



Speech by President Blanche Weber, Opening of Ecofest 2023

FUNDAMENTAL FUTURE AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES: SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CHOICE

„Our children should have a better future...“ And it was quite clear what is meant by „better future“: more social security, overcoming poverty, hardship... through growth. Growth as a prerequisite for a better life has shaped our culture for centuries.

For centuries, there has also been a direct link between „growth“ and the goal of a better life. But is that image still true today?

No. Definitely not, for several reasons, including the following three main ones:“

1.

The model of constant material growth is wrong from a **social point of view!** In the Northern countries, it has always been successful in making many people better off thanks to growth, even if wealth is unevenly distributed and there are still too many poor people. But honestly, the model fails from a global perspective. Our resource consumption, our way of life, and growth are fundamentally responsible for the fact that hundreds of millions of people worldwide live and work under inhumane conditions, and many are still dying of hunger. Every 4 seconds, someone dies of hunger. Of course, not only growth and the enormous resource consumption in our countries are responsible for this, but they contribute massively to it. The growth model in our countries is structurally responsible for the immense misery in the Southern countries. The term modern colonialism is rightly used! What a failure of the model.

2.

However, it is also known that from an **ecological perspective**, it is no longer sustainable. We are currently destroying our own livelihoods and, even more so, those of future generations.

3.

However, the model also no longer works from an **economic perspective**. Supply chain issues, the conflict in Ukraine, geopolitical tensions due to the dependence on often scarce raw materials, and so on, indicate that the economic model is economically too fragile and problematic to sustain. There are many other reasons to question and reevaluate the model, such as the fact that satisfaction is no longer tied to material growth, but that would go beyond the scope of this discussion.

The crucial question remains: Why do we continue to pursue a model that is no longer socially, ecologically, and economically viable, and is even associated with devastating negative consequences? And why don't these questions shape political agendas more significantly?

These days, one is asked by the press and others about our main priorities for the elections and the next government: but it's clear, a clear commitment to the necessity of a **fundamental cultural, social, and economic transition process and corresponding tools** for the necessary reforms and guidance on the way.





”Our children should have a better future...”

4.

Our social system is entirely dependent on the growth of the economy and the population. But even if we assume constant growth in GDP and population over the next 50 years, with the current pension system, in just 50 years, almost 1 active worker will have to support 1 retiree. This is not responsible policy! Yes, nobody really knows what the future holds or what the official forecasts will be. However, we do know the following:

a) Growth is not guaranteed, but the financing of the social system relies on it. That is not responsible.

b) Even if growth were to continue exponentially as planned, we can hardly fathom the consequences for mobility, housing, land use, and energy consumption. Some believe that such massive growth can be well organized, and there are efforts in national mobility plans and land planning to do so. There are also models in the climate plan. We say: we need to get a certain level of growth and better organize it. But to the extent we are talking about, it will not work, as experience shows. We must not deceive ourselves in this regard.

c) Even if we were to better organize growth, the next generation would have to figure out how to reform the system. Since we have to keep growing because the system is built that way, it is not a sustainable option for the long term.“

Because we lack the courage to build a responsible, sustainable model for the future, we not only risk passing on these enormous problems to the next generations but also speak hypocritically about green, sustainable, or whatever type of growth! Of course, without saying what is meant by it. Growth above all else! What an achievement! Not only do the next generations have to bear the dramatic consequences of the climate and biodiversity catastrophe but also have to watch as the shifts and adaptation measures are funded... while we knowingly leave behind a social system that is not sustainable for the future.

One should not leave these important questions to populist pronouncements, especially those propagated by some parties. Therefore, every party committed to rationality and shaping the future must seriously address the question of how our social system can become more independent of economic growth. We deeply regret that these questions are not taken up enough by the traditional parties!

The next government must approach this matter honestly. What is decided in concrete terms, whether a different financial foundation is put on the table or other adjustments are made, should be openly examined. But we must finally tackle this issue seriously!

5.

Another central element of the economic transition is the need for clear rules to be sure that prices no longer convey the wrong signals and incentives. The expression ‚sustainable tax reform‘ is not found in party programs. Certainly, some parties talk about respecting the ‚polluter-pays principle,‘ especially behind the concept of the CO2 tax, albeit at a very low rate. However, parties do not commit to the idea that the tax system must be fundamentally overhauled from an ecological perspective. We all know the importance of **internalizing social and environmental costs** to facilitate a transition. Luxembourg

taxes capital very lightly and is still lenient on environmental taxes, while heavily taxing labor. It doesn’t make sense, neither socially, environmentally, nor economically.

