# The Planetary Crisis, Brexit and the Pandemic

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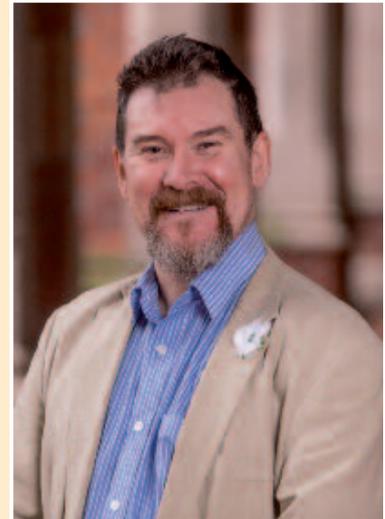
Introduction

Like buses, crises (including the opportunities that can also accompany them) seem to come in threes. First, since June 2016 we have Brexit and now, July 2020, the real possibility of a no-deal Brexit since the landslide election of Boris Johnston's Conservative party in December 2019. Second, the Covid-19 pandemic and the uneven manner in which governments, populations, businesses, trades unions etc. across the devolved administrations in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland have responded, have devastated lives, communities and economies. And finally, looming above both of these in terms of urgency and negative impact potential, is the planetary crisis – climate breakdown and the erosion of the life supporting systems of the earth. But not only do we face all three, they are also interrelated in complex and unpredictable ways such that addressing one of them could have impacts on the others. This is the trilemma of the turbulent times we live in. And this list does not include another connected crisis: the rise of right wing populism, xenophobia and 'post-truth' politics and 'fake news'.

Lest you get too depressed too early in reading this, there is some good news. The good news is that we have seen some progress on green issues. The climate crisis in particular has crept up the political agenda. This can be observed in the rise of social mobilisations such as Extinction Rebellion and the Youth Strike for Climate movements which unexpectedly just emerged in the last year. We can also point to the 'green wave' which saw support for Green Parties across Europe increase in the 2019 European elections, and the rise in Green Party support in local and parliamentary elections in the Republic and Northern Ireland in 2019-20. In particular, I want to draw attention to the rise and importance of non-state actors and action,

issues and forms of cooperation (existing and potential) across these islands organised around responding to the planetary crisis at local and global scales. Too often the media, academia, think tanks and public discussion focus on the state, corporations/business, large organisations such as churches, trades unions to the neglect of civil society, localised political actors and agency. This article will provide some commentary on the 'usual suspects and themes' of how Brexit, the pandemic and the planetary crisis may impact governmental and policy coordination and cooperation across the different levels and dimensions of 'big P politics', *inter alia*, political parties, national and devolved governments, significant business sectors such as agriculture, tourism, ICT etc. However, I wish to mostly concentrate on more local, non-electoral, non-policy, often more confrontational, oppositional, decentralised and grassroots forms of 'small p politics' now discernible around our planetary calamity. But this is *not* to discount, undermine or ignore the importance of nation-state level and especially more local state/council level politics and initiatives. As the pandemic has demonstrated in times of crisis such state action is vital, but we need to reconnect state action with civil society and localised mobilisation as suggested below.

In the context of Brexit for example the media, academia, lobby groups, think tanks all have an understandable tendency to focus on the state and 'big P politics', often together with attention to large economic interests, organisations or sectors. I wish here to move way from such a state-centric focus (and a state-capitalist focus in particular). Taking inspiration from James Scott's work on the dangers of 'seeing like a state' in all the dogmatic, bureaucratic and technocratic rigidity of centralised nation-states (such as Ireland and the UK), I wish to focus on the non-state, community (and sub-state, municipal), 'the indispensable role of practical knowledge, informal processes, and improvisation in the face of unpredictability'.[1] I base this on the one hand, and for full disclosure, as a left-libertarian (verging on anarchist) with a normative disposition towards non-state institutions and practices (such as commons regimes for example), which has always formed part of my green political theorising and activism.[2] Thus, I am more interested in the role of community-to-community distributed, decentralised and cross-borders mutuality and assistance than in any centralised and top-down, state initiated and maintenance of social, ecological or economic order and coordination across these islands.[3]

But more than that. I am now convinced after more than 25 years of scholarly research and more of green political activism (including a period as leader of the Green Party in Northern Ireland, and a councillor for 7 years on North Down and then Ards and North Down Council), that the system of liberal representative democracy within a market based capitalist system is simply incapable of adequately and equitably responding to the planetary emergency we face. I have come to the conclusion that the system is not broke… it was made that way. If we add in related problems of continuing class inequalities and privilege, widening wealth and income gaps within and between countries and regions within countries, declining human wellbeing across the 'minority world', growing distrust in political institutions, scientific knowledge and expertise and the media; my considered view is that we have to transcend liberal democratic capitalism if we are to have any chance of mitigating climate breakdown and reversing the accelerating rivet popping of the life-supporting systems of the planet.

