

Fintan O'Toole: Earth has a toxic virus – us

The coronavirus crisis reminds us we must find a way not to kill the host we inhabit

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[Fintan O'Toole](#)

Part one of the 2020 Sign of the Times survey by Behaviour & Attitudes is published by The Irish Times today. The annual snapshot of Irish life combines quantitative and digital qualitative techniques with B&A published data on the economy, health, technology and shopping. The research was conducted in January and February 2020. Today's findings are on the subject of climate change. Part 2 will appear next week.

Most of us can't see coronavirus, but we can see its effects. Unnervingly, we can see how, from the point of view of Planet Earth, it makes things better. For us human beings, it is devastating, emotionally, socially and economically.

But for the planet, it is a holiday from our otherwise relentless foulness. Video animations released by the European Space Agency, for example, show the speeded-up images of Europe taken from the Copernicus Sentinel satellite between New Year's Day and March 11th. The dense fog of nitrogen dioxide pollutants gradually recedes over the Po Valley in northern Italy as industrial activity ceases.

Coal consumption by the six large power plants in China fell 40 per cent in the first two months of this year, and China's emissions of CO₂ have probably fallen 25 per cent. The amount of carbon monoxide (mainly produced by cars) in the air in New York has dropped by 50 per cent.

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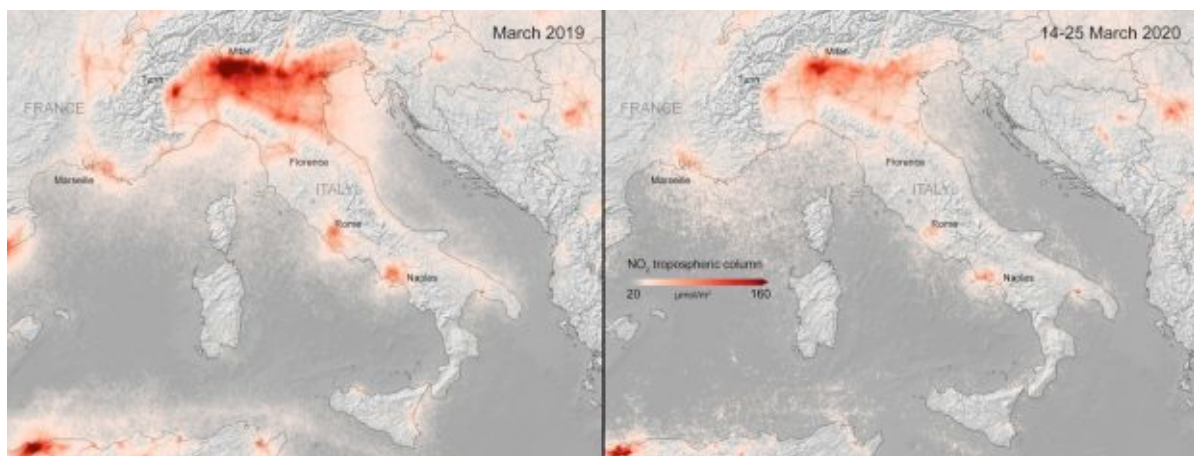
These dramatic effects point to two important things about the way we think about the climate emergency. One is that talk of "saving the planet" is misplaced. The attempt to

control the rise in global temperatures caused by human activity is not about saving Earth. It is about saving ourselves.

As the immediate improvements in air quality caused by the Covid-19 shutdown show us, the planet would benefit enormously if we were to disappear tomorrow. It would restore itself to health quite rapidly. From Earth's point of view, the toxic virus is us. It is we who have to find a way not to kill the host we inhabit and infect.

The other message is that we are suddenly doing the right things for the wrong reasons. Wrong, that is, not in the sense that turning off much of our economy is not a proper response to Covid-19, but simply in the rather grim truth the virus brings home to us.

We have a deep-seated tendency to do difficult things only when we run out of other options. Drastic, previously unthinkable changes in our way of life are perfectly possible – when we are persuaded that the threat we face is right here, right now. “Depend upon it, Sir,” said Samuel Johnson, “when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully.”

