Introduction

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CONTEXT AND RATIONALE

The message from the natural sciences on climate change has been consistent for over 30 years now: humans are causing the planet to warm, and we have a limited time to slow, stop, and possibly reverse this process. Although the impacts have become more dramatic and the projections more dire, the core information has remained constant: this is bad; act now or it may be too late. A key question follows from this, and it is one that most of us have been scratching our heads about for almost 30 years too. Why do societies not take the action required? Why do they not adopt the measures so clearly spelled out by the science?
Of course, there are many answers to this question, but at the heart of all of them is the notion that climate change has transformed from being solely a matter of physics to becoming a social, political, and general societal problem. The reason for inaction does not simply lie in a lack of scientific information, but rather because, as a so-called wicked problem, climate change discourses need to engage with and become moderated through a broad range of communication strategies, alongside feeding off various political, economic, policy, psychological, educational, and other inter-connecting social movements. It is helpful, as this volume illustrates, to re-focus on the “soft sciences” in order to expose and examine the growing social and political forces that help or hinder action on climate change.

The historical importance of scientific studies in situating the danger of climate change is affirmed by the opening chapter on the impacts of climate change on Ireland by John Sweeney, a contributing author of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Fourth Assessment Report, who provides the key scientific information which the rest of the book takes as its starting point. Furthermore, the role of climate modelling and engineering, for example, will remain an essential component in developing responses to climate change, and the work of atmospheric and oceanic science must continue. We are suggesting, however, that the reasons for inaction on climate change cannot simply be found in the physical sciences. It is to the social sciences and humanities we must also turn in order to help find our way out of the predicament identified by the physical sciences so many years ago.

We began to think about ways in which a focus on social arenas such as policy, media, and politics could be given more prominence in debates around climate change, and it was from these discussions that the idea for this book emerged. It was conceived as a way to bring together a range of subject experts to examine how Ireland’s social responses to climate change have been shaped and how these responses compared internationally.

We hope the volume will be of particular value to Irish readers, but can others learn from the Irish case? We believe so. Ireland is interesting, both because it shares features with other territories and because it has some unique aspects as well. Ireland is a small, politically stable state in which the social conditions should be conducive to collective action. Yet such action has so far failed to appear at anything like the required scale or
speed, and the reasons why are instructive to similar jurisdictions. Ireland’s status as a peripheral country is also a point of commonality with many others around the world which orbit a larger country or bloc.

In Ireland, politicians often debate whether the country should orient itself towards the US or the European Union (EU), to “Boston or Berlin” as it is sometimes expressed. Ireland is also interesting because of this tension between these two centres of gravity, and both European and American readers can learn from the Irish experience. Ireland’s media system, popular culture, politics, and worldview owe something to both federations. In the wake of Brexit, and of the rise of populism in the US and elsewhere, the way in which Ireland orients itself politically and culturally is also of wider interest.

Overview of the Book

The nature of the Irish experience in responding to the challenges posed by climate change is described and critically analysed in detail in this book. Chapter 2, “Climate Change in Ireland: Science, Impacts and Adaptation”, by climate scientist John Sweeney, sets out the scientific context for the rest of the book. Ireland’s rainfall pattern, exposure to drought and to both coastal and river flooding, has been increased by climate change. A two-metre storm surge could expose Ireland to a €1 billion insurance liability as a result of flooding. Biodiversity has been severely affected, and biodiversity loss will increase. Meanwhile, diseases previously seen only in more southerly latitudes will affect crop yields in Ireland.

In Chap. 3, “Ireland’s Policy Response to Climate Change: An Historical Overview”, Diarmuid Torney provides a critical historical overview of the policy responses to climate change, from the Celtic Tiger era through the economic downturn and the subsequent return to growth. Ireland is constrained by a number of circumstances in its ability to formulate a cohesive climate response, including fragmented governance systems and low population density combined with dispersed housing patterns. However, “Ireland enters the third decade of the 21st century with surprising momentum”, the author states, noting developments such as the Citizens’ Assembly on climate change, the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Climate Action, and the government’s 2019 Climate Action Plan. Whether this represents a real transformation in Ireland’s approach to dealing with
climate change or whether it is a temporary deviation from the historical pattern of policy and political inertia remains to be seen, he concludes.

