

**Friends of  
the Earth**

**Northern Ireland**

# Newsletter

Issue 16 Spring 2008

Friends of the Earth inspires solutions to environmental problems which make life better for people



## **Mark Durkan**

*Is the Leader of the SDLP moving his party towards a green agenda?*

**page 02**



## **EPA decision imminent**

*Lisa Fagan assesses the prospects of success.*

**page 03**



## **The Budget**

*How green is the Programme for Government?*

**page 03**



## **Nothing to fear**

*Green groups reassure farmers on EPA.*

**page 04**

**Can we expect stormy weather or a bright forecast?**

**Decision time on an Environmental Protection Agency**

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## Mark Durkan

**The leader of the SDLP has recently tabled an Assembly motion calling for a Climate Change Bill. Is this the beginning of a move towards an alternative 'green' agenda?**

Mark Durkan began his political career at an early age. While studying politics at Queen's University he was elected Deputy President of the Students' Union. At around this time he joined the SDLP, and shortly after became John Hume's assistant at Westminster.

He rose through the ranks to become chairperson of the party and a key figure in the Good Friday Agreement negotiating team. He served in the Executive of the new Assembly, first as Finance Minister, then as Deputy First Minister.

In 2005 Mr Durkan was elected to Parliament to represent the Foyle constituency, previously held by John Hume. His maiden speech in Westminster focused on poverty in Africa, aid and debt relief, establishing his social justice credentials. He has voted in favour of the smoking ban; against the replacement of Trident; and for an investigation into the Iraq war.

More recently Mr Durkan has begun to demonstrate promising environmental leanings. He signed the Westminster Early Day Motion calling for a Climate Change Bill, and voted in favour of Northern Ireland opting into the Bill. More recently he tabled an Assembly motion calling on the Executive to draft a Northern Ireland Climate Change Bill with legally binding carbon reduction targets.

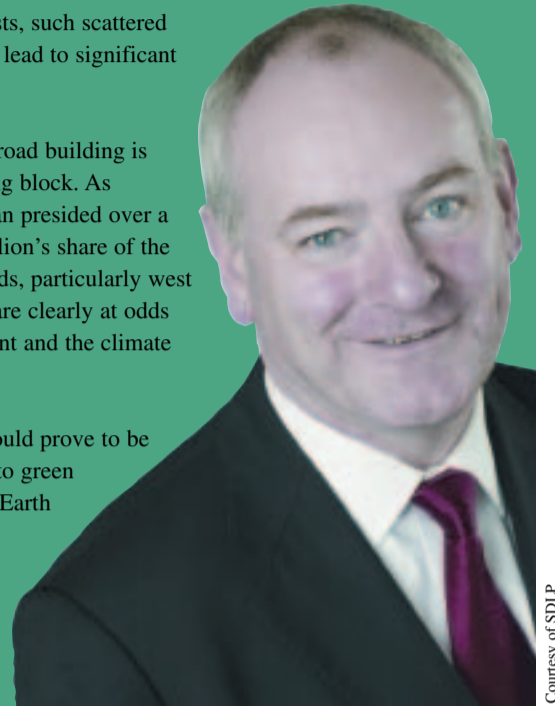
Under Mr Durkan's leadership, the SDLP has been an enthusiastic supporter of the campaign for an independent Environmental Protection Agency. Sustainable Development was also a strong headline theme in the party's 2007 Assembly election manifesto; and while he was Minister for Finance and

Personnel Mr Durkan provided £108 million for 23 new trains and saved the railways from closure.

There are, however, a number of contradictions in the party's policies. The SDLP has been a vocal opponent of PPS14, the planning policy which aimed to restrict unsustainable development in the countryside. The party's opposition, along with that of the other main Assembly parties, has led to a much weakened draft policy which could result in widespread suburbanisation of the countryside. In the carbon constrained world of the future, with high energy costs, such scattered development patterns could lead to significant fuel and transport poverty.

The party's enthusiasm for road building is another significant stumbling block. As Finance Minister, Mr Durkan presided over a budget which allocated the lion's share of the transport budget to new roads, particularly west of the Bann. Such policies are clearly at odds with sustainable development and the climate change imperative.

