



Meeting of Chairpersons of Environment and Energy Committees

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Session 3: Towards our Climate Change Goals

Address by Mr. John McCarthy, Head of the Environment Division, Department of the Environment, Community & Local Government

Ireland's drive to reduce emissions

Chairman McCarthy, distinguished Parliamentary Committee Chairs, Commissioner.

Let me first of all extend my best wishes to you on behalf of Minister Hogan who, due to Government business, regrets that he couldn't join you here this afternoon.

Before I turn my attention today to the specifics of the Irish context, I would like to take a few minutes to talk about the EU and international climate agenda. This is relevant not just because Ireland currently holds the Presidency of the Council of the European Union, but because ultimately so much of our climate agenda domestically is inevitably driven by developments on the international and EU climate stage.

We are having this discussion today at a very active and critically important time in the development of EU climate policy, both in terms of mitigation and the increasingly critical area of adaptation. While we have for a number of years had a well understood climate policy framework to 2020, through the 2009 Climate and Energy Package, we repeatedly hear from major stakeholders that, in investment terms, 2020 is tomorrow and that investment cycles need certainty over much longer planning horizons! Therefore, in addition to maintaining a realistic level of ambition for 2020 and the need to advance a number of important legislative files in the short term that will support the realisation of that ambition, it is timely that we look beyond that immediate horizon and map out the next incremental step on the EU path to a successful low-carbon future in 2050.

In parallel, it is also important to prepare well for the challenging international negotiations under the Durban Platform which are gathering positive momentum, as evident at the recent discussions in Bonn. The prize that we must all remain focused on in the international process is the ambition to agree a new climate treaty at the climate conference of the Parties in Paris at the end of 2015, in accordance with the timetable which all UN Member Countries signed up to at Durban some 18 months ago.

EU leadership in seeking to mobilise an effective global response to climate change is a priority which Ireland has consistently supported. That support also extends to progressive development of the EU's own internal climate policy agenda so that the Union, in addition to pursuing its own transition to a competitive, low-carbon economy, can also demonstrate its commitment to effective global action through leading by example.

As a Member State and in our EU Presidency role, Ireland welcomes and supports the recent initiative by the Commission in publishing both the Consultative Communication on the international climate negotiations and the Green Paper on a 2030 EU framework for climate and energy policies. We liaised closely with Commissioner Hedegaard's team in DG Climate Action for many months in trying to synchronise the completion of their work on both documents and the scheduling of our Informal Council of Environment Ministers, in order to ensure that we could kick off, at a very early stage, the important political debate on both proposals. This close engagement worked well - both proposals were published in late March and the Informal Council discussions took place here inside the walls of this historic castle just a few weeks later on 23 April.

Somewhat akin to the formation in which you yourselves are meeting here today, we arranged for the Informal Council of Environment Ministers and the Informal Council of Energy Ministers to come together and have bridging meeting involving both Councils at which the 2030 Green Paper was discussed. This provided an important - and perhaps all too rare - opportunity for both sets of Ministers to sit down together and exchange views on cross-cutting issues of core concern to both climate and energy Ministers.

In summary, the Council welcomed both documents as timely and well focussed, and also welcomed the comprehensive process of consultation which publication of the documents has initiated. In the case of the Green Paper, the political importance of providing clarity and certainty on a 2030 climate and energy policy framework was very clear, in the interest of investment, economic competitiveness and growth, and EU leadership in the international negotiations under the UN Convention. In the case of the Consultative Communication on the international negotiations, the Council, recognising the need to close the gap to the 2 degree Celsius target, highlighted the importance of EU leadership but also underscored the need to move away from the developed and developing country firewall of the past and secure an agreement under which all major economies commit to take action according to their current and future capabilities.

While the 2030 Green Paper and the International Negotiations communication are essential in the EU's strategic planning of its future climate agenda, it's vital that we do not lose sight of the "here and now" and the need to advance some critically important pieces of legislation that will provide the impetus for real emissions reductions in the short to medium term.

Therefore, we have been putting a lot of effort into the files in relation to CO₂ emissions from cars and CO₂ emissions from vans, both of which we are aiming to bring to First Reading Agreements by the time our Presidency concludes at the end of June. We have also made considerable progress on new legislation in relation to reducing fluorinated gases, an important group of gases to deal with because of their significant global warming potential,

and we will be in a position to pass that file in an advanced state to our Lithuanian colleagues to conclude during their Presidency in the second half of the year.

