

Statement by H.E. Mr. George Papandreou on the occasion of the International Conference “Climate Change in the Mediterranean and the Middle East – Challenges and Solutions

“Dear friends,

Let me stress why I think this Conference on Climate Change is of crucial importance. Some years ago, when I was PM of Greece, I took a joint initiative with then PM Erdogan to convene a meeting in Athens on the effects of Climate change in the Mediterranean. Despite the many conflicts and tensions in our region we could unite, Greeks, Turks, Israelis, Palestinians, and so many others from the region in a common position and document on fighting climate change. Jeffrey Sachs was instrumental in helping us formulate a common approach and I thank him again for his contribution. At that point I realized that our common concerns around environment could and should eclipse our animosities. At some point humanity, and we in the region, will understand how secondary our feuds are as we face the sure destruction of our civilizations as we know them because of the effects of climate change.

That brings me to my second point:

We can't wait.

We do not have the luxury to passively wait for the tipping point when the floodgates of climate change will break.

It will then be too late.

Yet our political cycles, or even our political processes in this globalized economy are more and more in a crisis management mode. One that undermines long term thinking, planning and decision making. I witnessed this as PM when the pressure from global markets pushed us all in the EU towards a short-termism logic. What we actually needed was the space, the planning even the time to make real changes. Today our societies are pressured with daily issues, a sense of insecurity and it is often too easy for leaders to cater to superficial ephemeral polls.

So this is where your, our work, the SDSN is crucial. First of all in providing policy makers with both innovative and realistic solutions as well as in an depth planning capacity. In a political narrative where government is the fiend and markets the gods, nations, politicians and bureaucracies have been losing the capacity for planning. Politics is less a creative citizenship and more a tightrope walk between polls, lobbies, funding activities and social media.

Secondly, in our democracies an informed and educated public is crucial if we are to create coherent policies and ones that have wide support, ownership by the public. Educating decision makers, opinion leaders and the wider public is of the essence.

This brings me to a third point:

Any social - economic transformations face resistance from vested interests or even habit. Scientists who have been warning of the effects we human beings have had on the environment are confronted with powerful lobbies.

And - very much because of this - we have the rise of Orwellian politics with what has been coined by one of the White House's spokespersons as 'alternative facts'. This makes our job even more challenging.

One may have varied interpretations of the facts, but there is a critical difference when you deny the facts and come up with your own facts, simply because you want to hold on to your myths and power. This phenomenon undermines the basic values of enlightenment, our Socratic method of inquiry, and creates

the ground for deep divides and polarization in our societies.
It kills the concept of dialogue and replaces it with religiously absolutist thinking.

This is where leadership is necessary. An often misunderstood concept. We don't need more blind fanatic followers, who worship their so called leaders.

We do not need leaders whose only advisors are themselves.

Leaders need to inspire and fight for a citizenry of critical participants.

Leaders, and that is who you are in this conference, need to create a common understanding, a community capable of making the necessary adaptations and changes.

Through dialogue, deliberation, painstaking analysis of facts.

'Taking back control' was the slogan of the brexiteers.

However if we want to consciously 'take back control' we cannot do so through isolationism, we need more cooperation, we need to deepen society's ability to monitor and choose it's future, if MODERN TECHNOLOGY OWES ECOLOGY AN APOLOGY, we need to reverse this and see how we will use the amazing power of technology, of our common wealth, of our amassed knowledge, in a way that will ensure sustainability and the public good.

And as Jeffrey Sachs recently said in Stockholm

'We need to collectively identify transformational pathways that will ensure better governance, shared wealth and social justice'.

Every transformation entails gains and losses.

Our leadership challenge is to ensure that we provide for a secure social-political environment (such as countries like Sweden have done) which will allow us to make the journey safely and effectively.

That we emphasize, highlight the gains. Gains, such as healthier lives on a healthier planet, greater equality, good governance, a change from ephemeral consumerism to deep and valued human relations.

I am a firm believer that Europe should make this its top priority.

I am sorry that in a conservative Europe there is much backtracking.

We need this vision - one that inspires and breathes new life into the European project and its global reach.

In the end our gains will completely outweigh the inevitable losses of inaction as we face the real threat of climate catastrophes.

One final suggestion - I know SDSN has been thinking about - let us work on a global school curriculum which would enable a younger generation to take on the task of creating a sustainable world.

My wishes for best of success in your important work through this conference and beyond.

And Thank you for your patience!"