At the state and 'big P politics' level I see a form of *wishful thinking* and *simulative green politics*,[4] as governments and their departments and agencies (regardless of which party is in power) blithely press ahead with ecocidal GDP economic growth for example, which has long passed its sell-by date as an adequate, never mind ecologically appropriate, goal.[5] The *wishful thinking* I see is the dominance of techno-optimistic modes of framing solutions to the climate

crisis within mainstream public debate and especially policy thinking within the state, with science fiction-like proposals for carbon capture and sequestration or solar radiation management given serious attention, consideration and funding. The *simulative green politics* I am speaking of here is the 'big P political' rhetorical and public acceptance that there is a planetary emergency, as evidenced for example in the number of elected chambers from national, to regional and local levels across these islands that have declared 'climate and ecological emergencies', but then… nothing. Or relatedly, how the unprecedented existential crisis our species faces is framed by political parties, businesses, the media, academia and policy makers as a 'normal' policy challenge that can and must only be framed and presented within such parameters.

The planetary emergency is a 'state of exception' not something that can be or ought to be shoehorned into the normal policy process and its incremental reformist logic. As if the planet and its non-human living and geo-chemical processes give a damn about 'Overton windows' in policy making. This is what it means to 'listen to the science' as Greta Thunberg and the Extinction Rebellion movement suggest. To continue in this provocative and radical vein (but remember, 'radical' simply means getting to the root cause of a problem, and this has been solely lacking in nation-states addressing the global ecological crisis), our existing liberal democratic nation-state systems and associated capitalist socio-economic orders, the soft and hard 'operating systems' of the state, especially the 'core state imperative' of endless GDP economic growth,[6] have now passed the threshold beyond which they are dysfunctional, sub-optimal and dangerous. I posit that what we have seen in the UK and Ireland (but equally applicable to almost all liberal democratic capitalist societies) are the kinds of states that worries Scott when he stated that

> *My case is that certain kinds of states, driven by utopian plans and an authoritarian disregard for the values, desires, and objections of their subjects, are indeed a mortal threat to human well-being* (p.8).

We have now reached a stage where serious debate is given to Elon Musk's dreams of colonising Mars, but where someone proposing that we need to transition beyond capitalism and liberal democracy is viewed as utopian or misguided, dangerous or 'politically immature'. More worryingly we have reached a stage where our young people, perhaps most clearly evident in those involved in the Youth Strike for Climate movement, and its international leaders such as Greta Thunberg (Sweden), or more locally here in Northern Ireland in Anna Kernahan (Belfast) or Dara McNulty (South Down), can now more readily imagine the end of the world rather than the end of capitalism. The climate anxiety and apocalypticism experienced and felt by these young people, who do not have a vote though they do thankfully have a voice outside electoral politics, should bring shame on our generation.

Just as Steinbeck wisely noted in his novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, that 'If you're in trouble or hurt or need – go to poor people. They're the only ones that'll help – the only ones', likewise we should look beyond and below the nation-state for discussions, inspirations and prefigurative but lived and live examples of thinking and doing beyond ecocidal economic growth, waiting for the Overton window to open, or state-sanctioned or commercialised notions of enterprise, innovation and action on the climate and biodiversity crisis.

In increasingly earthly and socially turbulent times as ours, where the UK is not simply exiting the EU, but we as a species are leaving the climatic stability of the '1,000 years of grace' of the geological era known as the Holocene, for the dynamically unstable 'Anthropocene',[7] I want to

suggest that we look down not up for inspiration and suggestive practices and initiatives that might, just might, help us navigate, adapt and minimise the pain and suffering and maximise the multiple co-benefits of transitioning to a low carbon, green regenerative economy and society. And while not always the case, as we will see, non-nation-state or corporate forms of sustainable, green and climate action, innovation, practice and thinking is very often oppositional, experimental, risky, confrontational and can be characterised as (sometimes subtle) forms of resistance to centralised, distant homogenising and command and control imperatives. From my own political perspective as a 'green republican' (read what this means before you jump to parochial conclusions!) this oppositional stance fits nicely with an agonistic view of democracy as non-violent disagreement, which I believe we will need to collectively and creatively respond to our planetary predicament.

