

EU 'must walk its climate talk'

VIEWPOINT

Caroline Lucas

EU institutions need to put their own house in order before it can be seriously considered as the global leader in the battle against climate change, argues Green MEP Caroline Lucas. In this week's Green Room, she says a start would be the end of the monthly "merry-go-round" between Brussels and Strasbourg.

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Climate change doesn't just threaten a future humanitarian and economic disaster, its effects are devastatingly visible today.

Wherever you look, the evidence for climate change is growing.

The most recent findings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC); the warmest April for 300 years; the almost annual devastation of Bangladesh from flooding; a massive upsurge in freak weather events; the rapidly shrinking Arctic ice, are just a few examples.

An overwhelming scientific and political consensus pronounces that this is being caused by greenhouse gas emissions produced by human activity.

It's increasingly being recognised that, to stave off its worst impacts, we must cut these emissions by as much as 80-90% over the next few decades.

So, as the European Union seeks a revitalisation of its role and purpose as it marks its 50th birthday, surely it has prioritised the adoption of policies to do just that? Well, no, not quite.

In April, EU ministers adopted a binding target of reducing carbon dioxide (CO2) emissions by 20% across the EU by 2020. This target doesn't go far enough, or fast enough, but the real problem is that it is unlikely to be delivered at all.

Why? Partly because the EU's policy priorities remain focused on the objectives of greater free trade and international competitiveness rather than becoming a leader in the global fight against climate change and sustainable living.

Carbon contradiction

Currently, the Lisbon Agenda, with its mantra of greater liberalisation, deregulation and privatisation, is allowed to trump efforts to achieve ambitious, binding emission reduction targets.

To tackle the new threats and challenges we face today, and to deliver a fair, sustainable and peaceful Europe into the 21st Century, the EU must undergo radical reform

For example, just a few weeks after trumpeting the success of agreeing the new CO2 reduction targets, EU ministers signed up to a new "Open Skies" agreement with the US, which will increase the number of flights by 25 million and belch an extra 3.5 million tonnes of CO2 into the atmosphere every year - and didn't see the slightest contradiction in doing so.

Or take the recent wrangle over new rules designed to combat CO2 emissions produced by cars.

Earlier this year, ambitious proposals to limit emissions were significantly weakened as the economic arguments of the industry commissioner took precedence over the desire to cut emissions voiced urgently by the environment commissioner.

The 50th anniversary of the EU is a timely moment to reassess its role and purpose.

It is already clear that, in order to be able to tackle the new threats and challenges we face today, and to deliver a fair, sustainable and peaceful Europe into the 21st Century, the EU must undergo radical reform.

In particular, if we are to genuinely make climate security a major new purpose of the EU, we need to replace its overriding objective of international competitiveness and free trade, with a new "big idea" for Europe based on environmental sustainability and economic localisation.

'Walk the talk'

But EU policy makers will never be able to convince business, private individuals and other nations to take the sometimes radical steps necessary towards this goal until they have shown that they are doing so themselves.

The fact remains that the European Parliament itself is a prodigious emitter of carbon. Take, for example, its anachronistic "two seat" arrangement that sees its meetings alternate between Brussels and Strasbourg, 220 miles away.

This completely unnecessary monthly merry-go-round consists of some 2,000 parliamentary staff and interpreters, nearly 1,000 assistants, journalists and lobbyists, 785 MEPs and 15 lorry-loads of trunks and documents.

This travelling circus is responsible for emitting at least 20,000 tonnes of CO2 every year - about the same as the entire CO2 output of a small nation like Kiribati, or 4,000 London households.

This is the conclusion of a report I and my Green Party colleague, Jean Lambert MEP, recently commissioned.

It argues that, if the parliament is to be a credible authority on climate change, the EU and its member governments must agree to end the Strasbourg operation immediately in order to "put its own house in order".

The report concludes: "The Strasbourg operation imposes a very large climate change burden. There are reasons why Parliament has evolved this way but the urgent need to take action on climate change requires a change of plan.

"Not to change historical working practice sends a very clear message to millions of citizens and thousands of businesses that they need not try very hard to change behaviour if this change is inconvenient."

The EU could become a world leader in tackling climate change and sustainable living, promoting

renewable energy generation and living more lightly on the planet - indeed, it's essential that it does so.

Moreover, exercising real political leadership on climate change would also re-invigorate the EU project, giving it a new aim and purpose, and helping to reconnect its institutions with its increasingly jaded half-a-billion citizens, inspiring them with a new sense of enthusiasm and common cause.

Green MEPs know this and are committed to trying to lead the other EU institutions and member governments towards the same conclusion. If we are to succeed though, we will have to put our own house(s) in order first.

Dr Caroline Lucas is a Green Party MEP for South-East England

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