

Is Ireland ready for a Green New Deal?

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Introduction

When I was invited to deliver this lecture back in June, I accepted the invitation with some trepidation. My reluctance was due, perhaps, to the fact that I have not been in the technical policy field so much in the past few years. Having spent the best part of the last twenty years of my professional life working in policy and academic circles on international development and climate change, a couple of years ago I gave that up to focus on grassroots work, and specifically bringing an ecological vision to life in faith communities, getting them to divest from fossil fuels. That work, together with my book *Climate Generation*, led me quite naturally to take to the streets. Today marks the 50th week since myself and a few other concerned parents first stood outside Leinster House in solidarity with Greta Thunberg, soon to be joined by thousands of climate strikers. It sounds funny to say, but I feel much further out of my comfort zone standing here now – than I do out on the streets!

Yet in saying I would do this lecture, I thought of Greta Thunberg, and the 157 young people who filled the Daíl last Friday. I thought about the importance of having the courage to speak to those in positions of power. Greta has addressed the US Congress, whilst acknowledging that she is not a climatologist or a policy expert of any sort. I am not a climatologist. I am a social scientist and an grassroots activist. When the youth speak, people are moved to listen. People listen not because the young people have the answers all worked out – but perhaps because they are prepared to ask the right questions. That's the spirit I would like to bring to our discussions this morning.

What do we mean by a 'Green New Deal'?

The question I have posed as the title for today's lecture is one that has been steadily coming to the fore over the past year or so – a Green New Deal (GND). The idea of a 'Green New Deal' is not new. It has been around for over a decade. The first research I found on the idea came from the New Economics Foundation in the 2008¹ and built on two decades by NEF on alternative economics. That grew out of a whole school of ecological economics, economics of sustainability – on which I did my PhD in the late 1990s. The work of Herman Daly, Ernest Schumacher, Tim Jackson and many others fed into what we now think of as Green New Deal.² An expansive report on a GND for Ireland was first prepared back in 2009

¹ <https://neweconomics.org/campaigns/green-new-deal>

² <https://www.gndforeurope.com/>

by Comhar.³ The idea then was taken up by the Sunrise Movement⁴ in the USA just two years ago, and since then a number of key texts have been written on the idea including Naomi Klein's recent collection of essays, *On Fire – the Burning Case for a Green New Deal*⁵. Naomi makes the case that a Green New Deal is essential the climate crisis is just one facet of a much deeper crisis of late capitalism. Tackling climate change at its root means untangling and unmaking that complex web of capital, power and privilege which has come to dominate our world today. Put simply: we can't solve the climate crisis without also addressing the many inequalities and injustices which underpin our economic system today.

Which historical precedent?

Of course, the idea of a 'New Deal' is deliberately recalls another era – the 1930s when the US was in the depths of the Great Depression and the audacious public spending plan of Franklin D Roosevelt to lift the US out of depression. In terms of scale and scope, is also reminiscent of the post-War Marshall Plan, through which the victors of World War II financed the reconstruction of those parts of Europe, especially Germany, decimated by war. Neither of these new deals of course had anything to do with environmental sustainability. In fact, it could be argued that both of these state-led programmes accelerated environmental destruction by ushering in massive market-driven consumer booms which set the path for the kind of production and consumption patterns that have prevailed ever since. This in fact, in my view, limits the usefulness of the historical precedent of the 1930s GND.

The historical precedent I think we need to consider is not the 1930s nor the post-War era – both of which involved rebuilding for the future. It is actually what happened economically and socially during the two world wars that can give us a sense of the scale, speed and scope of the transformation now needed. For countries on either side of the conflict, the world wars involved a unifying of **all resources to fight a common enemy** – and to survive when the odds were stacked against them. There were those who went off to the front to fight, but behind them, there was another army on the home front – an army of mainly women who took on completely new roles, who made enormous sacrifices, there were factories that were re-purposed within months to serve the war effort, the understanding that resources were scarce meant that rationing was brought in. All plans were put on hold to support the war effort. The wars utterly transformed the social order.

