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On the sidelines of a major science conference in Lisbon, **Connie Hedegaard** sat down with **Portal** and described Europe's successful balancing act of encouraging economic growth and reducing carbon emissions

Climate change action

Denmark's Connie Hedegaard served as the European commissioner for climate action during one of the toughest economic crises for decades. Convincing Europe's politicians and finance ministers to continue to invest in green energy alternatives whilst also reducing carbon emissions has been a challenging task when national governments have simply yearned to stabilise their economies and encourage economic growth. Yet Europe has led the fight against global climate change, both within the Union, through budgetary incentives, and on the global stage, where it has led the way in international negotiations. The EU's powerful and collective role has helped secure major transformative climate deals.

In October, Portal travelled to Lisbon to attend the high-level conference 'The Future of Europe is Science'. During the event, Portal sat down with Hedegaard to discuss her achievements during her four years in Brussels, the role of society in helping to tackle climate change, and the importance of continuing international co-operation.

What has been your greatest achievement as European commissioner for climate action?

I think the fact that we got 20% of the whole EU budget focused on climate change is a substantial achievement. Furthermore, 35% of the

increase in the science, research and innovation budget will go towards climate innovation. Instead of parking climate and environment in a corner, we are now mainstreaming it into all the sectorial policies, and this is an important achievement.

We have maintained climate on the agenda, despite all the obvious challenges, throughout this enormous crisis. To also have energy and climate on the European agenda, we are insisting it is not just about the traditional economy, but more about resource and energy efficiency and climate action being integrated into part of how we innovate and remain competitive in the future.

International talks have also been important. It is not hard to agree that they are progressing too slowly. In Durban in 2011, Europe had a very clear strategy, and we managed to speak with one voice and build the right alliances with many developing countries. In the end, we managed to push the big countries into

accepting what they had been resisting, namely that, in the world we live in, we will have to pursue a more low carbon growth strategy. It is not just the responsibility of developed countries; we have to adjust to the realities of the century we live in.

To what extent do we need to involve the citizen more greatly in climate action?

There is no doubt that you need the citizen onboard. In democracies, if the citizens cannot see the long term benefits, then it is not very likely that politicians will take the right decision. You need citizens to understand why it is important and why this decision makes sense economically.

The European Commission is not the best-suited body to reach out to people in each European region; the challenges are so different. National politicians discussing with their local and regional politicians is often much more effective communication.

A large campaign we oversaw, 'A world you like. With a climate you like', attempted to focus on positive solutions and visions in five countries. Following the campaign, which was later commended as the best public campaign in Europe, we saw that we reached out to more than three million Europeans via social media.

We can do more at the European level, and in my position, you can communicate the awareness message. Yet considering specific solutions, for example adaptation to climate change, there is one problem in Finland and there are very different problems in Spain. It is key for the European Commission that there is time for public engagement. In some portfolios you will have to undertake more international outreach. Brussels must, and should, be good at communicating.

How will Horizon 2020 build upon the progress made in FP7?

Horizon 2020 has a very strong focus on the Societal Challenges. Everybody in the European Commission will ask for money, yet we must use the EU budget much more strategically; for example, we have to recognise the joint challenges, e.g. energy systems across boundaries, ICT infrastructure, trans-European

networks and high-speed trains – schemes that benefit citizens and are of added value.

If there is consistency in the way money is spent, we can continue to have clear priorities, identify clear societal challenges and make a big difference. One of the major challenges in Europe is a lack of innovation and the inability to get things to scale fast enough – that is where the EU budget can make a difference.

What are your thoughts on meeting the 20-20-20 targets?

We are 80-90% on target to meet these goals. On renewables, it would seem we are on track, and regarding the CO₂ emissions, we will be exceeding this target. There was concern that Europe was only achieving 13% in energy efficiency, yet that was before the adoption of the Energy Efficiency Directive, which seems to be making a difference. Energy efficiency is one of the areas where EU member states can do even more in years to come.

Following the Russia-Ukraine crisis, if there were ever a time for Europe to address energy efficiency, it would be now. I am confident we will meet all the 20-20-20 targets, including overshooting the CO₂ targets; this is proof that targets help politicians and governments stay focused. I would argue that, had it not been for these targets, we would not have performed as well during the crisis. Europe is living proof of why it matters to agree targets that have not just good intentions but other binding ways for governments to keep their promises, too.

With increasing budgetary restraint, to what extent do you believe that climate action policy will remain high on Brussels' political agenda?

It is true to say that money is scarce everywhere these days, yet 20% of the earmarked budget for climate purposes only is incredibly important. Income support of 30% to the farmers can only be paid out now if they do something for the common good, for the environment and climate. Through the EU's structural and regional funds, a significant proportion of that will only be given out if they are working on efficiency, working on buildings and renewables. It is a much more targeted way of using the

The recent Russian-Ukrainian crisis demonstrates the importance of Europe increasing energy efficiency, says Hedegaard



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budget from a climate perspective. There is substantially more money for climate than there has ever been before in an EU budget. We are also changing thinking and making it so that a climate component in an initial phase of the research project makes the whole thing more likely to receive funding.

Whilst economic growth is returning to Europe, there are different rates from country to country. The big concern is where the jobs will come from. Efficiency, renewables, waste handling, recycling, investing in the circular economy – these are the sectors which have the potential to contribute to job creation. This is known as the Green Agenda, and it is one of the sets where we have the potential of creating more jobs.

We are sending around €400bn out of Europe every year to pay for our imported fossil fuels, including €140bn to Russia. That is a lot of money every day into someone else's pocket. Would it not be a positive long term strategy to reduce this cost and better address efficiency? Renewables are a possible source of job potential. If we review where we can create jobs relatively fast in Europe, retrofitting buildings or modernising pipelines or infrastructures for energy or transport are possible; yet these kinds of jobs must not disappear to China.

What we have tried to do, and to some extent achieved, is to mainstream climate with economics, the reforms and the job creation. Climate is not something that should be part of the crisis – it should be part of the tools with which we can exit the crisis; we are a very energy dependent continent.

What role can the EU now play in encouraging further international collaborative action in regards to climate change?

Europe has proven that we can decouple growth and emissions. The economy has grown by 45% since 1990, while in the same period we have reduced CO₂ emissions by 80-90%. It is possible to do both. Europe

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still needs to set a good example, showing innovative ways in finding solutions; we should not underestimate our role. You cannot have a climate change deal without the United States or China. We need a strong example set by Europe, and it matters for everybody that Europe pressures or pushes countries publicly. The Americans and the Obama administration were pushed, and the president was forced to make climate one of his key priorities. Europe is doing its footwork, and through this we will be able to achieve the 2030 targets; this is the soft power that Europe has and really makes an impact on the rest of the world.

If we can get the Americans onboard, we will ultimately affect how China plays its part. It matters that there is someone in the world among the developed countries setting an example; Europe has a very big responsibility. Yet we cannot move forward if our competitors are not taking action; we have a strong interest in making them move.

Turning our focus back to Brussels, what are your thoughts on the setup of the new European Commission?

Before becoming a European commissioner, I was the climate and energy minister in Denmark. We were the first country in the world to put these two portfolios together, reflecting the fact that you cannot have climate policy without energy policy. It is natural to have them together, something I have been arguing very strongly.

In the new Commission, it depends on how the workload and outreach is shared. There will be a vice-president for energy union and a commissioner for climate action and energy. It is good that they have two people for this, because there is a lot of international work in both the climate and energy fields.

HORIZON 2020

Connie Hedegaard
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