Ireland and Climate Change: Looking Back and Looking Ahead

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INTRODUCTION

Climate policy falls into that strange category of things government does not want to do, but must do. There are no (or few) votes in it. Doing it properly entails more effort and higher taxes. It involves uncertainty, complexity and a fractious mix of potential winners and losers. In the short term – which is the only temporal frame of reference available to political actors – it is not obvious what the rewards are, except perhaps the warm glow of civic virtue. For decision-makers, climate policy is viewed as a cost, a regulatory nuisance, an administrative burden with few effective change-agents making things happen on the ground. Talk of co-benefits such as cleaner air and healthier waterbodies count for little in this assessment. The "deep" Irish State is still hoping that magical thinking will part the clouds and deliver the ultimate techno-fix: altered strains of cow, citizen and machine will descend from the sky, and nothing else will need to change.

Over the years, apart from the criticisms of the environmental movement in Ireland, the various governments in office have had only to worry about costly litigation and EU fines.[1] The lack of salience of environmental issues among voters – even Green Party supporters – means that political parties are rarely inconvenienced by having to pretend that they care. Insofar as Ireland is "green," it is a brand, albeit one that needs protection as well as promotion by the State.[2] So far, climate change has appeared to be very remote from domestic politics.[3]

Greenhouse Gas Emissions by Sector, 1990-2016. (Source: Environmental Protection Agency, "Ireland's Final Greenhouse Gas Emissions 1990-2016" (Dublin: EPA, April 2018), 12)

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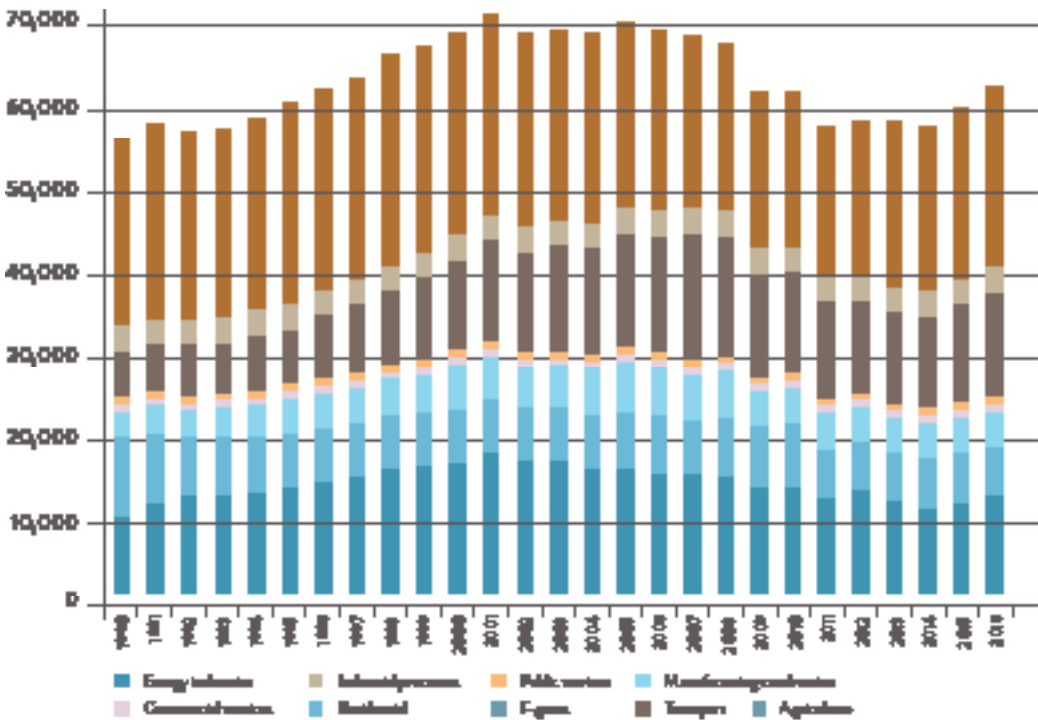
1   Failure to meet 2020 targets under EU directives could result in fines and emissions credit purchases of up to €500m by 2020, and between €3bn and €6bn by 2030.

