



PRESS WATCH -

Reputations and careers at stake in enquiry into RHI scandal

Reputations and careers at stake as quest begins to find out just who was to blame for RHI scandal. Not only does the reputation of former First Minister Arlene Foster hang on the judgment of Sir Patrick Coghlin, appointed to head the RHI scandal inquiry, Ed Curran writes in The Belfast Telegraph

The careers of civil servants are at stake also and they may now have to wait many more months to hear what might befall them.

The quest is under way to determine who was to blame. The more Sir Patrick investigates, the more lives are certain to be touched. The web of involvement in RHI stretches the length and breadth of Northern Ireland, from the 2178 applicants who joined the scheme to those such as at the Office of Gas and Electricity (OFGEN) charged with the monitoring of biomass boiler usage.

The inquiry must delve into the workings of officials in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, who supported the minister Arlene Foster, from as long ago as 2008, to develop, launch and promote her renewal energy policy for Northern Ireland. It must ask the Cambridge Economic Associates consultants, with their international reputation, why they did not propose a lower tariff which could have prevented such a catastrophic waste of taxpayers' money.

Then there are the special advisors, known as SPADs, working at Stormont but answerable only to ministers and not to the civil service. What influence, if any, did they bring to bear on

the catastrophic financial mess created by renewal heat incentives (RHI)? And, not least, there is the infamous "spike", when applicants piled their money on biomass boilers in the autumn of 2015 like gamblers told to back a racing certainty.

Sir Patrick might even extend his inquiry to Invest Northern Ireland, which promoted and funded renewal energy businesses, yet seemingly saw no flaws either in the RHI scheme.

Northern Ireland is facing another election in a month's time, in part at least, because of the political fall-out over RHI at Stormont. And yet, voters are unlikely to have any definitive answers for six months at least.

The announcement of the Coghlin inquiry puts everything on the back biomass burner.

Four politicians, Arlene Foster, Jonathan Bell, Sammy Wilson and Patsy McGlone, should have given evidence this month before the Public Accounts Committee, an encounter which would have surely enlightened the electorate before March 2.

Now the months of investigation conducted by that committee are placed on hold.

Instead, Sir Patrick Coghlin faces a mountain of preparatory reading in February as he works his way through all the PAC's written, oral and confidential evidence. A separate internal inquiry has been running since last autumn within the civil service. Described as "a fact-finding investigation" within the Stormont departments involved in RHI, such as the economy and finance departments, its conclusions were expected anytime now.

The roles of civil servants dating back to the launch of the RHI scheme in 2012, have been scrutinised to try and uncover why such costly mistakes were made, why the scheme was mismanaged for so long, why whistle-blowers' claims do not appear to have been acted upon, and why the chain of communication between the minister concerned, Arlene Foster, and her advisors and officials, was so inadequate.

Arlene Foster, herself, while accepting ministerial responsibility for "the work of the department during my time in DETI", says she had done nothing wrong herself. As a consequence, the finger of blame is re-directed at others who had a hand in the RHI scheme, not least the many civil servants who worked under her ministerial leadership on the renewable energy strategy.

However, it seems unlikely that Stormont's internal fact-finding investigation can continue while Sir Patrick Coghlin is carrying out his own inquiries. Instead, the internal evidence to date will land on his desk, adding to his burgeoning reading matter.

That will hardly comfort civil servants, whose roles have been questioned, some perhaps unfairly, and who are waiting to hear of any consequence for their futures.

In the meantime a shadow continues to hang over them and may well remain there until after the Coghlin report is published.

Sir Patrick's inquiry will surely focus on who did what, who was responsible to whom behind the scenes in places such as Arlene Foster's former Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

David Sterling was the most senior civil servant to Foster, when she launched the RHI scheme in 2012. In his evidence to the PAC committee last November, he explained the responsibilities of those involved and the chain of command and communication.

Asked why this line of communication did not appear to work, Sterling replied: "That can only be answered through the fact-finding review that

is being put in place. If I were to answer that I would be drawn into commenting on the conduct of officials who are already answering questions in the fact-finding review."

