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TEXT OF A SPEECH

MADE BY THE PRIME MINISTER

THE RT HON MARGARET THATCHER FRS MP

AT THE SECOND WORLD CLIMATE CONFERENCE

IN GENEVA

ON

TUESDAY 6 NOVEMBER 1990

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[Introduction]

Mr. Chairman, Your Majesty, President Koller, Distinguished Colleagues, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

May I begin by thanking Heads of Agencies and Organisations for sponsoring this Second World Climate Conference, and indeed all those connected with it. It is a most important event for all our countries and I wish you success in your endeavours.

Mr. Chairman, since the last World War, our world has faced many challenges, none more vital than that of defending our liberty and keeping the peace. Gradually and painstakingly we have built up the habit of international cooperation, above all through the United Nations. The extent of our success can be seen in the Gulf, where the nations of the world have shown unprecedented unity in condemning Iraq's invasion and taking the measures necessary to reverse it.

But the threat to our world comes not only from tyrants and their tanks. It can be more insidious though less visible. The danger of global warming is as yet unseen, but real enough for us to make changes and sacrifices, so that we do not live at the expense of future generations.

Our ability to come together to stop or limit damage to the world's environment will be perhaps the greatest test of how far we can act as a world community. No-one should under-estimate the imagination that will be required, nor the scientific effort, nor the unprecedented co-operation. We shall have to show statesmanship of a rare order. It's because we know that, we are here today.

[Man and Nature: out of balance]

For two centuries, since the Age of Enlightenment, we assumed that whatever the advance of science, whatever the economic development, whatever the increase in human numbers, the world would go on much the same. It was progress. And that was what we wanted.

Now we know that this is no longer true.

We have become more and more aware of the growing imbalance between our species and other species, between population and resources, between humankind and the natural order of which we are part.

In recent years, we have been playing with the conditions of the life we know on the surface of our planet. We have cared too little for our seas, our forests and our land. We have treated the air and the oceans like a dustbin. We have come to realise that man's activities and numbers threaten to upset the biological balance which we have taken for granted and on which human life depends.

We must remember our duty to Nature before it is too late. That duty is constant. It is never completed. It lives on as we breathe. It endures as we eat and sleep, work and rest, as we are born and as we pass away. The duty to Nature will remain long after our own endeavours have brought peace to the Middle East. It will weigh on our shoulders for as long as we wish to dwell on a living and thriving planet, and hand it on to our children and theirs.

[The importance of research]

I want to pay tribute to the important work which the United Nations has done to advance our understanding of climate change, and in particular the risks of global warming. Dr. Tolba and Professor Obasi deserve our particular thanks for their far-sighted initiative in establishing the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

The IPCC report is a remarkable achievement. It is almost as difficult to get a large number of distinguished scientists to agree, as it is to get agreement from a group of politicians. As a scientist who became a politician, I am perhaps particularly qualified to make that observation!

Of course, much more research is needed. We do not yet know all the answers. Some major uncertainties and doubts remain. No-one can yet say with certainty that it is human activities which have caused the apparent increase in global average temperatures. The IPCC report is very careful on this point. For instance, the total amount of carbon dioxide reaching the atmosphere each year from natural sources is some 600 billion tonnes, while the figure resulting from human activities is only 26 billion tonnes. In relative terms that is not very significant. Equally we know that the increases of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere date from the start of the industrial revolution. And we know that those concentrations will continue to rise if we fail to act.

Nor do we know with any precision the extent of the likely warming in the next century, nor what the regional effects will be. We cannot be sure of the role of clouds.

There is a continuing mystery about how atmospheric carbon, including the small extra contribution from human sources, is being absorbed: is most of it going into the ocean, as used to be thought? Or is it being increasingly absorbed by trees or plants, or soils, especially in the northern hemisphere? These are questions that need answers, sooner rather than later.

