

Northern Ireland

NEWSLETTER

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The Programme for Government What should be prioritised?



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Systematic failure

Northern Ireland is failing its people and its environment. It is a systemic failure that permeates every level of government. So insidious is it that it causes people to defend it and act against their best interests.

It begins with a political system that is obsessed with economic development. This is despite the mounting evidence that this obsession with economic growth is leading us towards disaster – climate change, resource decline, biodiversity collapse, poverty, inequality, ill-health, and unhappiness. We have lost touch with the things that are important for us as social animals – family, community, health, green spaces, a sense of place.

This systemic failure is best exemplified by our environmental protection regime. Across the board we see short-term economic growth elevated above protection of the environment, heritage or social cohesion. Never mind sustainable development or future generations, profits now are all that matter.

A prime example of this is the dualling of the A6. Although better options were available, the selected route cuts through flood plain between Lough Neagh and Lough Beg. Not only is this precious wetland an important feeding ground for swans, geese and other birds, it is also the landscape that inspired and nurtured Séamus Heaney, arguably the world's most popular poet.

To borrow from another Irish literary figure, to fail to regulate once may be regarded as a misfortune, to fail to regulate twice looks like carelessness, to continue to fail to regulate looks like a wilful act. A continued failure to regulate is what we see.

The Northern Ireland Executive's failure to tackle climate change is exacerbated by its policies on transport, waste management, agriculture, housing, and energy. Systemic failure is writ large in the case of the exploratory drill at Woodburn Forest. Domestic and European law was ignored or circumvented at every stage of the process, from issuing the exploratory licence, to failing to enforce planning



Photo courtesy of iStock

rules. What will happen at the site now that the company is leaving remains to be seen. Will the clean-up conditions be enforced?

From Cavanacaw goldmine to Mobuoy Road landfill site, Lough Neagh sand dredging to giant chicken factories, time and time again we see environmental law being ignored in favour of short-term economic gain. Never underestimate the lengths the authorities will go to in order to avoid doing what they are legally required to do. The vote to leave the EU adds further wiggle room for those intent on downplaying environmental protection. What will the status be of environmental laws derived from Europe?

This will get worse unless we change direction. We urgently need to enable people everywhere to improve their well-being on a planet that can sustain us in the long term. That means giving environmental protection the consideration it deserves. After all, we rely on a healthy environment to provide us with the air, water, food, and the sense of place we need. It also means giving communities the opportunity to participate fully in decision making.

We owe it both to current and to future generations.

Craig Bennett is the Chief Executive Officer of Friends of the Earth England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The importance of place

Growing up in the Irish midlands, I had the privilege of a bucolic childhood. I played unconstrained among the bogs, heather, and woods. Despite the enchantment that imbued my early years, those places were unremarkable to the outside world. The boglands of County Longford, far from pristine, are essentially industrial space, worked by Bórd Na Mona for milled peat, but to me it was a magical landscape. Though I have been gone from there longer than not, when I conjure an image of 'the environment' it is the expansive black of the bog and the

green light of native woodland that comes to mind.

My study of environmental sustainability has taken me to places very different from where I grew up – to the South Bronx in New York and to East Belfast, the field sites in which my PhD is based. However, connection to place and the community produced by it has remained central to my understanding of what a socially just environmentalism entails. Sense of place is an immensely, deceptively, complex subject that has increasingly

found itself at the centre of enquiry across disciplines; in anthropology, where I encountered it, but also from psychology to architecture, sociology to public health.

The idea of place as a fixed, bounded entity, containing a homogenous population is being challenged by this burgeoning field, with a growing recognition that social, economic and technological shifts are changing ideas of the specificity of place; of what, and where, we understand place to be. Place is not simply a location, a point on a map. It is a process of shared meaning, identity and history, a connection between people in relationship with each other and with the rest of the world. Not only is place a major determinant of access to education, employment, health care, and social interaction it is also crucial to our understanding of how people experience and relate to the world. It is this that makes it significant for the goals of 21st century environmentalism. Place is the point of intersection between the environment and human society.

