



Logging Practices: Discussion with Just Forests.

Joint Committee on the Environment,
Heritage and Local Government Debate

Tuesday, 12 May 2009

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Chairman:   The next issue on the agenda is No. 3, which is a discussion on logging practices. I thank the chief executive officer of Irish Woodworkers for Africa Limited, trading as Just Forests, Mr. Tom Roche. Unfortunately, the director, Mr. Duncan Stewart, is unable to attend. As this is Mr. Roche's first appearance before the committee, he is particularly welcome. The format of the meeting will comprise a presentation by Mr. Roche followed by a question and answer session with members.

Before Mr. Roche begins, I draw his attention to the fact that while members of the committee have absolute privilege, the same privilege does not apply to witnesses appearing before the committee. Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an official by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

Mr. Tom Roche: I thank members for the opportunity to address the committee. My objective is that Ireland should have a responsible natural timber procurement policy. The reasons for my concern in this regard are graphically illustrated in the documents provided to the committee. Members may have noticed the large slab of mahogany behind me. I found it in a dump in Tullamore 25 years ago and it is worth €200. We have become very wasteful. Being a furniture-maker, I realised what this slab of wood was when I brought it home. It was clear to me that such practices could not continue. This mahogany came from a 300 year old tree, planted in approximately 1700. It functioned as an item of furniture for a long period, before somebody decided it would make an excellent mortar board on which to mix concrete.

I founded Just Forests in 1989 to highlight this issue. As populations increase and resources dwindle, no country can afford to dump its forests into landfill. Like the glass of water before me, forests support and sustain life. It is vital that we protect our resources. The committee is in a powerful position to take action in this regard. As the Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs, Deputy Peter Power, stated in last weekend's *Sunday Business Post*, the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government has an important role to play in contributing to global sustainability and the protection of resources.

I have brought several wood samples with me that represent the backbone of the Irish furniture and joinery trade, which employs thousands of people. These two particular species are almost commercially extinct. This one is listed under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, CITES. We can no longer trade in it because we have not managed the resource. If one looks at any hoarding in Dublin, Tullamore, Mullingar or elsewhere, one will



find it is made with this Chinese plywood. I have had these samples analysed in the University of Hamburg. They all contain species of tropical hardwood that are illegally logged or in serious decline.

Before me too is a sample of a material that will do the same job. It is made in Waterford from sustainably managed forests in the State. This sector provides employment to thousands of people. Currently, they are all on a go-slow for several reasons, one of which is the flood of cheap Chinese plywood being used by Irish construction companies and Departments. As outlined in the booklet, several local authorities are using it. Even the EU's offices are using it. I took pictures of that.

Four mills in Ireland make the material from the thinnings of Irish forests and provides jobs for farmers and many others. It does the same job as the Chinese plywood. While I am not saying we should not trade internationally or import, we should ensure that whatever we import comes from sustainable sources. Otherwise, the quality of jobs will be undercut in Ireland and in developing countries that are trying to do it right.

These wood samples are a graphic illustration of what I am trying to say. We urgently need a timber policy that must, through legislation, filter down to all Departments and local authorities. We have drawn up a good policy for Offaly County Council, which we would like to be used as an example for other local authorities.

The issue is serious, as the global population is increasing at a considerable rate. There are 6.3 billion people now, but there will be approximately 9 billion in 15 years time. With dwindling resources, there will be a significant pressure on natural resources, which are the basis of economic development. We cannot work without them. Honduran mahogany came from Central America 300 years ago, was in someone's sitting room as a nice table and ended up in a dump in Tullamore. This situation cannot continue. It is not common sense and does no one any good. Everything I want to say is contained in the small and large documents. I will take members' questions.

Deputy Ciarán Cuffe:   I welcome Mr. Roche. I am looking at the photograph of the presentation in the office of the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland, RIAI, in 2002, which I attended and at which the then Minister for Foreign Affairs spoke eloquently on the need to ensure that sustainable timber be used.

