

A Citizens' Convention for a Post-Carbon Ireland

**An open letter addressed to all parties and candidates in General Election 2016
Friday, 12th February 2016**

Learning to Thrive within Planetary Boundaries

On the 12th of December 2015, the [Paris Agreement](#)¹ was adopted by consensus of the 195 member countries of the [UN Framework Convention on Climate Change](#)². This marks a watershed in recognition by the global human community of the unprecedented, existential, climate change threat to our common home. Since pre-industrial times, our world has warmed by a global average of almost 1 degree celsius, [due primarily to greenhouse gas pollution from human activities](#)³. But this relatively modest-seeming warming has been sufficient to trigger serious planetary-scale climate disruption, and is already having devastating humanitarian impacts on vulnerable communities in diverse geographical regions.

This winter's storms and flooding in Ireland should bring home to all the immediate, unpredictable and severely disruptive impacts of climate change. [Such impacts are likely to grow progressively more severe in the decades immediately ahead](#)⁴, though the detail is impossible to anticipate precisely — not least because it now depends critically on the scale and urgency of humanity's response. Thus, while we can no longer talk meaningfully of “solving” the problem of climate change, we still have very significant power to influence its trajectory. Firstly, we can limit both its speed and ultimate severity by embarking on an urgent programme of radical emissions reduction. This is especially true of those of us in the so-called “developed” world; for we have contributed most to the creation of the problem, have sequestered the bulk of the world's material wealth in the process, and have the technical capacity and moral responsibility to deal with the consequences. Secondly, and no less importantly, we can still act to brace our own society for the poorly predictable, yet potentially drastic shocks to our local and global human systems and environment that will be an inevitable consequence of the slow, yet implacable, climate disruptions we have already initiated.

This challenge is now stark: and it is fundamentally a challenge of *governance*: what will “people”, locally and globally, “choose” to do? The scale and urgency of this problem mean we must now make hard choices — difficult, inter-generational, tradeoffs between diverse social goals and aspirations. Unfortunately, to date, our political systems have found it very difficult to engage effectively: to formulate pathways towards a post-carbon future that are at once commensurate with the challenge yet also win widespread support from citizens. Instead, there has been a temptation to minimise the problems, tacitly suggesting that hard choices might still be postponed and that today's greenhouse-gas-addicted economy can simply continue with only incremental, cosmetic, changes. We urgently require a vision for a new Ireland that can both inspire and sustain our radical transformation to a post-carbon society.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paris_Agreement

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Nations_Framework_Convention_on_Climate_Change

³ <http://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar5/syr/>

⁴ <http://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar5/wg2/>

In the specific case of Ireland, for example, we may have to weigh the unequal impositions of wind turbines against the threat of chronic energy poverty; the freedom of motorways and (large) private cars against the perceived limitations and socialised costs of public transport; the image of pure green Irish agriculture against the inconvenient truth of [pollution intensive dietary choices](#)⁵; the communal costs of flood defences against claimed rights to one-off development; the local cultural traditions of turf harvesting and burning against the physical effects of polluting a shared global atmosphere and causing damage and suffering to geographically remote and disempowered peoples; the uncritical [prioritising of short-term economic growth over long term resilience and well-being](#)⁶. Above all, we must ask just [how much material consumption will ever be “enough” for us all to live lives of dignity, fulfillment and justice](#)⁷?

In the face of these brutal realities, and in this centenary year of the proclamation of our Republic, **we the undersigned therefore call on all candidates and parties in the forthcoming general election to commit, on a wholly non-partisan basis, to creating a sustained, citizen-led, national discourse on the challenges climate change poses to our society and how we should respond.**

We suggest that such a process of profound, non-party-political, national re-determination might be properly known as the **Citizens’ Convention for a Post-Carbon Ireland.**

This Citizens’ Convention process may incorporate elements already used by the Irish state such as the deliberations of the constitutional convention convened by the outgoing government and the process of popular consultations on major policy issues such as Green Papers. However, it must go **far beyond** these examples in its **scale, urgency** and **ambition**. It must engage and challenge the public, in a sustained, iterative series of major events and activities, accessible to every community in the country, to consider the range and nature of the changes we face, and seek to advance policies commensurate with them. It should facilitate input from both scientific and policy experts and also incorporate in a structured way representatives of all parties represented in the Oireachtas and local government, senior civil servants, and key state bodies and agencies. It must actively support deep learning and transformational reflection in a broad social, community, context. In this way, it will democratise and make real the link between difficult policy choices and the latest scientific evidence that characterises the work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. We envisage that such a process of national deliberation, if it is to deal adequately and comprehensively with the range of issues involved, would extend for perhaps eighteen months up to three years (without prejudice, of course, to ambitious early climate action by the incoming government, during that period). It would deliver a shared national vision, a “citizens’ charter” with concrete policy parameters, guiding the next government, and governments to come for at least the next three crucial decades, as we attempt to actively manage our transition to a secure, just, democratic and authentically sustainable post-carbon society.

By comparison with the Climate Change threat, every other national issue now pales into insignificance: post-Paris, doing “our best” is no longer answer enough — [it is finally time to do what is necessary](#)⁸.

⁵ <http://www.nature.com/nclimate/journal/v4/n1/full/nclimate2081.html>

⁶ <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/jan/23/prosperity-without-growth-tim-jackson>

⁷ <http://simplicitycollective.com/introduction-to-prosperous-descent-new-book>

⁸ <http://theclimatopsychologist.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/One-Degree-War-Plan.pdf>

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