

2009



'Sustainability and the Environment'

"We thrive and survive on planet earth as a single human family. And one of our main responsibilities is to leave to successor generations a sustainable future."

- Kofi Annan



Senator Feargal Quinn

SPEECH

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An Taisce

“An Taisce seeks to educate, inform and lead public opinion on the environment; and to advocate and influence policy at European, national and local levels. This remit is an interconnected approach to promoting environmental issues and sustainable development that revolves around three core actions; education, advocacy and heritage ownership.”

Introduction

An Taisce has been one of the main advocates of sustainable policies towards the environment in Ireland during the past sixty years.

These difficult economic times have led some people to say we should cut back on sustainable measures to preserve the environment and delay tackling climate change. The argument goes that governments must focus firmly on economic recovery, not on climate recovery. Some say that the shift to green manufacturing and low-carbon production, and even the upcoming global agreement on climate change in Copenhagen, must be put on hold.

An Taisce’s policies reflect the core belief that a high quality environment must not be sidelined in this way. They believe that a high quality environment is in fact central to Ireland achieving a successful and sustainable economy, as well as a high quality of life.

I was recently struck by a report commissioned by the European Union entitled: ‘The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity’ which was published recently. It found that the global economy is losing more money from the disappearance of forests than through the current banking crisis. It puts the annual cost of forest loss at between \$2 and \$5 trillion. Whereas the United States has lost over \$1.5 trillion in the financial sector, the report estimates that the global economy loses between \$2 and \$5 trillion every year due to deforestation. The figure comes from adding the value of the various services forests perform, such as providing clean water and absorbing carbon dioxide.

The report states, “As forests decline, nature stops providing services which it used to provide essentially for free. So the human economy either has to provide them

instead, perhaps through building reservoirs, building facilities to sequester carbon dioxide, or farming foods that were once naturally available”, or does not have use of such services at all. I think this goes some way to show how very easy it is to forget how vital the environment is to our economy. I am glad that An Taisce is putting the message across that forests and the environment are fundamentally important to our economy.

Perhaps our economy took precedence in the boom years over sustainable policies towards our environment. However, rather than being downbeat about the current economic downturn, we should look at it as an opportunity to look at new ideas for sustainable development in Ireland and it is the perfect opportunity to ‘rethink’ our attitudes towards the environment.

Sustainable development is about balancing our economic, social and environmental goals. The development of the Irish economy is of course extremely important but it should not be our only consideration. There needs to be balance between wealth, people, and our environment. We are building a society not only for today, but for our children and our children’s children. We must strive to ensure that all of our actions are considered along with their social, economic and environmental consequences.

Living sustainably means considering every decision we make in day to day life, ensuring that we try not to consume more than we need and we take account of other people’s wellbeing.

In the case of government policies during a downturn, it means not just buying as cheaply as possible, but creating policies and making decisions on behalf of the country that equally supports our communities, improves our standard of living and helps us to live within environmental limits. Economic growth policies should aim to promote environmental quality and social development at the same time. That is where we do need change in government policy and I support An Taisce’s efforts in this area.

Businesses must implement sustainable practices

As a businessman, I am naturally wary of pursuing a climate change agenda at the expense of job creation. Europe as a whole has to be wary of undermining its own economic competitiveness and there has to be balance between the environment and jobs and growth.

While even a few years ago this would have seemed impossible, businesses are adapting to sustainable models and gaining greatly from them.

Businesses have a critical role to play in adapting to sustainable policies for the benefit of our environment. Even in times of financial turmoil, perhaps more than ever, climate change is a strategic issue for companies.

The consumer is now demanding sustainable practices. As a grocer, I know that consumers want to be sure that the food they buy and consume is not only safe, healthy, nutritious and affordable, but that it also meets the highest levels of environmental sustainability.

That led me to question how we create an agricultural sector that will produce more food without damaging the environment? As a grocer I believe that retailers and the food industry are a critical element in mediating between the demands of consumers and the needs of the environment.

In the current recession, our industry has focused on maintaining low prices for consumers. Regardless of how long this recession lasts, though, the need for grocers and the food business to focus on sustainably sourced food in addition to value will not go away.

In fact, changing demographics will only make the issue more pressing as we saw from food riots last summer in countries as divergent as Egypt, Madagascar and Indonesia. The two main ways we can deal with this problem are by addressing how we produce food and how we distribute it.

How we produce our food is critical. The so-called “green revolution” of the 1950s and 1960s dramatically increased crop yields to accommodate a rising population and these efforts will have to be replicated and improved upon. Importantly, we must improve yields in a way that does not lead to large quantities of fertiliser run-off in rivers and lakes.

For example, Marks and Spencer has adopted “field-to-fork” standards that cover environmental and labour standards in the production of the food it sells while Unilever has sustainable agriculture guidelines for tea, sunflowers, tomatoes, peas, spinach and dairy products. The former chief executive of Unilever, Niall Fitzgerald himself said: “sustainability is here to stay or we may not be”.