In the documents submitted to the committee, our guests have included a response from the Office of Public Works, OPW. How did it square with their thoughts and did it go far enough? I suspect it did not go anywhere near the type of policy that our guests are seeking. What is their opinion on this?

As Mr. Roche has pointed out, there is quite a bit of confusion concerning the various certifications in common use. I must admit that I am confused by them. What wood certifications are worthy of support?

I wish to bring to our guests' attention the fact that the programme for Government seeks sustainable procurement policies. We must move our guests' document forward with the Departments of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and Finance. Perhaps it is the way forward. Mr. Roche pointed out that the procurement policies of State agencies and the European Commission will be crucial in showing the way forward. We can do a certain amount of naming and shaming, but the best way forward is to have a clear policy that is known by contractors, architects and engineers. We can work with our guests in this respect.

I commend the witnesses on their presentation and documentation, into which a considerable amount of work has gone. I support what they are doing, which became clear to me seven years

ago. The trick is to move it forward.



Mr. Tom Roche: Regarding Deputy Cuffe's concern about certification programmes, there are a number of international third party certification programmes. As far as Just Forests and the NGO community are concerned, the Forest Stewardship Council would be by far the most credible because it takes into account the three pillars of society. It takes into account the economic interests, the social interests and the environmental interests in a balanced development of standards that will sit with the three sectors.

The next most credible certification system would be Pan-European Forest Certification, PEFC. It has a good process also but we would not see it as being applicable to tropical regions. The Forest Stewardship Council is applicable globally to tropical regions, boreal regions and temperate regions because it enjoys that support right across the globe whereas PEFC we would see as being applicable mostly to European forestry and northern temperate forestry, but certainly not to tropical forestry as it does not have the expertise for that.



The Forest Stewardship Council would be our preferred certification system. It is, believe it or not, the one Coillte uses. Smart ply made by Coillte in Waterford, a sample of which I have brought to show the committee, is FSC certified. That gives Irish produced panel board significant access to European markets because right across Europe FSC is the preferred certification system because of its credibility and its balanced approach — economically, socially and environmentally. That smart ply, which is FSC certified, is manufactured by Coillte and gives much Irish employment.

As opposed to that, I have brought to show the committee a plywood made in China from timber illegally logged in either Tanzania, South-East Asia or possibly Brazil. Imagine the carbon footprint of this piece of plywood. The loggers take the timber from Africa, bring it back to China for manufacture into plywood and bring it back to Europe for sale into the Irish market. It has an enormous carbon footprint.

The first to which I referred, on the other hand, is made from the thinnings of Irish forests, and provides jobs to Irish people. It is legitimate. It is a sustainable industry. The fact that it is Forest Stewardship Council certified means it has great access to European markets which are discerning.

Deputy Ciarán Cuffe:   It is good to hear that Coillte is meeting a decent standard in this regard. My other question was on the OPW's letters which, for me, does not go far enough.



Mr. Tom Roche: It is important. That is a good question. If one looks at the coloured document, one will see the letter. That only came in the recent past. It states that the OPW has had a timber procurement policy in place since 1987. If one looks at the photograph of the EU office, or of the Irish Aid building in Dublin which I took, both of those use Chinese ply-board, a sample of which I have brought to show the committee. If any organisation has a legitimate timber policy, it would not have this Chinese ply-board on its procurement policy. With due respect, the OPW's letter is not worth the paper on which it is written because there is no validation of it.



Deputy Johnny Brady:   I, too, compliment Mr. Roche on his presentation, the booklets and the samples. We all witnessed old buildings being demolished. A big digger would go in to demolish it and everything was put into a skip or a lorry and transported to a dump of some form or other. In one sense such practice has changed due to the need to secure a permit to dump clay, builders' rubble, and so on.

