

Climate policy at a turning point in GE2020

At this stage, all of the main political parties fielding candidates in the general election have published manifestos, which have been put through a [rigorous analysis](#) by a panel of academic experts¹. We scored the parties against all of the [One Future asks](#), and also the recommendations of the [Joint Oireachtas Committee on Climate Action](#) from March 2019. Details of the methodology and scoring system used can be found [here](#).

Given Ireland's poor record on emissions, and the challenge of achieving the cuts recommended by the UN by 2030, we should be seeing the parties who expect (or hope) to be in the next government publish concrete proposals for decarbonisation that are fully costed, with quantified emission reduction estimates for each measure, along with implementation timelines and dates.

From a climate perspective, the timing and rate of emission cuts is everything: [winning slowly is the same as losing](#). As Dr. Diarmuid Torney of DCU put it in a [recent article](#) for the *Irish Times*, 'all countries have special circumstances, but the brutal maths of climate change mean all need to reach net zero greenhouse gas emissions within roughly a generation'.

System change, or incrementalism?

So the first measure of political ambition is the overarching policy framework that sets the date for net zero emissions, and the legal architecture to support that, in terms of carbon budgets and the requirement for all public bodies (such as local authorities, Coillte and Teagasc) to adhere to these. This is what system change would look like: high-level interventions where a small shift in one thing can produce big changes in everything downstream. Systems analyst Donella Meadows describes such leverage points as 'points of power'. You might be incentivised to change your commute by congestion, high parking fees, or by a carbon tax. But you can't design your own bus route or change vehicle emission standards by yourself. This requires an intervention at the level of the state and the institutions tasked and resourced to regulate transport policy. This is why One Future

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demands for GE2020 focus on ‘points of power’: what are they key policy levers we need to pull to get changes everywhere else, and do the parties have meaningful proposals to use them?

We compared the parties against One Future’s ask for min. 8% cuts year on year with legally binding 5-year carbon budgets. Achieving such mitigation rates will require, at a minimum, implementation of the recommendations of chapter 1 of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Climate Action (JOCCA) including strengthening of the 2015 Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act. Improved climate governance is vital if we are to get coordination across all government departments and public bodies and if all government policies and investment decisions are to be consistent with mandatory emission reduction targets.

But only some of the parties explicitly commit to new legislation (including Fine Gael, the Green Party, and the Labour Party) and many of the parties are vague about dates and targets, or commit only to honour the existing 2030 targets with reductions of 2% per annum (Fine Gael and Sinn Féin). People Before Profit have an ambitious proposal to reduce emissions by 53% by 2030, the Labour Party wants 50% cuts by 2030, while the Greens propose cuts of 7% per annum over 2020 levels by 2030. Sinn Féin scored the lowest of all parties in this category of climate governance. But think about this: even the most ambitious target still lags somewhat behind the recommended 7.6% per annum reductions by UNEP that developed countries should undertake. The promises range between 2% and 7% with significant implications for climate policies in the areas of transport, home retrofitting and energy. The onus on these sectors to decarbonise very rapidly is especially urgent as there is no sign of buy-in from the agri-food sector to measures included in the Fine Gael Climate Action Plan 2019, which would be necessary to achieving the modest 2% emission cuts therein.

Now is the time to invest in sustainable mobility

Both Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil explicitly commit to the existing capital programme under Project Ireland 2040 which involves €5.7bn on national road schemes. Sinn Féin have a radical public transport plan in terms of levels of an additional €1bn in capital expenditure.

The party sees a lack of investment, rather than poor governance (or a combination of both), fragmented delivery or bad policy design as the main barriers to climate action.

All of the parties propose more resources for rural transport but with few details, and often without any costings, which unfortunately may reinforce the perception that ‘Dublin-based political elites’ are out of touch with the needs of rural communities. All of the parties need to see that there is a link between transport policy and all aspects of quality of life and sustainable development (whether rural or urban). And it goes beyond just making public transport more affordable or even free. We need to roll out services that are frequent, reliable, affordable, zero emissions and that are integrated with other modes, and scale up investment in world-class cycling and walking facilities too. Yet only the Green Party and the Social Democrats were willing to sign up to the One Future target of a 10% commitment for cycling out of the land transport budget.

