Molly Scott Cato – MAW Conference 29th June 2019

"No Climate Justice, No Peace"

[Transcript of audio recording]

Pat Gaffney, introducing Molly Scott Cato:

"... to welcome this afternoon Molly Scott Cato to our event. She comes to us hotfooting it from Glastonbury. She wasn't on the Centre stage or whatever you call it ['Pyramid stage'] Pyramid stage but she has given presentations there over the last 24 hours and some of you may have heard her on the BBC news from Glastonbury. I gather she had a difficult time getting into the site - what it is to be a celebrity - and had no problems finding her way here today. And she's on her way to Brussels so we're particularly grateful to her for making this stopover.

You'll know that she's the Green Member of [the European] Parliament for South West of England and Gibraltar, and when she was speaking at the close of the European Parliament in April, she said "I'm a proud European and will continue to do everything I can to keep us inside the EU" [Clapping] "If re-elected I intend to spend the next five years protecting the climate and using my skills as an economist to make life fairer and more secure for the people of the South West of England", but I think for the world as well. She's been a member of the Green Party since 1988 and was elected a Member of [the European] Parliament in 2014. Before that she had an academic career, and was a Professor of Strategy and Sustainability at the University of Roehampton. She was re-elected, thankfully, in the recent elections, and received 18% of the vote in the South West, and that's the highest Green vote in the country. [Clapping] She has some key roles within the European Union, having been elected Vice-President of the Green Group which is a bureau that guides and leads others. And if that wasn't enough, she's been chosen as one of the Green negotiators to help set the European Parliament's agenda for the forthcoming term so a very key role for the future. So she brings with her this afternoon a huge amount of experience, practice, academic background to the theme that she is offering today - "No Climate Justice, No Peace". Thank you Molly."

[Clapping] [Microphone and lectern adjustments]

Molly Scott Cato:

"Thank you very much, thank you so much for inviting me - and I always love to come to events. If people ask me to a peace event or a women's event I can't say no, so I'm very pleased to come here today.

Obviously we are living through extraordinary and turbulent times, not just in this country but across the world and as I see it there are lots of crises intersecting with each other and that is quite disturbing for us all, but on the other hand a positive way of looking at that is that we are

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going to have to solve an awful lot of problems that have been with us for a long time simultaneously, I would say particularly on the question of Brexit and democracy which I see as completely bound up with each other but also the question of climate change and the question of peace. For me, these three are very much entangled and that's what I am going to be talking about today.

And then when it comes to questions, feel absolutely free to go wherever you want because I'm here as an MEP and if you want to ask me anything about how the European Union works - since you get almost nothing about that reported to you through the media here – you might be interested in some of those things, and similarly with Brexit, I'm very happy to share what I do know about that, which is what everybody knows: that it's all a bit uncertain but chaotic.

But what I wanted to start by saying is that as you have heard, I've come straight off a field in Glastonbury and that does give you a little time to chill out and unlatch the more intellectual side of your thinking and I've really been considering this issue of extinction and Extinction Rebellion (XR) because I participated in a debate with Gale Bradbrook, one of the founders of Extinction Rebellion, who I also know as a mum from Stroud so I have known her for a long time, and I think that sense of us being in this existential crisis now is a really important one and very much chimes with my first engagement with the peace movement when we felt we were under the threat of annihilation basically, and again we had that sense of extinction. What is interesting to me is, we get to this sense of it being a matter of life and death and how much of that is about our psychology and how much does that enable us to solve these problems or does it actually undermine our ability to think rationally and solve these problems? I suppose the bigger question, are we emotionally equipped as human beings to deal with these crises in a rational and constructive way or do we tend to respond to crises with aggression and violence?

Anyway I'm not a psychologist and I won't go into those issues in depth, but I think it is interesting how many of the campaigns and issues we are looking at now do seem to be becoming significant life and death defining issues and I think when Extinction Rebellion invented this idea "Rebel for Life, we are facing our demise here", it was extraordinary that there was a huge up-swell of people saying, "Yes, that's how we feel", and I don't think that is just the way they feel about climate change actually.

So then when I wanted to think about Green politics I think it's really about choosing life, I don't always use that slogan because it comes across as a bit cheesy sometimes, but to me that is very much what Green politics is about; your connection to the earth, it's about your connection to other people and other species and it's a really interesting thing that wherever you go in the world you find Greens.

