

# INTRODUCTION

*“Everybody talks about the weather but nobody does anything about it” MARK TWAIN*

Climate change<sup>1</sup> is an issue which has been rumbling away in the background for well over 30 years. It hit the global consciousness with force in 2006/2007 with the release of Al Gore’s film *An Inconvenient Truth*, and the IPCC and Stern reports. The issue then effectively disappeared from the mainstream media airwaves, to be replaced by the financial crash and global recession.

The Stern review pointed to a 75% chance that global temperatures would rise by between two and three degrees above the long-term average. In an interview at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2013, Lord Stern said: *“Looking back, I underestimated the risks. The planet and the atmosphere seem to be absorbing less carbon than we expected, and emissions are rising pretty strongly. Some of the effects are coming through more quickly than we thought then.”*

He now believes we are *“on track for something like four”*. Had he known the way the situation would evolve, he says, *“I think I would have been a bit more blunt. I would have been much more strong about the risks of a four- or five-degree rise.”*<sup>2</sup>

**The following statistics give an indication of where we stand at present:**

- Global greenhouse gas emissions increased by a record amount in 2010, according to estimates from the International Energy Agency.<sup>3</sup>
- Global emissions have been growing at an average of 3% each year since 2000. Ice in Greenland and Antarctica is melting much faster than predicted and global sea level has already risen by about 20 centimetres.<sup>4</sup>
- In January 2010, Ipsos MORI’s poll of British attitudes to climate change found that 91% of British people believed climate change was a reality; only 10% believed global warming is caused by natural forces; 87% believed people will become more concerned about climate change in the future; 49% felt that it is endangering the whole of life on Earth.<sup>5</sup>
- In January 2011, a Guardian/ICM poll found that 83% agreed that climate change poses an imminent or current threat, with just 14% saying it poses no threat at all; the survey found that 68% of respondents believed that humans cause climate change.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In these articles I use the terms climate change and global warming interchangeably

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2013/jan/27/nicholas-stern-climate-change-davos>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2011/may/29/carbon-emissions-nuclearpower>

<sup>4</sup> Figures released from the Global Carbon Project; *New Scientist*; 8th Dec. 2012; p. 11

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oltemId=2552>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/interactive/2011/jan/31/climate-change-poll>

- According to the Eurobarometer of 2010,<sup>7</sup> Irish people consider climate change much less of a priority (38%) for the EU than some of our neighbours such as Sweden (70%), Denmark (67%) or Austria (62%). Ireland ranks in the lower half of EU countries for this question, with the EU average being 44%. Respondents were also asked whether they thought that the EU is indispensable in tackling global problems such as climate change. The answers showed that fewer people in Ireland than in any other EU country thought so - just 47% of Irish people agreed that EU action was key, while the EU average was 75%, with many countries scoring even higher. And the survey showed that there had been a sharp increase in the number of Irish people putting economic growth above protection of the environment. More than 60% of Irish people answered “Yes” when asked whether “*Economic growth must be a priority for Ireland, even if it affects the environment.*” This compares with 44% for the same question in Spring 2008.
- Ireland’s greenhouse gas emissions fell by 6.7% in 2011, according to a report carried out by the Environmental Protection Agency. Energy, residential, industry and commercial emissions showed the biggest decreases. Agriculture remained the single biggest contributor to overall emissions, making up 32% of the total. Reasons for the 2011 reduction include mild winter weather, the recession and consequent drop in cement production, the increase in the use of wind energy, and changes in vehicle taxation to encourage the use of lower emissions vehicles. EPA Director General, Dara Lynott welcomed the news, but said recession-induced reductions do not mean environmental pressures are being managed in a sustainable way.<sup>8</sup>
- Under a 2009 EU law, member states agreed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from sectors including agriculture, transport, buildings and waste by 10% on 2005 levels over the period 2013-2020. It is up to national governments to implement policies and measures to limit emissions from these sectors. Richer countries, measured in terms of GDP per capita, took on higher targets and Ireland is at the top of the table with an obligation to cut its emissions by 20% over the period. Just two other countries, Denmark and Luxembourg, have a 20% obligation. In a report published at the beginning of 2013, the EPA confirmed that Ireland will miss its targets within five years. Buying carbon credits to cover the resulting shortfall will cost anywhere between €50m and €300m, depending on what further steps the country takes to cut its emissions in the relevant sectors. Environment Minister, Phil Hogan, published a draft climate bill at the end of February 2013, setting out some ways that the country may go about cutting its emissions. But the absence of any emissions targets from the bill was criticised by environmental groups. EU countries have not yet agreed overall decarbonisation targets for beyond 2020 but the European Commission has proposed emissions drop by 80% on 1990 levels by 2050. The UK has already signed an 80% target into law.<sup>9</sup>

