



Farming

Dairy farms face huge electricity price hike



Going green doesn't give retailers like Penneys a free pass

Anne-Marie Tomchak Comment



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Race to switch amid warnings over four-year energy squeeze

Senan Molony
POLITICAL CORRESPONDENT

CUSTOMERS are racing to switch energy firms as prices surge, while Environment Minister Eamon Ryan has warned of electricity supply issues for up to four years.

A potential energy crisis is brewing, and the *Irish Independent* recently

revealed that families could see an extra €400 on their bills this winter.

Energia has announced recent increases of 15.8pc, Bord Gáis will introduce hikes of 10pc on electricity and 12pc on gas from October 24, while Pinergy prices will rise by 7.8pc on October 11.

Recent figures show the number of electricity switches in April this year

was 25,017 – compared to 17,843 for the same month in 2020.

“This represents a circa 40pc increase,” says the Commission for the Regulation of Utilities.

It is expected that many more customers will rush to switch in a bid to avoid the worst of the price hikes.

Meanwhile, it is understood that import need has been discussed

by Cabinet, against the backdrop of escalating international prices caused in part by a Russian power play on its gas pipeline to Europe.

Green Party leader Mr Ryan said electricity supply would be “very tight” up to 2025.

He said there was a “real issue” when asked about the possibility of domestic power outages in future.

A well-placed industry source told the *Irish Independent* that further price increases are on the cards.

“The most people can do is switch supplier and chase cheaper prices. But all prices are floating up and the outlook is for further pressure in that direction.”

Full report: Page 4



End of an era: Fifty years after starting his career as a newsagent, John Hyland has pulled the shutters down for the last time. His Corner Shop in Dún Laoghaire was well known for its intimate, old-style feel. After decades of 5am starts, he can now catch up on some rest. PHOTO: STEVE HUMPHREYS SEE P3

Covid WhatsApp privacy warning to school parents

Eilish O'Regan

THE HSE has warned parents on primary school WhatsApp groups about the dangers of the rumour mill and naming a child who has Covid-19.

WhatsApp exchanges between parents could go into overdrive following the decision to abandon testing and tracing of primary schoolchildren who are close contacts of a classmate with the virus.

But the HSE has told parents that it is important that “a child's confidentiality is not broken in line with normal GDPR requirements”.

“It is important that children and families do not feel targeted or pressured to release information,” it said.

It comes as around 10,000 children, who had been restricting their movements after being identified as close contacts, returned to the classroom yesterday under the new rules.

Full report: Page 8

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John Downing

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**Kate Bowler**

We can't upgrade our lives – we can only live them **23**



Comment

Merely having a sustainability plan does not give companies like Penneys a free pass

Anne-Marie Tomchak



HAVEN'T you heard? There's yet another reason to love (or loathe) Primark. If you weren't already one of the hundreds of people queuing up to get through the doors of Primark (known here as Penneys) for your few bits earlier this year as soon as lockdown restrictions were lifted, that may have been because you're still not entirely comfortable with the brand's eco-credentials. But that could be about to change.

The fast-fashion behemoth (which notably doesn't sell online but is still wildly successful) has just laid out a shiny new sustainability plan. And it makes for interesting reading.

Primark is promising to make its clothes more durable and to use more sustainable materials as part of a new strategy for the next decade.

"Our ambition is to offer customers the affordable prices they know and love us for, but with products that are made in a way that is better for the planet and the people who make them," said chief executive Paul Marchant.

Let's dissect that sentence for a moment. In the past, the cynic in me might have interpreted it as saying: We've built a retail empire by selling you loads of tat that doesn't last while pursuing profit at all costs. But now we know that degrading the environment isn't good for business and we need to keep investors happy.

But hear me out as to why that's no longer my knee-jerk reaction.

If we're to see real change in fashion's impact on the environment (which is estimated to be between 4pc and 10pc of global carbon emissions) we need companies like Primark and others to fully embrace the transition towards a greener business model.

That means resisting the urge to cancel them before they've even tried. In the absence of robust laws and regulations to hold fashion to account, keeping an open mind while also keeping eyes open to potential greenwashing is imperative.



Popular: Customers queue outside Penneys in Blanchardstown during the Covid-19 pandemic

Greenwashing is where brands make a bunch of eco claims that are, at best, a bit of a stretch or, at worst, intentionally misleading. Consumers are left none the wiser about whether something is actually environmentally friendly. It has become so chronic that the UK's Advertising Standards Association is releasing new guidance to clamp down on it.

