

O'Leary on a flight of fancy

MICK O'Leary was giving it well again this week. Every so often he emerges from his Ryanair office to bestow tablets of wisdom on the nation. In doing so he divides the nation, and all other nations, into two categories — those who are willing to assist in boosting Ryanair's bottom line and those who are not. Once you cop that that is the entirety of his agenda it can be wholly entertaining to sit back and listen to him prattle on.

Doing so last Wednesday as he patiently explained to Claire Byrne on RTE why the world revolves around his company, my mind shot back nearly 26 years. In 1998, as Ryanair under O'Leary was about to seriously take off, the company ran into industrial relations problems. A group of 60 baggage handlers — from a staff complement of 1,000 — went on strike over the company's refusal to recognise unions. (There were other issues but that was at the heart of it).

During the strike, O'Leary was beaten black and blue in terms of the battle for hearts and minds. His effective opponent, Siptu official Paul O'Sullivan, won that hands down. The Taoiseach of the day Bertie Ahern condemned O'Leary's "tooth and claw style" capitalism. The public was firmly won over to the side of the baggage handlers.

O'Leary's error in that dispute was to stay schtum. He believed the best strategy was to ignore what he considered erroneous allegations about the company. He would not dignify them with a reply. In terms of a righteous stand, he had a point. In terms of the public relations battle, it was a disaster that O'Leary would never repeat. From then on he has approached every controversy toggled out for a heavyweight battle, flaking all opponents long past the sound of the bell.

What the baggage handler strike showed was his capacity to admit he had been wrong and change tact. That is relatively uncommon in the corporate world. O'Leary, unlike most others, has the self-confidence to acknowledge his shortcomings because he knows he is the best at what he does. Despite the silly, even offensive, money that is thrown at those in the upper echelons of the corporate world, many in situ are no Einsteins. As the economist Morgan Kelly once noted following the economic collapse in 2008, some of the banks had been "run by fairly dim former rugby players".

O'Leary, by contrast, is the real deal, a top-class operator in business. He is thus refreshingly honest about his shortcomings and even at times given to self-deprecation, another alien territory for most corporate bigwigs.

His capacity to change tact was also evident a few years back when he read-dressed his strategy of appearing not to



Ryanair chief executive Michael O'Leary appears to accept that carbon emissions are doing serious damage to the environment but refuses to see the aviation sector as a big culprit.

simply cannot continue to live as we have done for decades. Nobody, for instance, is suggesting that we should expand the national herd of cattle. Aviation will also have to play its part in coming to terms with the new reality. For a highly successful company that has been built on expansion and growth that will be extremely difficult. In such a milieu it should be no surprise that O'Leary is now lashing out at others who come bearing the inconvenient, and probably insurmountable, truths.

Perhaps, against all the odds, some technological wonder will come along to alleviate the worst ravages of climate change.

If not, the long view will have its own assessment as to who was talking sense at this time in history and who precisely was acting the idiot.

give two figs about customer complaints. He had built the airline's reputation on providing the lowest fares and knew that customers would continue to buy into it despite any discomforts about how they were regarded or their complaints dealt with. As other airlines followed him down the road, he realised that it was time for a rethink. Mick of the two fingers suddenly transmogrified into Mick with the protective arm around all comers. And he carried it off with the same aplomb as he had done in adopting the previous persona.

He has also changed tact in relation to the big existential issue of our time — climate change. For some time Michael O'Leary didn't believe in the science of climate change. How could he? Curtailing carbon emissions would wallop Ryanair's bottom line so therefore the science was entirely unhelpful and must be wrong.

In 2018, he told RTE's Damien O'Reilly that the cooling and warming of the planet had been "going on for years". "I don't accept that climate change is real," he said. "I don't accept the link between carbon consumption and climate change."

The declaration put him in some strange company. For instance, within the Dáil, Danny Healy-Rae had attributed climate change to an act of God. If such was even proven, O'Leary would, no doubt, declare that God was a fatcat idiot who was acting without due regard for the connectivity of a small island on the periphery of Europe.

During his interview with Claire Byrne this week, O'Leary was no longer clinging to the wreckage of climate



change denial. He now appears to accept that carbon emissions are doing serious damage. But when Byrne pointed out to him that aviation was one of the big offenders in this respect he was having none of it.

"Complete rubbish," he said. "Aviation accounts for 2% of Europe's carbon emissions, road transport accounts for 20%."

In reality, aviation accounts for closer to 3% of emissions and its impact could be compared with the impact of methane from the global herd of cattle, according to the Intergovernmental

Panel on Climate Change. There is an acceptance that the number of cattle on the planet should be reduced but Mickser is making the case that we should actually be flying more not less.

He had various pops at "the Greens and idiots on the left" for invoking what the science suggests is a sound policy of taxing aviation. In that vein, he demonstrated a particular ire towards Eamon Ryan, the Transport minister and leader of the Green party. Ryan was "an idiot". Repeatedly, he stated that the minister was "incompetent", which was spat out as an insult rather than a genuine assessment of performance.

"Can we move away from the personal insults?" Byrne asked him at one point.

Personal insults have always been a favoured arrow in O'Leary's public relations quiver, reserved for those whom he perceives as not doing their duty to contribute to Ryanair profits. These days, however, there does appear to be a note of desperation also informing the insults.

The turbulent climate has been showing recently just how messed up it is. There is a growing awareness, particularly among the young, that we



Mick Clifford