

Oisín Coghlan's speech at The Mary Robinson Climate Conference

Good morning. My name is Oisín and I'm scared.

That's the first time I've said that out loud in relation to climate change because, my role over the last 18 years in Friends of the Earth has been - I guess I've seen my role as being - the reasonable voice of environmentalism, the reasonable voice of the climate movement such as was back in 2005, appealing to reason, appealing to enlightened self-interest, framing the issue in a way that would move the dial for, if not quite middle Ireland then the progressive centre, for the politicians who might feel they couldn't move without being able to appeal to that progressive centre, and that affected how I talked about climate, it probably affected how I thought about it, and it probably even felt about how I felt about it. If you work on it for this long, you do a certain amount of compartmentalization in order to survive given the scale of what we face, but the honest truth is that that's not worked.

It hasn't worked politically. It hasn't worked in terms of our emissions, at least not either of those things at the scale or the urgency you need, and actually now and finally, it isn't working personally. It isn't possible to keep the struggle and the sentiment apart. The climate anxiety that I successfully compartmentalised for a decade or more is increasingly intruding into my life and into my feelings because, as Peter (Thorne) has summarised eloquently already this morning, reality isn't cooperating with the way I've been approaching this issue. You just have to look around the world to see it. Peter has summarised it a bit already and someone else mentioned it too.

Monday was the hottest day ever recorded on earth during human history, during our recordings of temperature. That record lasted 24 hours. Tuesday became the hottest day ever recorded in human history, and it could be broken again very soon no doubt, because of the combination of climate breakdown and *'El Niño'*.

We saw this extraordinary North Atlantic heat anomaly over the last few months. We're seeing the heatwaves in Asia and in the US, we're seeing the wildfires in Canada - and that's the list from this year. There were lists last year and the year before, and it's becoming, you would think, an increasingly unignorable '3 bell alarm' or whatever fire alarm, whatever that phrase is. Climate breakdown is here and now, it's no longer remote in time or place, it's not polar bears, it's not just sub-Saharan Africa, it is here and now.

We're always talking about how we're at the brink - 1.5 is on life support. I would say we are over the brink. We are like the Roadrunner out over the cliff with our legs still running. '1.5 is on life

support' is the phrase that's used often in these conferences over the last few years, because it's such a noble goal which we are clinging to, but if it is on life support the family are gathered around the bed and the undertakers are outside, confident of a booking for the morning. That means that my normal framings, my normal feelings are also breaking down.

Mary (Robinson) earlier said that this was a communications crisis as much as a climate crisis, and I agree. My answer is 'yes, but..' because I'm not a scientist, I'm not a climate scientist. I'm a communicator, I'm a word person. A lot of what I've been doing is trying to persuade politicians that they need to act, and over the last 18 years I've used all sorts of framings and none of them - I don't want to throw out all the hope and action - I'll come back to this - I am conscious that I'm doing something I've never done before really, which is choosing a relatively negative framing and I'm fighting against it even as I do it, but I do think, as XR (Extinction Rebellion) said, tell the truth.

And so, I started with climate justice because in 2005, I had spent ten years in the overseas aid and human rights sector or movement before coming to climate and environment. One of the things I knew as I entered this sector was that Ireland was the sixth most generous country in the rich world in overseas aid. We had a very proud tradition. Mary Robinson was often extolling, correctly, as well those who worked in it. And I did the numbers. I think I was the first person to do these numbers in Ireland, after I joined Friends of the Earth, and I discovered that we were also the sixth most polluting country in the rich world per capita, and I felt those two things were irreconcilable.

'We will put this this message out there and people will realise we need to change' - and indeed we formed the Stop Climate Chaos Coalition with the likes of Trocaire, Concern, Goal and Oxfam organisations that have much bigger household name recognition and reach than we had as Friends of the Earth at that time. And we've done good things together - I shall come back to it - but that wasn't enough.

That was a time when Ireland was very rich, before the crash. The economy wasn't the primary concern. We were talking about health care and elder care and childcare for the first time in a kind of post materialist way, so we said, we need to add planet care to that frame. And, we began to have some traction for a year or two until the cash came of course, and even before that - and actually Eamon Ryan used to do this as well at the same time - 'We need another Whitaker' - another great leap forward, another, you know, good long term switch in Irish policy as we had in 1950s and 60s towards an outward looking industrial policy. We need that for climate, for renewables, the opportunity. That wasn't enough.

