

World Environment Day 5 June 2008

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Panel Discussion - How do we Decarbonize the world?

To mark World Environment Day on 5 June, which this year was hosted by New Zealand, a distinguished panel of experts convened at Victoria University in Wellington to address issues surrounding climate change. Approximately 400 people attended the panel discussion (one of the largest gatherings in recent times for an IPS-related event), thus necessitating the use of two lecture theatres in Rutherford House.

The focus of the discussion was the urgency of the need to “decarbonize the world”. The discussion was chaired by Chris Laidlaw. The panelists were: Dr Rajendra Pachauri, Chairman of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) who led the IPCC team which was awarded the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize for their work; President Anote Tong of the Pacific nation of Kiribati who is also an economist; Achim Steiner Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP); and New Zealand Minister with responsibility for climate change, Hon David Parker.

Achim Steiner emphasized the seriousness of the threat to the global community from climate change and said that global warming was a stark reality which needed urgent action. He argued that we have become habituated to dependence on fossil fuels but the world community should realize that we don't have to continue doing things in the same way as we did in the past. He said that it is a myth that economics and environmental imperatives were pulling in opposite directions and that technology exists to make significant changes to emissions if it is implemented, as for example in the case of the low energy light bulb. He cited the remarkable growth in investment in renewable energy world wide (~US\$160 billion in 2007) and explained that in Germany it had taken just seven years, following innovative legislation, to enable business to seize the opportunities and deliver remarkable growth in low-carbon energy supplies (particularly wind and solar). He said that any feeling that there is plenty of time to combat global warming is wrong. We have taken twenty years already to recognize the threat and now is the time to act.

President Anote Tong of Kiribati said that he wanted to highlight the human dimension of the climate change problem. He explained that many Pacific countries were the first to be affected by the rise in sea level caused by global warming. Low-lying atolls had an average height of just 2m above sea level and were typically only 50-100m across. “I wish to pass on the emotion of the threat we feel” he said. “It is not about economic growth, it is about the survival of people”.

President Tong explained that his people have to accept the worst scenario “that we have to find somewhere for our people to go”. “We would like to be able to relocate with dignity.” He hoped that the world would realize that global warming was also a moral challenge and that, although it was too late now for many low-lying countries, hearing about their plight might induce action before other countries were similarly affected. He said that the solution to the global warming problem cannot be dealt with alone but that we must jointly address it. He had no doubt that there is goodwill among people, and that New Zealand was part of the solution, not only to help those who fall first to the

effects of global warming, but also in its leadership role in tackling global warming worldwide.

Dr Pachauri said that the world community has to realize that change is essential and that we will have no choice but to adapt to the several types of impacts that are occurring as warming progresses. He said that tackling climate change is urgent, but the cost of mitigation is relatively low (estimated as a mere 3% GDP loss in 2050). Moreover, there are many co-benefits such as increased energy security, reduced pollution and potential for employment in rural areas. He said that the way to bring about a shift to a low carbon economy was collaboration between governments and industry, plus a mix of regulatory measures. The moment there was an appropriate price on carbon, it would stimulate industry to deliver low-carbon solutions and give incentives to consumers. He commended New Zealand for being proactive and for taking the lead in tackling climate change.

David Parker said that the issue of climate change and its impacts was complex but “if we fail to tackle it, misery for millions will result”. He provided a perspective on New Zealand’s actions against climate change saying that New Zealand is moving along the path to sustainability faster than almost any other country in the world and was setting trends which other countries could follow. With its endowments in renewable resources he believed that New Zealand can tackle climate change successfully and that its success would inspire other countries. He said “I am proud of the steps that New Zealand has taken so far. We have been resolute in pursuing mitigation policies, which has not necessarily been popular politically, and we are getting our emissions under control affordably”.

Chris Laidlaw then opened the floor for questions from the audience. Topics in the ensuing open discussion ranged widely, covering concerns about methane emissions from meat production, whether human beings were to cause of the global warming problem or not, whether an international price for carbon would actually be possible, the responsibility of politicians to provide leadership and to take difficult decisions, the need for a global solution to rise above national interests and that it is the atmosphere that needs “decarbonisation” not the world as a whole.

The event was recorded by Radio NZ and the Supreme Master TV network. Media representatives from a number of other organizations were also present.

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