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From denial to delay: Climate change discourses in Ireland

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Abstract

Climate change is acknowledged as a pressing – even existential – problem for societies around the world. Despite the growing body of scientific evidence concerning the extent and impacts of climate change, meaningful policy responses have not been forthcoming. Actors and organisations intent on preventing or diluting policies around climate action have adapted their discursive strategies, moving from outright denial of the reality of climate change to focus on discourses of distraction and delay. Taking the case of parliamentary debates and media coverage of the 2021 Climate Action Bill, this research examines the extent to which these discourses are prevalent in Ireland. We find that discourses of delay were present, both in Dáil debates and in the media. We discuss the influence of these discourses on later interventions which affected the implementation of provisions of the Bill and may delay transformative climate action.

Keywords: Climate change, discourse analysis, discourses of delay, Ireland

Introduction

Since 1990, successive reports by the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) have charted the effects of rising greenhouse gas emissions on the climate. The language used to describe the impact of human activities on warming the climate has become

increasingly declarative and urgent, with UN Secretary General António Guterres declaring that the *Sixth Assessment Report* of 2021/2022 constituted a 'code red' warning for humanity (UN, 2021). However, the corporate sector had been engaged with the climate issue even earlier: by the early 1970s, there was significant evidence accumulating that global warming was happening and already posing a major economic threat globally. The Club of Rome, an organisation of corporate executives, former politicians and scientists, published *Limits to Growth*, which argued that continued economic growth was not sustainable (Herrington, 2021). Meanwhile, a 1974 CIA report found that economic and scientific leaders were in agreement that climate change was already causing problems around the world (Sterba, 1977). Also in the 1970s, research by oil conglomerate ExxonMobil concluded that the burning of fossil fuels was warming the atmosphere (Banerjee et al., 2015), citing an MIT study that recommended 'vigorous development of non-fossil energy sources be initiated as soon as possible' (Glaser, 1982, p. 18). Given that the scientific evidence concerning climate change has become more detailed and compelling in the following decades, it begs the question: why did this apparent consensus among politics, science and business not lead to the radical action required to tackle climate change?

Part of the answer to this complex question lies in the organised campaign to delegitimise climate science and discourage policies aimed at reducing emissions. There is ample evidence that the fossil fuel industries (coal, oil, gas and their extensive networks) have used discursive strategies to influence public opinion and policy formation globally (Cook, 2019; Klein, 2014; Supran & Oreskes, 2021). Climate scientist Michael Mann traces a long history of climate denial – from casting doubt on the science to smearing individual scientists (Mann, 2021). Recent research points to a shift from outright denial of the science to more subtle 'discourses of delay' (Lamb et al., 2020; Schneider et al., 2016; Supran & Oreskes, 2021), which appear to support climate action but actually serve to delay it.

Taking the case of parliamentary and media debates around Ireland's Climate Action Bill in July 2021, this article seeks to uncover and examine discourses of delay in an Irish context. If our understanding of climate change is socially constructed (Hulme, 2009), then discourse can be seen as an important element of 'cultural politics' (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005, p. 179), constructing 'a shared way of apprehending the world' (Dryzek, 2013, p. 9). Therefore, it is important to understand the discourses that play a part in 'producing

the social world' and in creating the links between knowledge and action (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 5), particularly at moments of significant change. The debates concerning the Climate Action Bill are an example of what Carvalho & Burgess call 'critical discourse moments' – significant events in which discourses become apparent and which have the 'potential for transformation in understanding' (Carvalho & Burgess, 2005, p. 1462).

The role of discourse

The concept of 'discourse' is at the intersection of language, power and action (Fairclough, 2012; Feindt & Oels, 2005; Hajer & Versteeg, 2013). It is embedded in institutions and interactions between actors, and may constrain or promote action (Bressand & Ekins, 2021). With roots in linguistics and in philosophy, discourse can be defined as a 'particular way of talking about and understanding the world' (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 1). Hajer & Versteeg (2013, p. 175) expand that basic definition to describe discourse as 'an ensemble of ideas, concepts and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena'. Beyond creating meaning, Foucault's theories explicitly link discourse to exerting power, defining discourse as institutionalised language that regulates and reinforces action, thereby shaping and enabling social reality (Jäger & Maier, 2009, p. 35). In this perspective, discourse is 'viewed as a form of social practice' (Carvalho & Burgess, 2005, p. 1461). The power dynamics which can be uncovered by examining discourses are laid bare in a statement by ExxonMobil VP of Public Affairs Herbert Schmertz:

> Grab the good words – and the good concepts – for yourself … your objective is to wrap yourself in the good phrases while sticking your opponents with the bad ones. (Supran & Oreskes, 2021, p. 17)

According to Dryzek (2013, p. 12), discourse is important in that it 'conditions the we way we define, interpret and address environmental affairs'. He argues that as the hegemony of the industrialism discourse 'began to disintegrate', this led to a variety of environmental discourses becoming prominent (Dryzek, 2013, p. 22). Identifying four major categories of environmental discourse, he distinguishes between those that he terms 'reformist' and more radical discourses that 'seek

to redefine the chessboard' (Dryzek, 2013, p. 14). Grounding his analysis in the context of market-driven economies and in the history of climate change and the environmental movement, Dryzek demonstrates how discourses can influence approaches to problem-solving and economic development. The 'broad strokes' used by Dryzek to define the discourse categories make them resonant but also perhaps too broad to be analytically useful. Nevertheless, his 'delineation of meta-discourses' has been noted as an agenda-setting work which is often quoted and has inspired further studies (Leipold et al., 2019, p. 450).

