

RIAI Thursday December 5th

Nevin lecture: Professor Mary Murphy

Response: Larry O'Connell, NESC

Introduction

Thank-you Dr. Tom McDonald, the NERI Institute and Katie Morgan, Forsa for this invitation to respond to Professor Mary Murphy's lecture. It has been a really stimulating, thought provoking and important lecture and it is an honour to respond.

Professor Murphy has, and indeed continues, to shape Irish social policy and practice because of her unrelenting focus on identifying and understanding the causes of inequality and challenging all of us, in Ireland and across the globe to respond with urgency and ambition. I think one of the core strengths is the way in which she is so deeply connects to and is passionate about issues as they impact on specific communities and groups, and in particular women. She cares deeply and she wants to affect real meaningful change, on these islands and beyond. The link, and indeed causal relationship, that she is now highlighting between climate change and inequality is ground breaking. In my response I want to draw attention to three aspects of the lecture: imagination, social dialogue & next steps.

Imagination

Professor Murphy, vividly shows and explains that the current overall system is not delivering or doing enough for many people, and, it is not delivering or protecting our environmental and natural assets. She provides an interesting and subtle but very important insight on the way forward. She frames the way forward as having "big imaginative ideas about the direction of travel and the capacity to define the smaller first steps in travelling down that route" (:5). She refers to this as a trick. I think that's absolutely right. It is always going to be a little mysterious: it is a process of back and forth between where we want to get to and first steps.

The trick, which can bring about transformative change, seems to begin by accepting that the precise future shape of policy is not fully known. But there is a shared commitment, at the very least, that there are fundamental shortcomings. The key, then, is to get started, take some initial steps and based on those to re-assess continually what might be possible, and to revise the big goal or idea as we go.

Mary offered the following insight, from Astra Taylor's work, which I think is really quite brilliant: "change is inevitable, the challenge is to make it transformative'. She also reminds us that there isn't a policy blueprint for this.

Framing the challenge in these terms she directs our attention to the "seeds of the past and present" that when nurtured and supported could grow into a transformed future. These include participation income, universal basic services, rights to more services, guarantees around work and pensions. All of these in various ways can be linked, as Mary notes, to seminal work by the Council on Ireland's Developmental Welfare State in 2005. On these issues and the need to be open-minded and determined to find fresh ways of working NESC is fully supportive of the agenda that Mary has outlined.

A key lesson that I take from the lecture is that there must be a commitment to travel, to go somewhere, there is a challenge to staying put to the status quo. I would say, as a caveat that a barrier to imagination and learning, is that many advocates for change, who see (rightly in my view) the need for transformative change are often a little disparaging of 'smaller first steps.' Even more so they are often quick to assume that initial smaller steps are small because the traveller doesn't want to go on a journey, they are often less open to the argument that the traveller in those early days is experiencing real difficulties and challenges. Put in other terms the path to transformative change may be more often a series of little loops than a line.

So, in NESC when we look at issues, such as agriculture, just transition and climate change, we are intensely interested in farmers, communities and innovative projects and why are they finding it difficult to progress quicker, what are the blockages, fears etc.

Accepting this, has implications for how progress of the sector is discussed and how targets and ceilings are set and evaluated. The tendency to believe that slow progress will be addressed or helped by higher and more stringent targets, in my view, is neither commonly correct nor rarely helpful. What's needed is to work through complex problems and key to developing ambitious and achievable progress is co-creation. As Mary makes clear there is no blueprint for transformative change, therefore we have to create and co-create it together.

Social Dialogue

This brings me to the second key aspect of Mary's lecture: the role of trade unions and social dialogue. In seeking to unlock our imagination and creative capacity to develop a better, more just, inclusive and sustainable future Mary refers to the capacity to "merge knowledge" from different sources.