Recently, I happened to be in a recycling yard in my old constituency where a man wanted to see me. He brought me down to see what he is doing. It was great to see the amount of recycling being done. Mahogany was dumped and thrown out and nothing thought of it. It is great to see



that piece which could have been in a dump for how many years?

Mr. Tom Roche: I found it 25 years ago.

Deputy Johnny Brady:   That is typical mahogany. I compliment the witness on the work he is doing. I met Mr. Stewart recently on a different issue. He is doing tremendous work in that area also. It is great that people like Mr. Roche, Mr. Stewart and others have such an interest in this area. As a committee we will do whatever we can in our power to ensure that what has happened in the past does not happen in the future.

Deputy Christy O'Sullivan:   I welcome Mr. Roche. It is nice to hear from a person who can apply common sense. We often hear from people who have many letters after their name but what they say does not always make much sense to us. The manner in which he has outlined his case makes a good deal of sense. I have to confess that, as one who has raided a few skips in my time, I am interested in the restoration of furniture and I have come away with quite a few treasures in my time. I am not an expert in this area but I place great value on old furniture, particularly pieces that have been needlessly lost.



Mr. Roche's piece here is typical. I have retrieved pieces from different sources. One would be amazed at the lengths I have gone to to retrieve them because I know their value. It is more of a pastime for me than being conscious of the real value, which the witness has highlighted. The real value, which he has highlighted, is the climate and, particularly now, the jobs that can be created from using natural material which we have here in Ireland. That is very important. While it is good to start at any time, we have not been pro-active in highlighting its importance. It needs an even bigger push than it is being given at present. Gradually people are becoming more conscious of the environment. The witness is a person with whom we can associate and relate to and I wish him the very best. The committee and all of us as individuals must play our part to help in every way we can.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon:   I thank Mr. Roche for his presentation from which we can see how passionate he is about his work. According to the material supplied, an area the size of 6,400 Croke Parks of tropical rain forests disappear every day. That is a frightening statistic. It is good that somebody is taking an interest in this area. I agree with Deputy O'Sullivan that the committee should do whatever it can to support his work. In regard to the shuttering board, is plywood being imported from China when it could be produced here? If so, is there a cost factor and what is the difference in price?

Mr. Tom Roche: Anything that is done well and according to the employment laws of any country and the highest standards involves cost. It would be slightly more expensive than this, but using it will keep people at work. It will reduce the carbon footprint in terms of not bringing it all the way from China. It will also contribute to sustainable management of the world's forests by using material from responsibly managed forests that are legal and sustainable as opposed to material from sources that are of dubious origin, most likely illegally logged, with the profits going to multinationals and nothing trickling back to the community, workers and so on. I agree there is a cost but there is a cost involved in everything that is done properly. The reason there is illegal trade in so many areas is because people get away without paying the full costs. There is a cost in this regard but there will be a greater cost if we do not do it right.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon:   I fully agree. The other area is recycling chippings and——

Mr. Tom Roche: Any materials, yes.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon:   It does not make sense, to be honest.



Deputy Michael Fitzpatrick:   Will Mr. Roche expand on the policy statement by Offaly

County Council? He welcomed it but I wonder if that could be used as a template for other county councils.

Mr. Tom Roche: I am glad the Deputy asked that question. In 2001, Offaly County Council became the first local authority in Ireland to formally adopt a timber policy. Niall Sweeney was the county manager at the time and Jack Keys, who I understand is now the county manager in Monaghan, was the director of services. I was on one of the strategic policy committees as a nominee from Offaly Community Forum and it was through that forum that we got the policy adopted. There was great excitement about that at the time. I can send the committee the quote from Niall Sweeney at the time but the Taoiseach, who was asked for a quote, said it was a very good move because it is about sustainability and alleviation of poverty. It was very warmly welcomed by all the members of Offaly County Council.

