

EMBRACING ALL VOICES TO DRIVE PROGRESS.

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In politics, media, and our social feeds, divides are widening. People are increasingly more entrenched in their beliefs and unwilling to consider the views of others. In such a fragmented environment, in which the loudest voices often prevail, it is easy to lose sight of what is really at stake—and of who is impacted most by any given issue. For policymaking, in particular, this represents a risk because it impedes a fundamental function of government: to represent and look out for the interests of the people who would otherwise be underserved in a “free market” environment.

Discord has become the norm, but it need not be. We are witnessing a perfect storm of post-pandemic shocks, extremism, and existential challenges—not least, climate change. If we are to meet these challenges and emerge stronger as a society on the other side, we have no choice but to restore constructive dialogue and consensus-building as our default mentality. By devising better policies that bridge divides and take into account disparate viewpoints, all of us—governments, the private sector, civil society—can decisively shape our future for the better.

Society expects nothing less. In a new international survey of over 44,000 adults in 22 countries, conducted by independent research firm Povaddo and commissioned by Philip Morris International, 9 in 10 respondents stated that to find solutions to the biggest problems facing the world, leaders need to consider all perspectives, even when there are strong disagreements.

If we are to address the challenges we face in a meaningful way, a more balanced and inclusive approach is required. This means making policy decisions that consider first the people who are impacted the most, ensuring their voices are heard and their needs are met. And then bringing to the table all parties—scientists, private companies, innovators, subject experts—who can help tackle the issues at hand.

One might assume this is standard procedure. It is not. Particularly on polarizing issues such as tobacco, the public

debate is rarely inclusive of all perspectives. According to the Povaddo survey, more than three-quarters of nicotine consumers (77 percent) feel that their voices have been excluded for too long and that a new approach to regulation is needed. Today, smoke-free products exist which, while they are not risk-free and provide nicotine that is addictive, are a far better choice than cigarettes for those adults who would otherwise continue to smoke. Where there is no regulation that enables access to these smoke-free products—and to accurate information about them—adult smokers continue to be denied the opportunity to switch to a better alternative. This limitation is even more pronounced for adult smokers with limited purchasing power and who today, suffer most by rising inflation. If they don’t quit altogether, the more obvious choice for them may become a cheaper cigarette (often procured through the illicit market) rather than a scientifically substantiated better alternative.

We can and must do better. That must start with insisting on commonsense policies that improve the outlook for all. The best way forward is to find a middle ground on which constructive debate can begin. I would argue that science is an obvious starting point. Scientific evidence and facts can become our shared language, our compass to finding consensus on the most critical issues—precisely as 85 percent of the respondents to the Povaddo survey demand for decisions that impact society and public health. It all starts with listening—to reliable sources of information, to people across the aisle, to the communities and countries where informed policymaking has transformed an abstract concept into measurable progress.

Today, we have the know-how, technology, and resources required to respond to many of our global challenges. By listening to all voices and embracing science as the basis for decision-making, we can overcome the impasse of division and enable progress toward a future that better serves us all.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Grégoire Verdeaux".

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