



SPEECH by Diversity Europe Group President Séamus Boland

'30 Years Defending European Consumers'

Meeting of the Consumers and Environment Category, 1 October 2021

Distinguished speakers, guests, dear colleagues,

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to this commemorative event, marking the 30 years of the Consumer and Environment Category of the EESC. I would like to open this conference with one simple word: congratulations! Congratulations to the Committee, but particularly to the Diversity Europe Group, which has galvanised, inspired and managed the work of this Category over the last three decades. Indeed, the Category has always been composed solely of Group III Members. There are times when we should publicly state that we are proud of our work and I think that this is one of them!

This Category is particularly important to the Diversity Europe Group, because it both pulls together and reflects our priorities, vision and identity. Many of you will know that when I became Group President, I made poverty reduction my overriding priority. Within that objective, consumer and environmental protection take centre stage, alongside mitigating Climate Change and post-Covid socio-economic reconstruction, which includes adaptation to digitalisation. And like the Consumer and Environment Category, Group III is putting Europe's 'future' and the 'opportunities of change' squarely at the forefront. It is all about prioritising innovation, social inclusion and sustainability.

So when we reflect on the vast progress that has been made in consumer protection over the last three decades, we should be proud that this Category has contributed to securing common EU legislation to regulate consumer over-indebtedness. We should be proud that we have focused on the sharing economy, collaborative consumption and the fight against planned obsolescence, embracing a more holistic perspective of the circular economy. And we should be pleased that EESC Opinions now take into account the consumer and environmental dimensions.

From my perspective, consumer interests and environmental protection must be defended in every village, rural area and small urban town. They are very much about the well-being and rights of citizens and communities. Consumer interests and environmental protection reflect our values and the societies that we aspire to. Progress made is tangible, notably in consumer protection and affects the daily lives of Europeans. This progress demonstrates the benefits of being a European citizen and helps to combat populism and anti-EU sentiment.

What is certain, is that the EU's Green Deal and 'Fit for 55' package will affect the lives of every European and that the everyday habits of consumers will determine whether Europe succeeds in attaining its climate change objectives. And it is this symbiosis between consumer and environmental interests that makes this Category so effective.

Later this morning you will debate the environmental, climate, digital and consumption challenges that we are already facing. Our Group discussed these same challenges last week, when we adopted a

statement on the urgency of Climate Change. I think that you will find that your discussions this afternoon will reach the same conclusions. Namely, that we need a mental shift, investing today and reaping the benefits in the next generation. And we will only be able embark on this new world by changing perceptions and attitudes. By anchoring fair and just climate mitigation and adaptation firmly within our European values and identity. In this context, the new EU Social Climate Fund to tackle energy poverty is a welcome step in this direction. Energy poverty is and will continue to be a fundamental challenge in our societies. It is imperative that we leave nobody behind and that we inform, involve and assist vulnerable consumers and vulnerable citizens.

I am certain that you will also conclude that it is civil society, which has both 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.

Ladies and gentlemen, I will bring my comments to an end. But before doing so, I would like to make a plea to all actors here today, from the European Parliament, the European Commission and civil society, to work together! We must seek out joint approaches and alliances and defend our vision of the future. There are many powerful interests which do not share our priorities, so the only way forward, is join forces, today.

Thank you for your attention.