War is, of course, the most dangerous of memories to recall. Violent conflict is, of course, the greatest social and environmental failure imaginable. It is the polar opposite of what is not needed. Yet, the dynamics of the war effort can help us imagine a time, still within living memory, where the future looked bleak, unimaginably so, yet whole countries came together and took *collective action*. In the case of war, they did so under duress – but

³ <http://www.irishenvironment.com/reports/towards-a-green-new-deal-for-ireland-october-2009-comhar-sustainable-development-council/>

⁴ <https://www.sunrisemovement.org/>

⁵ Klein, N (2019) *On Fire: The Burning Case for a Green New Deal*, Random House: London

ultimately because citizens realised that they could and should all play a role in a bigger, singular purpose on which theirs, and everyone else's future depended. Recalling the two great wars, moreover, is salutary. It reminds us that contrary to what some may say, humanity's track record in avoiding catastrophes is not so great. The relatively peaceful period we are living in today is full of fragility.

If we are to have any hope of salvaging our children's future now, we metaphorically need to *go to war* on an invisible but pernicious enemy - our greenhouse gas emissions and climate change impacts. The problem, of course, is that we know that a war on GHG emissions today is perceived to mean a *war on everything that we have come to associate with a modern, successful life*. When we correlate human development with sustainability across the globe, the findings are stark: with the exception of a small number of outliers (such as Cuba), rising wealth equals rising ecological footprint, rising emissions.⁶ On the face of it, declaring war on our emissions could be read as a war on our own economic well-being: economic suicide. It is seen as an act of self-harm – a war on our consumption habits, on the comfortable lifestyles to which we have become accustomed, on which so many jobs depend – and which society tells us constitute success.

Of course, this is a very middle-class, comfortable viewpoint to take. It is the position of those who, like us, whether we like it or not, are within the top 10% of emitters that contribute 50% of global emissions each year.⁷ We and others in this elite group also happen to be the ones who largely hold the balance of power, exercise control the policy narratives, hold senior positions in the corporations feeding consumer behaviour, and all the while exporting the idea that a life of private, unimaginable luxury, is an ultimate goal anyone can aspire to via global advertising and marketing. Whilst the ravages of climate change may now be encroaching on us, whether in terms of heatwaves or floods, by and large, we have not yet been forced to face the immediate, life changing environmental consequences of our high-carbon economy. The 'tragedy of the horizon' as Mark Carney called it, still seems just that: a distant horizon.⁸

But of course, the flip side of the 10% are the 90% of those who produce less than half of all global emissions – most of whom still live in varying degrees of poverty, and for whom that horizon is ever present. The overwhelming sense of the double injustices of climate change and poverty led Trócaire to adopt a public campaign on climate change which has now lasted over ten years.⁹ Trócaire has always been about supporting the capabilities of local communities to overcome poverty and injustice – to support them to have healthy, secure, happy lives, free from fear and discrimination. Trócaire was among the first in Ireland to document the multiple social and economic impacts that changing climate was having on

⁶ Global Footprint Network <https://www.footprintnetwork.org/2016/07/20/measure-sustainable-development-two-new-indexes-two-different-views/>

⁷ Gore, T (2015) *Extreme Carbon Inequality* Oxfam GB, Oxford.
<https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/extreme-carbon-inequality>

⁸ Carney, M (2015) *Breaking the Tragedy of the Horizon – Climate Change and Financial Stability*
<https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/speech/2015/breaking-the-tragedy-of-the-horizon-climate-change-and-financial-stability>

⁹ <https://www.trocaire.org/getinvolved/climate-justice>

those living in rural Africa, Central America and Asia.¹⁰ This wisdom of elders in communities, passed down in oral traditions, is now borne out in scientific reports which are startling.¹¹ The IPCC has repeatedly warned that yields from rain-fed agriculture, on which most people depend in Africa and Asia, will decline dramatically in the next decade, if not collapse, in a world of heating.¹² Can we even fathom what that means in terms of human development? Climate change is already one of the key drivers of increasing hunger across the world – and this is only set to increase further.¹³

Moreover, the double injustice of climate change and poverty is now being compounded by a third injustice – that of false solutions mimicking and replicating the structures of injustice. Many hundreds of millions still lack access to electricity, decent health-care, education, homes and jobs. Yet as the focus turns to curb global emissions with increasing urgency, within the paradigm of neo-liberalism, it could lead to displacement of financial and human resources, further deepening inequalities and delaying access to basic needs.

Yet the conundrum of inequality and climate injustice is not something that only exists internationally. In Ireland and in the EU, the same pattern emerges. Generally, the richer you are – the more you emit. Yet dependency on fossil fuels is embedded across society. This means that any measures to rapidly decarbonise – to do what is necessary in a war on emissions – must at the same time address the dependency on emissions at the lower end, and excessive emissions at the top end. Research shows that equality is a driver of emissions – and hinders collective action to control emissions. Addressing both at the same time, therefore, is essential. We need to declare war on our emissions and the structures of inequality which sustain them.