Dissent, disagreement and discord should not be viewed negatively on this account. The reasons for this are two-fold. Firstly, any 'just transition' to a post-carbon, post-capitalist society will produce 'winners and losers', thus necessitating conflict transformation processes within any sustainability transformative process (McIlroy, Brennan and Barry, forthcoming). As such, dissent and disagreement need to be valorised and included in any process, not marginalised or supressed. Secondly, the oppositional, non-conformist and sometimes outright confrontational character of such non-state actors contain the energy and insight for improvement and societal progress. As George Bernard Shaw astutely commented (and we will forgive him the sexism),

> *'The reasonable man adapts himself to the world: the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man'.* Man and Superman

Perhaps, just perhaps, with 'our house on fire' (Greta Thunberg) it might be time for us to be 'unreasonable' and do what is necessary?

The Planetary Crisis and the Pandemic

Consider the following statements: "At all stages we have been guided by the science" (Boris Johnson), "we need to listen to what the science says" (Arlene Foster), 'Horse Racing Ireland: putting people before profit' (RTE News, 15th March 2020), and this remarkable statement from the former Irish Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar,

> *"I know that I am asking people to make enormous sacrifices. We're doing it for each other. Together, we can slow [it] in its tracks and push it back. Acting together, as one nation, we can save many lives. Our economy will suffer. It will bounce back."*

The 'it' here and the background reason for the other statements is not addressing the climate and ecological emergency, but the coronavirus crisis of course. Yet, unlike the coronavirus, there have been official political declarations of 'climate and ecological emergencies' in the Dáil, Westminster, Stormont, Holyrood and the Welsh Assembly, and in most councils and local authorities across the islands. But, as yet, we do not see anything close to climate action commensurate with these declarations of 'emergencies'.[8] Unlike the determined and swift actions of governments and state agencies across the islands to the public health threat from Covid-19, there is little evidence of the same determination to take radical and tough decisions on the planetary crisis. It is pertinent to ask why not, given the latter crisis presents an even greater threat to the lives of all citizens (especially the most vulnerable) in those 'minority world' jurisdictions and others in the global south or 'majority world'.

Could it be that all these declarations of 'emergencies' are just that? Some 'in tune' public and 'politically correct' rhetoric and associated positive media coverage for politicians forced by mobilisations like Extinction Rebellion and the Youth Strike for Climate to do (or say they will do) more on climate action? Cheap talk about recognising there is an emergency… But in reality not believing it really is an emergency? Why is it that our political leaders listen to and make decisions informed by the science in the case of coronavirus – closing schools, restricting travel, putting in place financial support for those who 'self-isolate' etc. – but not when it comes to the climate and ecological emergency?

Here we need to start by asking a simple but revealing question: Why do we see politicians across these islands (mostly if unevenly) acting on medical science and expert epidemiological advice on how to deal with the coronavirus, including making some very difficult decisions, but not on the climate and ecological crisis? While most politicians say they accept the climate science and the reality that we are facing a planetary crisis, we have very little evidence of the type of action consistent with what the climate science recommends. The climate science indicates we need to urgently and at scale decarbonise not just our energy system (i.e. move away from a dependence on coal, oil and gas) but decarbonise our economies and ways of life: how we travel; the resource inputs and structure of our food system; how we build and maintain our urban spaces and homes; to our views of the 'good life' and expectations of 'normal'. Responses to the pandemic have led to dramatic and radical changes to the lifestyles of most people in the countries most affected. These range from citizens staying at home (whether 'self-isolating' and/or working from home, with some people forced to do so as in Italy and France), a massive drop-off in air travel, car journeys, and community self-help with neighbours and organisations helping the most vulnerable (but this needs to be balanced with some 'panic buying' of food, household items and medicines in some countries). And when we look at some state responses we can also observe radical action. Perhaps the most dramatic of which are the Spanish and Irish governments taking all of their private health providers and their facilities temporarily (and with payment) into public control as they address the public health crisis. Along with Italy, Spain's regulators also implemented a ban on the short selling of stocks in more than 100 companies. Other radical initiatives included the temporary suspension of evictions and rent increases in the Republic of Ireland, mortgage holidays in Italy, and the UK government committing to pay 80% of the salaries of employees who cannot get to work or work from home. Even in that most neoliberal of states, the USA, we see federal transfers of cash to hard pressed Americans.

