Talk On African Rainforests Given By Tullamore Man

A talk on the destruction of rainforests in Africa has been given by a Tullamore man, Tom Roche, to an Oireachtas Sub-Committee on Development and Co-Operation.

Mr Roche, who is the founder of the Irish Woodworkers for Africa organisation, expressed concern about the adverse effects on local population and environments by the depletion of the forests from which these tropical hardwoods are extracted and about the consequences for future supplies of these woods.

The sub-committee, which is chaired by Laois/Offaly Labour Deputy, Pat Gallagher, heard that most of the local authorities with whom Mr Roche has come into contact with, use only tropical hardwoods in the course of their construction work.

The sub-committee was also informed that, in many instances, tropical hardwoods are used where Irish substitutes are available and that organic chemicals can be used to render other Irish woods suitable as alternatives.

Speaking at the sub-committee meeting prior to Mr Roche’s presentation, Deputy Pat Gallagher said that Mr Roche had worked very conscientiously raising issues surrounding the destruction of rainforests and the use and misuse of tropical hardwoods.

He added that during the past summer, Mr Roche had an opportunity to gain some first-hand insight into this problem in Africa thanks in part to some assistance which he received from the development education section of the Department of Foreign Affairs. At the moment, Mr Roche is working on the policy issue of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species.

In his presentation, Mr Roche explained that he is a cabinet maker and furniture restorer by trade. When learning his trade in Australia, he learned through experience that trees are essential to the survival of humans and animals.

When he returned to Ireland, he set up in business in his hometown as a self-employed cabinet maker working specifically in tropical woods. But he discovered that tropical woods were becoming a cause of very heated international discussion and started questioning where the woods came from, how much we were using and what we were using it for.

‘I discovered that we import on average 25 acres of African forest every day of the year and have done so for a number of decades. I also discovered that where there was a lot of good forest cover there were healthy, thriving communities which did not want international aid because they had everything they needed in the forests.’

He added that the best way he could describe a good forest is that it is like a supermarket here in Ireland.

‘We go to Dunnes Stores or Quinnsworth and get everything we need under one roof. The forest serves the same purpose for indigenous people in rainforest lands, particularly in West Africa.’

These questions made him examine what he was doing and made him afraid for the future. ‘Anything I am doing today is for self-preservation. I am not doing it for the Africans, that just happens to be part of it. I am doing it for myself because I know from my own experience what trees mean to my life.’

This summer, Mr Roche said that he had gone to Africa and visited a rain forest project sponsored by Concern and our Government. He also visited a number of primary schools where tree planting programmes run by Concern and the Irish Government.

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Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs

Wednesday, 2 November 1994
The Sub-Committee met at 11.30 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy J. Connor, Senator M. Lanigan,  
"  P. De Rossa, "  M. Taylor-Quinn,  
"  M. Ferris,  "  S. Ryan,  

In attendance: Mr. N. Andrews MEP., Mr. J. Fitzsimons MEP., and Deputy Pat The Cope Gallagher MEP.

DEPUTY P. GALLAGHER (Laoighis-Offaly) IN THE CHAIR.


[Mr. Doss.] payments. The USA is the most obvious example in this respect. The EU contribution is a legal obligation and cannot be touched but voluntary funds which are not mandated, such as to the UNDP or UNICEF, and which must be voted on every year tend to be the easy hit. Fortunately with respect to these two voluntary funds Ireland is proving to be an exception and I hope this will continue.

People do not see the return on their foreign aid, but there have been returns, and progress has been made, especially in East Asia, but even in Africa. We have calculated the rate of return of Ireland's contribution to UN development projects. It has varied from 1,200 per cent to 600 per cent last year. In other words, what we spend in Ireland, such as experts, fellowships, training and goods, gives a return of approximately 600 per cent. In other countries they get less than 100 per cent back.

The Nordic countries, especially, get upset with us because they argue that they give us a lot more than we return to them. However, that is the nature of multilateralism and the swings and roundabouts must be accepted. Nevertheless, Ireland is getting a good return on its investment in this area.

