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The EU and climate change: debate at the European Parliament

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Climate change and energy efficiency - two areas of particular interest to the European Parliament - were the main topics examined at a round-table discussion on sustainable energy held at the European Parliament on 11 and 12 April by the Committee on Industry, Research and Energy. The debate was one of the events organised by Parliament to mark the 2007 Energy Globe Award.

Swift action needed

Opening the first session - titled *Climatise Yourope* - the President of the European Parliament, Hans-Gert Pöttering, stressed Parliament's commitment to the creation of a genuine energy policy for the EU and the contribution that the EP had made to the outcome of the recent European summit on this matter. "We need a new industrial revolution", he said, a theme taken up by other MEPs during the debate on climate change.

"The European Parliament will play its full part in this matter", added Mr Pöttering, although he pointed out that success was dependent on solidarity within the EU and on the commitment of the EU's partners: the USA, Russia, China and India. He concluded "The right decisions must be taken at the right moment, and the right moment is now".

We are all responsible

"We have made the world as it is" and "we are all responsible for the Earth", stressed Hollywood star and environmental campaigner Martin Sheen. In fact the question of mankind's responsibility surfaced several times during the debate.

"The minority view that climate change is due more to planetary cycles than to greenhouse gas emissions is making itself heard more and more. Perhaps we should take account of this view?", asked Alejo Vidal-Quadras (EPP-ED, ES, Vice-President of Parliament). He added "We should focus more on security of [energy] supplies" even though this issue is "less spectacular than climate change".

This question should indeed be taken into account more, said Olive Schaeffer, representative of the European Renewable Energy Council (EREC), but that does not alter the fact that mankind's energy management is responsible for the "dramatic situation" we see today. "If thousands of experts throughout the world have agreed, notably in the recent declarations in Paris and Brussels, that human activity and climate change are closely linked, there can be no further doubt".

For Dimitri Zenghelis, co-author of the Stern Review on climate change, who opened the second session - titled *Cool energy for Yourope* - the scientific evidence was indisputable: climate change poses serious global risks even if the distribution of these risks around the planet is not yet sufficiently well known.

Renewable energy

Is renewable energy more expensive? In the short term, certainly. But, according to Oliver Schaeffer, gas and oil prices are rising whereas the cost of innovative technologies is falling and "the wind and sun will never send us a bill". Moreover, pointed out Dimitri Zenghelis, greater use of renewable sources would contribute decisively to the stabilisation of greenhouse gas emissions advocated by the Stern Review.

Heinz Kopetz, head of the European Biomass Association, spoke about energy generation from organic matter. Peter Rae, of the World Wind Energy Association, told the audience about wind energy, while Nikolaus Benz of the company Schott Rohrglas described the technological progress made in the use of solar energy, in particular in Spain and Arizona.

Jeremy Rifkin, author of the bestseller *The Hydrogen Economy*, argued that the "new industrial revolution" desired by the European Parliament should be based on the use of hydrogen energy. "After the stone age, the fire age, the iron age, our period will be described by future generations as the oil age", he said ironically.

Several MEPs asked about the responsibility of political decision-makers in the exploitation of the technologies

and knowledge that we have already possessed for some time. The idea of converting chemical energy into electricity, said Miroslav Ransdorf (GUE/NGL, CZ) was "an old dream of Jules Verne". "The issue is probably not one of innovative capacity - we are already very advanced technologically - but of organisation and practical implementation", maintained Claude Turmes (Greens/EFA, LU).

Energy efficiency and traditional energy sources

According to several speakers, we cannot simply look for new energy sources without also thinking about managing better the resources we are using now. Paul Rübzig (EPP-ED, AT), a key mover behind the debate, argued that energy efficiency should be the key plank of the European Parliament's approach.

To make better use of the resources we have, it is not enough to pass laws, contended a representative of the European Commission. The success of the "energy package" (all the new EU legislation) also depends on an awareness and understanding of the situation by the public. A proper information campaign is needed throughout the EU, and examples need to be set, particularly in the transport and construction industries.

Jerzy Buzek (EPP-ED, PL) was optimistic about the use of traditional energy resources, such as coal and nuclear power, saying that with new technology they could be made clean and even cheaper than renewable sources. Paul Rübzig felt it was clear that we could not expect the developing countries to refrain from using these types of energy as this would be "like banning them from developing".

The nuclear question

Françoise Grossetête (EPP-ED, FR) told the meeting that "for the next 50 years we will not be able to do without nuclear power", even though "no-one, except one or two colleagues, dares to speak this word, which has become taboo". Rebecca Harms (Greens/EFA, DE) opposed this view, saying there was no justification for it.

Former Commissioner Franz Fischler saw the debate on nuclear power as "a pointless theological dispute", while Angelica Niebler, chair of the Industry Committee, emphasised that it was up to each Member State to choose whether or not to use nuclear power.

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