2   See for example, an Taisce's submission to An Bord Bia on the promotion of Origin Green, a branding exercise for Irish agricultural exports. While the organisation expressed its support for the initiative to move agriculture towards sustainable practices, they noted that "efforts to improve sustainability must focus on areas where Irish agriculture is currently having a negative impact on the environment rather than simply focusing on areas where we have a perceived market advantage." An Taisce, "An Taisce Review of Origin Green," An Taisce Submission (Dublin: An Taisce, 2016), http://www.antaisce.org/sites/antaisce.org/files/an_taisce_review_of_origin_green_2016.pdf.

3   Conor Little and Diarmuid Torney, "The Politics of Climate Change in Ireland: Symposium Introduction," *Irish Political Studies* 32, no. 2 (2017): 191–98.

DISCERNING THE PROBLEM

What explains Ireland's particularly poor performance in reducing greenhouse gas emissions? Conventional wisdom places the blame on poor policies, rather than poor politics. The National Climate Change Advisory Council for example noted in 2017 that, to date, policies have not been "cost effective," in that they misrepresent the "benefits" (presumably to the economy) of meeting EU targets. The Council's conclusions are noticeably apolitical, noting that "major new policies and measures, along with changes in current practices are required."[4] By contrast those countries that have been successful in driving emissions down and yet maintaining economic growth have been motivated by a broader set of concerns beyond economic efficiency and the threat of EU fines for non-compliance.[5]

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The pity is, we nearly managed it. Only for the collapse of the deeply unpopular Fianna Fáil/Green Party government in 2011, Ireland might at least have had climate legislation with teeth. Under that proposed bill, the government would have to oversee annual emissions reductions of three percent. Bizarrely, Irish greenhouse gas emissions have begun to increase again in line with economic growth since 2011 – long before there was any hint of economic recovery for ordinary folk. This suggests that unlike more efficient economies in Europe, our emissions are more closely aligned with economic output regardless of how fairly this growth is distributed. And Ireland's economic output reflects, to a large degree, the particular politics and political priorities that have prevailed over the past decade.

At the very conference which negotiated the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, then Taoiseach Enda Kenny assured food industry stakeholders that climate policy would not prevent increased beef and dairy production.[6] Various special arrangements have been repeatedly negotiated to accommodate Ireland's "exceptional" circumstances, but what is really behind all of this is exceptional politics. The 2016 general election, for example, was fought on a range of topics that excluded environmental concerns, apart from the successful campaign from the Left to abolish water charges. Playing the exceptional card buys time while other countries provide climate leadership and policy innovations Ireland can follow at a lower cost later on. The problem is that exceptionalism shifts the baseline emissions upwards past the point of both ecological sustainability and a fair share of the atmospheric budget. At 13.5 tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent per capita each year, Ireland's emissions are much, much higher than the EU average of just over eight tonnes per capita. Even if it's true that Ireland is a special case within the EU, there is still an argument to be made on other grounds for reducing emissions to a sustainable level, and for doing our fair share of mitigation in solidarity with the global South. Under the most recent EU Effort-Sharing Regulation, Ireland negotiated a target based on a much less ambitious starting point, and with various loopholes and flexibilities attached.[7]

PARTS OF THE PROBLEM

The Irish economy is highly dependent on exports, largely of high-tech goods. We have the quintessential trickle-down economy. Multinationals generate wealth and jobs; taxes fund government spending and the social safety net. Contrary to popular belief Ireland is one of the world's biggest exporters of pharmaceuticals and software, not beef or other foodstuffs. Many of the larger manufacturing plants in these sectors fall under the European Emissions Trading

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4   Climate Change Advisory Council, "Annual Report 2017" (Dublin: Climate Change Advisory Council, 2017), v, http://www.climatecouncil.ie/media/ClimateChangeAdvCouncil_AnnualReview2017FINAL.pdf.

5   Jan Burck, Fanziska Marten, and Christoph Bals, "The Climate Change Performance Index: Results 2017" (Berlin/Bonn/Brussels: Germanwatch and Climate Action Network Europe, 2016).

