

Mary Robinson Lecture

Trinity College Dublin, 15th February 2017

Climate Justice: preserving dignity in the face of adversity

It is a pleasure to be back in Trinity College for this annual lecture on climate justice. With each passing year the diversity of backgrounds and disciplines attending seems to increase. I know I have the students of the Masters in Development Practice here today, taking this lecture as part of your climate justice module. The module was the first of its kind here in Ireland and I am delighted that it continues as a mainstay of this innovative master's programme. I would also like to say a warm hello to the students joining us from Glasgow Caledonian University, home of the Centre for Climate Justice and a dedicated M.Sc in Climate Justice. I am heartened by the dedication of students and staff grappling with issues of equity and justice that lie at the heart of the fight against climate change.

When I started my studies here in Trinity College Dublin, one could have been forgiven for thinking we were on the brink of a global catastrophe. Perhaps you can relate? In many ways, the world was still coming to terms with the aftermath of the Second World War, the Holocaust and the first use of nuclear weapons against civilians. In Africa and elsewhere, the process of decolonisation was a complex

- and at times painful - experience for people seeking to find their feet and chart a course forward in their newfound independence.

In the midst of such uncertain times, it can be hard to envisage a common sense of global citizenship and shared humanity. However, these times of uncertainty bring with them opportunity for change – the nature of that change is determined by the character of the people.

I'm reminded, not for the first time, of a wonderful moment in W. B. Yeats's *Autobiographies* when he speaks of his political apprenticeship in Ireland. It was during the time of Charles Stewart Parnell, the start of the Gaelic League, and the beginnings of the Literary Movement. A conviction came over Yeats—so he tells us—that Ireland was, at that moment, “soft wax.” That it was going to remain “soft wax” for some years to come. It's an image of hope and change and I put it before you today because it suggests the possibilities of identifying an historic moment, a moment when, despite all the difficulties, it seems that we can change things. When situations no longer seem fixed. When the unyielding, the durable, the intractable suddenly yields. Today, as in the early 1960s, we live in a deeply troubled world - anxious about human security, swayed by the shallow yearnings of populism and shifting towards increasingly insular and myopic national policymaking.

For all the hardships and dangers of our particular political moment, there is that element of the pliable and possible about it—if we can change our minds and our hearts about what needs to be done and our responsibility to do it.

To help ensure this, the world needs a groundswell of people equipped, not only with the knowledge to devise solutions to the climate crisis, but also the vision to see that all people must be included in, and empowered by, the global response to the great challenges of our time. This is a challenge that you here today must take up.

When first drafted, the United Nation's Charter and the Universal Declaration for Human Rights offered an unprecedented vision of international cooperation, hope and human solidarity. Yet, visionary as she was, I wonder if Eleanor Roosevelt, when she was leading the drafting committee in developing the Universal Declaration, could ever have imagined a transformative global empowerment programme of the scope and ambition of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Similarly, could the participants at the first UN General Assembly have envisaged the type of global solidarity of 195 countries witnessed in the conclusion of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change?

It is important to remember that, thanks in large part to constructive and open multilateralism we have found ways to cooperate, we have

lifted many lives out of poverty, we have avoided major conflict and we have secured peace. But we still have a long way to go – and recent events remind us of how fragile that progress is. How hard we need to continue to work- to both protect and accelerate that progress, while sharing it more fairly – so that all people have equal opportunity.

I came to climate justice because, for me, it embodies both parts of a moral argument to act on climate change: being on the side of those who are suffering most, while also ensuring that they don't suffer further as the world takes action on climate change, and that they share the benefits of a world powered by renewable energy.

I am not a climate scientist – but I have endeavoured to spend my life in the service of those marginalised or made vulnerable by discrimination because of gender, race or poverty. I take as my guide Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which begins “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights”. It is important to note, however, that the Declaration, signed in 1948, and the two International Human Rights Covenants, adopted in 1966, do not include any reference to a right to a healthy environment.

When I had the honour to serve as UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, from 1997 to 2002, climate change was not at the front of my mind. It was through my later work on human rights in

Africa that I came to understand that any advances in development were threatened by the impacts of climate change.