The scientific and policy context having been established and examined in the first section of the book, the second section considers in more detail specific aspects of climate law, politics, litigation, and local government. In Chap. 4, “Climate Litigation, Politics and Policy Change: Lessons from Urgenda and Climate Case Ireland”, Sadhbh O Neill and Edwin Alblas describe and analyse the use of litigation as a means of compelling governments to implement action on climate change. When the political system proves incapable of producing adequate measures, they argue that the courts provide a means for citizens effectively to bypass politics. The authors outline the landmark Urgenda case in the Netherlands, in which citizens won a case against their government for failing to protect them against the impacts of climate change. They analyse an Irish case inspired by the Urgenda victory: the suit by environmental non-governmental organisation (NGO) Friends of the Irish Environment, claiming that Ireland’s 2017 National Mitigation Plan was insufficient to meet commitments made by Ireland under the Paris Agreement of 2015. Although the case was lost in the High Court, the authors argue that such legal activism can shape the political discourse and the policy agenda.

Roderic O’Gorman (Chap. 5, “Climate Law in Ireland: EU and National Dimensions”), who was elected as a Green Party TD in the February 2020 general election in the course of writing his chapter and appointed Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration in June 2020, examines EU and national climate change legislation and measures Ireland’s national climate law of 2015 against legislative best practice internationally. Ireland’s response does not compare favourably. When the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act was finally passed in 2015, “the law’s ambition and design fell well short of good practice”, says O’Gorman. The outline of a Climate Action (Amendment) Bill was published shortly before the dissolution of the 32nd Dáil (parliament) in January 2020 and awaits enactment. This addresses many of the shortcomings of the 2015 Act and can be thought of as “climate action for slow learners”.

Moving to climate politics, Conor Little (Chap. 6, “The Party Politics of Climate Change in Ireland”) charts and analyses climate change as a party political issue, noting that it has traditionally been a low-priority consideration. Two instances of higher salience for climate change are recorded—2006–2007 and 2019. In both periods, Ireland’s economic
growth was strong and levels of unemployment were low, international events provided a media focus, and there was electoral competition involving the larger parties and the Green Party. Little considers policy areas such as agriculture, transport, carbon tax, and energy, examining party positions on each. He concludes that party political attitudes to climate change have been characterised by “low-salience consensus”, but that this may change.

The response at local government level in Ireland has also been slow and piecemeal, argues Sabrina Dekker in Chap. 7, “Responding to Climate Change: The Role of Local Government in Ireland”. The author considers barriers to climate action imposed by local government and planning legislation and examines the ease of access to public representatives, a particular feature of Ireland’s political culture. However, some local authorities have shown leadership through the adoption of smart cities initiatives. A growing role for Climate Action Regional Offices can also help local authorities strengthen climate resilience in their areas.

The third section of the book considers Ireland’s social, visual, cultural, and media responses to climate change. In Chap. 8, “Ecological Modernisation, Irish-Style: Explaining Ireland’s Slow Transition to Low-Carbon Society”, Declan Fahy suggests that Ireland’s “confused and contradictory” responses to climate change make more sense when understood in the context of eco-modernism, a concept of sustainable development in which economic growth is considered compatible with environmental protection. However, to be eco-modern, one must first be modern, and Fahy argues that Ireland as a late moderniser was a poor fit for eco-modern policies initially. He examines the role of agriculture in shaping—and constraining—Ireland’s approach to sustainable development. Ireland can be categorised as a “weak eco-moderniser”, with a “calculated ambivalence over ecological issues”. There are signs of movement towards a stronger form of eco-modernism recently; however, Ireland has not yet had the kind of broad social and political debate necessitated by the challenges of climate change.

Trish Morgan (Chap. 9, “Challenges and Potentials for Socio-Ecological Transformation: Considering Structural Aspects of Change”) considers structural barriers to Ireland’s transition to a sustainable future. She uses the theoretical lenses of political economy, political ecology and field theory to examine the inherent tensions between economic growth and sustainability. The notion of spatial and temporal “fixes”—that during an
economic crisis, capital is not lost, but merely moved around in space and time—is also presented as a means of understanding Ireland’s financial crisis in 2008. Morgan also analyses the media as a site of cultural production, arguing that they are compromised in communicating ideas, practices, and imaginaries by commercial imperatives. The author presents a case study of TV coverage on the national broadcaster Radio Telefís Éireann (RTÉ) during 2013–2014 concerning the release of the 5th Assessment Report of the IPCC, noting that advertisements “bundled” with news coverage undermined the message of the IPCC report.