However, while there is a flurry of discussion and proposals to link the response to the pandemic to addressing the planetary crisis, there are questions to be considered as to whether we can or should link them, and even if it were possible, can the same 'crisis/emergency' response we see in the pandemic be replicated in responding to the planetary crisis? The reality might be that unlike Covid-19, climate breakdown and ecological devastation is not impacting the lives of people in the minority world, it is not something these populations can see rapidly spreading and killing people around them within their own communities and societies. Climate breakdown is more abstract, distant in space and time, than the pandemic which is a 'clear and present danger'. The dominant public and political discourse around the pandemic is that it will be defeated and therefore a 'temporary risk', the drastic changes to our lives are short-term, and then there will be a 'return to normality'. In short, there is confidence (warranted perhaps) of 'solving' the Covid-19 crisis. However, this is not the same with the planetary emergency which, even if we were to achieve the impressive task of getting greenhouse gas emissions down to stay within a 2 degree warmer world, would also mean us

having to adapt to a climate changed world. There is no 'solution' to the climate crisis, only adaptive and on-going coping strategies, over a much longer period of time. The demand for 'emergency solutions' could usher in large scale technological solutions such as geo-engineering; proponents regularly view such planetary scale technologies as 'insurance policies'.[9]

However, such 'techno-optimistic' solutions bring with them a 'moral hazard' of distracting or downplaying necessary climate mitigation efforts because these are too politically challenging in terms of requiring significant changes to our ways of life. And interestingly enough significant changes in how we work, live, move, feed ourselves, heat our homes, power our societies are precisely what the last Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report in 2018 indicated. As it starkly put it, 'Limiting global warming to 1.5°C would require rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society'.[10]

The fears and concerns around the virus within populations in the minority world which legitimate (at least for now) the unprecedented changes in our lives, including the restriction of our mobility and the rapid intervention of the state into the economy, cannot be said to be present within the same populations around the climate and ecological emergency.

Activism, Sharing and Learning – Brexit-Proofing Action on the Planetary Crisis
In this section I want to outline a sample of 'small p' (and some 'big P') political initiatives characterised by either an intentional or contingent sharing of ideas, support and practices on climate and ecological issues across these islands.

Just Transitions
The planned retreat from a carbon-based economy is an essential component of addressing the root causes of climate breakdown. But how just, inclusive and equitable this transition might be is not guaranteed. With its origins in the trades' union movement, the idea of a just transition stands as an energy transition pathway which can challenge head on dominant and comforting 'win-win' and 'greening business as usual' narratives. The reality is that moving to a low carbon or post-carbon economy and society means the end of the fossil fuel energy system. This throws up a host of complex issues ranging from the role of the state (national and local) in managing or coordinating the transition, issues of democratic voice and procedure, reframing fossil fuels as 'carbon resources', to divestment and reinvestment energy strategies. 'Just Transition' has become a politically significant way to frame climate and energy politics across these islands. This can be seen in the increasing use of just transition by the trades' union movement to articulate support or opposition to particular state or corporate policies. For example, the Bord na Mona decision to end peat production in the Irish Midlands,[11] or the near closure of Harland and Wolff in Belfast were called out as 'unjust transitions' by the unions.[12]

Other examples include the Green Party's *Just Transition Commission (Worker and Environmental Rights) Bill* currently making its way through the Dáil, which was inspired by the Scottish Just Transition Commission (established in 2018), while the landmark 2008 UK Climate Change Act has been copied and amended by the various jurisdictions across the UK and Ireland… with the exception of Northern Ireland. However, in the January 2020 *New Decade, New Approach* (Northern Ireland Office, 2020) agreement that restored the NI Executive after 3 years, there is a commitment to implement a Northern Ireland climate change act. Not for the first time, Northern Ireland being the last can turn out to be an advantage in terms of learning from the mistakes of others.