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There's a Green movement everywhere and last year in the European Parliament I had the great privilege of working with Lolita Traves a woman from Guatemala, an indigenous woman who has actually managed to keep Monsanto out of Guatemala, so she is pretty formidable and she is a Maya elder there, and it is extraordinary; she came to our group meeting and she spoke about the roots of her conflict and almost everybody in the room was in tears because it was exactly what we're doing on poverty; a totally different context, you know half way across the world, completely different culture, and language obviously but what she was expressing was exactly the way we do our politics as well, and I think that is a powerful grounding for what else we are doing, whether it is about peace, whether it's about climate change, and for me the rather strange thing is that that we are sitting here as this species, I mean we think of ourselves as incredible smart, don't we? I mean Homo Sapiens, knowing, wise etc, but actually we constantly prove that we are not very wise at all, but we do have at our disposal more knowledge and power than ever before and yet what we seem to be doing with that is almost all environmentally destructive – that's an exaggeration - I'm not going to say all the time, but we focus on the trivial and destructive an enormous amount of time and with intellectual effort and that makes me think there is something very destructive that we need to evolve beyond, and I think the main challenge we are facing is ourselves as a species. We are able to catalogue our own demise and we have to turn around, and to turn around we have to look inward at ourselves and our species and choose a different path.

Anyway I said that because I didn't want to get straight into talking and slightly repeating what was said this morning, which was looking at the impact of war in terms of climate because it seems to me that there is something shallow and trivialising about that. I mean the reason we object to war is not because it produces a lot of carbon dioxide. I'm sure that's true and for everybody in this room it's really important to say that; but that's not where we start. So when we make the connection between climate change and war, actually, we should start with the question of justice, with the question of fairness, with the question of why it is that people come into conflict with each other; so to me the social and economic aspects are absolute fundamental and later on I'll talk about why climate change itself is clearly going to give rise to greater conflict and migration and competition over resources. But anyway, just to say that I'm sure you've seen these figures already because I also looked at the book "How bad are bananas" by Mike Berners Lee. I don't actually agree with him about bananas and quite a lot of other things in that book but anyway he does have a go at trying to calculate how much C02 there is, and I am sure you saw the figure of 690 million tonnes of CO2 equivalent and 250 to 600 million tonnes of CO2 equivalent released during the Iraq war, he calculated - and so I just wanted to compare that with activities that we all engage in: that's the equivalent of … [suspect a small break in audio here] so a return flight from London, Gatwick is seven

times the CO2. So I did a very back of the envelope calculation (and the whole of these calculations are pretty back of the envelope to be honest). It worked out the two wars we are talking about, emissions were approximately the same as every UK citizen flying to Australia and back one and a half times. And that's an absolutely extraordinary amount of CO2, not to mention that it was entirely negative in its impact.

And then of course we also have to think about what our relationship with nature is like, in terms of war, and to me we're already in this war, we're already in a war with nature, we're already in a war with other species; we talk about "insectageddon", and we've seen precipitate declines in insect species. I am fifty six and quite a lot of people in the room, I think, are probably older than that. We can remember from our childhoods going out and having a picnic and swatting away wasps and actually finding them really annoying and this doesn't happen now because we're producing pesticides and we are using these pesticides to kill insects – that's what they're designed for - and we are using our clever minds and our science to create pesticides to kill insects. And of course they don't just kill wasps, they kill other insects which are at the bottom of the food chain of the birds and the voles and all those creatures which are also disappearing from our countryside.

So I think it's important that we recognise wars are going on everywhere, silent wars; and the US military machine is also the creator of a huge amount of pressure on the environment, so a study from the Pentagon actually says of the environment: it has become the silent casualty of war – fragile eco systems and habitats are destroyed, unexploded munitions are left behind, extensive waste contamination, water scarcity -[these] are the consequences of wars, and this exacerbates the human cost of disease, displacement, migration.