The Members of the Sub-Committee represent the tax payers and they have a right to know what we are doing. There are formal accountability mechanisms through the UN. We have formal accountability mechanisms through the UN. We have formal accountability mechanisms through the UN. We have formal accountability mechanisms through the UN.

The Tobin tax is a great idea which, so far, has gone nowhere. However, it takes time, 20 years ago nobody was talking about environmental protection. Often one has to launch these ideas and perhaps in time they will come to fruition. Often we make the comparison with the environmental movement and the climate change. It is inconceivable to our forebears that such an institution would not exist. Today, it is inconceivable that it would exist. Perhaps in 100 years we will regard the persistence of mass poverty as unthinkable and we will have solved the problem, or at least gone a way towards solving it.

Thank you, Mr. Doss, for a very useful exchange. You will have gained an appreciation of the Members' favourable view of this report and the continuing problem of human development. We have tended to look too much in on ourselves. In this respect, public opinion must be involved outside of the narrow circle of Governments and diplomats, and we are trying to move in that direction.

Debt servicing is a crucial issue for Africa, and especially its least developed countries. Even with the best economic management, which admittedly most do not have, they will not be able to grow themselves out of debt. Sooner or later, a major reform of debt will be required. It is happening with the Trinidad terms, but increasingly the problem is focusing on multilateral debt, World Bank and IMF debt, which cannot be rescheduled as it is preferential debt.

The UK Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Kenneth Clarke, made a proposal at the recent IMF and World Bank meetings in Madrid to partially alleviate some of the problems of the least developed countries, and got nowhere with it. That will require concerted pressure through the European Union to support that or similar proposals. That is where we must put the emphasis.

Mr. Finn: On the question of awareness, all of a sudden we are au fait with the outside world, as can be seen from the informed comments which we received from the legislators today. However, when I first came back from my assignment abroad in 1958, I met the local parish priest. He said to me that he had not seen me around for a while and asked where I had been. So, despite, full of myself and trying to impress him, I said that I had been in the Middle East, to which he replied that he had never liked Mussingar people.

Irish Woodworkers for Africa.

Chairman: The next item on our agenda is a presentation by Mr. Tom Roche of Irish Woodworkers for Africa. I am aware of the very good work which Mr. Roche has done in relation to an issue which has been put before this committee by organisations such as Earthwatch that, is, the destruction of the rain forests and the use of abuse of tropical hardwoods. Mr. Roche has worked very conscientiously for a number of years in this area. Members might be familiar with the Wood of Life exhibition with which he successfully toured around the country.

During the summer he got an opportunity, with some assistance from the development education section of the Department of Foreign Affairs, to gain some further firsthand insight into this problem in Africa. He is at the moment working on the policy issue of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species.

I welcome him to our meeting and thank him for taking the time to attend. A file has been circulated to Members which Mr. Roche kindly provided in advance of this meeting. I ask him to present his proposal to the committee and then we can discuss the issues which arise.

Mr. Roche: I am a cabinet maker and furniture restorer by trade. After serving my apprenticeship I emigrated to Australia in 1967 at the age of 18 years. I am certainly aware of the very good work which Mr. Doss has done in relation to the problem of deforestation. I also discovered that there is a question which has been put before this committee by organisations such as Earthwatch that, is, the destruction of the rain forests and the use of abuse of tropical hardwoods. Mr. Roche has worked very conscientiously for a number of years in this area. Members might be familiar with the Wood of Life exhibition with which he successfully toured around the country.

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The Netherlands has also cut back and 51 per cent of its municipalities do not use tropical woods.

If we are to get the maximum benefit from the millions of pounds put into forestry in recent times, we must start to use the produce of those forests. It does not make sense to plant trees and continue to take wood from Africa. Millions of pounds have been spent on forestry and we must now educate people that timber is a natural resource which would generate work. By using Irish timber we will also help to conserve Africa's forest thereby making Africans better off.

