

# Closing remarks



**B**orn and raised in rural Slovenia, Janez Potočnik spent his childhood in close contact with nature. He studied economics and, though not a member of a political party, he became an advisor to the country's prime minister and then Slovenian Minister for European Affairs. This led him on to the international stage, as he explains: "I was chosen to lead the Negotiating Team for the Accession of Slovenia to the EU and later nominated as European Commissioner by the Slovenian government. I was Commissioner for Science and Research from 2005-2010, and I've been Environment Commissioner since 2010."

In that time, Janez has become an advocate for 'new environmentalism'

and the circular economy. According to him: "If 'old' environmentalism could be described as being about

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campaigning on various issues and attempting to force businesses to change, 'new' environmentalism recognises that innovation is essential and that it is businesses that

will provide it. We need to change the way we produce and consume goods, so we move from a linear to a circular economy. Like this, we will not only become more resource efficient, but we will gain new jobs. For that we need everyone – governments, industry, consumers and producers, to play a part."

Janez explains that the priorities for the EC in terms of the environment over the coming years are set out in the 7th Environment Action Programme, which will be used to guide environment policy up to 2020. The aim is to enhance Europe's

features are: protecting natural capital; supporting resource efficiency and turning the EU into a competitive low-carbon economy; and tackling environment-related pressures and risks to health and wellbeing, such as air pollution and hazardous chemicals.

Having said in the past that the three 'I's – innovation, incentives and integration – are key to enabling a shift from the present linear model of intensive resource consumption to a circular model, Janez believes Horizon 2020 – an EU Research and Innovation programme with nearly €80 billion (£64 billion) of funding available over seven years (from 2014 to 2020), will drive these priorities forward. The funding is not exclusively for research related to environmental matters, as the programme is the financial instrument aimed at securing Europe's global competitiveness in general, but the environment definitely seems to be a key area of focus. Janez explains: "It is now in place, and it is helping companies innovate and invest in improving their resource efficiency. It focuses on taking great ideas from the lab to the market.

Resource efficiency does not come solely from technological and product innovation; it can also be achieved by developing different business models that are based on leasing or sharing, so we are trying to promote those as well.

“Regarding incentives for change, legislation is increasingly complemented by various market-based incentives that give businesses and consumers the right signals. Extending producer responsibility would affect the whole lifecycle of products, and move us away from a throwaway culture. People need incentives to repair products or use them longer. We also want to make sure that citizens can make informed choices. Better product labelling, about what resources products contain and their environmental impacts, would help.”

He adds: “When it comes to integration, we need to make [it] known that the circular economy model has huge growth potential. Valuable materials are leaking from our economies. In a world where demand and competition for finite and sometimes scarce resources will continue to increase, Europe can benefit economically from making better use of those resources. We’ll be trying to do that through the European Semester process [a yearly cycle of economic policy coordination] and the ongoing EU2020 review.”

Of course, the EU is made up of very different

countries, especially in economic terms, all doing something very different with their waste. In 2012, a ‘screening report’ looked into how member states manage their municipal waste. The report covered areas such as total waste recycled, disposal pricing, and infringements of European

to use – from landfill and incineration taxes and bans, producer responsibility schemes to ‘pay as you throw’ (PAYT) systems to promote waste prevention, reuse and recycling. He does note, however, that PAYT waste schemes, accompanied by effective public information campaigns, “have proved a

out that current legislation already requires member states to implement separate collection for plastic, metal, paper and glass by 2015 and that those materials represent between 40 and 50 per cent of municipal waste generated. In addition, he notes that biowaste, which is an additional obvious priority waste stream for recycling, amounts to between 30 and 40 per cent.

“The new target was set on the basis of the levels already being met in member states with high levels of recycling. The commission will support the efforts of all EU member states, especially those that are currently lagging behind. The ‘early warning’ procedure is intended to help anticipate difficulties of member states to achieve targets and to advise and assist them in getting on track. The commission has also proposed a range of specific measures to monitor progress and assess member states’ waste management plans, provide technical guidance and ensure the transfer of experience and good practices from best-performing to underperforming states.