That said, Mark Durkan should prove to be a valuable ally in the drive to green government. Friends of the Earth will be working hard to convince him that social justice is fully compatible with environmental justice.



Courtesy of SDLP

## Wake up to climate change

**Church bells rang across Northern Ireland on 8 December as part of the Global Day of Action on Climate Change. The event, called Sound the Alarm, was organised by Friends of the Earth, Trócaire, Christian Aid and Eco-congregation.**

Bannside and Banbridge local groups organised actions in Coleraine and Magherally to coincide with the bell ringing. Meanwhile over 100 activists gathered in the rain at St. Anne's Cathedral in Belfast, where alarm clocks, mobile phones and other noisy items were used to compensate for the cathedral's lack of bells.

Local rock gods Ash and singer-songwriter James Blunt both allowed local group members to promote the Big Ask at their Belfast shows in December and January.

Over 400 postcards were signed at the two gigs and lucky volunteers got to meet Mr Blunt backstage.

Thank you to everyone who gave up their Saturday mornings to take part in our EPA street action in January and February. Every MLA has now received some postcards from their constituents and over 3000 were completed altogether.

A big welcome to Craigavon's new co-ordinator Allison Neill-Rabaux, who took over the role in March. Please contact her if you're interested in joining the group.



Activists sound the alarm on climate change outside St Anne's Cathedral.

Courtesy of Declan Allison/Friends of the Earth

## News in Brief

#### Island gathering 2008

This year's Island Gathering will take place on 17 and 18 May 2008. We will be returning to Tí Chulainn Cultural Centre in Mullaghbane, Newry. If you would like to attend please call Colette Stewart on 028 9023 3488.

#### New Executive Director

Friends of the Earth has appointed Andy Atkins as its new Executive Director. He comes to us from development charity Tearfund and will replace outgoing Executive Director Tony Juniper in June. Andy is an experienced leader, campaigner and communicator. Many thanks to Tony for his inspiring leadership over the last 6 years.

#### Climate Change Bill

Mark Durkan has tabled a motion calling for an Assembly Climate Change Bill with legally binding carbon reduction targets. Go to [www.foe.co.uk/ni](http://www.foe.co.uk/ni) and ask your MLAs to sign the motion. Every signature counts.

#### It's easier to get active than you'd think

Sign up to our Email Activist Update and all you'll need is your mouse and keyboard. Every month we'll send you an easy 'one-click' action that you can do from the comfort of your computer desk. Sign up now on [www.foe.co.uk/northern\\_ireland/press\\_for\\_change/join\\_list/index.html](http://www.foe.co.uk/northern_ireland/press_for_change/join_list/index.html)

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# It's time for an Environmental Protection Agency

**Strange bedfellows you might think, green groups and big business? But, as Lisa Fagan reports, the developing alliance in favour of an Environmental Protection Agency includes captains of industry, among them the top brass at CBI, Phoenix Gas, Michelin Tyres and the Quarry Products Association.**

All have stated their support for independent environmental regulation as the consensus grows that a high quality environment underpins economic prosperity. Indeed, the chorus of support in favour of an agency also includes consumer champions, angling associations, rural voices and respected environmentalists.

Their endorsements were published by the nine environmental NGOs that have been campaigning for an independent Environmental Protection Agency structured as a Non-Departmental Public Body. Also included in the endorsement document are statements of support from leaders of all the Assembly parties, with the exception of the DUP.

Of course it's the DUP which holds the environment portfolio. Minister Arlene Foster has said she will announce her decision on the agency question by the end of the summer, despite earlier indications that she would decide by late March. Some in the DUP are voicing their opposition to the agency proposal ahead of the Minister's announcement, while those in support of reform are obeying party whips by staying quiet.

Besides the Review of Environmental Governance which recommended an EPA, the Minister must also decide how to respond to the report of the Criminal Justice Inspectorate published last October. While cynics have suggested that the Minister

wants to put some distance between a possible decision to refuse an agency and the events which led Ian Paisley Jnr to resign, others find their explanation in the complex series of policy issues on which she must now adjudicate.

**FINANCE AND ECONOMY MINISTERS WILL BE MINDFUL OF THE IMPACT ON NORTHERN IRELAND'S PUBLIC FINANCES OF EUROPEAN FINES**

There is no doubt that Mrs Foster is sensitive to the opposition to an agency from the Ulster Farmers' Union, particularly given the rural nature of her constituency. But as a member of the legal profession, she also understands the infraction risk should we fall foul of the European courts for breaches of environmental legislation.