She rightly points to the role of trade unions in providing insights into the issues that cause insecurity across civil society and of helping to generate a sense of belonging and trust. More than ever, we operate in a world where we need to build trust, to hear from and understand lived experiences. Trade unions, and all of our social partners, operate in a world where it is often hard to trust the veracity of information and where change is so pervasive.

Against this backdrop, trade unions increasingly provide a trusted means of communication and knowledge transfer from frontline into policy and back. They are a key means of assessing and developing what might be termed the legitimacy of policy action and ambition: they help gauge what people want and what they will support, based on where they are and their lived experiences and work context.

I use the word communication but mean it in a very deep and resource intensive way. It takes time to engage properly and respectfully with people where they are. In our work Trade Unions are integrally involved in helping to deepen our understanding of issues and of figuring out ways forward.

In the last two years this has involved working on Just Transition in agriculture, on developing a forward-looking ambitious strategy for Better Work, and most recently work on Land-Use and Energy. In each of these projects the engagements have taken different forms, and involved different people including colleagues in NERI.

It would be re-miss of me not to mention our great friend and colleague MacDara Doyle, who passed away this year. Macdara was a true champion for a better future for all and in particular for the idea of Just Transition. He was an active and energetic member of the JT Task force which established the Just Transition Commission. He is missed and hopefully the Commission will be come to be an imaginative and innovative institution that he would be proud of. Though from my time with MacDara, he wasn't always that easy to please, so JT Commission needs to work hard.

The social dialogue among partners, when it is most impactful, focuses on advice around steps that could be taken and re-imagining how to support or scale progress or remove blockages. In our work, for example, on JT and agriculture that included a focus on re-imagining the research, advisory and regulatory practices in agriculture (Just Transition in Agriculture and Land Use, Report 161).

Our work on Better Work it focused on demonstrating the case for Better Work. Better Work linked to better terms and conditions and better pay was shown to deliver tangible and significant benefits for employees, employers and the wider economy and society. Collective representation, employee voice and other forms of workplace democracy were key enablers of those win-win-win outcomes. The work also highlighted the importance of sectoral challenges and issues and the need to widen the focus of enterprise policy to include key sectors such as tourism and retail and also smaller domestic micro-enterprises more actively.

This illustrates our mandate, and I hope how it aligns with the call for institutional imagination and role of social dialogue outlined by Mary. It also demonstrates our theory of change, so to speak, which is to take seriously the need to look at change from multiple angles and in so doing to try craft or even co-create ambitious and feasible ways of moving forward.

Mary usefully highlights the range of institutions and means by which dialogue and social dialogue is now taking place. She mentions NESC, LEEF, Commissions (like Tax and Welfare, Low Pay and the Just Transition Commission, I mentioned above).

Looked at in the round there is now a rich tapestry for dialogue. But the challenge must be to continue to use these various means to deepen the engagement to ensure that conversations are problem-solving and focused on delivering the type of real change that moves us towards Mary's north star.

There certainly needs to be a greater emphasis on the co-design and co-delivery of 'imaginative' and innovative solutions. They can't be talking shops, nor should they be pulling against each other. The best argument for more social dialogue is effective and quality social dialogue. There is a parallel here to an argument Peter McCloone made regularly which was that the best argument for a bigger public service is a quality public service.

The responsibility is on those in positions of influence, in trade union and other stakeholder groups and civil society organisations, on academics and experts and those in Government, is to focus on what Mary calls the ultimate challenge, the challenge of time.

We are running out of time and the most critical issue is to find ways to accept, to nurture the seeds, pull out the weeds and in doing so get out of the way of the change, out of the way of the art of the possible.

She mentions the idea of “coming together as things fall apart”. In the world we live in that seems like something we all can and should grab hold of.