The global policy context is failing

The reality is that four years on from the signing of the Paris Agreement, all the signs are that our current efforts to tackle climate change are failing – and spectacularly so. Global emissions in 2018 grew by 3%. In fact, there is very sign the growth is accelerating rather than peaking.¹⁴ Scientists have told us we have a mere 11 years to half our emissions globally; 31 years to get to net zero emissions – which translates into a mere year left to peak emissions and implement a range of complex social and economic measures to deliver on those targets. Governments across the world have signed treaties and declared climate and ecological emergencies on paper – yet done little to address the fundamental, wide-ranging reforms required to our economy and social fabric. In the absence of these measures, “the emergency” becomes a euphemism for our own inaction.

¹⁰ Trócaire (2010) *Changing Lives – Climate Change in the Developing World*

<https://www.trocaire.org/resources/policyandadvocacy/changing-lives-climate-change-developing-world>

¹¹ Trócaire, 2014, *Feeling the Heat Report*

¹² <https://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar4/wg2/ar4-wg2-chapter5.pdf>

¹³ <http://www.fao.org/state-of-food-security-nutrition/en/>

¹⁴ IPCC (2019) *The Emissions Gap Report* <https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2018/12/UNEP-1.pdf>

It is why even such radical hothouses of rebellion such as the Financial Times are calling for urgent government action, for reform of capitalism to tackle climate change.¹⁵ I am not going to go into what the implications of failure are. I think RTE did a super job last week, as did the EPA at the climate lecture this Wednesday. Suffice to say that in the face of current trends, it is not only the children that should be scared.

So why, despite so much talk, are we still failing? *The problem, as I see it today, is one of conflicting logics driving our behavioural choices – and the fundamental inequality about which logic takes precedence in decision-making.* The reality is that despite appeals to safeguarding the long-term future, curbing emissions, our societies and our politics are dominated by the narrow logic of the economic imperative, of driving growth. We sometimes use economic arguments to make the case for action ‘we should act because otherwise our economies will contract by 24%’... this is madness. What kind of world are we heading into where we prioritise marginal growth over a liveable planet? It makes me call to mind the indigenous saying “it is only when the last tree dies we will realise you can’t eat money.”

That same self-interest or “greed” logic as sociologist Ian Gough calls it, has come to dominate our economics and politics, including our climate politics, at the expense of other more, collaborative logics.¹⁶ It is clouding our ability to think that any other logic could potentially save us from the environmental demise on the horizon. I am not anti-market – there is a place for well-structured, embedded and regulated markets. But now more than ever there is a place for publicly-funded, citizen agreed and accountable action in the interests of protecting public goods, the common good. Leaving the future of our planet, our children to any unfettered market mechanism – when arguably climate change is the biggest externality of flawed assumptions on which the market rests, seems mad – especially when there are alternatives on offer. Green growth or eco-efficiency measures are important, and a key part of a transition, but are not enough at this juncture point in the crisis. On their own they cannot address the crisis fast enough – nor address the structural inequalities that have developed over many generations. This cannot be done without thinking outside a narrow economic paradigm based on markets and maximising economic growth. This is a fundamental problem of just transition. We seem to have forgotten that “Earth produces enough for every man’s need, but not every man’s greed” as Gandhi said. We must turn this on its head by appealing to a higher logic and ask what the economy is FOR.

The new paradigm

So what does a new paradigm look like? The complexity of the multiple crisis we are facing today means that we are not just breaching our planetary limits on GHG emissions – we are

¹⁵ <https://www.ft.com/content/1999422c-057a-11ea-9afa-d9e2401fa7ca>

¹⁶ Gough, I (2017) *Heat, Greed and Human Need* Elgar, London

also breaching or almost breaching the other eight planetary limits set by earth scientists.¹⁷ We are doing this at a time, as mentioned, that we haven't even met the basic needs of most of the human population. To start to unpick this conundrum we need to find a new way of describing this inequality against the context of limits. The best articulation of what this new picture or paradigm looks like I have found is Kate Raworth's "doughnut economy".¹⁸

The doughnut is a re-work of the traditional concept of sustainable development – with a very important difference. Rather than seeing three interconnected spheres of economic, social and environmental sustainability in the form of a Venn diagram, her 'doughnut' or 'life belt' as Ian Gough calls it, shows them as two concentric rings. The outer ring represents the nine planetary limits, and the inner ring is the social floor. The bit in the middle is the 'safe space' for humanity. That is where all human activity, including economic activity happens. Whilst the doughnut is a relatively recent development, there is already significant interdisciplinary work going on to work out the metrics which underpin it and the practical applications of rethinking economics in light of the doughnut.¹⁹

