

Opening address by Minister Jan Pronk
President-designate to the sixth Conference of the Parties
to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

The Hague, the Netherlands, 13 November 2000.

Your Majesty, Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the Sixth Conference of Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.

A formidable task awaits us in the next two weeks here in The Hague. Negotiators from all Parties to the UN Convention on climate change will need to take the final steps towards ratification of the Kyoto Protocol and to bring into effect the obligations under the Convention itself.

There are plenty of reasons to take on climate change now. Yes, the climate *is* changing. Of course it is. It has been changing ever since the earth was formed, fluctuating between ice ages and world-wide heat waves. But in all of human history, the climate has never changed as fast as it is changing today. The evidence is mounting. Scientists tell us that what was merely a suspicion a decade ago is now a practical certainty. The greenhouse gases we produce are having visible impact on the environment.

There's nothing unclear about their forecasts or the consequences they predict. Islands and coastlines disappearing underwater, more extreme weather patterns, heat waves, rivers bursting their banks, drought, water shortages, failed harvests, ecosystems damaged beyond repair and diseases spreading. Dr Robert T. Watson, the chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, will soon tell you more about the science side. Needless to say, there are still doubts and uncertainties. After all, no one can look into the future. But the scientific community agrees that the risks are present and that they threaten the entire world.

Nature seems to have given us all the warnings we need. Floods, mudslides and windstorms are all getting more frequent. Science can't say to what extent we humans are responsible for this. But it doesn't have to. Indeed, it would be irresponsible to wait for absolute scientific proof. In 1992 in Rio, we agreed on a Precautionary Principle, now found in Article 3, paragraph 3 of the UN Convention on Climate Change.

I quote: "The Parties should take precautionary measures to anticipate, prevent or minimise the causes of climate change and mitigate its adverse effects. Where there are threats of serious and irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty should not be used as a reason for postponing such measures."

Let me point out that the effects of climate change *are* irreversible - for ecosystems, agriculture, water supply and health. The less we do and the longer we wait to tackle the roots of this problem, the more serious the effects and the greater the strain on the resilience of people, plants and animals. It's ironic that developing countries, which are least of all to blame for this predicament, will suffer the most devastating consequences. And on top of that, it is they whose economic resilience is lowest. The damage caused by climate change aggravates the socio-economic inequalities that already exist. The poorest people often live in the toughest locations in the world, the driest, the least productive, the most vulnerable. They are the first hit and the least able to defend themselves.

As we think about the role of science and the application of the Precautionary Principle, the Montreal Protocol is a good example to follow. In the early 1980s, driven by purely theoretical considerations, negotiators concluded a binding treaty to phase out substances that harm the ozone layer. Only in the late nineties did the decisive evidence come in, from sources like satellite and ground measurements, that the ozone layer *had been* damaged. It's a good thing we didn't wait. And we cannot wait on climate change either - or we will certainly live to regret it.

There are important links between climate change and other global environmental issues. Recent scientific research has shown that the enhanced greenhouse effect can slow down the recovery of the ozone layer by decades. Climate change speeds up desertification in areas that were dry to begin with. An unstable climate diminishes biodiversity. When we fight climate change we fight for the recovery of the ozone layer, we hold back desertification and we preserve biodiversity.

The international community has agreed that it must strive to prevent dangerous human interference with our climate. Scientists have forecast that we will ultimately need to cut greenhouse gas emissions by sixty per cent in order to reach this goal. That is a tremendous task.

The Kyoto Protocol is a first step. And a historic one. The Protocol is the first document in which industrialised countries have committed themselves to quantified agreements on limiting emissions of greenhouse gases. The aim is to reduce overall emissions by at least five per cent by 2010 (compared to 1990 levels). This will take an enormous effort, since the rich countries' emissions would otherwise increase by around twenty per cent over the same period. As a result the actual reduction for rich countries would be about twenty-five per cent.

Looking back at Kyoto, we can say that the negotiators there achieved an unmatched success. How often do international talks result in agreement about quantified targets in a fairly short time? It was nothing short of a miracle. But we also know how much *more* difficult it will be to agree on instruments than it was to agree on targets. Nevertheless, that is what we are here in The Hague to do. We must decide, individually and collectively, how to achieve those targets. This is what we've been talking about, constantly, in the three years since we met in Kyoto.

At this conference we need to make hard decisions. If we prolong negotiations and put off decisions, we risk seeing the targets that we have already set, slip out of our grasp.

- How credible will we look, if negotiations can't keep pace with climate change? Or if we trail behind events, while it is we who should be shaping them?
- How credible will we look, if our decisions only take into account the interests of rich people in rich countries, neglecting those of the poorest people in the poorest countries?
- How credible will we look, if we betray the trust that our nations have placed in their governments? Those governments made a commitment to tackle the dangers threatening the quality of life on earth. They reaffirmed this commitment at the United Nations' Millennium Summit just two months ago. This is their first opportunity to make good on it.

Together with the president of COP5, Minister Szyszko of Poland, I have met with many of the countries represented here in the past year. I have seen how vast the distances between their positions can be. There are many difficult issues we still need to make decisions about: adequate financial support for developing countries, the Kyoto mechanisms, the role of carbon dioxide sinks, the compliance regime and others. But for all of these issues I have seen that reasonable compromises are available. We don't have to think them up. What we have to do is make a principled, balanced and credible choice, and forge them into a whole.

Credible choices for the environment by reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Credible choices in the eyes of developing countries by supporting them, as they develop a sound policy for the future, and by protecting them from the consequences of unsustainable policies from the past. Credible choices in the eyes of the citizens of our nations. Credible also for future generations, yet unborn.

For there is such a thing as political credibility. We must continue to negotiate, but we must also understand that negotiations are a means to an end, not an end in themselves. It is time we showed that it *does* make sense to negotiate, that we are able to get results instead of locking horns, or deciding, as we have done time and again, to resume our talks later.

We need to negotiate with a willingness to give and take, to recognise each other's interests, to remain open-minded and to help each other. We need policy measures that are flexible and transparent, but we must stick to our targets. In our common interest. After all, it is in *my* interest if my neighbour achieves his target, and in his interest if I achieve mine. This requires confidence-building and a willingness on the part of all our countries to keep working together, to co-operate rather than compete.

It is time for us to show the world what public policy, co-operation, and market mechanisms can do for the environment. We need to bring negotiations to a successful close, so that we can ratify the Kyoto Protocol and start putting it into practice.

Thank you