In other research, discourse analysis has been shown to have particular relevance to the field of environmental policy (Feindt & Oels, 2005, p. 161), with numerous studies tracing the role of discourse in responses to environmental challenges (Dryzek, 2013; Hajer & Versteeg, 2005, 2013). Feindt & Oels see the relevance of discourse analysis as a response to three particular environmental policy challenges: first, environmental policy problems are socially constructed; second, struggles about meaning have been integral to the field; and third, environmental discourse has 'material and power effects', while also being affected by 'power relations' (Feindt & Oels, 2005, p. 161). Such challenges have led to observations that discourses may constrain development of key policies, such as those required for the next generation of energy transition in Europe (Bressand & Ekins, 2021). In the US Morris (2021) linked a fall in support for the Green New Deal to discursive strategies used to dismiss some of its proposals and proponents in leading newspapers, especially the 'othering' of young leaders like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

While research into climate discourses in the media has concentrated on print and legacy media outlets (Pearce et al., 2019), there has been a recent scholarly focus on social media (Auer et al., 2014; Holmberg & Hellsten, 2015). Much of this research is focused on Twitter, while other platforms such as Instagram, Facebook and Weibo, and messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger have been neglected (Robbins, 2020). The particular affordances of social media – communication, social interaction, collaboration, community formation (Zhao et al., 2013) – do not appear to influence climate debates on social media: most users interact with like-minded others, and communities of 'sceptics' and 'activists' develop in isolation from each other (Williams et al., 2015).

Climate discourses on social media coalesce around debates about the validity of climate science or the accuracy of temperature anomaly

data (O'Neill et al., 2015b). Legacy media are influential in social media debates: posts linking to legacy media reports proliferate, and the most influential accounts in online climate debates are often owned by journalists from legacy media outlets or other elite actors (Newman, 2017). Some researchers have found that online frames and discourses are similar to those found in legacy media content (O'Neill et al., 2015a), while other, more recent, research concerning online activity in the run-up to COP26 in Glasgow in 2021 found that three particular discourses of delay were prevalent on social media: elitism and hypocrisy, absolution (i.e. certain countries being 'absolved' from taking climate action) and unreliable renewables (King et al., 2022). Although discursive activity on social media lies outside the scope of this research, it appears that many of the discourses analysed here are replicated on social media platforms.

Countering climate action

As neoliberal market capitalism has come to dominate around the world, the influence of multinational corporations has grown (Crouch, 2011), to the extent that Professor Julia Steinberger, an ecological economist, has identified 'state capture' by fossil fuel industries as a root cause of climate inaction. The size and profitability of fossil fuel companies, and their international presence, give them structural power, while their ongoing funding of lobby groups, political campaigns and 'think tanks' is an example of instrumental power (Klein, 2014), leading to 'corporate ventriloquism' (Schneider et al., 2016, p. 19). The industry has been successful in protecting its interests because of the instrumental or discursive power it has used deliberately and effectively over the years. Monbiot (2017, p. 1) describes an 'infrastructure of persuasion' that generates narratives justifying not just the continued extraction of fossil fuels but the continuation of economic exploitation more generally.

Casting doubt on the science, denying the anthropogenic causes of climate change or its potential impact, and ad hominem attacks on scientists have all been used as strategies of this climate 'countermovement' (Klein, 2014; Lamb et al., 2020; McKie, 2019; Mann, 2021; Supran & Oreskes, 2021). As the scientific evidence has become harder to challenge, recent studies have identified more subtle strategies that are being used by those who oppose climate action. Several have identified different 'delay' discourses emerging

from the climate change countermovement. Although this organised opposition to climate action has its roots in the US, recent research into online links has shown that it has expanded transnationally, including to Europe (McKie, 2021).

In an analysis of thousands of documents across multiple countries, McKie found evidence of strategies that were not classic denial techniques, among them, for example, an 'appeal to higher loyalties', which positioned climate action as a threat to economic development; and 'justification by comparison', which alluded to others being greater offenders (McKie, 2019). Schneider et al. (2016) found similar techniques being used by the US coal industry, which moved beyond outright denial and used rhetorical strategies drawing on neoliberal presumptions to advocate for coal, positioning it as part of the American way of life.

Returning to ExxonMobil, Supran & Oreskes (2021) analysed internal and external company communications on climate change and found rhetorical patterns similar to those used by the tobacco industry to shift responsibility on to individuals and downplay the seriousness of the harm of its products. In a rigorous computational linguistics analysis, they illustrated the approaches used by ExxonMobil to 'oppose litigation, regulation, and activism' (Supran & Oreskes, 2021, p. 1). They found that the company used the concept of 'risk' to suggest that the serious impacts of climate change were not 'certain', reframing risk as 'doubt'. The study traces this shift in approach back to 1999, after the Exxon–Mobil merger. Interestingly, this strategy coincided with – or responded to – a growing 'sense of urgency attached to risks from climate change' (Carvalho & Burgess, 2005, p. 1466). By 2009 Exxon (now ExxonMobil) CEO Rex Tillerson outlined the company's new approach to climate change – seeking to delay action rather than deny the science (Supran & Oreskes, 2021). In a reflection of the power and influence of 'big oil' in the US, Tillerson went on to become Secretary of State in the Trump administration in 2016.