6   Little and Torney, "The Politics of Climate Change in Ireland: Symposium Introduction," 185.

7   Carbon Market Watch and Transport and Environment, "Effort Sharing Emissions Calculator," Effort Sharing Emissions Calculator, accessed May 21, 2018, http://effortsharing.org/ireland.

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Scheme and are highly responsive to energy and regulatory costs. The agri-food sector by contrast contributed about ten percent of Ireland's GDP in 2016, with beef exports worth approximately €2.38 billion – or barely two percent of Irish GDP.

Even within the "cost effectiveness" policy paradigm, it is astonishing that one third of our greenhouse gas emissions come from a marginally profitable sector when we are not even self-sufficient in food. The scrapping of milk quotas has opened up new markets for processed dairy ingredients, chiefly powdered milk, but at a cost to the Irish environment in terms of further risks to water quality and increasing greenhouse gas emissions. Nearly 140,000 small family farms are barely scraping by on the meagre incomes generated by farming.[8] Like the other forms of economic growth, the numbers are going in the right direction (up) but the environment and people's wellbeing are not.

The other sector which reports rising emissions

is transport. And this is not just an urban issue anymore. At least towns and cities have footpaths, cyclists and buses. Reckless land-use planning policies under the guise of welfare capitalism have populated the countryside with commuters with few alternatives. The most recent census data demonstrates that the environment is bearing the brunt of the lack of affordable housing within reach of jobs and colleges.[9] Our politically-driven planning system and its failure to deliver compact urban development is driving people, literally, to drive, making the transition to low-carbon mobility all the more complex and expensive.[10]

SOURCES OF THE PROBLEM

But who's to blame? Isn't it the fault of voters? Political parties and institutions respond to aggregate preferences. So, if we wait long enough for preferences to emerge in favour of environmental protection and a sustainable low-growth regenerative economy, everything will work out in the end. In normal liberal

8   Central Statistics Office, "Farm Structure Survey 2013" (CSO, Dublin), http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-fss/ farmstructuresurvey2013/.

9   The most recent Census figures show that more and more people are commuting longer distances to work as property prices push people out of the inner suburbs of Dublin and other large cities – see: Gráinne Ní Aodha, 'There's Been a 31% Increase in Work Commutes That Are over an Hour Long', *The Journal*, 31 August 2017, http://www.thejournal.ie/census-commuting-3574198-Aug2017/.

10   Menelaos Gkartzios and Michelle Norris, "'If You Build It, They Will Come': Governing Property-Led Rural Regeneration in Ireland," *Land Use Policy* 28, no. 3 (2011): 486–94.

democracies political parties overcome these collective action problems by placating special interests, and by introducing policies balancing various priorities.

But here's the rub: we have a highly regarded professional civil service, open political opportunity structures and accessible institutions with minimal corruption. On paper at least, we got through one of the most devastating economic shocks in history. But we have selfishness writ large in our system of decision-making, facilitated in no small way by our Single Transferable Vote and Proportional Representation electoral system. A welfare state yes, but one that robs citizens of their right to a well-planned environment under the defence of "localism," and which permits the affluent to relocate and rebuild on fresh pastures. Ireland is rapidly becoming divided into classes not of urban versus rural, or rich versus poor, but a society of individuals segregated by degrees of social exclusion and mobility. Our political system does not foster social solidarity. Why would it need to, when there is a niche candidate for every imaginable grievance, and no pressure on political parties to arrive at a consensus position to promote the common good?

To date there has been no consensus across parties that climate action needs to be placed at the heart of government policy.

Ours is a State which scatters the social cost of air, climate and water pollution perpetually into the long grass. A glance through the political parties' manifestos in 2016 reveals that most parties view climate change as a challenge best addressed with market and regulatory interventions.[11] There was little mention of the need to change mindsets, or the overall direction of government policy since, as the 2016 Labour Party manifesto expressed it, there is no need to choose between "what's best for the environment, and what's best for people in their day-to-day lives."[12] The narrative from Left to Right is one that views environmental policy as a series of tweaks or

adjustments to business-as-usual.