The prevalence of greenwashing in fast fashion was called out by climate activist Greta Thunberg in a recent interview with *Vogue Scandinavia*. Her assessment could not have cut closer to the bone. She described the "fantasy amounts" being spent by brands to "portray themselves as sustainable and ethical".

So let's not be naive about fashion's pivot. Remember, in the case of Primark, this is the same company that only a few years ago was paying out compensation to hundreds of workers in Bangladesh following a disastrous 2013 incident involving the collapse of a factory of one of its suppliers in Dhaka where more than 1,000 people died.

99pc of major fashion brands don't disclose how many workers get the living wage

It is also a brand that has been rated 'not good enough' on labour, environment and animal welfare by the fashion ranking system Good On You. Primark "uses few eco-friendly materials and there's no evidence it has set a greenhouse gas emissions reduction target", wrote Good On You in 2020.

But now it is 2021 – and a new world beckons where Primark is pledging to cut single-use plastic, make clothes that are fully recyclable by 2027 and halve carbon emissions across its entire value chain by 2030.

Primark is positioning itself as a brand that will focus on renewable energy and regenerative agriculture practices by 2030. It is promising to pay workers a living wage (no timeline given) and to train and upskill women who dominate the garment industry workforce.

Primark was unavailable for comment up to the time this piece was published.

The company's plan points to a fundamental conundrum facing the fashion industry, which has historically been

built upon inequality and extraction and obsessed with growth and profit.

How will making positive social and environmental changes affect the business model? Can a company remain competitive on price while producing higher quality clothes and paying workers more?

These are questions that all growth-focused capitalist structures are grappling with as they transition towards a model that doesn't see value solely through the prism of money.

The likes of Greta Thunberg doesn't believe it's possible for fashion brands to ever be sustainable while continuing to produce at scale. And she's right. The system needs a rethink.

But the good news is that the perceived value of a business is changing. This represents an opportunity for everyone – including Primark. Purpose and transparency have become new metrics of success in the era of sustainability and regeneration.

As it stands, 99pc of major fashion brands don't disclose how many workers in their supply chain get the living wage, and 96pc don't publish a roadmap on how they plan to pay them fairly, according to the latest Fashion Transparency Index. Fashion is not exactly leading the way when it comes to transparency. But is fast fashion missing a trick?

Take the mid-market Scandinavian clothing brand Ganni, for example. It has achieved cult sustainability status despite explicitly stating on its website that it does not identify as a sustainable brand. It says it is working towards being the best version of itself.

Yet everyone I talk to in and outside fashion circles assumes Ganni is up there when it comes to its environmental and social impact. The brand is not perfect. But it has earned trust. And in doing so, it has the space to improve without being accused of greenwashing.

So to brands like Primark, H&M, Asos and SHEIN, who have all recently made green pledges that have received a lukewarm reception from sustainability advocates... here's the thing: Having a sustainability strategy is actively encouraged but it doesn't give you a free pass. If you're really serious about making positive changes, plans need to stand up to scrutiny and include measurable targets and evidence of progress.

As the climate writer Aja Barber said, asking brands hard questions isn't cancelling them. It's accountability.

Anne-Marie Tomchak is a journalist and eco-entrepreneur. You can follow her on social media @amtomchak.

John Downing

The euro celebrates its 20th birthday with a facelift to soften its image
23

**Andreas Kluth**

The true impact of our school closures won't be clear for years
23



Comment

We need to get over our bungalow bias and embrace their sustainable potential

Anne-Marie Tomchak


IF YOU want to gain an insight into the Irish psyche and how triggered we are by the subject of property and our homes, then look no further than the reaction to *My Bungalow Bliss*.

Described (unfairly) by one social media user as “government propaganda to make us content with s**te our grannies left to rot”, *My Bungalow Bliss* is about getting us to reimagine the humble bungalow that many of us (myself included) grew up in in rural Ireland. It opens up an important conversation about how we can improve what we've already got and it makes a strong case for bungalows that are more aesthetically pleasing and more sustainable.

Before the first instalment of the RTÉ television series had even aired *My Bungalow Bliss* was already the talk of the town. The trailer for the series described the bungalows that pepper our landscape as “bog standard”. And, oh, did this hit a nerve.

