

Your Royal Highness,
Ministers,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Friends,

Our most sincere thanks to you, Your Royal Highness, for your presence among us today. As the Honorary Chairman of the IPF, you have supported us since the beginning, in our aim to create this essential bridge between science and people. Your support is obvious testimony of the seriousness with which you take this project, and your enthusiasm strengthens our determination to take our future in hand.

My thanks also go to all of you: I know you understand I cannot mention all of you by name here today.

Thank you, all – most sincerely, because without the thousands of people who have already joined our cause, this project would not be in the process of coming to fruition.

Facing up to the climate challenge is – for sure – one of the great ‘works in progress’ of the 21st century. Our ability to respond, as well as our desire and the extent and speed of that response, will determine the economic survival not only of Western society, but also of our planetary ecosystems.

An extraordinary example of this vital combined effort can be seen in the research base that we are building together now. This base will be the first of its kind to produce zero emissions, making it a unique model of how energy should be used in the Antarctic.

This project first came into being as an IPF initiative, Public Utility Foundation supported from the outset by Benjamin de Rothschild and Belgacom. The preliminary study of the new base could be started with the support of Louis Michel, at the time Minister of Foreign Affairs. And it can be made true today thanks to the commitment of Thomas Leysen, CEO of Umicore, and of Marc Saverijs, CEO of CMB: it is with them and their successors that the IPF has been able to find the bulk of its funding.

In view of the relevance of the project, as well as its scientific and international impact, the Belgian Federal Government also has agreed to support it. It will ensure the operation of the base in the future as part of a polar secretariat managed by the public and the IPF. It will contribute towards funding part of the equipment required for the base to conduct its activities, and it will provide new financial resources for Antarctic research programmes.

Our thanks go to Mr Verwilghen, Minister for Scientific Policy, who in conjunction with Mr Philippe Mettens and his entire department, has supported and backed this project at every stage.

Thanks also to Mr Flahaut, Minister of Defence, for having understood the universal scope of this project and for subscribing to it so quickly with all your people. Your support and collaboration are essential for the long-term success of the mission undertaken by this new Belgian base in the Antarctic.

And thank you, Mr Reynders, Minister of Finance, for providing active support to this flagship project – with the National Lottery, first of all, but also to the Royal Mint, for this magnificent 10€ commemorative coin that will be unveiled shortly.

So, why do we build a new scientific base in Antarctica, at the very southern tip of our planet?

First of all because we want to know what is going on up there. We want to get to know better the threat facing us and how it might become more serious in the years to come. We are looking for answers to the problem of energy associated with climate change and the growth of the world’s population.

That’s the ‘science’ angle. Climatology and the earth sciences are recent sciences and the climate is the result of extremely complex phenomena. The Antarctic ice, to give but one example, acts as a memory of climate conditions in the past, and studying the past helps us to understand the present and prepare for the future. Examining the ice is a ‘must’ for adjusting our relationship with nature in the best possible way and estimating its ability to tolerate the emission of greenhouse gases – and hence the production of energy on which our whole comfort and wellbeing depend today.

A second reason is that building the first research base in Antarctica that operates 100% with renewable energy – the first “zero emission” base – demonstrates that Belgium has the knowledge and the ability, as well as the technology, to do here what we can do far away over there in extreme conditions. This base will stimulate technological innovation and sustainable development initiatives.

And because finally we wanted to position this project towards the future and future generations. Its name, “Princess Elisabeth”, is the best proof of this. The new base will also provide an opportunity to communicate on a permanent basis with a wide array of stakeholders – ranging from businesses to schools – so that we can continuously make the public aware of the stakes involved with the climate and the solutions that we need to find. This includes solutions that are already available today and those we have yet to invent.

While I have always wanted my expeditions to be an extension of the achievements of my predecessors who carved out the history of polar exploration, I owe it to the scientific community for having discovered the absolute necessity of polar scientific research.

As the repository of the world’s climate archives, the Antarctic is unique, and conducting research there is both essential and indispensable if we want to understand the overall climate of the planet. It is also vital in our search to find the answers to the awkward questions being posed now by global warming.

Only science is capable of showing us the correct direction to follow. And right now it is urging us to review both the way we approach manufacturing and the way in which we use energy.

