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COP 21 and possible solutions: Stakes and Prospects

Interview with Nicolas Hulot,
Special Envoy of the Republic of France for the protection of the planet

You have been appointed "Special Envoy of the Republic of France for the protection of the planet" What does this task encompass?

As part of my task I have undertaken to raise awareness amongst political leaders, in all areas for there to be mobilisation that will transcend all political differences. The environment is a stake that affects us all, all continents, all cultures, nations and citizens. I have also engaged religious and spiritual authorities because I believe that apart from bringing together all technological, legal and institutional instruments, this is about understanding how we have arrived at this deep anthropological crisis in which we now find ourselves. We need to organise the means and the ends in the right order and decide what the priorities are, what takes matters forward. This might seem off-topic given the urgency of the situation but I believe that this is vital and that it is with this in mind for example that I have organised a summit to raise awareness on this issue in Paris.

If we continue to think that the environment is optional, that the climate crisis is a facultative issue or if it is not facultative, that it is not a question that conditions all issues surrounding the solidarity which we all hold dear, then we shall not be able to rise to the occasion. It is important to say that we are no longer just "concerned about the environment" which would lead us to believe that it does not affect us directly. I believe that via environmental issues we have reached the cornerstone of human dignity and social justice.

What is the difference between the Conference in Paris in December next and that of Copenhagen 2009? What can we hope for in Paris that we missed in Copenhagen?

1. The Paris Conference or COP21 will take place from 30th November to 11th December

The Paris Conference [1] inspires a great deal of hope and fear. We do not want a repeat of Copenhagen 2009. At least one thing has changed since 2009. At the time we were convinced that it would be a simple formality, that humanity would spontaneously interrupt a process that it started itself and which now threatens us. In fact things are much more complicated as soon as you have to combine two time scales, the short and the long term, as soon as you have 196 countries which are all decided and determined but which each express arguments that have been taken in their own corner, which are totally logical in explaining how it is not really their responsibility, that historically their contribution to this phenomenon is greater than their neighbour, that their present situation obliges them to postpone their efforts to counter climate change for just a little bit longer. When I hear what the 196 countries have to say I come out these discussions in the belief that they are right, but that collectively we are moving towards political suicide, that soon, if we continue to see this issue via the prism of our national interests – whilst we should see them via the prism of a universal state of mind - understanding that we shall all be winners or all losers, one day we shall all have to face the consequences. But when that time comes it will be too late. Our window of opportunity will have been radically reduced.

There is one detail that has changed in comparison with Copenhagen – we are not as powerless in terms of drafting a future energy model - because history has shown that when constraint cannot be avoided, the impossible is sometimes possible. Until now climate constraints have not really been acknowledged. Now that no one contests it – and this is what is unique to human genius – constraint is no longer the enemy of creativity but it has become the condition for it. I would like to share one of my convictions with you: as I have travelled around small and medium sized

countries I see some extraordinary things developing in the area of energy efficiency, the circular economy and renewable energies. I see the speed with which these things are developing. I am convinced that the international community can respond to the planet's energy requirements – mainly if not exclusively thanks to a combination of all renewable energies and energy efficiency.

What in your opinion are the main challenges that we face?

The climate is a challenge of justice but conversely the consequences of the climate issue – if in the future we lose sight of this – are probably final injustice in a world that could do without it. What frightens me the most are the effects on international relations. I am not simply concerned but I do also have hope – I mention this in the event that the Paris Conference turns into a kind of resignation or reduced ambition. Indeed in the 21st century in which differences are not necessarily those we might have foreseen a century ago, in which gulfs of misunderstanding, tension - to put it moderately – are greater and deeper than we might have imagined; the climate crisis which encompasses other crises (those of natural resources, desertification, deforestation, access to vital resources, notably water) is the final injustice because it mainly affects – and it is good to be aware of this – men, women and children who suffer the consequences of a mode of development from which they have not always drawn benefit. I insist on this point because we do not need this additional injustice and inequality and, above all, this is why we must not fail in Paris. There are no alternatives.

Do you think we have the means to rise to the challenges in the negotiations in Paris? More generally do you think that we can rise to all of challenges set by the climate?

Paris will reveal whether we must deplore that man is the master of his own fate or whether, on the contrary, we can be glad of it. I am glad because as long as we are in control this means that all paths are open to us. But we shall not have control for much longer – a time

will come when our science, our technology, human genius will rapidly be overtaken by adverse phenomena and this is why the last few years, which should have been useful, were ultimately futile. Of course they have enabled awareness to develop and this is probably the thing to acknowledge in terms of Paris: there is a blockage that has disappeared – and we now barely pay any attention to it – that of scepticism. No one contests the responsibility of human activity in the acceleration of the greenhouse gas phenomenon and therefore of the deregulation of the climate. This is a good thing.