Presumably most if not all of the questions have been asked within the civil service, but the outcome of that review now hangs on the Coghlin inquiry and the time it takes to report.

In his evidence, David Sterling refused to apportion blame within the civil service. He said: "The voices of the people who were working on this project need to be heard. They have to be able to give their side of the story. I will reserve judgment until after that."

Sterling is now in another hot Stormont seat, from the fat to the frying pan, as permanent secretary in the Department of Finance. If, after the March 2 election, Stormont cannot agree on a new Executive, he may be called upon in the short-term to administer an emergency budget for Northern Ireland.

If Sir Patrick Coghlin chooses to have open house in his inquiry, a conclusive report in six months looks ambitious. While Arlene Foster was at the heart of renewal energy policy in Northern Ireland from her appointment as DETI minister in 2008, other politicians have questions

to answer, including those who sat on the all-party energy committees charged with scrutinising the minister's policy and chaired first by Alban Maginness as far back as 2010 and then by his SDLP colleague Patsy McGlone from 2012.

Like Foster, none of them appears to have spotted what, with the benefit of hindsight, were fairly obvious flaws in the RHI tariff structure. As a former finance minister, Sammy Wilson is also in the frame, because of the apparent failure to monitor and approve RHI spending in his colleague Arlene Foster's DETI department.

Sir Patrick may wish also to investigate claims that energy industry experts, such as Biomass Energy NI, warned in the early days that the proposed scheme was unduly generous and open to abuse, but that such responses were overlooked.

As far back as 2010, the all-party energy committee under Alban Maginness discussed the launch of renewal energy schemes and heard from Fiona Hepper, then the Director of the Energy team under Arlene Foster and now promoted to the post of deputy Permanent Secretary in Education.

She told the committee: "We have work to do on the detail of an economic appraisal of renewable heat. That work will look at the best model for NI. It will consider the level at which the incentive needs to be pitched in NI.

"We want to determine whether we should simply replicate what will happen in GB or whether, because of the different scale of our energy market and the fact that we have a greater dependence on oil, we need to shape the model and incentives in a different way."

Eight years on, Northern Ireland is counting the cost of what turned out to be a different scheme from that in GB.

During that early meeting, Fiona Hepper said she had 11 staff in the renewable energy section and there 27 staff in the whole division. Asked was that enough, she replied: "We must get the most bang from our buck with our existing staff."

At this stage, it appears that only civil servants such as those in the energy division have faced investigation over their role in managing and monitoring the RHI scheme.

The declared aim for Northern Ireland, as set out by Arlene Foster, was for 4% renewable energy by 2015 and 10% by 2020. Elsewhere in Britain

and in the Republic, the same renewable projects continue towards similar targets without the political collapse and public outrage experienced here in recent months.

Perhaps, aside from reading the PAC and civil service files, Sir Patrick Coghlin will find the best starting point for his inquiry is the Northern Ireland Comptroller and Auditor-General annual report, published last July, and which offers the most succinctly damning indictment of the RHI scheme from an independent source. That report concludes that the RHI scheme was not designed in 2011 with viable cost controls, did not take account in 2013 of changes in the GB scheme, was over-generous in its tariffs, and could not be changed swiftly when demand grew.

In 2015, the scheme was not re-approved as it should have been, and as a result, nearly £12m was spent without any authorisation, which will impact on public expenditure for the next 20 years.

At worst, the scheme was open to fraud. It was not properly monitored or controlled. "This has led to an impact on the Northern Ireland block grant which is likely to be measured in hundreds of millions of pounds."

The public is now well attuned to what went wrong. The flawed economics of RHI are well exposed.

Identifying where responsibility rests is the task now at hand for Sir Patrick Coghlin.

Given the many diverse strands of inquiry he has to pursue, he may take longer than a few months to publish his conclusions.

As of now, Northern Ireland heads into an election, aware of the costly consequences of the RHI scandal but with no authoritative answer to the one question that surely matters to many at the ballot box?

Upon whose head or heads does the blame rest?

Ed Curran is a former Editor of the Belfast Telegraph. Above article published 13/02/2017