And to carry on with the theme of war on nature which we are clearly living through now, I want to investigate the impact of the Vietnam war on tree cover in Vietnam, because obviously we all know that the US used massive amounts of defoliant in Vietnam and to me trees are absolutely symbolic of life, so somebody using an aeroplane flying across the country and they decide to throw out chemicals just so they can kill all the rainforest underneath – that's horribly anti-life. Anyway there was an interesting paper in Mongabay [mongabay.com] which I looked at. It said that in the almost 50 years since the attacks on Vietnam's southern rainforests hit their peak which was in 1967 and at that time the United States sprayed 5 million gallons of defoliant including Agent Orange across more than 600,000 hectares. They were trying to eliminate the forest cover so that the enemy could be seen and killed. So forest cover declined sharply during the latter half of the 20th century as well – from 43% in early 1940's to about 17% by the end of the 1970's. After the defoliants, Vietnam tried to restore its economy, as you say in conventional terms, which they did by chopping down forest, selling the

wood and getting engaged in slash and burn agriculture. And so by 1999 foreign analysts estimated forest cover across Vietnam was as low as 10%.

But this is a story with a happy ending because there was a policy of devolution of forest control, and 1.4m households were granted 3.4 million Hectares of forest. And I think this is a really important aspect of what we're talking about; it's about control, it's about who controls. If something feels like a global problem outside your control, like climate change can feel like, like war can feel like, then you just feel disempowered and you don't try to solve the problem. But I think this policy of actually giving local people control over their environment was an important step forward and it was effective. At the 2012 COP Conference on Climate Change summit, Vietnam received International support, and gained finance to encourage it to support its forestry further. By 2011 forest trends analysis found that the tree cover in Vietnam was nearing pre-war levels, so it was back to the levels before 1967. All three classifications of Forest comprising 40.2% of its land area were improving. The Food and Agriculture Organisation has consistently listed Vietnam forest as moderately expanding between 1990 and 2015. So I think that's important in terms of the fact that you can repair the devastation of war; and also it's important because it shows you can change what you're doing; you don't have to see your forest as a resource that you can cut down and sell and then it's gone. And also, how incredibly abundant nature is and if we would just stop using our knowledge and our complete lack of wisdom to trash everything we could see the amazing regrowth and return of species and re-wilding. Those opportunities are there. So I think my conclusion from this first part is that we really need to evolve ourselves beyond the conflicted aggressive defensive psychology and to start to really empower ourselves, not just to resist war, but to repair the damage that's been done.

Another thing that links back to my idea of the death-wish is about the fact that I do think that Extinction Rebellion is doing an amazing thing – I was there when we launched it last October and I was occupying bridges as well – if you haven't been by the way, you shouldn't miss the opportunity, it's an amazing feeling. Just sitting in the road, traffic can't get past you, you own London basically, it makes you feel absolutely great, so don't miss out. Hardly anyone gets arrested and if you don't want to get arrested you just leave at the right time, but if you do want to get arrested you can do that as well. I always have this concern about people in the environment movement who say, don't worry the planet will be fine, as if human beings don't matter, as if we are some kind of cancer that has to be eliminated because we are causing all this damage and for me this is the opposite of what we need to do to solve this problem. I mean in spite of what I have been critical about human psychology I do think we are a precious and amazing species, and every single human being is unique and special. We can't just say how great it would be if

human beings weren't here because then the other species would have their chance, we need to recognise ourselves as part of nature and live in balance with other species.

I just say that by way of introduction, because there is some really interesting data about the consequences of war for environmental regeneration, this is particularly because humans are very destructive in our lifestyles now, but also in the past humans have been very destructive particularly in terms of loss of tree cover. So there is some interesting research from the Carnegie Institution for Science published in the journal rather depressingly called Poverty and it's about the trade-off between people and trees and when a war or a plague significantly reduces the human population, forests have a chance to regrow and to absorb CO_2 mitigating the greenhouse effect – in her research she discovered that after the Mongol invasions in Asia of the 13th and 14th C, which some historians estimate it killed at least 15 million people, newly flourishing trees in once deforested areas inhaled nearly 700 million tonnes of CO_2 from the atmosphere, an amount equivalent to the world's total annual demand for gasoline today.

