

AWASH IN GREENWASH

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“Everything clean can be soiled and everything beautiful can be corrupted. There’s no better example for it than greenwashing” (Kippar, 2022).

The colour green

Green is synonymous with Ireland, or so we like to think. We play in green. The boys in green. And now the girls in green. We market in green. *Origin Green* is the Bord Bia sustainability programme (Bord Bia, 2023). We schmooze in green. Every year at the seat of the United States’ (US) government in the White House on St. Patrick’s Day. And now we wash in green. Green washing. Every day we witness corporate Ireland’s greenwashing agenda (Robinson, 2022). Greenwashing that, for the most part, goes unchallenged in the Irish media. A greenwashing that is facilitated, in the case of one fossil fuel company, *Texaco*, by a media ‘personality’ and former Irish rugby international.

Alongside *Texaco*, other household names – *BP*, *ExxonMobil*, *Shell*, *Circle K* and *CERTA* are involved. It’s not just the oil industry that is awash with greenwashing. *IKEA*, the Swedish multinational conglomerate furniture company, the 90 per cent *Coca-Cola*-owned *Innocent* drinks company, the Canadian coffee company *Keurig*. The fast-fashion Swedish *H&M* company, the US cleaning product company *Windex*, the Irish airline *Ryanair*, the US plastics company *Hefly*, the London-headquartered *Unilever* company. The Filipino-based *Monde Nissin* food company. The British-based *HSBC* banking and financial services company. The Swiss-based *Nestlé* food company. The US-based *Starbucks* coffee houses. The German car company *Volkswagen*. The US-based *Apple* company (Ibid.).

Greenwashing and its ubiquity

In 2018, as part of their ‘eco-drive’, fast-food multinational *McDonald’s* ditched their plastic straws in favour of paper straws. However, following criticisms of its replacement, *McDonald’s* admitted that the substituted paper straws are not ‘fully recyclable’ (BBC, 2019). An attempted greenwashing that was found out and left the conglomerate scurrying for cover.

In its 1971 advertising campaign, *Coca-Cola* hit upon a hit song to further burnish its product’s image in what was one of the early entrants into the greenwashing arena (Coca Cola, 1971). Often cited as quite possibly the greatest advertisement in television history, the jingle was subsequently re-written and became a major hit for the British band The New Seekers.

“I’d like to buy the world a home

And furnish it with love.

Grow apple trees and honey bees

And snow white turtle doves.

I’d like to teach the world to sing

In perfect harmony.

I’d like to buy the world a coke

And keep it company.

That’s the real thing” (Ibid.).

Curiously, it was composed by US advertising executive Bill Backer while sitting in the airport café in Shannon, Co. Clare, after the plane he was travelling in was forced to land due to blanket fog in London. It cost \$250,000 and was, for its time, the most expensive advertising campaign ever produced (Andrews and Barbash, 2016).

Bizarrely, *Coca-Cola*, the world's top plastic polluter over four successive years (2017-2020) (Branded, 2021), was a key sponsor of the United Nations' (UN) COP-27 climate summit, held in November 2022 in the Egyptian coastal resort of Sharm el-Sheikh. Quite apart from the incongruity of having one of the top polluters as a sponsor of a climate change conference, Egypt is one of the most autocratic countries, with the fourth worst human rights record in the world (The Global Economy, 2022). As Emma Priestland, a coordinator for Break Free From Plastic, a global alliance of organisations and individuals, argued: 'Coca-Cola sponsoring the Cop27 is pure "greenwash"' (Green and McVeigh, 2022).

In 1997, the giant US energy company *Chevron* initiated the *People Do* campaign, one of the most egregious examples of corporate greenwashing (Chevron, 1997). Featuring cuddly bears, sea turtles and butterflies, the advertising campaign highlighted *Chevron's* erroneous claims that it was its policy and practice to restore marshes once used for oil exploration (Watson, 2016). Another featured a fox cub and thirsty animals at waterholes. All might have passed as a promotion for a David Attenborough film.

