

***Conference on Polar Regions, House of Commons Parliamentary Committee
London, 7th December 2016***

Honourable Chairman,
Minister,
Honourable Members,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with great emotion that I take the floor before you today on a crucial topic which is the situation in the Polar Regions, and the Antarctic in particular.

It is a critical issue for the future of our Planet and I also know that in this distinguished House, you have always been able to address the key challenges of our world.

I am honoured to speak about the Poles before the Representatives of this country whose history echoes the glorious achievements of so many Polar exploration heroes. As you know, my country has always demonstrated its interest and exposed its concerns on these issues.

My great-great grandfather, Prince Albert I, was the first modern Head of State to venture into the Arctic. He brought back from his expeditions to Spitsbergen various types of evidence, including exceptional photographs, which still today are valuable documents for the knowledge of these regions, their climate and their evolution.

In 2005, then in 2006, shortly following my accession to the Throne, I myself embarked upon such journeys to the North Pole, so that I could take stock of the situation first hand, comparing what I saw with the records left by my ancestor.

A few years later, in 2009, I travelled to Antarctica where I was able to complete my knowledge of these regions and the issues they are facing.

I have come to speak to you today in the name of this tradition and in the light of my own experience. But also in the name of the action I implement, with my Government and my Foundation, both in the field and at international fora.

This action is motivated by an awareness of the dangers today threatening the Polar Regions, and the Antarctic in particular. Above all this action is motivated by the imperious need to protect these regions while there is still time.

We recently learned, through the Danish Meteorological Institute, that the daily air temperatures in the Arctic this November had exceeded by 15°C to 20°C the average over the period 1958-2012. The future of these regions is indeed now a matter of unprecedented urgency.

However this issue, fundamentally, lies perhaps not so much in the Poles themselves but in the danger that threatens them.

This danger, as we are aware, is we ourselves. This feeling of invincibility which too often spurs us on, it is this excessiveness that the Greeks called "*hubris*", reflected by our tendency to subjugate nature.

Such excessiveness has led our societies to follow a path of unsustainable development, to burn hydrocarbons and to jeopardise the Earth's climate. Taking advantage of the global warming it itself provoked, this excessiveness is pushing humanity today to try and exploit new fishing and geological resources right up to the borders of the Antarctic.

It is therefore this excessive behavior which we need to combat today, at every level, if we want to save the Antarctic, the Poles, and quite simply the Planet.

In order to achieve these goals, we need, first of all, intellectual tools. We need knowledge. We need the insight of scientists. Consequently, our first duty is to offer them support and our primary obligation is to listen to them.

I have been advocating for the last two years with the IPCC and multilateral organisations for a special IPCC report to be produced on climate change, the oceans and the cryosphere.

The first phase of this report was launched just yesterday in Monaco. Its publication, expected at the beginning of 2019, will assess the state of scientific knowledge with regard to all issues related to the Poles, the glaciers and the oceans, and their evolution within the context of climate change.

This holistic and objective, multidisciplinary and rigorous approach is to also take into consideration the human challenges involved. It will enable us to know exactly how the Polar Regions are faring today. It will enable us to gain a better understanding of the way in which they are affected by global warming. And it will also enable us to identify the ways in which the change can be mitigated or stopped.

Produced by the world authority, the IPCC, this report will thus mark a major milestone for the future of the Antarctic, a continent which in many respects is still widely unknown.

Quite recently, contradictory studies were published, generating fear of the risk of the accelerated melting of the Antarctic glaciers, which could result in increased sea levels close to three metres. Contradicting previous models, these studies should be accurately appraised, so that we are able to understand the mechanisms they describe, and thus counter them more effectively.

The knowledge gap that still exists with regard to the Antarctic is in fact one of the reasons that could currently limit our actions.

In order to take efficient action, our first task is therefore to support the remarkable work of the scientists who are dedicated to its research and study.

Their work is accomplished, in some cases in extremely difficult conditions, which I had the opportunity to see first-hand in the twenty-six stations I visited there.

To this effect, support for their work should be two-fold - political and logistical - ensuring that installations and scientific expeditions in the Antarctic are designed in the most rigorous way possible in terms of impact on the environment, which is not always the case. The development of renewable energies, such as in the Belgian station Princess Elisabeth, together with suitable materials, should be a prerequisite.

Support for the work of scientists also means setting up ambitious programmes, commensurate with the issues with which they are concerned and which we so critically need.

However, it has to be said that in this respect, research in Antarctica is unfortunately often fragmented. This continent dedicated to science pursuant to the Washington Treaty does not sufficiently benefit from coordinated international scientific programmes. From the one hundred and ten major scientific facilities installed in Antarctica, only two are truly international, and moreover these only concern two countries.

International scientific cooperation currently in force, for example in the space industry, is however a necessity which would have huge benefits here, from an economic and an ecological point of view - by limiting the effects on the environment, and also from a diplomatic point of view and by promoting dialogue.

Moreover this would be in keeping with the excellent promise contained in the Antarctic Treaty, which to date is one of the finest examples of peaceful international cooperation, created for the good of humanity under the aegis of science.

It brings me to a second aspect which concerns responsible action in regard to the Antarctic: the establishment of sustainable political rules.

The 1959 Treaty provides the necessary guarantees to protect the continent itself. Plus, the Madrid Protocol which supplements it, the twenty-fifth anniversary of which we are celebrating this year, gives it an essential environmental dimension.

Together, they represent a model from which it would be worthwhile taking inspiration for the protection of other regions with similar importance for the whole of humanity.