In a significant public relations setback for ExxonMobil, one of its lobbying executives described on camera how the company advocated for carbon tax in the US, knowing that it would not be implemented and using this deception as 'an effective advocacy tool', in what has been described as a 'classic shift from denialism to delayism' (Carter, 2021). Indeed, this 'elevation of the carbon tax' as the best response was identified as a prominent discursive strategy in undermining the Green New Deal in the press (Morris, 2021, p. 7). It is a salient

example of a corporate marketplace advocacy strategy designed to protect the market for its product (Miller Gaither & Gaither, 2016, p. 587).

Another oil major, BP, has continued its production of fossil fuels, while appearing to express concerns about climate change (Doyle, 2011). BP has been credited with popularising the term 'carbon footprint' (Safire, 2008), thus shaping the individual responsibility discourse. Mann contends that such discourses have been used by 'inactivists' to deflect and drive wedges between climate activists (Mann, 2021, p. 79), with one example being to use the 'hypocrite's trap' (Schneider et al., 2016, p. 20) to undermine activists by criticising their personal carbon footprint. Hajer & Versteeg (2005, p. 180) situate the discourse of individual responsibility in the broader 'politics of life', deeming it a failure of environmental politics, in which the state transfers responsibility for action to citizens. This implies that discourse is not static or simply defined by fossil fuel companies, but evolves and changes through an interaction between and among individuals, states, media, companies and other entities.

Lamb et al. (2020) observe that discourses are used in sophisticated ways to influence discussions on when, where and how action should be taken on climate change. Based on a range of sources, including an extensive review of the research and a systematic content analysis of public testimony and news articles in Europe and the US, they identify a list of what they call 'climate delay discourses', which they found occurring repeatedly across contexts (Lamb et al., 2020, p. 2). Although these discourses often reflect legitimate questions and concerns, the authors show how they have also been used by proponents of climate delay to 'disorientate and discourage ambitious climate action' (Lamb et al., 2020, p. 3).

It is evident that those opposed to climate action deploy certain discourses in strategic ways to forestall measures and policies aimed at reducing emissions, and that these deployments take place at 'critical discourse moments' (Carvalho & Burgess, 2005).

Ireland's critical discourse moment

Ireland has frequently been described as a climate 'laggard' (Robbins et al., 2020) and annually ranks among the lowest performers in Europe when it comes to climate action (Burck et al., 2020). The label persists, even though Ireland enacted a Climate Action Act in 2015 and a Fossil Fuel Divestment Act in 2018, became the second

country in the world to declare a climate and biodiversity emergency, and launched an ambitious *Climate Action Plan* in 2019.

Despite these policy developments, implementation of measures required to reduce emissions remains elusive and Ireland continues to fail to meet its targets. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has cautioned that the 'extent of change required … is unprecedented' and spans across all key sectors of the economy (EPA, 2022, p. 2). The agriculture sector continues to play a dominant role in Irish society (Robbins et al., 2020) and has in the past resisted being included in plans for change, lobbying against the 2015 Climate Bill, for example (Torney, 2019). Industrial policy is also a site of tension, with IDA Ireland (2021) identifying 'big data' and 'cloud computing' as areas of opportunity for growth in foreign direct investment (FDI), while at the same time EirGrid, the electricity grid operator, has warned about the 'unprecedented scale of proposed data centres' being a threat to decarbonisation and to 'security of supply' (Commission for Regulation of Utilities, 2021).

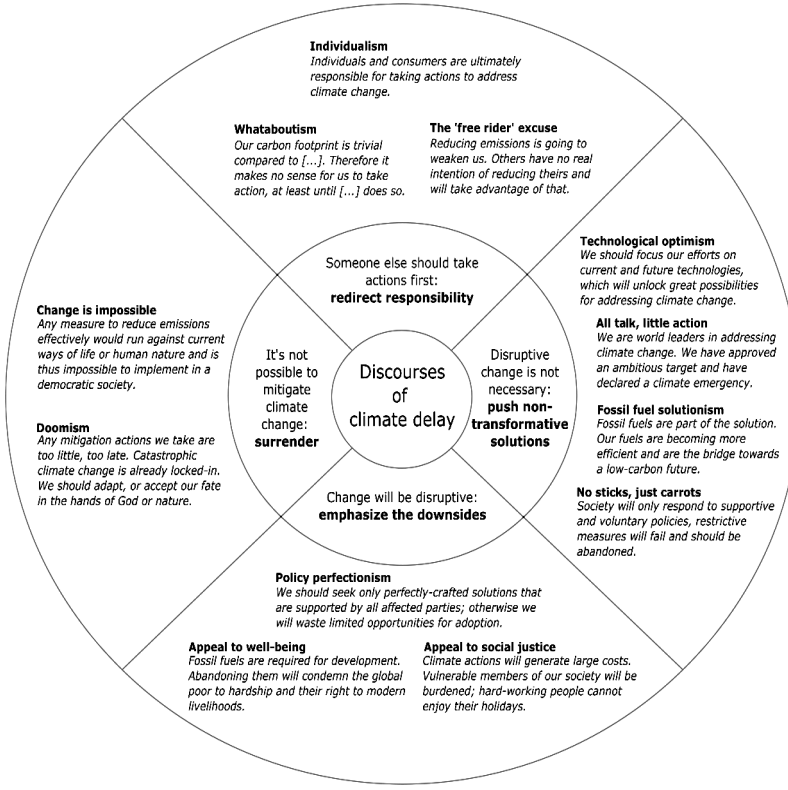
As EirGrid has noted, 'Ireland is at a significant crossroads' (Commission for Regulation of Utilities, 2021, p. 28). With the passing of the amended Climate Action Bill in 2021, setting targets in law and requiring carbon budgets, it appears that the country might be on the cusp of taking significant action to tackle climate change. This provides a relevant and timely opportunity, a discrete discourse moment that can be examined for evidence of whether and how discourses of delay play a role in Ireland and which ones are most salient. This study aims to contribute to the literature by examining whether such discourses lead to 'adverse effects on climate politics' (Lamb et al., 2020, p. 5) and potentially constrain future action.

