

At precipice of global ecological collapse

President Michael D Higgins Speech at the Intergenerational Climate Justice Conference in Cork City in November 2019

LET me be very clear about the challenge we face: Climate change is the most pressing issue facing us all as a global community.

This year, Ireland became the second country in the world to declare a climate and biodiversity emergency, recognising the critical nature and scale of the challenge facing us all.

Climate disruption is a global issue, a national issue, and a local issue for which the window of opportunity to act is closing worryingly fast.

We as humans must take responsibility now for our role in this crisis, a crisis in which the origins can be traced back to the onset of the Anthropocene era at the start of the industrial revolution in the 1860s when an insatiable, unrestricted consumption of the Earth's finite natural resources began.

In recent decades, as consumption has intensified, we have experienced an accelerated period of the Anthropocene, and the impacts on the Earth's dwindling natural resources are now all too apparent: rapidly declining biodiversity and accelerating climate change impacts brought about by global warming.

In short, we are at the precipice of a global ecological catastrophe.

Furthermore, dangerous shifts in climate are placing stress on communities, where ecosystems can no longer support populations, leading to a decline in, and ultimate lack of, resources for living and human flourishing. This, in turn, contributes to conflict, violence and forced migration and exile. The greatest impacts will be borne by Small Island Developing States whose very existence is at stake.

Unless we collectively take action to prevent catastrophic climate change, together with a real commitment and transfer of resources towards assisting communities to prepare for, and adapt to, changing climates, these population flows, driven by climate shifts, will take place in a context of old and emerging new conflicts that will undoubtedly be exploited by extremists.

Our basic human morality suggests that it is indefensible that another 100m people be doomed to extreme poverty by 2030 should we fail to honour the commitment to tackle climate change.

The need for collective action addressing the climate crisis becomes more evident every month. The defence of previous generations that 'we did not know' will not be available to any of us.

Your conference today is focused on intergenerational aspects of climate change and climate justice. Intergenerational equity can be understood as fairness between generations.

Edith Brown Weiss, professor of international law at Georgetown University, has developed a comprehensive outline of a principle of intergenerational equity. Our prevailing neoliberal economic paradigm, a paradigm that has been with us like a dark cloud for almost four decades now, is one that constitutes an ideology that is opposed to regulation, and inimical to an intervening role of the state. Furthermore, a culture of 'short-termism' pervades modern political life, as has been noted in a 2013 report by the Oxford Martin Commission for Future Generations entitled, 'Now for the Long Term'. Future generations, or those not old enough yet to vote, do not currently have large political or economic influence, the commission correctly notes. Níl tionchar polaitiúil acu fós.

A lack of political capital is a major impediment to securing policy change. That is why it is so heartening to see the youth of today — personified by individuals like Greta Thunberg — spearheading a new movement with courage and assertiveness.

An inability to plan for the long-term, or incorrect, myopic or narrowly focused planning, will have devastating consequences for future generations. The choices that we make individually or via the apparatus of the State through policies that we develop and adopt — on energy, water, greenhouse gas emissions, cities, planning, models of business, etc. — will determine the options that will be available to the generations to come.

The State has a huge and potentially very positive role to play in all of these policy decisions. We must, therefore, reclaim the State and reassert its constructive, and potentially transformative, role in our lives, acknowledging that the State has suffered heavily, has been ravaged, as a result of decades of attack from an orthodox laissez-faire economic narrative asserting that the State's role needs to be minimal, and the private sector should lead in all aspects of life, including the response to climate change.

The State has been much maligned through a constant and consistent attack from the right, an undermining of its competence and legitimacy, and a disregard or ignorance of its success in wealth creation and improving the broader quality of life of citizens.

Yet, as Mariana Mazzucato has demonstrated so brilliantly in her book,

The Entrepreneurial State, government investment and the state more generally has played a central, often critical, role in driving innovation and technological developments, including in the areas of climate change, sustainability and environmental protection — imagine a world without environmental protection agencies!

