

# **Còmhradh – Argyll Faith and Culture Conversation**

**Glencruitten House, 25-26 April 2014**

## **“Faith and the Environment”**

### **Summary of Proceedings**

Following its customary pattern of structured sessions framed by thoughtful worship and interspersed by generous breaks to enjoy table fellowship, this round to the Còmhradh focused on questions pertaining to faith and the environment.

The scene was set by Adrian Shaw, Church of Scotland Climate Change Officer, with the following presentation.

### **A Tale of Two Stories**

We live by stories, secular and sacred. They enshrine our beliefs and shape our political discourse. Of the many secular stories in Britain in 2013 there are narratives about the economy, consumption and wealth on the one hand; and on the other about the environment, wildlife and climate change. These stories present very different views of the future and different challenges for all people of faith.

#### **THE ECONOMY**

The first is the story about the economy. This story says that we need economic growth to resolve our big problems such as poverty and unemployment and that economic growth will make us richer. Half a century of sustained economic growth faltered in Britain in 2007, nominally because of some bad behaviour by the banks and the housing bubble and now, the story goes, the country needs to get back on track to return to prosperity and full employment.

The big political parties may differ in how to achieve this and how the spoils of economic growth should be divided up but they both repeat the message that economic growth is essential for our future wellbeing.

#### **All Political Parties Agree**

David Cameron, the prime minister, in a speech to the CBI in November 2013 set out a strategy to boost growth and engineer a “fundamental” rebalancing of the UK economy to be *“a real culture change in our country in favour of enterprise”*. Talking at the revival of economic growth in 2013 Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg said the figures *“show that we are firmly on the road to economic recovery”*. George Osborne, Chancellor of the Exchequer told the BBC: “It shows that we are on the path to prosperity. Lots of risks remain, so we have to stick with the economic plan that has got us this far.”

*"What's encouraging about these figures is that it's not just services that are growing. Construction is growing and manufacturing is growing."*

In the Autumn Statement 2013 he set out the following.

*"The government's long-term economic plan is restoring the public finances to a sustainable path and the deficit as a percentage of GDP is forecast to have halved by 2014-15. This plan has also helped maintain historically low interest rates and is building a stronger economy which is the only way to achieve a sustained rise in living standards".*

Ed Balls said a Labour government would bring forward an increase in investment in infrastructure and in housing and called for action to deliver helping to people who were suffering from falling living standards.

*"The return to growth is something to celebrate and nurture but with business investment still on hold and banking lending to small business still falling, with youth unemployment still very high, with living standards still falling for most people this is no time for complacency."*

### **Scotland**

Meanwhile in Scotland Alex Salmond, First Minister, said

*"...The Scottish Government believes that business as usual is no longer appropriate for Scotland. A vote for independence would provide tremendous economic opportunities."*

*"A vote for independence has the power to be transformational and to fundamentally re-balance Scotland's economy, improving prospects for employment, job security and prosperity at every level of society."*

*"Boosting economic performance and tackling long-standing inequalities in society will take time. There are no overnight solutions. It will also imply careful decisions and choices over priorities."*

Salmond set out a broad vision during the launch of the paper at Dundee University. He focused on key areas for economic growth, including doubling exports, boosting industry, encouraging more immigration, getting more women into work and supporting business growth through tailored tax policies.

### **And it's not just in Britain**

in the USA President Obama's website lists his top priority as securing the American dream and strengthening the middle class... Building an economy that creates more good paying jobs in the fast-growing industries for hard-working Americans.

**Christine Lagarde**, the head of the International Monetary Fund is warning European governments against complacency despite the region returning to growth.

Speaking at the Fund's headquarters in Washington DC, managing director Christine Lagarde said that EU member states cannot afford "fatigue" on their commitments to create jobs and to shore up the region's banks. *"They need to move on with the European banking union, continue structural reforms so their economies can unleash growth and create jobs."*

### **Also in China**

Speaking at a national congress for China's official trade union, Premier Li Keqiang said that China needs economic growth of at least 7.2 percent in order to ensure adequate employment. *"The reason why we want to stabilize growth, in the final analysis, is to preserve jobs. Now with gross domestic product growth of 7.2 percent, China can create 10 million new jobs annually and ensure that registered urban unemployment is around 4 percent"*.

China has some 30 million workers who are directly dependent on China's export industries, and an additional 100 million serving in supporting industries, Li said. *"If exports fall rapidly, it will create an employment problem,"* he said.