The crash came and our mission stalled for the first time for ages, and I remember being in rooms with policy makers at conferences in 2010 saying: 'You all know the only way you met our Kyoto (Climate Agreement) targets for 2010 was by crashing the economy. Let's not do that again in 2020.' And everyone would laugh and go 'Who would be stupid enough to do that again?' And, of course because of the crash primarily, because of the way the government set things up, we didn't plan. We actively didn't plan to meet our 2020 climate targets.

The only way we met those targets to any degree - well with one exception around renewable energy - was because of Covid. We reduced emissions in 2020, but we overshot our targets for those periods, with the exception of renewables, because we set targets for renewables and electricity when in the 2007-2011 government and they were met, so targets have a role to play. That's my way of saying that narrative is not enough. Communication is not enough. We need power - and I'll come back to that.

Actually, I want to say one thing when I was talking about climate justice as an aside. I do agree with at least one thing with you Murray (Hitzman), vehemently, which is that overpopulation is not the issue. Overconsumption is the issue. There is huge carbon inequality in the world. I was trying to find the statistics, but I have no signal and I have no Wi-Fi, so if someone finds it for me before I finish talking please shout it out.

In aviation emissions, which is not the same thing, I think 1% of the world's population is responsible for 50% of aviation emissions. I can't remember the figure for emissions overall, but it is really stark. Most of the world's population, where population is being added in the world, is not driving climate change. It is our overconsumption and our historical responsibility in the north - global north - that's driving climate change. So population control is not the answer, and of course we know anyway the root to population stability is development, tackling poverty, and specifically attacking women's inequality, so that's where the focus for that should be. And I know Murray, you weren't basing your policy prescriptions on that, but I do think it's too important a point to let go.

So, our primary task has been, the primary approach is campaigning. We tried to build coalitions with corporates as well as the overseas aid agencies. We launched the Irish climate leaders group on climate change in 2009. Actually Mary Robinson spoke at a meeting with them and for them. They met the Taoiseach at the time, Brian Cowen before he went to a UN summit. We've had all sorts of coalitions, alliances with trade unions, with corporates, with overseas aid agencies. We have mobilised, we've done stunts in streets, maybe not quite as direct action yet as XR. We've done everything we can to build awareness, to build engagement of citizens with politicians, and there have been big wins - the Climate Change Law in 2021, the ban on fracking in 2017, the ban on new

licences for offshore oil and gas exploration, the divestment of the sovereign wealth fund, the ISIF - all of those, not all of them of course attributable to Friends of the Earth (but we were very involved in the law), but attributable to the broader climate movement - were really significant wins either substantially with the law or symbolically say with offshore exploration because there's not much there anyway. We've never found anything anyway, apart from Corrib,, but to borrow a phrase from Bill McKibben, the famous climate activist, those wins are too slow, and in climate winning slowly is the same as losing.

That law that we passed in 2021, after effectively three 4-year campaigns to 2011, 2015 and 2021, is great. It would have been really good ten years earlier, when it was killed by vested interests in 2011. I won't go down the rabbit hole of naming those, but people and organisations decided to kill that law, and they bear responsibility for the fact that we're now starting from here, and we have to do in 10 years what we could have had, and again Peter was saying this, had 20 years or 30 years to do.

So if we'd started in 2010 or in 2000, when we published technically our second climate action plan (but the first one people don't remember), we would have been talking about reductions of 2.5-3% a year to reach what we need to be about 2030. Now we're looking at 7, 8, 9 percent per year, which is really, really challenging, and it becomes very difficult to do in any sort of just transition way as well. So that's very difficult, and I want to come on to what that means for us and what we do about it now in my remaining time, but I would say this again, because I can't quite let go of the 'hopium', of the positive spin.

It is worth saying, because the UK report was mentioned, that it's only showing 29% reduction by 2030, not 51% that's now in law, but that is actually an improvement. I mean, just four years ago in 2019, the EPA projections in 2019 were saying that with all the measures that were then in place - I'm not sure if these numbers are precise, but the scale is correct - we would be at, I think, 55 million tonnes of emissions in 2030. Those new EPA projections show it at 44 million tonnes, so that's not nothing. It is in fact a significant chunk. It's just not where we need to be, or not to the scale of progress we need to see, but it is a significant improvement from 4 or 5 years ago, and that has been driven by the campaigning of the youth climate strikers, of XR, of ourselves and of the law that is driving that change in policy, but it's not enough. It's not fast enough.

What we're finding now is, having to move from - I thought it would be the hard part getting those targets in law and getting the policy framework in place - it transpires now that that is the easy bit. Trying to actually do the hundreds of actions across four or five sectors that actually cut emissions in half in 10 years is much much harder - surprise, surprise really. And it transpires that we're not ready for it, either as public or as the political system or as the corporate system, and not ready for it in

different ways. I think psychologically, in the case of the public, and in terms of the systems and the levers that the state has at its disposal, or that it is prepared to pull, which I shall come back to.

