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Interview with Laura Burke, Director General of the Environmental Protection Agency

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Introduction

This is a lightly edited transcript of an interview recorded in-person on 26 February 2025. The questions were agreed prior to the interview, the transcript was agreed by both parties and subsequently edited as part of the special edition production process of *Administration*. Thank you to everyone who facilitated this process and particularly to Director General Laura Burke and to Journal Editor Dr Joanna O’Riordan.

Laura Burke, retired as Director General of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in April 2025 having served as one of five EPA Directors since 2004, and having been appointed to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Director General role in 2011. In this position, she led and strategically managed the EPA. Laura was the Chair of the European Environment Agency Management Board from 2017 to 2023 and is a member of the Climate Change Advisory Council, and of the Food Vision 2030 High-Level Implementation Committee. Prior to joining the EPA, Laura, a chemical engineer graduate of University College Dublin (UCD) with a Masters in

Science from Trinity College Dublin, worked in the private sector. She is a Fellow and President of Engineers Ireland and is a Chartered Director. In 2025, Laura was appointed an adjunct full professor in UCD. She is a member of the Board of Genio. In 2016, Laura was awarded the UCD Engineering Graduates Association Distinguished Graduate Award.

The interview began with congratulations to Laura on her long tenure as Director General of the EPA, and thanks for agreeing to this interview. Questions were grouped into three themes; reflections on the role and contribution of the EPA, questions that reflect themes in this special issue, and some reflections on wider global environmental issues. We began with a broad reflective question.

MM: To begin with, what are your thoughts as you prepare to leave the EPA, looking back what was most significant?

LB: One of the things that really strikes me with the EPA, since I joined it, and since I have been at the agency, is the relevance of environmental issues. The agency has just grown so much. And the interest in environmental issues has really grown. A thing I've been really keen on over the years, is to make sure that the agency is relevant to the public, to political discourse, to research, to as many aspects of society as we can be, because, you know, I think as Albert Einstein said 'the environment is everything that isn't you' – all we do has an impact on and we are impacted by the environment. So trying to make us as relevant as possible, that is probably the biggest change I would have seen over twenty years. At one stage, we were seen as scientists with pointy heads and sitting in splendid isolation. I think we are very much more connected to the outside world now, which is great. And we have grown and evolved, and the range of functions that we now do versus what we did and what we are known for is very different.

When I joined the agency, people used to say to me, oh, you are just the policeman – there was a need to understand our role in providing trusted evidence and science to people. I think that [being an] independent source of good quality environmental data, environmental science is really important and particularly now in this world where everybody has an opinion and there is all sorts of stuff in social media. People can say okay, well if the EPA produces a report, we know that's based on good evidence and fact. So that type of monitoring and reporting work is being quoted extensively, not only in the environmental sections or environmental departments but right across business community. The other piece is about more working

with others and so working with them through other organisations and that's everybody, we've engaged with everyone. Even in the context of climate change, we have engaged with the likes of the Central Bank and financial institutions in the context of climate-change risks. The big change will be really about the breadth of our work and the relevance of our work.

MM: How challenging has it been as the strategic leader as EPA has grown and deepened in depth?

LB: An insightful woman I worked with used to always kind of push me on these sorts of things and talked to me about adaptive leadership. And that is, you need to adapt to different situations. People always say, 'Well, what's your leadership style?' It depends on the situation and on the people you are working with. You know, it depends on so much. But the most important thing about strategic leadership for the agency is 'focus'. We do so much, but there can always be a desire that we should be doing X, or we should be doing Y, or we should be doing Z. We really need to always focus on our role and mandate and do what we are assigned to do really, really well. And that's helped us over the last number of years, that kind of continued focus on the role and mandate, asking what's the added value that the agency will bring to something. Because as environmental issues are much more to the fore now, there are lots of other people and organisations working in this space. The public service can get a bit territorial but there is more than enough work for everyone. Each organisation needs to look at the particular value that we can bring. With EPA, it's very much about data, science, evidence.

MM: We appear quite stuck when it comes to advancing some of the societal challenges. Can you talk me through an example of an EPA contribution that managed to unstuck something that was quite difficult or hard to get traction on?

