Advancing environmental justice for a peaceful society, a healthier democracy, the rights of nature and a sustainable economy.

The environmental justice movement has come of age. New groups are forming, the web of connections and mutual solidarity is getting stronger, the energy is palpable. The clue to this success was always in the name. A movement must be always moving, and it is moving to watch now how fast it is moving. In September, over 7,000 came to the streets in Belfast demanding climate justice.

The day after saw a major rally in Derry to demand rights for the earth. A new initiative in Belfast, called Múscail (Awakening) is forging alliances between social and environmental justice. Groups are growing in their ambition and with a much broader menu of tactics that includes surprise, resilience-building and creativity. Groups who started off as single-issue campaigns have matured into amplifying a broader vision for environmental justice. Take Rostrevor, where a campaign was formed as a single-issue campaign to protect an ancient woodland. The totemic ‘invisible tree’, invisible that is to the decision makers, has become an international story of ecological illiteracy and systemic failure in environmental protection. The tree was voted Tree of the Year. Even though the group RARE (Rostrevo Action Respecting the Environment) lost a judicial review they continue to hold the system to account. Their journey has now led them to getting Newry, Mourne, and Down Council to pass a climate emergency resolution.

Groups who were formed to oppose new road schemes are calling for the Rights of Nature, the next frontier in environmental justice.

A fishing club in the River Faughan is holding planners to account and appealing to the Aarhus Convention Compliance Committee in Geneva. Regulation by agitation, regulation by litigation, disruption of power structures through creative dissent are the defining characteristics of this movement. And the movement is starting to see success. The protectors in Tyrone, including Save our Sperrins, won in early November a significant court victory against NIEA who failed to apply correctly the Habitats Directive. This augurs well for those taking cases tackling endemic pollution of air and climate that will be deliberated soon in the Northern Irish courts.

Dreams and possibilities are also becoming a reality. Doors that were tightly closed are opening. If you have an idea, such as the Belfast Metropolitan Residents Group’s one million trees for Belfast campaign, the lesson is: just go for it. The Council has now said it will happen and it is this bottom-up pressure from the grassroots that is making positive change happen. The unravelling of the RHI inquiry and the subsequent political stalemate has created the vacuum in which people are finding their voice and shaping their own environmental democracy. RHI wasn’t just a financial and political scandal but an ecological scandal. The idea of hijacking climate breakdown to increase atmospheric emissions is being seen as not just morally reprehensible but symptomatic of a deeper malaise that is making many in the movement search for a deeper understanding.

At a recent meeting to discuss the new NIEA environmental strategy the room was calling for a form of cultural renewal, a revival, a socio-ecological imagination that could reframe our relationship with the earth, not as resource to be exploited but as a relative to be respected. One key to the success of this movement is that those involved are being generous, supportive, and allowing everyone to have their own voice. There are no leaders, only midwives or doulas – no one is the conductor of the orchestra but there are many modest facilitators who gently beat the rhythm of a drum to keep the music alive. The question for now is how do we keep this movement alive, to make it stronger, to allow it to sing and dance? My thinking is that another key to success is to recognise and accept that for an environmental justice movement to grow no-one can own it, it is owned by itself. No one strategy will keep it afloat, it will grow and shape itself organically by working creatively and interdependently. No one person or group will lead a movement to the promised land because in the world of environmental justice everyone is a leader.

James Orr
Director, Friends of the Earth NI & EJNI Steering Group Member
Climate Change to figure in General Election?

