

WORD OF WELCOME

■ MARGARET ARCHER, PASS PRESIDENT

Good morning everybody and welcome from the two Academies. We will start with the more senior, the Academy of Sciences, and then our newcomer, the parvenu, the Academy of Social Sciences, and it's always a pleasure when the two get together, especially on – well, we only get together on important topics. We've had a very good workshop on education together, now we are addressing sustainability and the whole programme, for which we must thank our three organisers, is about the issue of sustainability, so thank you very much to Ram – I'm told I'm allowed, I must call him Ram, because I will mispronounce his name otherwise, so forgive me for this – to Partha Dasgupta, on behalf of the Academy of Social Sciences and to Archbishop Roland Minnerath who, as usual, is the faithful source of continuity in our Academies and proceedings.

I think the only thing I want to say, apart from welcome, is very, very little about the novelty of the problem of sustainability. It is a late 20th century issue, it's a millennial issue, but it does raise two interesting questions to me, one about why it is so late, at least in human history, that we have a problem of sustainability. Up to 200 years ago we had David Ricardo, the economist, talking about the bounty of nature, that natural abundance was here to stay and, in true enlightenment fashion, man could become the master of all things natural. And amazingly, of course, this view which only Malthus, in one sense, challenged, with his contrast between the geometrical growth of population and the arithmetic growth of means of subsistence, only Malthus really challenged this seriously within the 19th century. So we all know the list of our unfriendly human dealings with the planet and its constituents on which we depend.

There is one thing that interests me, and this is the last point I want to make. In our discussions and in the papers I have had the chance to read so far, the whole emphasis falls, and rightly, in many ways, upon the unfriendly dealings of humankind with nature in all its aspects, but in this list, which I will not repeat – we all know it, although some people, as we well know, still deny it – one thing stood out to me. The human factor is treated as a constant: it's our institutions, it's the things we develop, it's our technology, our means of production. These things change but humankind is treated as some kind of constant in the equation which, and maybe this is the next problem on the human agenda, is not a constant any longer. We have ide-

ological movements for human enhancement techniques, and ideology which specifically aims to develop human capacities above and beyond their current average when humankind is treated as a natural kind. We have technological developments such as the ‘captors’, the implanted chips, the GPS systems, that human beings carry around with them, that enable new capacities for social control, social domination, surveillance, knowing exactly where all of us are all of the time, and if you put all of these together they’re going to give rise not, I think, to the cyborg that some of the more extreme theorists are trying to frighten us with but, certainly, we cannot assume that the needs, requirements, capacities, abilities of the human species are unchanging: they’re changing from day to day.

So what I hope is that there will be interchange and exchange between the two Academies on these crucially important issues, crucial for our very survival, and that, in a sense, we will not end up in this plenary meeting like the village dance where the same phenomenon seems to happen throughout the world, girls on one side, boys on the other side, and the dance is nearly over before they decide that they will get introduced. So I will pass over to Professor Arber, to greet you from the point of view of the Academy of Sciences.