If you take on board the basic tenets of the doughnut, a number of things come into sharp relief from an economic perspective. Firstly, is the obvious realisation that human economic activity exists within physical limits and resource constraints. This is hardly a new idea – it dates back to the critique of the growth paradigm of Meadow et al. 'Limits to Growth' in the 1970s.²⁰ The resource base of the planet is finite. There may be substitutable materials that can be used to meet certain economic needs, and production methods that reduce the materiality of economic processes, but nothing material is beyond the bounds of the limits of the planet. But it is only in recent times we have been able to put clear scientific parameters around that *limits* to growth theory.²¹

Secondly, the doughnut idea compels us to think about human *needs and wants* differently – within the context of inequality and limited ecological space. Over the past thirty years, we have become obsessed with the idea of 'insatiability' and forgotten 'sufficiency', as President Higgins noted in the Aras at his seminar on rethinking economics.²² The idea of breaching limits within a society where the majority still do not have their basic needs met forces us to rethink that. The big question becomes one of defining universal needs and particular wants. Who gets to decide what is 'the floor' and what is the 'ceiling'? Many different theories are out there in the SDGs, the Human Development Index, the Happiness

¹⁷ <https://www.stockholmresilience.org/research/planetary-boundaries/planetary-boundaries/about-the-research/the-nine-planetary-boundaries.html>

¹⁸ Raworth, K (2017) *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think like a 21st Century Economist* Chelsea Green

¹⁹ The latest initiative based on the doughnut economy is a multi-disciplinary global community of practice called "rethink economics" <http://www.rethinkeconomics.org/>

²⁰ Meadows, D et al (1972) *Limits to Growth* Club of Rome Report, Potomac Press.

²¹ Earth systems science – planetary limits.

²² Rethinking Economics Seminar Report <https://president.ie/en/media-library/news-releases/president-higgins-promotes-discussion-on-the-role-of-the-state-in-economic-policy>

Index and so on. Ian Gough defines needs as universal, objective (ability to function), plural and non-substitutable, satiable and sufficient and cross-generational.

Thirdly, the doughnut brings into relief the systemic relationship between the breach of ecological limits and the social impacts that result from those breaches. We can now trace the impacts of climate change and burning fossil fuels directly and indirectly on human needs. Addressing this requires a new way of thinking across disciplines, where the role of earth science takes on a much more central role in defining policy.

Finally, perhaps what comes most sharply into relief in looking at the doughnut is the logic of ever increasing individualised consumption and its impact on both human well-being, inequality and ecological limits. The logic of the Bruntland Report “if everyone lived like us we would need five planets” comes once again into sharp focus.²³ Within the confines of limits, needs and wants, is there a growing case to curb private luxury? Can we do the unthinkable and recompose or even reduce consumption? This new paradigm not only compels us to think about curtailing excessive consumption, but design and redesign the economy to move back within the confines of the doughnut. This means re-making consumption and production within our limits. It requires a new logic at the heart of the economy.

The doughnut quite bluntly, challenges us to re-imagine society beyond limitless self-seeking individualism and endless economic growth. It demands that we think about what mindset changes are needed to live safely within the available shared space. Is it possible to re-shape our economies around resilient communities where there is a vibrant, regenerative, circular economies of sharing, communion, collective action, relationality? Can we shift away from short-term thinking towards long-term, ‘cathedral thinking’ in Greta Thunberg’s language? How do we move out of our academic, policy and social silos to build deep collaboration built on a shared understanding of the new paradigm?

The problem is that the underlying paradigm of ‘economy, stupid’ and ‘no such thing as society’ has become so structurally embedded, we have become conformed to that caricature. Tackling the climate crisis is not just about money - having a bigger budget to tackle greenhouse gas emissions – it is about a new shared logic based on a vision of the human family sharing one common home. People may well smirk – perhaps say that these normative values are based on a belief in a very positive vision of the human person. Yet there is ample economic evidence from behavioural economics that human beings are fundamentally social beings, ecological beings. Our motivations are complex.