I mentioned earlier the critical importance of the adaptation side of the climate agenda. Sometimes seen as the “poor relation” in the climate debate, the reality is that even with very substantial progress on mitigation, the adverse impacts of the changing climate are already increasingly evident. Adapting to these changes is one of the most fundamental challenges for our future development and requires careful planning.

While much of the adaptation planning needs to take place at the national and local level, certain adaptation challenges do not respect national boundaries and there is an important role for regional approaches. The EU climate adaptation strategy published by the Commission last month is an essential piece of Europe’s climate adaptation architecture and has the potential to stimulate growth and jobs and prevent potentially high human, economic and environmental costs arising at a later stage. As Presidency, we recognise the importance of the Strategy and are therefore aiming to have Conclusions adopted on it at next month’s Environment Council.

I mentioned at the outset that we are having this discussion at a very active and critically important time in the development of EU climate policy, both internally and in terms of the EU’s engagement with the global negotiations process. But of course action at the national level is also vital and, here in Ireland we are currently immersed in an equally active and important programme for the development of national climate policy and legislation.

The Government objective is to complete the Programme by the end of this year and adopt a final national policy position on transition to a low-carbon future, including appropriate institutional arrangements, as well as finalising the introduction of primary legislation.

A major challenge for Ireland is the fact that, within the EU, we have a somewhat unusual greenhouse gas emissions profile, due to a number of factors, including the high share of our emissions which are agriculture-related. This is not because we have a carbon intensive agriculture sector – quite the contrary in fact, we have a very carbon efficient agriculture and food sector – it is simply due to the scale of our agriculture industry in our overall economy. The significance of the agriculture and food sectors in Ireland brings a sharp focus to the parallel international priorities of climate protection and sustainable food production in a world with a projected population of nine billion people in 2050.

While Ireland is on course to meet its emissions reduction target for the purposes of the Kyoto Protocol in the commitment period 2008-12, through policy initiatives including the restructuring of vehicle taxation on carbon dioxide emissions and the introduction of a carbon tax, we will have to ensure that in our efforts to return to stronger economic growth, we embed rigorous sustainability requirements in economic and environmental terms. We know that if we get our growth strategy wrong, we run the very real and significant risk – as the Commission has repeatedly pointed out – of locking ourselves into an environmentally unsustainable future that will undermine our credibility on environmental grounds and our competitive position in the medium and longer term. The deep cuts in emissions that will be required in the period to 2050 represent a huge challenge for Ireland, but early and effective transition to a low-carbon path holds out the prospect of a real opportunity to demonstrate environmental credibility, and achieve competitive advantage in the emerging global green economy.

In anticipation of the outcome of the national policy development process, Government has already announced a high level of mitigation ambition for 2050 and work is now underway on low-carbon roadmaps in four key sectors of the economy – energy, buildings, transport and agriculture. The objective is to achieve near zero carbon dioxide emissions by 2050 in the case of energy, buildings and transport, and carbon neutrality in the case of agriculture. It is expected that these sectoral roadmaps will be completed this year and that they will provide the foundation for a national 2050 low-carbon roadmap to be finalised next year.

At this stage in the policy development programme, the outline provisions of a Climate Action and Low-Carbon Development Bill, together with the underlying policy analysis, have been referred by the Government to the relevant Parliamentary Committee (which is chaired by Deputy McCarthy) for consideration. Minister Hogan has made it clear that he sees a central role for the Parliamentary Committee in the policy and legislation development process, particularly on the critical issue of how to meet Ireland's binding EU and wider-international mitigation commitments, as well as pursuing national objectives in a low-carbon economy. The Committee's report, which the Minister expects to receive later this year, will be a key input to final decisions by Government on national climate policy and legislation.

In overall terms, one of Minister Hogan's priorities is to position Ireland in the vanguard of climate-progressive countries, not just in the EU but at a wider international level. This reflects Ireland's support for EU proactivity and leadership in the international process. Our on-going efforts under the Programme for the development of national climate policy and legislation, including the input which Government will receive from the Parliamentary Committee later this year, is critical to achieving that aim. And we believe that the priority which he have attached to climate issues during our Presidency will help drive further significant progress on the EU's ambitious mitigation and adaptation agendas, while also positioning the EU to maintain its leadership role in the international climate process, a process which is critical if we are to keep global warming below 2 degrees Celsius and avert dangerous climate change.

Thank you.