The media are the source of much of the public’s information on scientific topics such as climate change, and the levels and nature of climate coverage by journalists are the subject of Chap. 10, “Climate Change and the Media” by David Robbins. International climate coverage is growing but remains relatively low. It peaks at times of UN climate conferences and major scientific reports and then fades back to the margins. Ireland’s coverage follows this pattern but exhibits some unique characteristics. The economic crisis of the late 2000s, which coincided with the term in government of the Green Party 2007–2011, the presence of a powerful agriculture lobby, and the precarious financial state of the indigenous media sector have all influenced coverage levels in Ireland. The nature of Irish coverage is shown to be conservative, with eco-modern discourses and political framings dominant. Ireland has even adopted its own brand of scepticism, involving sarcasm and dismissiveness rather than outright denial of climate science.

The response to climate change of Ireland’s visual media—in the form of eco-cinema—is the focus of Pat Brereton’s contribution (Chap. 11, “Cultural and Visual Responses to Climate Change: Ecological Reading of Irish Zombie Movies”). Brereton examines low-budget zombie movies such as Dead Meat (2004) as a site of environmental discourse, arguing that such films can engage new, younger audiences with the topic of environmental degradation and can use the creative imaginary of horror to encourage more engagement with environmental issues. Brereton argues that these “horror flicks” can help puncture the romanticisation of food, land, and the stewardship role of farmers and notes how the Irish hurley, which features prominently in Dead Meat, has been decoded as “the new chainsaw” in the eco-cinema literature.

The fourth section of the book presents various perspectives and analysis of more citizen-led climate initiatives. The role of low-carbon communities such as ecovillages, community energy initiatives, and activism from
civil society is examined, alongside approaches to climate education and the Just Transition movement. In Chap. 12, “Community Engagement and Community Energy”, Clare Watson analyses the community energy sector in Ireland and charts the progress of local energy and low-carbon transition projects, focusing on three in particular: the Templederry Community Windfarm in County Tipperary, the Aran Islands Energy Co-op in County Galway, and the Dingle 2020 initiative in County Kerry. Barriers to community projects that were identified in the late 1980s—lack of feed-in tariffs, difficulties in gaining planning permission, securing investment finance, and obtaining access to the grid—still persist and must be addressed. Ireland’s All-of-Government Climate Action Plan of 2019 is an encouraging development, she concludes.

Education can play a key role in climate change mitigation and adaptation, say Fionnuala Waldron, Ben Mallon, Maria Barry, and Gaby Martinez Sainz (Chap. 13, “Climate Change Education in Ireland: Emerging Practice in a Context of Resistance”), but climate change education is a contested space. The Irish education system has focused on promoting environmental citizenship and climate action at individual and school level rather than on system critique or collective political action. Teaching climate change in the classroom can be challenging for teachers, and they must be supported to develop understandings of the complex issues surrounding climate action and climate justice, the authors argue. Climate change education which does not focus exclusively on “soft”, apolitical approaches can “offer a valuable framework for educators to support the knowledge, understanding and collective action of children, young people and wider society”, they conclude.

The role of trade unions in ensuring the transition to a low-carbon society is a just one is the focus of Chap. 14, “Climate Action via Just Transitions Across the Island of Ireland: Labour, Land and the Low-Carbon Transition”, by Sinéad Mercier, Patrick Bresnihan, Damian McIlroy, and John Barry. The Just Transition perspective holds that social dialogue is necessary to ensure that the pay and conditions of workers involved in the transition are not adversely affected, and the authors argue that bargaining power through unionisation is vital. The Northern Ireland peace process has lessons around conflict management and transformation that are relevant to this transition process. The authors suggest that, when considering a just transition, Ireland’s farmers should be thought of as the equivalent of oil and gas workers in other countries. Direct democratic state governance is needed to ensure that people, communities, and
workers are not unfairly disadvantaged. Without such measures, support for any low-carbon transition becomes more elusive.

