second half of 2007), -4.5 in 2008, -5 in 2009, 2 in 2010 and .5 in 2011 – substantially negative growth over their three and a half years.

Environmental performance must be benchmarked against this and it was very much worse for the Greens not to achieve promised 3% annual emissions reductions than if economic growth – to which emissions are tied – had been as high as projected when they entered government.

So, as Harry McGee was at pains to emphasise in another piece before they entered the current government – debating whether the Greens had played senior hurling, they may indeed have introduced a carbon budget, new building-energy standards, emissions taxes for cars, and a carbon tax. But their introduction was solely as means to an end – to decrease carbon emissions by 3% annually. That aim failed. It would have failed even worse if the means had not been introduced. The failure was abject.

Greens’ likely failure on Climate targets: performance since entry to government

Emissions

Despite a sharp fall in greenhouse gas emissions last year due to the impact of Covid-19 Ireland exceeded its cumulative 2020 greenhouse gas emissions target by 12 million tonnes.

The Environmental Protection Agency described this as “a wide margin” and said the country now needs to use carbon credits and possibly purchase surplus annual emission allocations from other EU member states to

achieve compliance with our EU climate obligations. These measures are not being implemented.

Re-commissioning Oil and gas

Oil and gas power stations are being brought back into action and Eamon Ryan made the unimpressively dubious statement to RTÉ news on 29 September that using them more than expected, “will not jeopardise Ireland’s emissions reduction targets”. It will. Of course.

Agriculture

Agriculture accounts for 35 per cent of Ireland’s annual greenhouse gas emissions, the largest contributor. It is the highest percentage in the EU. In June the EU’s Court of Auditors reported that Ireland is one of just three EU member states to record an increase in greenhouse gas emissions from livestock over the past seven years and is one of the highest emitters per hectare of agricultural land. It had signed up to cut overall emissions by 20 per cent – on 2005 levels – by 2020, but ended up reducing them by just 10 per cent. The gap between Ireland’s 2019 levels and its 2030 target is now even wider. Ireland’s dairy herd is almost 30 per cent larger than it was before the ending of EU milk quotas in 2015, and its milk production is close to double what it was before the ending of quotas.

Existing measures proposed by Teagasc and Department of Agriculture’s AgClimatise strategy are inadequate and the likes of our Food Vision 2030 are inadequate and the Greens suffer from anxt in dealing with the hard-nosed farming sector. It will be surprising if there is significant progress in reducing the national herd in the lifetime of this government, though failure will increase the reductions required from other sectors.

Greens’ likely failure on biodiversity: performance since entry to government

The Greens had left out biodiversity from their questions so the Programme for Government too is light on it. Remember we’ve lost 60% of vertebrate animals in the last fifty years and it’s supposed to be the second most important issue for greens.

A recent investigation by Noteworthy.ie found that “Loss of Ireland’s biodiversity is accelerating - and we’re missing the chance to halt it. Virtually no protected sites have management plans and Ireland is moving further away from a target for effective nature conservation. Its author Niall Sargent found:

- Recent biodiversity audits paint a worrying portrait, with a



quarter of birds a serious conservation concern, 77 species of plants and animals considered endangered and only five of 59 habitat types in a favourable condition.

- Only a small fraction of the targets under our National Biodiversity Action Plan, including critical action points such as developing management plans for our national park network, have been completed.
- Biodiversity experts and environmental economists are also concerned with the lack of measurable results-based targets under the current plan.
- Recent EU audits and reports are critical of the State's management of our protected nature sites, citing insufficient ecological knowledge that make it difficult to establish effective conservation measures.
- Just over 60% of legally protected nature areas have conservation objectives that are specific to the species and habitats they are designated to protect, while virtually no sites have management plans, well below the EU average.
- The European Commission has 15 open infringement cases against Ireland over environmental issues that an expert forum has said points to the State's role as the "biggest transgressor of environmental law in Ireland".

Greens' likely failure on Climate targets: the recent NDP

The coalition recently published its infrastructure programme, the €145bn national development plan 2021-30. It was the first adventure for the climate targets, it needed to be compatible with them but isn't. Since 2017, the percentage of Gross National Income committed to public infrastructure has risen from 2.5% to about 4.5% undermining the radical, if true, view that the future is reducing new infrastructure not massive new, exciting infrastructure.

At its launch Éamon Ryan said "Up to 80% of our electricity will come from renewables by 2030". The Programme for Government had said "Up to 70% of our electricity will come from renewables by 2030".

Depending on your disposition you'll regard the change as an improvement or casual wishful thinking.

€5 billion in additional carbon tax receipts over the period of the NDP have been allocated to increase capital investment levels in energy efficiency. However, the premise of environmental taxation is that its fruits are deployed to minimise the downside to the most financially vulnerable – primarily through income-tax cuts for the least well off. This is because without justice climate measures are unethical – and there is a danger of a backlash. Around 75 per cent of the NDP expenditure is

concentrated in four sectors: Housing, Transport, Education and Health. Around 50% will be on the first two alone.

