

Interview with Dr Rajendra Pachauri, 13th May, 2002

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Introduction

Dr Rajendra Pachauri was controversially elected as Chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in May 2002, having previously been Vice-Chair. Susan Ballard was able to track him down at his base in New Delhi, where he is Director General of TERI (the highly-respected Tata Energy Research Institute), from where he gave us an early interview on how he sees the challenges that he faces in this vitally important role.

Dr Pachauri generously spoke for over 45 minutes. His responses covered his reactions to the controversy surrounding his appointment, his relationship with Al Gore, the challenge of communication, and why people should trust the science of climate change. He ends with a call for moral leadership on this issue by world leaders.

Susan Ballard is Joint Editor of www.changingclimate.org working from Oxford University's Environmental Change Institute. Towards the end of the interview, David Ballard, her husband and job-share partner, joins in.

On taking up the IPCC Chair

(Susan) How do you feel about becoming chair of the IPCC?

(Dr. Pachauri) It will change my life quite a bit because I'll certainly have to make a major commitment in terms of time, which is no surprise. I'm certainly pleased to be in this position and I hope I can do justice to it. I feel particularly pleased that there are so many members of the IPCC who actually put their confidence in me and I feel particularly happy and proud about that but that also imposes certain expectations that I hope I can live up to.

(Susan) Your appointment caused a stir because you were the preferred candidate of the Bush administration and as a director of the Indian Oil Corporation Ltd could be open to accusations of conflict of interest. How well have you weathered this storm?

(Dr. Pachauri) I think much of it was misdirected and misconceived because firstly I had nothing to do with the decision of the Bush administration. The fact is that my predecessor (who I have a great deal of friendship and regard for) completed his full term but wasn't nominated for a second term. As you're aware, in US politics this is not unusual, I mean when a president moves in he also brings in thousands of people who subscribe to his philosophy in all kinds of positions. There are ambassadors who get changed so there's no reason why one could have presumed that my predecessor would have been nominated for a second term.

My being on the Indian Oil Corporation board isn't something I think is relevant at all. Firstly, I'm not a paid member of the board. This is a public sector corporation and there are five of us who are outsiders and who sit on the board to provide advice to the company and move it in the right direction. I'm proud to say that I've been able to sell the idea to the Indian Oil Corporation of moving into renewables in a big way. I've also been very insistent that every single project must get an environmental impact assessment carried out and I feel in that position I've been able to make some kind of a difference. You could either condemn the oil industry and say that I'm going to have

nothing to do with them, or become part of an effort to change their direction. I think I've done that so I'm not one little bit embarrassed. I think people have picked up this fact totally out of context and gone to town with it.

His qualities in the role

(Susan) Dr Watson was reported to have said to the BBC shortly after your appointment that he thought you had integrity and that he hoped you had integrity? What do you think he meant by that?

(Dr. Pachauri) Well I suppose you should really ask him! I really don't know what he had in mind when he made that statement. I think if he says he thinks I have integrity I would just leave it at that. I don't know what he meant by the second half of his sentence. I really don't know.

(Susan) What particular qualities do you want to bring to your new role?

(Dr. Pachauri) I'd like to bring some sensitivity to the problems of different parts of the globe and in that effort I would also try to see that the assessment focuses to the extent possible on local and regional assessments, particularly in terms of the impacts of climate change in different parts of the world. I would also like to focus on some of the socio-economic aspects because indeed the science is very well established and important but I think there are several other aspects of climate change which need considerable emphasis and elucidation. I hope I'd be able to make some difference in that direction.

(Susan) What aspects are you talking about?

(Dr. Pachauri) I'm talking about the economics of specific actions related to climate change whether that is mitigation or adaptation. One would need to translate some of the physical and scientific assessments into economic variables because if the IPCC has to be policy relevant then these are some of the aspects we need to do a lot more on. If one looks at the whole chain of actions and reactions related to climate change there is a science part which deals with the atmospheric sciences. In terms of impacts what does that translate into? Impacts on agriculture, on water availability, on forestry and so on and so forth. I think we need to go a little more in depth on some of these issues and try to translate them into economic variables so that policymakers would understand the context within which climate change would require certain decisions.

About his background

(Susan) How do you think your background in business and engineering helps you shape this kind of perspective?

(Dr. Pachauri) Well I'm an economist and I've been working on issues of natural resources. I would say that I started as an energy economist and that I went into environmental economics so I have a range of experience. It goes onto energy economics to begin with, the kind of choices one needs to make to move towards low carbon intensity energy forms. Also as an environmental economist I can assess the externalities imposed by climate change on natural resource systems. I think that's critical whether you're talking about biodiversity or water resources or the question of healthy soils. I think all of that needs to be put within a framework by which one can see it as a set of economic choices. I believe my background would allow me to do that. I must also say that the chairman is one out of many that has to be part of the decision making in the IPCC. I can only put forward my views and ideas but it's ultimately the panel that has to take a decision.