Take transport for example. We're now seeing fights over whether we lose 2 parking spaces outside some shops in Deansgrange in Dublin, because people want the parking spaces more than the bike lane to get people to school safely or whatever. We're seeing those concerns about Bus Connects, around all sorts of issues, around Irish cities even though there's now unprecedented funding available for cycling and walking infrastructure. We're seeing the farming lobby understandably, saying: 'Hang on a second. In 2015, you, the government, told us to invest massively in dairy. Go for growth. Go for expansion. And, now you're saying we have to reduce emissions?' In their case, only by 25% by 2030. We're seeing on the broader scale - I saw a headline today - Shell saying that it would be dangerous to reduce production of oil and gas. I'm not sure if they mean dangerous for their profits or dangerous for our lights. We know though that their production is dangerous for our futures. And then, there's some good news around renewables, we know that, both solar and wind, but again not without problems.

What I'm going to show you now is not by way of critique, it's by way of understanding the challenge. Whenever I go outside Dublin, as the son of a newsagent, I always want to buy the local paper. So, last night in a petrol station out the road - which I walked to by the way, I came by train. I needed a sugar boost to think about my speech at ten o'clock last night. I bought the Western People, and the headline is this: "Wind farm threatens scenic location in North Mayo". Now, it may change the view in North Mayo, but we know what's threatening our scenic locations. It's climate change. It's climate breakdown. It's sea level rise. It's extreme storms. But the challenge is, we're not seeing it. The majority in this room, as someone said, is an exception, but the majority of Irish people - or people around the world - are not seeing it yet as a threat that requires any form of sacrifice, rather as an inconvenience really.

To take an example which might sound extreme outside this room, maybe even inside this room - there's nobody in Kiev complaining about the view being spoiled by the patriot missile systems defending their city that weren't there a year ago, because they recognise and we recognise an existential threat to Ukrainian sovereignty and democracy from the illegal, immoral Russian invasion. But the threat we face collectively, on the planetary scale, and again the planet will be fine - I totally agree with you on that Murray - it's us, it's human civilization and that's why actually it's one of those false narratives 'environmentalists want to save the planet'. The planet will be fine. It's us. It's humans. We're friends of earthlings as well as earth. We're not seeing the threat, we're not

understanding it, and we're not responding as a state with an emergency response, despite the fact the Dail declared a climate and environment emergency four years ago.

So where does that leave us?

I do think, it leaves us, or it leaves me at least, struggling both personally and professionally in terms of how I do my job between fear and hope. I've always resented the fact that environmentalists have been told 'don't use fear, it doesn't work.' There's all kinds of studies about all sorts of things that drive human behaviour, and it is a complex picture, and there is no silver bullet - short version - but why can't we use fear in the face of a huge threat?

Churchill didn't say, well he did say, sorry Churchill did offer the prospect of bright sunlit uplands, but he said it involved "blood, toil, sweat, and tears." Now, he said we will fight them on the beaches. He didn't say: "let's go to the beach and see. It might be sunny, and so if the Germans arrive, we'll see if we could have a party." He didn't. There was no sense that he had to only explain the war in positive ways that would keep everybody happy as they went along, no. There was what was recognised as an existential threat, so it involved an emergency mass mobilisation of society in order to face it, and that is equally true for climate if not in fact more so.

And there is of course, the truth now is, because in typical Irish fashion 'I wouldn't start from here', because of where we're starting from, there is no smooth path. There is no way we can do the radical transformation we need without disruption. We can try to make it as far as possible, as inclusive as possible, but the choice now, you know - Greta (Thunberg) said something like this and we said something like this 15 years ago - change is coming whether we like it or not. Our choices are in between whether we manage it or whether it's abrupt. That was 15 years ago. Well now, the change is here. It's getting increasingly abrupt and disruptive on the climate side, and if we're going to stop it from being disruptive, it's going to involve inconvenience - that's the inconvenient truth - it's going to involve disruption, but the alternative is worse, and our leaders are not yet accepting that or articulating that, or reflecting that to society in a way that mobilises action.

If you listen to the likes of Greta - and I want to quote what she says about hope - but if you listen to her or the UN Secretary General...I've put various quotes up on the screen, and said can you guess which ones is Greta, a teenage radical climate activist, or which one is the UN Secretary General? At times now you'll have trouble knowing which is which. The UN Secretary General is sounding more and more like a desperate campaigner who feels people aren't listening to him in his denunciations of the fossil fuel industry and his pleas for attention and action from the world's leaders.

