

Opinion & Analysis

Exquisite moment offers chance to secure our future



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OPINION

There are many directions we can take between now and 2028, from the disastrous to the redemptive

AS THE story goes, Rip Van Winkle went to sleep for 20 years and awoke to find a world transformed. The original tale, by author Washington Irving, has the hapless Van Winkle awoken to find himself at odds with an unfamiliar world in which the American War of Independence has been waged and won and the old monarch King George has been routed.

As another George completes his eight-year petty monarchy, leaving behind a legacy of corporate cronyism, military misadventures and environmental vandalism, what kind of world might a latter day Rip Van Winkle awaken two decades hence to find? It's hardly an idle question; in fact, it may be the most pressing issue of our times.

The future has been described as an unknown country. Unknown, yes, but not unknowable. Radical advances in science and technology have delivered gems such as the Hubble telescope, which allows us to peer into distant galaxies. Scientists have also been able to harness vast computing power so we can begin to understand our planet home as a complete living system. And what they have found is anything but reassuring.

Armed with these insights, there are many possible routes to 2028; here are just two:

The Red Path: The new president took up where his predecessor had left off. Despite earlier promises, he refused to re-enter the Kyoto mechanism, arguing as Bush had done before him that it might hurt American jobs. Under intense pressure from the energy lobby, he also refused to reclassify CO₂ as a pollutant and tip-toed away from his previous commitments to introduce a carbon cap-and-share mechanism to begin sharply reducing US emissions.

The Copenhagen Climate Conference in December 2009 was a fiasco. Billed as the successor to Kyoto, the refusal of the US to come aboard meant the Chinese and Indian governments also stayed away. The EU, hampered by sniping from Poland and others, limped away from Copenhagen, and our last real chance to stop runaway emissions.

Business-as-usual lurched along for nearly another decade, as we continued to spend money we didn't have buying things we didn't need using resources we couldn't replace. Then environmental collapse in China led to a massive drop in production, triggering spiralling prices worldwide.

Water overtook energy to emerge as the decade's deepest crisis, with aquifers drying up, flash flooding and glaciers in decline. This

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crippled agricultural output, leading to worldwide food shortages. By 2020 the UN watched powerlessly as at least two dozen major conflicts raged across the globe. By 2028, international trade had reduced to its lowest level in more than a century. Van Winkle awoke to a nightmare world from which there seemed no return.

The Blue Path: Just as many had suspected, the new president proved to be a genuine reforming radical. This time, however, Americans were ready for real change, after the crushing 2008 economic debacle. By the time he left office eight years later, this president had almost completed an historic retooling of the US economy.

A massive nuclear and renewables programme allowed the decommissioning of two-thirds of the country's coal plants. As with the ozone crisis two decades earlier, America was able to elbow and cajole its major trading partners down the same path. What was astonishing was the lack of resistance to change. One determined nudge – and the whole world seemed to shift.

The green energy sector was, by 2018, the world's largest business, albeit in a scaled-down global economy. That year's edition of the Argos catalogue had shrunk from its 2008 peak of 1,800 pages to just 28, and curiously, that still seemed more than enough. Taxing emissions did put up prices, but the societal shift away from vanity consumption meant most people weren't poorer; they simply bought less. Austerity was the new black.

This revolution was led from the front. Here in Ireland, images of Taoiseach Simon Coveney arriving on his Segway electric to convene the 34th Dáil and president Mary Lou McDonald tending the Áras vegetable allotment captured the zeitgeist of the new zero carbon Ireland.

By 2024, the pace of life in Ireland and beyond had changed radically. The private car

was by now vanishingly rare. Almost all short-haul travel was by electrically powered bikes and mini cars, with public transport handling the rest. But mostly, people lived and worked locally, relying on the internet to connect with the wider world. CSO data released in 2026 found four in five Irish people describing themselves as “full/part-time farmers”.

After the demise of Ryanair, septuagenarian and lifelong Green Party supporter Michael O'Leary went on to rebuild his fortune by developing the world's largest offshore wind farm near Inishvickillaune.

Globally, the battle to prevent irreversible climate change seemed, as Van Winkle awoke in early November 2028, to be winnable. Sharp declines in international trade did hurt some developing countries, but not as fatally as resource exhaustion would have done. And we in the western world relearned the wisdom of our grandparents in making do, re-using, repairing and living simpler, more connected lives.

Can we possibly reimagine our existence, and in so doing, secure our future? As dawn crept over Dublin Bay yesterday, for an exquisite moment the answer seemed almost palpable: yes we can.