All of the companies referred to above have been cited for greenwashing activities that include misrepresentation of practices, overstating ambitions, false and misleading certification, non-verifiable and exaggerated claims, vague and aspirational targets, the corruption of language and more (Robinson, 2022).

Greenwashing: a word gone viral

It all started with a towel in a hotel in a resort in Fiji and a young ecologist with an interest in clam shrimp, bog turtles and the northern cricket frog. In 1983, Jay Westerveld was on a research trip to Samoa when he stopped in Fiji to surf. Staying at a rough little guesthouse, he ventured into a sprawling luxury beach resort to avail of the facilities. On reading a note in the hotel's bathroom, something jarred with Westerveld. To protect the island's reefs and eco-system, which the hotel claimed to care deeply about, guests were invited to re-use their towel rather than throwing them on the floor after one shower.

But here's the rub.

With scant, if any, regard for the fragile eco-system, the hotel was at the time pouring tonnes of concrete to construct new bungalows on a prime stretch of coastal land, metres away from the imperilled reefs. The 're-use towel request', Westerveld concluded, was nothing more than a ruse to reduce costs and increase profits. Reflecting on that experience later, he coined the phrase 'greenwashing', the reality with which we have all become too familiar.

Corporate deception goes to the heart of greenwashing. It is the green jacket it wears. Such is its usefulness it has morphed into many other arenas. Sportswashing. Perhaps the most spectacular example of sportswashing took place during the 2022 soccer World Cup in Qatar where sport was used to 'wash' an appalling human rights record. Or take Gulf States' involvement in the English Premier League, or Saudi Arabia's attempted takeover of international golf and its investment of US\$6.3 billion in sports deals in a period of just six years (Michaelson, 2023).

Not everyone has been demurely passive when confronted with the sportswashing juggernaut. Reflecting on the decision to award Russia the hosting of the World Cup in 2018, television presenter and former England football captain Gary Lineker simply said in reference to the decision to award Russia the hosting of the World Cup in 2018: 'we were sportswashed' (Lineker, 2022). 'Looking back now, we should have spoken out more', Lineker noted (Ibid.).

Another who spoke out was Irish journalist Eamon Dunphy who characterised the action of FIFA, soccer's world governing body, as 'the ultimate sportswashing decision', in hosting the World Cup in Qatar in 2022 (Dunphy, 2022). Catherine Cleary, a contributor to *The Irish Times* and founder of *Pocket Forests*, has also spoken out on the social dimension of greenwashing sponsorship: 'Sponsorship buys "social licence" to continue polluting activities. We are the society that is granting this licence and it is up to us to withdraw it' (Cleary, 2023).

Greenwashing Irish style

Green Ireland has witnessed its share of both greenwashing and sportswashing. For example: *Certa*, Ireland's largest fuel supplier's sponsorship of the Ireland Women's cricket team; *Applegreen's* 'BioDive' project; and *Texaco's* Children's Art and 'Support for Sport' competitions. *Texaco* wears its sponsorship of the children's art competition as a badge of honour. According to its website, the children's art competition 'has acquired the status of an institution and become a part of the fabric of Irish life that has endured and developed across the generations' (Texaco, 2023). The Department of Education and Science, Boards of Management, school principals, teachers, subject associations, teacher unions, non-governmental organisations, along with a host of past advocates, past participants and winners including a former president (Mary Robinson) and a former government minister (Ruairi Quinn) have remained silent on *Texaco's* sponsorship of the children's art competition.

The entrenchment of fossil fuel agendas and perspectives across Irish society remains significantly unchallenged even in contexts where the topic of climate change is actively discussed and engaged with. The National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development in Ireland (DES, 2018) was one of the Irish government's key strategies for 'Education for Sustainability' underpinning the Action Plan for Education (DES, 2016). In the former, the word 'green' gets forty-two mentions.