### **Summary of the economic Story**

In summary then all governments mentioned are committed to promoting economic growth to create jobs to create wealth and employment. There are differences of emphasis - Some talk of rebalancing the economy, some like China have much stronger government intervention. All seem to have some sense that economic growth is not an option; we must have it to address problems unemployment and poverty. I hear no other story from governments on the economy: all seem to agree it must grow; all seem equally committed to the same big idea: economic growth is a good thing.

### **Shopping**

This spills over into our lives in so many ways, of which the annual festival of consumption is one. This is a story by Claire Jones from the Financial Times, January 17, 2014.

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### **UK retail sales surge over Christmas**

Retailers repaired some of the damage of a mixed year in the final month of 2013, as big spending by shoppers over the Christmas period sparked the fastest growth in sales in almost a decade.

The quantity of goods bought soared by 5.3 per cent and the amount spent by 6.1 per cent last month, compared with December 2012, smashing economists' expectations.

Alex Hamilton, retail consultant at Planet Retail, said: "The sharpest annual rise in retail sales for almost a decade provides further evidence to suggest that the UK economy is on a sustainable growth path."

Chris Williamson, economist at Markit, said: "The increase in sales corresponds with a number of factors that have buoyed households' spirits. Consumer confidence has improved in recent months, fuelled by improved job security as the labour market picks up, the better economic news flow in the media and

lower inflation. At the same time, more people are in employment, which naturally boosts consumer spending as more people are earning.”

Online sales had another great month with sales rising 11.8 per cent year-on-year.

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If sales go up at Christmas we should all cheer; if sales go down we should be concerned.

A question that we may wish to reflect on in discussion: is this consistent with a Christian understanding of Christmas?

## **THE STORY OF THE ENVIRONMENT**

There is a second story, a message coming primarily from scientists and NGOs. This is a story about nature and our impact on it.

### **Climate change**

The fifth assessment report on the science of climate change by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was published in September 2013. It draws together, reviews and summaries research on climate change from over 9,000 published sources around the world. It is the most complete and up to date source of information on the science of climate change.

### **Among the highlights are the following.**

- It is extremely likely that human influence has been the dominant cause of the observed warming since the mid-20th century.
- Warming in the climate system is unequivocal and since 1950 many changes have been observed throughout the climate system that are unprecedented.
- Each of the last three decades has been successively warmer at the Earth’s surface than any preceding decade since 1850.

### **The assessment finds that**

- the atmosphere and ocean have warmed;
- the amount of snow and ice has diminished;
- the global mean sea level has risen; and
- the concentrations of greenhouse gases have increased.

### **Looking forward the report predicts**

- global warming of between 1.5°C and 2°C relative to 1850 to 1900;
- heat waves are very likely to occur more frequently and last longer;
- currently wet regions receiving more rainfall, and dry regions receiving less, although there will be exceptions;
- as the ocean warms, and glaciers and ice sheets reduce, global mean sea level will continue to rise, but at a faster rate than we have experienced over the past 40 years; and

- the effects of climate change will persist for many centuries even if emissions of CO2 stop.

### **What are the impacts ?**

**Current sea-level rise** is about 3 mm/year worldwide. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), "this is a significantly larger rate than the sea-level rise averaged over the last several thousand years", and the rate may be increasing.

Between 1870 and 2004, global average sea levels rose 195 mm (7.7 in).

Two main factors contributed to observed sea level rise. The first is thermal expansion: as ocean water warms, it expands. The second is from the contribution of land-based ice due to increased melting. The major store of water on land is found in glaciers and ice sheets.

Sea level rise is expected to continue for centuries. In 2007, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) projected that during the 21st century, sea level will rise another 18 to 59 cm (7.1 to 23 in), but these numbers do not include "uncertainties in climate-carbon cycle feedbacks nor do they include the full effects of changes in ice sheet flow". [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Current\\_sea\\_level\\_rise\\_-\\_cite\\_note-syr\\_3-2-1-14](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Current_sea_level_rise_-_cite_note-syr_3-2-1-14)

More recent projections assessed by the US National Research Council (2010) suggest possible sea level rise over the 21st century of between 56 and 200 cm (22 and 79 in).

On the timescale of centuries to millennia, the melting of ice sheets could result in even higher sea level rise. Partial deglaciation of the Greenland ice sheet, and possibly the West Antarctic ice sheet, could contribute 4 to 6 m (13.1 to 19.7 ft) or more to sea level rise.