Power and paradigm shifts

So if we accept these basic tenets of a new paradigm – in particular the inter-relationship between the economic, social and planetary limits – then we need to ask why aren’t we there yet? I like to think about it like moving house. Think about major shifts of paradigm in

²³ UN (1987) *Our Common Future – Report of the World Commission on Sustainable Development*

human civilisation – they were not incremental. Of course there is a process of transition, often abrupt. Many people continued to believe that the world was flat long after it was proven to be round. Many powerful institutions held to the belief that the earth was the centre of the universe long after it was disproven. A new paradigm is a new set of facts about the world that takes some time to land, to describe fully – but then it is something you inhabit – like moving to a new house. We should be living in it just now – moved in years, possibly decades ago. We should be redecorating it by now. Instead, we have just finished arguing about whether it is possible that another house could exist. (There is No Alternative as Thatcher famously said). We haven't even started to build the foundations. These delays are not an accident of fate - they have been caused by elites and institutions that have powerful interests in keeping us in the old house. They have invested heavily in that old leaky house, they built careers and institutions which gain prestige from the old house. They know that their investments, careers are at stake if a new house, a new paradigm is accepted. They are prepared to stop at nothing to sow misinformation and to marginalise those who have been working on this for decades. For me, the idea of a GND is the first set of changes we need to bring about to move into this new paradigm, this new house.

A Green New Deal in Ireland?

If we were for a moment to consider this new paradigm – to 'move house' and imagine a different future. How we can begin to shift in Ireland towards living within this new paradigm? Where do we start? The first thing to say is that many people and parts of Irish society are already moving to the new paradigm and many have been working on these ideas for decades – it is the political and policy world that is playing catch up. Over the past few years we have seen a sea change in public opinion – especially due to the strikes, but also simply because the science finally being heard above the noise. One of the interesting things about my work over the past three years is that I have spent much of it on the road meeting communities right across Ireland who are seeking to address the climate crisis and sustainability. I am routinely amazed at the sheer creativity, resilience, and energy of the communities I meet.

At the same time, as a nation, even with all our additional measures, we are spectacularly failing to meet our targets.²⁴ If we continue on our current trajectory we will still miss our 2030 and 2050 targets. Our current climate policies are still working squarely within the old paradigm – and do not adequately address the linkages between environmental, social and economic policies. This is evident in the structural displacement of jobs, the impact on poorer communities dependant on fossil fuels. Moreover, because we are still working from the perspective of the unshakable imperative of increasing individualised consumption and growth, there is a growing focus on eco-efficiency measures and what individuals can do on their own. This is often a deflection in the absence of major structural changes to key

²⁴EPA (2019) *Provisional Estimates of Ireland GHG Emissions for 2018*
<http://www.epa.ie/pubs/reports/air/airemissions/>

sectors such as agriculture and transport. This gap between rising understanding of what the climate and ecological crisis means and inadequate response is only going to grow in the new few years. It requires a step change in our response.

What would an Irish ‘new deal’ look like within the new paradigm?

As said already, the idea of a green new deal is that it is more than a financial package – it is not about simply increasing the budget for environmental protection or eliminating subsidies on fossil fuels, though that would be a start! We need to think in terms of what would it look like if we went to war on climate change, on our emissions? What if we did so in a way that mobilised all available resources, human, public and private finances, institutional – in a singular effort to fight for the future of our children? What would it take for us to truly inhabit the doughnut? This requires a bold vision which appeals to the power of collective imagination – a new consciousness to emerge where the intergenerational cry to ‘save the planet’ becomes the governing principals for society.

We have no shortage of useful starting points from the policy perspective – the recommendations of the Citizen’s Assembly²⁵, the Youth Climate Assembly Recommendations²⁶, and many coalitions like SCC are already working on GND proposals. It is impossible for me to list out all the changes we need to make to our economy and society to start to address the climate and ecological crisis with the speed and scale that is now required. You know better than me how many sectors require of profound change: energy, transport, agriculture, housing, planning – and how far we are from making the deep changes needed.

Priority Reforms

At a top level, in terms of key reforms, I think a number of things are essential if we are to see a step change towards facing the climate emergency and inhabiting this new paradigm. We could adopt the key tenets of the ‘doughnut’ as our national framework for a just transition. The French Government has already adopted the doughnut as its’ framework for environmental policy. We need to start to wean ourselves off the growth obsession by officially adopting a range of indicators of human well-being. We must put a zero emissions target and a date into law and strengthen legal provisions for ensuring this is adhered to. To be in line with the Paris Agreement and science, this should be 2050 at the latest. We need to signal that we accept the science by having legally binding national carbon budgets set by the Dáil. At the same time we need to review the legal mandates of all state agencies including Coillte, Teggasc, SEAI and others, in light of the climate law. This would give legal force to Emissions Impact Assessments of all proposed Government policies and plans. We