There was some fascinating research published last summer, about the impact of the discovery of America when Europeans moved to the Americas and the genocide of the Native peoples there; the impact was so devastating in terms of murder and also disease that it had significant impact on global climate. It's estimated that European settlers killed 56 million indigenous people over the 100 years after their arrival in Central America and this caused large swathes of farmland to be abandoned and in fact it naturally re-forested. So there was an increase in trees and vegetation across an area the size of France which resulted in a decrease in CO_2 levels in the atmosphere and it's been suggested that this was actually sufficient to cause the mini ice-age which you recognise happened here in the 16th Century. And so it's not a simple equation; it's not so simple as to say actually war only creates CO_2; because the elimination of people does, sad to say, reduce the production of CO_2; and that's why we need to be very careful about what we are saying here, because we don't want to make simple equations just as if it was a simple question, because it's not; for me it's a profound and spiritual question, it's not about scientific calculation.

So that's one half in a way, and the other half is about how climate change is going to impact on, and increase conflicts - and I see you've done a really nice film here which I look forward to seeing [MAW's Conflict & Climate Change DVD] - but this makes the very important point that competition over resources, and climate change reducing those resources and making areas of land uninhabitable, is actually one of the big pressures behind the large population movements we are seeing in our world today and we are seeing migration on unprecedented scales, so the number of international migrants worldwide has grown rapidly in recent

years; it reached 258 million in 2017, up from 220 million in 2010 and 173 million in 2000.

And as we know the most obvious impact of this has been the attempt of people to cross the Mediterranean to come to Europe, and 35,000 people have drowned in the Mediterranean over the past two decades, and last week to commemorate those people we had a ceremony at the European Parliament where we stood on the Esplanade and read the names of all those people and it took a horrifying amount of time to do that. So climate change is displacing people and it is leading to conflict but at the moment we don't have a definition of a climate refugee, and one of things we are trying to do in the European Parliament is to create such a definition because at the moment you have to prove that you will be killed by civil conflict or by political authorities in order to gain refugee status, but we are saying that you also need to introduce a concept of a climate refugee because people's lives are becoming impossible and they are moving, not for a better life but from genuine fear of dying because of the consequences of climate change. So the European Parliament is attempting to define what a climate refugee would be and according to the statistics published by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, every year since 2008, an average of 26.4m people around the world have been forcibly displaced by floods, windstorms, earthquakes and droughts.

And clearly climate change is not even a question about science now, we live in climate change, it's an experience for all of us, and we know that in our country people are dying because of the heat, but mostly we have services that protect us and our lives will continue pretty much as normal, for the time being at least, but in other countries their ability to survive is already disappearing, therefore countries are disappearing. So it's been estimated that 200,000 Bangladeshis become homeless every year due to river bank erosion, and it's not easy for them to find another place to go – Bangladesh is the largest single country that is at risk from inundation, because it is very low lying and as sea levels rise it's simply being swamped. And the residents of the small islands of the Pacific, Kiribas, Nauru and Tuvalu have seen one in 10 people having to migrate, but they are not classified as refugees even though they are trapped in worsening environmental conditions. Of the 186 countries assessed in a recent survey on climate vulnerability, Chad in Africa was rated as facing the highest peril, but in the future environmental effects will have enormous effects on many populations, especially those in coastal and low lying areas such as Vietnam, Netherlands and certain parts of the US.

So I am sure that a lot of you either read or read summaries or are aware of the IPPC report published last autumn, which was quoted in Stuart's presentation, the 1.5° report which was very strong in terms of saying what we have to do and what risks there are, but it was also quite a sign of hope because 1.5° warming as a target hadn't been on the table

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before Paris – they'd been thinking about 2°. One of the people I shared a panel with at Glastonbury was Sir David King, a former Chief Scientific Adviser, and he was one of the people that was actively involved in saying "No we're going to go better than 2°, we're going to look at 1.5°", and when that report was done by the IPPC, it was very clear that we are going to have to make really significant changes as to what we are doing right now, and they said effectively we have 12 years to stop runaway climate change from happening.

We are all aware of the sort of impacts we might be seeing but it is difficult to make that clear connection between conflict and climate change; a little bit like it's difficult to say that any particular weather event is the result of climate change, but once you see the pattern, once you see the pattern of people leaving their home because of forest fires or floods or droughts because they simply cannot subsist there any longer, then you see them moving to other people's land and the possibility for conflict becomes very clear, and what we are building up to is a sort of inter-reaction between these climate changes, poor crop production and failure of natural resources. The conflict over these scarcer resources causing migration and then people not having enough to eat and having to move and so you are building up some nasty feedback loops in terms of the future potential for creating greater conflicts.