What global temperature rise it would take to melt the Greenland ice sheet is still matter of debate. It may be as little as one degree Celsius; it would be almost certain if temperatures rise by four degrees Celsius. The speed at which it will happen is also uncertain but probably would be hundreds of years.

Consider the impact on Oban, or other coastal towns in Argyll of a one metre rise in sea level. Think of the flooding likely in Forth Valley or Somerset levels, or of NYC. Think also of south east Asia, of Bangladesh or the Irrawaddy in Myanmar. And consider the small low lying island states of Tuvalu and Kiribati in the Pacific, states that are likely to become uninhabitable in this century if sea levels rise by only a modest amount.

### **Climate Change will Change Lives**

Climate change is real, it's happening and we are causing it by burning fossil fuels in prodigious amounts: coal, oil and gas. In Scotland we produce over 40 million tonnes a year of emissions of carbon dioxide, the UK ten times that amount and the USA about 5 billion tonnes. As a consequence the amount of CO2 in the atmosphere has risen from under 300 ppm to over 400 ppm as we speak. The consequences are profound. In the twenty first century, climate change will change lives.

Jim Hansen, formerly of NASA, said the following to the US Congress in 2014

*“When the history of our planet is written, the United States will stand in stark relief. It remains to be seen whether that bold impression will be positive or negative. At the end of World War II and in years thereafter we stood as a positive leader, with generosity to our foes and generosity to our friends in the rebuilding of their nations.”*

*“Our parents did not understand that their burning of fossil fuels caused a problem for future generations. On the contrary, they were the great generation responsible for the generosities that I mentioned above. If we continue on our current path, pretending that we do not understand the consequences, what adjective do you think our children will apply to our generation?”*

### **Biodiversity**

Another story comes from Edward Wilson, a Harvard biologist who wrote ‘The Crisis of Biological Diversity’ in 1985. Twenty-five years later, he reflects on the crucial importance of biodiversity?

*“It is indeed difficult to raise public awareness about the ongoing mass extinction of biodiversity. I and others have been trying for decades with every means available to us. The problem is that most people do not have much understanding of the subject, as opposed to crises in the physical environment, and extinction of species, especially in faraway places elsewhere in the world, seem to them a remote issue.”*

He wrote:

*“The sixth great extinction spasm of geological time is upon us, grace of mankind. Earth has at last acquired a force that can break the crucible of biodiversity. The creation of that diversity came slow and hard: 3 billion years of evolution to start the profusion of animals that occupy the seas, another 350 million years to assemble the rain forests in which half or more of the species on earth now live.. Unlike the rest of science, the study of biodiversity has a time limit. Species are disappearing at an accelerating rate through human action, primarily habitat destruction but also pollution and the introduction of exotic species into residual natural environments. I have said that a fifth or more of the species of plants and animals could vanish or be doomed to early extinction by the year 2020 unless better efforts are made to save them.*

*In the world as a whole, extinction rates are already hundreds or thousands of times higher than before the coming of man. They cannot be balanced by new evolution in any period of time that has meaning for the human race.*

*How has this come about?*

*Try HIPPO: habitat loss, invasive species, pollution, over-population, and over-harvesting of wild species. Humanity didn't mean for it to turn out this way; we just blundered into the crisis by a multitude of small, largely unconscious actions. These include hunting as many animals as could be caught, clearing as much land as could be converted into agricultural fields, drawing down as much water as could be reached, and other survival practices that on a short-term basis have always seemed perfectly logical.”*

It is interesting that both Hansen and Wilson make the same point. No one wanted to cause environmental destruction nor really expected it. We are

discovering that our actions have had unintended consequences and we seem to have great difficulty accepting what this means for our future behaviour.

### **Scottish Referendum: Scotland's future**

The Scottish Government referendum white paper includes a commitment that... *the government of an independent Scotland ... will seek to enshrine environmental protection in the constitution.*

There is no elaboration on what this might mean but it does stand alongside commitments in the white paper to continue promoting renewable energy and to support the Scottish oil and gas industry, both existing Scottish Government policies with major environmental implications.

There seems to be a contradiction here. On the one hand the Scottish Government quite rightly claims credit for its Climate Change Act that commits Scotland to cut its carbon footprint by 80% by 2050. To help put this into effect the Scottish Government has supported the rapid expansion of wind power on land and at sea. This has been controversial but successful in reducing the carbon footprint of the electricity we use in Scotland.