(Susan) How significant is it that you are from a developing country?

(Dr. Pachauri) There may be some symbolic significance. I suppose I am a little more sensitive to the problems of poverty, to the constraints developing countries face in taking a particular path or another in their development strategies. I've lived both in the North and the South and I really wouldn't classify myself as someone typically coming from a developing country. I've lived and worked in the US, I've been born and brought up in India. I started my schooling in a convent. The first language I learnt to read and write was English so I'm not too sure whether I'm a typical developing country national.

About the field of climate change

(Susan) What do you find most frustrating about the field of climate change?

(Pachauri) What I find a matter of great concern is that even after the Rio summit of 1992, and ten years having gone by, we still don't have at least a broad consensus on what we are going to do to emissions and concentration of greenhouse gases in the earth's atmosphere at least over a period of three or four or five decades. I think it's very important for global society to focus on where we want to go. One can then quibble about whether the Kyoto Protocol is the best way to get there or whether there are other means to do so. I'm a little bothered about the fact that we still don't have a broad enough consensus on basics, on what should be the state of development of today's economies so that we are able to get to some commonly defined destination. This bothers me a great deal.

(Susan) And the most rewarding thing about it?

(Dr. Pachauri) The most rewarding thing is that there is an enormous amount of awareness all over the world and that is clearly an achievement. It's an achievement of the IPCC, of the scientific community and I would say of several decision makers and public leaders who have had the courage and the sagacity to be able to understand what climate change is all about. It's really heartening to see that there is growing awareness and this is one of the things I feel the IPCC must attempt to a much greater degree, namely to be able to spread the message effectively. I think the outreach part of IPCC's activities is going to be critically important in the future and that's an area I hope to emphasize.

(Susan) What do you still want to find out?

(Dr. Pachauri) I really feel that we have to somehow narrow the uncertainties in the assessment of climate change because, let's face it, as long as the uncertainties remain where they are then there will be lots of sceptics who'll pooh pooh all the work of the IPCC and other bodies that are involved in this business. I think therefore there is need for much greater research, much larger resources going into research so that we're able to come up with assessments that certainly enhance the probability of the predictions we're making. I believe if we can do that then I think the numbers of quantitative estimates are fairly compelling as they are. The only thing that people hold up as sceptics is the fact that there are still lots of uncertainties in the business and you're dealing with a very complex system. I don't see how you can do away with these uncertainties but the more that the knowledge and research can reduce their range, the stronger would the arguments be in favour of doing something.

Trusting the science on climate change

(Susan) Why should a layperson trust the IPCC?

(Dr. Pachauri) Well I suppose it's because this is by far the most comprehensive assessment that's carried out by people who have knowledge and by and large we are able to mobilise the best minds in the world to focus on this problem. What the IPCC does is certainly far from perfection but I think it's far beyond what anybody else is able to do. This is largely because it relies on state of the art knowledge that's available on the subject and secondly because it's able to do this on a collective basis which I think is the biggest strength of the IPCC. There really aren't too many such exercises carried out in which you have such a range of distinguished persons and minds getting together and coming up with comprehensive assessments. So my answer would be that this is really the best we have and it may not be entirely good enough but it is clearly better than what you can get in any other way.

(Susan) What is the best thing to say to people who are still denying that climate change is anything to worry about?

(Dr. Pachauri) That's an interesting question. One comes across it all the time. I think, without sounding unscientific, when one is talking to people who are basically laymen and are looking – in some cases desperately – for some sign of conviction behind climate change, then I think one can talk about some of the freak events that are happening all over the world. I think one can also talk about the fact that if you look at measurements of warming there is now a record of increasing temperatures that is there for anybody to see. Finally I would use the other argument which I am afraid I have mentioned on several occasions, there is still a society called the flat earth society. The adherence to that was I am sure several million fold larger maybe a couple of centuries ago, but they have dwindled now and I suppose this will happen with climate change as well.

(Susan) We're about to publish an article citing research from Harvard and MIT which shows that the informed US public believe climate change is real and harmful but also believe they can wait until the evidence is overwhelming before taking any action What would you say to them?

