Article by Martin Bouygues published in Les Echos
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Energy transition: let's not put off the decisions

At a time when our country is emerging with difficulty from the crisis, we should not give in to the easy temptation of once again putting off the decisions about energy transition which need to be taken. There are many good reasons for taking prompt action, such as France's dependence on fossil fuels, growing fuel poverty among households, the objectives set by the European Council and the obsolescence of our existing building stock. The other one being that energy transition is a source of activity and growth. The next environmental conference must come up with a practical and realistic project, involving the whole of society and encouraging new lifestyles which give priority to wellbeing while using energy sparingly and efficiently.

The challenge facing us all is to unhitch economic growth from energy consumption. In order to achieve that goal, France can and must draw on its energy-efficiency expertise as a priority. We have some highly effective companies in this area.

The Bouygues group, which has cutting-edge skills in positive-energy buildings, eco-neighbourhoods, and smart grids, through Alstom, quite naturally feels especially concerned by the challenges of energy transition, as it has shown by renovating its own buildings and constructing new and remarkably energy-efficient ones.

The building industry in France, accounting for a quarter of France's greenhouse gas emissions, half its energy consumption and oil and gas imports worth more than €15 billion a year, is technically ready to meet the energy-efficiency challenge. The Grenelle environment laws have been particularly beneficial for new buildings.

French firms are now building some of the most energy-efficient structures in the world. However, the rate at which we renew our building stock is less than 1% a year, which is far from enough.

In order to continue what has been done for new buildings, the public authorities now need to introduce measures to speed up renovation of the existing stock. In doing so, they would send a particularly convincing anti-crisis message, creating thousands of skilled jobs that cannot be relocated elsewhere, improving the building stock while addressing the issue of fuel poverty, and cutting France's trade deficit by reducing fossil energy imports. If the government takes all these measures while also investing in both fundamental and applied research, it will encourage the emergence of French energy-efficiency champions. This is crucial at a time of talk about industrial renewal.

Several conditions must be met in order to achieve this collective goal. The future regulatory framework must accelerate the simplification of overlapping legal standards; government policy must also be stable so that players can take a long-term view. Building is a long-cycle industry and all those involved (construction professionals, manufacturers, landlords, private individuals, training institutions, etc.) must be able to see the road ahead so that they can invest without qualms.

We must also understand that without some coercive measures, targeting the most energy-intensive public and private buildings, nothing will change. In order to be accepted without resistance, such measures will of course have to go hand-in-hand with innovative financing so that players find an interest in the long-term gains generated by their investment. The right balance will need to be struck between curbing CO_2 emissions, reducing the energy bill and ensuring the competitiveness of French industry. Households, already under considerable strain, will join this virtuous circle if it means they do not financially undermine their future living conditions.

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