

Jean Monnet Lecture
Former EU Commissioner for Climate Action Connie Hedegaard
25 February 2016

**“The European Union and the Paris Climate Summit:
Strengths and Weaknesses of the European Approach to Climate Change”**

“If not Europe, who else?”

Within the framework of the Jean Monnet Lecture series, the Centre for European Research had the pleasure of welcoming former EU Commissioner Connie Hedegaard as the first guest lecturer of this year’s series. On Thursday, 25 February 2016, the former Commissioner for Climate Action delivered a captivating and highly informative speech on the European Union’s role in the adoption of the 2015 Paris Agreement on Climate Change and discussed the strengths and weaknesses of the “European approach” to Climate Change.

Setting the stage for her speech, Hedegaard introduced the audience to the subject of the evening by affirming that climate change was “already here” and stated that the outcome of the most recent climate conference reflected the vitality of the matter. While the first-ever universal climate deal marks a milestone in the efforts to counteract global warming and its repercussions, the former Commissioner emphasised that the deal should not be regarded as the solution but rather the initial step taken towards developing a more sustainable growth model for the world. Most importantly, she pointed out that this agreement demonstrates a break-away from the traditional “North-South Paradigm” – which can be regarded as one of the main weaknesses of the previous climate agreements – towards a new paradigm of collective responsibility by which developed, emerging and developing countries subscribe to the trajectory of sustainable development.

With regard to these important developments, Hedegaard argued that the EU played a decisive role in the adoption of this agreement, not only in the run-up to the conference but also by demonstrating that it was possible to reduce emissions and still achieve economic growth. According to the former Commissioner, the results of the 2009 Copenhagen Climate Change Conference had proven that there was not enough willingness to reach a global agreement at that time and this reinforced the need for Europe to speak as a united voice at the subsequent 2011 COP in Durban. Learning from the shortcomings of Copenhagen, the preparations for Paris 2015 were strongly focused on forming a coherent strategy for climate

action in the European Union and, as Hedegaard explained, this endeavour would prove to be a great success. Another aspect that has significantly shaped the EU's bargaining position is reflected in the fact that it has made important progress towards creating a market for renewable energy which would allow for high investment costs to eventually level out. Referring to Germany's successful investment in solar and wind energy, the expert further called attention to the fact this pioneering work has benefitted the EU's position in forging strong alliances with important countries in the Global South whose support further cemented the EU's bargaining position during the Paris conference.

Unsurprisingly, the informative speech had raised many questions among the audience and consequently stimulated a lively debate between the speaker and the attendees. While Hedegaard devoted ample time to outlining the strengths of this European approach to climate change, the audience noted that she had not considered the weaknesses of the same approach on an equal footing. The former Commissioner did not shy away from addressing the inquirers' concerns and showed herself open to addressing a variety of critical questions broaching the issue of whether the Commission will be able to ensure that member states meet the 20/20/20 targets and discussing why more emphasis is put on the economic aspects of climate change compared to the security aspects.

As for the weaknesses of the "European approach", she pointed out that internal discrepancies within the European Union were one of the major challenges that needed to be addressed in order to determine a common course of action regarding climate change. Amidst the economic and political tribulations of the past years, maintaining climate action as a priority on the EU's agenda took much effort. Reaching common grounds on how to address the challenges of global warming was not a simple task and amidst the plethora of issues that each state wants to pay particular attention to, there had to be an advantage for each member state in order for all 28 to come to an agreement. Europe had to focus on getting its own policies in place in order to convince the international community that its approach was valid. For Hedegaard, it is crucial for the EU to further strengthen its position in international negotiations and this can only be achieved by reducing bureaucratic hurdles to the benefit of faster implementation of important policies. Ultimately, this will enable Europe to set a good example for how sustainable growth can be furthered.

Although 195 countries have signed the Paris Agreement, the most important – and most difficult – is yet to come and laying out concrete plans regarding climate change policies is the next crucial step. While Hedegaard is hopeful of the initiatives taken by the US and China in the most recent G2, she reaffirmed that much remains to be done. For the EU, this means that the EU Emissions Trading System (EUTS) will have to be reformed and that the Commission will have to decide on how to allocate responsibilities between member states. Although there is global interdependency, the global institutions' capacity to enforce legally binding agreements remains weak and nation-states will have to demonstrate the willingness to actually put words into practice. Paris has provided the framework for making global governance stronger but the only way to force key actors in the public and private sector to act – as the former commissioner put it – is by “naming and shaming”.

“Someone needs to be a frontrunner for advancing change and Europe plays this role when it comes to climate change. *If not Europe, who else?*”. With these final words, Connie Hedegaard notes that civil society action remains a driving force to bring about true commitment and European citizens must become active partners in this ambitious pursuit by sending signals to the market through changed consumption behaviour.