

EU Informal Meeting of Environment Ministers
Brussels, 15-16 January 2024

Your Excellencies, good morning.

It is a great honour to address this gathering of European Ministers of Climate and Environment for the second time in my life. The first time was about thirty years ago, when Belgium held the EU presidency for six months. It must have been 2024 or 2025. I was in my early fifties. Quite young in fact, though it didn't feel that way. The 2020s were not gay, but grey.

They had kicked off energetically—“climate justice now!”, the streets still echoed—yet only a few months in, the new decade had come to a standstill with a global pandemic locking us all up. Two precious years were lost and on the very day we could finally breathe again and start afresh, a gruesome war was launched in February 2022, followed by another major regional conflict in October 2023. It was deeply frustrating. Every time we felt ready to tackle the long-term, planetary challenge, a new regional, purely anthropocentric conflict sucked up all of our energy, attention and resources. Blinded by the fights, we almost forgot our biggest battle.

Citizens, meanwhile, started to despair. Wasn't climate change too big to handle? Couldn't we wait for some future technology to solve it? And was the whole thing even true in the first place? Social media had cast doubts on traditional sources of authority, like science. Algorithms pitted people against each other. Entire communities were falling apart. Economic inequality was on the rise, as were natural catastrophes and migration. Meanwhile, artificial intelligence was still so unregulated that every lie could pass for truth. It was at this time I first heard words like 'truth collapse' and even 'reality collapse'. In those days, it wasn't clear whether all EU member states were going to withstand the perfect storm that had been building up

over the years. Massive social unrest, political violence, fascism, coup d'états and state collapse all seemed possible again.

How on earth were we going to solve this? I didn't say it out loud at the time, but I frankly admired anyone who aspired to a job as minister of climate or environment in those days. It took guts. It really did.

But now we know that it was precisely this generation of political leaders in Europe that brought about the crucial changes we needed so badly. It was this cohort of ministers and state secretaries that got us through the tunnel. If we are quietly talking here today in 2054, it is thanks to your eminent predecessors who turned the Grey Twenties into the Thriving Thirties, the Vigorous Forties and the Flourishing Fifties. Today, we reap what they sowed.

How come they did not despair in that darkest hour? I guess four crucial new insights brought light to the tunnel. The climate problem had been known since the late 1970s, the technical solutions were familiar since the late 1990s, but it was only in the 2020s that *behavioural* insights opened up new vistas.

The first one was: *Citizens are not as crazy as they seem*. The noise on social media had led many to believe that the majority of Europeans were utterly unwilling to do anything at all against climate change. Tackling it, therefore, often felt like political suicide. However, brilliant research in the early 2020s showed that politicians across Western democracies systematically underestimated citizens, even their own voters. An international team of scholars led by Stefaan Walgrave concluded that politicians, I quote, “make large errors and even regularly misperceive what a majority of the voters wants. They misperceive not only the preferences of the general public but also the preferences of their own partisan electorate. Politicians are not the experts of public opinion we expect them to be.”¹ Unquote. It sounded harsh, but it was liberating. People were almost human.

¹ S. Walgrave et al. 2023: Inaccurate politicians: Elected representatives' estimations of public opinion in four countries. *The Journal of Politics*, 85, 1. <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/722042?journalCode=jop>

Other scholars like MacKenzie and Caluwaerts made an even more surprising discovery. When everyday citizens were given a chance to deliberate climate policy with each other, they became quite willing to do extra efforts, such as paying substantially higher taxes on petrol, even if the positive effects would only occur after two generations.² This, too, was liberating. Citizens and climate did not have to be at loggerheads with each other. If people had a seat at the table, they increasingly endorsed tough measures.

A second key insight soon followed: *in order to decarbonise, we need to democratise*. As long as climate measures were imposed from above, civil unrest was to be expected. Yet the moment you left that vertical dynamic behind in favour of a more horizontal exchange between politicians and citizens, a whole new conversation started. That insight grew out of the so-called deliberative wave. In the early 2020s, the OECD had documented over 730 examples of Citizens' Assemblies.³ These representative mini-publics brought together random samples of, say, 100 everyday citizens for a couple of weekends to learn about a given topic, listen to each other and formulate policy recommendations. Ireland had used this procedure to change its constitution on abortion and same-sex marriage and many other member states had experimented with it. In the 2020s, democracy in Europe was not only about votes, but voices too. Thirty years ago, my colleague Yves Dejaeghere was also in the room, the director of the Federation for Innovation in Democracy Europe.⁴ He had been helping many national governments in Europe to set up these mini-publics.