And on the one hand I find that, oh that's great, that's fantastic, and that scares me too. If that's where he's got to, how much more radical or desperate do we need to become as campaigners? I would say that the phrase from Greta that I like most is around hope where she says: "don't look for hope, look for action because when you see action, hope is everywhere." I do think that's a way forward. I think action is the antidote to anxiety.

I want to go back to that dilemma between fear and hope, and go back to Al Gore, who said a couple of things in his 2006 movie that have stayed with me and that I use frequently. One is that, because this is where we are now, he was worried that people would go from denial to despair without stopping in the middle for action. That I think is really a big risk now. I do think we need to keep hope alive, but through action. I do think there's a real risk that the people who thought that wasn't the problem or who want us not to think about the problem, will now say, there's nothing we can do about it, we'd better just try to cope. There may be some members of the public, but certainly the vested interests would go that way.

The other thing Al Gore said was that he expected when he went to Congress in the mid 80s, that his fellow congresspeople would respond to the science in the same way he did, and they didn't. They just went "huh, another issue, another day, what's next?" and he said then, only when it's on the lips of their constituents, will politicians respond.

That has been the Friends of the Earth campaigning model over the last 50 years, not just 15 years, and as I said it has had some success, but it's clear now that it's not enough, that we need to do other things, and more things, and do things differently. This is why I'm actually delighted today you got to show your videos Manuel, because I do think that direct action now has a role to play, very clearly it does. One of the questions that has been asked in an interesting book, *How to blow up a pipeline*, that came out couple of years ago, why hasn't the climate movement been more aggressive in its tactics, given that the anti slavery movement, the anti apartheid movement, the movement for votes for women, all adopted very not just non-violent direct action, but very direct action?

There were suffragists that we don't hear about so much, who were the mass of the movement looking for votes, and the suffragettes were the direct activists, and we now call the whole movement that because they won. They burned post boxes with random post in it, they broke windows on Oxford Street. They burned down county halls around England - targets unrelated to their cause, simply to draw attention to the injustice that they faced. Now the climate movement has come nowhere near those things. Just Stop Oil interrupted the (cricket) test match yesterday, and the Sun labelled them eco-yobs today.

I don't know exactly what the right balance of actions are. I don't know what the right direct actions are. I don't know exactly what the right targets are, but certainly the fossil fuel energy itself, fossil fuel infrastructure, well I think they are now all legitimate targets for sure. But I do know that what we've done so far hasn't worked, hasn't been enough, and we are going to need to be unreasonable, because reason hasn't been enough to move the dial fast enough or far enough, but that might be speaking unreasonably, or doing unreasonably. My hope now is that, when reasonable people start acting and speaking unreasonably, that shifts public opinion and political action.

We did a poll with Ireland Thinks in the last few days. They haven't published the findings just yet, they just got them last night. One of the questions we asked is, has the SUV deflation actions of some group in Dublin called the Tyre Extinguishers, how would it affect your thinking? We didn't ask you to approve. We said, would it make you more or less likely to buy an SUV next time, or make no difference? The vast majority, 27%, said it made no difference. 10% said it was more likely, but 20%, or one in five, said it would make them less likely to buy an SUV. Now I don't know how that compares to if nothing had happened, but it's an interesting example of an intervention that certainly changed the conversation about SUVs in the last few weeks. There's all sorts of issues targeting individuals, targeting people at their homes, but it was interesting the effect it's had.

So, I'm going to finish by quoting my favourite speaker on these things, because I've said we're beyond the brink, we're beyond reason. I don't think we're beyond hope though. It's a writer called David Roberts in the U.S. who I've read for a long time. He wrote this quote quite a long time ago, but he said this - *'Remember there is no too late here. No game over. It would be a tragedy to shoot past 2 degrees to 3 degrees, but 4 is worse than 3, and 5 is worse than 4. Being not being prepared for any of those would be much worse than being prepared. The future always forks, there are always better or worse paths ahead, there is always a difference to be made. When we ask for hope then, I think we're asking for fellowship. The weight of climate change, like any weight, is easier to bear with others. And if there's anything I've learned in these last -he says 10, my case now 18 years - there are many many others, they're out there, men and women of extraordinary imagination, courage and perseverance (and in here of course), pouring themselves into this fight for a better future. You are not alone, and as long as you're not alone, there is always hope. But that hope now needs to become action - and I would say from now - that action needs to be increasingly unreasonable in order to save the future for ourselves and our children.'*

Thank you.