LB: I will give you two examples, one a little bit broader than the other, maybe a little bit more about the EPA. So Climate Change in the Irish Mind is something that we've worked with Yale University [on] over a number of years and that really has become the definitive source of where the public thinking is at with regard to climate change. I now see that being used and being quoted in public and private sector organisations and I think that's helped the climate debate because sometimes people say well you know it's urban versus rural or it's this versus that and actually the evidence shows there isn't an urban-rural divide. Now there are differences in Ireland versus other

countries, we do not like bans, for example, maybe that's the Irish culture, we don't like being told not to do something. But because we've been able to do this questionnaire and engagement with people, and it's over 3,000 people are interviewed, in-depth interviews for it, supported by Yale, you get really rich information that, whether it's policymakers, whether it's government departments, or businesses, they can use the information in the context of climate change. And I think debunked some of the myths.

The other example is where we used to describe environmental issues we got caught up in technical language. And one of the areas that I always describe is things like urban wastewater treatment. We would be talking about secondary treatment and tertiary treatment, and nobody had a clue what we were talking about. And it was in around the time of the establishment of Uisce Éireann, and we became the environment regulator, we said we really need to explain things in plain English and how people will understand. So, in that context, we started talking about raw sewage and people understood that – if there was raw sewage going into [their] local bathing area or into the sea or into the river. The reason I say that that unstuck things is then I heard politicians in turn talking about the need for proper wastewater treatment because there's raw sewage going into our waters. So, by using language that people understand, by making things relevant, I think you can unstuck things. There are still loads of challenges, of course there are. But I think that is, there are two examples that I think have been quite powerful.

MM: Yes, I think it is very true that our language often just doesn't enable us to articulate what we want to as well.

LB: And sometimes because we are, as scientists and engineers, very comfortable in our own language and I'm sure that's every discipline. We all get comfortable in our own language and if you want to achieve an outcome you need to be talking to people in a language that they understand. This is not patronising or talking down to them or anything like that. This is making connections with people.

MM: This brings me naturally to the Irish Climate Change Assessment process. Mirroring the process of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was very innovative, an example of institutional imagination. What was learned from this and will it be pursued in future years?

LB: And it was a very innovative process. I think in Ireland, people in Ireland are much more attuned to the IPCC than in other countries. You talk to somebody on the street now they know about the IPCC so we are doing something right. But we need to localise things and it was the climate team here in the EPA that came up with the idea.

The idea really came, as I said, from the staff and from the team. I mean, what has been learned is, and I think the IPCC at a global level is saying, it is a big beast of a thing to kind of get over the line. You can only do this so often. I know we had twenty-two leading academics involved in this, which was great, but it is very time-consuming.

That is one thing I would say and it's how often then you would repeat something like that because what that's shown us so far is really that this is the definitive work of what's happening with regards to climate change in Ireland. What is learned from it – really positive getting lots of different universities working together, people of different disciplines working together. A difficulty always then is condensing that. What are the small number of messages? But we got there, we got there in the end. And I think the other piece that this is the same for everything, is don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good. You must finish, you must publish, it's not of any benefit to somebody if it isn't actually published. So, I think it was really, really successful. The purpose of it is then to use it and to go out and to facilitate these types of discussions with discussions with lots of other actors as well.

MM: You mentioned the EPA role in monitoring and evaluation earlier on, Are tools like cost–benefit analysis or business cases wide enough to capture some of the social outcomes and the dynamics that can be created by a good policy?

LB: I think they don't. And that's the long and the short of it. And I remember during the recession there was discussion about, you know, not everything that counts can be counted. There is that piece, and it sounds simple, and it may sound sometimes a little bit trite, but that's real. You know, we do the cost–based analysis (CBA). I know the significant work, not only at a national level, the EPA has funded a lot of research in the area, but also European level about natural capital accounting. But there is still a risk that we're trying to put numbers on things that actually are really valuable in a broader way. And we can't always value things by their monetary worth or try to put a monetary worth on them. And there can be a risk when you try to put a monetary

worth on something that, you know, people say, well, is that all? If I exploit that resource, I'll make more money from it. So, I think it doesn't allow for the broader discussion on value.

CBA is one lens, but we need to be looking at things from more than that. And even in the context of policy discussions, and what we talk about within the agency, we do look, as an agency, through one lens, which is the environmental lens. But we must accept in the context of policy-making that you also have the social and the economic lens. You know, you must keep these things broad, and I know we'll come to the just transition later, but you know if you look at things purely from one lens, you miss critical aspects.

MM: Three of the articles in the special edition talk specifically to the challenges of implementation. From the perspective of what you've seen in the EPA, can you drill down to the most serious implementation challenge or the key policy prescription that you would advise?