So obviously I am interested to hear what you have to say and we can discuss this further, and my conclusions are not particularly cheerful, but I think it is important to acknowledge what I said at the beginning that everything has to change, and that's a little unsettling, but a lot of change has been resisted for a very long time, but I think the possibility to make radical changes is really with us now.

I want to start my conclusions by just mentioning one thing I think would be great that you could be doing – which has nothing to do with what I've been saying – this is about the ICAN UN Treaty process. I am sure you have all had this experience where you talk to a politician and they say to you – this happened with Zak Goldsmith who was also at Glastonbury – they say "I'm a multilateral sum person so when there is a disarmament process, then I'll sign up to it" – and then you say, "Yes there is one, it's the ICAN process – have you signed up to it?" and then they pretend they haven't heard you. Well we have to stop this, we have to stop this right now. Everybody who says they believe in multilateral disarmament has to get behind that process. So let's all put enormous pressure on our MPs about that total hypocrisy but let's also think of a more skilful way to communicate that. I was so furious about this, I went on to a runway where they have nuclear weapons in Belgium last year and got arrested, for the first time; Belgium is a very good country to get arrested in – they have this thing called "Administrative Arrest" and they just take your fingerprints and let you go, so doesn't take up a lot of your time so I can recommend it. But the point is that the reason why we were

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there was precisely this point – about the hypocrisy over ICAN; so we tried to get that story into as many newspapers as possible and our story was: "Look at the multilateral disarmament process and European countries that are not getting behind it", though some of them are, but Belgium isn't, and UK isn't, and we have to put huge pressure and stop our politicians being hypocrites around that issue.

We all know how desperately costly war is and how immoral it is to measure it in any other terms than the loss of human life, those special human lives I was talking about before, but because climate change, social justice, displacement and war - all of these are in a nexus together, they are inter-related, and when you address one, I believe you address them all, because we will not solve the problem of conflict without having global justice. We will not solve the problem of conflict without addressing climate change, and my view is that we will not solve any of these problems unless we have properly functioning flourishing democracies, not just in this country but right across the world. I think the opportunity we are being offered in this country now as a result of Brexit is precisely to make sure our democracy works properly.

The interesting thing revealed as a result of the Extinction Rebellion process is that 60% of people agreed with Extinction Rebellion about what should happen. That was a Times survey – I was astonished by that, but only 20% of people agreed with their methods. But why are they having to take those methods, why are they having to sit on the pavement? Because the democratic process is not working. Obviously for me, I am immensely frustrated that the 10% of people who potentially and actually vote Green at the moment are represented by one MP – this is a complete outrage; we should have 60 MPs – imagine how that would transform the votes in Parliament on climate change. But it goes much wider than that, it goes to the fact that we have some really bad MPs sitting in safe seats who don't have to worry how bad they are, or don't even have to answer your emails because, like in 1872, that's when they created the West Dorset seat, and it's been a Conservative seat ever since. OK its Oliver Letwin, he's not the worst person in the House of Commons, but seriously how much competition is there for that seat? How much does he have to work to actually retain that seat – nothing at all. So the whole issue of safe seats has to be swept away as well, we need to have a system where your vote counts, everybody's vote counts and the proportion of votes for each party is translated into power. That is not a radical suggestion - that is just what democracy looks like. Anyway, I don't think you can address any of these other issues without also addressing that issue,

But I also think we need to think about social justice in terms of our trade policy and in terms of our approach to taxation as well, and those two issues I work on quite a lot in the Parliament. It's a cliché to say we are, but I don't think it's even that we are standing at a crossroads; we are in the midst of a maelstrom of inter-related crises but I think if we

have courage, the real opportunity for making really significant changes is there, and we just have to have the courage and energy to drive this forward. So I would say, choose life. Whether it's about politics – I think that's the Green Party, you may disagree, spiritually, choose life, personally, choose life. Make those decisions and also rebel for life, that is the slogan of Extinction Rebellion, we are not going to put up with this any longer, we have to take it into our own hands and resist and use the political fabric, we have to make the world a better place, not just in terms of climate change but also in terms of peace.

Thank you very much."

[Clapping]

Recorded and transliterated by David Collins & Tim Devereux