



**Friends of
the Earth**



29 July 2019

Dear Taoiseach,

We are increasingly concerned by the growing gap between how the Government is presenting itself to the world as a champion of climate dialogue and the actual practice here at home. The gap can be closed with a few key decisions, if they are made in the near future. In fact the Government has a real opportunity now to shed Ireland's reputation as a "climate laggard", to use your words, and take real steps towards leadership.

We have a good story to tell if we get the next couple of chapters right. Right now, however, there is a real risk that a couple of big missteps will undermine the credibility of everything else. Here are the areas where the rhetoric of dialogue are not matched by the reality.

Just Transition

Despite repeated calls from the trade unions (including a recent motion at the Biennial Delegate Conference of ICTU), and the clear recommendation of the all-party Oireachtas Committee, the Government is refusing to actually sit down with the trade unions, the energy companies (ESB and Bord na Móna) – which we own, the affected communities, and other stakeholders to plan for a Just Transition away from fossil fuels. As a result, workers and communities in Clare and the Midlands are facing growing uncertainty, anxiety and dislocation. This situation was entirely foreseeable and avoidable.

At the macro level, it is now 21 years since consultants, hired by Government, advised that we plan to stop burning peat and coal for electricity, in order to meet our *2010* emissions targets. At the micro level, economic growth across Europe was always likely to increase the carbon price for burning coal at Moneypoint. And the plan to extend peat burning for another decade after direct subsidies end this year, by burning it with imported biomass, was always likely to collapse under the weight of its absurd unsustainability, as evidenced by recent decisions by the EPA, An Bord Pleanála and the courts.

The Government should now immediately set up a Just Transition Taskforce, that "ensures all relevant voices are heard and included", and puts social dialogue and collective bargaining at the centre of the transition, as the ICTU motion puts it. The Government must drive the negotiation of a Just Transition agreement with all the stakeholders that addresses the concerns of the affected communities and workers, while getting peat and coal off the electricity grid without further delay.

National Dialogue on Climate Action

The National Dialogue process has significant potential but currently too often looks like a PR label rather than a structured dialogue with a coherent strategy:

- The regional meetings, while very well facilitated, are infrequent and its unclear what impact their outputs have.
- The “flagship conference” by the EPA in May had no speakers presenting on behalf of Irish civil society.
- At the recent National Economic Dialogue session on climate change, all the social partners (IBEC, ICTU, IFA, Environmental Pillar, Community and Voluntary Pillar) made it clear that the absence of a national stakeholder forum on climate policy was hindering their ability to engage and support climate action.
- The recent “town halls” on the Climate Action Plan, however well-intentioned, have been poorly advertised, and come across as PR rather than genuine dialogue. It’s not even clear if they are formally part of the National Dialogue.
- The Advisory Committee hasn’t been kept informed or adequately consulted on key developments (such as the EPA conference) and it’s not clear their advice is being taken seriously.

Intergenerational Dialogue

Championing intergenerational dialogue on climate action at UN level has become a key plank of the Government’s campaign to be elected to the Security Council next year. But there has been no real effort to engage the youth climate strikers here at home. Honeyed words from the Taoiseach at the time of the strike in March where he said he would “listen to what they [young people] are saying”, and smiling photos from politicians on the day have not been followed up.

At the recent High Level Political Forum on the Sustainable Development Goals at the UN in New York, Ireland co-hosted an event called “An Intergenerational Dialogue: A greater role for youth and civil society in climate action”. The panel comprised Minister Canney and two officials from Ireland, state representatives from three other countries and youth representatives from three countries. There was no youth or civil society representatives from Ireland on the panel, despite the fact two Irish Youth delegates were in the room, as were NGO observers from two organizations that are members of the Stop Climate Chaos Coalition, and despite repeated engagement by the youth and civil society observers in advance of the event.

It should not have come as a surprise therefore that Fridays for Future issued a public statement highlighting the contradiction between this reality and the rhetoric on dialogue, which the Friends of the Earth observer at the event read out from the floor. The response from Government officials was instructive. First, it was to have what can only be described as a “hissy fit” and to shoot the messenger, who was simply doing her job as a civil society representative. Second, it was to cite long-standing initiatives such as Green Schools and ECO-UNESCO programmes. Worthy and valuable as those initiatives are, they do not amount to a structured intergenerational dialogue between the Government and young people about climate action. If you are serious about intergenerational dialogue but unsure how to proceed, ask organizations representing the strikers.

Climate Emergency? What Climate Emergency?

Finally, while you are asking members of the UN General Assembly - effectively the world’s parliament - to vote Ireland onto the UN Security Council next year, partly as a champion of

climate dialogue, you are actively blocking the Irish parliament from even debating what the Climate Emergency it has declared means for the future of oil and gas exploration in Irish waters. Surely you see the contradiction there?

The irony is that Ireland is close to having a really good story to tell about its recent climate action “journey”. From a place where we were a laggard at bottom of the EU league table, significant process has been made. The policy process – from the Citizens’ Assembly and the Joint Oireachtas Committee to the Climate Plan and the forthcoming NECP – was an innovative response by the political system to reputational risk, growing public concern and civil society campaigning. There is already significant international interest in learning lessons from this process.

Meanwhile, even as national emissions continued to rise, the new parliamentary arithmetic since the 2016 General Elections has meant that opposition Bills that could command a Dáil majority eventually became new laws with all-party support to ban fracking in Ireland and divest the sovereign wealth fund (the ISIF) from fossil fuels. Leaving aside the climate science and the global ethics against continuing speculative exploration for new oil and gas, the Government is missing a huge *political* opportunity by blocking debate on the Climate Emergency Measures Bill, rather than negotiating amendments that could similarly produce a cross-party consensus.

Resolving contradictions to restore credibility

For your pitch to UN General Assembly members on climate dialogue to have any credibility, you must urgently close the gap between rhetoric and reality in these four areas: Just Transition, National Dialogue, Intergenerational Dialogue, and the Climate Emergency Bill.

Otherwise we will continue to call out the contradiction between what you say and what do. Given that Ireland is co-hosting the Youth Climate Summit on 21 September 2019, we would urge you to address these issues before then.

As you know, Friends of the Earth has always believed in constructive engagement with decision makers, with the process around the Citizens Assembly, the Oireachtas Committee, and the Climate Action Plan, including many examples. Fridays For Future has called for meaningful engagement by decision makers since the youth climate strikes began.

We stand ready now to engage positively to address the concerns raised in this letter before any further damage is done to Ireland’s already battered reputation on climate action just at the moment when it could begin to recover.

Yours sincerely,



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