Methods and approach

This research focuses primarily on the Dáil debates on the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2021 and secondarily on related media coverage. The passing of the Bill was an important development in Irish policy. Most of those speaking in the Dáil debate were intending to vote for the Bill. In that context, the decision was made to focus the research on whether, in a largely positive scenario, there was evidence of delay discourses. The Bill was publicly supported by the vast majority of Oireachtas members, across all parties. The debate provides a rich testing ground for how

discourses of delay might be utilised in the absence of overt resistance, and whether they might lead to 'adverse effects' (Lamb et al., 2020, p. 5). Lamb et al.'s typology of climate delay discourses (see Figure 1) is derived from a synthesis of literature and original research, providing a useful analytical framework.

Figure 1: Typology of climate delay discourses



Source: Lamb et al. (2020), reproduced with permission.

Lamb et al. (2020) identify four fundamental questions about climate action and social change. They map those questions to twelve discourses, which are grouped into four discourse categories (see Table 1).

Table 1: Lamb et al.'s (2020) four fundamental questions about climate action, and their related discourses of delay

Fundamental question	*Delay discourse category*	*Discourses in the category*
Is it our responsibility to take action?	Redirect responsibility	Individualism Whataboutism The 'free rider' excuse
Are transformative changes necessary?	Push non-trans-formative solutions	Technological optimism All talk, little action Fossil fuel solutionism No sticks, just carrots
Is it desirable to mitigate climate change?	Emphasise the downsides	Policy perfectionism Appeal to well-being Appeal to social justice
Is it still possible to mitigate climate change?	Surrender	Change is impossible Doomism

The Dáil debate and related media articles were coded against these twelve discourses and four categories. This deductive approach was complemented by an inductive approach, with three new discourses emerging during the analysis of the Dáil debates, which did not fit neatly into Lamb's typology. All three were placed within the category of 'Emphasise Downsides'. These are detailed in Table 2.

Access to the Dáil debate transcripts is publicly available via the Houses of the Oireachtas website.[1] The second-stage debate took place over a number of dates, beginning on 21 April 2021 and concluding on 6 May 2021. All contributions from all parties were included in the sample. A total of fifty-six TDs spoke in the Dáil during the debate.

Newspaper articles were accessed via the LexisNexis online database. After some testing of different search terms, articles were generated by using the search term 'climate action' in the date range from 20 April to 31 May, inclusive. The sample included national newspapers in Ireland, albeit limited to those that were available via LexisNexis. The date range was chosen to coincide with the second stage of the Bill but also to allow for a longer period of coverage after the conclusion of the second stage.

[1] See https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates

Table 2: Three new discourses that emerged from analysis of the Dáil debates

Discourse	*Definition*	*Sample quote coded to this discourse (Dáil)*
Democratic accountability	Concern that the Bill was not democratic, particularly in relation to the role of the CCAC	'The Bill proposes giving the CCAC the power to set the initial carbon budget … I believe democracy would be better served if the minister and the government, who are answerable to this House, presented the budget and involved the CCAC.'
Public engagement	Calls for more public engagement and concern that the public were not sufficiently consulted or involved	'I believe it is risky to seek to bind our citizens in a legal obligation without properly teasing out with them what it implies.'
Scale of challenge	Rhetoric that emphasises the scale and enormity of what has to be achieved	'Can we make all these huge changes? Can we change our transport system, the way we do agriculture and the way we heat our homes and generate electricity?'

The search yielded 145 articles that included the term 'climate action'. An initial review led to removal of duplicates, letters from readers and articles that contained only a passing reference to the term. The remaining 108 articles were added to the sample. Each file and newspaper article was then coded against the codebook, using content analysis techniques (George, 2009). Content was coded at the level of sentences – wherever a discourse of delay was identified, it was coded, which means that individual files can have multiple coding references. A reference could consist of a sentence or of a number of sentences together, whichever created the meaning. Where there was no evidence of a discourse of delay, the content was not coded. During the coding process, content could be coded at a number of different levels: category (e.g. 'Emphasise Downsides'), discourse (e.g. 'Social Justice Appeal') or sub-discourse (e.g. 'Farm Impact').

