Twenty-eight years ago, the English scientist Timothy Berners-Lee, then working at the European research facility CERN, built a prototype for a development that was to revolutionise global communications. As he put it succinctly at the time: “I just had to take the hypertext idea and connect it to the TCP and DNS ideas and – ta-da! – the World Wide Web.”

It took more than a decade for Berners-Lee’s invention to reach commercialisation, enabled by the parallel improvement in microprocessor capacity and increasing PC sales. In 1994 he founded the World Wide Web Consortium at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Boston, USA. The United States had been a step behind in the development of the web, but won the race to global commercial exploitation of a European invention. Let us not see a repetition of history with renewables.

No longer unchallenged
The rest of the world is still a step behind Europe in developing wind energy technology. In 2007, two out of every three wind turbines supplied to the €25 billion global market were produced by a European manufacturer. Europe is in that favourable position because a handful of governments and the European Union had the foresight over the past two decades to provide the necessary frameworks for investment in a promising future technology.

Denmark took the lead in the 1990s and Germany and Spain followed. The European Union passed the world’s most important piece of legislation for renewable energy in 2001, setting a target for 21% of the EU’s electricity demand to come from renewables by 2010.

During that time, Europe was unchallenged when it came to developing policies for both climate change and renewable energy. We are no longer unchallenged. The rest of the world is catching up fast.

Time to cash in
These past European achievements are particularly impressive given the time-consuming and complicated process of reaching consensus on legislation among 27 independent member states. But the proposed EU Climate and Energy package, setting targets for 2020, has been under way for two years now, and has still not been agreed. A total of €180 billion is going to be invested worldwide in wind energy over the next five years, according to the Global Wind Energy Council. We are at the starting line of an industrial development similar to the car industry in the past. It is time for Europe to cash in on its long-term investment.

Up to now, the United States has been dragging a set of very heavy feet over effective climate and renewables policies. But the US and other regions of the world have an advantage: they can react faster than the EU.

Within days of being elected President, Barack Obama announced a new energy plan which includes measures to “create five million new jobs by strategically investing $150 billion over the next ten years to catalyse private efforts to build a clean energy future”. The plan also includes “an economy-wide cap-and-trade system to reduce carbon emissions by the amount scientists say is necessary”.

The EU member states, meanwhile, have already rejected an emissions trading scheme covering all types of emissions and are currently considering watering down a Commission proposal for 100% auctioning of emission allowances for the power sector from 2013. The Obama cap-and-trade policy will require all pollution credits to be auctioned, ensuring that “all industries pay for every ton of emissions they release, rather than giving these valuable emission rights away to companies on the basis of their past pollution”.

Fast competitors
The competitors are at the gate and their weapons are strong climate and renewables policies. That is good news for the wind energy sector. But Europe needs to put its house in order, if we are to reap the commercial benefits of our 20 year commitment to renewables, by passing an ambitious and clear Climate and Energy package before the end of the year.

With the World Wide Web we were ahead, but stumbled at the starting line of global commercialisation. If we rest on the laurels of yesterday’s successful renewable and climate policies, history will be repeated and European jobs and welfare benefits worth billions of Euros will be lost to other regions. The starter has raised his gun. EU member states: please get in line. It is Europe’s future welfare you are gambling with.