Historically, environmentalism has had a difficult relationship with place. It valorised the natural as separate from the human, drawing on the sublime grandeur of wild landscapes advocating a conservationist impulse to protect these spaces, along with their flora and fauna,

from human harm. In a movement searching for the universal, place was avoided for its often inward-seeming perspective – an us-and-them quality that is prone to producing reactionary politics like NIMBYism and sectarian territoriality. But there is a growing realisation that, in an interconnected world, the same unsustainable practices that threaten our wild spaces and their populations also affect people, falling disproportionately at the feet of our poorest communities, both rural and urban.

A new, place-focused environmentalism is progressive because it confronts the interconnectedness, rather than the separateness of these things, including a concern for the conditions of human as well as non-human life. It allows for a folding in of issues of social equity, distributive justice, and economic fairness with more traditionally 'green' concerns. When the environment ceases to be an abstract idea, and is seen, instead as the place where we live, the processes that sustain us, the storehouse of our memories, and the common interest we share, protecting it becomes less a fringe activity and more an act of keeping our homes, our livelihoods, our relationships, and ourselves alive.

Rebekah McCabe is the Creative producer at PLACE.



Friends of the Earth

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Lough Beg, an Uncut Jewel

Before recently planted trees began to block the view, the swans of Lough Beg made an impressive sight from the A6 west of Toomebridge. To see them now it is necessary to come off the A6 at The Elk and watch from a minor road. It helps to have binoculars or better still, a telescope. It's Northern Ireland's number one site for wild swans and has a wide variety of birds throughout the year including many that are rare.

Lough Beg has largely gone under the radar. It remains little known and rarely visited, an uncut jewel, a wetland of rare beauty with a wealth of wildlife and a suite of designations to match. Little wonder its marshes and meadows, "the wet and the weeds and the wilderness" inspired a future Poet Laureate to write of "the peewit and the curlew and the whirring snipe" and to later dream of his boyhood growing up in a "real land, a shore at evening, quiet water, wind in the grass, the calls of birds, maybe a man or woman out counting in a backfield just standing looking, counting cattle, listening."

In Bellaghy work is about to get under way on a new, multi-million pound tourism centre which it is hoped will serve the community and act as a focal point for study trips by overseas visitors wishing to immerse themselves in the life-shaping landscapes of Seamus Heaney. Just when things were looking rosy for Lough Beg another multi-million pound project has been given the green light. This is the re-routing and widening of a short stretch of the A6 which will break up the big Creagh swan fields at the south end of the lough.



Photo courtesy of Thinkstock

This elevated (thus highly intrusive) road will fragment our last remaining wet grassland - a natural flood plain which this winter was under the highest water in living memory - and our most important wintering grounds for wild swans. Fragmentation destroys biodiversity. It doesn't take many cuts for a wetland to lose its appeal to big flocks of waterfowl that are sensitive to disturbance.

It will also fragment the landscape of the great poet himself!

Anywhere else these swanfields and the adjoining Lough Beg would be cause for celebration. Across England, Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland there are wetland nature reserves like

Caerlaverock, Slimbridge, Welney, Martin Mere, Inch Lake, and the Wexford Slobs. They are all priceless assets to a nation's well-being, wonderful places to watch birds and recharge the senses.

I know them well and none is as beautiful as Seamus Heaney's Lough Beg.

If only the tourism consultants drafted in by councils that are desperate to attract visitors would advise them to invest in the long term protection of their natural and built heritage - their environment.

Chris Murphy is an independent wildlife consultant.

Time to Walk the Walk

On the 17th December last the northern tip of Ulster, Malin Head, recorded a temperature of 16°C, its highest December value for 60 years. Some reports indicated that this occurred in the middle of the night, but in any event it was typical of a sequence of extreme seasons that have characterised Ireland in recent years. Winter 2015/16 was the wettest on record in most parts, winter 2013/14 was the stormiest for at least 143 years and farmers will remember the cold spring of 2013 when the grass refused to grow until well into May.

There was a time when climatologists were loath to link such extremes with global climate change, but the ability to run complex climate models thousands of times has provided a powerful new tool to attribute a percentage at least of the probability of such extremes occurring to greenhouse emissions. Thus the UK Met Office recently published research results which contended that an extended period of winter rainfall, such as we had last December, is now seven times more.

