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Saving our planet... Doing nothing is not an option

Speech by Michael O'Flaherty
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General policy debate on "Europe, the fastest-warming continent:
Accelerating climate action with young people"
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President, Rapporteur, Honourable delegates to the Assembly, fellow panellists, Members of the Council of Europe Advisory Council on Youth,

It took a long time for our European general societies to wake up to the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution.

And that was despite warning after warning from across the world, of disappearing Pacific islands states, of calamitous rainfall, of ruinous desertification and the related displacement.

It seems as if it is only now that our European societies have woken up to the high danger following that dreadful summer of record temperatures and wildfires and a continent deeply underprepared. And here I have to observe that we had no shortage of European signs.

The degradation of our environment has been visible to all. For instance, in my own hometown in Ireland, the extent of flooding increased dramatically over the past decade. And, of course, we have benefited from sustained civil society activism, brave, smart and passionate.

This morning I pay tribute to and I thank everyone who has tried to wake us. In particular, I thank senior activists, such as the group of senior women activists (KlimaSeniorinnen) in Switzerland and, everywhere, I thank young people.

We still desperately need the engagement of civil society, but the burden of duty falls elsewhere.

Above all, we are at the moment to wake up our politics and to put the crisis at the heart of our parliaments and governments. We need leadership that is scientifically informed and is no longer interested in trade-offs and short-termism. In this regard, I appreciate the role being played by this assembly.

I acknowledge how far ahead you are of many national parliaments and how its deliberations will greatly enrich global, regional and country-level efforts.

To assist the Assembly and all of us to rise to the moment, allow me to suggest five actions for our political leaders.

First, listen. In the first place, listen to the planet in its pain. But also listen to the scientists and activists. Listen to those who will inherit the damage that we have done. Young people have every reason to be furious and they must be heard.

Second, protect. It is essential that those who protest, especially young people, are adequately protected by our states. The right of peaceful protest should be respected. And here I am very worried about the situation in a number of places.

Third, obey. Our governments have the duty to obey law, including international human rights law. This includes the environmental-related jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights and the guidance offered by the International Court of Justice regarding the duty to ensure a clean and healthy environment.

What's more, in addressing legal obligations, it is necessary that our governments make sure to implement both mitigation of harm and adaptation of society.

Fourth, avoid one-size-fits-all approaches. Climate change does not hit all equally. It strikes far harder for those already overlooked at the edges of our societies. I think of Roma pushed to live on filthy landfill sites. Of older people institutionalised in shoddy buildings totally unsuited to today's climate.

Fifth, fill the global legal gap. In other words, it is high time to draft and promote a binding treaty for Europe on the right to a clean and healthy environment. We need a sturdy treaty whereby our states can be held to account.

A roadmap to make it sturdy is, of course, those sources I mentioned a moment ago, the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights and the opinion of the International Court of Justice. Another element of the map is that deep experience of this organisation in crafting treaties and giving them robust oversight systems.

President, Dear friends,

in conclusion, I have to acknowledge that I am no climate scientist. I am not in a position to interrogate the claim of some that we are already past the tipping point, that environmental catastrophe is inevitable. But I am clear that such foreboding must not deter us.

Doing nothing is not an option.

Thank you.