Lorna Gold provides a history of the civil society climate movements around the world and in Ireland (Chap. 15, “The Changing Faces of the Climate Movement in Ireland”), noting that NGOs and activists were focused on increasing the ambition of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) process. After the failure of the UN climate summit in Copenhagen in 2009, climate activists disagreed about whether the UNFCCC process was the most effective focus of their efforts. Furthermore, while NGOs in northern countries emphasized global, science-driven efforts to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, a new focus on climate justice emerged from the Global South. This spatially embedded justice perspective has in turn been superseded by the new youth climate movement, which foregrounds time and urgency. In Ireland, new groups have emerged and the climate movement is undergoing unprecedented change. Pre-existing power structures remain, even as new voices join the movement. The author concludes that “The important thing is not that everyone is saying the same thing, but that there is advocacy happening”.

Lastly, Peadar Kirby, a resident in Ireland’s only ecovillage, in Cloughjordan, County Tipperary, considers in Chap. 16 the role of ecovillages in modelling to the rest of society what low-carbon living looks like and reflects on the experience of the Cloughjordan ecovillagers in setting up their community. The role of participatory projects in tackling climate change has been recognised belatedly by the IPCC, and Kirby argues that “Ecovillages provide spaces where such transformative visions beyond business-as-usual scenarios can be promoted and implemented, and rich lessons learnt”. Cloughjordan’s ecovillage status rests on three pillars: ecological building standards, district heating, and food system. The ecovillage uses a bottom-up decision-making system inspired by ecology: the Viable Systems Model. Despite the emphasis on participation and consensus, divisions remain, the author notes. Cloughjordan was a pioneering project, and national regulations and practices have caught up with many aspects of its operation. The challenge for Ireland’s first ecovillage now, argues the author, is to “remain ahead of the curve, learning and spreading the lessons of how vibrant, resilient and welcoming communities will be the seedbeds of a low-carbon Ireland”.
CROSS-CUTTING THEMES

When considering the diversity of chapters in this book, and in reflecting on so many perspectives and accounts, certain motifs and commonalities emerge. The influence of agriculture on nearly every aspect of Ireland’s response to climate change is immediately evident. It is mentioned in almost every chapter, and its shadow falls across social arenas from policy, media, and party politics to education, the Just Transition, considerations of eco-modernism, and even zombie movies. Ireland is an outlier when it comes to the contribution of agriculture to its national GHG emissions profile. Furthermore, land, farming, and farmers hold a near-sacred status in the national consciousness. Significantly reducing agricultural emissions is difficult without reducing livestock numbers and changing land use, and there has been a reluctance in many parts of Irish society to confront this issue and engage with farmers. If Ireland’s transition to a low-carbon society and economy is to come about without deep social division, this is a conversation we need to have.

Related to the inertia, conflict avoidance and political long-fingering around agriculture is another cross-cutting feature: Ireland’s weak institutional response to the challenges posed by climate change. Across governance, policy, party politics, local government, and even the media, the issue has been seen as low priority and has had low salience. Policy documents have been unambitious, legislation has been weak, and diplomatic capital has been spent in securing flexibilities for Ireland.

Environmental debates in Ireland have much in common with those in other jurisdictions, and the perennial tension between incremental versus radical change is another common feature across several social arenas. It emerges in the struggle between those who would like to see Ireland develop a stronger form of eco-modernism, those who wish to proceed more slowly and cautiously, and those who reject eco-modernism completely and call for more radical system change. This is evident in political and policy debates between “realos” and “fundis”, and it is present among those who argue that the media should cover climate change as a systemic issue rather than continue with episodic coverage.

These debates are almost entirely concerned with mitigating the effects of climate change through various GHG emissions reduction policies and measures, while debates concerning adaptation to the effects of climate change are neglected. This one-eyed focus on mitigation is not unique to Ireland, but it is marked nonetheless. Across education, policy, and
governance, attention is devoted very significantly to issues of mitigation. This is also true of media coverage, which is largely concerned with scientific reports and political posturing at the UN, EU, and national level. Considerable resources are being devoted to adaptation strategies at local and national policy level, but adaptation has not yet made its way into the wider social discourses around climate change.

