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THE PRIME MINISTER

**SPEECH BY PRIME MINISTER GUY VERHOFSTADT  
AT THE INAUGURATION OF  
THE RENEWABLE ENERGY HOUSE**

BRUSSELS, 22 MARCH 2006.

Monseigneur,

Commissioners,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The energy debate has recently taken a fresh turn. Until a few months ago, this discussion was very polarised. It was a bitter clash between ecologists and economists. The ecologists were using statistics about global warming and the hole in the ozone layer. Often, they gave the impression that the economy and industry were mere obstacles standing in the way of an ideal world.

Pitted against them were the economists, using unemployment figures. They contended that economic growth is the only way of boosting employment and achieving social security. They also claimed that ecology was seriously impeding such growth.

The recent oil crisis added a new dimension to this debate. The abrupt, sharp rise in oil prices opened up everyone's eyes. The rise of the Chinese economy and its associated oil consumption has brought globalisation right into everyone's home. In fact, the mini oil crisis made people appreciate two things: firstly, that if we fail to do something about our competitiveness, rate of employment and our social security, we will come under serious pressure. And secondly, that oil resources are not inexhaustible, and that from now on oil prices will remain high.

In short, recent events have convinced people, more than ever before, of a clear need for renewable energy and energy saving. This is a really good thing. After all, it brings us closer to the truth, namely that ecology, the economy and social equity - which the Prince referred to as the three "E"s, are not opposing each other. On the contrary, they are complementary pillars that any sustainable society needs. And if one of the three pillars becomes unstable, this will ultimately put extra pressure on the remaining two.

Proof of this lies in the Kyoto accords. Since the government started to implement Kyoto, we have seen that doing so has strengthened both our environment and our economy. Since we started encouraging research into renewable energy and also the use of such energy, companies have set up major new facilities here in Belgium, with extensive research capabilities. Toyota is but one example of this. In fact, the measures we have taken to shore up R&D, including in the energy sector, proved to be so successful that we have already expanded them three times.

Other countries are also stepping up their measures. For instance, Sweden has set itself the target of becoming an oil-poor economy by 2010, although, it must be said, largely by using nuclear energy. However, this Swedish objective is simply not an option for most European countries. The European Commission knows this very well. Which is why the Commission set the target of generating six percent of all energy from renewable sources by 2010. In any case, I'm determined that Belgium will succeed in rising to this challenge.

Every citizen can help us achieve our goal. Today, another commendable initiative was announced on the radio: three local authorities in East Flanders have taken a joint decision to build three large wind turbines. The project will be run by a cooperative in which the local residents also own shares. Once these three wind turbines are up and running, the energy they generate meet the full energy requirements of these three municipalities, a fine example of the concept of the three "E"s.

In short, renewable energy is the right way to go. It is the way of the future. The Renewable Energy House leaves this in no doubt! There are three good reasons for this. Firstly, the economic reason. For the first time, this House is bringing together all the major European actors in the renewable energy domain, one of our fastest-growing economic sectors, with an annual turnover of more than fifteen billion euro, providing more than three hundred thousand jobs and supplying eight percent of Europe's current energy requirements.

The second reason is ecological. For the first time in Brussels, a one-hundred-and-twenty-year-old building has been refurbished to minimise

its energy consumption and explore different renewable energy technologies, making it entirely reliant on renewable energy.

The third reason is political. The debate about energy is not going to disappear from the political agenda over the coming decades. So the decision to build this House in the political decision-making centre of Europe was a very good idea. As was the decision to open up this house to any citizen who wishes to visit it. This will help to focus people's minds on their future.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We would never have inaugurated the Renewable Energy House here today without the commitment shown by Prince Laurent. In taking this initiative, he has shown us that his concept of striking a balance between the economy, ecology and social equity can be achieved. So I would like to congratulate the prince and his staff on this remarkable project and I am sure we will hear of them a lot in the future.

Thank you for your attention.