

# European Environmental Bureau Speech 6 November. Dynamic Earth.

(2250 words = 15 minutes at 150 wpm)

## **Welcome and introduction**

1. It is a great pleasure to welcome you to Edinburgh and to Scotland. Thank you for choosing to bring your conference here. I am passionate about Scotland and the beauty and diversity of our environment. Looking up from this conference centre towards Arthur's Seat in the park behind us, you can get a glimpse of why Scotland has just been voted the most beautiful country in the world by *Rough Guide* readers – an accolade that we are deeply proud about!

2. If you have time – and I hope you will – to visit the exhibitions within this building you will discover that Scotland's position in relation to the European continent has changed significantly over geological time. At one stage, our Highlands were part of what is now Canada. However, for a very long time now, Scotland has clearly been part of Europe and I for one have always been very comfortable with that arrangement. And while geography may have left us on the edge of Europe, our ambitions and our values place us at its heart.

3. And yet our long, productive relationship with the European Union and its institutions is under threat. My disappointment with the outcome of the referendum on EU membership is intense, but so is my determination to keep focussed on what we need to do to protect our environment, no matter what our future relationship is with the EU.

4. And that's why I am so pleased to join you this morning. Because, as each of us from different parts of Europe looks to the future, we must do that as global partners. Connected not just by our climate, geographies and biodiversity but by our shared ambitions.

### **Commitment to EU environmental standards and principles**

5. I was delighted to have the opportunity a few weeks ago to meet with representatives of the Green 10, including EEB, in Brussels and to discuss our shared priorities for the European environment.

6. Just after the EU referendum last year, I gave my commitment that I would do everything in my power to maintain, protect and enhance our environment. That is a commitment I share with Scotland's First Minister – Nicola Sturgeon – who stated to our Parliament that any threat to

Scotland's distinctive and ambitious approaches to environmental standards and to climate change – along with many other areas - is “completely unacceptable”. We will not let our goals be undermined by any race to the bottom in pursuit of future trading agreements.

7. The European Union was founded on a recognition of shared values and common interests which transcend national boundaries. A robust and effective approach to protecting our environment has proved, for many of us, to be one of those key shared values. So my ambition is to carry through not just the letter of EU environmental law but also, its spirit. That spirit is captured in the underlying principles of precaution, prevention and rectifying pollution at source, as well as the ‘polluter pays’ principle. And I want to assert my intention and determination to ensure that these principles sit at the heart of Scotland’s approach to environmental policy in the future, wherever that future lies. Without them, we risk lagging behind and diverging from the ambitions of our European allies as well as missing key tools that can help us to meet international ambitions such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The UK Government must also be clear about its commitment to these environmental principles and about how they will ensure the principles will continue to shape its approach to future

environmental policies and practices. I will continue to press UK Ministers until we have absolute clarity.

**Global leadership on the environment, as shown by key achievements and ambition in PfG**

8. I am in no doubt that membership of the European Union has been of vital importance for Scotland's environment. Scotland has a significantly greater proportion of its land area designated under Natura 2000 than other parts of the UK, providing protection for a wealth of habitats and species, and we remain a stronghold for a number of species which are currently threatened elsewhere in the EU.

9. With support from the EU LIFE programme, we have led innovative conservation programmes for species such as the Atlantic Salmon and Freshwater Pearl Mussel. Our network of marine protected areas, covering 20% of our seas, is continuing to ensure that our amazing marine ecosystems are safeguarded for future generations to enjoy.

10. And under the Water Framework Directive, River Basin Management Plans have helped us deliver significant improvements in the quality of our water environment. Indeed I know our approach has attracted attention from other parts of Europe and we have been proud to share our experience and

learn from others. This week a delegation from the Ukraine is in Scotland to study our approach to flood risk management.

11. It is on this strong, consistent framework of EU-derived environmental standards, that Scotland has also been able to build its profile in addressing global challenges. Scotland was among the first countries in the world to sign up to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. We can claim a place among the leading countries in tackling climate change. We have not been afraid to take difficult decisions – our opposition to GM crops and our recent decision not to support the development of unconventional oil and gas in Scotland are two strong examples. And of course, winning the Circulars Award at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2017 gives very clear evidence of leadership and partnership in driving a circular economy in Scotland.

12. We will not rest on these achievements. As resources become scarcer and our need to mitigate climate change becomes ever more urgent, I believe that changing to a resource efficient and low carbon economy is the only option. Dynamic, agile countries like Scotland can get ahead by embracing change earlier and driving it further and faster.

13. That approach is at the heart of our Programme for Government, published at the start of September. It is our most ambitious Programme yet. It raises our collective ambition, even where we're already doing great things. It's about striving for more – about making the biggest difference we can. In the face of serious challenges, like the uncertainty of Brexit, a positive approach is essential. And, as Richard Dixon of Friends of the Earth Scotland generously remarked this is also “the greenest Programme for Government in the history of the Scottish Parliament.”

14. I agree. We have introduced a set of joined-up government commitments all geared towards transformation - a step change in our ambition towards a low carbon economy through new low emissions zones and the electrification of vehicles, backed by a strong renewables sector; a major focus on marine litter, the introduction of deposit return and an expert panel to explore environmental charging to end our ‘throwaway’ culture; and a continuing major set of actions on climate change, including a new Climate Change Bill that will set more ambitious long term targets in direct response to the UN Paris Agreement. Scotland's statutory climate targets are already the most ambitious in the UK and our Bill proposals would place us at the forefront of international ambition.