² M.K. MacKenzie & D. Caluwaerts 2021: Paying for the future: deliberation and support for climate action policies. *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning*, 23, 3. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1523908X.2021.1883424>

³ M. Mejia 2023: Trends in deliberative democracy: OECD database update. *Participo*. <https://medium.com/participo/2023-trends-in-deliberative-democracy-oecd-database-update-c8802935f116>

⁴ <https://www.fide.eu/>

Not surprisingly, the most popular topic for Citizens' Assemblies those days was the environment.⁵ Dozens of European countries and cities drafted people by lot to come and talk about the green agenda. KNOCA, the excellent Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies, kept track of them.⁶ Soon it turned out that everyday citizens across Europe went much further than the official National Energy and Climate Plans of their respective countries, as professor Jonas Lage found out. They systematically called for *sufficiency* and *regulation*, issues their governments were often very reluctant to propose.⁷ Yet when voters became citizens, they showed what was feasible.

A third insight from the early 2020s built on the previous two: trusting citizens was great, and inviting them to one-off Citizens' Assemblies was good, but that was not enough. Here is what we learnt: *Citizens' Assemblies are much more productive if they are made permanent*. Institutionalised citizens' assemblies made for "more hard decisions", as the OECD called it, as well as "enhancing public trust."⁸ In 2022, the Brussels Region became the first city in the world to install a *permanent* citizens' assembly for the climate, soon to be followed by Milan. Minister Maron, who hosted that infamous meeting 30 years ago, famously reasoned: "The solutions to climate change are in everyone's hands. It's not just up to activists or engineers. We need to do it collectively, without excluding anyone. To put it bluntly, we'll get there together or we won't get there at all."⁹

⁵ M. Mejia 2023: Trends in deliberative democracy: OECD database update. *Participo*. <https://medium.com/participo/2023-trends-in-deliberative-democracy-oecd-database-update-c8802935f116>

⁶ <https://knoqa.eu/>

⁷ J. Lage et al. 2023: Citizens call for sufficiency and regulation — A comparison of European citizen assemblies and National Energy and Climate Plans. *Energy Research & Social Science*, 104. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2214629623003146>

⁸ OECD 2021: *Eight Ways to Institutionalise Deliberative Democracy*. <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/4fcf1da5-en.pdf?expires=1705233712&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=0E49347DD4024C96B2DB583624DDDACF>

⁹ Le Soir, 17 November 2022. <https://www.lesoir.be/477406/article/2022-11-17/cest-collectivement-quon-doit-y-arriver-sans-reserver-la-parole-certains-contre>
David Van Reybrouck, Not for circulation

Insight number 4 was still simmering those days. It whispered: *Do not just summon citizens to talk, but also to act.* We were discovering the fascinating ideas of ‘carbon wallets’ and ‘flight credits’ at the time. What would happen, we wondered, if citizens could play a more active role, beyond lifestyle choices? What if every European were given the same amount of ‘flight credits’ per year? They would have to spend them when booking their annual holiday, but no-flyers could also sell them to frequent flyers, thus making some money. Given the unmistakable link between wealth and emissions, would such a scheme not benefit the poor and sanction the rich? Or what would happen if all adult Europeans received a weekly amount of carbon credits, to be spent when purchasing fossil products or to be sold when you didn’t need them? Of course, the amount would diminish every year, so that we reached net zero in time.¹⁰ It was only in the 2020s that twenty years of pioneering research on personal carbon allowances started to inspire political debates.¹¹ Today, it has become completely normal that people can actively monitor their emissions, but back then it was a total breakthrough that citizens were not condemned to be passive bystanders. When given appropriate policy instruments, people became incredible catalysts of climate action, rather than obstacles.

Dear Excellencies, when I gave that speech to your predecessors long time ago, I was still shaken by the fieldwork I had undertaken shortly before in the eastern part of Belgium, a few months after the devastating floods of 2021. For my piece *Rain Requiem*, I had talked to relatives of the forty victims. And I couldn’t forget this mother, Fabienne. Her 23-year old son Quentin, a tall guy who had just graduated as a chef and caterer, had been swept away by the river. His body had been found ten days later and fifteen kilometres further downstream. She was sobbing as she spoke. “He was such a good swimmer. So strong. If only I could hold him in my arms one more time.” And she added: “Nature has taken my son, but that doesn't make me love her

¹⁰ D. Fleming & S. Chamberlain 2011: *TEQs. Tradable Energy Quotas: A Policy Framework for Peak Oil and Climate Change*, House of Commons.

S. Alexander & J. Floyd 2020: The political economy of deep decarbonization: Tradable Energy Quotas for energy descent futures. *Energies*, 13, 17 <https://www.mdpi.com/1996-1073/13/17/4304>

¹¹ F. Fuso Nerini et al. 2021: Personal carbon allowances revisited. *Nature Sustainability*, 4. <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41893-021-00756-w>

any less. Nature is so fragile today. We have ill-treated her so badly, we need to protect her. I may be no more than a little ant, a mother who has lost her son, but I can shine as well. I'll do anything to make my son proud of me.”

I am an old man now but I can still hear her words. The 2020s truly were a tipping point. What was grey, could turn pitch-black. Yet, a handful of brave and wise people made sure there was light. It was an honour to speak to them. They did an incredible job. And I am so grateful to them.

Thank you. Thank you so very much.

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