Global climate change within limits need not by itself pose serious problems - our globe has after all seen a great deal of climate change over the centuries. It is notable that the blue-green algae which dominated the Precambrian period at the dawn of life are still major components of the marine phytoplankton today. Despite the climate changes of many millions of years, these microbes have persisted on earth virtually unchanged, pumping out life-giving oxygen into the atmosphere and mopping up carbon dioxide.

The real dangers arise because climate change is combined with other problems of our age: for instance the population explosion;

- the deterioration of soil fertility;
- increasing pollution of the sea;
- intensive use of fossil fuel;
- and destruction of the world's forests, particularly those in the tropics.

Britain will continue to play a leading role in trying to answer the remaining questions, and to advance our state of knowledge of climate change. This year, we have established in Britain the Hadley Centre for Climate Prediction and Research for this purpose. We need to improve in particular our understanding of the effect of the oceans on our weather, improve too our capability to model climate change. I have seen for myself the outstanding work being done on both these subjects at the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, Colorado.

We must also make sure that research is carefully targeted. Too many people can do the same thing, and at the same time vital problems can be neglected. The task of global observation is immense. It will require a coordinated effort more ambitious than any attempted before, as the meeting of scientists and experts last week recognised.

[The need for precautionary action]

But the need for more research should not be an excuse for delaying much needed action. There is already a clear case for precautionary action at an international level. The IPCC tells us that we cannot repair the effects of past behaviour on our atmosphere as quickly and as easily as we might cleanse a stream. It will take, for example, until the second half of the next century, until the old age of my grandson, to repair the damage to the ozone layer above the Antarctic. And some of the gases we are adding to the global heat trap will endure in the Earth's atmosphere for just as long.

The IPCC tells us that, on present trends, the earth will warm up faster than at any time since the last ice age. Weather patterns could change so that what is now wet would become dry, and what is now dry would become wet. Rising seas could threaten the livelihood of that substantial part of the world's population which lives on or near coasts. The character and behaviour of plants would change, some for the better, some for worse. Some species of animals and plants would migrate to different zones or disappear for ever. Forests would die or move. And deserts would advance as green fields retreated.

Many of the precautionary actions that we need to take would be sensible in any event. It is sensible to improve energy efficiency and use energy prudently; sensible to develop alternative and sustainable sources of supply; sensible to replant the forests which we consume; sensible to re-examine industrial processes; sensible to tackle the problem of waste. I understand that the latest vogue is to call them 'no regrets' policies. Certainly we should have none in putting them into effect.

And our uncertainties about climate change are not all in one direction. The IPCC report is very honest about the margins of error. Climate change may be less than predicted. But equally it may occur more quickly than the present computer models suggest. Should this happen it would be doubly disastrous were we to shirk the challenge now. I see the adoption of these policies as a sort of premium on insurance against fire, flood or other disaster. It may be cheaper or more cost-effective to take action now than to wait and find we have to pay much more later.

[The need for environmental diplomacy]

We are all aware of the immense challenge. The enormity of the task is not a matter for pessimism. The problems which science has created science can solve, provided we heed its lessons. Moreover, we have already established a structure of international co-operation on the environment to deal with ozone depletion. For the first time ever, rich and poor nations alike set out together to save our planet from a serious danger. This painstaking work culminated in the historic agreement reached in London this year. That agreement is a real beacon of hope for the future.

The main focus in London was on protecting the ozone layer. But the agreement will have other consequences. We should not forget that CFCs are 10,000 times more powerful, molecule for molecule, than carbon dioxide as agents of global warming. But of the other greenhouse gases, carbon dioxide is by far the most extensive and contributes around half the manmade greenhouse warming. All our countries produce it. The latest figures which I have seen show that 26 per cent comes from North America, 22 per cent from the rest of the OECD, 26 per cent from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and 26 per cent from the less developed countries.

These figures underline why a joint international effort to curb greenhouse gases in general and carbon dioxide in particular is so important. There is little point in action to reduce the amounts being put into the atmosphere in one part of the world, if they are promptly increased in another. Within this framework the United Kingdom is prepared, as part of an international effort including other leading countries, to set itself the demanding target of bringing carbon dioxide emissions back to this year's level by the year 2005. That will mean reversing a rising trend before that date.