Ultimately the decision will be made by the Executive where three out of four parties have pledged their support for an agency. Besides, the DUP Finance and Economy Ministers will be mindful of the impact on Northern Ireland's public finances of European fines, and alive to the demand from business leaders for regulation that is fair, consistent and predictable.

At the time of writing it is unclear whether the reshuffle within the DUP following the resignation of its leader will impact upon the environment portfolio but Mrs Foster is considered to have been a strong performer and may be elevated to one of the vacant ministries.

What is clear is that an unprecedented consensus has developed around the need for a fresh start for our precious environment. This once-in-a-generation opportunity will expire by the end of the summer.

# Happy Anniversary

**It will shortly be the first anniversary of the return of devolution; the tenth anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement has just passed; and Friends of the Earth is celebrating thirty years of activism in Northern Ireland. Time to reflect on three rather different timescales.**

Thirty years ago Friends of the Earth activists met to campaign on nuclear energy. Doubtless they will be gratified that there are no nuclear plants on this island but dismayed that we are having the whole debate over again under the guise of tackling climate change. While climate change was on very few agendas in 1978, it was certainly a concern for those early campaigners. They may be pleased that the issue is now so high on the political agenda, at least at a UK level, while uncomprehending that Governments should have to stare catastrophe in

the face before agreeing on even the need to take action.

During nine of the ten years since the political milestone of 1998 Friends of the Earth engaged alternately with direct rule and devolved ministers. There were successes born of common sense arguments, grassroots activism and broad popular support – the campaign to save the railways is a good example. Sometimes resorting to the law was the only option and both the European and domestic courts were the scene of Friends of the Earth victories.

In a properly functioning democracy, however, legal actions should not be needed on a routine basis so the return of devolution a year ago spelt a lean future for Friends of the Earth's lawyers. That was before it became clear that we have created a peculiarly impenetrable form of democracy where the veto enjoyed by the two largest parties favours those that are happy with the status quo. And the last thing our environment needs is inaction. It looks like the courts in both Luxembourg and Belfast may be kept pretty busy after all.



**Sellafield nuclear reprocessing plant: 30 years on nuclear power is still not a viable option.**

# The Budget was a missed opportunity

**The Executive's recent Programme for Government and accompanying budget were greeted with widespread approval – except from green groups.**

The economy was the budget's number one priority and despite the huge infrastructure investment there was room for the customary tax cutting measure so beloved of Governments on these islands, as domestic rates were frozen for three years.

So far, so conventional. Those exercised by issues of sustainability and climate change were unimpressed. Friends of the Earth pointed out that the commitment to growing a 'dynamic, innovative economy' was wafer thin without any reference to the astonishing global markets in environmental and sustainability technologies. The organisation bemoaned the lack of recognition of local innovators like Powerscreen, Willis and Wrightbus.

That missed opportunity to build on Northern Ireland's traditional strength in engineering extended to those other strong local suits of construction and agriculture. But far



**Peter Robinson's decision to remove mandatory renewables from Building Regulations is a serious blow for the fledgling renewable energy sector.**

from recognising these opportunities, the Programme failed to renew the very successful 'Reconnect' scheme for domestic renewable energy. Worse, it emerged that Finance supremo Peter Robinson, who is also responsible for building regulations, had caved into the conservatism of the Construction Employers Federation and reversed Peter Hain's decision to make renewable energy mandatory in all new homes. Although insulation standards would achieve the same carbon reductions it was, according to John Woods, Northern Ireland Director of Friends of the Earth, "a kick in the teeth for our local domestic renewables

industry" as over 160 businesses and several hundred trained installers saw their business plans torn up by the man who professed to be a champion of the economy.

Meanwhile, Regional Development Minister, Conor Murphy, secured an impressive £3.8 billion for transport infrastructure. The bad news is that he plans to spend four fifths of it on new roads, locking the economy into the high carbon model that will produce the opposite of the economic progress intended by the Programme for Government.

