



SPEECH of Mr Séamus BOLAND, President of the Diversity Europe Group of the EESC

Inaugural session of the conference 'Climate Change and Energy Transition', Paris 2 March 2022

Esteemed speakers, ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

I would like to welcome and thank you all for attending this conference, which is the **first event** that our Group has organised **outside of Brussels in two years!** It is very good to finally be back among local civil society organisations, for it is you who **give meaning to our work in Brussels!** And today, we will be discussing a topic which is urgent and concerns all of us, namely: **Climate Change and Energy Transition.** And what better place to be discussing this topic, than the Academy of Climate, among very distinguished speakers!

Some may say that it is frivolous to debate this topic, given the war that has broken out in our neighbour **Ukraine.** Some may say that our priority should be defending **peace, equality and justice.** Peace is a fragile flower, currently trampled on by the Russian President. But like peace, climate change and the energy transition are about our **common future.** They are about **values and our humanity.** And for that reason, I am proud that we are discussing this subject, even in these turbulent times.

And I would like to begin by sincerely thanking **Mr Orru,** President of the Council of the **Academy of Climate** for hosting us today. Your hospitality is very much appreciated and I hope that through this event, we will be able to also support your daily work on this crucial topic. I would also like to warmly thank our **French delegation of Members,** in particular **Thierry Libaert** and **Arnaud Schwartz,** who have been instrumental in making this event such a success!

Ladies and gentlemen, **Climate Change** is already upon us and there is **nowhere left to hide.** Regular severe floods, fires, droughts and hurricanes. This is what the world looks like at **1.1 to 1.3° Celsius** warmer than when the steam engine was invented. Today, it is simply **impossible to ignore the impact of Climate Change** on our daily lives.

Scientists confirm that **1/8 million animal and plant species** are **at risk of extinction.** **25% of plants are threatened with extinction.** And this process is happening across the globe, **100 times faster than the natural rate.** These losses are deeply tragic, but they also deeply threaten **human existence.** All of bio-diversity is interlocked and we as humans, are totally **reliant on biodiversity!**

Hence, there is no doubt in my mind, that we are at a **pivotal moment in time.** This is the moment for us to change our future for the better. And we have no choice, but to **urgently deliver on our common promises.**

Cutting emissions, even at faster rates, will not be enough. We must also **heavily invest in preparing emergency plans and in adapting to the changing climate** and the **energy transition**. This will entail a **mental shift**: investing today and reaping the benefits in the next generation. But invest we must, with **increased sustainable financial resources**, backed up by strong commitments from public authorities, business, civil society and citizens.

The **European Green Deal** and the **'Fit for 55' package** are both necessary and urgent. But they must be accompanied by commitments and action at the **national, regional and local levels**. And at all levels we need **better planning and coordination of policies**. I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate the **city of Paris** for its ambitious **Climate Action Plan**, which is an inspiration to many cities! Unfortunately, the transport sector remains a big polluter, with **95% of trucks in Europe consuming fossil fuels**. And we still have a long way to go in cleaning-up our energy consumption.

Indeed, **energy** accounts for **2/3 of greenhouse gas emissions**. In the **20th Century**, oil fueled our economies, our societies and geopolitics. In the **21st Century**, it is imperative that we **invest in renewable, affordable and home-grown energy**. And the latter is crucial, in order to make Europe more independent, with stable and diversified power supplies. Today, **China produces 72% of the world's solar modules**. So we must rapidly increase our production capacity for renewable energy sources in Europe. Only then will the EU be "*Master of its destiny (and)... Free of its choices*", as the French Presidency of the Council of the EU has called for.

The EU has the funds to realise these objectives, but we need to **speed up the production of renewable energy and to consume efficiency**. We must **remove all subsidies to fossil fuels**, massively invest in Research & Development and strongly encourage business to take up its role seriously and generously. Above all, there must be careful cooperation between overarching EU strategies, national and regional plans. There are several EU funds that can be used to finance the energy transition, so let us make the most of what is available!

Ultimately, it is my firm belief that access to energy and clean energy, is a right! This is why it is imperative that the climate and energy transitions are also **just, fair and inclusive transitions**, leaving nobody behind. These two transitions will result in job losses and higher living costs. So they must be well prepared, informing, involving and assisting **vulnerable consumers** and **vulnerable citizens**. The new **EU Social Climate Fund** to tackle energy poverty is a welcome step, but it will not meet all of the demands of the transitions. We also need incentives for consumers to renovate smartly and sustainably, in tandem with strategies such as the **EC's Renovation Wave**.

But above all, there must be **regular and constructive dialogue** between citizens, civil society organisations and policy-makers. There must be an **honest recognition and debate on the benefits, trade-offs and transitional costs that our societies will undergo**. And this discussion should take place at all levels and across the widest possible social spectrum. If we do not invest in this dialogue, there will be a massive public backlash. And one age-group which must be at the **centre of these discussions**, is **youth**. This is their future, much more than it is ours.

The final point that I would like to make relates to the involvement of organised **civil society organisations**, which want to be and must also be allowed to be at the **heart of this process**. Every socio-economic sector of civil society must be empowered to lead, design and implement the climate

transition. Civil society organisations can promote **new economic models**, such as the social economy, which have proven very useful in addressing previous socio-economic challenges.

Ladies and gentlemen, as we are in France, I would like to close by referring to the **French political philosopher, Alexis de Tocqueville**, who argued that the collective business of society should be done voluntarily by the people themselves, rather than by government. And I share the belief that it is **civil society** which has the ambition and creativity to imagine this **sustainable, resilient and fairer world**. It is civil society which has a pivotal role in **driving and maintaining the momentum** on climate mitigation and adaptation among communities and citizens. It is these same actors who will have the tenacity to **invest in, accelerate and embrace change with bottom-up initiatives** which respect the opinions and the rights of local people.

Finally, I would like to say that **nature has a true value** and we have a **true responsibility toward it**. Humans have irreversibly shaped our planet. And we will irreversibly shape its future by the decisions we make over the next few years. **What happens in this future, will depend on all of us**. Thank you for your attention.