

## OPENING ADDRESS

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Ladies and Gentleman,

It was with great pleasure that I accepted the invitation to address you at the start of this international conference. You are here to evaluate the results of the first Netherlands' Research Programme on Global Air Pollution and Climate Change, NRP I. And you will also be discussing strategies for the second NRP I. I have come here today as a politician, to tell you what the Government is expecting from the scientific community over the next few years.

Many of the world's climate scientists are contributing to the invaluable work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. The IPCC has concluded that the serious risk of human-induced climate change justifies immediate action. Going on the strength of the precautionary principle, the international community, therefore, took steps to minimize these risks by establishing the United Nations' Framework Convention on Climate Change. The developed countries committed themselves to curbing their emissions of carbon dioxide to 1990 levels by the year 2000 as a first step.

The Netherlands had already introduced a climate change policy before the Convention was finalised. It aims at a 3% reduction for Carbon Dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) by the year 2000 relative to the 1990 level, a 10% reduction of methane emissions and a stabilization of Nitrous Oxide (N<sub>2</sub>O) emissions. This policy has always rested on a broad consensus in Parliament and society. Measures to support the 2000 target are also beneficial from other points of view.

In the Netherlands, we want to do as much as we can to link the interests of economy and the environment. With the measures taken so far, we have certainly made a good start. Nevertheless, our most recent forecasts indicate that we will need an incentive tax on energy if we are to meet our commitment. Of course, I am still hoping for a common energy tax within the European Union. But the new cabinet has committed itself to the introduction of such a tax in the Netherlands in 1996 if the preferred option fails.

An important element in our climate policy has been the National Research Programme, the reason for this conference. Many of you have participated in this programme which was set up to increase our knowledge on the climate system, the causes and effects of rapid climate change, and sustainable solutions. Its unique integration of strategic and applied research has received international acclaim. It was meant to encourage our scientists to participate in international research programmes.

These programmes have greatly enhanced our understanding of the climate system. And the results so far have not changed the basic conclusions of the 1990 IPCC report. Of course, there are still many uncertainties left, but we must realize that every answer may raise new questions. We have to learn to cope with this. Climate change is a difficult problem to handle for everyone: for scientists, for politicians, for the media, and for the general public. The atmosphere is a very complex system, and the links between human activities and the climate are not always clear. There are many things we do not yet know precisely. Furthermore, there are long time lags between causes and effects. The picture is very confusing, especially for the ordinary man in the street. Let me say a little bit more about this.

Until now, the emphasis on uncertainties has dominated the public discussion about the greenhouse effect. And as I said, this leaves many people, in the Netherlands too, confused about the seriousness of the matter. Some react by playing down the probability and consequences of climate change or by denying the problem outright. Others argue that we can afford to wait and see, and rely on adopting measures should threat of flooding become a reality.

The uncertainties could contribute to a wait-and-see attitude. I think such attitudes are fundamentally flawed. We must realize that by the time scientific uncertainties have been resolved it will be too late. The consequences of rapid climate change could become very costly and serious -maybe even irreversible- as time goes on. In a country like the Netherlands we may see damage to ecosystems and a decreasing supply of fresh water. Developing countries may even have to endure worse problems. We cannot possibly afford to be indifferent about these issues.

In general, however, I think that the public expressions of doubt that I just mentioned should be a signal for us to use a different type of communication. Instead of emphasising uncertainties, we need to express our scientific understanding in clear terms of risk. That is the type of information policymakers, but also decision-makers in the business community and ordinary citizens are accustomed to handling. Most of our economic decisions are taken in the light of various risks. So that is the type of information politicians and the public need to receive from the scientific world!

I think that scientists involved in the National Research Programme should take the lead in changing tracks to a risk-based discussion of the nature and the consequences of climate change. This implies translating the results of effects studies into operational terms, attuned to the most vulnerable areas of the world.

There is another fact that is becoming increasingly important for the progress of international climate policy. In international discussions there are many questions that need to be answered on the basis of the latest scientific findings. Research efforts should therefore be closely attuned to the questions that arise in the international policy arena. So, let me now give you an impression of what is going on in the run-up to the first meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Climate Convention, which is to take place in March next year in Berlin.

Emission stabilization by the developed countries is only the first step towards achieving the ultimate objective stabilization. And it is a very small step if we look at the measures that will ultimately be necessary! At their first meeting, the Parties will have to decide what the next step should be. IPCC has been requested to bring together and assess the scientific information that would help in determining the need for future commitments. Preliminary results show that the development of global emissions over the next decade or so is crucial to what we can ultimately achieve. If we take no further action we will probably not attain the ultimate objective of the Convention. Consequently, Prof. Bert Bolin, rightly advised INC delegates to address the question of commitments for the first decades of the next century as soon as possible.

Now, how are we going to set out our course. We do not yet know exactly what a dangerous level of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere means. What we can say right now, is that it would be foolish to cut off certain options at an early stage.

We must keep in mind that the risks are two-way. There is not only the risk of inaction. There is also the risk of being more aggressive than necessary in dealing with the problem. The challenge is to strike the right balance by designing a kind of step-by-step risk optimization process. We need to adjust our course at regular intervals on the basis of the best available information at the time. We must try to manage the risk of climate change -even if the problem turns out to be more serious than we think- nor should we disregard the risk of major changes in our economies.

Let me illustrate the dilemma as follows. When you are driving a car in the mist you cannot look far ahead. So what do you do? Of course, you drive slower and more carefully so that you can anticipate in time. You also look attentively to any signs by the roadside to see what lies ahead.

One example of applying this approach would be to assess potential investment decisions in certain areas with respect to their effect on the overall energy intensity. In areas such as the transportation infrastructure, buildings and energy supply systems we should avoid development in the direction of more energy and Carbon Dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) intensive patterns. Everything should be done to think ahead in this areas and launch innovative approaches in them. During the first meeting of the Conference of Parties, therefore, I will actively support initiatives aimed at reaching international agreement on specific areas, such as energy conservation and economic instruments.

For many developed countries, including the Netherlands, it is probably already going to be difficult to achieve the Carbon Dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) target for the year 2000. Nevertheless any credible strategy must soon include a scenario beyond 2000. Investors with a long-term horizon need guidance with respect to long-term developments in climate policy. I would urge participants in the NRP to provide policy-makers with the basic information they need to design the policy options for the period beyond 2000.

Finally, I must conclude that ongoing scientific research into all the relevant aspects of the climate change problem is needed to lay a solid basis for climate

policy. The second National Research Programme should thus continue to investigate the workings of the climate system. It should also provide ammunition for developing strategies and measures for adaptation and mitigation for the period beyond the year 2000. Finally, I would strongly recommend the risk-based approach as a new dimension in effect research and in the communication of results. Both politicians and citizens urgently need information of this kind to clarify their thinking and bring the climate change problem closer to solutions.

Ladies and Gentleman,

I hope that you will be able to shed light on the issues I have mentioned during the days ahead. I wish you a very fruitful and inspiring conference.

Thank you very much!