Greens' likely failure on Housing and Planning: the NDP

Nevertheless, despite a NESC report and recommendations, the NDP demands no express binding link between housing numbers and the National Planning Framework or balanced regional development, and no emphasis on sustainable high-quality housing that preserves biodiversity, provides facilities and amenities, and is linked to public transport. High-quality balanced regional is an aspiration, delivery of which depends on the whim of the property sector and a few paltry regional funds. There is no political will to temper the 25% of the 400,000 homes envisaged that, with current trends, will be built one-off in the countryside, the least sustainable housing mode.

Already development of regional cities is falling behind National Planning Framework projections (2016-40) of 50-60% in each case versus the projection for Dublin of 25%.

And all over Ireland development patterns are not just slow but perverse. Too many hotels, too much expensive student accommodation, too many buy-to-lets. And Eoghan Murphy's legacy of rules to force high-rise and low apartment standard through whatever the local authority wants and the pushing through of vast Strategic Housing Developments bypassing local authorities but with many of the decisions of An Bord Pleanála falling to judicial review. And that's not even addressing the pressure for data centres.

The Greens have lost their longstanding sensibility to planning. There is some evidence from recent marches that they may pay a big political price for their inertia.

Greens' likely failure on Transportation: the NDP

Roads

Not a single road has been omitted in the transition from the last national development plan three years ago to the current one which proposes to spend €35bn on transportation over 10 years.

The big road projects include the M20 motorway from Cork to Limerick; the Galway City outer ring road; the co-funded A5 to Derry; the upgrade of the N4 from Mullingar to Longford; and the N24 from Limerick to Waterford.

Embarrassingly, in response to moaning from a callow FF backbencher, the Greens went along with concessions that there are roads not mentioned in the NDP that somehow have full government support. The Greens point to the

Programme for Government's commitment to 2:1 but that is hardly a mandate to refuse particular roads (decision-makers needing to approve roads will simply point to the possibility public transport budgets will increase proportionately), particularly in the early years of the NDP.

Public Transportation

And some of the public transport behemoths like Dublin's Metro, being necessarily longer-term, risk the traditional long-fingering, especially if the coalition collapses. In a battle between redneck FFG backbenchers and effete Green Ministers it is the former who will prevail.

Cycleways

On cycleways doubtless the Greens – derided as Fine Gael on bicycles – may deliver the easy agenda of cycle lanes but they risk enormous delays because they do not understand that the rollout needs to be subjected to Environmental Impact Assessment. Among other things this would require alternative routes and materials to be considered, generating higher-quality results. The party misunderstood the Mannix Flynn judicial review taking down the Sandymount cycleway, and rather than comply with its requirement for EIA seems destined to engineer years of courts-driven delay as it attempts to circumnavigate the European EIA Directive. A senior source in Éamon Ryan's department told the Mirror recently: "This would be an attempt to bypass the planning regulations by inserting a clause that exempts infrastructure for non-mechanical vehicles from normal planning rules". A source close to the Minister said "the idea is that local authorities would be allowed to trial transport infrastructure projects such as bike lanes or footpaths for a certain period such as six or nine months, during which there would be public consultation". And the Mirror even saw a draft of the legislation.