That was in 2001 but, unfortunately, I used to make inquiries as to how the policy was filtering down to the purchasing department in terms of specification clauses but, to be honest, it was never put into practice. I lobbied the council again through council members. I stood outside the council offices for three days on a hunger strike. I told them they had a timber policy and asked them to please put it into practice. Some weeks later I was invited to submit a new version of it, which I did, of which the members have a copy. In part 3 of this booklet they will see the actual policy that was submitted to Offaly County Council in January 2009. That was submitted to Michael Roche's environment department at their request. It is with the council although I do not know where it is, to be honest.



I want to make one aspect clear. The strategic policy committee that got the policy through initially in 2001 was the housing, social and cultural SPC. When I started making noises about the implementation of the policy, it was taken from that SPC and given to the environment SPC despite major objections from the members of the housing, social and cultural SPC. That debate got very heated and heavy and many members of that committee walked out because they felt it was a stalling mechanism by Offaly County Council not to put the policy into practice. It caused a great deal of controversy at the time. However, that is the new version of the policy that was submitted in January 2009 to the environment committee SPC in Offaly County Council awaiting endorsement or amendment.

Deputy Michael Fitzpatrick:   It has not yet been adopted by the county council.



Mr. Tom Roche: The new policy has not been adopted. Some members of Offaly County Council are of the view that because the first policy was legally adopted, there is some room for ensuring this one is adopted without any objections because it had already formally adopted a policy. This is merely an updated version of the old policy and they believe there should not be any controversy as to whether it should be adopted. That is the point some of the members are making.



Deputy Christy O'Sullivan:   Is Offaly County Council the only local authority that has a timber policy?

Mr. Tom Roche: Yes. As far as I know, it is the only authority to insert a public notice in the newspaper requesting input on a draft timber policy at our request. No other authority has approached us. I sent letters to numerous other authorities asking them to do so, including to Westmeath County Council recently. That council has some very controversial cladding on its lovely new civic offices. I asked the council if it would adopt a policy but it did not reply.



Deputy Christy O'Sullivan:   Would it be appropriate for this committee to suggest to local authorities that they put a timber policy in place? Can we do that or would the request have to come from the Department?


Chairman:   Our committee can do it directly.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon:   I agree with Deputy O'Sullivan. I believe we should.



Chairman:   The Department could emasculate something like that, and make a big issue of it. We could do it directly.

Deputy Christy O'Sullivan:   I formally propose we do that.



Chairman:   Yes. We might give them a copy of the proposal for Offaly as guidance and to clarify what we are saying.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon:   I second the proposal, because it is an opportunity to create and save jobs.



Chairman:   Absolutely.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon:   Despite the recession work is being done and timber is being used daily. We should do what we can to ensure that it is Irish-produced, recycled timber wherever possible.



Mr. Tom Roche: A good timber policy always gives first preference to locally produced goods. If locally produced goods are not available or are not up to the required standard, one can then opt for goods produced outside. Giving first preference to locally-produced materials reduces the carbon footprint, keeps jobs in the locality and ensures the resource is managed properly. It is important to emphasise that a good policy always gives preference to locally-produced materials, as an environmental concern.

Senator Geraldine Feeney:   I apologise for arriving late to the meeting. I have looked at the policy document. I am a Tullamore woman and was curious about the policy. Given that local election candidates are seeking election and re-election, I am sure there is plenty of talk about supporting this when they come to Mr. Roche's door. It would then be finally adopted. I note that it was adopted in 2001. Was it not implemented?

Mr. Tom Roche: It was never implemented. It was only when I started asking why it had not been implemented that the policy was moved from the housing, social and cultural SPC into the environment SPC for further discussion.



Senator Geraldine Feeney:   I presume that committee needed an update and Mr. Roche rejigged it.

Mr. Tom Roche: Yes, I rejigged it. It reflects all the issues and the current best standard. It is an up-to-date policy.

Senator Geraldine Feeney:   It makes one think before one does anything, such as looking at where the product is sourced.

