

Keynote address by Diana Wallis MEP, Vice-President of the European Parliament, at the Nordic Council of Ministers' conference on Common Concern for the Arctic.

Ilulissat, Greenland, 9 September 2008.

I must start with an apology on behalf of the President of our Parliament, the European Parliament, Hans-Gert Pöttering. He very much wished to attend this event.

I shall be briefing him fully on my return, and the Parliament will be debating a question to the European Commission on Arctic issues in the coming weeks

I also wish to say a thank you to our hosts; this is my third visit to Illulissat. I say that because my first visit here was to attend the precursor to this conference that was hosted by the Danish presidency of the EU in 2002. That conference rightly insisted on the Arctic window in the EU's Northern dimension policy, and since then Arctic issues have become far more current and topical. In between, I returned with a study group of European parliamentarians helping to add to the awareness in our Parliament.

Of course, awareness of the challenges and threats of climate change begin to face us all now. In my own garden before coming here yesterday I could smell the damp of autumn, three or four days of torrential rain, including in some places a month's rainfall falling within a few hours. Homes that were flooded last year were flooded again. Actually, I should not be able to sense autumn in my garden yet; it should still be our summer. **You** might not have noticed the differences in my garden, just as when we see the ice fjord tonight or the glacier on Thursday we might be forgiven for thinking as visitors, well there still seems to be a vast amount of ice here – what is the problem? In this respect it is crucial that we listen to local inhabitants and residents, especially in the Arctic, and we have to listen to science.

The physical changes in the Arctic have been screaming at the world like that well known metaphor of the canary down the mine for the last decade or more, screaming for urgent attention to face both the threats and challenges, and, yes, the opportunities raised by climate change here in the north. I believe that the European Parliament has been and will continue to respond in three ways: firstly by seeking closer co-operation in this region through its commitment to the new EU Northern Dimension Partnership, then as a co-legislator in the EU where we are taking a lead with the ambitious legislative package to combat climate change, and lastly in seeking from the Commission a more holistic approach to EU Arctic policy.

The European Parliament was active in the debate leading up to the formulation of the new Northern Dimension Partnership. I think we secured two if not three plenary debates on the subject. Of course, after the 2004 enlargement of the EU there was always the possibility that focus would shift to the Baltic, almost an internal EU sea; and to some degree it has. Yet we have still kept the Arctic in there ostensibly as an equal partner. However, attention to the Baltic in itself raises eyes northward and involves tackling some of the same horizontal issues, particularly those relating to the marine environment.

In addition, as you would expect as a Parliament of elected representatives, and as a trans-national Parliament at that, the European Parliament has always been keen to see the full input of elected representatives from across the Northern Dimension area into the policy; it should not just be ministerial or inter-governmental, and that has indeed been a fear with the new partnership. Our Parliament had always called for a so-called Northern Dimension Forum. A loose arrangement - we certainly did not want to create another institution in the north – rather to facilitate the meeting of representatives from the area. We hosted the first such meeting in Brussels in the spring of last year, and we will host a second next spring. I believe I can say

that the first was a success and I have no doubt that it helped inform Commission and government thinking.

I also know that, as our President has made intercultural dialogue a theme of his presidency, he would wish me to underline our commitment to the peoples of the Arctic: to listen and learn from them. This has indeed always been a concern expressed in our resolutions and manifested by our commitment to the establishment of the Forum I just mentioned.

However, of course there is nothing like problems or issues closer to home to focus the attention of parliamentarians. I have already mentioned climate change. By setting binding targets (20%) for cutting CO₂ emissions we can send a signal to European industry to invest in cleaner and more energy efficient ways of production. With current oil prices this makes a lot of sense for both industry and consumers! The changes to climate affect us all, our economy, our health, the prospects of future generations and may seem insuperable, but within the EU small steps when multiplied by 27 Member States can make a big difference and can also, importantly, help force the pace of change internationally. The EU has an important leadership role and the Parliament is very much a part of that.

Energy issues are equally worrying us all now. Hardly a day goes by without TV news stories about price hikes and concerns. It is accepted that the EU needs a proper energy policy and, of course, with that comes a shared interest in what happens to the potentially rich resources being revealed in the Arctic. Yet, in a shared concern we *all* have a duty to act responsibly, to act with due regard for sustainability. Again you will find a sustainable approach to the environment at the core of most of what the European Parliament says.

The changes in the Arctic relate not only to resources of course, but maybe also to new sea routes, new trade ways. As a major trading bloc the EU cannot ignore this. The practical effects of

the changing seascape are already with us. Already we have a huge increase in seaborne tourism in the Arctic seas. It worries me when you think of all the passengers on those great cruisers - and what facilities does the Greenland coastguard have by way of search and rescue? Not a lot, I think. With the best will in the world a new Titanic is imaginable. I have little doubt that many of those tourists are my electors; that is European citizens, so we have a very real interest.

Indeed, it is a truism to say that the world has an interest in the Arctic, yet what is true is that to date perhaps the EU has underplayed its involvement. We count among our Member States three Arctic nations, then among our closely related neighbours participating in the Internal Market through the European Economic Area another two Arctic nations – more than half the numeric membership of the Arctic Council. The Parliament has always participated actively in the Standing Committee of Arctic Parliamentarians which shadows the Council. Indeed, this summer I led the largest ever delegation of EP parliamentarians to the conference in Fairbanks, Alaska. The Parliament will host the next biannual conference in summer 2010 – a first. We will bring the Arctic to Brussels. We now want to see the Commission take a role in the Arctic Council commensurate with its standing and those of the Member States. *It is clear from the Commissioner's statement that the EU has much to contribute on so many of the horizontal issues under consideration.* That was also made abundantly clear to me when, earlier this year, I had the occasion to host a seminar on Arctic governance in the European Parliament: the attendance and interest were beyond our expectations. Great faith is placed in the Law of the Seas Convention and the Arctic Council.

However, the Arctic Council structures also have to show themselves up to the tasks ahead. As the Arctic becomes the focus of international attention and national interests, there has to be a clear political framework and everyone has to keep together. One of the words you often hear in the European

Parliament is *solidarity*: it is central to the European ideal. Standing by one another, but also including everyone, the Parliament has a problem with exclusion or exclusivity. The Arctic nations and peoples and those close friends of the Arctic have to find a coherent mechanism to work together to confront the challenges of the future. In the coming months we shall be debating the Commission Communication in our Parliament, and I hope we will be able bring the experience and optimism of a unique trans-national Parliament to the Arctic debate. I also look forward to sharing the fruits and outcomes of this conference with my colleagues.