The nature of the samples means the analysis is primarily qualitative but it does incorporate frequency analysis (George,

2009) to identify the most frequently occurring discourses in both samples and to assess any differences between groups (e.g. political parties or publications). This qualitative approach has the advantage of allowing for an in-depth, textured understanding of the content. On the other hand, the scope does not allow for looking at a broader set of data, and statistical analysis of differences between groups or items is not appropriate because of the difficulty of comparing like to like.

Findings

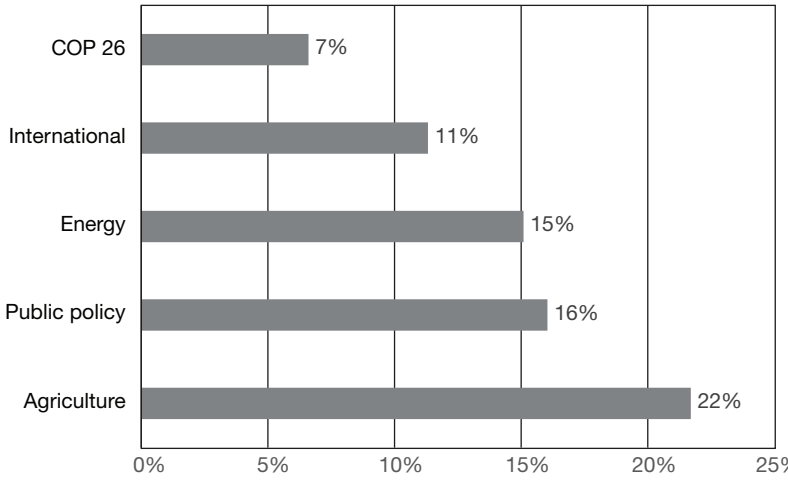
It is possible to make some general remarks about the parliamentary and media debates concerning the Bill. During the Dáil debates, all parties and speakers referenced discourses of delay, even those who spoke strongly in favour of the Climate Action Bill. The only party leader to speak was Eamon Ryan, Minister for Climate Action, the sponsor of the Bill. The only other members of the cabinet to speak were Green Party ministers. The speeches were delivered orally in the Dáil chamber. For the most part, they were civil. The exception was when Minister Ryan was speaking: he was heckled loudly by several rural independent TDs who opposed the Bill. Dáil speaking time is allocated by party and within the party, so comparisons of number of speakers or number of words across parties are not meaningful.

The sample of news articles covered the period from 20 April to 31 May 2021, inclusive. The following is a summary of general findings: of the 108 articles that carried a reference to 'climate action', discourses of delay were present in 86 articles, comprising 80 per cent of our sample. Agriculture was the most frequently occurring topic in the sample, with 22 per cent of articles having it as the primary subject matter. Figure 2 displays the five most frequent topics, which made up 71 per cent of the sample.

Articles appeared most frequently in the news section (32 per cent), with the farming section next (10 per cent) and business/agribusiness third (9 per cent). Caroline O'Doherty, environment correspondent of the *Irish Independent* (11 articles), and Kevin O'Sullivan, environment editor of *The Irish Times* (9 articles), were the most frequently named journalists, reflecting their specialised environmental/climate roles. Three articles appeared on the front page, all in *The Irish Times*, none of which were about the legislation going through the Dáil.

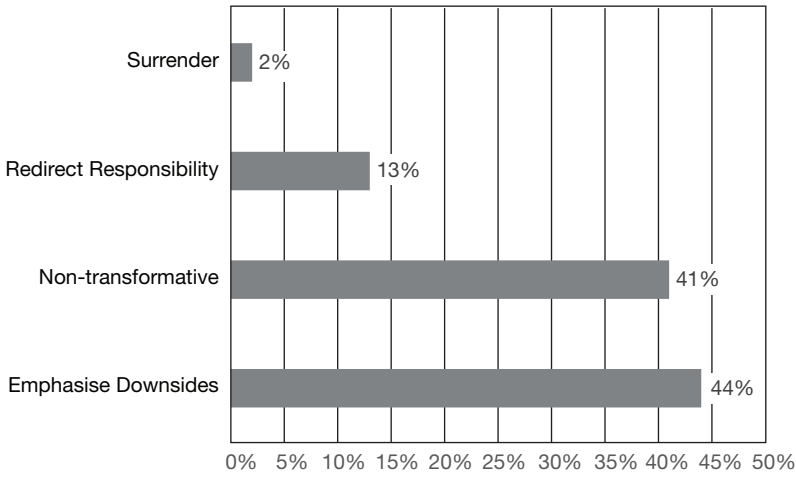
Four articles directly covered the introduction of the Climate Action Bill in the Dáil. In the three that appeared on 22 April, objections raised by rural TDs were given particular prominence. The

Figure 2: The five most frequent topics in news media coverage



Dáil debates did not noticeably drive an increase in coverage of climate action. The peaks in coverage of climate action were more likely to be driven by events like President Biden pledging the US to reduce carbon and the Climate Dialogues Summit, which was held in Dublin.