I would meet women from agricultural communities in Rwanda, Liberia or Malawi and hear the same tales – the seasons are changing, the rains don't come as they used to. Communities no longer knew when to plant and when to harvest. These shifting seasons were having disastrous impacts on their food security and resilience. I recall Constance Okollet, a farmer from Uganda, telling me how she relied on the sale of a surplus from their small agricultural yield to pay essentials for her family - education, fuel, healthcare, clothes. Now, the changing climate threatened her family's basic subsistence. In listening, a great injustice became clear to me – the impacts of climate change are felt first, and hardest, by those communities with the least responsibility for the crisis and with the least capacity to respond or adapt.

Climate Justice is the antithesis of the rise of populism and the resultant myopic, inward looking decision making. The existential threat of climate change confronts us with our global interdependence. In order to avoid the worst impacts of climate change and achieve the ultimate goal of the Paris Agreement – *to hold the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above preindustrial levels and pursuing efforts to limit the*

*temperature increase to 1.5°C above preindustrial levels*¹ – world leaders must act in solidarity, motivated by an enlightened self-interest.

Leaders must also learn to listen to those living on the front lines of climate change and act accordingly. People like my friend Constance in Uganda, or Ursula Rakova, a courageous woman from a small atoll called the Carteret Islands near Papua New Guinea. Faced with rising sea levels and the threat of increasingly devastating storm surges from more frequent tropical storms, Ursula has endeavoured to organise her people and assist them in moving from their island atoll home to mainland Papua New Guinea, where they will be safer. But this means leaving their ancestral home behind and taking on the challenge of integrating into a new community and a new way of life. The stories of Constance and Ursula tell us that our current way of life is flawed and unsustainable. They also speak to the capacity of people to rise above adversity with dignity and courage and we should take heart from their example.

The 2030 Agenda envisages a *‘world of universal respect for human rights and human dignity, the rule of law, justice, equality and non-discrimination; of respect for race, ethnicity and cultural diversity; and of equal opportunity permitting the full realization of human potential and contributing to shared prosperity’*. This is the world we

¹ United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (2015) Adoption of the Paris Agreement (Decision 1/CP.21) 21st Conference of the Parties, Paris: United Nations.

can create; building on what we have achieved to date and being determined to forge a bright future for generations to come. Justice, dignity and the rule of law are foundational values that can shape a resilient world – able to withstand shocks and outbreaks of violence. Able to protect citizens and to uphold rights.

Agenda 2030 draws the links between climate change and sustainable development. The Sustainable Development Goals are universal and apply to all countries. We cannot have peaceful and prosperous societies without taking urgent action on climate change. We know that the commitments made by most countries before Paris to take action on climate change are insufficient, and leave us on a pathway to at least 3°C warming above pre industrial levels, which would be a catastrophe².

Science tells us that we cannot go on burning fossil fuels to power our societies. We can see that the industrial revolution, the transition that ushered in the prosperity in which we in developed countries now live, left billions of people behind. I'm sure you are familiar with Oxfam's recent statistic that just 8 men own the same wealth as 3.6 billion of the poorest people on earth³ - global inequality is rapidly worsening. Business as usual, the fossil-fuel

² World Resources Institute (2015), Why Are INDC Studies Reaching Different Temperature Estimates? Available at: <http://www.wri.org/blog/2015/11/insider-why-are-indc-studies-reaching-different-temperature-estimates> [Accessed: 13/02/2017]

³ Oxfam (2017), Just 8 men own same wealth as half the world. Available at: <https://www.oxfam.org/en/pressroom/pressreleases/2017-01-16/just-8-men-own-same-wealth-half-world> [Accessed: 13/02/2017]

based development paradigm, is driving the world towards large scale, catastrophic climate change and increasing inequality.

However, the challenge we face is not simply about leaving fossil fuels in the ground. In fact, weaning the industrialised world off fossil fuels is perhaps the easier puzzle to solve, but must be done with more urgency. Avoiding the most devastating impacts of climate change while enabling development for all people is a greater challenge. The overriding priority for developing countries is development.

Let us consider the case of access to energy. Development requires energy and yet in our world today 1.2 billion people are without access to electricity⁴. Those of us living and working throughout the developed world take access to modern energy for granted. We forget, or perhaps have never known, the drudgery that access to energy removes from daily life. Energy is the engine of development - it brings life transforming benefits – lighting for schools; functioning health clinics; pumps for water and sanitation; cleaner indoor air due to a decrease in cooking on open fires and greater income-generating opportunities. It is imperative that all people have access to productive energy.