I thank Deputy Gallagher (Laois-Offaly) for inviting me to this meeting and members for listening. I will do my best to answer any questions.

Chairman: Thank you for that clear presentation.

Deputy Flannery: I congratulate Mr. Roche on the presentation of a case which will involve his livelihood sometime in the future. Even now he is showing her young people are more conscious of the environment nowadays, particularly due to the efforts of Earthwatch, which is active in my constituency. My 12 year old daughter reminds me of my responsibilities in this area and about the need to preserve rainforests. Mr. Roche put it succinctly in this documentation we got.

The Chairman lobbied the Minister, the Tánaiste and others about what Mr. Roche is doing on our behalf. Is it possible to initiate any other programme vs-a-vs the importation of the hardwoods without being affiliated to CITES? Does affiliation to CITES give us additional powers to do what Germany has done?

Years ago nobody thought a wonderful product like ivory would be banned but it became socially unacceptable to have ivory products because of the implications for wild animals and its production is now illegal in most countries.

The use of costly beautiful hardwoods indicates prestige. We must convince people that other products are as good. A factory in my constituency can produce a fibre board from any type of wood and produce the finish of the best hardwood in the world. There is no excuse for using hardwoods from the point of view of quality. You probably know the Medite product and use it in cabinet making.

Do we need to affiliate to CITES to get legislative power to ban the use of hardwoods or can we initiate a campaign through importers and others who made decisions about purchasing? It is time — I congratulate you for doing this — we were made more aware of this problem. We should not wait for our ten and 12 year old school children to remind us of what civics class teachers are reminding them of the importance of such products.

Mr. Roche: It is essential to become a signatory to CITES for a couple of reasons. Already 120 countries have adopted the CITES principles or are CITES members. Our voice would be another voice added to the hundred countries. It would give Ireland power in that if one of our species of wood for example oak became threatened or overexploited we could propose to CITES that we do not want oak to be traded anymore but want it put into perpetuity for the next generation so it can regenerate itself.

In order to apply the CITES principles one must become a member and that would give us power. Germany, for example, has proposed 18 species of west Africa mahogany not because it wants to ban the trade in it but because it wants it controlled. It is another way of controlling trade while supporting the principles of CITES in which I strongly believe.

Senator Taylor-Quinn: I welcome Mr. Roche and I compliment him on his presentation. We are indebted to people like him for bringing this issue to our attention. Much debate and discussion
Chairman: You are proposing that we invite someone from the Department prior to a motion being passed on that subject.

Senator Taylor-Quinn: Yes. It is all a matter of finding out the background.

Deputy S. Ryan: It is great to have somebody with a technical knowledge of the issues to speak to us. Is Mr. Roche suggesting or recommending a complete ban on hardwoods in this regard? It would probably be desirable in certain ways to try to reduce the amount of hardwoods coming into the country. What alternatives would Mr. Roche use for some of the hardwoods that would be necessary for outdoor work?

Mr. Roche: I am not advocating a ban on tropical hardwoods. I am advocating control on the amount of timber extracted from tropical rainforest systems and I am advocating that it be done in a fashion that is compatible with the environment, in such a way that it does not destroy the wildlife or put indigenous peoples out of their homes. There is a lot of good quality, highly prized wood in these tropical rainforests and I would personally feel very deprived if I were not allowed to use it. I am not advocating a ban. I have made that very clear to everybody. I am asking that we control our use of it.

There is no need to use tropical hardwood to build a shopfront in Ireland and then paint it. It is contrary to what I was taught as an apprentice. I was told to sand the wood and bring out its beauty. In recent years I have seen people painting it. All these signals are going out to youngsters and they are confused. It must be rectified. I am not advocating a ban, just control. We should be much more conscious of our uses of tropical wood.