LB: I'd love if there was one policy. I think in the context of implementation, the EPA has talked for many years about aspiration, and I've talked about aspiration versus implementation. We write a lot of policies and plans. But what's the big thing? It's when we're writing or we're taking on directives at an EU [European Union] level that we think of the implementation at the time, because I think sometimes people are so happy that the plan is finished and it's printed, it kind of goes onto a shelf nobody's talking at the time of when it's been developed how is this going to be implemented and it looks good. I've seen this situation and we've had it ourselves in the agency, particularly when you are developing something that others are to implement.

It will not work unless you engage those others. If that was the one thing, because [of] that idea that you can write a plan or you can write legislation, [but] without engaging the implementers, [it] is not going to work. Now, on the flip side, we've seen that Ireland has been really good at implementing a number of environmental directives. Look at the Industrial Emissions Directive, we've done that really well. We license and regulate facilities and I think you know even with regard to the transparency of how we regulate, we're the second to none around Europe. You can access information on industrial licence facilities from your computer and you can be anywhere in the world, and you know their performance in Ireland, and we are unique in that. So, I think we've done some things really well but what I would say is in the

context of that, and that is an example, the EPA as implementers of the Industrial Emissions Directive have been involved in the cycle. You know, so you need to have people involved.

MM: The theme of the special issue is 'transformation'. The EPA's recent State of the Environment report talks about the need for 'transformation'. How do we promote a dialogue about transformation?

LB: Well, we've done one of the things in the *State of the Environment Report*. We did look back and we're very keen to look back on the fifty years since we joined the EU because I think we can often focus on all the things that aren't working but when you look at the transformation of the country in the last fifty years, we are in a completely different space. The population is increased, our health is improved, the level of education is increased, employment is increased, the quality of our environment has also increased. So, there's lots of really positive things. And that can also show you that, well, the will is there; we do it.

How do we take that next step in transformation? A lot of it is around commitment, but it is also showing the positives because if we always talk about the negatives and, look, as an agency in our reporting, often we are reporting negatives. We need also to point to success stories, and we have success stories in every sector, we are talking about energy, we can talk about the greenhouse gas emissions in the context of electricity generation have absolutely dropped like a stone over the last number of years and be rightly proud of everything that we've done in that space. But equally you can look at public transport, you can look at the Luas, successful in the context of public transport around Dublin, or you look at the agriculture sector and there's some really good examples of farmers really committed to environmental outcomes. The challenge we have is speeding up and scaling up that change. So, there are things being done, but now the urgency is there, we need to do it faster, but we need to be able to show people the importance of it and the positives out of it.

MM: The journal focuses on policy coherence, Just Transition in agriculture and adaptation as three typical challenges. You've already begun to talk about some of the challenges in the agriculture sector and some of the positive changes, do you want to drill down into that as an example?

LB: We spend quite a significant amount of time engaging with the agriculture sector. When we talk about investment in renewables,

people think it can be seen as very positive, it's investment, it's new technology. Some of the dialogue when we talk about agriculture is around and or can be perceived to be in the space of cutting farmers income. I think none of us would like to be the person that's been told, you know, that your livelihood is no longer going to be in existence or asking to make significant cuts so I think that's a starting point that we need to acknowledge. We've seen a huge amount of engagement at local level with regard to, for example, with regard to water quality. Recognising that this is also that social licence to operate, that you know, that it is, and if we promote ourselves as a country of being clean and green and marketing our food products as such, we've seen in 2023 agricultural emissions, greenhouse gas emissions dropped. We also have seen in the context of water and nitrates some indicators now; there are still indicators that nitrates levels have stabilised and reduced slightly. Still at too high a level, but it is a positive trend and showing that where you make that commitment, where you put that work in, you can get results.

MM: Are climate change and climate justice sufficiently aligned? What governance or policy integrations can better cohere them or integrate them as dual objectives? Can you talk about that relationship between climate policy and social policy?

LB: I'll approach things around long term and short term. I think when we started some of the climate discussions a number of years ago, in the broader scientific community and the economists, there was a focus on net positives or 'your GDP [gross domestic product] will only drop a small amount'. That's at a macro scale. But if you're somebody living in the Midlands and you're closing down the power stations or the bogs, you don't really care the net impact of GDP, you care about the impact on you. And, you know, we see the same about coal mines in Poland and, you know, other issues right across Europe. I think we oversimplified this message. So I do think that's changed now and there's a much greater understanding at a national and EU level of local impacts and bringing people with you on it. The intent is now very much about how do we make this huge transition whilst also recognising it will have impacts on some communities, some sectors more than others and then how do we support those.