It is clear that if traditional, fossil fuel based generation of energy is used to provide electricity for those currently living in energy

⁴ IEA (2017) Energy Poverty. Available at: <http://www.iea.org/topics/energypoverity/> [Accessed: 13/02/2017]

poverty, the remaining carbon budget will be rapidly depleted. However, if affordable, sustainable alternatives are not made available, developing countries will turn to fossil fuels as the only option available to them – and who could blame them? They need to lift their people out of poverty, improve public services and power their economies - just as the developed world has done.

We must recognise that energy policy being crafted today by decision makers in developing countries will have implications for decades to come. For example, a decision to build a coal fired power plant is a 30 to 40 year commitment. We only need to look around Europe to see how difficult it is to wean a nation off its addiction to coal. In France, the three coal fired power plants still in operation are all over 30 years old. In Germany, 27 percent of emissions are as a result of coal – in fact, coal still accounts for about 17 percent of all European emissions⁵.

Developed countries cannot simply insist that poorer countries refrain from using fossil fuels on account of climate change. Instead they must provide feasible alternatives through investment and transfer of technology. This can only be achieved through a functioning multilateral process, one which enables all countries to

⁵ Climate Action Network (CAN) Europe, European Coal Map. Available at: <http://www.coalmap.eu> [Accessed: 13/02/2017]

work together to forge an inclusive transition to a safer and more prosperous future for all.

I believe it is in addressing the needs of developing countries that the “soft wax”, the uncertainty of our time, can be moulded to positive ends. Because today, for every regressive policy, for every small minded Tweet demonising the “other”, we are witnessing communities coming together to deliver a different message. People are becoming more aware of their role as global citizens and the need to protect the global commons. Whether is it the millions of people marching across the world in support of women’s rights last month or the countless solidarity groups mushrooming across Europe as citizens open their hearts and their homes to people seeking refuge within our borders, we can see all around us an indomitable spirit of empathy and compassion that will not be cowed by cynicism or fear mongering. Perhaps more than ever before, people around the world want their voices heard by their leaders and decision makers. There is a resurgence in political participation and it is in this spirit I see the solution to the climate crisis.

Civil society is an important actor in participatory decision making. Civil society represents the views of citizens and enables them to engage in shaping the communities and countries they live in. Civic space has a legitimate value and, in an increasingly interconnected world, we see new ways in which people can organise and mobilise

for change. Power holders need to realise that by allowing citizens a voice, even a dissenting voice, they don't diminish their own power. In fact they may gain insights that make them a stronger leader. The shutting down of civil society voice is a real risk, not just to human rights and justice but also to development and peace and security. Bringing civil society to the table brings new ideas and innovation, and gains the support of the people needed to actually implement change.

An open civic space is also the key to accountability. Accountability describes rights and responsibilities that exist between people and institutions that affect their lives. It means establishing the rule of law and a just social and political order.

Accountable institutions are transparent and answerable to the people they serve. Civil society plays an important role holding institutions to account for the actions they take and fail to take. When accountability works, citizens are able to make demands on powerful institutions, state and non-state, and ensure that those demands are met. This builds trust. Accountability is a growing theme in global development as well as a principle of climate justice.

At the international level, Agenda 2030, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda and the Paris Agreement all affirm the importance of accountability and transparency. Through Agenda 2030 leaders commit to be accountable to their citizens. In the Paris Agreement

countries commit to greater transparency at the international level so that they can be accountable to each other for the actions they are taking to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and provide climate finance. None of this is strong enough, or enforceable enough but it is there and can be worked on.

In this regard, the rule of law will be critical to enforcing commitments on climate change and advancing climate justice. In the past number of weeks we have seen the advantage of the separation of powers between the executive, judicial and legislative branches of government, both in the UK and the US. Responding to Brexit last month, the British Supreme Court ensured the government could not trigger their departure from the EU without parliamentary approval, meaning that Members of Parliament and their peers now have a responsibility to scrutinise the government's plans and not merely rubber-stamp a legislative act with a three-line mandate for triggering Article 50. In doing so, the Court provided confirmation that it is the sovereignty of Parliament, as opposed to executive powers exercised by the Prime Minister, which has the final say on decisions impacting upon the constitutional landscape. Similarly, following the reprehensible immigration ban enacted via executive order by the President in the United States, a three-judge panel in the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals unanimously upheld a

lower court's order blocking the administration from enforcing its immigration and refugee order.