There is a lot of wood in this country suitable for use in shopfronts. We have millions of cubic meters of Douglas fir coming on stream, planted in the 1920s and 1930s. This is excellent wood and it will do the very same job as a tropical hardwood in a shopfront, window or door. It is Irish grown and much more suitable to this climate because it is grown here. We have no excuse for not using Irish wood, because we have all the modern technological means of increasing its lifespan by adding organic chemicals to it. There are organic treatments for wood to make it last longer. We have good wood available as an alternative to tropical hardwoods for certain jobs.

We all deserve a nice piece of furniture in our house but when we started using tropical wood in shopfronts we went overboard and we are now abusing a very precious resource. There is no need for it.

Those are the two points I wish to make. I am not advocating a ban, I am just asking for control, and that we would be much more selective about where we use this wood. Education plays a big part in this and in my exhibition I have tried to educate people and make them understand that there are alternatives to tropical woods.

Deputy De Rossa: Has Mr. Roche had a reply from the Minister for Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht to his letter concerning CITES? Perhaps, Chairman, you might request the Department on behalf of the committee to send an observer to the convention next week. That at least would be an indication of interest. It does not commit the Department to taking on board the convention itself, but at least it would open the door. Finally, how much of the new timber we have is hardwood? I would not recognise hardwood if I saw it, but I do appreciate that this wood is probably recycled from somewhere else.

Deputy Ferris: It is all recycled Irish wood.

Deputy De Rossa: The reply from the Office of Public Works is fairly weak in terms of the obligation on staff not to use hardwood. Apart from inviting someone from the Department, perhaps we should talk to the Office of Public Works. Local authorities have a major role in construction. I do not know to what extent, if any, local authorities use hardwood in centres that they may build. It is something we all need to become conscious of in a daily basis in terms of the various decision-making roles which we all have, in the Dáil and outside of the Dáil, on issues which may have an impact on this.

Mr. Roche: When I have an exhibition in any town — I have had 30 of them so far — I always try to get a Minister or somebody in the locality to launch it. That way I am more or less guaranteed that council officials will come along. I always offer alternatives to the woods they are using. Most local authorities are using tropical woods in areas that could be well served by using locally produced wood. If we are to convince people of the forest potential that we have, we must start at council level and let the councils be seen to be using locally produced wood. There is not a council that is not within 10 miles of a forest. Councils could use wood produced locally by using local woods. Then you will get the people to follow. It can only be good for us all. We have to start with the councils and I try to lobby them on that.

Chairman: Thank you, Mr. Roche. There are a number of courses of action which we can take. I would like to thank Senator Taylor-Quinn that we pass a motion urging the Government to support the convention, in addition to asking an official from the Department to attend our next meeting to discuss Ireland's position, is something the sub-committee could act upon. In addition, the suggestion by Mr. Roche that we should, on behalf of the sub-committee, contact the Minister to urge that at least an observer attend, can be acted upon immediately. The point made on the issue of exchange with regard to local authorities can be pursued, because many of them are aware of this issue through the exhibition, and the sub-committee could, therefore, com-
[Chairman.]

I noted from the file submitted by Mr. Roche that there was correspondence with the Minister for Agriculture, Food and Forestry, and in this respect, I suggest we write to the Minister on two issues. The first is to ask him, and also the Minister for Tourism and Trade, to explore what action can be taken, multilaterally and within the EU, on this matter. The second issue is to ask the Minister for Agriculture, Food and Forestry to support the principles of the forest stewardship council, mentioned by Mr. Roche.

Is it agreed that the sub-committee proceed with these suggestions? Agreed.

I thank Mr. Roche for attending the sub-committee. I have been familiar with his work for some time, and I have always been impressed with the way in which the theory of the issue is combined with the practise of it. We often hear of these issues in a theoretical way, and I therefore compliment Mr. Roche on the practicality of his presentation and proposals. He raised issues which the sub-committee can work on and report back to Mr. Roche on progress made.

