

Good morning. I am heartened to see so many passionate young people here today.

2 Never before in human history have there been so many young people in the world. There are about 7.3 billion people in the world. And there are about 1.8 billion young people between the ages of 15 to 24.

3 Do you know the level of carbon dioxide in our atmosphere? It is about 400 parts-per-million. When was the last time the carbon dioxide concentration was so high in our world? You would have to go back to about 800,000 years ago, way before human beings existed.

4 So, this is the situation that your generation finds itself in.

5 For today, I just wanted to make three points about climate change. One, it is a complex phenomenon; two, it will require difficult choices; and three – it will impact young people the most.

6 Let's deal with the first point. It is complicated. If I asked you what the weather outside this auditorium is now, most of you would say that it is hot, because when you came in, it was warm. In other words, you tend to make an assumption based on your immediate past. If I asked what you think the weather would be like tomorrow, you would probably say "hot" too. And for those of you from Singapore, you will know there are no seasons, it is only hot and wet. If I were then to ask you, what is the chance of a storm tomorrow, what would you say - 20%? That sounds very scientific, but how do you know it is 20% and not 25%? You are guessing, right?

7 So, the challenge is that climate science is very complicated. This is a very large field of scientific endeavour, including randomness and chaos theory, and requires super computers to compute all the different parameters. The truth is that it is almost impossible to be absolutely precise about what is going to happen in the future, based on what we know of the past, and based on an incomplete set of measurements in the present.

8 The trouble with such complexity is that, actually, it does not fit with human psychology. You see, as human beings, we are all primed to focus on the present; we all remember the immediate past, and we all assume that the immediate future is a straight-line extrapolation of the immediate past.

9 It also means that once you get uncertainty like this, human beings will have differences of opinion. It would not be so bad if the differences of opinion were merely honestly-held differences, on the basis of different interpretations of the facts. That is why the field of climate science allows a wide variation of scenarios. In other words, if someone tells you that the sea level would only rise by one metre by the end of this century; it is an estimate, or even a guess. Similarly, if someone tells you that the sea level would rise by 10 metres, it is also an estimate. Sophisticated computer models can give you a statistical analysis of which statement would be more likely, but the fact is that

there is a wide variation.

10 The other thing that has emerged in recent times is the way people interpret facts. We are not computers – we are human beings. In fact, a lot of the way we interpret facts is affected by our emotions, our psychology, and our prior prejudices, preferences and beliefs. That is why, even today, you will find there are climate ‘denialists’, people who say that this is one big hoax being propagated by young, soft-headed ‘greenies’. On the other hand, there are ‘alarmists’, who think that the world is ending, and there is nothing anyone can do about it. Then, there are ‘sceptics’, ‘optimists’, and the people in between.

11 The thing that you have to realise - because the science is complex, because human beings are diverse, and because there is such a strong overlay of emotions - is that different perspectives are being brought to bear. In this room, most of you, I presume, would believe that this is an unprecedented situation, and an emergency of your generation. But you must understand that this is not a universally accepted assessment.

12 Next, what do we do about it? The challenge for climate change is that this is a classic problem called the ‘tragedy of the commons’. This refers to a problem in which something belongs to everyone and everyone expects to use it, but no single person feels responsible to look after it or to make sure that it continues to remain available to everyone forever. If you think about a field outside the campus, if the field is within the fence, it belongs to you and you are likely to look after it. But if the field is beyond the fence, it belongs to the community, anybody can use it, and you are not going to mow the grass or fill the potholes. You are not going to look after it.

13 For climate change, one ton of carbon dioxide, whether it is emitted in this part of the world, or in any other part of the world, has the same effect globally. The atmosphere, the global climate, is the “commons”. We all assume that the air will not be toxic, that there will continue to be oxygen, that carbon dioxide will remain stable, and that temperatures will not change and that global climate systems will not undergo cataclysmic change. We all assume that. But, we’re all incrementally, individually and collectively, putting stresses on it.

14 The only way to fix it is for us all to take collective action. And here is where it becomes difficult and perhaps almost impossible. Ambassador Kwok (Fook Seng) and I have spent so many hours and burnt so much fuel flying all over the world and arguing for years. People had been negotiating this since 1992. Everyone is bickering about who should do more, who has the right to do less, when should it be done, can it be done later on, and arguing about commas, punctuation marks, and words. It becomes a bit of a ‘wayang’, one big choreographed show with lots of talk, and actually nothing very much being done. It is even harder to get an agreement, because most of the time, people are arguing whether it is fair or not fair, whether it is your job or my job, whether it is your fault or my fault. Unfortunately, we still behave like toddlers on the global stage. So there is a need for collective action, but it is very difficult, because of history, because of humans, and because of the politics behind it.

15 My third point is on what you are going to do as young people, particularly as young people in ASEAN. ASEAN is a very special region. We are probably the only part of the world, except for Africa, where 60% of the population is below the age of 35. You are probably on the right side of the demographic majority in ASEAN. Being young means you are also the group with the biggest stake in the future. For me, it is a theoretical argument whether temperatures rise by 1, 2 or 3 degrees or whether sea levels rise by 1 metre or 10 metres, because I am not going to be around. But for you, it is a reality.

16 So you have the numbers, you have skin in the game. The purpose of having meetings like these that you have organised is that you become aware, you determine the facts, you try to understand the science, and you try to understand one another. Particularly because you are from different countries, you have different perspectives, and you have to try to organise and to mobilise yourselves, so that real action will be taken.

17 Now, specifically for climate change, my own sense is that so long as it is an argument on sacrifices, not much will happen because for politicians and negotiators everywhere, their key instinct is to protect their own communities, their own countries, their own voters. And so long as it would appear that we can get a better deal by saying “no” and by blocking proposals, politicians all over the world will find it impossible to arrive at a fair, sustainable and long-term solution.

18 The real impetus that can break this deadlock is when politicians everywhere feel that it is their own local people and their own local voters pushing them. Now, in order to persuade people to do more, it is not enough to “scare” people. We also have to show people that it is in our own medium and long-term self-interest to do the right thing - to consume less energy, be more energy-efficient, and use renewable energy instead of burning fossil fuels - because renewable energy is more secure, more reliable, less pollutive and a healthier choice.

19 So what your generation needs to do is to invent the technology and make people aware of the choices that they have and help them make the right choices. Eventually, when this feeds into the adoption of the right technologies, most of which is already available; and we have politicians and negotiators making the right choices because their own people want them to - then and only then, will we have a major breakthrough in solving this complicated problem that requires collective global action.

20 So I wish you all the best in your deliberations, and I hope you understand that this is not just a talk-shop, this is actually important for your future, and for the collective good of the world. Thank you all very much.