Citizens Assemblies on the Planetary Crisis
Ireland was the first country in the world to establish a Citizens' Assembly on Climate Change,[13] and its pioneering work has been adapted by others such as the UK which in 2020 established and ran its own Climate Assembly UK. While advisory, and therefore 'decision-recommending' as opposed to 'decision-making', what is interesting about the UK one is the overwhelming support that any post-pandemic government recovery package should resist reinstating 'returning to normal'. Rather the Assembly suggested that 'Government, employers and others should support changes to the economy and lifestyles which help achieve the UK's net zero emissions target'.[14]

Fortuitously, citizens' assemblies and more deliberative, inclusive and participative decision-making processes on climate issues is also a demand of many green and climate activists. Consider the three demands of Extinction Rebellion. Firstly, they demand that the Government must 'tell the truth' about how bad our situation is by declaring a climate and ecological emergency and 'listen to the science'. Secondly, they demand Government to act now to reverse biodiversity loss and reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2025. And finally, they demand that we need to 'go beyond politics', by creating a Citizens' Assembly to develop policies and strategies on how to address the crisis. If, as I think we will see, more citizens (especially the young who do not have a vote, but have a voice) taking to the streets to demand action on our planetary emergency, citizens' assemblies, especially at more local levels will be indispensable in my view to contain in a constructive manner the anger and anxiety of people frustrated by a lack of progress. Such assemblies have the potential for crowdsourcing local solutions to global dilemmas.

City-based Climate Commissions
There is a growing network of cities in the UK, not as yet extended to the Republic, that have established city-level Climate Commissions. The first Climate Commission was established in Leeds in 2017, and has spread, in part due to an ESRC funded project, the Place-based Climate Action Network (PCAN, 2020), to other cities such as Edinburgh, Belfast, Surrey, Doncaster, Croydon and Lincoln. There is also interest in establishing similar commissions in Dublin, and even in the absence of a city-level climate commission in the Republic of Ireland, there are academic, policy and civil society networks across the UK and Ireland connected to these commissions. The latter are embryonic but have included sharing of ideas and experiences around what a 'just transition' would look like in Ireland and Northern Ireland.[15] These networked cities within the UK share ideas and initiatives around city-level climate governance, climate resilience and adaptation and the planned transition towards a low carbon economy and society.   An example of this mutual learning is how some of these commissions have shared 'green and inclusive' recovery proposals as we emerge from the pandemic. The retrofitting of the housing stock for example has been proposed for Belfast, Leeds and Edinburgh.[16] This is particularly significant for Belfast given its higher dependence on oil for space heating and the abysmal insulation of its public and private housing stock: the combination of which accounts for the city (and NI as a region) having the highest rates of energy poverty in Europe. Such policy learning to achieve the stated objective of these Climate Commissions (and other local actors) to 'build back better' as we emerge from the pandemic are excellent examples of non-nation-state forms of distributed and decentralised coordination.[17] And there is every reason to be confident that these will be resilient whatever happens post the UK existing from the EU.

Community Wealth Building

The viral spread of the 'Preston model' of 'community wealth building' across the islands is interesting as an alternative localised and sustainable form of economic development which runs counter to the globalised, competitive, FDI focused approach favoured by national and regional governments in the UK and Ireland. In explicitly aiming to use key 'anchor institutions', such as Universities, health trusts and councils to relocalise the economy and thus minimise the leakage of wealth and income outside the local economy, it is viewed as a step in the direction of a sustainable, green economy. Its 'municipal socialist' approach has been discussed by think tanks in the Republic,[18] Northern Ireland,[19] Belfast City Council,[20] and most recently adopted in Scotland by North Ayrshire Council.[21] Community wealth building is viewed as an effective way for the implementation of local 'green new deals' and creating jobs and investment in a low carbon regenerative economy, creating more climate and economically resilient and self-sufficient communities.[22] Crucial and instrumental to the spread of this model has been the energetic and entrepreneurial work of the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES).