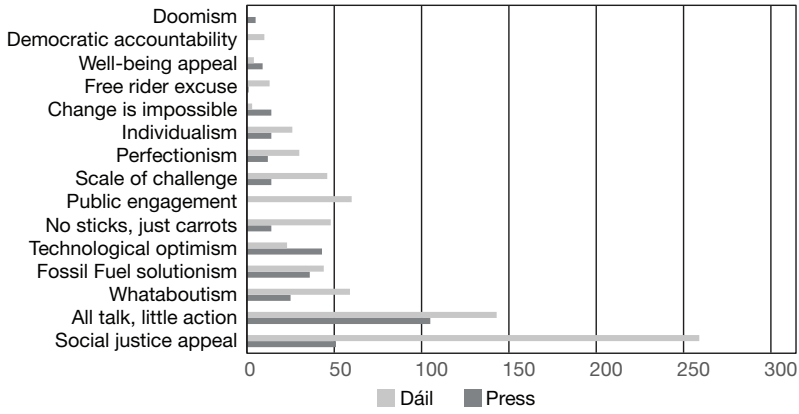
Figure 3: Percentage references by discourse category in Dáil debates and media coverage



There were 1,158 references to delay discourses identified in the samples. Examples of all four categories and all fifteen discourses were found in the data. References were not distributed evenly across discourse categories (see Figure 3), with 'Emphasise Downsides' (44 per cent) and 'Non-transformative' (41 per cent) being most frequently used. 'Redirect Responsibility' accounted for 13 per cent of references, with only 2 per cent in the 'Surrender' category.

At the discourse level, two discourses stand out as occurring far more frequently than others (Figure 4). 'Social Justice Appeal' was coded with 310 references, while 'All Talk, Little Action' had 248 references. These two discourses were most referenced both in Dáil debates and in the press, although the order was reversed, with 'All Talk, Little Action' the most common discourse in the press (105 references) and 'Social Justice Appeal' most common in the Dáil debates (259 references).

Figure 4: Frequency of discourses in Dáil debates and media coverage



Discussion

The Dáil debate that was the subject of this study was near the conclusion of a long legislative process, encompassing deliberation and recommendations from the Citizens' Assembly on Climate Change, the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Climate Action and an earlier Dáil debate. Environmental organisations, climate experts and industry representatives all contributed to public discussions. Given

the groundbreaking nature of the proposed legislation, these debates were essential.

Lamb et al. (2020, p. 5) point out that discourses of delay often 'build on legitimate concerns' and the intention of the argument may not always be clear. For example, in Ireland some of the political parties that have been vocally demanding climate action might use the 'appeal to social justice' discourse with the intention of climate justice being integral to any action. Other parties might use it with the intention of delaying action or reflecting narrow clientelist interests. The coding of Dáil speeches does not take a view of the intention of the speaker, simply identifying the presence of the discourse. Even though many protagonists might be raising valid concerns while still advocating for action, and recognising that these discourses 'may be put forward in good faith', the analysis of the Dáil debates seeks to 'identify the features of these discourses, rather than to attribute underlying motives' (Lamb et al., 2020, p. 3). While the underlying motives of speakers may vary, the context of the speaker's or party's history of climate change activism or inactivism is relevant. It is also enlightening to consider how later actions can be traced back to the discourse used.

The Climate Action Bill 2021 was signed into law on 23 July, some two months after the conclusion of the debates that were the subject of this research. It could be assumed that, as the Bill was approved and enacted, the evidence of discourses of delay is irrelevant to the policy outcome. However, there are a number of reasons to question that assumption, not least Ireland's repeated failure to deliver on earlier climate commitments. The discussion here examines two areas that show how discourses predict action: the centrality of agriculture to the debates and the role of economic policy, particularly as reflected by the parties that are in power in Ireland. First, it is important to understand the most frequently used discourses in more detail.

An 'Appeal to Social Justice' 'moves social impacts to the forefront of policy discussions' (Lamb et al., 2020, p. 4). It was by far the most frequent discourse during Dáil debates and the most referenced discourse for all parties other than the Green Party and People before Profit/Independents for Change, both of whom had it in second place after 'All Talk, Little Action'.

Within the 'Social Justice' discourse, much of the focus was on 'just transition', a phrase that was used 134 times during the debate, most frequently by Sinn Féin (44 times) and least frequently by Fine Gael (6 times). Some speakers focused on particular constituencies or

affected groups, for example, Bord na Móna peat workers in the midlands. Others focused more generally on those who would be most disadvantaged by fuel poverty or by a carbon tax. A number of references were made to climate justice on a global scale, but the focus was usually national and often local.

Some frequent subthemes emerged. In particular, concern was expressed about the impact of climate action on agriculture, on farming communities and on rural Ireland more generally. Some 40 per cent of references focused particularly on either the farm impact (22 per cent) or the related topic of a 'rural divide' (18 per cent). The Independents group, which includes mostly rural TDs who voted against the Bill, devoted 18.8 per cent of their speaking time to an appeal for social justice, and were particularly concerned about the potential impact of climate action on agriculture and rural communities:

> It is my considered opinion that in the fullness of time, history will record that this Bill was the biggest attack on agriculture and rural Ireland and will be at the expense of every man, woman and child living in rural Ireland. It will wipe them out. (Deputy Michael Collins, Independent)

At the other end of the political spectrum and in support of the Bill, People before Profit/Independents for Change and Sinn Féin were less concerned about impact on farms and spoke more about the need for a 'just transition' that addressed inequality and poverty:

> The people who are primarily responsible for carbon emissions are large industries or governments and those who are much more wealthy in our society. Therefore, if we are to move towards a carbon-neutral economy it has to be done in a way that ensures those most able to pay and those most responsible for those carbon emissions pay their fair share. (Deputy Eoin Ó Broin, Sinn Féin)

Twenty-five articles in the press sample carried fifty-one references to social justice. Over half of the references were to agriculture and rural concerns, with the themes broadly paralleling those raised in the Dáil debate.

