

Opening remarks of Janez Potočnik
Commissioner-Designate for Environment
European Parliament Hearing
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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Honourable Chairman of the Committee Mr Leinen,
Distinguished members of the European Parliament,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is right that as a candidate for a public position of great responsibility, I must appear before you, the directly elected representatives of European citizens. It is right that I am obliged to set out my vision and respond to your questions. I know that if you confirm my appointment I will not only gain your confidence, but also public credibility.

I feel privileged to be standing in front of you as Commissioner Designate. And I feel honoured that President Barroso has asked me to take on the responsibility of such an important portfolio: Environment.

Some of you will know me already, just as I have come to know some of you. I come from Slovenia. I have spent the last five years as Commissioner for Science and Research. Perhaps you know that I'm an economist by training and that I headed the team negotiating Slovenia's accession to the EU. I would like to add that I'm a keen volleyball player and that I have two children.

Today I hope to show you why I believe my background and my experience make me a good candidate for the environment portfolio. But I also want to show you that I know where I want to go, and that I have a pretty good idea how to get there.

Let me start with a quote: "Europe will exist as a green continent, or it will not exist. The world will exist as a blue planet, or it will not exist."

This quote is from one of my speeches back in 2008. Its meaning is pretty obvious. But I repeat it because I am convinced it is true. And it illustrates a theme which has underpinned my time as a Commissioner for Science and Research, and which will continue to underpin my mandate as environment Commissioner, of course if you confirm me. That is the theme of sustainability - in all senses of the word, but particularly environmental sustainability. It is a theme that means a lot to citizens because it matters to them.

Europe does not only come from a textbook or a Treaty; it is about the daily life of millions of Europeans in cities and regions and countries. It is where European rules work and where the European advantage is played out for real.

A few decades ago Europe was demolished. It needed reconstruction. Europeans were desperate, in need of reconciliation. The European Union brought peace, stability, security and the promise of prosperity and a better life. The *raison d'être* for European cooperation was more than obvious at that time.

Today we are rather complacent about these achievements. The motives of our predecessors 50 years ago remain valid now and will remain valid for the future, but they don't speak to today's younger generations. Europe is a good place to live, so why should we continue to strengthen our cooperation?

We should, because it is not only Europe that has changed; so has the rest of the world. It has changed dramatically and it has changed for ever, whether we like it or not. We are now ever-increasingly interconnected and interdependent. We share so many of the benefits of a globalised life, but also its problems. We face climate change, unsure energy supplies, pandemics, loss of biodiversity, food and water shortages, structural economic imbalances, security threats ...and the list does not end there. These are challenges that do not recognise borders. They belong to everybody. They are global.

These new challenges raise the level of common responsibility and of individual responsibility. Our response as Europeans to these challenges will only be effective if we respond together. The 21st century will be the century of fragility. We have to make it a century of sustainability and effective global governance. For that to happen, the world needs a strong and responsible Europe; a Europe that is capable of speaking as one and which can grasp the nettle of political leadership. That is the Europe I stand for and the Europe I believe in. That is the Europe that younger generations can identify with and adopt as their own.

We are in the middle of a major transformation, from a post-War, resource-based economy into a knowledge-based economy. President Barroso has made it clear that as we look towards the EU of 2020, we will need a more 'convergent and coordinated approach', both in terms of investing in new sources of growth and in political terms by improving – even more – the special relationship between the European Commission and the European Parliament. I fully support these aims and through the Treaty of Lisbon I believe that our partnership will be more important than ever.

I have spoken about our fragile world. And it is this very fragility which makes the environment such a key part of our positive agenda for the future. What could be more fundamental, more universal than the stewardship of the air we breathe, the ground we walk on or the water we drink?

There was a time when people spoke about sustainable development and the environment as a moral issue – something a few marginal and specialist campaign groups cared about and the rest of us considered probably right, but not so urgent. This is no longer the case. We see common environmental concerns across the political spectrum. We are now faced with convincing and overwhelming scientific evidence of environmental damage caused by no-one else but us. And a whole new generation of Europeans demand clear and decisive action to preserve and reclaim the planet which we - an invasive species in our own right - have done so much to hurt. It's not even about future generations any more; it's about our own generation.

Alongside this is the fact that preserving the environment makes such enormous economic, social and business sense: maybe we don't have a silver bullet to take us out of recession, but we have a green one. I don't deny that reaching higher levels of environmental protection can cost money, involve administration and regulation. But it is necessary, and in the long-run it saves money. It also improves our quality of life, stimulates our economies and creates jobs. Yes, we need growth and new jobs, but we need growth and jobs that are coherent with the principle of sustainable development – we need a knowledge-based resource-efficient economy.