²⁵ <https://www.citizensassembly.ie/en/How-the-State-can-make-Ireland-a-leader-in-tackling-climate-change/Final-Report-on-how-the-State-can-make-Ireland-a-leader-in-tackling-climate-change>

²⁶ <https://www.rte.ie/news/youth-assembly/>

go further and consider the measures outlined in the Youth Assembly to address the imbalance between the profit motive and environmental damage, such as an ecocide law being adopted and an international treaty being supported by Ireland. In an effort to start to make a distinction between 'need and greed', we should review our advertising standards laws to curtail and even ban adverts for high emissions luxury items – in a similar way to the smoking ban. We should also take more stringent measures to prevent 'green washing' – where low emissions claims are made by high polluters.

Eco-social policymaking

What is abundantly clear is that in the context of an highly unequal society, we need to think in terms of eco-social policies which can both bolster the capacity of poorer and marginalised communities to cope with climate impacts themselves and the need to reduce emissions. Taking transition seriously means addressing the displacement of jobs from high carbon sectors – and the new opportunities emerging – in a timely manner. It requires attention to regional dependencies, skills shortages and needs. Progressive welfare states, social security, social insurance, good social services are themselves preventive and precautionary measures in the face of climate change. They provide a social floor and need to be strengthened and reformed to address the challenges of an increasingly unpredictable world. Other *pro-eco-social programmes* include retro-fitting of public housing and housing for those on low incomes; expansion of public transport infrastructure; generous supports for those communities displaced by decisions to transition to low carbon sectors such as the peat workers in the Midlands. All of this requires a high degree of forward planning and engagement from the communities affected.

In terms of financial measures to fund a Green New Deal, the same principles ought to apply. The heavy burden needs to be placed on the polluters. It is worth examining the proposal of the Youth Assembly of a corporation tax linked to emissions. Other taxes that could be considered are reform of VAT to reflect emissions, a luxury tax such as a levy on frequent flying, a site value tax to incentivise the use of vacant land for housing. The proposal of a financial transaction tax is one which has long been muted as having huge potential to address financial volatility and fund public goods such as climate action and international development. Much of the funding of local action could be met with a state-backed low-cost loan and grant scheme to support retrofitting and renewable energy transition. Many of you, I know, already have proposals in this direction.

Key Catalysts: Imagination, Nature and Community

However radical some of these measures sound, I fear that even these are not enough to get us close to where we need to be to tackle the crisis we are in. Moreover, they do not get us anywhere near addressing the conundrum of whether some or most people might be 'content' with 'less' in the interests of the planet and others. I would like to spend the remainder of my time focusing on three areas that I feel have not been focused on enough

both in Ireland and internationally in relation to the Green New Deal that can help us tap into those more difficult parts to reach such as remaking consumption and production. How do we spark the deeper transformation we require if we are to find the collective will to declare war on our emissions? They also happen to be areas where I feel Ireland can excel. To do this I want to focus on three words: imagination, nature and community.

Power of Imagination

The first word I want to focus in on is imagination, collective imagination. Perhaps the single most important thing that needs to happen today, if we are to have a change of making the major shifts we need to make towards a low carbon, resilient society, is to invest in our capacity to tell the new story – or new stories. In a world of fake news, this could well sound like propaganda – in war times governments invested significant amounts of money in the hearts and minds war. I would say that today, just a radical an approach is required in re-orienting our society towards a sustainable and just transition. The difference with a propaganda campaign is that this is not based on an ideology but on science. It is about ‘uniting behind the science’ as Greta Thunberg puts it. It is already happening – Sweden has appointed a ‘storyteller-in-chief’ to help articulate the new narrative in view of sustainable cities.²⁷

In harnessing the collective imagination, public institutions such as universities, schools, and the arts are essential. The role of the public broadcaster, moreover, is critical. Last week RTE stepped up with a great week of programmes communicating the science and the implications of climate change – but this has to become normal. As John Gibbons said in his piece about the RTE Climate Week in the Irish Times ‘the only remarkable thing about science week is that we find it remarkable’.²⁸ It is now key that this is bedded down in new editorial standards and guidelines on climate science, like the ones other national public broadcasters like the BBC have adopted.²⁹ In terms of Education, there are many programmes that can be scaled up at all levels to ensure that the next generation coming up are equipped with the facts about climate change and the ecological crisis. The Youth Assembly proposed some which need to be considered. Beyond schools, however, the urgency of the crisis means that we also need to address the knowledge gaps and misinformation at all stages of life. Within universities such as Maynooth, there are plans to look at how this could become part of the critical skills programme for all students. Beyond university, we need to be looking at lifelong learning in workplaces, community networks and informal settings like libraries. The power of imagination is not only about learning facts – there is a very significant role for creative sectors here in harnessing the power of the