Yet, if you were an alien fresh from another planet, walking the streets of Bantry, watching what’s going on, listening to the news, reading the papers and chatting in the local pub, you would certainly know that there’s a problem with jobs and the economy, you would probably hear people giving out about the government and the bankers, but you would be very unlikely to pick up any mention of global warming or climate change. You might hear people complaining about the awful wet weather, and where have our summers gone, or high energy prices, but there’d be no mention of greenhouse emissions, carbon footprint or sea level rises. A few years ago, maybe, but not now.

So why the silence?

According to Mike Hulme (2009)<sup>10</sup> climate change has emerged as a phenomenon which poses challenges on an unprecedented scale. But it is not a problem waiting for a solution. It is an environmental, cultural and political phenomenon which is reshaping the way we think about ourselves, our societies and humanity’s place on Earth.

And it is an intangible, un-situated risk. Risk perceptions are socially constructed, with different groups

<sup>7</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/ireland/press\\_office/news\\_of\\_the\\_day/eurobarometer-report-ireland\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/ireland/press_office/news_of_the_day/eurobarometer-report-ireland_en.htm)

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.rte.ie/news/2012/1012/341329-environment-emissions/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.thejournal.ie/shortfall-in-greenhouse-gas-emissions-target-may-cost-ireland-e300m-818053-Mar2013/>

<sup>10</sup> M. Hulme (2009) *Why we Disagree about Climate Change*

prone to take notice of, fear and amplify some risks, while ignoring, discounting or attenuating others. How the risks are perceived by the public will also depend on the particular contexts that people find themselves in: their personal experience of climatic danger; the way their affective and analytical reasonings operate; their placement of trust in experts; their values and world-views. Therefore, we cannot simply expect scientific experts to conduct and communicate climate risk assessments and that individuals and social groups will consequently act to reduce those risks.

The authors of *Positive Energy (2007)*<sup>11</sup> say it is not possible to claim that a majority of the public believes that tackling climate change is a more urgent priority than other issues. And they don't think it is possible to claim that most people are fully aware of how they are contributing to the problem – with many unaware of the impact of domestic energy use, or of what practical steps they can take to mitigate it. And even more importantly, it remains impossible to claim that a large majority of the public feels responsible to act or is empowered to do so. The burden of responsibility is still frequently assigned to governments, industry and other countries, while far too many people still say that there is little meaningful action on climate change that they can take themselves.

According to Anthony Giddens (2009),<sup>12</sup> a threshold has been crossed; most political leaders are now well aware of the hazards posed by climate change and the need to respond to them. Yet this is just the first wave. The second wave must involve *“embedding it in our institutions and in the everyday concerns of citizens.”* Here, he says, there is a great deal of work to be done - to be able to mitigate climate change, members of the public have to be on board, and most at the moment are not.

And Giddens states that *“we have no politics of climate change”*. We do not have a developed analysis of the political innovations that have to be made if our aspirations to limit global warming are to become real, which is a *“strange and indefensible absence”*. The politics of climate change has to cope with what he calls Giddens's Paradox,<sup>13</sup> which goes as follows:

*“Since the dangers posed by global warming aren't tangible, immediate or visible in the course of day-to-day life, however awesome they appear, many will sit on their hands and do nothing of a concrete nature about them. Yet waiting until they become visible and acute before being stirred to serious action will, by definition, be too late.”*

Giddens claims that this paradox affects almost every aspect of current reactions to climate change. It is the reason why, for many citizens, climate change is a back-of-the-mind issue rather than a front-of-the-mind one. Attitude surveys show that most of the public accept that global warming is a major threat; yet only a few are willing to alter their lives in any significant way as a result. He claims that among elites, climate change lends itself to gestural politics – grandiose-sounding plans largely empty of content.