The second most frequently occurring discourse was 'All Talk, Little Action'. The overwhelming recurring theme in this discourse

was around the gap between rhetoric and action. Government parties were likely to criticise this past gap while lauding the leadership currently being shown, without any apparent acknowledgement that they may be the same parties that have been in Government for some time:

> There have been too many plans in Ireland for different initiatives and they never develop into anything. (Deputy James O'Connor, Fianna Fáil)

Centrality of agriculture

Agriculture has been identified as one of the 'cross-cutting themes' (Robbins et al., 2020) in Ireland's response to the climate crisis. The findings in this study bear that out, with agriculture permeating the discourses of the Dáil debates and the news articles. Those who overtly opposed the Bill, primarily rural independent TDs, were particularly vocal about what they perceived as social justice issues affecting agricultural communities; so were the larger government parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. But is there a link to delayed action? Two contemporaneous examples suggest that there may be.

As the Dáil was debating the Climate Action Bill, one of Ireland's largest agribusinesses, Glanbia, received planning approval to build a cheese plant in Waterford. An Taisce, an independent environmental and heritage non-governmental organisation, challenged this approval in the courts. An Taisce's actions came in for significant criticism from agricultural organisations and from legislators. During the Climate Action Bill debate, Fine Gael TD Michael Creed (a former Minister for Agriculture) described An Taisce as part of 'the weaponised wing of the environmental movement'.

Three days later, six of Creed's colleagues – four former ministers and two senators – issued a statement criticising An Taisce. The current Fine Gael Junior Minister for Heritage and National Parks, Patrick O'Donovan, also 'launched a blistering broadside on An Taisce' (McConnell, 2021). Even the Taoiseach, Micheál Martin, weighed in to criticise An Taisce's decision to appeal, while his colleague Barry Cowen (Fianna Fáil), another former Minister for Agriculture,[2] sought to change planning laws to curtail the ability to appeal.

[2] Albeit very briefly.

The discourses that were most evident in the research sample can be seen woven throughout the criticisms of An Taisce – in particular, 'Social Justice Appeals', with An Taisce being cast by Fine Gael as a 'leading threat to the future of rural Ireland' (Fine Gael Press Office, 2021). The incongruity of government TDs threatening the funding of An Taisce while simultaneously declaring their support for climate action exemplifies the discourse of 'All Talk, Little Action'. The Taoiseach defended his stance by responding in the Dáil that the Climate Bill was 'a landmark piece of legislation' (McConnell, 2021). This led one commentator to quip: 'Can you eat cheese while talking out of both sides of your mouth? The Taoiseach appears to think so' (Clifford, 2021).

The An Taisce controversy is just one example, interesting because it was happening concurrently with the debate on the legislation, but also because it was noted as possibly 'a signpost to the cultural and policy conflicts to come' as policy requires actions that are considered 'hugely unpopular with Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael TDs' (Leahy, 2021).

Of more significance are the late amendments that were made to the Climate Action Bill, right before it was signed into law and with very little time for further debate in the Dáil. The amendments were made in the Seanad and were heavily criticised by environmental activists and by members of the opposition, particularly on the basis that they 'represented the vested interests of big agribusiness' (Deputy Bríd Smith, Dáil Éireann, 14 July).

How did this happen when government TDs spoke in support of the Bill and indicated they would be voting for it? Our analysis of what they actually said as they 'cloaked themselves in the language of environmentalism' (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005, p. 180), and the discourses they used, makes the late changes less surprising. The amendments to the Bill can be traced back to the discourse in the Dáil debates. In the 'Democratic Accountability' discourse, several TDs expressed concern that the Climate Change Advisory Council (CCAC) might have too much power, potentially undermining the democratic legitimacy of the Dáil. The late amendments appeared to diminish the role of the CCAC, requiring it to comply with government discretion, rather than the other way around, leading Professor John Sweeney to complain that the CCAC will be 'rendered toothless' (Crosson & Starkey, 2021). Similarly, the impact on agriculture was a major theme in the Dáil debates and the possible stress on farm communities was often mentioned. This 'Social Justice

Appeal' discourse is also prevalent in media coverage of the Bill and of climate action in general.

It appears that the late amendments will give the government power to determine how emissions will be calculated, including in the agricultural sector. Professor Sweeney, Professor Barry McMullin and other climate activists warned that this could undermine the scientific basis of the Bill and also put it under political control, making action subject to lobbying and political pressure (An Taisce, 2021). Indeed, the Irish Farmers' Association (IFA) took credit for the amendments, openly attributing the result to their intensive lobbying of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael (IFA, 2021). The final vote on the Bill reflected the criticisms of the amendments, with sixty TDs voting against the Bill, up from ten before the amendments were made.

Economic policy vs environment

The tension between the agricultural sector and environmentalists mirrors the tensions at the intersection of economic policy and climate policy. More broadly than the agriculture sector, Ireland's economic policy has been founded on FDI. Barry outlines how Irish institutions have co-evolved with FDI since the 1950s, adapting to continue to attract and accommodate FDI (Barry, 2007). By the 1990s, the Irish government had 'embraced free market ideologies' and those mechanisms had become embedded in 'institutional, political and cultural contexts' (O'Callaghan et al., 2015, p. 32).