Retrofitting Ireland

To meet our 2030 targets as a minimum (that’s the 2% trajectory, not 7.6%), we would need to bring over a million Irish homes and buildings up to a minimum B2 BER standard. On buildings and retrofitting, the parties appear to have more in common: there is a spectrum of policy options that range between 50-100,000 retrofits a year, apprenticeships, one-stop-shops for expert advice, low-cost loans and state investment, especially in retrofitting the public housing stock. This is where the carbon tax revenue comes in: most parties that endorse carbon pricing want to ringfence the revenue for income supports for those in fuel poverty or retrofitting measures, with Fine Gael also dipping into the funds to pay for the Just Transition measures in the Midlands. Sinn Féin oppose the carbon tax, and perhaps as a result their retrofitting measures are most likely underfunded at €160m or an additional €12m per annum. Fianna Fáil propose a new Green Homes Agency which would coordinate the grants, project management and low-cost loans. However, the most ambitious of retrofitting programmes will still likely rely on a rising carbon tax trajectory - if not for the revenue it will bring in, for the incentive it will give to householders to engage with a retrofitting programme in the first place.

The energy revolution

We did not grade the parties for their support for or against a carbon tax as it was not a One Future demand. But those parties that oppose any further increases to the carbon tax (Sinn Féin and People Before Profit) should be challenged to justify why only capital investment in new infrastructure by the State rather than a mix of policy instruments is the only or best approach to mitigation. They should also be required to explain how they would ensure there would be no spike in demand for fossil fuels if the existing carbon tax was abolished. It would be hard to deny that measures are needed to curtail *both* the demand for and supply of fossil fuels, and in fact, the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Climate Action acknowledged this in its 2019 report: if we are serious about avoiding dangerous global warming we will need to keep all fossil fuel reserves in the ground – including the polluting shale gas which threatens to enter our energy networks as Liquefied Natural Gas. Both Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil were reluctant to commit to banning LNG or ending offshore exploration immediately. They also declined to commit to the closure of all peat and coal fired power generation by 2021.

Ireland's renewable energy resource is a major asset that needs to be developed rapidly to displace fossil energy sources such as coal, peat, oil and gas. A Just Transition is not just a buzzword, it is a negotiated solution to the prospect of rapid change in certain industries. People Before Profit and Sinn Féin propose to increase the percentage of renewable electricity on the grid to 90% and 80% respectively by 2030, and all parties support some degree of grid access for micro generators such as households, schools and farms. But again, these targets are more onerous than they appear, against rising electricity demand from data centres and the need for widespread grid improvements and regulatory changes to support distributed microgeneration. Rolling out up to 5GW of offshore wind by 2030 as the Green Party proposes will be challenging, given the fragmented regulatory regimes in place at the moment and the lead-in time for major projects.

Agriculture must play its part

In short, there is a credibility gap evident throughout these manifestos. And although the Green Party scored highest overall, the party did not supply any detailed costings with their

manifesto unlike People Before Profit and the Social Democrats. The People Before Profit 'Planet Before Profit' document is remarkable for its transparency, costings and radicalism. The entire manifesto is costed against a novel proposal to take the major agri-corporations into public ownership and use their resources to help finance a major afforestation and rewilding programme. They also propose to reduce the dairy herd by 50% by 2030 and compensate farmers with a New Green Payment. While such a measure would undoubtedly reduce emissions, it is hard to see it becoming reality in the life of the next Dáil.

What is more important is that the parties support measures that will align the agriculture sector with the 2030 targets, even the voluntary measures set out in the 2019 Climate Action Plan, along with the various measures in the JOCCA report chapter 8. The JOCCA report recommended a new diversification strategy for agriculture, along with CAP reforms to reward farmers for high nature value farming and carbon sequestration, especially for peatlands which make up almost 20% of Ireland's land area. Without a nationwide programme for rewetting and restoring bogs, and science-based measures to limit methane and nitrous oxide emissions, current policies will exacerbate the climate and biodiversity impact of agricultural practices. The Social Democrats have some particularly strong proposals on biodiversity, but it is the bigger parties' positions on agriculture and the sustainability of farm incomes that will be crucial in next programme for government. At the moment, neither Fine Gael nor Fianna Fáil propose to shift production away from livestock, and measures to promote anaerobic digestion on farms or forestry will not be sufficient to offset rising emissions from the dairy herd.

Conclusion

What are the prospects for a 33rd Dáil that prioritises climate action? Based on the manifestos we reviewed, many of the parties are proposing patchy policies that are light on detail or measures that are siloed rather than making climate action an overarching priority. Above all, we will need to see, as a matter of urgency, a new climate bill that corrects the deficiencies of the 2015 Act, and that sets a net zero target well before 2050 with 5-year carbon budgets. Carbon budgeting needs to commence in 2021 so the Climate Change Advisory Council (or its successor if reformed) need to put climate science to the core of its

advice. Those parties that aim to be in the next government will need to start thinking about providing detailed costings and quantified emission reductions to match their rhetorical gestures.