

Chair's Speech  
Biodiversity Citizens' Assembly  
Sat 14<sup>th</sup> May 2022

Welcome back everyone, I hope you've all had an opportunity to get to know each other now and we're opening now to our livestream and I'm sure we will have people tuning in from all across the country, potentially all across the world. So, you're very welcome, ar an gcéad dul síos, go raibh míle maith agaible as ucht bheith anseo linn inniu. When I was told originally of the invitation that 20,000 people had letters sent to their homes and over 2,200 responses, it really confirmed my enthusiasm of people in Ireland and who came back with such dynamism and interest wanting to participate in the future of their country. So, the fact that all 99 of you are giving up 10 days of your year to participate in this exercise in deliberative democracy is really, really inspiring and táim fíor bhuíoch as sin. I'm so, so grateful and from having the chats with you beforehand, a couple of you, I know, there's an element of post Covid anxiety here. It's probably one of the first few times you've been in a room with so many people that you don't know and it's tricky now to get, how do I do the small talk again so I also appreciate that takes a lot of energy out of people. So thank you very much for that. While Citizens' Assemblies in Ireland are earning us a very strong reputation internationally, involving people in our democracy, this is, as far as we know, the first Citizens' Assembly that is taking place globally looking at the issue of biodiversity loss. We can therefore feel a real sense of privilege and pride that the work we might do might well be noted by others not only in Ireland but also abroad and I'm very hopeful that what the recommendations that you, we, come up with will not only be impactful in Ireland but also abroad.

National Biodiversity Week was launched yesterday with over 100 free events around the country so it's timely today and it is I have to say unfortunately it's an accident that our first meeting is in National Biodiversity Week, but a happy accident nonetheless and because the issue of biodiversity loss is, it's a local one, it's a national one, it's a European one, it's a global one. So what we do in our own locality be that in our townlands or our urban estates, in our relatively small country, it will impact the rest of the world and because biodiversity in and of itself requires consideration of systems, so what happens in one small system impacts in the larger system.

To actually give a little bit of background on myself because I'm aware not everybody and I haven't gotten introduced myself to everyone yet, but my background is originally in maths and physics and I know very little at the moment about biodiversity loss and I'm very happy to learn about that with you all but I'm hopeful that my background in maths and physics, which looks at systems and looking at initial conditions and perturbations and how that influences other systems beyond that, I'm hopeful that that might bring something to our conversations as all of your backgrounds in various avenues and we'll also bring to those discussions. Now while the question that we've been asked is on the surface simple, we've been asked by the State to examine how the state can improve its response to the issue of biodiversity loss. The answer to that is going to be complex, so our recommendations are

going to be framed by our Terms of Reference provided to us by the Oireachtas. You may have seen them already but I'll list them out here.

The international, European, national, regional and local dimensions to the emergency; the threats presented by biodiversity loss and the opportunities to reverse the loss that's going to be important; what are the drivers, what are their impacts and the opportunity to address them; what are the perspectives of the general public, advocacy groups, representative groups, experts and policy makers and interestingly enough a paper I read last night, found a correlation between how many people know about a Citizens' Assembly and the recommendations getting implemented, so that's one task that I give to all of you, tell everybody what you are doing on this Citizens' Assembly. Tell them all you are learning about biodiversity loss because it will make what we do more impactful at the end; we've also been asked to look at opportunities to develop greater policy coherence and strategic synergies between biodiversity policy and other policies. I think that's going to be key. Thankfully we'll have experts to advise us in and around those policies. We've been asked to look at opportunities to promote greater public understanding of biodiversity and to improve the State's response to the challenge. So, there's a lot there and even though we've been given 10 days which is actually more than other Citizens' Assemblies have been given, in that we have full weekends for them, I think it looks to the enormity of this issue but also how impactful we can be with it and I'm very hopeful that all of this work will be done within the backdrop of Ireland having declared a Biodiversity Emergency in 2019. We were the second country in the world to do so at the time. We're looking at the devastating rates of loss of life and habitats across land and sea but there's also really successful pilot projects underway. Today we'll be looking at what is biodiversity and the scale of the problem, but we'll also over the course of our work here, about the successful projects that are underway and we'll look at those to see well how can they be maybe brought forward and expanded. So, this is a large and important task to undertake but it's also a really, really wonderful opportunity to impact our country's policies and actions and that's something that I am incredibly excited about.