The European Community has also reached a very good agreement to stabilise emissions. I hope that Europe's example will help the task of securing world-wide agreement.

Targets on their own are not enough. They have to be achievable. Promises are easy. Action is more difficult. For our part, we have worked out a strategy which sets us on the road to achieving the target. We propose ambitious programmes both to promote energy efficiency and to encourage the use of cleaner fuels.

We now require, by law, that a substantial proportion of our electricity comes from sources which emit little or no carbon dioxide. That includes a continuing important contribution from nuclear energy.

Such measures as these - which increasing numbers of countries are adopting - should be seen as part of the premium on that insurance policy which I mentioned. They buy us protection against the hazards of the future: but they also pay dividends even though the gloomier predictions about global warming are not fulfilled - dividends such as less air pollution, lowered acid rain, reduced energy costs.

Mr. Chairman, people may disagree about the effects of increased man-made carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. But everyone agrees that we should keep in healthy condition the forests and seas which absorb and utilise a large part of it here on earth. We would be wise to do that for other reasons too: for the beauty of the forests and the infinite variety of species which inhabit them, and to preserve the food chain and balance of nature in the sea.

That's why we want to contribute to conserving the world's forests, and to planting new ones. Trees help to reduce global warming. We intend to plant more at home: we have just announced our plans to replant one of the ancient forests of England - destroyed in an earlier phase of our history.

We shall offer our expertise and aid funds to help plant and manage forests elsewhere in the world, particularly in tropical countries. A year ago I told the United Nations General Assembly that the United Kingdom would aim to increase its funds for tropical forestry by £100m. We now have 150 projects underway in more than 30 countries.

Our aim is to give the people in those countries a better standard of living by conserving and using the forests than by cutting them down.

[The need for a Global Convention]

But our immediate task this week is to carry as many countries as possible with us, so that we can negotiate a successful framework convention on climate change in 1992. We must also begin work on the binding commitments that will be necessary to make the convention work.

To accomplish these tasks, we must not waste time and energy disputing the IPCC's report or debating the right machinery for making progress. The International Panel's work should be taken as our sign post; and the United Nations Environment Programme and the World Meteorological Organisation as the principal vehicles for reaching our destination.

We will not succeed if we are too inflexible. We will not succeed if we indulge in selfrighteous point-scoring for the benefit of audiences and voters at home. We have to work sympathetically together. We have to recognise the importance of economic growth of a kind that benefits future as well as present generations everywhere. We need it not only to raise living standards but to generate the wealth required to pay for protection of the environment.

It would be absurd to adopt policies which would bankrupt the industrial nations, or doom the poorer countries to increasing poverty. We have to recognise the widely different circumstances facing individual countries, with the better-off assisting the poorer ones as we agreed to do under the Montreal Protocol.

The differences can't be drafted away in that famous phrase so beloved of diplomats "a form of words". They need to be resolved by tolerant and sympathetic understanding of our

various positions. Some of us use energy more efficiently than others. Some of us are less dependent on fossil fuels. And we each have our own economic characteristics, resources, plans and hopes for the future. These are the realities that we must face if we are to move forward towards a successful conclusion to our negotiations in 1992.

Just as philosophies, religions and ideals know no boundaries, so the protection of our planet itself involves rich and poor, North and South, East and West. All of us have to play our part if we are to succeed. And succeed we must for the sake of this and future generations.

One of our great poets, George Herbert, in his poem on "Man" wrote this:

"Man is all symmetry,  
Full of proportions, one limb to another, And all to all the  
world besides;  
Each part may call the farthest, brother; For head with foot  
hath private amity,  
And both with moons and tides."

We are, in symmetry with nature. To keep that precious balance, we need to work together for our environment. The United Kingdom will work with all of you in this cause -to save our common inheritance for generations yet to come.



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