

What we need is spiritual growth

The Greens had won. Claude Turmes, Luxembourg MEP and deputy leader of the Green Group in the European Parliament, was in upbeat mood, having just got off the train from the plenary session in Strasbourg, where the Greens and their allies had succeeded in rejecting the Commission's proposals to water down carbon reduction targets. He was the speaker on 6 February, tackling the challenge of the environment, in the series of lectures organised by the Luxembourg Jesuit community under the heading 'Three challenges for a crisis-hit Europe'. But underlying his good news was the need to take seriously the current stresses affecting ecosystems. Turmes warned that the planet is coming dangerously close to the tipping point of a global temperature rise of more than 2% above the average, which would release methane trapped in the Siberian permafrost, thus inevitably triggering a number of damaging events. He pointed out that there is always room for negotiation on social policy, but this is not possible with the climate. His talk focused on three recent decisions to illustrate how the Greens and the European Parliament are making a difference, and then pointed to some signposts for the future – some ways in which Luxembourg is already adapting to climate change, and some indications of how society could develop if Green policy prevailed.

Environmentalists had been disappointed by the recent Commission proposal on climate and energy policies, which they regarded as reversing the progress made over the last 25 years by weakening binding targets for carbon emission reductions in each country; 300 amendments had been tabled and debated that week in the European Parliament. More ambitious targets on renewable energies were essential to keep global warming below the tipping point. The Greens had been able to persuade others to join them, and MEPs from several political groups and about a dozen countries had come together to firmly reject the Commission proposal. Parliament was thus sending a clear message to the councils of energy ministers and heads of state which would meet in March and take the final decision.

The second decision concerned plant seeds. In response to the Commission's draft regulation aiming to simplify and replace a plethora of directives on plant health, the Greens were standing up for the right of small companies, farmers and gardeners to harvest, use and sell plant seeds, as they had been doing for millions of years, against the the big plant breeders and producers of more sophisticated and hybrid seeds which wanted to patent seeds. The regulation as currently drafted would not allow any seed to be sold in the EU unless it was included on an official register. This would be bad news for small producers as registration would be expensive, and Luxembourg's Agriculture Ministry feared that the country's three seed-producing firms – including one that supplies all the seed potatoes for Egypt – would go out of business. It would also limit biodiversity while, as Turmes pointed out, now more than ever we need as many different types of plant and seed as possible, as this biodiversity would help farmers and gardeners to adapt as the climate changes. A petition organised by the Greens in Luxembourg had received 6000 signatures in 15 days, which had changed the Luxembourg Government's mind. This and similar developments in which gardeners and ecologists put pressure on governments would probably be enough to secure a majority against the regulation.

The third example was implementation of the Directive on water quality. The Directive is not new; the Greens and other groups in the European Parliament have worked for years on legislation to safeguard water quality. It has demonstrated its effectiveness since the Court of Justice's decision last November to fine Luxembourg for failure to implement it properly, following warnings that waste water treatment was not effective enough in removing nitrates. Turmes took the view that this fine would oblige Luxembourg's new government to take water quality seriously.

We were given an insight into the political process; a small party like the Greens needs to form

alliances with others if its views are to prevail. Support can sometimes come from unexpected quarters; the Greens were isolated in their campaign against the seeds regulation until the Slow Food movement in Italy got involved. This started a lively discussion in Italy and put pressure on Italian conservatives to reject the regulation. There are strong lobby groups on both sides of any debate. Even in Luxembourg, there are firms with links to the oil and gas industries who campaign hard against any action to promote energy efficiency and renewables. Sometimes lobby groups and industries use unfair tactics and parliamentarians are offered inducements to promote their interests. Luckily there are strict rules about the gifts that MEPs are allowed to receive.

One source of anxiety for Turmes is the growing trend in several countries to call for repatriation of some powers or even for dismantling of the EU. This, he considered, would be a grave mistake. EU countries need to work together to achieve clean rivers and acceptable air quality and to win the race against climate change.

Some hopeful developments are already happening. Luxembourg has introduced legislation that new buildings must be energy-efficient, and builders here and elsewhere are building in more energy-efficient ways. This could set an example to China and other fast-growing economies. Renewable forms of energy are already being used, an example being the proliferation of solar hot water and photovoltaic panels, which in the last 20 years have gone from experimental to widely available. The first wind turbine was built in Denmark in the 1970s, in response to difficulties with the oil exporting countries, and now most of Denmark's electricity comes from renewable sources and there are wind farms all over the world, which in some cases have proved very profitable. Turmes thought it was entirely possible for 60% of Europe's electricity to be produced from renewable sources by 2020.

The Forests department in Luxembourg is already thinking about what species of trees to plant when forests need renewing. The traditional oak and beech may no longer be the best answer for south-facing slopes which may in future be too hot for them. Similarly, winegrowers along the Moselle are considering buying new vines from the Burgundy region and producing red wines instead of some of the traditional Luxembourg varieties.

Questions from the floor elicited some pointers to how the Green party would like to see the future. Luxembourg grows less than 1% of the vegetables it consumes; more should be done to encourage regional, organic produce. It should be on the menu in canteens in State-run hospitals, schools, etc. Catering contracts for such institutions have to be put out to public tender throughout Europe, and it is now possible, thanks to a recent Court of Justice ruling, for environmental criteria to be specified in tender documents.

In the past, governments have relied on the car industry to provide employment. Turmes agreed that it is very difficult to persuade the majority to think of the climate first. However, car factories are increasingly using robots rather than people, and trendsetters such as young Californians are turning away from cars as a status symbol in favour of Iphones. Car ownership is likely to decline, particularly in cities because of the lack of parking space, and leasing is becoming more popular. Youth employment would be helped by a Green-inspired EU policy that all young people in Europe should be offered a job or a training place within four months of leaving school.

The way to relaunch the European economy after the financial crisis, he said, is to invest not in car manufacture but in environmental projects such as low-energy buildings, wind farms and urban transport. The EIB could play a key role by increasing budgets for such projects. Another incentive for investing in renewable energies is that buying oil and gas from outside Europe means that every year Europe is transferring 4% of GDP to Russia, Qatar and Dubai. Energy saving measures could stop this. There is plenty of work to be done, and money to be made, in renovating existing

buildings. Personal care services can also provide plenty of employment.

The last question was on growth, and specifically, how can we finance the European social protection model if our economies are not growing? Turmes drew on the study by Canadian economist Peter Victor, concluding that the finance for investment in infrastructure and personal care should come from taxing the rich, as in 1960s pre-Reagan USA when the richest Americans had paid a 70% tax rate. For Turmes, the problem is that politicians who say that taxes must be raised to finance environmental policy tend not to get elected. Rich people are increasingly powerful, and those without private means who want to go into politics, particularly in the US, need to accept sponsorship from powerful industries. He hoped that environment ministers would organise a discussion on environmental policy and how to raise awareness.

In conclusion, Turmes made it clear that on a finite planet, endless growth is impossible, stating: 'The only development that is sustainable is personal and spiritual development'.

The next talk in this series will be on 7 May and the subject is 'Europe and the challenge of a just taxation policy'.