Why doesn’t a cross-party structural reform succeed in creating a price framework that better taxes what is problematic and discusses what is desirable? More tax on the environment and capital, less on labor. It’s actually a win-win situation if specific social-selective compensations are provided in parallel. Why doesn’t Luxembourg implement ‚green budgeting‘? This means looking at how much state funds are misallocated and thus contribute to the climate and biodiversity crises. Foreign studies have shown that these are billion-dollar amounts. Why?

We will do everything in Meco to ensure that such instruments are included in the new coalition agreement.

6.

I have now only mentioned a few more structurally important reforms. We could take more of them. Where is the problem? Isn’t it always the same, namely that it is done as if one could achieve the transition to a sustainable system with a few patchwork measures on the current system, but that in the end, everything can remain the same?“

Somehow, the following statements from individual parties are symbolically significant for this: They talk about a ‚pragmatic‘ climate protection in their programs. What does ‚pragmatic‘ climate protection mean? A solar panel during the day and business as usual otherwise?

To be honest, when a party writes that, it seems they haven’t recognized the problem. Apparently, they don’t understand that the laws of nature are non-negotiable! And that we cannot pick and choose which laws of nature we want to follow. That we cannot say to nature: wait a moment with your laws, we have better things to do. Moreover, we ourselves and scientists unanimously confirm that in addition to the climate crisis with its immense heatwaves, weather extremes, and everything, the situation in biodiversity is even more alarming in a certain sense. The ecosystem is like a network. Pull a few threads, and the network holds. Pull more and more, and the network tears completely and is ruined. And we are, as the World Biodiversity Council - the counterpart to the World Climate Council - clearly stated, very close to the point where the network tears. Climate change offers, cynically speaking, an adaptation strategy for parts of humanity. Biodiversity does not!



7.

It seems to stem from a fundamental misunderstanding that the tone in many party programs is: „We will not further regulate; instead, we prefer financial incentives to encourage eco-friendly behavior among individuals and businesses. Support, voluntarism is emphasized.“

Of course, certain financial incentives and subsidies are necessary, and these instruments are an important element of the transition. But they are not enough! They do not get us the change that is absolutely necessary.

You can't subsidize everything that's positive. Where do we get that money? Couldn't we finance better things with that money in part? And, most importantly, by subsidizing the positive, it does not offset the negative developments for long if they are not stopped. And if something is known, and this is what all scientists are saying now, it's that time is running out. Neither time nor money to achieve a transition solely through subsidies is there!

It's not possible without clear regulations. We don't get financial assistance if we drive at 50 km/h through a village, but it's written in the rules. We also don't say that those who don't want to pay shouldn't use them. Or wearing a seatbelt isn't voluntary; it's prescribed for everyone's safety. You don't get a croissant pressed by a police officer if you don't wear it, and if you don't, it's also okay. To be honest, I sometimes wonder if the courage wouldn't be there for some even now if the ban on smoking indoors wasn't already in place...

It is the damn responsibility of politics to initiate the necessary reforms, to advocate, argue, and inform why specific measures are needed.

Yes, a requirement for solar panels on new homes and industrial buildings, a limitation on land sealing for every locality as it is now in the ‚Programme directeur‘ of spatial planning. It's even better on the EU level that we have to reduce soil sealing to zero, just like it's stated in our new ‚Programme directeur‘ of spatial planning. Prohibiting such mundane things as gravel gardens to combat overheating and contribute to biodiversity.

Of course, one must involve the stakeholders in a dialogue where arguments are exchanged, including municipalities, professional actors, and citizens. But we need rules.

8.

„But then I naturally come to the **question of acceptance**. Yes, politics and decisions in the ecological field require acceptance, and yes, it's not always easy.

In social media and the anonymous comment sections of the media, there are certainly people who get upset. But is that really such a broad sentiment? Or is it not that even a small number of people play the keyboard of social media especially effectively? Aren't we giving the populist voices more space than the voices that engage constructively?“

The fundamental question, nevertheless, is how can acceptance be created as effectively as possible?

And in this election campaign, unfortunately, it's not exactly a good example. We fervently hope that after this, the discourse will reach another level. To take an example: it can be said that there were some regulations in nature conservation that were not so well-targeted, there was an excessive focus on details that annoyed people, and the essentials were lost sight of. We, as „Movement“, acknowledge that there are real issues. But two things must be considered:

- On the one hand, the ministry is, at least in part, in the process of addressing the issues, albeit slowly. We remain determined that important improvements are still to come.
- On the other hand, when one identifies issues or believes they can identify them, one can also take a tone that clearly harms the cause. A discourse that says, ‚it shouldn't be every bat...‘ is unworthy not to be called populist. It's ultimately a matter of positioning: someone who speaks like this downplays the importance of issues like conserving bats and deliberately trivializes the cause of nature conservation. **That is exactly the style of politics that brings populism and political disenchantment because it's not about facts but about partisan mood-making that ultimately undermines common societal goals.**

Clear, factual criticism that does not undermine the principle of nature conservation outright is important. However, when it happens in the manner that several are doing now, one should not be surprised that acceptance problems are even further exacerbated.