Unprecedented levels of mobilisation around the climate emergency and ecological breakdown have begun to translate into significant shifts in mainstream political campaigns. Northern Ireland’s two main parties have begun to foreground climate and environmental policies in the face of an unprecedented civic mobilisation, and pressure from other parties. The so called ‘green wave’ across the island of Ireland this year, in which the Green Party began to stage a significant electoral recovery in the Republic of Ireland and the party added to its tally of local government seats in the North, has accelerated policy initiatives. Arguably, the Green Party advances have been driven by global civil society initiatives including Greta Thunberg’s Friday School Strikes, and Extinction Rebellion. The global impact of these movements has spilled on to the streets of Belfast and Dublin, notably on 20th September when up to 7,000 young people rallied in the city centre and were then treated to a line-up of local politicians and promises to deliver on a climate emergency motion at Belfast City Council. Other local authorities, including in Derry, have followed suit. Evidence of the green wave has been evident in a number of declarations of a ‘climate emergency’ and in undertakings by Mayor of Belfast, John Finucane, to place the environment and climate change at the heart of his year in office. He also chose Friends of the Earth as his annual charity. Belfast’s accelerated response to climate change has also been driven by a multi-city policy and research programme, championed by Professor John Barry, at Queens University Belfast. The Place-based Climate Action Network (PCAN) was introduced at an event held at Parliament Buildings, Stormont. The network will establish Commissions in Belfast and Edinburgh. The Commissions will help the local delivery of the UK’s climate change objectives by supporting action in cities through a partnership made up of the private, public and civic sectors. The PCAN network will receive £3.5 million in funding from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) over the course of five years. The Democratic Unionist Party, whose former Education Minister, Peter Weir MLA, sent an “off message” warning to the student strikers on 20th September, is also getting its act together. The Party has launched a root and branch review of its approach to the environment, with the publication of a new pre-consultation document, in pursuit of a “healthy, greener and pleasant place, region, country and world.”

Climate Case Ireland: High Court rules against Friends of the Irish Environment.

In September 2019 Ireland’s High Court ruled against Friends of the Irish Environment CLG’s lawsuit ‘Climate Case Ireland’, which challenged the Irish government to embrace a more ambitious climate policy. Essentially, the case asked the government to follow through on its legal obligations, and on what it has consistently agreed is necessary to prevent the worst impacts of climate breakdown. The High Court’s verdict was not what we had hoped for, but there are some significant outcomes. Based on what we heard in court, the judge recognised the urgency of climate breakdown and accepted that Friends of the Irish Environment had a right to bring the case. The court, however, did not want to intervene in what it saw as a policy issue, referring to the separation of powers.

Friends of the Irish Environment will now consider grounds for appeal. For a more detailed analysis of the case and Ireland’s issues relating to its current greenhouse gas emissions see here and for full details of the case and related documents here.

Dr Peter Doran, QUB

Dr Andrew Jackson, UCD
EJNI Events

EJNI will host its second event in Derry-Londonderry at the Playhouse Theatre on Friday 29th November 2019 9.15am-2pm. This highly topical workshop, ‘Building Bridges: Exploring transboundary environmental justice in Ireland’ will bring together interdisciplinary academic researchers, NGOs, regulators, community activists, environmental lawyers, representatives from industry and government. The session will include contributions from key stakeholders on a range of relevant issues:

- ESPOO, human rights and the frameworks for environmental justice in Ireland (Anurag Deb, KRW Law)
- Biodiversity, Brexit and the Border (Karín Dubsky, Coastwatch)
- Clearing the Air on the Trans-frontier Ammonia Carousel (Vincent Lusby)
- The Potential of the Good Friday Agreement to Enhance post-Brexit Environmental Governance on the island of Ireland (Alison Hough, Athlone Institute of Technology)
- The Loughs Agency as a mode for transboundary environmental governance (John McCartney, Loughs Agency)
- Is Ireland Open for this type of Business? Cross border cooperation in relation to international mining (Fidelma O’Kane, Save our Sperrins)
- All-Ireland possibilities for climate litigation (TBC)
- Transdisciplinary research and pathways to effective collaboration (Dr Michael Brennan, University of Ulster)

We will also welcome attendee participation in a group discussion on ‘supporting cross border cooperation and environmental justice in a post conflict society’. This will inform the production of a briefing paper which will be issued to decision-makers on both sides of the Irish border as well as the Irish and UK governments. The event is free but registration is required as spaces are limited. Lunch and refreshments will be provided. If you are interested in attending please contact admin@ejni.net with any dietary requirements.

Consultations

Highlighting ways of influencing the development of environmental and planning law and policy to a wider range of stakeholders is another important part of the EJNI project. Current consultations of interest include:

- The Department of Agriculture, Environment & Rural Affairs (DAERA) is seeking views on the potential scope, scale and ambition of Northern Ireland’s first environment strategy. The consultation details are available here, and the deadline for responses is 5pm on the 23rd December 2019.

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