



REPORT

Green Foundation Ireland

invites you to an evening in-person
SEMINAR

GREENING THE NARRATIVE:

Effective communication of the green message



Wednesday 31 May 2023 – 18:30 to 21:00

Venue: Oak Room, The Mansion House, Dawson Street, Dublin 2

Admission to this event is **FREE** but you **MUST** register beforehand.
You can do so through [our Eventbrite page here](#).

GREENING THE NARRATIVE:

Effective Communication of the green message

THEME

Throughout Europe and in Ireland, the greens have had many policy successes. However, many of these achievements are often ignored or dismissed in the media and social media.

In this seminar communication experts and campaigners discuss how green messaging can be improved and how the greens can better inform the public and change public awareness and consciousness.

ABOUT OUR SEMINAR

Green Foundation Ireland's Communications Manager and former Minister for the Environment, **John Gormley**, co-ordinated and introduced the conversation by thanking so many people for attending on a lovely evening for an event that promised to be both engaging and provocative. There were so many interesting speakers focused across two panels around politics and the media. How to get a 'green' message across, as the country faces so many difficulties, remains an ongoing challenge. For example, he noted that in German politics at present, there is a real problem within Government and between various political parties like the Greens who are often cast as the 'bad guys'. Anecdotally and very humorously, John further recalled some Green Party stereotypes back in 2007, when he was scheduled to attend a meeting of the UN on Climate Change in Bali. The then Minister Micheál Martin mis-heard him thinking he talked about getting back from ballet. More seriously, at present there are growing tensions around an urban-rural divide, as we strive to address the climate crisis which is leading to greater polarisation. Such tensions are not helped when mainstream media like the *Irish Independent* have headlines like 'Now 200,000 cows must be culled to hit climate targets'. This was a front page headline for an article by Ciaran Moran (30 May 2023), which no doubt encourages more conflict and polarisation of opinions rather than fruitful debate.

The event was moderated by journalist **Alison O'Connor** who is particularly interested and knowledgeable about such issues, sparking productive discussion on the role of journalism and media generally.

This Green Foundation Ireland event was held in the Oak Room at Dublin's Mansion House, which is home for Green Councillor and Lord Mayor **Caroline Conroy**, who is currently finishing up her term of office. She welcomed everyone and was delighted we could all make it to her somewhat temporary gaff and set up the debate around how to ensure green

messaging is effective. Basically, we want to ensure a better greener future for all. But to achieve this, we need to build a wider platform and get all of society behind us, it is not good enough to let our media in particular be dominated by bad faith actors.

The Lord Mayor's conversion to the green agenda began at an early age, recalling her early love of [The Lorax](#) by Dr Seuss (1971), which was translated later into a very successful film that has had a major influence on many children and adults. The story, of course, speaks for the trees, as the land became choked with pollution and the resultant story offers us hope for the future of the world. We have a duty to plant that seed and nurture it within society, while effective media and all forms of communication can help in this transformation.

Minister **Ossian Smyth** received a text to go back to the Dáil for a vote, so he had to deliver his message very quickly, recalling how communication of the green message remains difficult for all of us, no matter what side of the political spectrum you come from. Basically, we have to present an optimistic message and give people hope, avoiding blame and shame which gets us nowhere. Following these carefully chosen words, the Minister literally had to race out of the room.

Meanwhile, Green Minister **Pippa Hackett** was more relaxed, while recalling a contentious Dáil debate on the Nature Restoration Law which is very topical at present. Farmers are not sure how to respond and the debate remains so polarised that nothing moves forward. We need to keep centred, but unfortunately the media loves conflict. Politicians have to be able to communicate effectively with all citizens and not by simply dictating what needs to be done in the future. Nonetheless, while many people are willing to make some sacrifices, a whole swathe of the population don't appear to want to change. Politics of course remains the art of the possible, making strides in the right direction is always better than pulling back.