The precious bungalow brigade came out in force to take the ear off Joe Duffy on *Liveline*. Such was the level of injury at having their homes characterised in a supposedly disparaging way that there were calls for the show to be cancelled. But was the animosity levelled at the programme disproportionate?

God forbid anyone should dub a self-built bungalow from the 1970s anything other than extraordinary. Housing is a politically and emotionally charged topic.

But the whole point of this show is to take something “bog standard” (which is, by definition, ordinary or basic) and turn it into something exceptional. The objective is to demonstrate what is possible when a bit of vision and imagination (not to mention money) is applied to a type of property that is increasingly considered undesirable.

Yet, it's that very insinuation that bungalows are unwanted or unloved that someone who lives in this type of property does not want to hear – even if the facts say otherwise. Bungalows are now among the hardest properties to sell. Many of them



Hitting a nerve: Before the first instalment of the RTÉ television series had even aired, *My Bungalow Bliss*, presented by Hugh Wallace, was already the talk of the town

are lying dormant – dark, cold, damp, dilapidated. The story of how so many bungalows came about from the late 1970s onwards partly explains why they're such a hot button topic now. It also illustrates why there is such a bias against them.

After the publication of Joe Fitzsimons' book *Bungalow Bliss* (a sort of DIY manual with off-the-shelf plans), cookie cutter bungalows began sprouting up around the country. People finally had the opportunity to build their own homes for a fraction of the price, and they grabbed it with both hands. But not everyone was a fan.

Some environmentalists and architects saw them as a blight upon the landscape, ruining our beautiful countryside. Even the creator of *Bungalow Bliss* acknowledged how divisive they were.

“For many thousands of people, *Bungalow Bliss* was a godsend. Others regard it as a curse,” wrote Mr Fitzsimons in a follow up book, aptly called *Bungalow Bliss Bias*.

Given the bungalow's chequered past, the knee-jerk reaction to the promo for the show wasn't entirely surprising. But it's the reaction to the bungalow transformation that happens in episode one of the series that I find particularly revealing.

We watch as Davin and Niki spruce up a “dark and nasty” Galway bungalow which they bought for €150,000. The couple go way over budget, spending €350,000 on the renovation work. The transformation

Politicians and policy makers are at odds about the role that one-off housing should play in helping to address the current housing crisis

is impressive: a contemporary, minimalist home that's energy efficient with a distinctive green corrugated iron roof.

Sifting through comments online is a mix of delight and derision. People either love the design and want more details about the eco-friendly elements or they can't get their heads around why anyone in their right mind would spend so much money renovating rather than just building something new.

But those hung up on ‘new’ have missed the point of the programme and, in the process, have failed to see the important role that bungalows can play in the circular economy of a more sustainable property sector.

One-off housing may not, in retrospect, have been the most well thought out from a planning or sustainability perspective.

Politicians and policy makers are at odds about the role that one-off housing should play in helping to address the current housing crisis. Clusters of homes or developments near towns and villages are seen by some as more sustainable and easier to manage. And that's before we talk about the bone of contention around ribbon developments where houses are built along a road.

But what I'm referring to are the houses that already exist. What's done is done. Rather than let them deteriorate and become an even bigger scourge in some people's minds, there's a chance to make

them a part of our sustainable homes strategy.

Existing housing stock must be a part of how we retrofit the country's homes and make them more energy efficient. And that includes (dare I say it) the lowly bungalow. But right now, the negative bias and the budget associated with making these homes fit for purpose is still too big a barrier to entry for people. They're not seen as something worth spending on or even something developers might take on.

My Bungalow Bliss forces us to reckon with Ireland from a time gone by and redefine the role of the bungalow today. For some, the beloved bungalow will forever be a cherished part of our culture and heritage. For others, it represents a part of our past that we'd rather forget. But to move forward we need to get over our bungalow bias to embrace their potential.

Buildings from previous eras can be modified to accommodate our needs. *My Bungalow Bliss* is timely. If RTÉ commissions another series, it could rename it: *My Sustainable Bungalow On A Budget* so that viewers are treated to true circular economy bliss. In the 1970s the bungalow represented opportunity. Today, it represents the same thing.

Anne-Marie Tomchak is a journalist and sustainability founder. You can follow her on social media @amtomchak.