There was a second impediment – which to date made us “strange creatures” according to Bossuet which “*inflict the effects but which continue to adore the causes*”. There was a lack of solutions to a problem of which we were aware and which left us a slightly defenceless, because what had been the solution for 150 years for a part of humanity has now suddenly become a problem. I am thinking here of the massive use of fossil energy especially. In the most recent GIEC report experts tell us, no more, no less, that we have to give up using 70% of the fossil energy reserves that are easily accessible beneath our feet if we want the slightest chance of remaining below the 2° limit. And this is the heart of it. This in general is where my counterparts switch off, simply because it means a deep, and possibly a cultural challenge – because it involves asking people to relinquish spontaneously and voluntarily a precious resource – black gold. Over the decades we have not been educated to give up voluntarily and spontaneously the use of such important deposits. And yet we shall have no other option – in any event in the present state of our technologies, competence and economies. This is the equation before us in Paris. It is also a paradox of our time, not simply in Europe: whilst we should be opening – to technological innovations, systems – and be a little daring – we are in fact extremely conservative. It is the problem in times of crisis: during these periods we are very timorous.

You say that the difference between Paris and Copenhagen lies in the possibility of finding solutions. What are they?

Because of the climate we shall be forced to boost the development of renewable energies, as some are

already doing. We have to look at how fast China is developing its renewable energy production capacities: in 2012 they had already risen beyond their 2020 goals. I visited a certain number of research centres and I saw that within a 10 year time span the cost of renewable energies and notably the cost of solar energy has already been divided by two, whilst energy efficiency between the energy captured and that recovered has continued to rise (this is not as evident with wind power, however the same trend has also been seen with this energy). In many countries – and not just in far off places – in Italy for example, renewable energies and notably solar energies, are achieving what we call “grid parity” [2]. Let us imagine the situation in 20 years’ time. Imagine that each country producing its own energy within its borders using virtually free energy sources, since the wind, the sun, the thermal gradient of the oceans are freely accessible. Obviously the turbines and the machines to capture this energy have to be paid for, but try to gauge the geopolitical consequences of the development of an energy model like this if every country can be self-sufficient. If we simply look at the last decades at the origins of all of the open or hidden conflicts, there have been issues linked to fossil energy supplies, the first of these being oil. If, due to climate change, we are forced to step up this change we shall re-establish equity in the world. Since, as soon as a country can produce its own cheap energy, the power struggles we know today will cease, the kind of power struggles that sometimes force us to ignore a certain number of values when our energy interests are threatened. I also think that we might address the climate issue as an opportunity, but probably – and this is one of the solutions – to think differently about development which will be based more on cooperation rather than competition, an economy that shares rather than concentrates, with the possibility of providing access to clean technologies to countries which do not have the means.

What are the pre-conditions for success in Paris?

There are a certain number of issues to address before the Conference. If we follow the pace of diplomacy, traditional negotiations at the Conference – quite sincerely I cannot see – and this is because France is

the host country – how we shall be in a better position than in Copenhagen to appease tension and change the positions of the various parties.

Firstly we have to re-establish trust with the countries in the south and the most vulnerable. Every year nearly 20 million people are forced to move because of the effects of climate change. According to UN forecasts if we allow climatic phenomenon to continue their development there will be hundreds of millions of climate refugees. I am not saying this to frighten anyone but for us to be aware, to remind us that according to the UN’s Convention on Desertification, desertification in Africa, which is being speeded up by climate change, will have brought 60 million people to Europe’s doorstep during the period 2000-2020. Prior to the Paris Conference we must re-establish trust with the most vulnerable countries, in terms of our determination and our sincerity and I might add a third dimension – our ability to honour our promises of aid, support and financing. The pre-conditions for the success of the Paris Conference are financial instruments. If we do not give up our financial orthodoxy – but this applies in other areas too – we have no chance of re-establishing trust because it is not with the existing budgets of the so-called “rich” countries that we shall keep our promises, notably that of amending the green fund or adaptation aid to a total of 100 billion \$ by 2020. Financing is a vital issue that we sometimes try to put to one side but we shall not find innovative sources of money in the existing budgets. The assessment, promotion and adoption a certain number of innovative mechanisms are vital to win confidence back again.

