

**Interview:** Stefania Prestigiacomo

# ‘There’s a new spirit at the international table’

*It’s an uphill path for climate negotiations on the way to Copenhagen. In this interview with EER, Stefania Prestigiacomo, Italy’s 42-year-old minister for the environment, takes stock of the two staging posts held in Italy – one in her Sicilian home town – and outlines Italy’s new approach to climate change. ‘In the past, environmental demagoguery triumphed over hard fact.’*

| by James Osborne

With Italy holding the presidency of the Group of Eight, Environment Minister Stefania Prestigiacomo has had the chance to help pilot international climate change negotiations towards a global accord in December. She presided personally over the G8 Environment Ministers’ Meeting, held in her hometown of Syracuse, Sicily, in late April. In July, the G8 Summit in the earthquake-struck town of L’Aquila, near Rome, coincided with a meeting of the Major Economies Forum on climate change.

Given Italy’s important role, Danish Climate and Energy Minister Connie Hedegaard had urged Prestigiacomo and the rest of Italy’s government to make sure real steps forward were taken at these meetings to ensure a successful outcome in Copenhagen. But reactions have been mixed: while some applauded the commitment by industrialised nations to reduce their emissions by at least 80% by 2050 (although against an unspecified baseline year), Ban Ki-moon, secretary general of the United Nations, described the efforts as “insufficient”.

In this interview with EER, Prestigiacomo took time during her summer vacation to take stock of the climate change negotiations and explain what Italy is doing to make up lost time on its Kyoto Protocol targets. She also outlined why she is leading Italy in taking a firmer stance in negotiating climate commitments beyond 2012.

[How would you sum up the climate negotiations during the Italian presidency of the G8? What were the make-or-break issues?](#)

I believe that in the last few months of intense diplomatic work some important steps have been made. This road to Copenhagen – which started at the G8 Environment Ministers’ Meeting in Syracuse, continued with the Major Economies Forum and then arrived at the G8 Summit at L’Aquila – isn’t finished yet but some important areas of agreement have been marked out.

The most delicate diplomatic puzzle isn’t a question of numbers for emission reductions but the mechanisms for reaching them. The dissemination of low-carbon technologies is a key issue,

*'It isn't a question of numbers for emission reductions but the mechanisms for reaching them'*

one we raised at Syracuse and which is in many respects at the heart of the negotiations. In fact, only if emerging and developing countries can get the energy they need for their growth by employing technologies with low greenhouse gas emissions will they be able to sign up to a global accord. An agreement that goes in this direction implies an accord that is also financial in nature and addresses the governance of financing.

**What can you tell us about how things went “behind the scenes”?**

It's rather similar at all these major summits. Everyone has non-negotiable points; there are always problems that arise at the last minute and put the whole negotiation in doubt; and then there are delicate mediations at the 11th hour that manage to bridge the gaps. In this regard, the summits of the last few months have been no exception. Of course, there has been

## *‘The agreement at L’Aquila was a result of extraordinary historic significance’*

a lot of curiosity and interest, especially at Syracuse, about the positions on climate issues of the new US administration, positions that were expressed for the first time at a major international gathering on that occasion.

**What chances do you see for an ambitious and wide-ranging accord in December?**

It's hard to make forecasts. The months ahead will be very intense. For sure, there's a new spirit at the international table: the new US position and Obama's commitment on these issues carry great weight, the openings by the Chinese and Indians are significant. There's a lot of work to do and we will work at it.

**In contrast with the substantial impasse we saw at the UN talks in Bonn in June, how important was the role of the G8, together with the major developing countries? At what point was most progress made?**

The climate agreement reached at L'Aquila was a result of extraordinary historic significance. For the first time in history, the world's most industrialised countries and the developing nations that will be the major players of tomorrow laid down black on white their commitment to limiting greenhouse gas emissions so as not to exceed an increase in global temperatures of 2 degrees by 2050.

At L'Aquila, western countries sent out important signals towards an agreement at Copenhagen, by giving themselves a higher target – cutting emissions by 80% - compared with the reduction of 50% required of all the world's countries and by announcing a doubling of funds for investment in low-carbon technologies. And the G8 Summit at L'Aquila confirmed the stance taken at Syracuse according to which it is precisely low-carbon technologies that represent the key instrument that

will ensure environmentally sustainable growth for poor and developing countries and allow us to reach the global target of cutting emissions by 50% by 2050.