Analysing deep cores of Antarctic ice confirms us that the temperature of our air is linked to the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. It tells us that CO₂, the main greenhouse gas, comes essentially from the use and exploitation of fossil fuels. And it tells us that only by reducing greenhouse gases, and CO₂ in particular, will we be able to find an answer to the warming process that is currently underway.

The Earth as a planet is not in danger. It will without doubt adapt, sooner or later, to the changes “we” are imposing upon it but we can no longer be sure that “we” will be able to adapt to these changes.

However today, I’m optimistic, as I’m convinced we can make the necessary dramatic reductions in emissions, we can find the ability to adapt to the changes that are occurring and at the same time restructure our economy, we can rethink the way society is organised and create new jobs in the future.

And this is precisely what we are interested in when building the new research base in the Antarctic. Our aim is to demonstrate that we, in this country, have the ability to work together to build the first base in the world that has 100% zero emissions – and that we are capable of laying the foundations of economic and social renewal.

This is also what this project is all about and the purpose of staging this event here in Brussels, the capital of Europe: we need “to show” that things are possible. And that we can be daring.

Daring is what we need. Daring, because time is short. Daring, because that is exactly what Adrien de Gerlache demonstrated when he set out for the Antarctic from here 110 years ago, with an international team of scientists.

And finally, daring, because Belgium was one of the twelve nations to sign the Antarctic Treaty in 1959, two years after the last International Polar Year, and we now need to show again that we are capable of setting an example during this current International Polar Year.

We need to understand that Antarctica is both a model and a source of great hope.

It is a model, because 48 nations have reached an agreement on how this continent should be governed. Protected by the most stringent environmental contract the planet has ever seen, this great southern land – twice the size of the United States – is totally dedicated to science and peace.

Establishing a new scientific base at the foot of the Sor Rondane Mountains is a way of completing the necessary scientific observation network formed by the other stations that already exist on that continent. Returning to Antarctica in this manner also enables us to assume full responsibility for the daring that Belgium first showed 50 years ago.

The Antarctic is also a hope, because the unique and shared manner in which this continent is governed shows us that we can work together to find an answer to the climate challenges that face us.

It is a hope, because we need to dream of a possible new world if we want to be able to build it and commit ourselves to it.

This base, which His Royal Highness Prince Philippe will reveal to us in a few moments, has now been partially assembled so that a full-scale verification test can be conducted.

This test will make sure that before we set out, the way the base will be assembled in the Antarctic works properly and has been thought of from every angle. We are running this test, because in the Antarctic, there is no back-up workshop just around the corner.

The base will then be dismantled, beginning next Monday, packed into containers and shipped, first to Cape Town and then to Antarctica, where it will arrive in mid-December.

The Foundation's specialists and staff will set off at the beginning of November to prepare the ground and the foundations, as well as build the 700 m² of storage space that we have not pre-assembled here. They will then transport the 180 tonnes of materials that make up the station from the Antarctic coastline to the actual construction site, 190 km inland.

This coming winter, over 50 people will take part in building the base, which will have its official inauguration in February 2009, at the end of the International Polar Year. Each one of these 50 people will devote their time to making the work of the entire team operating in conjunction with the IPF and its financial partners come true. These partners include:

Umicore and CMB first and foremost.

Then Alpro, Dexia, Electrabel-Suez, P&V, Quick, Schneider-Electric and Transcor Astra Group, and of course all the others.

I would like, once again, to pay tribute to their commitment, their generosity and their farsightedness.

It is with all of them that we have started to develop this project, and it's only by working together that we will give this project its real *raison d'être*.

The project is an ambitious one and will require significant funding; we still need to find 3 million € and to do so, we are counting in particular on funding from the public and the commitments that the authorities will not fail to make to help us achieve that target.

It is for this reason also that it's important for you to be here today.

Because support from the people will show us that they understand what we are doing and that building a bridge between science and people is not a pie-in-the-sky notion.

Because together we will affirm our determination to take our destiny in both hands and show our leaders exactly what our priorities are in the face of the climate change challenge.

And, finally, together we will write a new page in the History of Belgium – a page of which we can be truly proud.

Alain Hubert,

Brussels, September the 5th 2007