Side-by-side with the green rhetoric sits the *Texaco* Children's Art competition. Pupils and students are expected to uncritically engage with the green school agenda and the *Texaco* agenda. This incongruous synchronicity directly challenges some of the key recommendations of the Report of the Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss (The Citizens' Assembly, 2023). The Assembly concluded that 'children and young people are integral to ensuring the environment is protected (Ibid.: 20). Recommendation 62 called on all involved in education - The Department of Education and Science, the Teaching Council, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, and the Teacher Education Support Service(s) - 'to engage in meaningful curriculum reform and teacher education to explicitly incorporate teaching and learning on biodiversity in early childhood, primary and post-primary curricula' (The Citizens' Assembly, 2023:

20). Recommendation 64 stated that: ‘school grounds and local public amenities need to be developed as a support to a diverse and meaningful nature education. In line with this, basic biodiversity training for school staff, including maintenance and grounds staff, should be rolled out on a national basis’ while Recommendation 65 stated: ‘the Green Schools Initiative should be reformed to ensure nature and biodiversity feature in the initial stages of the programme (Ibid.). Few cultural institutions have challenged *Texaco’s* association with a children’s art competition. Fewer still members of the media.

Texaco’s ‘Sport for All’ agenda provides the second leg of its greenwashing strategy. For a paltry €5,000, camogie, Gaelic football, handball, hurling, rugby, soccer, and other clubs across the country are expected to compete against each other. The total fund available is a modest €130,000. RTÉ 2FM broadcaster and former Munster and Ireland international rugby player, Donnacha O’Callaghan, is the brand ambassador of the *Texaco* ‘Support for Sport’ competition:

“I’m very excited to take part as I truly believe that a fund of this size can make a very real difference to the betterment and running of any club in this country. I truly believe that... €5,000 from *Texaco* ... can make a very real difference to the betterment of any club... Only 26 clubs were that lucky in 2022” (Martin, 2020).

Donnacha O’Callaghan is also an Ambassador for UNICEF Ireland, an organisation dedicated to the improvement of children’s lives across the world, especially in countries most at risk from climate change. According to UNICEF Ireland, ‘virtually every child on the planet is already affected by climate change’, yet its management appears to see no contradiction in sharing a brand ambassador with a fossil fuel company (UNICEF, n.d.).

It is in contexts such as these that the debate on greenwashing has taken on greatest importance – as the public struggles to come to terms with the implications of climate change. As the urgent need for radical engagement grows exponentially, greenwashing becomes a deliberate and deceptive strategy used by the fossil fuel sector to sow doubt, confusion, and divisiveness in public

discussion. It is a core element in polluting public awareness and public judgement on climate change issues. In November 2022, António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations asserted that:

“We seem trapped in a world where fossil fuel producers and financiers have humanity by the throat. For decades, the fossil fuel industry has invested heavily in pseudoscience and public relations – with a false narrative to minimise their responsibility for climate change and undermine ambitious climate policies. They exploited precisely the same scandalous tactics as big tobacco decades before. Like tobacco interests, fossil fuel interests and their financial accomplices must not escape responsibility” (Guterres, 2022).

A deafening Irish silence

With some justification, Irish international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) claim to have played a pivotal role in shaping public opinion on a wide range of international justice and human rights challenges. On issues such as spiralling inequality and the not unrelated spiralling military industrial complex, gender-based violence, the campaign for debt cancellation, apartheid in South Africa and Israel along with a host of human rights abuses across Africa, Central and South America and Southeast Asia, Irish INGOs along with trade unions, some returned missionaries, an assortment of centre-to-left wing political parties and many other activists have routinely been at the forefront of advocacy and campaigning on international human rights abuses. This is also true with respect to environmental issues generally and climate change more particularly.

There is a broad corpus of NGO-led work on climate justice, climate change and greenwashing per se. This is as it should be and as we have the right to expect. The work of Trócaire (2017) on climate justice and that of DE.ie on greenwashing (Kendrick, 2023) are just two examples of that ongoing work. But on the specific issue of the conflict of interest involving Texaco and UNICEF, all NGOs (individually and collectively), with the exception of Just Forests, have been singularly silent. The unwillingness of UNICEF Ireland and other Irish INGO platforms, specifically Dóchas: the Irish Association of Non-Governmental Development Organisations and IDEA (the Irish Development Education

Association), to acknowledge what we regard as a clear conflict of interest in Mr. O’Callaghan’s dual ambassadorships of Texaco and UNICEF is deeply troubling, if not indefensible. Remaining silent on this issue is tantamount to colluding in *Texaco’s* sportswashing agenda.