I argue, therefore, that a radical paradigm shift is required in the connection between ecology, economics and society. The mere placing of a new lens on the existing orthodox growth model will not suffice.

IF WE are to achieve a paradigm shift, it will be necessary to combine the radicalism that is in the consciousness of climate activism, with the consciousness of egalitarianism and the programmes of inclusion activists.

I support calls for a new ecological social paradigm, such as that being advocated by scholars including Professor Ian Gough of the London School of Economics, Kate Raworth of Oxford University, and others.

Their approach offers a new, recovered version of political economy, and I would suggest that all third-level institutions and places of education would facilitate it being taught across the social sciences and, thus, enable such an integrated, sustainable paradigm become available to inform policy.

Consideration of a new ecological-social paradigm recognises the limits of the world's natural resources, as well as the role that unrestrained greed has played in creating the climate crisis. It is, in my view, a better programme in the syllabus in terms of both heterodox economics, engaged social theory, and practice.

In his book, *Heat, Greed and Human*

Need, Professor Ian Gough outlines how this alternative paradigm is rooted in the concept of human need over greed, moving away from models of insatiable consumption, unrestricted accumulation being taken as inevitabilities that are unavoidable, or indeed as appropriate to be offered to others. should never underestimate the strength of the resources of those who will oppose a paradigm shift, such as that of which I speak, to what is sustainable in all its forms, redistributive, more inclusive, empathetic, humane. We are already witnessing some of the effects of more extreme weather conditions on our own island. Last year we experienced a tumultuous period of unsettled conditions, from a protracted wet and cold winter, with one of the heaviest snow storms in recent memory, to a heatwave coupled with rare drought conditions.

And just last month, we experienced the aftermath of the most northerly and most easterly Atlantic hurricane since records began, just two years after Hurricane Ophelia became the first ever Atlantic hurricane to land on our shores.

Meteorological models predict that we in Ireland can expect in the future more extreme weather events, such as winter storms and flooding, as well as drier summer conditions, and that the intensity and severity of these extreme conditions will become even greater, with bigger impacts on our people, our society and our economy.

Action is now needed.

All of us, individuals and communities alike, are asked to take ownership of the commitment to tackle climate disruption and biodiversity loss if we are to succeed in our low-carbon transition for our economy and our society. This is not optional. We, all of us as citizens, have a moral obligation to play our part in this great societal challenge.

The good news is that we can make small and easy changes to play our part in the climate and biodiversity crises. Simple actions like mowing your grass less often, retaining soft landscaping over hard paved surfaces, and letting the odd flowering weed spring up in your garden here and there can be hugely beneficial for biodiversity.

With regard to climate crisis, we in Ireland need to continue to insulate our energy-inefficient homes, upgrade our heating systems to renewable energy sources, such as heat pumps, switch to electric vehicles, and wean ourselves off our fossil fuel-dependent lifestyles.

However, simple things, like remembering to switch off lights when rooms are not in use, boiling only enough water as required, using lids on saucepans when cooking, holidaying at home or closer to home, taking public transport or cycling and walking instead of using the car — all of these seemingly small actions cumulatively make a big impact on our carbon emissions.

I encourage you to try what you can. Every measure has the potential to influence change and protect our environment, our biodiversity and mitigate climate change. Bí gníomhach, bíodh misneach agaibh agus cothaígi dóchas agus ceartas.

A sense of justice not only for now but for the future requires that the capacity and power of our residual sense of a shared humanity be invoked to give us the energy to reconnect

our lives through a balanced relationship between ecology, ethics, economy, culture and a lived experience of fulfilment.

The time to act is now. The longer we wait, the more we intensify and perpetuate the injustice of climate change, and we run the risk of correctly being regarded by future survivors of our planet as having been in collusion with the destruction of the lives and lifeworlds of some of the most vulnerable peoples of our human family and the biodiversity on which our planetary life depends.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh go léir