We expect that the next government fundamentally promotes acceptance for the transition and that the opposition - whatever party and role it may have - conducts a proper, fact-based discourse on the necessary reform steps, even if a project is not perfect. We should have consensus and communicate that there is a great need for action, and we strive for the best solutions. A policy that prepares for necessary changes, inspires enthusiasm, and contributes to finding solutions collectively.



9.

An absolutely central question is that of **social justice**. In the transition, every individual must be included, especially those with less financial means.

Our Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has multiplied by a factor of four since the year 2000!! Nevertheless, we have glaring social injustices even in Luxembourg, and the wealth gap is widening. In 2021, 115,980 people, or 19.2% of the population, are ,at risk of poverty.'

When we talk about subsidies and support, the focus should be on those people. This has been partly done, for example, with the redistribution of the CO2 tax (although it's unclear if it was well-implemented), but fundamentally, not nearly enough.

We, as the Movement Ecologique, advocate for targeted and socially selective financial support for people with lower incomes in the transition. It's an extremely important issue that can be found in party programs but not in enough detail. In the context of tripartite discussions, we, as MecO, opposed capping energy prices, and it's been debated whether the revenue and consumption should be exempt. This burdens the state budget with several million or more, which could be used elsewhere. There's no real reason to provide substantial subsidies to high-income earners and heavy energy consumers. We need price rationality. However, many election programs propose advocating for even lower energy prices for everyone. That's not socially just. **We need a fundamental discourse on how fairness in distribution and socially selective support for people with fewer financial resources can be ensured.** These questions are inherently tied to the ecological transition.

An interesting piece of information in this context: Did you know that as Luxembourgers, we seem to be in the top 10% of the richest, seemingly even the top 1% richest in the world! Then we should address fairness in distribution more in our context, in the Greater Region, and in a global context.

10.

However, let me also say something about the concept of freedom, which is so closely linked to the question of acceptance. The freedom of the next generations will be significantly restricted as we consistently act in response to the inevitable consequences of the climate catastrophe - the extreme heat, water issues, refugee numbers, and much more. It is already clear. The constraints will be much more substantial than what is currently popularly addressed as freedom. Freedom of choice for a car's engine? Holding on to a gas or oil heating system instead of adopting an energy-efficient technology? Is it freedom? Where is the relationship there?

Actually, it's almost cynical to talk about freedom in such contexts when one knows what's at stake for the freedom of future generations.

11.

I come back to my initial quote. **It should be better for our children...**

A German survey of over 70,000 young people shows that the youth today feel exactly the opposite. It reveals that only 22% of them believe that they will have a better life than their parents. Sociologist Hartmut Rosa describes the feeling of the youth as follows:

„One no longer has the feeling that we are moving forward toward a horizon, and it's fun to fight, to strive to create something. Now we have to run faster just not to slip back. We are running toward an abyss that is getting closer to us. Now the government says: we must manage to „grow out of the crisis.“ But we know: if we achieve precisely that, we will worsen the ecological crisis... The new time is negative, not positive... It is about preventing the worst for all sides.“

An analysis that is immensely touching!

Let us make our last contribution and work to ensure that the outdated goal of growth and these negative future scenarios are no longer relevant by infusing a new common culture with new values, new visions, and new positive future prospects. **The ecological transition is primarily a cultural transition.**

We firmly believe that we have a historical duty and also a historic opportunity to replace the cultural image of growth with new values, new visions, and new positive future prospects. A cultural image where human life is not sacrificed at the altar of material goods but rather in art, social interaction, and more...

Opposing the sterility of concrete, embracing the diversity of green spaces in our localities. Reversing globalized agricultural policies to a regional focus, with an absolute emphasis on organic. Curiosity, wonder, and reverence for the beauty of nature... We are convinced that there are societal majorities in favor of this.

As the sociologist Adorno said: „Even in historical situations of ‚life in the wrong,‘ there is the vision of ‚the good that arises from the wrong.‘

Let us create this positive image, work to strengthen it, and choose and support politicians who understand the challenge, show ‚attitude,‘ and are willing to say that we cannot live better tomorrow than today, but we can live better. In the interest of enriching the good life for us all, but also because it is crucial for the next generations to survive.

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