

**Institute of International and European Affairs,
Dublin**

Lunchtime Talk by John Ashton, 14 January 2015

**Chaired by Eamon Ryan, Leader of the Irish Green
Party**

Seven Stairs to Paris

***Climate Change, and the Politics of Loss and Renewal
in Europe***

- 1. Thank you Eamon. It's an honour to be here.**
- 2. This Institute is a beacon of cosmopolitan discourse in Ireland and across Europe. A beacon, it must be said, in a dark sky that just got a bit darker over the last few days. So it's wonderful today to feel the warmth of your fire and to be able to throw a few logs of my own on top of it.**
- 3. I've always thought of myself as British.**
- 4. But the moment I first set foot in Ireland, too late in my life, I knew that here I am not British. Here I can never be British. Here in Ireland I am English.**

- 5. I now come often to Ireland. I look forward to each visit. And each time I step off the plane I offer silent thanks for the gift you have given me. The gift of knowing myself better, because of course I was English all along.**
- 6. English *and* British. English *and* European. British and European by virtue of being English.**
- 7. You cannot know yourself until you have seen yourself through your neighbour's eyes.**
- 8. And here's something else I owe your country.**
- 9. One Saturday night two years ago, I found myself -thanks to Eamon but it's a long story - in the village of Ballyvaughan in County Clare, at the edge of The Burren, that haunting landscape of creviced limestone just across the bay from Galway. I remember the lights of Galway twinkling like jewels on the water.**
- 10. But I should be more precise. My exact location for much of that night was the front parlour of O'Loclainn's Whiskey Bar in Ballyvaughan.**
- 11. The room was packed. Nobody could get to the bar. Tumblers of Green Spot were being ferried to and fro in hands raised above a sea**

of heads, like those precious fragments of bitten off leaf carried aloft by processions of ants in a David Attenborough documentary.

12. There were a few interlopers like me. But most of the patrons were local. They were not only there for the whiskey. They were there to sing. My God, did they sing. They never stopped singing, for hour after hour.

13. Bawdy songs, songs of the seasons, songs of loss and disappointment, songs of prodigality and redemption. Even a heart-rending ballad about a property speculator and his comeuppance.

14. Everybody knew the words to that one!

15. Then suddenly a hush descended. From this Saturday night congregation there rose a reverential chorus:

And it's three score and ten, boys and men.....

[now singing]

*And it's three score and ten, boys and men
Were lost from Grimsby Town
From Yarmouth down to Scarborough
Many hundreds more were drowned*

- 16. It was the chorus to a song I'd last heard forty years before, in a seaman's pub, the Baltic Tavern, now long gone, on the Quayside in Newcastle upon Tyne. I used to go there every Friday evening to hear old timers singing anthems of the sea.**

- 17. The song I heard again in O'Loclainn's tells of a vicious storm that swept like a scythe down the North Sea one February night in 1889.**

- 18. Up and down the coast, as dawn broke, mothers, wives, and sweethearts found themselves staring down a long dark corridor of grief and destitution. In those days the loss of a breadwinner could easily fling you into the workhouse, a prospect equally dreaded on either side of the Irish Sea.**

- 19. Centuries of shared history have, alas, divided the Irish and the English as often as they have brought us together. You are perhaps more conscious of that than we are. We English would do well to reflect more than we have on the footprints we have left on Irish soil and in the Irish imagination.**

- 20. Yet that night on the western edge of Ireland men and women of The Burren reached across time and space in grief for the lost sons of England's eastern shores a century before.**

- 21. We are all peoples of the sea.**
- 22. What we have in common matters more in the reckoning than what divides us.**
- 23. And that's a good place from which to look at climate change.**
- 24. Ten months from now in Paris representatives of every government in the world will gather at the invitation of President Hollande on behalf of the United Nations.**
- 25. They will try to agree on the promises we should make to each other in order to avoid dangerous climate change; try to redeem the failure of our last attempt to do that, in Copenhagen five years ago.**
- 26. Whatever unfolds in Paris will be momentous. Whether the conference succeeds or fails it will tell us something crucial about the modern human condition.**
- 27. No project can succeed unless those who embark on it really know what they are attempting and why.**
- 28. My parents' generation built what became the European Union to banish war from our continent.**