²⁷ <https://www.citylab.com/environment/2019/11/climate-change-news-solutions-per-grankvist-viable-cities/601597/>

²⁸ <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/rt%C3%A9-s-climate-week-must-be-the-spark-for-a-coherent-action-plan-1.4083150>

²⁹ <https://www.carbonbrief.org/exclusive-bbc-issues-internal-guidance-on-how-to-report-climate-change>

creative commons, co-creation of solutions and supporting programmes around themes of transition.

Here I would like to mention one area I feel is very much overlooked, but has a key role to play in harnessing the power of imagination – faith communities. Whilst religious attendance may be declining in Ireland, and the Catholic Church has faced very serious problems, faith and spirituality has not declined at the same rate. Church remains an anchor for the majority of the population and a source of guidance, if not dogma. The majority of key moments in most peoples' lives, moreover, still involve church – childhood milestones like baptism, communion, confirmation, then marriage, death – all of which have an ecological footprint. Similar milestones exist in other faiths. With Pope Francis 'Laudato Si'³⁰ being taken on board, a growing number of faith communities across Ireland are stepping up and going green.³¹ In doing so they often don't make a song and dance about religion, but quietly act as the linchpin for many local community groups to come together and develop community action for sustainability. The actions of these groups need to be supported through a national programme to enable parishes and other faith communities to adopt ambitious programmes to go carbon neutral.

Nature's Way

Perhaps the most overlooked and exciting solution to the climate crisis is the one that is all around us: the abundance and regenerative capacity of nature itself. I will never forget watching David Attenborough's documentary about climate change earlier this year when he said that we have found the most incredible, effective carbon capture solution to the climate crisis right here in front of us – it is called trees. Working to protect and restore nature's capacity is staring us right in the face – it is a no brainer. And yet, the blindingly obvious is not only being ignored – we are working against nature. Yet the potential for a regenerative economy – where we don't only stop extracting, but we focus on the restoration of bogs, tree planting on a massive scale, rewilding parts of the country is crying out for a major programme, as part of a war on emissions. The beauty of such an initiative is that it could be very low cost and involve every citizen in the country from the youngest to the oldest in a collective effort, over a number of years, to support nature-based solutions.

Can you imagine if such a scheme was adopted by every school, parish, community organisation in the country? How many seeds of native trees could be gathered, how many trees could be planted in every nook and cranny of the country? Just think of the education and health benefits of such an initiative too! Parts of school yards could be turned into nurseries for seedlings, gathered from local woodlands. Church yards up and down the country could be rewilded – to support biodiversity. We talk so much about toxic childhood – about the fact that children are sedentary and on screens all the time. How much benefit could be gained from a massive native tree planting and rewilding programme in terms of

³⁰ Pope Francis (2015) *Laudato Si – On Care for our Common Home*
http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

³¹ See <https://www.ecocongregationireland.com/>

health too. The Tree Council of Ireland already has these schemes up and running – but it needs to be taken to scale, to have a serious impact on our emissions.³² Scaling up and incentivising community based jobs in tree planting would be a major part of the solution. In such schemes, attention would need to be given to ensuring poorer communities have priority access and amenities are enhanced. But how about a national tree planting day each year for the next five years where everyone is given a day off work and school in a singular national effort to accelerate tree cover? If Ethiopia can do it – and plant 350 million trees in a day, surely we can too.

Of course, any scale up in tree planting has to be matched by legal protection for nature. There is a need to restore the budget of the National Parks and Wildlife Service, which suffered 80% cuts during the austerity years, and reunite the natural environment with the rest of the Department of the Environment. We need to give better legal protection to trees. It is crazy to me that mature trees can be routinely cut down with no repercussions – often in the name of development. Sometimes even in the name of climate solutions, as in the case of the Dublin bus corridor. In the UK preservation orders on trees are routinely used to protect native trees and the habitats they provide. In Ireland, trees in urban areas have no such protections. Protecting the trees we already have – and ones we can plant is absolutely critical.