I wish the sub-committee to consider inviting the Minister for Finance to attend a meeting and discuss the contribution which he made on Ireland's behalf to the anniversary summit of the IMF and the World Bank. The debate which took place on the subject in Ireland earlier in the year had some impact on the contribution which Ireland made at that summit, and I would therefore like the Minister to attend a meeting and provide a resume of his contribution and to take questions from Members. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The sub-committee adjourned at 1.35 p.m.

SUB-COMMITTEE ON NORTHERN IRELAND

The Sub-Committee met at 3.30 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy S. Barrett, Senator S. Maloney.
... D. Bree, B. Briscoe, J. Connor.
... A. Currie,* P. De Rossa, S. Doherty,*
... P. De Rossa, S. Doherty,*
... P. De Rossa, S. Doherty,*

*In the absence of Deputies N. Owen and E. Ryan respectively.

DEPUTY J. O'KEEFFE IN THE CHAIR.

Presentation by Committee on the Administration of Justice in Northern Ireland.

Chairman: I welcome the members of the Committee on the Administration of Justice in Northern Ireland. Angela Hegarty is the chairman, the vice chairman is Christine Bell and the minutes secretary is Catriona Ruane. The parliamentary liaison officer is Dr. Colm Campbell and the information officer is Martin O'Brien. They are accompanied by three interns who are Hanne Vanlivi from Estonia, Udane Essien from Nigeria and Jeanine Bucherer from Germany.

The CAJ is a cross community group interested in ensuring the highest standards in the administration of justice in Northern Ireland. It is proper to point out initially that the committee does not take any position on the constitutional issue. The committee is very clear that a respect for human rights will have to be a cornerstone of any lasting solution in Northern Ireland.

We are very interested in getting up-to-date views on the situation in Northern Ireland. The submission by the group has been circulated. We are particularly interested in their views of the current situation in light of the latest developments. We would like to hear their views on the priorities in terms of human rights in the peace process. It would be very helpful if we had a view of the process from the one hand, west Belfast, and on the other from the Shankill. There is a feeling here that the government and the effect of the absence of the political representatives. We would like the groups informed opinion on that.

There are also other areas such as policing which we would be interested in getting a view on. I know that the group has always been interested in the question of the RUC and I invite them to touch on that. After the group has given an outline of their views I will ask for questions.

Ms Hegarty: Thank you for inviting us to speak. It is an opportunity which we welcome very much and we hope that it will be a productive meeting. We are happy to answer any questions Members might have. The committee was formed in 1981 by a group of people drawn from all the communities in Northern Ireland. There is sometimes a notion that there are just two communities in Northern Ireland. However, we have a number of ethnic minorities including the Chinese, Indian and travelling communities. Our membership is drawn from those communities as well as from the two major communities - the Protestant and Catholic communities.

The committee was set up to ensure that the highest standards of international law were applied in Northern Ireland and to monitor Government action and legislation in this respect. We take no position on the Border but our view is that no matter what constitutional arrangements may pertain, the IMRO and the proper application of the law should be applied as a minimum to the legal system in Northern Ireland.

I noticed that the Chairman referred to west Belfast and the Falls. I am from Derry. The issues are not just Belfast based. I am always very careful to say to people that we draw our membership from all over Northern Ireland. We also have members from outside Northern Ireland. We work on a range of issues, not just those which are traditionally associated with the conflict. For example, we have done quite a deal of work on the issue of racism in Northern Ireland and the effect of the absence of any anti-racist legislation. It is fair to say that we have been instrumental in partnership with the Chinese and travelling communities, in persuading the Government that something needed to be done.

We work on complaints and issues raised with us by all the communities. We have worked, for example, on issues of miscarriages of justice in relation to the Casement murders a few years ago. We also work with the communities on harassment. A feature of the conflict in Northern Ireland has been harassment in both communities. We have worked with the communities in the Shankill and the Falls and elsewhere on that issue.

Our international work has been a feature of our organisation in the past few years. We are a member of the Federation Internationale Droits du