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Time to stop seeing climate action through the lens of economics

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Measures to combat climate change are almost invariably presented in piecemeal fashion and framed within a wider economic narrative. Consumers are encouraged to adopt an affordable suite of lifestyle alterations, politicians debate a range of punitive measures and incentives aimed at influencing individual and business behaviour, and businesses alter their investments and behaviour while shifting attention to technological innovation that will both help the environment and earn profits.

Ireland's 2021 National Climate Action Plan follows this pattern. It stresses the importance of cost effectiveness in policy implementation and the obligation to protect competitiveness and maximise employment.

Likewise the the narrative of the European Green Deal also largely refers to economic concerns and market-based mechanisms, namely moving away from a fossil fuel economy and pushing the adoption of carbon pricing.

In recent remarks the president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, explained that the deal "shows the value that this transformation will generate, and how public and private investment can – and will, of course – work together to make it a reality."

She emphasised the success of the existing emissions trading system in incentivising innovation and reducing emissions, and its potential across new sectors like construction and transport. Ultimately, she said, it is market-driven measures combined "with the right social balance" and investment that will allow the EU to "build for our future by design and choose a better, a healthier and a more prosperous way for the future".

Market economy

Critics of ambitious climate action also frame the debate within an economic narrative. They ground their arguments in familiarity, with the world they know and like and the market economy they wish to protect. Their vision of the future is the present, albeit with more unpredictable weather and collateral damage.

Unburdened by an unknown future, they argue for relying on technology to compensate for global warming rather than dramatic shifts in behaviour.

The right-wing American Cato Institute, founded by the Koch brothers, who earned their fortune in oil, sums up this position: “contrary to much of the rhetoric surrounding climate change, there is ample time to develop such technologies, which will require substantial capital investment by individuals.”

Certainly the EU and national governments should adhere to policies that lead to reduced carbon emissions and strengthen resilience to more extreme weather. But they must go further and visualise a new way of being.

It is needed to counter the growing evidence of what will happen if too little is done, whether by deliberate choice or inability to reach political agreements.

If we had this type of brave and unequivocal vision for Ireland it would describe a country 15 years from now where wind energy exports are set to drive economic growth; boat and train travel are far more common; short-haul flights are banned except for emergencies; and city centres are pedestrian-only.

We would speak of a future where supply chains for food and clothing are more localised, creating jobs, revitalising small farms, and regenerating rural and coastal communities; where food choice itself has altered significantly as vegan options are increasingly sophisticated and dependent on sea and land farms, as well as lab production.

We could envisage a country where water and energy costs and use amongst households and businesses are publicly regulated but also sustained through investment in infrastructure and R&D; where recycling clothing, electronics, appliances, and furniture is commonplace and a sought-after skill; where urban gardens and bee farms are popular and widespread; and where the rights to clean air and water are fiercely protected by the public.

Responsibility

Critically, in this vision for Ireland individual responsibility for collective welfare will have become normalised as a political idea and policy framework. Irish researchers, NGOs, and government representatives likewise participate in global networks of universities, civil society organisations, companies and government and international agencies whose collaboration has not only advanced innovation but also highlighted the importance of democratic participation in climate action and reducing inequality between and within nations.

This vision may seem unrealistic (and way too progressive for some) but at least it offers a constructive and comprehensive guide to the reformation required in lifestyles, aspirations, the labour market and business opportunities.

Despite the devastation in their country the German Greens’ response to the floods in Germany exemplifies the management and mitigate rather than the transformative approach that could help both better prepare the public for future weather events and engage in climate action.

This sort of hesitation will hinder confronting the climate crisis. It prevents politicians and the public alike from imagining an alternative and positive future – a vision which would light the way forward for us all, not just those able to escape to bunkers in New Zealand .

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