“Projects to improve waste management will remain eligible for EU funding. The aim is to work closely with member states to ensure the optimal use of EU funds, with a priority given to investments and technical assistance related to waste prevention, reuse and recycling. The new LIFE Regulation (the

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legislation, showed startling differences across the EU. Many member states are still landfilling huge amounts of municipal waste, while others have comprehensive waste collection systems and bury less than five per cent of their waste in landfills. Based on these findings and known best practices, the EC prepared roadmaps with tailor-made recommendations for individual poor-performing countries on how to improve waste management using economic, legal and administrative tools, as well as EU structural funds.

Janez does maintain, however, that it is up to the individual member states to decide which measures

very effective way of reducing municipal waste and should be encouraged everywhere”.

He continues: “It is one of the key best practices that have worked well in places with high recycling rates, along with efficient and convenient separate collection schemes. A well-implemented PAYT scheme brings an immediate boost to recycling, not to mention a financial incentive for the citizen-sorter.”

Asked about the new, challenging 70 per cent recycling target (which caused such a stir in the UK when it was announced in July), Janez accepts that it’s ambitious, but says that it’s also realistic. He points



EU's funding instrument for the environment and climate action) also includes the possibility of funding projects in support of implementation of waste management policies."

And what of the UK's unique situation where co-mingled waste collections are used by many councils – how does the outgoing commissioner feel about the idea that separate waste collection is only applicable when it is technically, environmentally and economically practicable (TEEP)? Janez is clear that "co-mingled collection of more than one waste stream is acceptable only if the subsequent separation can achieve high-quality recycling similar to that achieved by separate collection".

He continues: "It is very much a question of the available separation technology. Practically, this usually excludes the collection of biowaste and other 'wet' waste fractions co-mingled with dry fractions such as paper. On the other hand, dry recyclables such as metal and plastic can be collected together if they are later separated to high-quality standards."

But what about energy from waste? Janez reiterates that waste prevention should always be the first priority, with disposal as the last resort. He explains that in the waste hierarchy, prevention is followed by reuse, recycling and recovery of waste, including incineration with energy recovery, with

disposal right at the bottom. But he says that incineration, when used to produce electricity, steam and heating, in a way that targets only the fraction of waste that cannot be recycled, and provided it is done under the right conditions, can be part of an advanced waste strategy.

Despite the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA) finding that incinerators operating in some EU states have the capacity to burn 'more than the non-recyclable waste generated', Janez says that although waste-to-energy plants are far from being a panacea, they need to be kept going even as waste volumes fall. "Eurostat statistics show that there is no overall overcapacity for incineration at the European scale, but that capacity

intensive treatment installations, like waste-to-energy facilities.

"We have just presented ambitious new plans to phase out landfilling and increase recycling to 70 per cent by 2030, which

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is not evenly spread, and some member states need to import waste that would otherwise have been buried in landfills in the country of origin. Investment strategies for waste management at territorial level need sufficient flexibility to ensure that recycling rates increase and that progressively less waste goes to landfill. And of course they need to avoid any lock-in effects or overcapacity in capital-

means that recycling should be given priority in any waste management strategy. The proposals should provide a clear and robust perspective to guide long-term investment strategies, shifting the focus to prevention, reuse and recycling. In the future, EU regional funds should focus on the first steps of the waste hierarchy, in line with targets the commission is proposing."

While time will tell whether Europe (and the UK) can manage its resources in as efficient a way as Janez envisages, there's no doubt that his tenure as Environment Commissioner has seen many vital steps forward when it comes to environmental issues. With his term now coming to an end, Janez points to the developments in the environment portfolio that he is proudest of: "Securing an international agreement to halt biodiversity loss at the Nagoya Summit is one. We have also made significant proposals on issues such as air quality, water and waste." Though he points out that, since the economic crisis of 2008, it has been a difficult time to be responsible for the environment: "In that context the greatest development was to put resource efficiency and the circular economy on the political agenda as a priority. Neither of those issues was on anyone's lips a few short years ago."