On the other hand it is committed to the continued development of the oil and gas industry. This is understandable given the huge importance of oil to the economy of Scotland and in particular to the economy of Aberdeen and the north east but it comes at an environmental cost. The white paper suggests there are 24 billion barrels of oil still recoverable from the North Sea and colleagues tell me this, if all burnt, would far exceed other carbon dioxide emissions from Scotland for decades to come.

So what a constitutional commitment to protect the environment would look like and what effect it might have are open questions given the continuing commitment to a fossil fuel economy.

### **Points for discussion**

These two stories tell us about the world around us; one about the economy and one about the environment.

What is the relationship between these two stories; one that insists we must have more economic growth and one that says if we carry on like this we are creating huge problems both for ourselves and the other species with which we share the planet?

How do these stories relate to the Christian story and the demands made of us that we love our neighbour and care for creation?

*This presentation provoked a challenging discussion on the Friday evening which set the scene for the rest of the weekend. On Saturday morning discussions were further enriched by contributions from Lynda Mitchell and Ed Tyler.*

### **Lynda Mitchell**

The earth is very old, 4-6 billion years old. If its entire history were represented by the 12 hours on the clock humans would arrive only in the last few seconds. If it were represented by a toilet roll stretched out around the room humans would arrive only in the last half millimeter.

Given the earth's longevity, the human species has had a big effect in a relatively short time. This has occurred through a significant increase in the CO2 emissions in the atmosphere. The greenhouse effect became observable around 1970 when warming of the sea could be detected. Carbon dioxide has now reached 400 parts per million, a higher level than that of the ice ages.

There have been catastrophic climactic events in the past but the earth can take as much as 10 million years to recover. The planet may adapt over a long period but will humans be here to see it? Many species may be unable to adapt fast enough – either by migration or evolution.

Evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa is already showing the advance of the desert with once-fertile lands being subject to desertification.

Since the Stern Report of 2006 it has come to be acknowledged that climate change is also an economic problem. Nonetheless efforts to address it seem to be like wading through treacle. Will it be a case of too little too late?

### **Ed Tyler**

Many people are looking for a techno-fix. We have got so accustomed to technology providing solutions that we are close to “technology is the answer – what was the question?” There are other ways to effect change and these may be required e.g. to achieve a transition from a fossil fuel economy to a renewables economy.

We should not underestimate the power of change movements. What is needed is a change of paradigm, a change in the way we look at the world. Faith groups can be on the leading edge in such a movement of change. Adrian Shaw suggested that there could be a “Berlin Wall moment” in relation to climate change – a moment when a great historic change takes effect.

There is need to have a vision of a well-cared for earth and harmonious human community and then to plan the stages we will need to go through to get there. While we have a deep-time perspective we also need to plan the next 30 years in great detail, with a determination to “make it so!”

### **Group Work**

Plenary discussion was interspersed with group work. The Saturday morning session of group work focused on actions we can take and the following suggestions were made:

- create networks of interdependence
- support local businesses – buy from the farm gate
- grow as much of your own food as possible and have a bartering network
- timebanking – exchanging skills and time
- advocacy for change
- credit unions



- car pools
- more use of bikes, including electric bikes
- promote local slaughterhouses
- plant trees
- community building

### **Mindfulness Walk**

At midday on Saturday all participants engaged in a silent mindfulness walk in the Glencruitten grounds, including the walled garden and Firth of Lorn viewpoint.

### **Concluding Session: Faith and the Environment**

Adrian Shaw introduced the final session by citing the essay of Lynn White which argued that Christianity had played a big part in promoting the exploitative approach to the earth which had brought about environmental crisis. He pointed out that the biblical idea of humanity having “dominion” over the earth can be used in ways which are very damaging to the environment.

In response participants worked in groups to consider how faith might be part of the solution:

- We need to accept that Christianity did play a part in the industrial revolution and the rise of capitalism and repent for the part which the churches have played in damaging the earth
- Jesus has subverted ideas of “dominion” and introduced a new kind of authority, a new kind of power
- The church needs to be counter-cultural, fostering more environmentally conscious living – something which may not sit easily with approaches to church growth that aim to fit comfortably in contemporary culture
- The church may need to be a “site of struggle” - a place where the tensions in relation to faith and the environment are worked out
- There is need for awareness-raising and education at all levels in relation to climate change and the environmental crisis
- We must be prepared to be political and to challenge the prevailing system
- We need to let money talk – investing in initiatives which are geared to sustain the environment
- Churches can be a force for change, e.g. through the 300 eco-congregations found throughout Scotland. We should not underestimate the importance of prayer.