## Green groups reassure farmers on EPA

**Green groups have reassured farmers over the proposed creation of an Environmental Protection Agency. The environmental organisations were responding to concerns raised by the Ulster Farmers' Union that a new agency would add to the burden for farmers. Supporters of an agency insist, however, that farmers have nothing to fear.**

- Farmers are custodians of the countryside and can look forward to receiving support and advice from the staff of the new agency.
- An EPA would not be an extra layer of bureaucracy; it would replace DOE Environment and Heritage Service (EHS).
- The merger of EHS with Rivers Agency, Loughs Agency and the Fisheries Conservancy Board should reduce the regulatory burden on farmers by minimising duplication, meaning less paperwork and fewer farm visits.
- Farmers can expect higher charges for licences and permits whether or not EHS is replaced by an EPA, according to the 'cost recovery' policy imposed by HM Treasury.
- Regarding cost to the taxpayer, the running costs of an EPA would not exceed those of EHS, according to research carried out by an economist commissioned by RSPB. The same research suggests that the agency set-up costs could be recovered through efficiency savings within 5 years.

Lisa Fagan of Friends of the Earth spoke on behalf of the coalition:

"Farmers are responsible for shaping and maintaining the vast majority of our countryside. Financial support for the industry is increasingly tied to managing the environment rather than food production. Farmers are facing

growing demands to reduce farm pollution and will face major challenges from climate change. An EPA can help them prepare their businesses for the future by providing advice and support and by operating a fair and transparent regulatory regime."

She concluded:

"An EPA will make its key decisions in public. It will be governed by a Board whose members will be public appointees. Board meetings will be held in public: members of the public and journalists will be free to attend. Minutes will be published on its website. This transparency will enable the EPA to earn public confidence as well as the trust of those it regulates. Farmers have nothing to fear from the creation of an EPA."

Courtesy of Ian Jackson



**Farmers have nothing to fear from the creation of an independent Environmental Protection Agency**

## Carbon offsetting: solution or distraction?

**The concept is simple. But is offsetting little more than buying indulgences for the 21st Century?**

Offsetting has been promoted as a pain-free way of tackling climate change. Dozens of schemes now claim that carbon conscious individuals and businesses can compensate for their emissions by donating in this way. And the rise of offsetting may have had some benefits – for example, helping raise awareness about climate change. Some of the companies involved have offered simple, at-a-glance carbon calculators that clearly illustrate the

impact travel has on the planet; and 'gold standard' offset schemes target projects around the world, supporting poorer communities to access safe,

**SOUNDS GREAT, DOESN'T IT? BUY YOURSELF OUT OF THE PROBLEM AND CARRY ON POLLUTING THE ATMOSPHERE. UNFORTUNATELY, IT'S NOT THAT EASY.**

renewable energy and adapt to the impacts of climate change that are now unavoidable.

Sounds great, doesn't it? Buy yourself out of the problem and carry on polluting the atmosphere. Unfortunately, it's not that easy. Offsetting schemes may look like a 'get out of jail free card' but they're no real substitute for reducing the emissions we generate. Environmental organisations including Friends of the Earth have raised some serious doubts, saying schemes are simply being used to ward off legislation and are delaying the urgent action needed to cut emissions and develop low-carbon solutions. The fact is we just can't buy our way out of the problem –

there is no solution to climate change other than to emit less pollution.

Tree-planting schemes should be ruled out of any offset scheme. Large-scale plantations are not great for biodiversity, are known to displace people and cause social disruption; plus doubts have been cast on the contribution that trees outside the tropics have in reducing carbon dioxide levels. We've also got to take into account the time a tree takes to grow. We've only got 10 to 20 years to tackle climate change so if a tree takes 20 years to reach maturity the noble gesture of planting becomes

just that – a gesture. It just won't work fast enough.

If you do want to help with these kinds of projects, support well-known charities such as Practical Action or Christian Aid; and if you do want to use an offsetting scheme as a last resort, go for one that promotes energy efficiency or renewable energy with the gold standard accreditation.

This extract is taken from Friends of the Earth's book **'How Can I Stop Climate Change?'** which will be published in May 2008, RRP £14.99. Buy your copy at [www.foe.co.uk/shop](http://www.foe.co.uk/shop).