Ireland’s image—both its image of itself and the image perceived from the outside—is a recurrent theme. Ireland is seen as “green” because of its extensive pastureland and its relatively unindustrialised landscape. This green image has been used in government promotion campaigns related to food and tourism. As Trish Morgan points out, “Green is semiotically synonymous with environmental well-being and therefore, associates Ireland with positive connotations of nature”. However, there is a marked disconnect between this green image and a reality in which Ireland’s GHG emissions continue to rise and the country’s water, soil, and biodiversity continue to be degraded by intensive agricultural practices. This disconnect has been identified and explored by filmmakers, and there is a role for eco-cinema in exploring a post-agricultural Ireland.

Ireland’s responses to the particular challenges of climate change can read like a litany of failure. In chapter after chapter, failures of governance, of political courage, missed opportunities, chances for transformation forgone, are described and analysed. Yet in most cases, the chapters conclude by noting a change in what might be called the “mood music” around climate change. The final common theme of our book is hope. In governance, the 2019 Climate Action Plan is seen as potentially transformative; in media, the public broadcaster and private media outlets have responded to an increase in public interest; in civil society, new groups have re-energised and re-imagined climate activism. In other areas, around education, the Just Transition, and the visual media, awareness has grown and debates are ongoing. Just as Ireland was a late moderniser, and a late eco-moderniser, it is becoming a late adopter of climate action measures.

**The Influence of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Climate Debates**

The arrival of the Covid-19 virus in Ireland in late 2019 or early 2020 prompted a swift and generally effective response by the Irish state. The resources of multiple agencies were mobilised, extensive lockdown
measures were introduced, and some private assets were commandeered for public use. This wide-ranging intervention by the state shaped climate action debates in a number of ways. Firstly, it was evidence that concerted government action in the face of a crisis was effective and, perhaps more surprisingly, could enjoy widespread public support once the nature of the crisis was clearly communicated. Environmental campaigners began to ask why the government could not respond with similar urgency to the climate and biodiversity emergency.

Secondly, there was considerable public and media discourse concerning the improvements in environmental conditions during the lockdown. The reduction in transport activity and in manufacturing output meant that air and water quality improved, and carbon dioxide emissions are projected to have decreased significantly on a once-off basis. The lack of access to indoor exercise facilities meant that the public were forced to exercise outdoors, resulting in an increase in public awareness of the importance of green spaces in cities and the need for improved facilities for walkers and cyclists. The measures called for over many years by climate change activists—the reduction in private car use and greater support for modes of active travel, for instance—were inadvertently implemented and received widespread support.

Lastly, the debates about the economic cost of interventionist measures were changed by the pandemic. The Irish government instituted various wage-support and welfare schemes and pledged that post-Covid efforts to deal with the cost of these would not involve a return to the austerity measures that followed the 2008 economic crash. There was widespread social acceptance that human health was a higher-order concern than economic productivity or commercial activity, and the few public figures to call for an end to the Covid restrictions on economic grounds did not receive wide support. It became accepted that the government could borrow and spend as necessary in the face of a public health emergency. Again, environmentalists pointed to the parallels: if practically unlimited public funds could be made available to deal with a health emergency, why not for a potentially even more damaging climate and biodiversity one?

Other aspects of the Covid-climate comparison have also become evident. Having been somewhat maligned over previous years, experts and expertise were suddenly back in fashion. The science and crisis communications aspect of the pandemic may have lessons for communication concerning climate change. The emergence of hyper-local economies, encouraged by 2 km and then 5 km travel restrictions, could serve as
exemplars of local resilience. The community spirit and solidarity evident in Ireland’s response to the pandemic point to a resource that could be mobilised in support of climate action.

The pandemic has also posed significant risks for the climate and broader sustainability agendas. Interest in sustainability has historically tended to wane during economic downturns as a result of both limited bandwidth of the policy system and constrained resources. Against this backdrop, environmentalists in Ireland and around the world have sought to learn lessons from the recovery from the global financial crisis, widely seen as a missed opportunity to shape a green recovery. The need to “build back better” became the slogan of those seeking to integrate climate and sustainability into national Covid-19 recovery plans, for example, by calibrating stimulus plans to deliver sustainability objectives as well.

Against this uncertain and evolving backdrop, the core themes of the following chapters are more pertinent than ever. Ultimately, it remains to be seen whether we have left it too late or whether more recent public and political engagement with the issue will enable Ireland to dispense with its “climate laggard” reputation at last.