(Dr. Pachauri) I think that that's a very insular view and that's part of the problem. I'm afraid people aren't looking at what the impacts will be on the rest of the world. I'm afraid they only look at what would concern them in their own backyards. This is where the IPCC can make a difference by going into much greater detail on what the impacts will be in other different parts of the world. I once had an argument with a very distinguished academic in the US, a friend of mine, and I told him that if we continued on the path we are on all the Maldivian Islands could disappear in maybe 60 or 70 years. He said, "How many people inhabit the Maldivian Islands?" and I said maybe 70 or 80 thousand. He said, "How much would it cost to resettle them?" You see if one takes that kind of approach then nothing matters, you can say "alright lets wait, so what if a few islands are drowned, all those people can always be moved somewhere else." I think it represents a somewhat careless if not a callous attitude to reality and I hope people will be shaken out of that in due course.

Communicating climate change

(Susan) What do you pinpoint as the main communication challenge?

(Dr. Pachauri) That's a very difficult question. My feeling is that you almost have to design a message for different parts of the world. The message that would be most effective in the small island states in the developing world would perhaps be very different from the message that you would provide to a ski resort in New England in the United States. That's where I believe

essentially the messages will have to come out of what is relevant at a local and a regional level and once we're able to determine that then we will also be able to determine what's important for the people of particular regions. To give you an example in India where maybe seven hundred million people are dependent in some form or other on agriculture because they live in rural areas. If there's going to be a problem with cultivation of wheat or paddy or whatever I think people need to be told how this is going to impact on their lives and I think that's where the socio-economic assessment of the impacts of climate change is vitally important.

(David Ballard takes over from Susan) The general public is a broad constituency of different groups with different professional and technical languages. The IPCC documents are difficult for lay people to understand. What processes of communication are needed to address this?

(Dr. Pachauri) This is where we really need partnerships because the IPCC has to put out documents that go through a particular form and process and we can't modify them because of the process of approval and review. If the products we come out with can be used by other groups that are more in tune with what the lay public demands, then they can convert it into products and use all forms of the media, print, television and whatever. Then I think you'd be able to get the message across to many more people in a much more effective form and I think there has to be a genuine effort to establish relationships with groups and organisations outside the IPCC and work with them to carry the message forward.

Morality and leadership

(David) You talked about consensus. How do we stimulate a moral discussion alongside a technical discussion?

(Dr. Pachauri) I really wish there was some way of mobilising two or three major leaders in the world who could take the lead. I think if that was to happen (and maybe it is wishful thinking because politicians by and large worry about politics as their only religion) but if there was even two or three leaders who count who took the lead and started voicing the messages that are coming out of the scientific community's efforts, then I think we would have made a beginning. I don't see anything short of that. This is where you need statesmanship of the highest order, where people start talking about things that they believe in even if they're not very popular with the public at this point in time, or with certain special interests and different elements of society, so I really wonder how one can energize that.

Between you and me I was hoping that ex-Vice President Al Gore (who was a friend of mine but has surprisingly been very critical of me recently) I thought someone like him might have done something. There are others who have shown flashes of conviction and brilliance in this area but I don't know what happens when they face the public and the reality of politics. They just sort of back off.

(David) Are you happy for us to include this?

(Dr. Pachauri) I'm quite open about this. Al Gore has acknowledged me in his book and I have printed material where he said very good things about me and praised me to the skies to the point where I was embarrassed. I was truly surprised that last month in the "New York Times" he wrote an article that criticised me, I suppose for political purposes. I was quite shocked.

(David) So you wouldn't see yourself as a "drag your heels" candidate?

(Dr. Pachauri) I can't believe that! I find an inconsistency there because on the one hand he says that I make virulent anti-American statements, now those were all related to climate change, and on the other he calls me a "drag your heels" candidate. There's an inconsistency there. I just didn't understand that.

The Bush Administration and climate change

(David) Do you have any realistic wish for what the Bush administration might do over the next few years?

(Dr. Pachauri) Now that I'm chairman of the IPCC I should really stay away from making any comments about what I expect any particular country or any particular government to do. I would say that I hope the global community as a whole understands the seriousness of the climate change problem and attaches some importance to the work of so many scientists. They can question it, they can certainly scrutinize what is being put forward, but I hope they wouldn't just wish it away I hope they would treat it with some degree of seriousness and if necessary start a debate, start a discussion on it and then come up with some plan of action. As in all democracies, things of this nature certainly require a debate. I only hope no government in the world dismisses these issues out of hand: that would be unfortunate.

(David and Susan) We'd like to thank you for the incredible generosity with your time Very many best wishes for a very successful term in office.

(Dr. Pachauri) Well thank you. I need a lot of good wishes. I know the uphill task I'm facing.

Where Next?

On this site

What do you think of what Dr Pachauri said? Please join in the debate! Use the Questions and Comments button on the right hand menu and let us and other site users know what you think. We hope that Dr Pachauri might find the time in his busy schedule to answer a selection of comments directly.

External Links

Take a look at the excellent [TERI website](#), where Dr Pachauri is Director General.