This isn't the first time in history that we've made significant changes, humans have always changed and adapted. You look at the changes over the last you know again fifty years in all sorts of sectors,

technology all these sorts of things. We have changed, so we can change. But it is about having a mature discussion rather than trying to, whether intentionally or not, pretend that everything will be fine, and it will be grand overall. You must be able to recognise the impact on people and sectors of the community. You must look at things through the economic, social, environmental lens. If you just look at it through a purely scientific lens, it's a very interesting academic discussion and you know academically what you should do. But what about people? And I think we also do need to have in Ireland. So, and not only with climate change but I think in the context of my area, you know, how do we say we need this overall transition and we need wind turbines or we need solar and that overall, that is a public good that we need to be driving forward and that individuals can't inhibit that. Yeah, there's a really interesting subtext there in relation to trying to like that our concept of freedom is so individualised at the moment in terms of the law and how we can think as collective freedoms to create the social good that we want to create collectively. And that that's part of the answer is in just changing how we understand the concept of freedom to act. But I think we're a long way off there.

MM: We have seen the appointment of the Just Transition Commission, which Ireland is being lauded now as the first to establish. The European Commission is setting up the Fair Transition Observatory. Do you think there is some momentum in that space?

LB: I think it has to help. Because it highlights the potential issues, or some of the potential issues. So, I think of course it should help, and it is allowing those voices to be heard. Because the voices are there. And the people feel impacted. So, I think it is a really positive development, and we won't get the change we need unless we address these issues. And there will be pushback and of course there will be pushback. So, I think it is really, really positive. Now it's like everything else but then how is it supported to do its work, etc., as time moves on, again both at a national and EU level.

MM: Conceptually there are so many ideas like donut economics, eco-social contracts, post-growth, well-being and just transition. all competing as meta-narratives to try and frame the understanding. And do you see any one concept as more useful than others in enabling us to move forward with an understanding of what needs to happen?

LB: In the context of a framework, and you mentioned the Wellbeing Framework, [at] the EPA we've tried to promote links between health and the environment. Because what we've seen and what I've seen over the years is, and you know [I've] been through a few recessions, is when times are tight, people say 'Well we need to sort out the economy now, when we sort out the economy, we'll sort out the environment' or whatever it might be. And you know, society doesn't work like that first of all. And, when you look at [the] environment, environment and health are inextricably linked. And when you're protecting the environment, it's not for its, you know, environment as this kind of separate thing, you are protecting the health of people. So, if you've got good air quality, there's knock-on benefits.

If you've got good, unique water quality. All these things are health, and [they and] our environment are inextricably linked. And when you look at environmental laws, for example, from the EU, whether it's water quality or bathing water quality or air quality or whatever it might be, even the Industrial Emissions Directive, they're actually all about protecting people's health. And I think so the framework we often look at is the environment and health. There is a three-legged stool of the environment, social and economic – we need a balance between environmental, social and economic.

MM: From being on the Climate Change Advisory Council and your outgoing role in the Environmental Protection Agency, can you reflect on the likelihood of meeting climate targets?

LB: The EPA is the competent body for preparing and for compiling and publishing national greenhouse gas inventories and greenhouse gas projections. So, we are the body in Ireland that does this work, and we are the body that then reports into EU and UN [United Nations], etc. What are we seeing? We are seeing that based on all the information, based on all the planned policies, the current policy, planned policies, that we're not going to hit either our EU or our national targets. So that is the situation as of the most recent climate action plans. We're seeing a reduction of 29 per cent based on 2018 levels by 2030. If all current and planned policies and measures deliver in full. Now, slight caveat to that is there's some policies like embodied carbon in buildings and diversification of agriculture that we haven't even been able to incorporate in the projections because we do not have sufficient information to incorporate them into the projections – so based on the information we have at the moment, we're saying 29 per cent.

That doesn't meet the target, but even still, if we could hit 29 per cent reduction based on 2018, that would be a huge achievement. So I think we can, you know, it's a question of keeping the momentum up, but you know, in 2023 when we produced our greenhouse gas inventories, we saw the greenhouse gases were at the lowest level they've been in thirty years. That is incredible. In a growing economy, with a growing population, that we've reduced our overall greenhouse gas emissions. Because when you look at Ireland, we are different to other countries. Our population has gone from 3.5 million to 5 million people. The more people you have, typically the more emissions, because each one of us emit greenhouse gases, to think of it as a growing population and a reduction at the same time is a big achievement.

