Opinion & Analysis

McWilliams becomes a devoted convert to ecology

JOHN GIBBONS

David McWilliams has discovered that saving the planet is more crucial than economics

A JOURNEY, the great American novelist John Steinbeck wrote, is like marriage. "The certain way to be wrong is to think you control it."

Author and economist David McWilliams recently completed a television series exploring the roots of the global economic crash. The film he made may not change the world, but over the last 12 months or so, journeying around the world has changed him. What he ended up broadcasting "certainly wasn't the story I set out to tell".

McWilliams, an asthmatic, found himself gasping for breath as they filmed in the pea soup of heavily polluted Chinese cities. "There I was, coughing and spluttering and it occurred to me that this entire society is literally choking itself," he told me.

In the course of filming, McWilliams experienced what can best be described as a personal epiphany. As he puts it: "I had an almost Pauline conversion last year, I thought to myself: I'm missing the larger picture here, this is the only story; economics is incidental."

The larger picture he refers to can be summarised as Peak Everything, and this became the title for his powerful final episode, which was broadcast on RTÉ on Tuesday night. He had touched on all these issues before, but in a more abstract, perfunctory way. Simultaneous peaking of oil, water resources, food production and atmospheric pollution mean that the era of global economic growth is now history. "We've become rich plundering the planet," is how he summarises it. Compared to the challenges posed by resource exhaustion, exacerbated by climate change, he accepts that "the global financial crisis looks like small beer".

Coming from an economist, this admission borders on heresy. Discovering that these issues are in fact about life or death, possibly for himself but certainly impacting directly on his own children's generation, came as a profound awakening. It's impossible to truly pay attention to this issue and fail to realise its fathomless consequence. That, in turn, changes everything.

Three years ago, McWilliams was ahead of the pack in identifying the Irish economic boom as a sham; the illusion of wealth was little more than selling overpriced houses to one another, using borrowed money. With one or two honourable exceptions, the Irish economics establishment dismissed this analysis, as did most media pundits and politicians. Former taoiseach Bertie Ahern sealed his own political legacy when lambasting those who were "cribbing and moaning" about the economy at the time, infamously adding: "I don't know how people who engage in that don't commit suicide."

> "Human civilisation will persevere until it has destroyed itself"

Ahern was, we must assume, being figurative. There is nothing at all metaphorical about the conflagration of looming crises, and the Sisyphean efforts required to alter their trajectory. The documentary featured a clip of a youthful author, Paul Ehrlich warning an audience in 1971 that "we haven't ruined the planet's atmosphere yet, but we're right on the verge".

Ehrlich is hardly a noted optimist, but even he could not have anticipated the Arctic being completely ice-free in summer by 2020. Yet that is the latest scientific projection. "Man has taken the lid off the northern end of his planet and we can't put that lid back on again," Prof Peter Wadhams of the Polar Physics Group said last week.

Thirty-eight years later, an older, less sanguine Ehrlich updated his prognosis: "For the first time, with globalisation, we are facing the collapse of everything."

Hearing these words is one thing; actually absorbing their meaning is an entirely different proposition, and so the realisation came dropping slowly but inexorably to McWilliams: having already destroyed much of the planet, human civilisation will persevere until it has destroyed itself.

While the conversion of one of our economic commentators to ecological reality is a welcome start, what are the rest of them thinking? If they haven't noticed, they're idiots; and if they have, why on earth isn't this our number one issue?

Economist Colm McCarthy's most recent public contribution in this area was to pen a snide, shallow critique of the worthwhile Green New Deal document published earlier this month by Comhar, the sustainable development council. He accused Comhar, for instance, of claiming it suggested its green deal would be delivered "at no apparent cost", when its costings were clearly set out. There is also the self-financing component of the deal. Home insulation is a classic example.

The compelling economic case for a full national home retrofit programme was set out yesterday by the Institute of International and European Affairs. Its Greenprint report envisages a 12-15 year programme costing €1-€1.5 billion annually, but saving a similar amount in reduced heating bills, while creating 30,000 jobs directly, reducing fuel poverty and cutting Ireland's annual emissions by 5 million tonnes. Can we expect our economic elite to dismiss this too as another woolly green fudge?

When McWilliams asked: "Is our civilisation going to crumble because we simply couldn't stop spending, building, burning and consuming?" he seemed actually to realise the full import of these words. As for his fellow economists, "they were all down in Kenmare last weekend, shouting about Nama, and it suddenly struck me that it didn't actually matter". People presenting new ideas are, he reminded me, ridiculed at first, then violently opposed, until at last these same ideas become accepted as universal truths.

Let us begin.

John Gibbons blogs at www.thinkorswim.ie