I am thinking of course of the Arctic region, which is currently preyed upon by new and increasingly pronounced temptations:

- with global warming and the melting ice, new sea routes are increasingly being used;
- technical progress has made possible the exploitation of resources which up to now were inaccessible;
- and, human settlements, mainly of a commercial nature, are likely to increase.

This movement contributes to the degradation of these ecosystems, until now preserved, which poses a risk of major ecological disasters across the entire Planet, as would be for example an oil spill in the Arctic.

That is why for many years I have been eager for the international community to give thought to the status of these particularly fragile areas which are essential for our common future.

Such reflection should not be limited to only the States making up the Arctic Council, but should involve the Planet as a whole. This is what was achieved in Antarctica, a key achievement which we now need to defend.

The same technical and climate changes, making the Arctic accessible to human ambitions, are also threatening Antarctica or will be doing so tomorrow.

Already certain voices, certain States even, are questioning the principles of the Madrid Protocol. Whatever the lines of argument used, we know what such words are aimed at, and above all we can guess the type of disaster they will lead to, if some countries decided unilaterally to infringe common rules.

Consequently, I wish to solemnly reaffirm in front of you a requirement of vigilance which concerns us all. More than ever before, together we need to defend the principles laid down in Washington and Madrid. And we also need to reinforce them, as the threats are evolving.

We should also exercise our vigilance beyond the ice shelves and glacial landscapes, because it is the entire region which is endangered, and it is the entire region which is so precious to us.

It brings me to the issue of the southern oceans, which are currently at the heart of many concerns regarding the Antarctic.

The recent announcement by CCAMLR, regarding the creation of a large marine protected area in the Ross Sea is in this respect an extremely significant step forward. I have personally taken action for many years to promote this project and I welcome the consensus reached between the initiators of the project, the United States and New Zealand, and Russia for its implementation.

I hope that it will be followed by other similar conservation measures.

Specially Protected Areas and Specially Managed Areas had already been foreseen in the wake of the Washington Treaty. Their aim was to prohibit or control human activities in certain particularly sensitive ecosystems.

However their installation was limited to the actual scope of the Treaty. I believe that today we need to adopt a wider approach, in order to address threats which no longer only concern certain special areas, but are spreading out across the whole region.

Marine protected areas are relevant tools for this, capable of providing whole ecosystems with the resources necessary for their regeneration, whilst at the same time promoting the development of a sustainable economy for the users of these seas.

Their development and expansion could greatly benefit from a more homogenous and more global framework, with improved coordination of initiatives and increased resources, both financial and political. In this respect, I think that the negotiations currently underway at the UN on High Seas biodiversity, or BBNJ, represent a key opportunity to complete and adapt the existing law.

Marine protected areas also need additional resources, because there is no point in announcing protection measures if we do not have the capacity to deliver them from an operational point of view. This is an issue being raised all over the world and which we need to work on, whilst showing no hesitation in turning to innovative solutions.

In the Mediterranean, together with other coastal countries, we have set up a trust fund aimed at promoting the development of marine protected areas. I believe that this type of collective initiative may be considered useful in Antarctica.

It would also be worthwhile, there more than anywhere else, to capitalise on innovative technology, which may prove to be of particular value for the management of remote marine areas. Satellite surveillance and the collection and processing of data from ships sailing in the vicinity would considerably facilitate the management of these huge areas. Objectively, we do not have the financial and human resources necessary to oversee them by using traditional tools.

In all cases it is thanks to proper coordination between the local and global approaches that we will, I believe, be able to progress more efficiently to protect these key regions. Today they are among the rare areas of the world where human activity has not yet done too much harm.

This two-fold approach, both scientific and political, must be implemented in order to equip ourselves with the means necessary to protect them in a sustainable manner.

To protect the Poles sustainably, and the South Pole in particular, there is one requirement that should take precedence over all the others and implement with greater speed: effective action to combat climate change about which I would like to say a few words in conclusion.

Following the success of COP21 last year in Paris and COP22 a few weeks ago in Marrakech, we have begun to outline concrete and efficient courses of action. However, at the same time, views calling into question the anthropogenic origin of climate change have emerged here and there.

In light of the planetary dangers of global warming which could lead to melting ice, destroy many ecosystems, disrupt meteorological balances, provoke repeated disasters, lead to the disappearance of Island States and generate unprecedented humanitarian crises and conflict, we cannot lower our guard. We need to stay vigilant, determined and ambitious.

This is the first and vital phase of effective action for the Polar Regions. It is even more so because by protecting the Polar Regions, we can prevent accelerated global warming, whether through the reflective effects of the ice, through the conservation in frozen soils of greenhouse gases, or through the sequestration of carbon in marine protected ecosystems.

The fight against climate change is therefore the only way for us to genuinely preserve the Poles. Above all it is the only way of leaving our children a world which is fit to live in.

As such, Antarctica is for all Defenders of the Earth far more than one issue among others: it is a beacon. It is a scientific beacon in that it concerns unique international cooperation, based on science and for the preservation of peace.

It is a political beacon, since the mechanisms of collective unprejudiced management, of this common heritage of humankind, are exemplary.

And finally it is a human beacon, since these distant lands carry within them the future of Humanity.

The Poles continue to mirror our profound truths and, at heart, our destiny as human beings. This is I believe what my great-great grandfather Prince Albert I meant when he wrote in his memoirs, on his return from Spitsbergen: *"Never had I experienced sailing with such emotion, never had I probed so deeply into human nature"*.

Thank you.