

Opinion & Analysis

Ignoring the greatest crisis in centuries



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Only wide-ranging actions can address the profound systemic threats to our global climate systems

THE CHRONICLES of Narnia, the classic series of children's fantasy novels, were completed in 1954 by Belfast-born CS Lewis and have since sold more than 100 million copies. The first story, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, tells the tale of four ordinary children who discover the entrance to the magical land of Narnia through an old wardrobe.

With Ireland's finances in tatters and a State pensions shortfall that has quadrupled over the last eight years to €102 billion, pundit Eddie Hobbs said at the weekend that public-sector workers were living in a parallel reality, in which, he quipped: "Narnian economics apply".

It was a good line and raised a few chortles in the studio among Marian Finucane's guests on RTE radio. However, the longer the discussion continued, the more surreal it all began to sound. There was nothing at all unusual about this panel, which along with Hobbs featured a former politician, an economist, a trade unionist and a one-time political candidate.

The conversation proceeded unremarkably along the standard lines – Nama, public borrowing, etc. It wasn't until later that evening that I could put my finger on it. Never mind senior public servants: most of our political class and our entire professional

commentariat have climbed into the wardrobe and taken up permanent residence in Narnia. There is really no other way of explaining how the greatest crisis to face humanity in 100 centuries of recorded history doesn't even make it on to the agenda when producers and editors are sitting down to plan these discussions, never mind intruding into the consciousness of otherwise intelligent, articulate guests.

These are, I accept, serious charges. Let me hand over for a moment to Nobel-winning economist, Paul Krugman. Last week he owned up to profound feelings of despair. "If you've been following climate science, you know what I mean: the sense that we're hurtling toward catastrophe but nobody wants to hear about it or do anything to avert it," he said. "Dire warnings aren't the delusional raving of cranks. They're what come out of the most widely respected climate models, devised by the leading researchers."

The entire community of climate scientists have, en masse, become Cassandras – "they have been gifted with the ability to prophesy future disasters, but cursed with the inability to get anyone to believe them," Krugman added. In a rational world, the looming climate disaster "would be our dominant political and policy concern. But it manifestly isn't. Why not?"

In the case of the US, powerful vested interests have reduced the national debate, be it on healthcare reform or climate legislation, to an ugly Punch and Judy show. The dominant ideology for three decades has been of the supremacy of the marketplace and limiting the power of government to refereeing and regulating. And here's the nub of the issue: only wide-ranging actions at intergovernmental, indeed intercontinental level, can address the profound systemic threats to our global climate systems. The markets certainly can't fix it.

Comhar's impressive Green New Deal document received perfunctory coverage. "We in academia and people in the media have a job to keep stating the obvious in ways that make sense to people," according to chairman Prof Frank Convery. Irish politicians are, he adds, "just reflecting what they're hearing". Which, from the media, is precious little indeed.

Since Irish public debate is not ideologically paralysed to anything like the level that obtains in the US, what possible reason can be advanced to explain the near total domestic silence on the threats to our global life-support systems? We are now being drawn ever deeper into a range of interlinked global crises involving energy, water, food production, fisheries, emissions, species

extinction, habitat loss and overpopulation.

Any one of these is profoundly serious; taken together, they tell us the web of life is unravelling. If you haven't noticed, that's because no one here in Ireland is really talking about it. Yes, it's a difficult, even depressing topic, but so is Nama and at least that is being debated exhaustively. Meanwhile, our media still persists in treating climate change as a weather story, a nice filler for a slow news day.

The public takes its cue from the media, and on the climate crisis we are being scandalously non-informed. Nor is this just about politicians. The handful of people who frame Ireland's public debate have tremendous power but to date have failed abjectly to discharge it responsibly. Most, I suspect, are blissfully unaware that they're living in Narnia.

The late Joe Strummer of The Clash went on to become a noted environmental campaigner. As the Green Party members this Saturday vote to decide the fate of Ireland's first green-tinted Government, Strummer's lyrics might strike a chord:

*Should I stay or should I go now?
If I stay there will be trouble
If I leave it will be double.*

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