And in Ireland, when you look back at it, in 1990 every person in Ireland emitted around 18 tonnes of carbon dioxide a year. Now we're down to 10. Now, again, you know, you keep saying, well that's because you have more people, but it's not as simple as that. The more people you have, the more emissions you normally have. So, we've managed to do something really successful, which is more people and cut overall emissions. Is it good enough? Of course not. But it is in the right direction.

MM: How do we resolve not meeting targets in the context of international commitments?

LB: Well, we have international commitments, we signed up to international commitments with a 42 per cent reduction by 2030 as part of our EU targets. We need good strong evidence, if you're going to be negotiating. I think the EU as a block is incredibly important in the commitments at EU level and then seeing what's the fact of maybe just and fair, what's the fair contribution that Ireland should be making as part of that. Well, in doing that we need to have good science, good evidence and be able to describe very clearly what is the situation in Ireland and we do need stretch targets because we can't keep going and saying we're different. I think that's been a tendency in Ireland over the years. This is true, but you know, everyone else in Europe can get a little bit sick of 'we're different' but having good science and good evidence to say this is the situation and also being able to show the effort and the momentum. So, showing what we're already doing, I think that's really important.

MM: There is a growing awareness of the need for capacity for anticipatory governance, for thinking about and governing the future. How can EPA move more into scenario planning?

LB: EPA have been, through our research programme, and engaging with the European Environment Agency, doing more important work on forecasting and horizon scanning, including scenario planning, you know, for different energy transitions, etc.

The other thing is, you know, we learn from the ex-post analysis, I don't think we're particularly good at that. And in our current EPA research work, our upcoming call, we are looking at ex-post analysis and policies. Because we do need, without it being scapegoating or anything like that, we need to be able to say, this has worked well, this hasn't, and then how does that bring us into the future? And we need mature discussions because you know we're talking about innovation, we're talking about imaginative kind of governance arrangements, not everything's going to work. And I think there needs to be an acceptance of that because we'll end up in paralysis if you can only do something different if you're guaranteed it's going to work.

So, I think a bit of experimentation in a measured control, you know, we need to be able to do that. Even as an agency, we're looking and kind of saying, in the context of, we need to make sure that our governance is absolutely appropriate, but where are the areas we're willing to take a little bit more risk, and where are the areas that you're not willing to take risk and to experiment in some areas of, for example, whether it's in our environmental monitoring, using new things, using drones, using other things, using new technology, recognising that you might try something that won't work. So, I would say there is the ex-post analysis and learning from the past, and then there is, you know, there is innovation and risk-taking, but do it in a considered manner.

MM: Finally, can I ask what are you most proud of and whether you have you any advice for your successor?

LB: I am most proud of how we've grown as an agency and how the agency is so relevant to all aspects of society now. How we've made sure that we are relevant by doing really, really good work. That will be something that, whenever I talk to people, they always talk to me about the great work of the EPA, they talk to me about the great staff we have. That doesn't happen by accident. That's all of us working together and being really committed, really focused on the work that

we do. examples in two different areas that I'd be proud of. First is the merger between the EPA and the Radiological Protection Institute back in 2014, so ten years ago. And that was an example, and the IPA [Institute of Public Administration] did an ex-post analysis of the merger and highlighted the success of the merger in the longer term and how that benefited ultimately both organisations and we came out as one strong organisation with a broader remit. Which doesn't always happen. And I think good integration of staff, skills, experience, and expertise. So that's what we think that is. And that was back down to the people who have done it.

And then, the other example where I think the agency has done really well, and again another case study that was published in the IPA, the *Administration* journal, is the development of our senior management network, or effectively our senior management capability and leadership capability, and how we work together across the agency, even, you know, people with very, very different functions and remits, all coming together as the leadership team of the agency. And that's the directors and program managers and our regional managers working together, whether it be on strategy, whether it's on our values, our behaviours, and some of the senior managers and the agency board members will be leaving and moving on. They're actually working together on that.

MM: And what advice would you give your successor?

LB: Enjoy it! It's a great agency! Someone once said to me, I must have been going through some sort of trauma at one stage, and said, 'This too will pass'. Joking aside, you will have good times, and you will have bad times, and there will be difficulties of course, you know, there's [sic] always going to be difficulties and really good times. You just need to enjoy the good times and remember that during some of the more difficult times, that this too will pass. And we've a great team. We've great staff in the agency. They're really, really committed. We have loads now of new, enthusiastic, younger staff bringing fresh ideas. And the key is to focus on our role and our mandate, always be focusing on the EPA's role and where we add value.