- 29. They knew that they were embarking on an ascent. They were going to learn the lessons of the past to build a better future. They were laying the foundation, they hoped, for a Europe of peace and justice, a Europe of ever better rewards for honest work, where a portion of those rewards would be reinvested in the continuing struggle against want, idleness, ignorance, squalor and disease.**
- 30. With our climate project, do we really know what we are embarking on and why?**
- 31. Well, this too is an ascent so now climb the first stair.**
- 32. You look around. People stride purposefully in all directions, heads down, eyes locked onto the featureless ground at their feet. You peer at their faces and get a shock. Each of these eccentric folk looks the same. Each looks exactly like you.**
- 33. “Excuse me, about climate change....?” you enquire as one rushes by. With hardly a broken stride the answer flies back: “That’s environment, over there”. You can’t see what they are pointing at, but before you can ask, they’re off.**
- 34. The environment, as we conceive it, is not about *us*. It is *outside us*.**

- 35. Thanks to agriculture, the journey from the land to the city, prevailing interpretations of scripture (not least after the eclipse of Celtic Christianity) and then, later, thanks to Reformation Humanism and the Enlightenment, we see ourselves as separate from the environment. We assert dominion over the environment, which is there to meet our needs and be moulded to our ends.**
- 36. A question about the environment can only be a question about what we should do. It cannot be a question about who we are.**
- 37. For ten thousand generations we have walked this earth. Never in all that time have we faced a question that is more about who we are than climate change. Only if we treat it as a question about who we are can we summon the will to do what we have to do.**
- 38. Climate change asks: are we curious about the world and each other?**
- 39. Climate change asks: are we willing to accept the consequences of our actions?**
- 40. Climate change asks: are will still serious about peace and justice, better rewards for honest work, the struggle against poverty?**
- 41. Climate change asks: are we going to choose cooperation not conflict? Because**

that really is the choice and we have to decide now.

42. So if anyone says to you: “climate change is about the environment”, however high and mighty they may be, they are being either ignorant or disingenuous.

43. Box their ears, and climb higher, climb the second stair.

44. You have entered a labyrinth of corridors and meeting rooms. People huddle in conspiratorial knots, clutching scraps of paper, printed in a variety of languages, to match the tongues in which they are arguing with each other. At the heart of the labyrinth is a cavernous chamber where people sit obediently in rows, each behind a little flag and a microphone.

45. You approach one of the huddled groups. This time you get a more friendly answer to your question.

46. “We are the Diplomats and climate change is about The Text” they declare. “You’ve come the right place. The negotiation of text is our job.”

47. Climate change is not about the negotiation of text.

48. National interests, fixed in national politics, set the instructions negotiators carry into the chamber and therefore they fix the level of ambition any agreed text can encompass. The level of ambition currently compatible with the way many parties to the negotiations see their national interests is too low to deal with this problem. No amount of text can make up for that. Once you get down to text, it is too late.

49. But climate change *is* about diplomacy.

50. Only through diplomacy engaging with the political forces shaping other nations and our own can we refocus perceptions of core interests, align them with the outcome we need, and raise the limit of attainable ambition.

51. Yes, diplomats can negotiate text but so can other officials. Those diplomats who think the text is what they should mainly be attending to should think more deeply.

52. But the diplomats do have good intentions. They are making an effort. They do not deserve to have their ears boxed. So thank them, then climb higher.

53. Climb the third stair.

54. Here are some eager looking people. They catch your eye as if waiting for a challenge. “We are the Engineers, Technologists, and Innovators,” they announce. “Climate change is about energy and we are the people to fix it”.

55. “What you need” they explain, “is an energy system free of carbon emissions, within a generation. We can build that. You can afford it. It will improve your health, cut your bills, free you from exploitative suppliers, protect you from price shocks.”

56. Nothing these people tell you is wrong. They too have good intentions and are making an effort. So thank them for their counsel and don’t box their ears.

57. But just because we know how to do something does not mean we do it. Otherwise, there would be no more hunger, because we certainly know how to grow enough food to feed everybody.