It is not just civil society organisations but the Irish media, too, that have been silent on greenwashing. Following a profile of the *Texaco* Children Art competition (artswashing in practice) on the Ray Darcy Show (RTÉ Radio One), we sought an opportunity to reply so that we could highlight Texaco’s greenwashing agenda. This request was rejected. We were informed that this was a light entertainment programme. Clearly, promoting Texaco’s greenwashing agenda is in line with the national broadcaster’s light entertainment remit but challenging Texaco’s greenwashing agenda is not. All broadsheet newspapers in this country were asked to provide commentary on *Texaco’s* sportswashing agenda in Ireland and, with the exception of the *Sunday Times* (2023), none responded to our request. However, a number of regional newspapers did, including *The Offaly Express* (2023), *The Tullamore Tribune* (2023) and *The Limerick Leader* (2023).

In response to what we perceived as that deafening silence, we produced a Just Forest published twenty-page resource (King et al., 2023) on sports and arts washing that focuses on the Texaco oil company’s efforts to greenwash its image by inserting itself into the social and cultural life of the country. Each of us has come to this story from very different perspectives but with one overarching aim – to challenge the greenwashing activities of corporate power internationally and in Ireland.

Truth to power

Holding truth to power is an oft-cited mantra of the fourth estate. In that struggle it would appear that the powerful have won out. Holding truth to power is also the self-cited task of the international development NGO sector. Holding global institutions like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the UN Security Council, The G7, and the EU among others is the stuff of engaged NGO work. Important as that work is, it is low-hanging fruit. Holding each other to account, when being held to account is warranted as we believe it is in this case,

is an altogether different but no less important challenge. Human nature being what it is, it is always difficult to hold our friends to account. But if we fail on the latter, we undermine our credibility in the former.

The struggle to ban, restrict and challenge greenwashing by fossil fuel and related companies has taken on increased urgency given the arguments and findings summarised by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in February 2023 (IPCC, 2023). In 2021, under a new climate law, France became the first European country to ban fossil fuel advertising. The ban includes provisions related to greenwashing advertisements, specifically banning the use of any wording on a product, its packaging, or in advertising promoting a product or service, indicating that the product, service, or activity of the manufacturer is carbon-neutral or has no negative impact on the climate (Insights, 2021).

A new law is currently (August 2023) making its way through South Korea's National Assembly that would slap a three million won (\$2,271) fine on companies judged by the country's Ministry of Environment to have deceived the public about their green credentials. The law is likely to pass before the end of 2023 (Kapron, 2023). There have been parliamentary calls for similar bans in The Netherlands, Spain, and Belgium as well as calls from civil society organisations in Australia, Canada, and the UK.

In an effort to reduce risks of false claims (greenwashing) in 2019, the European Commission announced a series of legislative and non-legislative initiatives. This was followed in March 2023 with a *Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on substantiation and communication of explicit environmental claims*, otherwise known as the Green Claims Directive (European Commission, 2023). This includes 'a commitment to tackle false environmental claims by ensuring that buyers receive reliable, comparable, and verifiable information to enable them to make more sustainable decisions and to reduce the risk of "green washing"'. The need to address greenwashing was subsequently set as a priority both under the New Circular Economy Action Plan 5 and the New Consumer Agenda (European Commission, 2020).

The European Commission has stated that 53 per cent of green claims give vague, misleading, or unfounded information, 40 per cent of claims have no supporting evidence, and half of all green labels offer weak or non-existent verification. In 2023, there were 230 sustainability labels and 100 green energy labels in the EU, with vastly different levels of transparency (European Commission, n.d.). To ensure green claims are demonstrated, EU member states will be requested 'to set up a system of verification for the substantiation of environmental claims', that will have to be carried out by 'independent verifiers' (ibid). Most importantly, EU countries will be put in charge of ensuring that 'those rules are enforced and place 'penalties' on offenders that 'should be effective, proportionate and dissuasive'.

