

“Poland could play a more positive role”

Interview with Rebecca Harms, member of the European Parliament, 08 October 2008.

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On 8 October 2008 I met with Rebecca Harms, a member of the European Parliament for the Green Group who is on the Industry, Research, and Energy Committee, the Environment Committee, as well as the Temporary Committee on Climate Change. We met in order to discuss the international climate negotiations and the EU’s energy and climate change package. The following is a transcript of the interview.

Thanks for having me, Rebecca. First question: What should happen at the COP14 in Poznan?

The most important thing in my view is that Europe and the other industrialised regions of this world do not underestimate this meeting for the developing countries and emerging economies. The most important areas that need to be better discussed than was the case in Bali are the financing of climate mitigation and adaptation to climate change in developing and emerging economies, and the financing of technology transfer, behind which of course you have the other issue of intellectual property rights which is an incredibly difficult topic. But in these issues of financing and technology transfer promises have been made by the Europeans and other industrialised states and therefore there needs to be a good basis on these building blocks in order to reach a strong agreement in Copenhagen in 2009.

Has the EU already made any suggestions for financing? Or has it already pushed forward negotiations?

No. We have continually heard that the preparations surrounding Poznan are very tough. I have been continually told that the negotiations following the Bali roadmap are weak and not very ambitious. We also have the feeling that Poland’s initially great enthusiasm

to take on this COP has unfortunately not translated into ambitious preparatory work. In the EU I have noticed that most actors at the moment are not even focusing on Poznan. Instead they are claiming that Poznan is ‘only about the interests of the developing countries’ – read the poor countries – and that ‘we need to prepare ourselves for Copenhagen in 2009’. Simultaneously, if we look at the debates that are being led here in the EU and particularly inside the European Council then one gets mixed feelings because some things are running really well, particularly in the Parliament. Unfortunately, however, many of the Commission’s instruments that are included inside the EU’s energy and climate package are currently threatened to be vetoed inside the EU Council.

So what is happening with the European Emissions Trading System (EU-ETS) and the package right now?

Well, at the moment the main tool that the EU is advancing through the package in order to reach our climate goals is the ETS. We have just voted on it in the Environment Committee and we were able to prevent the free allocation of permits to all the manufacturing industries, which was pushed for by the conservatives and liberals, as opposed to auctioning off these certificates.

Luckily, the Environment Committee was able to prevent such a development. But at the same time this is only the Parliament position now and how our negotiations with the Council and the Commission will go is yet to be seen. I am getting increasingly pessimistic when I see that there are attempts to water down the instruments we have put forth in order to reach the 20% target, when we all know very well that 30% or even 40%, like in France and Germany, are necessitated.

I was in Poland last week and when they talk about the package they say it is unfair and punishes Poland, claiming that it does not take into account the reductions Poland has done during the 1990s and that Poland is such a coal-based economy, etc. How do you view these concerns?

I like Poland a lot. I think it is a great country and I know how important it is to have a unified Europe and so I know what a great and important role Poland plays within this. And in this vein, I would wish that Poland could play a more positive role in the debate about the climate change package. I think that these concerns are rather short-sighted and that the politics are rather short-term. I think that the burden-sharing proposal for the 20% greenhouse gas reduction target is very good indeed. It is fair and it takes into account the economic basis of every member-state so I think Poland should not exaggerate. One thing has to be clear, particularly for Copenhagen, that if Europe wants to truly continue its leadership role and be a leader in the formulation of climate policies then we need to stop with this theatre performance and stop attacking these compromise-based policies and suggestions of the European Commission.

I think Poland has incredible opportunities when it comes to renewable energies. Poland has an

enormous potential when it comes to energy savings and efficiency. And of course it is incredibly difficult to move away from coal. Nobody disputes this. But, this problem is not just a Polish problem. I know that in Poland hopes are very much based on clean coal technologies and that carbon capture and storage (CCS) is a great topic of discussion but one should only really focus on these technologies when they are available and when they function properly. Otherwise we are wasting a lot of time and efforts that could already be put into energy savings and efficiency, which would directly benefit the Polish people by diminishing their electricity, gas, and even petrol costs.