58. You have not yet heard what you really need to know. So climb higher. Climb the fourth stair.

59. The air is getting rarefied. Around you are mountains. Snowflakes tickle your cheeks. You deduce from the sign above a nearby restaurant that you are in a town called Davos.

- 60. Diners emerge. They are radiating bonhomie. You put your question.**
- 61. “Climate change?” they exclaim. “Why, that’s a matter for business. You should have come to us in the first place. Those people bending your ear on the stair below, they work for us. Climate change is a matter for business and we are the Captains of Finance and Industry.”**
- 62. “Climate change is about the allocation of capital. We decide that. The post-carbon economy will be built if at all through our choices. There couldn’t be a better time, with interest rates low and capital in abundance looking for safe returns.”**
- 63. Some of these jovial fellows (they are mostly men) seem oddly hunched up. “That’s just the shareholders on our backs” they explain, not quite meeting your eye. But don’t worry. Our shoulders are broad. We’ll do our best to get you where you need to go”.**
- 64. Business until recently underestimated climate risk.**
- 65. Without climate security there cannot be food, water or energy security. Without food, water and energy security there cannot be**

stability. Without stability business cannot invest and cannot thrive.

- 66. Whether it hits your infrastructure, your workforce, your supply chains, your cost of capital, your customers' purchasing power, or simply unleashes macroeconomic shocks, climate risk is bad news.**
- 67. If you thought systemic risk in the financial system was as bad as it gets, you haven't got your head round climate risk. But this penny is now dropping and that along with the oil price will no doubt be in the air at the real Davos later this month.**
- 68. Business still underestimates climate policy risk.**
- 69. Policy shapes the markets that business invests into.**
- 70. Policy has killed the old utility business model, by driving down the cost of renewables. Look at today's Financial Times [hold up full page article: "US utilities fear death spiral].**
- 71. Policy will tilt the balance of risk and reward increasingly away from fossil energy as governments try harder to keep their climate promises and make new ones.**

- 72. Businesses exposed to climate risk will demand stronger policy.**
- 73. Businesses built around carbon-free energy will increasingly demand stronger policy.**
- 74. Businesses not locked through their business models into fossil energy will want to end up on the winning side and will welcome stronger policy.**
- 75. Policy may or may not eventually do enough. But believe me the pressure of policy is not going to go away, and it will get a lot stronger than it is at the moment - even if the price of oil does not soon pick up again.**
- 76. Businesses that bet against the forcing by policy of carbon emissions out of the energy system within a generation make a reckless gamble.**
- 77. And fossil energy businesses, whistling to keep up their own spirits and those of their shareholders, make a reckless gamble when, in denial of this possibility, they reject the devastating case that is now quite rightly being made about unburnable carbon.**
- 78. It's hard for them not to do anything other than whistle because if some of their assets are going to stay in the ground, they are not**

worth as much as they need investors to think.

79. Oil and gas companies in particular are squeezed in a three way vice. Investors and regulators will want to derisk unburnable carbon and future climate policy. New resources cost ever more to bring to market. And now low oil prices are hitting revenue and collapsing the business case for previously planned investments.
80. A business model that has long been a mainstay of the global economy is coming under extreme pressure. The implications reach well beyond energy - not least to the pensions industry that has hitherto seen oil and gas as a safe as houses bet.
81. And by the way, outside the US, there won't be much fracking, for oil or gas. Even in the US the fracking bonanza could yet end in tears.
82. In oil and gas, the bulls have had it their own way since the Rockefeller days. Now here come the bears, says Eddie O'Connor¹ who is well known in this city, here come the bears to chase the bulls away.