Is Ireland really different in this respect to other EU or OECD countries? After all, Eurobarometer studies and the recent Citizens' Assembly conclusions have highlighted a growing awareness amongst Irish citizens of the need for action on climate change. Yet we are held back somehow from progress towards sustainability by our uniquely open electoral system which affords political opportunity structures for naysayers of all hues, and for which the only antidote is a high level of citizen education and a tolerance for caricature.

However, the fragmentation of the Irish political system belies a deeper convergence of opinion on what is *not* at stake. To date there has been no consensus across parties that climate action needs to be placed at the heart of government policy. Behind all the rhetoric of ecological modernisation, green growth on the right and, on the other hand, critiques of extractivism and exploitation on the Left, there lurks a strain of climate denialism among Irish politicians and voters that translates visibly into demands for expensive adaptation schemes to unwanted weather.

Confounding our difficulties is the perception that the costs of action are imagined to be too high, and that they require unsustainable government investments with low returns. This serves to perpetuate a lock-in of fossil fuel infrastructure from diesel buses to peat-fired power stations. While low-income households have few affordable options to move out of fuel poverty, the State is pandering to large energy consumers, some of whom are now embarking on data centres which will drive up the demand for electricity at a time when we should be using all additional renewable capacity to support the electrification of transport and heating. If the public can't see that a larger share of renewable energy means lower – not higher – energy prices, they have little to gain by supporting onshore wind or solar projects that frequently end up in protracted legal or planning battles. We have a building stock that requires radical and deep retrofits, and an energy system that requires transformation

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11   Although one group, the Independent Alliance, which is now represented by two Ministers at cabinet level, did not mention climate change or the environment once in its pre-election commitments.

12   Labour Party Ireland, "Labour Party Manifesto 2016" (Dublin: Labour Party, 2016), 49, https://www.labour.ie/download/pdf/labour_manifesto_2016.pdf.

towards 100 percent renewables by 2050. The market will not deliver these changes, and nor can voters demand them if they are not even on offer by political parties, or if the problematisation focuses on an attitude of entitlement and quick fix.

Another problem is that while the Irish political system is notoriously "open," the policy community does not operate with the same degree of transparency and equality of access, especially at a local level. Closed policy networks operate to limit the framing of debate to a narrow set of issues and interests, and successfully intertwine the interests of the State with economic interests. This is a particularly troubling feature of agricultural policy. No matter how much environmental groups petition and contribute, participation in decision-making is highly restricted to the key economic and State actors. Compounding this notoriously closed way of doing policy is the fact that epistemic elites in the policy realm are almost exclusively educated in the discipline of economics, which leads to a very narrow framing of available policy choices. The Citizens' Assembly highlighted what never happens in practice: a broader societal dialogue with range of perspectives and inputs that frames the issue carefully and scientifically *before* interest groups start lobbying. What we get instead is a narrow focus on which policy is efficient versus those policies which are not, instead of questioning the place of econometric efficiency as the sole metric of value.

THE TIME FOR RESPONSIBILITY AND SOLIDARITY

Philosophically speaking, we have yet to witness postmaterialist values forcing a wave of green political demands in Ireland in contrast to other European countries.[13] It is possible that such undercurrents of social change are not taking off because people feel economically insecure, in large part due to the dysfunctional economy of work and housing that is robbing generations of young people of a stake in society. Perhaps it's because Irish

politics is quite peculiar in that there is little evidence of ideological cleavage dividing the main parties.

From an ecological perspective, that is no justification for delay. We have already as a species crossed planetary boundaries, and Ireland is doing more than its fair share of warming the planet. The fragile atmosphere and ecosystems upon which we depend for survival are increasingly polluted and deteriorating. Our weather and climate systems will throw up new challenges to our societal resilience, and even if Ireland's share of the cumulative emissions is still small, we have a lot of work to do to shift towards a low-carbon economy.