Legal checks and balances, like these, will be critical to keep the world on track towards the goal outlined in the Paris Agreement and safe from the whims of successive governments. However, for the rule of law to be effective in tackling climate change, existing gaps in the legal infrastructure for dealing with climate change must be addressed in the coming months and years. A report by the International Bar Association entitled 'Achieving Justice and Human Rights in an Era of Climate Disruption' found that the current system of international law is not well suited to addressing climate justice. This is deeply troubling. The legal system we have now at international and domestic level is not equipped to deal with the scale of the challenge posed by climate change - the biggest threat to human rights of the 21st Century. The fragmented nature of the relevant legal regimes, and their origins in most cases in a world before awareness of climate change, means that reforms are needed to enable them to respond effectively and to deliver climate justice. More effective and coherent use of existing laws, rules and norms would inform better climate responses at the international and national level and the legal reforms required to ensure fair and effective climate policies and actions

Likewise the continued development of climate legislation at the national and sub national level will be critical to anchoring the Paris commitments in law and ensuring a long term approach to climate action. The GLOBE 2016 Global Climate Legislation Study finds that there were 850 climate laws and policies at the end of 2015, compared with 426 in 2009 at the time of the Copenhagen climate conference⁶. The continuation of this trend will be an important step in ensuring that Paris is a success.

Before concluding, I'd like to say a little about the role of universities in advancing climate justice. Stabilising the climate, and charting a course for a safer world with opportunity for all, will require innovation - not just in science and technology - but also in our lifestyles, our legal systems, our business practices, the way we farm, the way we run our cities, the way we communicate... the list goes on. For the road ahead, we need good people with the means to do good things. You see, averting climate change is not simply a matter of ending our addiction to fossil fuels – it requires a radical and just transition of our societies. And it will be you, and others like you, who mould the “soft wax”, who bring about the change we need to see in the world. The green revolution will be driven by those young minds that can grapple with the complexity of the challenges we face, and devise solutions that are born out of a sense of empathy

⁶ Nachmany, M & Fankhauser, S (2016) The Global Climate Legislation Study – 2016 update, London School of Economics.

and fairness as much as they are by technical skills and knowhow. If we do not base our solutions in empathy, then we are likely to fail in our efforts to hand on a safe world to future generations where they can live with dignity and equality.

The education from which you are benefitting is a privilege afforded to a few. With this privilege comes a responsibility to find ways to apply your learning for the betterment of humanity. Perhaps some of you are sitting here thinking, “This is all well and good, but my research has nothing to do with climate change...”. That could be true - but you may be surprised to discover that your expertise can contribute to the realisation of climate justice.

My Foundation is guided by core principles - one of which highlights the transformative power of education for climate stewardship. When delivered in an effective multidisciplinary manner, education can increase consciousness of climate change and sustainable development and produce new insights not only at the scientific but also at the sociological and political level. A practical first step would be for universities to integrate the Sustainable Development Goals across teaching in all schools and faculties. There are some fields where the relevance of the SDGs are obvious – engineering, medicine and global health, economics, gender studies to name a few – but perhaps it is worth considering where other skills might be brought to bear to advance the SDGs. What can historians tell us

about the success and shortcomings of other great societal transitions? Can anthropologists provide insights that would spur progress towards more equal societies? What is to be learned from epidemiologists about the spread of information on social media that might help to better communicate the 2030 Agenda?

Even before embarking on a professional career, students have a critical role to play in advancing the 2030 Agenda and driving the discourse. Here in Trinity College, the student body offer a shining example of this. The success of the push for the university's divestment from fossil fuels was down to the perseverance and dedication of the students. Determined to go further, now I hear concerned students are working with Provost Patrick Prendergast to secure membership of the International Sustainable Campus Network this year. I draw inspiration from your dedication to the sustainable transformation of the campus.

In conclusion, I would like to return to Yeats and his belief that turbulent times can be shaped by those with vision. A quote often attributed to the Sligo poet, but perhaps in error, is that "education is not the filling of a pail, but rather the lighting of a fire". Regardless of the source, the sentiment holds. There may be trying years ahead, where the progress made by the global community through open dialogue and our multilateral processes is threatened. But warmed by the fire of ingenuity, creativity, academic rigour and empathy,

from these uncertain times we can mould a safer and fairer future, where all people can live full and prosperous lives underpinned by rights and dignity. I wish you strength and courage for your future studies and the careers that lie ahead of you.

Thank you.