Mr. Tom Roche: That is right.

Senator Geraldine Feeney:   I thank Mr. Roche, and my apologies for being late. I was at another meeting.

Chairman:   Mr. Roche, there is general support in the committee. Nobody has an issue with what you have said. Is there anything we can do?


Mr. Tom Roche: There are two approaches. A national timber procurement policy must be



adopted at Government level and enshrined in legislation. A directive is being brought forward by the EU called FLEGT — forest law enforcement, governance and trade. It has already been adopted by several EU countries. Ireland is not attending the meetings on it at present.

Chairman:   Which Department is responsible?



Mr. Tom Roche: The forest service in the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. I made a submission to the Department last January and attached the Offaly County Council policy. The Department welcomed it and thought it was a very good submission. I rang the Department last week to get an idea of its position on this new EU directive and an official told me: “Sorry, Tom, we are out of the loop at the moment.” I asked why and he said it was because of cutbacks. I said I could not believe it. Surely there is enough money available to send someone to Europe in respect of this matter. The directive to which I refer will be imposed on Ireland, regardless of whether we like it. Therefore, it is good to be prepared.

This is a very good directive, which relates to sustainability, livelihood and managing the resource properly to ensure that it will be in place for the long term. I appeal to the Chairman to contact the Department’s forestry and wildlife service in Wexford——



Chairman:   The committee will write directly to the Minister.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon:   I am a member of the relevant committee and I will raise the matter with it.

Mr. Tom Roche: ——to ensure that it continues with the FLEGT process. Those involved need to be briefed on how to make provision for this in legislation. The Chairman should also write to the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and ask him to ensure that a more updated version of this policy be enshrined in legislation. I could forward a copy of Offaly County Council’s policy on this matter to the Chairman and he could then forward it to other local authorities.

Chairman:   We will comply with Mr. Roche’s three requests. First, we will ask the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food the position regarding the FLEGT process. Second, we will ask the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government to ensure that this matter is dealt with in legislation. Third, if Mr. Roche provides a copy of Offaly County Council’s policy, we will circulate it to all other local authorities asking them to consider putting in place similar policies.

Mr. Tom Roche: That is great. The importance of the national procurement policy is that it will filter down through from the OPW and the various Departments building new premises. The OPW is responsible for public buildings and must, therefore, have a similar policy. If a directive comes from the Government and if the policy is enshrined in law, the OPW will have no option but to implement it.

Chairman:   We have concluded our discussion on this topic. I thank Mr. Roche for coming before the committee. People who are concerned with regard to this matter need to appear before members in order that account might be taken of their views. Was the document circulated by Mr. Roche produced for today’s meeting?


Mr. Tom Roche: Yes, at a cost of €690 for 20 copies.

Chairman:   Who put it together?



Mr. Tom Roche: I was responsible for doing so.

Chairman:   Well done.

Mr. Tom Roche: I have been up late for the past few nights working on it.

Chairman:   Mr. Roche has done a very professional job.

Mr. Tom Roche: I could talk to members about this matter for two hours. However, the pictures in the document, such as that of the Taoiseach, Deputy Cowen, accepting the good wood policy guide at the Royal Institute of Architects, and what he said on that occasion with regard to forest certification are of much more value. There are also pictures of Mullingar's new civic buildings and the Irish Aid information centre, which was officially opened by Deputy Bertie Ahern last year. With regard to the latter, I informed Deputy Bertie Ahern that illegal timber was used in the construction of the Irish Aid information centre. I also informed him that the Government is supporting development projects in Africa and said that it is not possible to have it both ways. With regard to the production of the documentation, my money was well spent.

Chairman:   We appreciate the documentation we have received. The committee will follow up on the matter in the way I have indicated. I thank Mr. Roche for his presentation and for enlightening us with regard to this matter. We do not know everything and we will not discover information about certain issues if people do not come forward to provide it.