## Climate Change Bill

**The UK Climate Change Bill making its way through Parliament will establish legally binding carbon reduction targets. Northern Ireland specific targets are needed though to silence the predictable 'special case' pleading.**

The Climate Change Bill is slowly but surely proceeding through the Houses of Parliament. The second Report Stage has delivered three defeats for Government; a clause defining the purpose of the Bill as aiming to keep warming below 2 degrees Celsius has been inserted; reporting duties have been placed on the Prime Minister, rather than on the Secretary of State for Environment; and aviation and shipping emissions are to be included from the second budget period onwards. Gordon Brown has previously announced the

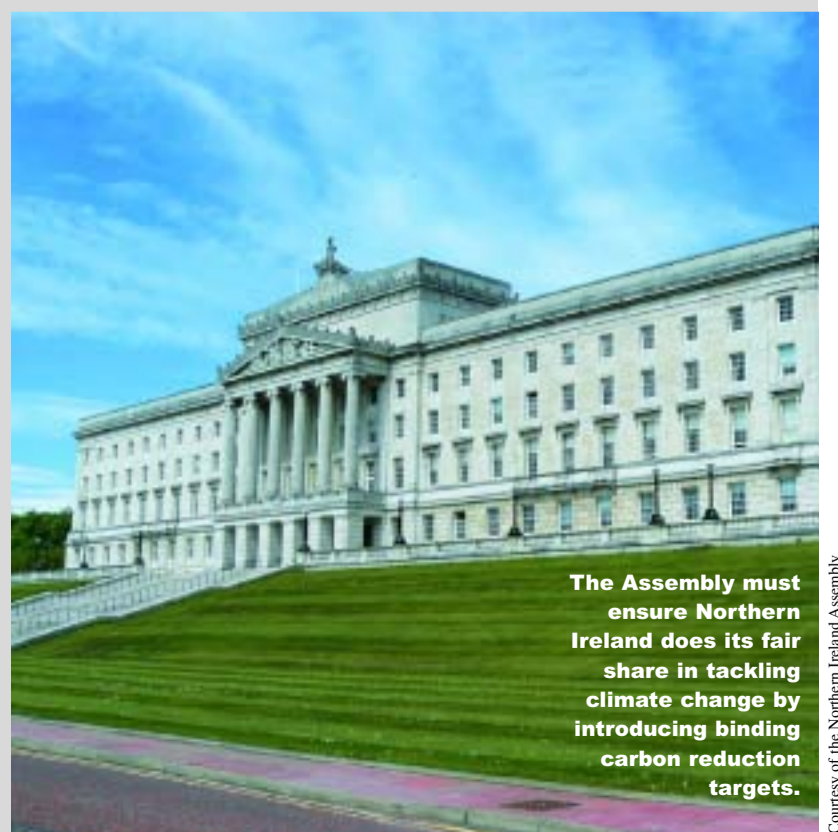
Committee on Climate Change should look at increasing the carbon reduction target to 80 per cent, a call that was repeated by the Chancellor in March's budget speech.

In Northern Ireland, Friends of the Earth plans to repeat the success of the Big Ask. A motion has been tabled in the Assembly calling on the Executive to produce a Northern Ireland Climate Bill with legally binding targets. Such a Bill is essential if Northern Ireland is to make its fair share of cuts in carbon dioxide.

It is inevitable that some will argue Northern Ireland is a special case and should be exempt from binding targets. While it is true that the economy has lagged behind that of the UK and Ireland, a business-as-usual approach will not help.

The world is moving towards a carbon constrained future - a future with high fuel costs. Northern Ireland is at the end of some very long oil and gas supply lines so we can expect to feel the squeeze earlier than other regions. In this climate, energy intensive, fossil fuel reliant businesses will struggle. But imaginative, visionary entrepreneurs will flourish. Renewable energy companies; developers pioneering low-energy construction techniques; insulation fitters; bicycle rental shops; bus manufacturers; local and organic food producers, and more, will all do well.

A Climate Change Bill with robust targets would send a clear signal to businesses that the Assembly's Executive is intent on steering Northern Ireland towards a low-carbon future rather than battling against the tide. Climate change is coming whether we're ready or not - best to be ready.



**The Assembly must ensure Northern Ireland does its fair share in tackling climate change by introducing binding carbon reduction targets.**

Courtesy of the Northern Ireland Assembly