## **Scotland's position on EU-UK negotiations**

15. EU membership has been significant in helping Scotland to achieve a leadership role in many of these areas. For example, Europe's ambition and support for the Paris Agreement was central to its coming into force last year during COP22 in Marrakech that I was fortunate to attend.

16. But Brexit, and specifically, the UK Government's proposed approach to Brexit, poses a threat to these ambitions. There is a great deal at stake for all of us. So you can be assured that, with my Cabinet colleagues, I am actively pressing the UK Government for assurances on a number of matters which we want to see at the core of negotiations with the EU.

17. Firstly, we will seek to ensure that funding to support delivery of Scotland's ambitions for environment and climate change, along with other key areas such as the rural economy, are at least maintained at current EU levels. The assurances we have been given so far are short-term, and limited in their coverage.

18. Secondly, future trading arrangements must satisfy Scotland's interests. We will strive to protect our producers from third country imports, produced to lower standards and costs. And we will resolutely resist any pressure to weaken environmental and other standards as a condition of trade agreements.

19. Thirdly, the rights of EU citizens and their contribution to our economy and communities must be protected. We will seek to secure an immigration arrangement which allows us to recruit the brightest and best talent into Scotland – from seasonal manual labour to highly skilled posts in plant science, environmental engineering and low carbon technologies.

20. Fourthly, we will continue to collaborate and demonstrate leadership on the international stage. We will seek to ensure that the UK remains party to all international conventions ratified by the EU, and take steps where possible to participate in collective action. We have an excellent reputation as a partner in all types of collaborative programme, which we are determined to protect.

21. Finally, we will press to secure continued participation in EU initiatives which are of mutual benefit, including the regulation of chemicals and radioactive waste, the operation of

EU energy and carbon markets and in sharing data, information and knowledge.

22. Scottish organisations have received over £350 million in support from the Horizon 2020 programme since 2014 – investing in knowledge, in technology and in people. The EU’s Data Collection Framework funds 80% of the survey activity carried out by Marine Scotland Science. In the absence of such funding in the future, difficult choices will need to be made – both by the Scottish Government and by other organisations – which could potentially have a serious impact on our coastal communities, our marine industries and our scientific capabilities in Scotland.

23. Participation in a wide range of European initiatives, organisations, events and programmes has brought significant benefits to Scotland and it has widened our perspectives. We also hope that you feel this involvement has benefitted other parts of Europe, and that we have been able to bring a valuable and well-informed perspective to European debates and actions on the environment.

**Scotland engaged internationally – forward looking, outward looking & collaborative**

24. Much of what we have achieved in Scotland has built on the standards established across Europe that underpin the common market. We will continue to express the highest level of ambition we can for Scottish and European environments. I hope you will join us in this cause.

25. This is not just about current standards. It is about future proofing policy to deal with the demands and challenges that will be placed on our environment, climate and people over the coming decades.

26. We know that the EU has further to go in ensuring the future of our precious shared environment. Despite 25 years of focus on biodiversity recent research reports indicated a 75% decline in the abundance of insects in German nature reserves. I'd be very surprised if the same pattern was not evident in the UK. Perhaps as well as biodiversity we should be thinking about bioquantity as a measure to judge success.

27. We also know that pollution continues to blight the lives of many Europeans, in our air, our seas and in our fresh waters, and that many people lack easy access to healthy green areas. However, I continue to believe these issues are best tackled in a co-ordinated and collaborative way, ensuring we share our expertise, our knowledge and our progress.

28. It would of course be equally wrong to pretend that the governments alone can secure the future of the environment or that they know all the answers. Making the shift to a more resource efficient, adaptive and green minded Europe will hinge on the action and enthusiasm of the many, not the few.

29. In Scotland, we are lucky to have a long tradition of strong civic organisations and non-governmental bodies. I believe that active citizens and local groups will be key to our success. In 2015, Scottish Environment Link reported that 565,000 people in Scotland volunteered to help with environmental projects.

30. There are many inspiring stories to be told of communities taking action to improve their local environment. For example my own awareness of marine pollution issues was heightened when pupils from a primary school near Edinburgh constructed a massive jellyfish from plastic bottles collected on their local beach and brought it to the Scottish Parliament. We have groups making the links between the environment and health, between environment and developing new skills and employment. We have farmers helping the recovery of threatened birds like the corn bunting and we have farmers developing new enterprises enabling the public to see wildlife such as the reintroduced sea eagles and red kites.

31. It's these kinds of stories that give me inspiration and encouragement. We are in a new phase of environmental awareness. The old idea that the environment was in some way an alternative to jobs and profits must surely be on its last legs. In a few weeks' time, Edinburgh will once more host the World Forum on Natural Capital – an event that brings together environmentalists and economists, politicians and the business community in recognition that we only have one planet to live on and its resources are not limitless. Learning to live within the limits of those resources is not just a message of making do with less, it's a message about being innovative and imaginative in our use and reuse of precious resources. Scotland wants to be at the forefront of that innovation, and to do that we need to collaborate; we need to learn; we need to share. And that is why events such as your conference today are important to us.

32. Scotland's environment is the basis of our economy, our health, our landscape, and our way of life. We are proud to be a clean, green country with wholesome food and drink and great hills, lochs and cities to explore and adventure in. We are happy to share these things and invite your help and advice in taking good care of them. Whatever happens over the next few

years, you can be assured that Scotland is still firmly attached to Europe, geologically and culturally.