Such growing conviction regarding the seriousness of what a failure to tackle climate change may bring should galvanise our responses. It's not as if the science community, led by the IPCC, has been silent. In their 5th Assessment Report the IPCC confirmed that the global community has only 2-3 decades of 'burn' left before the inevitability of dangerous climate change occurs. Percolation of this reality to the person in the street, and particularly the policymakers has been painfully slow. The former respond to short term economic concerns primarily while the latter are often paralysed by powerful vested interest groups.

For both parts of Ireland two sectors are particularly problematical: agriculture and transport. The removal of the milk levy in April 2015 has encouraged farmers to expand into dairy farming, in the case of the Republic planning for 300,000 more methane-producing units as part of a 50% increase in milk output by 2020. For transport there is a systematic failure in both parts of Ireland to 'climate change proof' future plans. Large expenditures on new roads are prioritised over public transport, and car-dependent policies for retail, employment and residential settlement still are all too often the norm. We act as though the decarbonisation of society which must occur in the next 35 years can be postponed until the last minute.

The ratchet rules in the Paris Agreement commits both the UK and Ireland to ever decreasing greenhouse gas emissions. Later this year the EU Effort Sharing Decision for the period 2020-2030 will be announced. Intensive lobbying behind closed doors is occurring to minimise national contributions. For an island that talks the talk about its green, clean image, it's now time for new governments in both parts of the island to walk the walk.

Dr. John Sweeney is Emeritus Professor of Geography at the National University of Ireland.

Learning the lessons of Woodburn

In June, the oil and gas exploration company, InfraStrata, announced it had found no fossil fuels at Woodburn Forest. The company has begun to remove its equipment from the site and must restore it to its original condition.

In their 50 year Agreement with NI Water InfraStrata had "the right to re-inject Petroleum, water and any other fluids into the Site and under the Site." Stop the Drill campaign questioned the role of NI Water in leasing the site to an oil/gas company putting this water at risk of contamination. Over 1800 streets are supplied across Belfast, Carrickfergus, Newtownabbey, Larne, Whitehead, and Ballycarry.

In Northern Ireland the oil and gas industry are allowed to conduct exploratory drilling by 'permitted development'. We learned via an information request that, "the Department did not complete its EIA Determination or advise the applicant of PD Rights until 19th December 2013, at which point Permitted Development Rights had been granted by default."

The risks of exploratory drilling in Woodburn Forest are well documented and it appears that the need for intense scrutiny in relation to this sensitive site had been avoided. The fact that the chemical characteristics of this process were not known to the Department (or if they were they were not assessed) at the time of permitted development rights being applied is a key issue. Among the most concerning chemicals which InfraStrata used at Woodburn are Halad-300L

NS and Biocide T. These are not chemicals which should be allowed under permitted development.

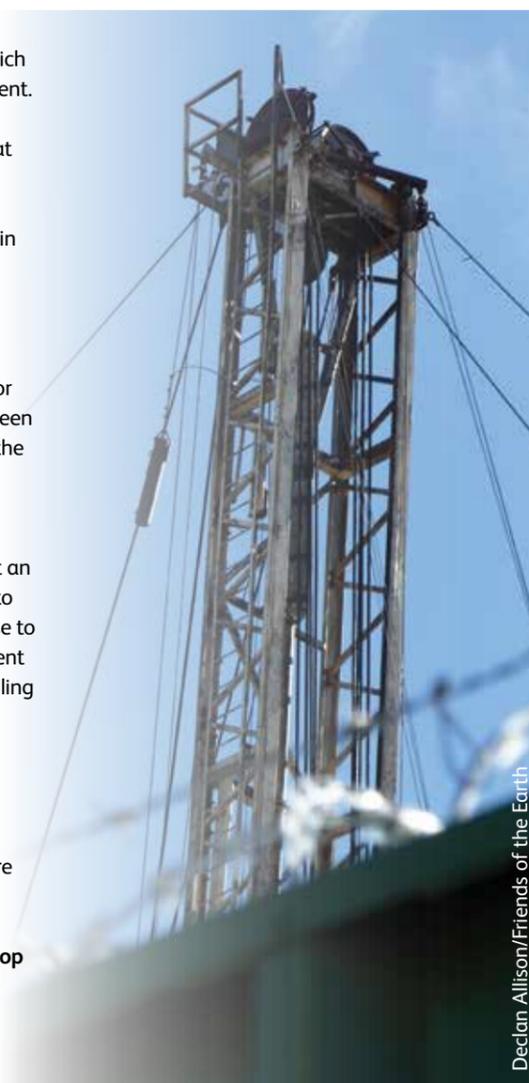
We have a right to participate in decisions that have a significant environmental impact. This is a human right and ratified by the Aarhus Convention. Not being allowed to participate in this decision is a violation of that right.