It'll be an evidence-based exercise, we'll focus on the scientific data but will also interrogate where it might be necessary how that data has been generated and statistically analysed and I know there are actually a lot of you with backgrounds in that will be helpful in that regard but we will also be guided, I'm very grateful, by our expert advisory group and I am delighted to introduce them to you now. Some of them are sitting here, some of them at the back of the room and some couldn't be with us today due to various reasons but we will definitely be meeting them over the course of our work. So initially we have Professor Tas Crowe, who's Director of the Earth Institute at UCD and he's also Chair of the National Biodiversity Forum. We have Dr Mary Dobbs who is Assistant Professor at the Department of Law at Maynooth University, who specializes in environmental law and governance and we have Michael O'Conneide who is a former Director of the Environmental Protection Agency and former Director of Marine Environment and Food Safety at the Marine Institute. At the back of the room, we have Dr Clodagh Harris a senior lecturer at the Department of Government and Politics and an affiliate of the Environmental Research Institute at UCC. Two other members who couldn't unfortunately be with us today, Professor Jennifer

McElwaine, the 1711 chair of Botany at Trinity College Dublin and Dr James Moran who's a lecturer in Ecology and Biology at GMIT who leads the Agro-ecology and Rural Development research group. So, they have already given up so much of their time in addition to the normal work that they do and I'm incredibly grateful for their time and their expertise working with the Assembly. It's a huge commitment but it's really important because they will guide us on who are the national and international experts in this field who will talk to us as we proceed with our work. So, thank you sincerely for that and I wouldn't mind giving them a round of applause if we can.

Clodagh has been giving me crash courses in deliberative democracy and the more I learn about it and the more I'm grateful to each and every one of you for committing all of your time to participating in this important exercise, something which by all accounts, strengthens the democratic nature of societies because it's bringing people together directly into the policy making landscape. It's asking you to engage in an informed way by making decisions on behalf of your neighbours, of your family, your friends and your countrymen.

I've already mentioned you're giving up 10 days of your year, you're sacrificing, you know, family, friendship, community commitments to do so, so thank you very much and I really hope that this is something that you'll enjoy being part of. It's not like a twitter poll because you will have heard so much and learned so much as we go through and we make our recommendations, so thank you so dearly for that and please give yourselves a round of applause. Now I'm hoping that this is going to be an enjoyable experience where friendships will emerge and I do think it's funny that I think all the Cork people already found themselves at a table!

So, you know, we're coming together. I think this is a 'meitheal', I'm from rural Ireland and we used to have 'meitheals' where everybody would come together and help one person, you know, save the hay or something like that. As a child it was our job to go and get the lemonade but this is us coming together on behalf of our community, so in that 'meitheal' I hope we develop that 'nasc', those really deep relationships with one another and that you know, because we're all here in the same spirit and in that I really want to make sure all voices are heard, all opinions are welcome. We'll maintain an atmosphere of respect for one another in our conversations as Tas said earlier, we'll learn how to agree with our disagreements, something like that you said or you said it nicer Tas. We have principles to guide us.