Besides coal, nuclear energy is also a prominent topic in Poland. How do you see this?

Well, one nuclear power plant in particular plays a big role in Poland. But to be quite honest with you, one nuclear power plant in Poland is not going to solve the energy crisis if there even is one. And this power plant will not make any contribution to the 2020 climate change targets because I have severe doubts that this power plant will start producing its first kilowatt per hour after 10 years, taking into consideration the many years of planning and construction that are necessitated. And in this timeframe you can do much more in other sectors. Furthermore, after Chernobyl, Poland has had to face many problems and they acted with great speed to tackle them, handing out iodine in order to limit the spread of Chernobyl's adverse effects.

Nevertheless, people should remain aware that Poland was a country that was particularly hard-hit and that is still suffering to some extent and therefore I would discourage Poland from mistaking climate protection with nuclear energy.

Coming back to the EU level. What climate change targets does the EU have for 2020 and 2050?

The European Union has, at the great climate change summit that took place under the aegis of the German Presidency, taken on a unilateral target of 20% for the whole EU, and the most important areas are then an ambitious expansion of renewables - 20% share of renewables by 2020 - and an increase of energy efficiency also by 20%. Concerning renewable energies we are currently formulating a directive, which is going very well. I think that the instruments envisioned under this directive will be able to achieve our renewables goals. Concerning energy efficiency we are, unfortunately, not doing enough. There is not enough political focus on efficiency and energy savings. And then there is, as we mentioned above, the emissions trading mechanism, which is the Commissions' central instrument in order to limit CO2 emissions. The Commission has proposed the full integration of the energy industry and energy-intensive industries into this ETS, aiming for full auctioning of CO2 certificates in 2020. This, however, is being opposed by many countries. So here again, we see that there are problems with the member-states when it comes to the ETS and effort-sharing – although you can also call it burden sharing because it is a burden as well.

With CO2 and cars, on the other hand, there are quite good developments in the European Parliament. The majority is supporting the EU's proposals but here too we are seeing the big member-states together with the large car industries trying to prevent developments in this sector.

The Industry Committee also tried to prevent these developments, did they not?

Well, the Committees working on CO2 and cars are the Industry and

Environment Committees. It is a classical controversy and we don't know how it will end because we have a procedure entitled enhanced co-operation, which means even though the Environment Committee is taking the lead, the Industry Committee is very influential and their negotiator will also be present in the negotiations with the European Commission.

And what about EU targets for 2050?

In the framework of the G8 and the Bali results there are EU targets for 2050 in the international context and there the number is 50-80%, which I think is in line with the recommendations of the IPCC. This is important, but I have also noticed that the readiness for targets in 2050 is much greater than for short or medium-term targets because of course the latter means you have to act now. And my impression is that there is a great tendency to do a bit less and a bit more slowly. And I am worried that the whole financial meltdown and banking crisis will be used as an excuse to go against ambitious climate protection measures.

How do you see India and China? Should they have targets already?

From a particular point forward they will also need to take on targets. However, we cannot make our actions contingent upon their actions. The North, so to say, the industrialised world, has created this problem to a large extent. Today, we have a CO2 per capita that far surpasses China or India. China and India are large countries, that have very high emissions, which is not surprising, but their per capita emissions are not as high as ours neither is the wealth in these countries and therefore we cannot expect them to contribute to the same extent as we do.

We will only get them on board if we ourselves start changing and putting an end to our waste economy that wastes energy. We need to change this and definitely take on our share of the burden for the poorer countries. This means financing mitigation efforts abroad and particularly adaptation measures because we are the cause behind the floods and the food crisis. So we need to offer a lot more in order for the others to come along. On the other hand, I had the impression in Bali that a large part of those countries are also ready to come along and join us in global climate protection, but we have to take the first steps and not just make speeches.

Interview conducted by Roderick Kefferpütz

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