Despite the evidence and calls for more sustainable energy, the fossil fuel industry has continued to explore, exploit, and extract with little, if no, evidence of commitment to real change. Business as usual remains the mantra. As the chorus against greenwashing grows, *Texaco* and its parent organisation *Chevron* are continuing to clamp down on those who seek to challenge its greenwashing agenda. US human rights lawyer Steven Donziger remains at the centre of that clampdown. In 2011, Mr. Donziger took a class action on behalf of the indigenous people of Lago Agrio in which a court in Ecuador found that *Texaco* had deliberately and systematically discharged billions of gallons of toxic, cancer-causing oil waste onto indigenous ancestral lands between 1964 and 1992 (Global Justice Program, 2021). The legal case raised critically important issues related to global warming, indigenous rights, and international judgment enforcement. Since then, *Texaco* has systematically pursued Mr. Donziger through the US courts for fraud, bribery, and racketeering activities. Other less well-known human rights activists have suffered even more. The non-governmental organisation Global Witness estimates almost 2,000 climate activists have been assassinated across the globe in the last ten years. Tens of thousands more have been jailed without trial or due process of law (Global Witness, 2022). Peaceful protest on human rights and environmental issues is under systematic and often violent attack in the United States and around the world.

Conclusion

The fossil fuel sector and big oil in particular are at the core of the most urgent climate emergency issues we face locally, nationally, and internationally. Challenging fossil fuel companies in all dimensions of their agenda, including their greenwashing activities, remains a priority. Collectively, we have made substantial progress in promoting public awareness of the dangers of accepting the fossil fuel 'business as usual' agenda. Building further on that progress is fundamental. Accepting or ignoring the greenwashing agenda of fossil fuel companies such as *Texaco* and its partners, locally and internationally, is a basic requirement for accelerating that progress.

In the context of our collective climate emergency and the wholly negative role of the fossil fuel sector, the unwillingness of UNICEF Ireland and the other Irish INGO platforms (Dóchas and IDEA) to acknowledge or engage with the many conflicts of interest described above is indefensible. It betrays not just a number of core national strategies and plans to tackle climate change; it also betrays many key values we have come to associate with Ireland's INGO movement. Additionally, it makes a mockery of our commitment to education for sustainability in the education system overall as well as undermining many of the stated aims of national sporting organisations. While it often appears to be about a single cause or issue, it is never just about a single issue; it's always more than that.

Greenwashing is that issue. Rather than being a single, stand-alone cause, it is a critical cross-cutting issue that goes to the heart of the global power imbalance and the deepening inequality that has become such a hallmark of contemporary society. To ignore its perfidious presence, to gloss over its insidious nature, to be indifferent to its single-minded determination to deceive, is to act as its enabler. Collectively and individually, we have a choice. That choice falls in a particular way on civil society organisations and in particular on internationally focused NGOs, teachers, school administrators, educational policy makers, artists and art administrators, sportspeople, and sports administrators, and on which we all have a responsibility. It also falls on mainstream Irish media who are prepared to feature articles on international sportswashing but are, at best, reluctant to feature greenwashing or sportswashing.

We either stand with the majority of the world's population who in their everyday lives feel the heat of the fossil fuel companies or we stand with the fossil fuel oil companies. Sports and cultural organisations, all actors within Irish education and the Irish development NGO sector, have a similar choice and, as citizens of one of the wealthiest countries in the world and least affected by the extremes of climate change, so do we as individuals. A clear binary choice. Collude with the Texaco greenwashing agenda or disassociate themselves from that agenda. Stand with the oppressed people of the world who suffer desperate deprivations because of the activities of the billion-dollar fossil fuel industry or stand with the billion-dollar oil companies and their apologists.

'Looking back now', Gary Lineker stated, 'we should have spoken out more' (Lineker, 2022). He is right. It's that simple. And we still have time. It's late but not too late. On this there is no middle ground.

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