Coordination between anti-fracking activists

Across the UK and Ireland there are links between groups and communities resisting extractivist exploitation of local resources. This is particularly the case with the coordinated pan-islands movements against fracked gas and fracking. While locally based, and where each anti-fracking movement needs to be considered within its distinct local political, legal and economic context, these movements are highly interconnected across the islands and beyond to Europe, North America and Australia.[23] An example of this is the links and sharing of resources across the Irish border by groups opposing fracking in Leitrim for example, helping communities in Tyrone against fracking or the opening of a gold mine.[24] The importance of such opposition lies in preventing the exploitation of 'sub-prime' carbon energy sources which not only cause great environmental (especially water) pollution but divert capital from going into renewable and clean energy investment.[25] As the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) notes, 'Unconventional Gas opponents fear that large investments will come at the expense of more environmentally-friendly alternative energies, such as solar, wind, tidal, geothermal and secondary biomass energy sources'.[26] The sharing of arguments such as this, as well as different local campaigns learning protest techniques and successful strategies from one another, is common within the global green movement, made easier now with social media and more widespread availability of ICT and the internet.[27] And there is no reason to think such non-state community-to-community, local movement to local movement solidarity, communication and coordination will stop because of Brexit.

What is interesting about these initiatives, practices and innovations, is while not 'Brexit-proof', many of them would not, *ceteris paribus*, be fatally undermined either in themselves or in their capacity to be spread and shared across these islands regardless of the manner in which the UK leaves the EU. And while of course we should not neglect the importance of state and intra- and inter-state action (especially when the pandemic has demonstrated the importance of state action and coordination between governments), we should also look to strengthen non-state actors and agency. In some ways the 'people to people solidarity' we saw in response to the Syrian refugee crisis in 2017-18 with citizens across Europe acting more quickly and with greater practical humanitarianism than the EU as a whole or its individual members, might be a good way of understanding the types of learning, sharing and mutual support that will continue to grow across these islands. We already see engaged citizens and communities bypassing official electoral politics and political parties, the normal policy process, mainstream

media outlets and the institutions of liberal democratic governance. For some, such as those involved with Extinction Rebellion or direct action green politics, this is because they have no trust or faith that the institutions and processes of liberal representative democracy are up to the task of responding to the planetary emergency. For them the system is not broken: it was made that way. Hence their slogan of 'system change, not climate change'. Just as the climate or ecological crisis does not respect the arbitrary borders created by polities, history, jurisdictions or administrations, neither do those citizens, initiatives and organisations animated to rise to meet the reality of climate and ecological breakdown.

Conclusion: Building Back Better

Crises are events where 'all bets are off' and the 'rules of the game' can be up for renegotiation and rewriting, where there are openings for new ideas, practices and possibilities. Crises are also lessons in new ways of thinking and acting… And responding to them requires stories, narratives to help us understand them, explain their causes and assess solutions and coping strategies. At the moment there are a variety of narratives or 'structures of feeling', as the Marxist cultural critic, Raymond Williams put it, competing for our attention. These range from comforting ones of a 'swift return to normality', the 'master narrative' or commonsense encompassing how most people and elites think, to others which don't fit so easily within that 'return to the Anthropocene' rather depoliticised, top-down and often naively techno-optimistic response. During normal times, out of all the possible ways to organise society, there is only a limited range of ideas considered acceptable for mainstream political discussion—known as the 'Overton window'. The pandemic has forced that 'realm of the possible' wide open, and as suggested above, we need to move beyond a fixation on a nation-state and 'big P politics' focus. In just a few short months of the pandemic we've seen political and economic ideas discussed and in places implemented that had previously been rejected as 'utopian', 'unrealistic' or 'too radical'. There is a possibility for a new narrative, a new 'commonsense' and most importantly a constituency and evidence-base for not 'returning to normal' but rather 'building back better'.

Let's hope, for hope's sake, we do not lose either the lessons we are currently being taught by a harsh teacher or the multiple opportunities for change this current moment offers. We have the ideas, many of us have had them for decades. Now (having missed the opportunity of the 2008 global financial crisis) is the time to act on them and have the courage of our convictions. If, and it's a big if, anything remotely close to a green new deal or a 'justice and sustainability' focused recovery strategy, comes to pass in the months and years ahead as a result of the pandemic and lessons and opportunities learnt and wrested from it, the creation of less unsustainable and ecocidal societies might be fitting tribute to those we have and will lose due to the current pandemic and the longer existing 'slow violence' of the planetary emergency.

