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Address given
to the Summit of Consciences for the Climate
at the invitation of President François Hollande

by
Michael D. Higgins, President of Ireland

‘The Power of Ideas for Climate – Making a New Beginning’

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I wish to thank President Hollande for his invitation to be here and address you today on the theme ‘The Power of Ideas for Climate – Making a New Beginning’. May I congratulate him on his initiative. My hope is that our sharing of perspectives will help yield the positive result we all need from the World Conference here in Paris at the end of November.

Climate change is the great challenge of our time, already challenging most severely those already poor, for whom, if we do not act, it will deliver devastation. Ours may be the final generation with the opportunity to effectively respond to the now urgent effects of climate change. This year thus marks a defining moment for the future of humanity. In this year 2015 we will decide on what must be a shared universal response to climate change – and on a practical agenda for action. We will also this year decide on what should be sought as ‘development’ in the wake of the Millennium Development Goals, in response to global poverty and increasing global inequality.

The meetings in Addis Ababa, New York, and again here in Paris, taken together, constitute a sequence of proximate and interlinked moments where the governments of the world are confronted with urgent choices, choices that cannot be avoided. Yet the opportunities are also immense. Leaders and their representatives are presented with opportunities to construct a new order for humanity and for our planet.

The political and technical decisions that are to be made over the coming months may be complex, but ultimately the great challenges of our time are ethical and intellectual in their nature. It is especially fitting then, that we have been offered this opportunity by President Hollande to consider what are questions of conscience, of inter-generational justice, and that we do so here in Paris, a city at the heart of a great French intellectual tradition.

Whether we will succeed or fail in the work ahead will be determined by the response we bring to the irrefutable evidence of science, the degree of our moral courage, our ethical values, and the inspiration we can call upon.

We need to break away from a destructive relationship with the diversity that is life on our planet towards a new paradigm of existence, one that will be built on the respect we must have for the wonderment and renewal of nature.

We must begin with an acceptance of the evidence of science. It is now clear that failure to respond to the scientific reality of climate change may ultimately lead to the destruction of life on our planet. We must therefore unequivocally reject the position of those who would obscure the scientific reality of climate change in their protection of any narrow and short-term self-interest. The first ethical test is in accepting that there can be no compromise with truth.

We must also reflect on the historical pathway that has brought us to this point. Climate change had an intellectual origin in a hubris that regarded nature as a subject for domination and exploitation. We must acknowledge that the human causes behind climate change have identifiable historical contexts, grounded in forms of development and industrialisation that were based on the exploitation of fossil fuels, with an assumption of infinite growth.

The complex questions of duties, justice and balance must be considered with this historical context in mind, and with acceptance of the ecological debt that is owed by the more developed nations to those nations who continue to aspire to an equal world of opportunities, for freedom to achieve sufficiency, and a human flourishing with sustainability.

Extreme individualism manifesting itself as insatiable consumption and accompanied by unconscionable levels of inequality, characterises much of what is regarded as the developed part of our planet. The narrow paradigm of progress now threatens the destruction of the habitat which our fellow humans inhabit as well as precipitating unsustainable levels of poverty and inequality in our human communities. Many, as Terri Swearingen has put it: “are living on this planet as if we have another one to go to”.

Yet at the heart of most cultures there is, I believe, a disposition towards ethics, a disposition that goes beyond reciprocity, that seeks to transcend, and is in harmony with the wonder of nature.

One of the great lessons also of the history of humanity is that we are regularly presented with an opportunity to embrace new possibilities, to break away from failed paradigms and modes of thought. Ideas and the triumph of idealism over self-interest were what inspired us in 1945 to seek a new world order based on solidarity and the universality of human rights. This was acknowledged by such as Albert Einstein who famously said with extraordinary prescience that:

“we shall need a substantially new way of thinking if humanity is to survive”.

Now, as in 1945, a new normative framework is needed. We need to confront the hegemonic ethic of individualism and insatiable consumption at the roots of our behaviour and replace it with a new thinking, which reconnects us to our planet of diversity, and which sets a new balance between the discourses of economics, ethics and integrated ecology. For this task we will need new tools, the crafting of which can be the most exciting intellectual opportunity of our time.

There is cause for optimism that this new thinking is emerging. The return of interest to the age-old human institution of “the commons,” the interdependence and shared responsibility it encapsulates, is but one example.

In the spiritual traditions, and I instance contemporary writing such as ‘Laudate SÍ’, the concept of “ecology of integration” is now prominent, and in turn from the tradition of human rights, the theories of “climate justice” and of environmental rights as human rights have come forward.

All of these valuable intellectual and spiritual contributions, and the examples I have instanced of both, can, I believe, combine to inform a new ethical framework on which a new harmonious and sustainable paradigm not only of development, but of true security, can be built.

We must accept, however, that the moral imperative for action will not necessarily flow from any simple presentation of a case from reason, revelation or understanding.

We must be candid about the global capacity for change, the obstacles to change, and we must recognise that to reconstruct our models of economics and development will involve in many instances swimming against the tide, it will require moral courage.

We must be realistic too about the current state of our law and politics. Our current malaise is grounded in a cynicism that we must confront and dispel. There is too among our citizens a disconnect with representative and deliberative democracy that we must recognise and heal.

We need inclusive, humane, and non-judgemental engagement with the voices of those most affected by climate change. We must place them at the centre of the proposed solutions.

I perceive among the populations of the world, and especially among the young, a search for beauty and a yet retained sense of awe at the harmony of nature. Among the elders of the planet there is also a respect for the potential of the inherited wisdom of the world to inform institutions and policies in new circumstances.

When history records the actions we take or fail to take at this our moment of truth, we will not have the excuse that we did not understand, that we did not know. We have been gifted, in a global communications order, with the knowledge and the opportunity to act.

Would it not be the greatest of all human achievements if we were to succeed in delivering the benefits of science, the shared wisdom, instinct and intuition of diverse cultures, and the products of reason and faith; and in delivering all of these through new, balanced models of development, ecology and society?

Then we might say, that when facing the fullness of our challenge, we made the decisions that offered a shelter that protected the vulnerable of the present, and at the same time, offering creative and imaginative possibilities for future generations.

Let us succeed together.