In March, when I was President of EuroCommerce, which represents the European retail sector, we launched a Retail Forum to promote the sector's environmental sustainability and help consumers to buy green. Retailers are in a unique position to help consumers make sustainable choices and buy green. Product information must be clear, and sustainable products must not be a luxury. Commerce is driven by competition and consumer demand, which particularly involves sustainability. The priorities of the Forum include finding an agreement reliable environmental assessments for food products, examining key sustainability challenges facing the food value chain (such as climate change, water, resource efficiency and waste reduction) and developing ways to address these.

Retailers must focus on sustainability not only because it is the right thing to do, but also because our customers and our stakeholders demand it. There is no alternative.

In my own view, the grocery industry will have to make major changes, like all industries. In my opinion, the key factors that will increasingly shape the food industry of the future to make it more sustainable will be more local food, less beef and greater efficiency in distribution.

Other companies based in Ireland are taking major steps to make their impact on the environment more sustainable. For instance, the Irish drinks company, C&C

introduced a Sustainability Programme. This revolves around four core objectives: to minimise Bulmers' impact on the environment, nurture natural resources, support local communities and regional economies and continuously improve the environmental impact of packaging. Beginning in 2007, the group undertook a study of its carbon footprint and its own impact on the environment, which gave it a clear idea as to what way the sustainability programme needed to be developed.

Other examples include Bausch&Lomb, a medical devices and pharmaceutical company, which challenged its Waterford factory to reduce its annual energy consumption. The plant identified compressed air as the most significant use of its energy and thus developed a three-pronged approach to reducing this. As a direct result of these steps, the annual compressed air usage was reduced by 24.2%, yielding a saving in running costs (including maintenance) of €140,000 per annum. These examples show that measures which address the environment can also be beneficial to business. 'Sustainability' need no longer be a word feared by businesses.

Criticism of An Taisce

There are those who have implied that there exists something unpatriotic or 'un-Irish' about some of An Taisce's activities.

An Taisce's policy of objecting to planning permission to new houses being built in rural areas or certain cases where it has opposed the building of factories has caused it to receive bad press and resentment. An Taisce's concerns are not understood, particularly by the farmers' son or daughter who wishes to build a home on the family farm.

Of course, there mistakes have been made, like any organisation, but An Taisce's goal is to oppose uncontrolled development in rural settings. I think it is very obvious to see that developers wielded more power during the boom years with empty housing estates now blotting our landscape. I think there is a real need for An Taisce to be part of the watchdog mechanism against uncontrolled development.

I would argue that seeking to protect the environment is one of the most 'Irish' things that one could do. The physical environment is what makes us unique and is key to our competitive advantage.

We need good management of our main tourism asset, which is of course, our environment. This is not only an ethical choice but is extremely important for our business future. As a nation, we have always marketed ourselves as a 'green' country. That means that the expectations of tourists to our country ('The customer') - who are attracted by the image of unspoilt landscapes and a green environment - must be met.

However, it is not just a matter of image. An environmental approach has the potential to yield cost-savings for tourism businesses – energy efficiency being one example. Another example is a recent survey in the UK which found that 80% of UK tourists are prepared to pay an extra £30 - £70 per night to stay in an environmentally-friendly hotel.

Another recent poll by responsibletravel.com suggested that Scotland was the leading 'eco-tourism' destination in Europe. Why can't Ireland be the number one 'eco-tourism' destination? Very important considerations are being given to the challenges we face in coming years. An Taisce needs support so we can compete with our main rivals like Scotland as well as other places of natural beauty in Europe.

Conclusion

Perhaps the most influential voice on the environment and sustainability, Al Gore, has stated that: "Ireland, with its successful business model and unique political positioning, has a key role to play among developed nations in driving the environmental agenda". Ireland is a beacon state when it comes to development aid – encouraging much bigger countries to provide aid to developing countries. In the same way, Ireland can be a 'beacon state' to encourage countries to take on sustainable business practices to protect the environment.

We have innovative new ideas in this country such as UCD implementing The Gateway Project which will see the university based on environmental sustainability

while Dundalk has become Ireland's first sustainable town. Through 'Dundalk 2020', the town aims to provide an example for other towns and cities to use energy in more sustainable patterns. As a result of all the projects both underway and completed it is estimated that 5,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide has been saved in Dundalk.

Within Ireland, An Taisce is the leading voice in promoting sustainable practices towards the environment. We must ensure that environmental concerns are not sidelined by Government due to financial constrictions in these difficult times.

Climate change is already happening, and we are devoting too little resources to understand how best to adapt. This is where co-operation and dialogue between the Government, An Taisce, the business world and other environmental groups comes in. Better understanding between these groups will be better for us all.

With the world's economy in turmoil now is perhaps the best opportunity for us to focus on climate change and develop a realistic agenda for sustainability in Ireland. Hard work has to be done to keep conservation of our heritage high on the public agenda from our largest businesses to our youngest citizens in the classrooms across the country.

The challenges are great, but not insurmountable. An Taisce has already made huge inroads in educating us and making us aware of the issues facing us as a people. I wish it success for the future.

In short, we must balance our competitiveness with environmental sustainability - a challenge that I think we are up to.

Corporate Support

Corporate support of An Taisce is one way of helping to forward the message of sustainability. For some of its projects, it receives project funding from state agencies and individuals, but as an organisation it requires core funds to continue to move forward in all of its important activities - it needs your support to continue

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