The first being openness. So, we're going to be completely transparent, all our plenary meetings are going to be livestreamed, all documentation will be made available online including all the submissions that come to us through citizens assembly.ie. We'll hope to be fair, allow a full spectrum of views to be heard and that we'll have really good briefing materials in advance that's factual, informative and accessible and partial. As well, we'll have equality of voice for every member of the Assembly to participate. We'll have respect for each other's opinions. We'll work as efficiently as we can and we'll make use of our limited time together. It sounds like a lot but actually when you think about Biodiversity, it's such an enormous subject. I do, I'm getting a little bit afraid about how will we manage this but we will because we'll be efficient with our time and that will be collegiate as well. That

we'll recognise we are a diverse group of people and we'll endeavour to work together in the spirit of collaborative collaboration and communication and community and on that, you know, we're representing all different age groups, backgrounds and jobs, genders and I really hope it'll be a wonderfully diverse group working together. I also want to make the point that we're going to have independent valuation of the process, somebody to correct our homework, to make sure we're doing it well and to make sure that at the end of it nobody can say, well those recommendations are nonsense because this wasn't done properly. We'll be doing this properly, we'll be doing this as well as we can, that we can all stand over it because there's no point in all of us investing our time and our energy into this if we don't have output that we can be proud of and that will be implemented.

So, our work will be about balance not just hearing different views but also about balancing the economy, the society, and nature. I think there can be dichotomy of views where we can just focus on nature to the detriment of others or we can just focus on economy to the detriment of others, so we'll try and develop that balance as a group and see where we come out with. That we're not all experts in Biodiversity yet but over the coming months we will learn enough to make our informative decisions. As an educator, I'm conscious that learning in meaningfully engaging ways is the best way to build knowledge and so we're going to have robust understanding through discussion, there's going to be a lot of listening but a lot more discussion and and I hope that throughout the process we'll all be comfortable to say "I don't know enough about this" so I want more information on that and in that regard it would be really important, that the Steering Committee, who have already volunteered themselves from the first online meeting, and are your go-to because if you feel that we need something more of any particular thing, please you can tell me but also you can tell the Steering Committee. So, I'm going to name them and I'd ask them to stand up and just so we can all see their faces. So, just in the order that I have here, Sheelagh Brady, hi Sheelagh, thank you for putting yourself forward. Ruairi Breslin, thank you very much. Anca Cerbu, I hope I'm saying that correctly Anca, sorry I didn't get to speak to you beforehand. Louise Conlon, if Louise is here, thank you Louise. Dan O'Dwyer thank you very much Dan and Jenny Santiago Young, thank you very much Jenny. I've spoken to the Chairs of previous Citizens' Assemblies and they've all said the Steering Group are incredibly important because they're the go-to for the Assembly to say actually could you tell the Chair and the Secretariat we need more of this, we need more of that. So, we'll have a good relationship and I'll chat to you all later and but thank you for putting yourselves forward for this role. There's so many people already working in this area in Ireland and around the world, volunteers, academics, environmentalists, fishermen, farmers, who all are very knowledgeable about nature, who are all very invested in this issue. As a collaborative group as I've said, we listen to everyone, we will agree on the best actions to take for our country to further curb biodiversity loss and protect our precious environment because you know if we have degraded it so much, we won't be able to enjoy and what it is. I'm very much looking forward to, I'm looking forward to working with you all on this and while I am a little bit anxious and overwhelmed about the amount of work that is ahead of us for the next six months, I am also very positive and very hopeful that what we produce as a group, will be informed, it'll be robust, it'll be implementable and that the recommendations will

have a positive impact on Biodiversity in Ireland and by proxy I hope around the world and as I said I hope we can all communicate that to our various communities and because the more people that know about it, the more likely the politicians are to do something about it. So with that, beir bua linn! I'm now delighted to begin our video presentation. Now we had invited Professor Robert Watson, who is a former Chair of the Intergovernmental Science Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. He's also former Chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. We invited him and he was really wanting to be with us but unfortunately already had plans for today. So, he, that evening recorded a 20-minute talk for us and sent us on some very detailed slides and we're delighted to have him involved and addressing our Citizens' Assembly and Biodiversity loss. So, as our first presentation from an international expert, I'll leave the video over to Professor Robert Watson. Go maith agat.

ENDS.