¹ Eddie O'Connor and Adam Bruce: On Oil, Renewables, and Pension Funds, January 2015: www.mainstreamrp.com

- 83. But if as a taxpayer you think only banks claim to be too big to fail, you may be in for an unpleasant surprise.**
- 84. Staying a step ahead of this transition won't be easy for business. But it will be a lot easier than not staying ahead of it.**
- 85. So leave the diners to reflect on that in the alpine air. No need to box their ears: their task is hard enough as it is. Climb higher. Climb the fifth step.**
- 86. Up here the light is white and dazzling. You are greeted by soberly dressed technocrats. "You probably think this place looks unreal", they say. "That's because you have left reality behind. You are now in the economy, and you are in good hands. We are the Economists, and we are the only people who know our way around here."**
- 87. "The energy system is the foundation of the economy. That's what the industrial revolution was about. We harnessed the potential of fossil energy, which became embedded in the way the entire economy works, the whole pattern of production and consumption."**
- 88. "What we have at the moment is a high carbon growth model. If we want to fix the climate we must replace it with a completely**

new growth model, a carbon neutral one. That's a tough job. You're going to have to put us in charge."

89. Economists have been in charge for a long time. Not wanting to look economically illiterate, the politicians (whom we'll meet in a moment) long ago surrendered to them.

90. Economists, it turns out, know rather less than we thought they did about how the real economy works. They don't understand shocks, they don't understand climate and resource stress, and they don't fully understand growth.

91. In Britain the Office of Budgetary Responsibility every six months announces its forecast for growth in the British economy over the next cycle. Then it explains why the growth we got over the last one turned out so different from the previous forecast. The British economy is one sixth smaller today than most economists were telling us until 2008 it would be by now.

92. Economists told us to put a price on carbon. That helps drive change at the margin in a model. In real life, we need structural change not marginal change; politics not the market limits the ambition inherent in any carbon price; and even if the price were

optimal it would be drowned out in the boardroom by other conflicting signals.

- 93. Don't get me wrong. I'm not against a carbon price. I am hugely in favour of resuscitating the European Emissions Trading Scheme. But this and similar mechanisms can never make more than secondary contribution to the transition. The cost of capital for low carbon infrastructure matters much more, for example, than the carbon price.**
- 94. Some economists have made outstanding contributions to our understanding of climate change, and some are now dedicating their careers to that endeavor. But the real gaps are in economics itself, not in climate economics. The dominant neoclassical doctrine has little of value to tell us about how to use policy to drive rapid transformational change of the kind we need across the whole economy.**
- 95. We do however know already that we must get moving straight away, and that for almost all economies the costs of the transition are manageable and probably exceeded by the benefits, even in the short term.**
- 96. You haven't the heart to box the economists' ears and in any case they are now arguing with each other. You'd better**

leave them to it and climb higher. Climb the sixth stair.

97. A friendly hand reaches down and pulls you up. Its owner wears a rosette, like everybody else up here.

98. “We are the Politicians”, they announce. “Climate change is not about diplomacy or energy or capital or economics. Climate change like everything else is all about power.”

99. “Yes, energy is the foundation of the economy. But that’s where power has its roots, where the relations of power in society are fixed. There was a once a great storyteller called Marx who understood that.”

100. “A new energy system means new power relations. Yes we can afford the transition overall. And there will be many winners. But - as Eamon knows all too well - the winners never say thank you. And there will be losers too, who will certainly blame us for their plight. Some may have a reasonable case, and others will be too powerful for us to ignore.”

101. “We’re not sure this can be done” they conclude. “We politicians are not exactly flavour of the month right now. People don’t trust us as much as they should, and that will

make it harder. But if you want the climate fixed, you still need us in charge. And if we find we haven't done enough, we can always pretend we have".

102. Politics is how we make choices together. It's the only way we have to do that.

103. In my lifetime, we have never been more divided than we are now. Only politics can bring us back together.

104. In my lifetime, we have never been more lost than we are now. Globalization has left us disoriented and fearful, easy prey for populists, demagogues, false prophets, and pied pipers, all offering illusions of simplicity in a complex world.

105. We need politics to remind us of where we really came from. We need politics to sing to us of where we now must go.

106. But politics has forgotten how to sing. It has sold its harp for tuppence in the market. How can we make choices if the only available choice is what we are told the market demands?

107. Politicians have stopped doing politics.

108. Those who have grown used to power now just feel entitled to it and don't even try.

Those who are still trying - and Eamon nobody is trying harder than you and your counterparts across the green movement - you have unfortunately not found a voice that can stir the hearts of the people.

109. Those who have grown used to power now do policy not politics. They confuse the headlines with the people they aspire to lead because the headlines are easier to understand and manipulate. When reality and orthodoxy conflict, it is reality that must be mistaken.