\* \* \* \* \*

In 1999, my ex-partner, Quentin Gargan, and I bought a 34-acre hill farm near Bantry, Co. Cork. Over the years, both of us had been active on various environmental campaigns and we felt it was high time that we walked our talk – enough whining, more action. We wanted to reduce our carbon footprint and then show people how we did it.

Together with our young son Luke, we built a comfortable straw bale home, overlooking Bantry Bay, powered by a wind generator, solar panels, a micro-hydro turbine, and a wood-burning stove, and for ten years we produced a lot of our own food.

We were both involved in a number of local initiatives aimed at encouraging the use of alternative energy

---

<sup>11</sup> S. Retallack, T. Lawrence, & M. Lockwood (2007) *Positive Energy*; p. 53

<sup>12</sup> A. Giddens (2009); *The Politics of Climate Change*; p. 4

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*; p. 2

and the cutting of greenhouse gases, including the setting up of the West Cork Energy Trust (a Warmer Homes Scheme providing home insulation and advice to the disadvantaged) and, for a number of years, the organisation of an Energy Tent in the Bantry Agricultural Show. Quentin ran as a Green Party candidate in the 2007 General Election. In the early years, we organised a number of open days on our farm, and our building project was described in various newspaper articles.

In 2006, Luke, then only three years old, and I, featured at the very end of the peak oil documentary “*A Crude Awakening*” - just the two of us in our woolly jumpers, hoeing the herb garden and bringing in the goats, our wind generator blowing gently behind our Hobbit-like straw bale retreat, amber sun setting over the pastoral landscape. After scenes of global devastation and prophecies of impending doom and destruction, I think we were meant to be a symbol of hope - possibly even one of the solutions. Gawd help us, we weren't even hoeing the vegetable patch.....

That is when I began to wonder if all was well in my world.

And the fact that, as far as we could see, Quentin and I were failing miserably in our local attempts to change hearts and minds and to encourage others to lower their own carbon footprints didn't help. This is when I started to doubt whether our kind of campaigning was really up to the job of saving the planet. And our failures seem to be reflected elsewhere. While most people seem to know more about global warming, and, by and large, they understand the problem, they appreciate that changes need to be made, and, when asked, they say they are willing to do more and go further, their actual behaviour lags well behind intentions - a large gap exists between rhetoric and action. Most people prefer to tweak the margins of their lifestyles and do not perceive a need for a fundamental shift in behaviour. And they do not seem to be internalising the issue, but rather are mentally re-directing it to other people, places and times.

In 2007, I set out on a journey of discovery, to try and understand this reaction (or lack of), and to answer the question “*Why don't they get it?*”

The quest involved a lot of reading, watching and listening, which, over time, led to much soul searching and a great stretching of the mind. The question gradually turned around and became “*Why don't we get it?*”

My mission eventually led to this series of 21 articles which look at human behaviour and how it might relate to climate change, and ask if environmental and climate campaigners have got it wrong by not taking the vagaries of the human mind into account.

As you will see from the bibliography, I have read, and continue to read, a lot of books about the issue. Inevitably, before launching into each volume, I leaf through the final chapter. I do this in the vain hope that the author's last words will include the silver bullet - the magic solution that will solve all our climate woes. Of course, I never get what I want, and readers of these articles, may also feel a tad deflated and a little let down, as I too am unable to provide the panacea to our ills.

After all, the problem is large and unless someone comes up with an incredible invention that sucks carbon out of the atmosphere without costing the earth, we have to admit that there is probably no easy way out and no simple solution. The world's response will continue to be clumsy and convoluted. However this doesn't mean that we, on the ground, shouldn't continue to do our bit. We just need to do it better - to take stock of our approach, understand how human behaviour works, evaluate what's effective and what isn't, and be open to any changes that may need to be made along the way. Sounds easy.....

Hopefully the following articles will help in the process, and if nothing else will raise questions, give food for thought and provide a basis for future discussion, both within the environmental movement and beyond.