**Turning to Italy, you are a long way short of the emissions target imposed by Europe's burden sharing agreement: you need a reduction of 5.6% from 1990 levels but the European Environment Agency shows Italian emissions up 10% as of 2006. With time running out, is there any way Italy will meet its target?**

Italy is behind and there will be a price to pay for underestimating our target. We need to catch up on lost time with a policy approach that is oriented in general towards energy saving and efficiency. We need to modernise our energy system by substituting or “greening” our most polluting plants and we need to boost renewable energy sources.

We have launched a series of programmes in the last few months. Most recently, in July, the “Pact for the Environment” marked a change of tack in our strategy to fight greenhouse gases and pollution. This is a major agreement for sustainable development in our country that brings together the government and 11 big Italian industrial groups, but it's also open to other public or private organisations.

The value of the pact lies in the way we are boldly assuming our joint responsibilities over the issue of the environment and in the choice by distinguished representatives of Italy's business community to be protagonists in this challenge, making public commitments that are agreed upon with the government and part of a coherent and shared national plan.

The Pact aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in a way that marries environmental protection with economic growth and to promote technological innovation, which is considered a central element of sustainable growth.

**What does that mean in practice?**

Our objectives will be pursued with two instruments. Firstly, in order to overcome part of the financial difficulties that are still hindering the spread of renewable energy sources and energy efficiency, there will be a 600 million-euro rotating fund, which will be able to trigger 3 billion euros of investments.

We have also signed voluntary framework agreements with the companies in which they commit themselves to invest in the environmental sector. The accords already signed – and more will follow – with these 11 companies that have joined the Pact foresee 12 billion euros of investment.

According to our initial estimates, this Pact with its rotating fund and the voluntary accords will reduce by 25% the gap we have to make up for the Kyoto Protocol, which today amounts to about 30 million tons of CO<sub>2</sub> a year.

### What does the Kyoto Protocol mean for the Italian economic system – both in terms of costs as well in terms of business opportunities?

The costs only for new plants that will come on stream between 2009 and 2012 have recently been estimated at more than 800 million euros. Then we may face European fines, which would be hefty. The fact that Italy in February 2008 (under the previous government of Romano Prodi, ed.) accepted emission quotas that were clearly below the demand we were seeing has burdened our national system today with heavy economic costs but without providing any benefit for the environment.

During the negotiations on the Climate & Energy Package for the years 2013-2020 (carried out by the current Berlusconi government, ed.) we managed to get our point of view accepted as regards environmental protection, equity and national competitiveness.

Italy today needs energy – more clean energy. We therefore need to continue – or, rather, to accelerate the process of upgrading and replacing old plants with ones that are less polluting. It's a mechanism backed by the government and that the Environment Ministry is supporting with an incredible acceleration of its permitting activity while at the same time keeping intact guarantees and rigour on environmental protection.

### What lessons has Italy learned in the 12 years since the Kyoto Protocol was drawn up and what do you want to avoid in a new global accord or in a Kyoto II post-2012?

Italy, like other countries, has a productive system with its own peculiarities, which cannot be forgotten in the course of an international negotiation in which everyone is trying to reach an accord but also to defend their own national interests. In the past, the logic of environmental demagoguery triumphed over hard fact. Unsustainable commitments were made that haven't benefited the environment but have weighed our country down with extremely heavy burdens. This is an approach that we rightly turned on its head during the negotiations on the Climate & Energy Package last autumn, when we reached an equitable and joint agreement.

In general, I think we will get the best results for the environment and for our country's development if we stop seeing the fight against climate change as a system for allocating penalties, as happened in the past, but instead as a major opportunity for development. That means not hampering economic growth but having the ability to manage it, directing it towards a sustainable development, the development of the future. ■

## Who is Stefania Prestigiacomo?

*Born into a Sicilian family with local industrial interests, Stefania Prestigiacomo was elected president of the young entrepreneurs' association of her home town of Syracuse at the age of 23 and four years later entered Parliament for the Forza Italia party created by the current prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi. She was minister for equal opportunities in Berlusconi's governments of 2001-2006, one of the youngest people to hold a ministerial post in the history of the Italian republic. Now aged 42, she has been Italy's environment minister since her appointment by Berlusconi in May 2008. Prestigiacomo has worked hard to erase the Environment Ministry's reputation as a barrier to economic development, inherited from her predecessor Alfonso Pecoraro Scanio, the former president of the Green Party who vetoed all manner of infrastructure projects. Since she took over in May 2008, Prestigiacomo has ensured 280 environmental impact procedures have been closed, 150 of them a backlog inherited from Pecoraro Scanio. She is keen for the ministry to become known instead for the bureaucratic efficiency often invoked as a key goal of the Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's government.*

*She is married with a son and has a degree in public administration.*



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