110. In Ireland and in Britain we are being told the same story. Let's make our country the best place in Europe to do business.

111. It's yesterday's story. There is no story about how we will reconnect the economy to the crumbling ecological base, how we will fix the climate, how we will protect against systemic risk, how we will contain the speculative economy and rebuild the real economy, how we will repair the broken social contract and the contract between generations, how we will breathe new life and purpose into a Europe that we need today more than ever but that has run out of political steam.

112. Yes, we have come almost to the heart of the matter. Climate change is about politics before it is about anything else.

113. But politics is broken. It's going to take a lot of politics to fix the climate. We're going to have to fix politics at the same time.

114. Warily now, with no strength to box anyone's ears, you come to the seventh stair. You take a deep breath and you climb higher, for the last time.

115. *The end of all our exploring is to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time,* wrote T S Eliot.

116. Around you, on all sides, are the same people you met when you started out.

117. They have stopped striding. They stand, like statues, expectantly.

118. They have stopped staring fixedly at the featureless ground. They stare fixedly at you.

119. And as you stare back, they slowly melt away, leaving behind nothing but what was there all along, leaving you staring into your own soul.

[Pause]

120. Your soul says to you: “the night is dark but only by knowing darkness can you know the light”.

121. Your soul says to you: “our future is not what happens to us. It is what we build together”.

122. Your soul says to you: “to build our future we must first remember our past”.

123. Your soul says to you: “our past is full of treasure because it is full of songs.”

124. Nowhere - nowhere in the whole wide world - are there more songs than there are here in Ireland.

125. We English, having lost our songs, tried to take away yours. Songs are subversive. Queen Elizabeth the First rounded up our travelling Irish bards and, it is said, she burned their harps. But when we persecuted you for singing of Ireland itself you turned towards the light² and softly sang your secret song of Roisin Dubh.

126. Only when the oppressor forbids you to utter your own name can you know your own true strength and beauty.

² An allusion suggested by the poem Tobar Phadraic, from *River Flow: New and Selected Poems* by David Whyte

127. Your songs buried themselves under the ground. New struggles superceded old ones and new songs were written for them. Much of your politics today is locked into itself by those once new songs, now themselves from another time.

128. But the old songs just buried themselves deeper. If we dig, we can still find them.

129. The old songs tell us we live not by our individualistic choices in some imagined market. We live only through each other.

130. The old songs tell us that what we call the environment never was separate from us and we never had dominion over it. We are part of it and it is inherent in us. Only through all that surrounds us can we know ourselves.

131. This ancient wisdom is Ireland's greatest asset.

132. With this ancient wisdom, Ireland can be a leader not a follower in fixing the climate.

133. With this ancient wisdom Ireland can be a leader not a follower in renewing politics not just here in Ireland but across Europe.

134. With this ancient wisdom there is no limit to what the people of Ireland can choose to do

together, no limit to what we can all accomplish together.

135. The late Seamus Heaney understood this. He dug deep down into the Irish soil when he wrote:

And then there was St Kevin and the blackbird.

The saint is kneeling, arms stretched out, inside

His cell, but the cell is narrow, so

*One turned-up palm is out the window, stiff
As a crossbeam, when a blackbird lands
And lays in it and settles down to nest.*

*Kevin feels the warm eggs, the small breast,
the tucked*

*Neat head and claws and, finding himself
linked*

Into the network of eternal life,

*Is moved to pity: now he must hold his hand
Like a branch out in the sun and rain for
weeks*

*Until the young are hatched and fledged and
flown.*

*And since the whole thing's imagined
anyhow,*

Imagine being Kevin. Which is he?

Self-forgetful or in agony all the time

***From the neck on out down through his
hurting forearms?
Are his fingers sleeping? Does he still feel his
knees?
Or has the shut-eyed blank of underearth
Crept up through him? Is there distance in his
head?
Alone and mirrored clear in love's deep river,
'To labour and not to seek reward,' he prays,
A prayer his body makes entirely
For he has forgotten self, forgotten bird
And on the riverbank forgotten the river's
name.***