As a result of the Stop the Drill campaign the then Minister Durkan announced a 'Call for Evidence' on Permitted Development Rights for mineral exploration. The Minister said "I am keen to ensure situations such as the confusion in the planning process at Woodburn are avoided."

On Monday 6th June 2016 Minister Hazzard announced that the 'call for evidence' brought an "overwhelming response in favour of change to the existing system". He said he would propose to the Executive to remove permitted development rights for oil and gas meaning exploratory drilling would need full planning permission.

In the interests of health, public participation and transparency we continue to highlight and challenge the major inaccuracies in the processing of this decision. We must make sure the same thing doesn't happen elsewhere.

Fiona Joyce is a prominent activist in the Stop the Drill campaign.



Declan Allison/Friends of the Earth

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Growing for Gross

Agriculture is important in Northern Ireland. Agriculture produces local food but a legacy of production and land management has created the landscape that many of us regularly enjoy. Indeed many of us have a direct or indirect connection to rural life. The sector accounts for approximately 10 per cent of private sector employment, though farm incomes have been falling here as in many other parts of the world. It's an interesting time to consider if we can all be winners in this competitive world?

Government in Northern Ireland seems to believe we can. The Going for Growth Strategy that was approved by the NI Executive, sets out a raft of recommendations for development in the agri-food sector. Its premise is to expand supply, secure global markets, and to reduce costs. Figures are ambitious – to grow sales by 60% to over £7bn, create 15,000 new jobs, grow sales outside Northern Ireland by 75% to £4.5bn, and to increase value added to £1 billion by 2020. There are 118 recommendations in the report, of which 80 are directed

towards government. In addition the industry-led Agri-Food Strategy Board is requesting an investment of £400m over three years (to lever an industry investment of £1.3bn). The NI Executive has agreed priority areas that it will work on. However, these targets were agreed in 2012 at a time when markets were much more buoyant than they are today. Some industry experts fear they are unlikely to be achieved.

With an estimated output multiplier of 1.9 (i.e. every £1m of food and drink processing output generates



Courtesy of Digital Vision

£1.91m in regional economic output), the benefits to small family farms compared to corporate gains must be questioned. This is perhaps best exemplified by the poultry sector - the gold standard within Agri-food. Undoubtedly it offers security for some farmers, it raises many concerns. These are starting to become visible, not least with the plethora of poultry shed buildings appearing across our landscape. Connected with this is the immediate problem of disposing of the 270,000 tonnes of waste litter from chicken processing. The NI Executive has provided a loan of £9.3m towards a £23m anaerobic digester plant being built in Ballybofoey. It will treat just under 10% of annual waste from NI and it will produce

biogas. We could ask very many more related questions of animal welfare; economic gains; efficacy of channelling gas across the country; and so forth.

The proximity of the agri-food sector to government as evidenced in Going for Growth raises serious questions about the clientelist relationship between industry and government. Who is setting the agenda here – is it large corporations or small farmers? Where is the public interest in these activities that involve the public purse? Is this the way that we want to see scarce resources distributed?

Dr. Ruth McAreavey is Programme Director MSc Planning and Regeneration, Queen's University.

Driving Progress

Abortion, Cannabis, Israel. Even flags-and-emblems. Each would rank high on any list of contentious issues. But sometimes, in certain circumstances, not as contentious as a proposed road. Say you are against the A6 and watch the North West sway away in appalled disbelief.

Roads have become status symbols for towns, cities, communities. If you don't have a motorway, you are being disrespected, discriminated against, deprived.