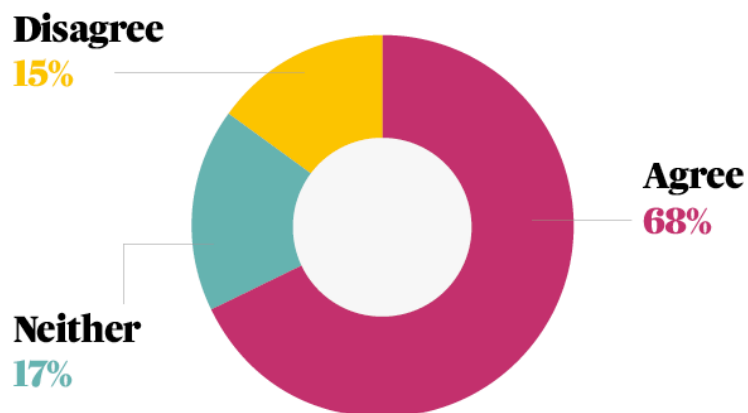


Existential threat

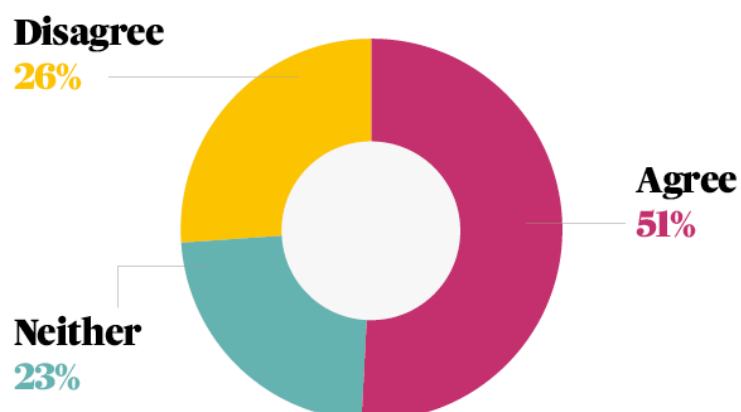
Coronavirus has concentrated the minds of governments and societies because we have been convinced that we are, metaphorically speaking, to be hanged in a fortnight: the existential threat is immediate.

But the threat of climate is in fact much greater: civilisation could be hammered by the virus but it will be obliterated by runaway global warming. This has been known since the 1980s, yet relatively little has been done to stop it. The big question is: what does it take for us to concentrate our collective minds on this slower but more profound existential threat?

“7 in 10 consumers are concerned about environmental issues”



“Half believe environmental issues have a profound effect on their life”



This is the question that hovers over the findings of this year’s Signs of the Times study by Behaviour & Attitudes, of the way Ireland is feeling about itself. In its section on climate change, there is a real sense of public anguish.

The groundwork for the study was done in January and February before the coronavirus crisis hit Ireland, but in a period when apocalyptic images of the wildfires in Australia and our own experiences of floods and storms were very much on people’s minds.

What emerges from the study is a kind of cognitive double bind. We are caught between, on the one hand, an awareness that something radical must be done and, on the other, a deep anxiety about how exactly we can make a difference in our own lives, a sense of powerlessness and a lack of faith in public leadership on the issue.

These are very important findings and they present a huge challenge, not just to any new government, but to the whole way in which journalists, academics, institutions and campaigners talk about climate change.

We should be ashamed: Ireland is one of Europe's worst performers on reducing greenhouse gas emissions and remains the most car-dependent society in Europe

At one level, anxiety is good news. Given the power and wealth of the forces behind climate change denial (stretching from the White House, through Rupert Murdoch's media empire, to the vast fossil fuel industry and super-rich investment funds), it is actually somewhat heartening that 68 per cent of those surveyed agree with the statement "I am extremely concerned about environmental issues".

We should be worried. We should also be ashamed: Ireland is one of Europe's worst performers on reducing greenhouse gas emissions and remains the most car-dependent society in Europe. The findings of the study are consistent with the broader sense of urgency expressed most obviously in the Green Party winning 12 seats in the general election in February.

But anxiety and shame are useful only if they are productive. Neither emotion necessarily produces real change. Many people, for example, feel anxious and ashamed about their weight and their diet. Weight-loss experts will tell us that these feelings can actually get in the way of sustained alterations to eating habits. They just make people feel bad about themselves and seek comfort in food, which makes them feel worse and so on.

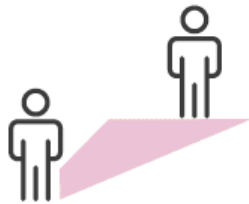
Urgent question

The Signs of the Times study raises an urgent question: is the Irish public in danger of becoming locked into precisely this kind of feedback loop, where worry and guilt about climate change actually feed a disempowered hopelessness?