My focus as environment Commissioner will be on impact and results. What do I mean by this? There is a Japanese saying that sums it up nicely: "*vision without action is a daydream...action without vision is a nightmare*". We need a vision; we need policies based on information, analysis, knowledge and solid evidence; and we need to choose the best tools to implement those policies, whether they be smart regulation, market based instruments, public procurement or investment, networking or communication, again... based on solid evidence.

The environment is as complex as the world itself. And because of this, so many of our environmental issues overlap with other responsibilities and interests. Therefore if I am to achieve real impact as Commissioner for environment, it will not be enough to merely ensure enforcement of the framework directives, ensure good management of Natura sites and implement other parts of the environmental acquis.

I intend to fight hard for a coherent and comprehensive approach across the gamut of Community policies. I intend to ensure that we direct the range of

financial instruments at our disposal to make sure we achieve our environmental objectives. I intend to open up new partnerships with the Member States and with regions, to make sure that subsidiarity is not an excuse for inaction, but an engine which reinforces our ability to achieve goals together. And I intend to engage with all those who can contribute to improve the environment; to use dialogue as an even more effective weapon; dialogue with you, the honourable members of this House, dialogue with NGOs, dialogue with business, dialogue with Europeans, and dialogue with our international partners.

I want environmental policy-making to be informed to a degree it has never been before: grounded in evidence and nurtured and fine-tuned through dialogue. I want it to be agreed but effective, mainstreamed but targeted, principled but practical.

The main axes I see for my new mandate.

First resource efficiency: My first priority will be to make sure that the EU 2020 project is about growth and jobs built on a strong foundation of sustainability and resource efficiency.

I would not be the first to point to the huge opportunity of green growth and green jobs. I also believe in the potential of a green stimulus, but it is also too simplistic and too convenient to believe that we can just switch to low carbon production and spend our way out of recession. Green growth will not necessarily provide us with the “high level of environmental protection” that the Treaty demands of us. Similarly it is great to see eco-industries growing strongly, but they will not provide all of the answers.

We must concentrate on how to break the link between growth and resource use, and that will involve changing behaviour across the wider economy and society. Not an easy task, but I believe it is possible. Possible because for business the concept of resource efficiency is already second nature, and becoming more-and-more attractive.

To green the mainstream economy I am going to fight hard to turn environmental protection into environmental valorisation. We need to find ways to value our environment in our decision making. Even if we cannot reduce the environment to economic figures, we can find ways to go beyond our obsession with GDP, we can find ways to internalise externalities. Here I will use my experience as research Commissioner and as an economist. I will push for economic incentives that promote innovation and creativity. The more we are aware of the real and inherent value of our environment, the more effectively we

will be able to design policies to combine our economic, social and environmental goals.

Second, Biodiversity: The variety and resilience of our ecosystems, species and genes is the world's natural capital. It provides vital goods and services, such as food, carbon sequestration and water regulation that underpin our prosperity, social well-being and quality of life.

Biodiversity is inextricably linked to climate change: effective climate action is required to preserve biodiversity, while environmental action will contribute to mitigating global warming and to our ability to adapt to climate change. Climate change has shot to the top of the political agenda worldwide and that's where it belongs. It must retain our focus – especially after Copenhagen. But we have another related challenge that is equally critical, equally urgent, and perhaps even more complex. What I want to see is that same kind of political commitment and public awareness devoted to preserving our biodiversity.

I believe that the doubling of the environmental 'presence' in the College will enable us to give biodiversity and our other environmental challenges the attention they deserve. I have already met Connie Hedegaard, and I can assure you that our combined strengths and experience will be a real advantage.

Third, implementation and enforcement: We can already do a lot through effective enforcement of the existing environmental legislation. Not only is this already agreed and on the statute books... and therefore quickly implementable, effective enforcement provides the legal certainty, the level playing field and the predictability that business needs and expects.

It is this background and these ideas, Mr Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen, which will inform and drive my work as environment commissioner.

When President Barroso offered me the chance to take up the environment portfolio, you may think it odd, but my first thoughts were about home. I love Slovenia. Slovenia is for me not just a flag or a GDP figure. It is more than its proud people, its rich culture or its heritage. It is also the clean rivers, green forests and white mountains where I grew up, and where I still walk every weekend when I get the chance. I am lucky to come from a country where nature is so beautiful and so well preserved – indeed the country with the highest proportion of its territory in the Natura 2000 network. I want my children, and the children of my children, to be able to enjoy the things that I have often taken for granted. I hope that I will be given the opportunity to make sure that they – like all Europeans – have the opportunity to do so.

Together with you and with your support, Honourable Members of Parliament, I can do a lot. We can do a lot! We must do a lot!

Thank you for your attention.