> *... an ecological concept of citizenship would ask not what our community can do for us, but what we can do for an expanded concept of community.*

Our political representatives need to move from rhetoric of entitlement and compensation to a narrative of responsibility and solidarity. Responsibility means facing the challenge of undoing our dependence on fossil fuels and bringing Ireland's per capita emissions down to zero over the coming decades. This formidable trajectory is a necessity if we are to hold warming below 2°C. And solidarity means doing this work together, sharing burdens fairly and squarely and not leaving anyone behind. This is not a simple task. It requires a politics that is not available on the "market," and of course it carries the risk of the worst that localism and populism can throw up. Instead, an ecological concept of citizenship would ask not what our community can do for us, but what we can do for an *expanded* concept of community, one which is responsive to the needs and rights of non-citizens, future citizens and even nature itself. The task of building a green or ecological State is that of ultimately ensuring that "the demands of the human economy do not outstrip the regenerative capacities of the eco-systems upon which that economy depends."[14]

13   Ronald Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles Among Western Publics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977). Though there is evidence that there is a change of attitudes regarding the role of the State in regulating morality issues.

14   John Barry, "Towards a Green Republicanism: Constitutionalism, Political Economy, and the Green State," *The Good Society* 17, no. 2 (2008): 3–11.

How feasible this is at present is another question entirely. Robert Goodin, a "realist" green scholar notes that wherever green demands are presented as "all-or-nothing" demands, economic imperatives will win out in a liberal democracy.[15] Therefore to gain any traction at all, any political solutions to our ongoing predicament must be able to embrace ecological communication, an ability to perceive changes in the State of the environment and respond appropriately.[16] This capacity to give "negative feedback" is the capacity to generate corrective movement when a natural system's equilibrium is disturbed. For this, an engaged and informed media is a necessity. In addition, political solutions must coordinate effectively across different problems (so that solving a problem in one place does not simply create greater problems elsewhere) and be robust, flexible and resilient. These features are not commonplace in Irish policy and politics, and yet these are precisely the features we need to develop in our political institutions and our democracy. There is no political alternative to the ecological State, if a State is to retain its notions of legitimacy and responsibility at a time of ecological crisis.

Whether it is politically convenient or not, we are facing an unprecedented environmental crisis. Ireland is not immune to changes in the global climate and ocean currents, and we are only adding to our vulnerability by relying on imported fossil energy and on over-taxing our land and water bodies in order to sustain our present ways of living and working. The aftermath of the 2008 crash opened up a period where imaginative approaches to tackling this crisis seemed possible. That opportunity was missed. What we now need is to translate the challenges we face into a set of political demands that find their expression in all corners of the public sphere, from the media, to civil society organisations, local communities and all other stakeholders. As President Michael D. Higgins expresses it:

The challenges of living in this age of the Anthropocene cannot be met by our continuing in the grip of old and tired orthodoxies, or by our being constrained by an economic philosophy which would separate our engagement and activity in economic life from our culture and society or from the natural world. We shall need new ideas, and we must advocate and fight for them intellectually and practically, invoking the enduring human values of compassion, solidarity and friendship, that are capable of addressing those inequalities of wealth, power and income which so often lie at the heart of the dysfunctional relationship between economic activity and the ecosystem.[17]

Facing this challenge does not require a new committee, tribunal or convention. It requires a concerted commitment by existing political actors – political parties, policy experts and civil servants – to reconceptualise what is in Ireland's "interests" in light of the unassailable scientific evidence already in the public domain. There may not be a neat win-win solution: some irresponsible investments and decisions may result in stranded assets, reversals or even economic losses. But we are not immune from responsibility. Future generations of Irish citizens will suffer from today's business-as-usual policies. If we cannot undo the cascade of irresponsibility and greed that led to the banking crisis, we can at least learn from it by choosing not to repeat it.

15   Robert E. Goodin, *Green Political Theory* (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2013).

16   John S. Dryzek, "Political and Ecological Communication," in *Debating the Earth: The Environmental Politics Reader*, ed. John S. Dryzek (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 584–97.

17   Michael D. Higgins, "Desertification - Ireland's Role in This Global Challenge" (Áras an Uachtaráin, March 26, 2018), http://www.president.ie/en/media-library/speeches/desertification-irelands-role-in-this-global-challange.