The Minister recalled a recent visit to a small town in Offaly called Pullagh – which in Irish means a hole in the middle of the bog – showcasing what they were doing in the village, while admitting that there probably were no Green Party voters there. Yet everything they did smacked of green values, with lots of recycling, water harvesting and being situated on the greenway. The town has a community shop and fundraise for this, while at the same time treasuring their industrial and natural heritage. If everyone and every community did this in Ireland, the island would be fantastic. Basically, she affirmed the old chestnut, don't let perfection be the enemy of the good, while helping people to care through a community-focused agenda is essential. But once politicians promote fear, this can leave the essential green agenda on the back foot and remains the easiest emotion to get people motivated negatively. In the end, nothing is as powerful as the local community coming together for a common cause.

Senator **Malcolm Byrne** of Fianna Fáil from County Wexford and Spokesperson on Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, jokingly recalled a story by Winston Churchill that the opposition is over there on the other benches, but the enemy is often behind you. We all need to address the biggest existential crisis of our time, namely climate change and biodiversity loss. This is an ongoing concern and challenge for all political parties across the spectrum. For instance, the suggestion that farmers are against the climate challenges ahead remains unhelpful, it's important that they are seen as 'pro-environment'.

It's not easy being green when you are constantly in the red! Farming has to be sustainable, and we need to support farm families.

The first speaker in the Media Panel was **Dave Robbins**, a long-time journalist who is now Director of the Climate and Society Research Centre at Dublin City University. Communication of course is understood as a process framed around the building of the message, which can be competitively framed between various stakeholders. Who wins the battle to establish the dominant narrative is often up for contestation and how it lands with audiences depends on a broad range of different variables.

In his research Dave has interviewed the Green Ministers and various media handlers from the last Coalition Government about their respective communication strategies. Surprisingly he discovered that they often did not think of media in a purely strategic manner, but alternatively in a more *ad hoc* way. Working out how to improve communication, generally it's best to tailor the message for segmented audiences and speak to them around where they are situated. You have to frame a message that resonates with your audience and not presume they are in the same space you inhabit. As is often asserted, citizens and stakeholders are all locked in various bubbles and echo-chambers.

The green/environmental message needs to continually focus on positive opportunities and, as noted several times by politicians cited above, by clear solutions to problems. Only talking about sacrifice and difficulty can simply induce fatalism, rather than taking action. Dave spends much of his time working with media organisations on their climate change coverage, which is also essential from an educational perspective, and proposes that the government should fund effective climate change journalism, which is especially needed for local media covering environmental issues. Such long-term training remains expensive to organise across the island, but this would help increase overall climate literacy across the media landscape. Climate science remains a fast-moving area, while joking that often journalists are not naturally numerate, and the media, much less the educational sector, sometimes struggle to fully understand the science. He emphasised that environmental literacy training is constantly needed.

Another journalist **Catherine Cleary** who writes the 'Game Changers' column for *The Irish Times*, affirmed how the 'game is not changing fast enough'. Yet recalling official government policy, we are surprisingly good at change, mentioning the plastic bag tax levy, when there is the support of a cohesive community behind it. Yet we appear easily frightened by even the idea of change. The doom-driven scenario especially remains so shocking for most audiences. Why would we bother acting in the first place, if we were simply pivoting from denial to doom, without stopping at the most important 'doing' phase, which can actually help change the world.

For example, Scotland has a simple poster campaign on food waste, so coming up with good stories around what we should do, as well as what we should not do, remains essential. For instance, we need to address the vocal minority who are often against change, while recognising the media and also politics loves a row; basically, conflict sells. Solutions are often seen as somehow boring, so basically we need to figure out how to make otherwise boring solutions as interesting or even as sexy as possible.

Another example cited recalled the congestion charges debate in London, with huge objections from various quarters, yet when it was actually put in place, the charge was easier to secure acceptance. Democratic politics needs to act strong; strengthening the spine of consensus and not expecting to please everyone all of the time. At the same time, recalling the Irish comic Colm O'Regan, who quipped that telling farmers, who do a physically hard job, that they are simply wrong, does not work and green messaging needs more positive and realistic alternatives.