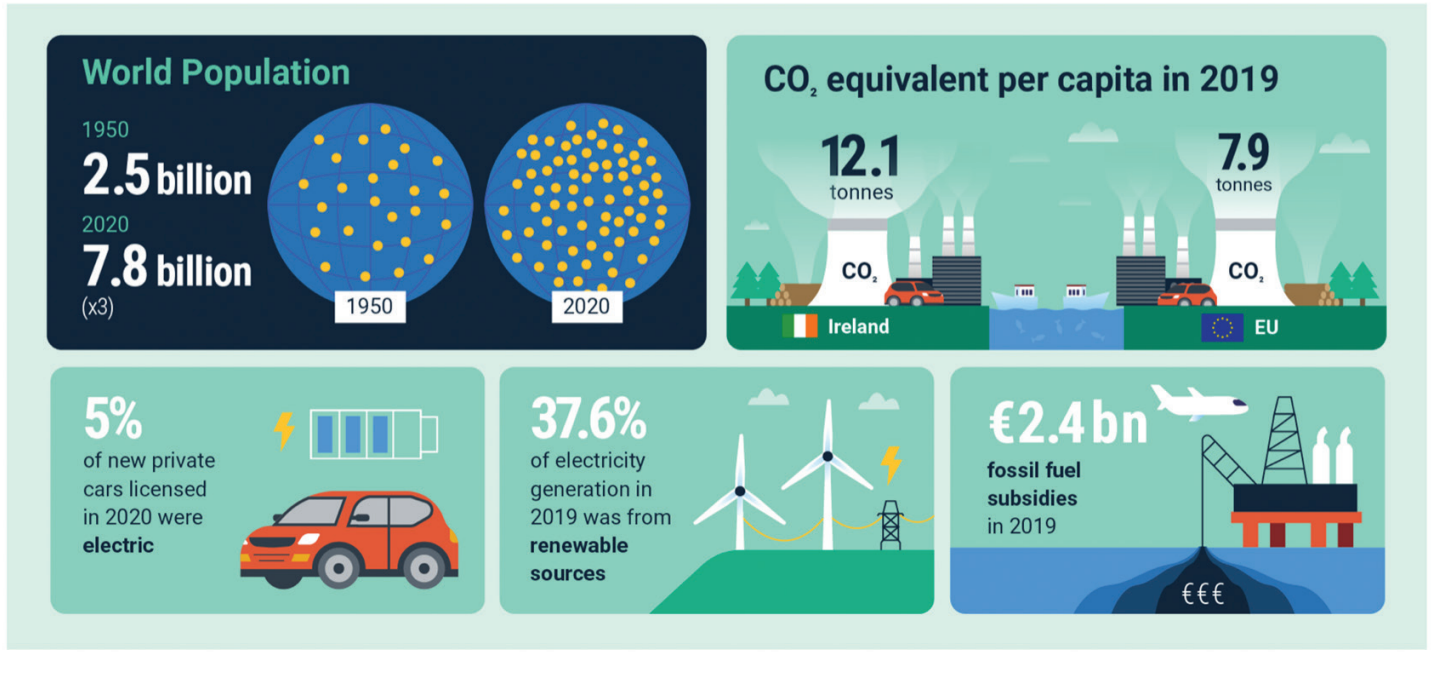
The problem is that any attempt to stop the EU-mandated environmental assessment of projects with "significant effects on the environment" in urban areas won't stand scrutiny in Irish courts. Because, thankfully, the EIA Directive, ironically a major longstanding protection for environmentalists, being EU-derived, is unassailable.

Greens' likely failure on Biodiversity: the NDP

In terms of protecting biodiversity the NDP notes the Government has set seven key objectives on Biodiversity in the National Biodiversity Action Plan 2017-2021. That Plan contains 119 actions under a framework of seven strategic objectives. But they are aspirational and there is no sense biodiversity loss is being arrested or indeed that it will be a significant factor in key decisions, such as housing and transportation

Environmental Indicators Ireland 2021

Environmental Indicators Ireland 2021



location. As outlined above, according to Noteworthy, ie, only “a small fraction of the targets” have been completed.

So: what should the Greens do?

As the Greens were entering government last year I wrote:

“The problem: last marriage didn’t work out

The Green Party, which was married to Fianna Fáil from 2007-2011 (and the PDs up to 2009) is in danger of entering a farcical re-marriage to Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael.

If you’re marrying someone you think isn’t into you, you should get a detailed and watertight pre-nup. Especially if you were married to them before and it didn’t work out; and they’ve been making nasty comments about you for years.

Unfortunately, as they endlessly but secretly progress their formal talks not on nuptials but on a programme for government, there is no suggestion on a strategic level the Greens have remembered that the age-old and continuing problem with Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael and the environment is they are often happy to make promises and even to provide new measures, it is just that they do not provide for their enforcement.

The solution: “credible” quality of life indicators

It has long been established that environmentalists best achieve both a) the full breadth of their quality of life agenda (also known as a wellbeing or sustainability agenda) and b) its enforcement, through applying up to 100 “credible” quality of life indicators which replace

GDP as the gauge of society’s success.

This agenda is well recognised by the UN, OECD, EU and others.

The point is that it covers a multitude including reduction of emissions and protection and enhancement of biodiversity; and a full range of other environmental as well as of social (educational attainment, rates of participation in sport, imprisonment rates etc) and economic indicators (jobs, growth, inflation etc) that are established progressively, rendered as targets and systematically monitored. If the targets are flouted, ultimately the pre-nup kicks in dictating divorce.

The Greens should ensure government measures say 100 indicators of success. If the indicators fall short of reasonable timetabled targets, monitored regularly, then policy has to be adjusted and improved. The Programme for Government promises some but not enough indicators.

So we need sustainability indicators. Targets. Monitoring. Recognition if necessary of failure and promotion of existential ultimatums to the body politic which, if not heeded, should lead to departure from government on mind-concentrating points of environmental principle.

And the media

It’s time the media got their heads around the need to assess the Greens’ performance objectively, and against the commitments in the Programme for Government - not wishfully and via the indulgent analyses of ENGOs. It’s not as if the agenda is trivial. 📢