The second thing is that the credibility of the Paris Agreement will be achieved with the introduction of the means to achieve national goals. Obviously the agreement will be credible if the sum of national commitments (INDC) places us on a 2° trajectory but we have to define the way we are to achieve these goals. The second pre-condition is that some States take concrete measures and notably I am thinking of the States meeting at the G20 summit, which alone represent 70% of the greenhouse gas emissions and towards which other States legitimately turn, expecting them to take a certain number of initiatives, whatever the outcome of the

2. The idea whereby renewable electric energies can do without subsidies when their price drops below that of the electricity retail market.

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Paris Conference. A price has to be set for carbon otherwise we shall be deceiving ourselves in terms of our determination to move on to a post-carbon economy. This is central and must be the focus of our attention.

What about the European Union's role? What are you expecting of Brussels?

The European Union was amongst the first to fix its contribution – no pun intended – in a European “climate” that was possibly more difficult than it was when the “Energy-Climate Package” was decided upon in 2001. This contribution provides Europe with credibility – not in terms of giving lessons to anyone – but for simply trying to mobilise, convince and unify. Obviously the EU has a network; it is extremely complementary in terms of its influence including that of France. We need to use the EU's capability, its diplomatic network and all of the opportunities it is given to appease positions and to push arguments through – notably those in support of a solutions agenda. It is the EU's role to show that we are not in stalemate, that there is an energy model, with tools and instruments that we must adopt or adapt and that we can enter a post-carbon society, but to do this there are a certain number of conditions to fulfil. The EU must therefore enable the unification of our voice on these conditions, these pre-requisites, these instruments, but it also has an important role to play in terms of mobilising civil society. This is a real problem – I am not sure that European civil society is being spontaneously mobilised right now nor that it has understood that COP21 is a vital, decisive moment. Our fellow citizens sometimes have much more tangible, real concerns and this is the problem in Europe: we are speaking of a threat that is sometimes invisible, that seems far away in time and space, whilst it is already at work and that we have a perfect model of what the future will be like if we allow these phenomena to run out of control. We need Europe to reassert an ambition, a vision, that it is working on carbon price instruments, that it is working on innovative financing schemes and that it is helping us to assess these and promote them.

In view of the tense international situation at present, notably with the crisis in Ukraine, how can we guarantee strong commitment by Russia?

I have been to Russia and met Vladimir Putin's special advisor on climate change. We had an extremely firm discussion. Eight days later the first Russian contribution was sent, whilst the calendar provided a little more flexibility since it is possible to declare national contributions (INDC) until October. It is extremely important for Russia to be in the process with its own commitment. I also noticed that the Russians interpret things completely differently now than a few years ago. Indeed they are suffering the disruption of the climate themselves: peat fires on Moscow's doorstep, unusual periods of drought which have greatly affected agricultural production. They are encountering epiphenomena that have surprised them in Siberia with the appearance of giant craters and methane gas fumes probably in the permafrost, because above zero temperatures have caused the melting of a certain amount of decomposing matter. The most intelligent thing that I heard in Russia was the following: *“even if we were not suffering the direct effects of climate change, could we think for one moment that we were the only place in the world without problems whilst everywhere else climate change is disrupting everyone?”* It is a view that I was happy to hear in Russia. There has been a change in mindset. Obstacles will not necessarily come from them: they even suggested as part of a meeting of the BRIC group to show their good will and encourage the other countries to follow them. We have therefore achieved a diplomatic success on the part of our Russian counterparts rather than the contrary.

The link between systems governing the climate and the oceans no longer needs to be proved whether this is in the scientific community or amongst decision makers as shown by the call from Paris regarding the high seas in January. What might we really expect in terms of

goals for the marine environment at the Paris Conference?

This is a real problem. The issue of the oceans, just like the Ramsar Convention on wetlands or that of the Convention on Desertification is closely linked to that of the climate. In UN procedures, as they stand today, things are not linked. During the Durban Conference (which prepared the one in Paris) this link was not established in an institutional or legal manner. But this does not mean that in Paris and before Paris, we cannot make the link. I think it is extremely important to bring all of these issues together because although I do not know as much about this particular system I do know a great deal about desertification, deforestation and wetlands. I would just like to give an example to show just how wrong we are in adopting vertical approaches. Regarding desertification, by 2050 there will be 9.5 billion people living on earth. To feed this population we shall require 500 million additional

hectares of farmland. At present 4 billion hectares of land, notably farming land, have been destroyed. The cost to rehabilitate this land per hectare, to be able to use it, to produce food on it and also to store tonnes of CO2 costs between 20 and 30\$ per hectare. This is exactly the climate contribution price made in France which is the lowest carbon tax ceiling. It is therefore vital to encourage businesses and industries via the price of carbon, to reduce their emissions, and at the same time to believe that the marine and forest ecosystems, wetlands and farmland can help a great deal to remain on the 2° trajectory.

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