The pandemic induced economic slowdown should not be viewed as a temporary pause on either economic growth or capitalism, but rather the foundation upon which a better and different economy and society is constructed. I am reminded here of a wonderful phrase from the Scottish author Alasdair Gray about "working as if we are in the early days of a better nation". In 'building back better' and responding to the pandemic-induced economic contraction, we should insist government bailouts be used to create a sustainable, climate resilient, post-carbon, post-growth and post-capitalist economy. A tall order? Yes. Costly? Yes. Difficult to achieve politically and democratically? Absolutely. But we now know the following:

- Austerity was a lie;

- There is a magic money tree;

- States and populations can act with speed, determination and at scale for the common good when faced with an emergency;

- Another world is possible.

And maybe, just maybe the pandemic has created the possibility for thinking that it is now easier to imagine the end of capitalism than the end of the world… regardless of the outcome of Brexit.

Notes

[1] James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (1998), p.6.

[2] The recent evolution of which has led me to become considerably more Marxist in my political economy analysis and civic republican in my democratic thinking; see John Barry, 'Green Republicanism and a Just Transition from the Tyranny of Economic Growth' (2019).

[3] Relatedly, but something for another time, I think a nation-state, policy, political party/elections focus misrepresents politics in general, and democratic politics in particular. Neither elections nor policymaking exhaust what democratic is or can be. While in this article I wish to focus on what I would pose as positive and progressive potentials of community, activist and local sustainable and green initiatives and practices, I am not unaware of its reactionary and negative dimensions. For example, it has always struck me as something of a middle class, secure and rather privileged position this focus on 'big P politics', especially here in Northern Ireland, which pays insufficient attention to the lived political realities of working class communities divorced from liberal representative politics. At the same time, and as much in the spirit of provocation as brevity, this 'big P political' focus on the state, policy etc. often offers a mistaken and dysfunctional analysis of, and engagement (where this happens), and often inadvertent collusion with, the enduring reality of 'paramilitary peacekeeping' in post-ceasefire Northern Ireland; see Sean Brennan, *Ulster's Uncertain Menders?* (2017), pp.187-234.

[4] See Ingolfur Blühdorn, 'Sustaining the Unsustainable: Symbolic Politics and the Politics of Simulation' (2007).

[5] See John Barry, 'A Genealogy of Economic Growth as Ideology and Cold War Core State Imperative' (2020).

[6] Ibid.

[7] See Anne Fremaux and John Barry, "The 'Good Anthropocene' and Green Political Theory" (2019).

[8] See John Barry, *This is what a real emergency looks like* (2020).

[9] Royal Society, *Geoengineering the Climate: Science, Governance and Uncertainty* (2009).

[10] Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, "Summary for Policymakers of IPCC Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C" (2018).

[11] See Unite, "Bord na Mona: Peat harvesting suspension must be accompanied by clear roadmap to protect jobs and earnings" (2020); and Irish Congress of Trade Unions, *Building a Just Transition: the Case of Bord Na Mona* (2019).

[12] See Unite, "Professor John Barry of Queens University launches an open letter in support of Harland & Wolff workforce" (2019).

[13] See Laura Devaney et al, "Ireland's Citizens' Assembly on Climate Change: Lessons for Deliberative Public Engagement and Communication" (2020).

[14] Climate Assembly UK, "Interim Briefing" (2020).

[15] See Sinéad Mercier, "Four Case Studies on Just Transition: Lessons for Ireland" (2020); Jeanne Moore, "Approaches to Transition" (2020), and "Progressing Sustainability in the Context of Covid-19" (2020).

[16] Place based Climate Action Network, "Climate Commissions" (2020).

[17] See John Barry, "Building Back Better" (2020).

[18] Paul Goldrick-Kelly, "Community wealth building for the regions?" (2020).

[19] Development Trust Northern Ireland, *Time to Build an Inclusive Local Economy: A Charter for Change* (2018).

[20] Belfast City Council, "Minutes of City Growth and Regeneration Committee Meeting, 15th January, 2020" (2020).

[21] North Ayrshire Council, "Community Wealth Building" (2020).

[22] See Rethinking Poverty, *Road Map to a Green New Deal* (2019).

[23] See Tamara Steger and Milos Milicevic, "One Global Movement, Many Local Voices" (2014).

[24] See Rory Carroll and Severin Carrell, "'How much is a life worth?': Northern Irish community split over gold-mining plans" (2020).

[25] See John Barry, "Fracking in Northern Ireland" (2015).

[26] UNEP, "Gas Fracking: Can we safely squeeze the rocks?" (2012).

[27] See Jeroen Van Laer and Peter Van Aelst, "Internet and Social Movement Action Repertoires" (2010).

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