If it's a fact that your city or region has been done down over the years, the idea that a motorway, or at least a fast-flowing dual carriageway, is an entitlement which you have unfairly been denied may come to mind naturally - especially when, seemingly everywhere, "progress" is presented as synonymous with more and bigger vehicles on longer, broader roads.

The A6 - the main route between Derry and Belfast - undeniably needs upgrading. It has stretches - from the M2 exit to Toome, for example - which double as death-traps. By

any criterion, it's a poorer road than Belfast-Newry, Belfast-Larne or, as it seems from Derry, Belfast-anywhere.

So the state of the road can reasonably be regarded as both symbol and substance of the relatively depressed state of the North West. And the solution can therefore seem obvious - a spanking new highway for the region as high-spec as we can win funding for.

To counter this argument, it's not enough to invoke the catastrophic effects of rising CO2 emissions or the damage inflicted on the communities and landscapes the road would gouge through.

The preferred route for the A6 runs across a tract of land built on top of the biggest illegal dump in Europe at Campsie just outside Derry. The dumping having been illegal, nobody knows for certain what's buried there. The relevant environmental impact assessment was made a decade ago. We know less now than we did then.

Because we don't know what we are dealing with, we don't know what the dangers are. So - stop the road, at least until we have had a closer look at the implications. Which is absolutely reasonable, irrefutable - unless you are a mainstream politician out to show that your commitment to local economic development matches that of any

of your rivals. In which case, you are likely to sign dumb about the dump.

We can fight the issue road by road. Despite all, we could win in the courts on the A6. The A6 plan has, typically, not been tested in any serious way, none of the lessons of the A5 fiasco learnt.

But to win overall, to change the context in which issues of transport connectivity and economic advance and equalisation are discussed, and proper priority given to environmental factors, we need a different class of politics altogether.

Eamonn McCann is an MLA for Foyle.

A Wales fit for Future Generations

Since its establishment there's been a duty on the National Assembly for Wales to promote sustainable development. To some extent this has been useful, with annual reports and the continuation of the post of a Commissioner for Sustainable Futures after the UK's Sustainable Development Commission was axed. But it's never really been mainstreamed across government or changed the way decisions were made in Wales. And particularly in times of economic hardship we've seen any short term jobs or potential economic growth being given priority over wider social or environmental concerns.

So with Wales getting the powers to make its own laws in 2011 there was an opportunity to put this right - thinking beyond the day to day, or electoral cycle, of politics and looking ahead to a vision. It was a chance to ask ourselves what sort of country did we want to be and what sort of world did we want to leave for future generations? It can't be done overnight, but we've taken a big step to achieving this through the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act which was passed last year, after

a lot of discussions, consultations, campaigning and negotiations.

Basically it's about well-being – of people and the planet, of current and future generations and of Wales and our impact on the world.

It's about investing in the right things. For example home energy efficiency measures that cut carbon, tackle fuel poverty and create quality local jobs in every community. Or planning preventative health measures like supportive active travel and healthy diets, and supporting local producers with fair prices through public procurement.

And it's not just about different outcomes but doing things differently, working in line with the sustainable development principles of thinking long-term, taking preventative action, collaboration and integration between agencies and involving people and communities in the decisions that affect them.

The Act applies to all devolved public bodies in Wales – from the Welsh Government and local authorities to health trusts and the arts council. It sets a 'well-being duty' for them to

carry out sustainable development, and develop plans in order to reach a set of well-being goals stated in the Act. These goals are for Wales to be a prosperous, resilient, healthier, more equal and globally responsible, with cohesive communities, vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language. There's a new Future Generations Commissioner to help public bodies adapt and pick up on problems.

The duty only came in on April 1st and the office of the Commissioner is just being set up, so we're yet to see proof of how it can work. The first big test will be the newly elected Welsh Government's programme for government.

It's certainly a work in progress and a big challenge. But it's a bold statement about the sort of place we want to be and become, about how we want to work together and what we think is important. And we're hoping that it can also be an inspiration and example to other countries and regions. So over to you - what do you want Northern Ireland's future to be?

Haf Elgar is a Campaigner with Friends of the Earth Cymru.

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