The primacy of economic concerns over environmental concerns (Morgan, 2020) was evident in the research findings – even the 'Social Justice Appeal' discourse primarily focused on the economic impact of climate action on various constituents. Both the Glanbia cheese factory example and the late amendments to the legislation showed how government and big agribusiness are discursively connected.

In a different area of economic policy, IDA Ireland has warned of 'considerable reputational damage' that could be caused by an 'energy supply crisis', but has 'strongly opposed' a moratorium on new data centres, despite concerns about the demands on the electricity grid (Allen, 2021). This emphasis on Ireland's international reputation was found to be a common subset of the 'All Talk, Little Action' discourse. Concerns about industry and power supply led to the Minister for the Environment approving new fossil fuel generation plants for emergency supply. In this case, 'Fossil Fuel Solutionism' moved beyond discourse to become a material response.

The discussion here points to the connections between discursive developments (e.g. focus on social justice) and non-discursive effects such as the Climate Action Law being amended to accommodate the concerns of the agriculture sector (Leipold et al., 2019, p. 456). It appears that some Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael discourse in the Dáil debate could be construed as foreshadowing later efforts to delay or constrain transformative climate action. In fact, three days after the Climate Bill was signed into law, the *Business Post* reported that carbon budgets would be delayed by the government's last-minute amendments (Murray, 2021). A year after the debate that was the focus of this study, the EPA reported significant gaps between planned carbon budgets and projected emissions, with the agriculture sector predicted to increase emissions up to 2030 (EPA, 2022).

Conclusion

The typology of discourses of climate delay developed by Lamb et al. (2020) has proven to be a useful analytical tool and many of the discourses resonate in the Irish context. 'All Talk, Little Action' and 'Social Justice Appeal' are particularly significant here, with emphases that may be unique to Ireland, such as concern for the impact on Irish rural life (rooted in clientelist politics) and the focus on needing to protect the country's international reputation (rooted in the economic dependence on FDI). Discourses of denial were largely absent from media coverage of climate change in Ireland up to 2016 (Robbins, 2020), suggesting that the presence of discourses of delay in media coverage and parliamentary debates in 2021 is not simply a case of 'denial becomes delay', but may rather suggest that discourses of delay have emerged as climate action climbs closer to the top of the policy agenda.

By international standards, Ireland does not have a significant fossil fuel industry – but the country does have a very significant agriculture sector. In *Ireland and the Climate Crisis*, Robbins et al. identify cross-cutting themes in the Irish response to climate change, among them the influence of agriculture and an ongoing tension between incremental and radical change (Robbins et al., 2020, p. 11). Irish economic policy is also built around FDI and this too appears to be a constraining factor (Barry, 2007). Hajer & Versteeg (2005, p. 177) have described 'the study of discourse' as allowing one 'to see how a diversity of actors actively try to influence the definition of the problem'. The dominance of the agriculture 'regime' and successive

governments' long-standing commitment to FDI as the preferred route to achieving the priority of economic growth appear to be obstacles to meaningful climate action.

Releasing its *Sixth Assessment Report* in 2022, the IPCC warned that there is a 'brief and rapidly closing window' to achieve climate goals (IPCC, 2022). António Guterres, UN Secretary General, spoke starkly about the impact of climate delay:

> We are on a pathway to global warming of more than double the 1.5°C limit agreed in Paris. Some Government and business leaders are saying one thing, but doing another. Simply put, they are lying. And the results will be catastrophic. (UN, 2022)

In the context of what Guterres says clearly is a climate emergency, it is critically important to understand how to distinguish well-founded concerns about action from discourses of delay, thus providing insight into where future points of contention might be. There is much scope for further research to expand the understanding of the role discourse plays and perhaps to explore how the dominant agriculture and economic discourses in Ireland can be reshaped to meet the needs of the climate crisis. A more thorough network analysis of linked media activity to uncover networks of influence could further illuminate the influence of strategic actors in climate debates. Those promoting climate action would benefit from exploring how 'inoculation' strategies and other techniques can be helpful to counter delay and build support in the general public (Cook, 2019; Farrell et al., 2019). The role of social media in shaping perceptions is also likely to be a key to future research. The question of how delay discourses might apply as action for climate adaptation becomes more urgent is another potentially fruitful research area.

Deep reductions in emissions will require transformative change in every country, including Ireland. Those transformations will touch on our core way of life, on justice issues, on our economic system and on whether we can even conceive of solutions that are 'post-growth'. Hulme has argued that:

> We need to see how we can use the idea of climate change – the matrix of ecological functions, power relationships, cultural discourses and material flows that climate change reveals – to rethink how we take forward our political, social, economic and personal projects over the decades to come. (Hulme, 2009, p. 362)

Hope for the future was another of the cross-cutting themes identified by Robbins et al. (2020, pp. 11–12). Historically, Kiberd (2017, p. 6) has argued that the Irish people have shown great adaptability and 'talent for adjustment'. The passing of the Climate Action Bill, imperfect though it might be, represents a 'critical discourse moment' in Ireland. Therein lies some hope for the future. As Friends of the Earth Ireland commented, the Climate Action Bill represents 'the start of the race of a lifetime' to reduce emissions.

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