While **Pat Leahy**, political correspondent with *The Irish Times*, recalled another more unsavoury politician from a previous age in the UK, namely Enoch Powell, who affirmed that politicians complaining about media is like a ship's captain complaining about the sea! Our job in the media is to report critically and fairly about the issues, and certainly not becoming an arm of government.

There is a real political argument however around how environmental green issues can be resolved and paid for, most especially focusing on the pace and design of measures to counteract the global environmental crisis. Consequently, our job in the media is to report on political wrangling around climate action. Of course, he admitted that we give more attention to where there are rows, accepting that people are more interested in such news, rather than policy, which in turn sells newspapers! But Pat appeared to justify this since it's through the rows that you can define yourself in policy terms.

While getting a dig in regarding how the Green movement has been 'the boy who cried wolf too often', at the same time joking nonetheless that 'the feckin' wolf usually turns up in the end.' He believes that Green Party politicians need to constantly make their case fairly before the public and notes that Rural Independents appear to reserve special vitriol for rural Greens – probably realising that the green message, if it is communicated effectively, might manage to threaten their own seats.

A Master's student and journalist **Rosalind Skillen**, who writes for the *Belfast Telegraph*, spoke of a growing communication crisis around climate change. As journalists and communicators we need to constantly break down the issues, insinuating that many people for example don't know what the 'circular economy' is, much less what 'net zero' means, or how to visualise carbon, is well beyond most people's comprehension. We need to make such issues and debates more accessible and always focus on how local campaigns and solutions can be embraced. Local green stories for example around cutting trees are relatively easy to get audiences engaged, while focusing on the co-benefits of climate and economy is much more acceptable. Certainly, we should use the economic and especially the health angle to climate change to get across powerful political messages which resonate across all audiences.

Finally, **Tom Molloy**, Director of Communication with the Green Party, gave the meeting his perspective on the issues. He began by querying how can it be the case that in almost every country in the West, the climate crisis is high in citizens' recognition, yet polling figures show greens still not doing very well. One wonders, he suggests, is this because voters tend to vote for optimistic people and Green Party policy and politicians tend to be more pessimistic regarding the future of the planet. Or maybe it's because we don't tell stories simply enough, or provide solutions which appear to be both technocratic and overly complex. Political parties, including those green-leaning ones, should learn from journalists and tell

stories that speak directly to audiences. We should accept for instance that sometimes talking about one person and their problems can be more effective than using big global human stories. Finally, being somewhat counter-intuitive I suppose, he asserted that what works in one country may not work in another. Many countries like America and Germany are really affected by climate change at present, but in Ireland, we don't apparently have to worry about it as urgently. Furthermore, he concludes somewhat provocatively, we are too polite in the Green movement, we let people off too easily and don't call people out enough for the 'lies' they tell. Yet, from a communications perspective, pointing the finger at people who for instance drive SUVs or go on long haul flights can be counterproductive.

These very engaging and provocative brief comments by politicians and media commentators were followed by an equally engaging Question and Answer session. Discussion focused on the perennial media dilemma: why should Greens be offered assistance by the mass media to do their political job, while acknowledging several times that the media circus is almost like a 'Punch and Judy' show, with different parties and stakeholders pitted against each other. Such tensions are particularly exacerbated, it is claimed, across online media platforms, and in response there was a powerful call for more funding for public service and more diverse media output, together with dedicated funding for journalist environmental training.

Finally, it was queried, how well informed are journalists regarding the climate, with the response that there are lots of different types of journalism which all need to be catered for. Certainly, there is a place for advocacy within journalism, but most panellists seemed to concur with Dave Robbins' call for more training and environmental literacy across the board. All in all, the media and especially politicians need to be conscious of their responsibilities in speaking to a broad audience, who don't necessary understand or buy into the climate agenda.

You can [access our videos of the seminar here](#).

Green Foundation Ireland

12 June 2023