Community Driven Economies

The third word I want to focus on is community. Perhaps the biggest obstacle to moving forward with a deep transition is how to imagine that people might be happy in a world with less stuff. Perhaps the biggest untapped resource in addressing this conundrum rests within the power of communities. To do this we need to look to the many great examples of where communities are getting it right. Over the past three years I have met thousands of people across the country involved in literally inventing a new economy from the bottom up which fits within the doughnut economy. They are engaged in initiatives to support various dimensions of circular, regenerative economy – zero waste groups³³, repair cafes, the library of things, the alternative local currencies, local GIY groups, community gardens – to mention a few. They are literally untapping vast amounts of community value and building resilience against future shocks which may hit communities in the future. There are also the visionary communities like Cloughjordan Eco-Village who have been pioneers in experimenting with ecological ways of living as communities.³⁴

In working with these communities, I have seen again and again how much different generations can offer each other in co-creating responses together. What often emerges in conversations is a rediscovering practices from a different era not so long ago where scarcity a key driver of behaviour: it is not so long since we were taught to ‘Make do and Mend’ – now the circular economy; where everyone had a cottage gardens – now called GIY and

³² <https://treecouncil.ie/>

³³ <http://zerowasteireland.com/>

³⁴ <http://www.thevillage.ie/>

community gardens. These groups exist at a local level, and have rapidly developed into national and regional networks.

However, these groups often run on a shoestring and are *marginalised by the dominant economic paradigm focused on individualised consumption*. They are often still seen as hippy sub-culture – when in fact they are an essential and valuable part of the solution since they offer a vision of a different economic praxis. As part of a Green New Deal we need to see a massive investment in these community-based economy initiatives. We should see circular economy hubs in every town (perhaps in conjunction with the national broadband roll out hubs?) Harnessing the power of the internet with local hubs could start to bring these initiatives such as the library of things, local currencies, and so on into the mainstream. Local groups, from the Residents Associations upwards, need to be empowered to add value to their communities through such regenerative and circular ideas. Moreover, we need to see a scale up of other initiatives to bring communities together around energy transition such as the scale up of the SEAI energy communities and a Tipperary Energy Agency for every county. We need to see schools and parishes brought into these schemes through micro-generation programmes.

Conclusion

So what conclusions would I like to draw from this lecture this morning? I think one thing I want to stress is that as the reality of climate breakdown and ecological destruction becomes self-evident – as it inevitably will in the next couple of years – many different pathways for action will present themselves. Many pathways for addressing the crisis will come to the fore. Some will bring the current narrowly focused market-driven approach to its logical conclusions. In fact some, such as the oxygen bars in Delhi providing citizens with gulps of fresh air in a smog ridden city, are already on offer.

Yet the climate and ecological crisis challenges us to think differently – beyond the current paradigm and what is at stake. In the words of Pope Francis in *Laudato Si*:

“A sober look at our world shows that the degree of human intervention, often in the service of business interests and consumerism, is actually making our earth less rich and beautiful, ever more limited and grey, even as technological advances and consumer goods continue to abound limitlessly. We seem to think that we can substitute an irreplaceable and irretrievable beauty with something which we have created ourselves.” (LS 34)

Addressing this requires us to think in an inter-disciplinary way, across all sectors of society – based on the science - the available carbon budget and ecological space, and the imperative of a war on emissions, whilst addressing underlying inequalities. To do this we need a broader language within leads to a theory of necessity and luxury. The platform needs to be based on the need to rapidly decouple economic activities and emissions, as

well as putting in place measures to enhance collective well-being within ecological and social constraints.

The road ahead will not be easy. As discussed, the failure to shift paradigm is not by accident. There are serious issues of power, privilege and prestige at play in transition. It is only if society at large is equipped with knowledge and pathways for action that change will happen. For this we require trade unions, faith communities, educational institutions, companies and the public sector to work together as never before. This is a moment when we are required more than at any other to rise to the collective challenge – at the very moment everything in our wider society, the lurch to the right, seems to be saying there is little hope.

Yet there are many signs of hope. In the face of adversity, the best of humanity – our capacity to sacrifice for future generations – comes to the fore. Last summer I visited the Normandy beaches: I saw and tried to imagine the unbelievable sacrifice that those young men – and women – made. It was humbling. Let's hope we do not ever face such sacrifice again. Over the last year we have seen Greta and all the students who are prepared to sacrifice their education each Friday for the sake of the climate. Just yards from here my 73 year old friend Patricia Devlin is on hunger strike for the climate. These brave people already live in the new paradigm and will not forgive us if we delay any further. We would do well to get inside their heads and catch up!