One counterintuitive conclusion from the study is that we actually need to embrace a disreputable old friend: hypocrisy.

What effect are my efforts having?

“The discourse is all about pitting the individual against others”



**Individual
vs
individual**

“My friend goes on about how she’s cut out all plastics, but I know she takes four flights a year”



**Individual
vs
big business**

“Why should I do anything while Coke won’t phase out plastic bottles”



**Individual
vs
governments**

“What’s the point in my recycling when another government puts all their plastic in the sea”

What kind of leaders do people want?

Celebrities: Too hypocritical

Academics: Too low-profile, uninteresting

Politicians: Too self-interested, not passionate enough



Greta Thunberg

- Her own behaviour is hard to fault
- Very passionate (but in a way that sometimes unnerves people)
- Concern for the planet is obvious to some, but others feel it’s manufactured by those around her



David Attenborough

- Treasured figure
- Love for the planet, no agenda
- Has brought the issues to light in an impactful way
- The only spokesperson universally considered fit to lead

Almost all of us are hypocrites in relation to climate change. There is a tiny ethical minority of people who do almost no harm. These people are immensely admirable, and their example is of great importance to the rest of us. But there is a downside: the idea that if you are not a climate saint, you are hopelessly lost in climate sin – and since most of us are going to hell anyway, we may as well sit back and enjoy what’s left of the journey.

Climate behaviour: What must be done?

Overall finding

Almost nothing is being done to foster a sense of a collective effort that could make a difference.

Collaboration

Fostering a 'we're in this together' spirit.

Incentivisation

Sustainable behaviours should be financially advantageous.

Clear direction

On the 'right' way to do sustainability.

Improvement in infrastructure

Certain green behaviours need significant support.

Recasting small changes

As the catalyst for bigger ones, rather than just pointless.

Help

Nudging in the right direction.

Two things in the study illuminate the way this works. One is that the perception of hypocrisy in others becomes an excuse for our own inaction. "Whataboutery" became an Irish art form during the Troubles: the IRA may be bad but what about the Famine?

It applies also to climate change: why should I drive the car less often when my neighbour takes 10 flights a year?

The other is that this disdain for hypocrisy creates an impossibly high standard of authority. We want, according to the study, an authority figure on climate change who has a powerful personal presence, an ability to bring the problems graphically to life and “impeccable credentials in terms of their own sustainable behaviour”.

Until someone impeccable comes along to lead us, we are off the hook. What sounds starry-eyed is really rather self-serving

To which one can only say: good luck with that. We want a superstar communicator who doesn't fly, doesn't drive, doesn't eat meat, lives in a zero-carbon house and wears recycled clothes.

There is, ironically, a kind of hypocrisy in this desire for an idealised non-hypocrite – until someone impeccable comes along to lead us, we are off the hook. What sounds starry-eyed is really rather self-serving. If we listen only to those who have achieved the nirvana of total green enlightenment, we barely have to listen at all.

The truth is that we are – or should be – in a period of radical, epoch-making transition. In such a period, we have to live in one world while creating another. There are very few real puritans in such a period.

Sense of futility

It is clear from the study that people in Ireland actually know this very well in their own lives. They may care passionately about curbing emissions but still have to drive a round trip of 100 miles to and from work because of the way Ireland has been allowed to develop. Does that make them hypocrites? Hardly – it makes them real.

The big challenge is how we prevent this double bind from creating only a sense of futility that would, in this crisis, be self-fulfilling. The key is a phrase in the study: the common feeling of being “out of control”.

People who are trying to deal with addictions may need some anxiety and guilt to motivate them, but they succeed only when they are given the confidence to feel in control. This is what a new government has to establish for its citizens – to balance worry and shame with power and possibility.

The good thing about a sense of control is that it can be a virtuous circle: small wins increase the confidence that change is possible, opening the way in turn to bigger ones

It may help that it will be doing this in a post-coronavirus world where the power of the collective has been brought dramatically back into play.

Will that government have “impeccable credentials” on the environment? Dream on. But the absence of sanctity is no excuse.

The good thing about a sense of control is that it can be a virtuous circle: small wins increase the confidence that change is possible, opening the way in turn to bigger ones.

This study is a useful guide for what government needs to do. Be absolutely clear about what the plan is. Communicate small gains, not as trivial drops in the quickly warming ocean but as catalysts for larger transformations. And fight futility with both weapons: fear in one hand, hope in the other.

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