Next Steps

This brings me to issue of next steps. Policymakers and citizens are operating in an unprecedented era of uncertainty, including, as I mentioned, in relation to the trustworthiness of so much information. There is also a relentless, and usually valid, pressure to respond to the issues of ‘today’ with a focus on policy and delivery responses which are most immediate. Public expectations are higher than ever before as to what Government can and should deliver. There are also more and more voices in the public policy debate often focusing on policy concerns specific to one sector or group. While this is enriching in many ways, it can be increasingly difficult to distil key issues and have deeper debates about challenges, potential trade-offs and solutions which can build consensus around choices and priorities.

So, I think to create the type of better future envisioned by Mary we need to create more space, in NESC and elsewhere, for discussion which can take uncertainty and difference seriously, which releases us even temporarily from the immediate need for a solution and which allows us to think systemically about the dots that need to be connected. NESC works hard to create such a space but more such spaces are needed, if we are to develop and enrich our democracy, to wide and deepen it as Mary suggests.

We need to have more spaces for deep and meaningful conversation about our future, where there can be honest, brave and sometimes difficult conversations, among experts and non-experts (users, citizens) about the challenges, trade-offs and /or synergies.

NESC’s publication *Ireland at Pivotal Moment*, which marked 50 years of NESC committed to five key areas of work to help support this dialogue about our future.

First, the Council will continue, through its established processes of social dialogue, to reflect, and work, on how Ireland can navigate forward, particularly in the face of deep forces for change. These include the need to live within planetary boundaries, the changing trajectories of demography and migration, the promise and the challenge of artificial intelligence (AI) and profound geopolitical tensions.

Second, the Council will help reframe national discussion of demography and migration by providing a detailed factual account of both issues and looking at how both can be instrumental in helping reduce, rather than magnify, many existing pressures and capacity constraints in Ireland.

The Council believes that there is a growing tendency to view demographic change, in particular the growing proportion of older people in our society, and migration (inward and outward) in a negative way.

The Council considers this view to be short-sighted. It is outdated as regards older people's capacity to participate and to live full, independent lives and misunderstands the reality of the role of migration in the modern world. It misses the opportunities and positive ways that both an ageing population and migration gives us a chance to re-organise and re-imagine care, housing, education, in a sense everything and in doing so help us promote more social cohesion.

Third, in line with the Developmental Welfare State thinking, the Council believes that we cannot rely on tax and welfare reforms alone to deliver equality of opportunity – the day of assuming that citizens are passive recipients of policy is over. The Council will deepen its focus on disconnects between Government's efforts to 'do the right thing' and the lived experience, or what is delivered.

This will entail further work, in social and environmental policy, on what might be termed 'how-to design to deliver'. This would focus on how services can be designed such that professional and organisational boundaries are respected while also ensuring that there is a sufficient mandate to co-operate and collaborate to deliver services, especially more complex services.

Fourth, the Council will explore how building up our climate and biodiversity resilience can be a means by which Ireland shows leadership to the world, where on foot of our ambitious laws and statutory commitments, Ireland can demonstrate 'how-to' bring about meaningful change to the tangible ways we support and protect our key natural assets, on land and at sea, and reduce our environmental footprint.

NESC will emphasise and showcase how to build a consensus around achieving the transition to a decarbonised economy and society via widespread social and behavioural change.

Fifth, and finally, the Council will examine issues linked to ongoing digitalisation, including generative AI, looking at issues including the appropriate technological and regulatory landscape, the impact of AI on work and services, its adoption and diffusion across key public and private sector activities, and cybersecurity.

I think these areas are informed and hopefully Mary will agree are well aligned with the ambitious vision and action plan contained with tonight's lecture.

Conclusion

In closing, and stealing yet another of Mary's insights, I think the "things that can bring us together, as things fall apart' are a shared commitment to leave nobody behind and to leave the planet better than we found it. The deep causal link between inequality and climate that Mary helps us see, is I think the focal point around which we can unite.

In that sense, I would close as I began by thanking Mary for the inspiration and challenge, she provides for me, my colleagues in NESC and so many others in the policy system and the wider networks of activists.

Thank-you Mary.