John Downing

No pressure at all, Herr Scholz, you're only being asked to prevent a potential world war **23**

**Victoria Richards**

Kanye's antics make us cringe but we can't look away **23**



Comment

As our bills go through the roof, fossil fuel giants are laughing all the way to the bank

Anne-Marie Tomchak


WHEN I think of what's going on with our energy bills these days, for some reason the word "Dickensian" keeps coming to mind. Perhaps this is in part because the hardship that skyrocketing bills will bring into people's lives is reminiscent of the dire social conditions portrayed in Charles Dickens's novels.

Fuel poverty is a genuine fear and concern for many now that our energy bills are due to go up by hundreds of euro this year. But the real reason the headlines about gas prices sound like something Dickens would have written about is because of the comically repulsive characters involved and the kind of inequality they represent.

Let me explain why the fossil fuel giants and energy suppliers are currently in that role and why they're missing a trick to turn things around in how they're perceived.

Consumers are now in a distinctly vulnerable position. With rising inflation and soaring energy bills, households are going to have to come up with around €2,000 more this year just to cover basics like groceries and home heating. Meanwhile, the fossil fuel giants are laughing all the way to the bank.

The energy crisis has helped the likes of BP to become "a cash machine". Those are the words of the company's chief executive, Bernard Looney, who says they are "performing while transforming".

BP is reported to have recorded \$4bn in profit in the last quarter of 2021. To put this in context, it made \$115m in the same period of the previous year.

Shell has also had a "momentous year", according to its chief executive, Ben van Beurden. It recorded \$6.4bn in profits for the last quarter of 2021 compared with \$393m in the same period the year before. Same story in the US, ExxonMobil recorded profits of \$23bn and Chevron \$15.6bn over the past year.

There have been calls in the UK for a windfall tax to be imposed on the energy



'Short-termism': A crude oil pump jack in the Permian Basin in Loving County, Texas, US.
PHOTO: REUTERS/ANGUS MORDANT/FILE PHOTO

giants which have led to glib responses from the likes of Van Beurden. For the record, he isn't convinced that a windfall tax would help with supply or demand.

Like most things in life, the story of the energy crisis carries nuance and the solutions to solving it aren't straight-forward or binary. We can't just flick a switch and expect the transition to clean energy to happen overnight. The infrastructure simply isn't there yet and more investment is needed in renewables and in researching the efficacy of things like carbon capture.

But when a company like Shell increases its dividend to shareholders by 4pc after a bumper year, what message does that send? It's good for a company to keep shareholders happy, but where is the long-term vision?

The optics currently coming from the energy sector smack of short-termism. So why aren't energy giants pledging to pour the majority of their profits into clean energy solutions? The numbers they routinely give out about how much they're investing in renewables pales in comparison to the money that's still being poured into fossil fuels.

As the Swedish geographer Brett Christophers recently wrote: "To understand

If profit is the main goal of fuel giants, it's time for us to engage our role as citizens and work together to regain control

the economics of the energy transition, we should adopt a 'profit-centric' perspective, rather than a cost-centric one." He outlines how hydrocarbon production, for example, in areas like oil is still more profitable than renewable energy generation. The big energy giants are investing more in oil and gas development than renewables because "the barriers to entry to the renewables business are much lower than in oil and gas, thus increasing competition and depressing profitability".

If profit is the main goal rather than demonstrating an urgent duty of care to consumers or the environment, it's time for us to engage in our role as citizens and work together to regain control.

That means setting up community schemes to, for example, get solar panels or wind turbines (where appropriate) at a reduced cost with our own battery storage. That means taking advantage of government retrofit and insulation schemes to help us finance positive changes to our homes and work towards living in super-homes of the future.

That means sharing reliable information with each other about the best value tariffs and not taking everything you're told by your energy provider at face value. Fix-

ing your tariff is not necessarily the best option at the moment, for example, and some green tariffs are not green at all.

We also need to scrutinise the so-called solutions being put forward. Do you really want to install a smart meter and allow energy companies to have even more oversight and knowledge of your energy consumption? For some, data collection is not an issue. For others, it's a deal breaker. Will a new boiler really reduce your carbon footprint?

I was recently offered a new boiler to improve the energy efficiency of my home. Given that boilers will be phased out in new homes over the next decade, this felt like blatant greenwashing at best.

And although I'm a big fan of wearing extra layers in the home and only putting the heating on when we really need it, telling us to wear warmer socks isn't going to cut it.

While the energy giants and suppliers have done little to date to read the room, we would not be in this mess if we were more self-sufficient and less reliant on gas. Fundamentally this is about power. It's now time for us all to recognise our own power and work towards energy autonomy.