

## F I R S T P E R S O N

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### CALL FROM KIRIBATI

Citizens of the Planet, and Fellow Australians. Australians come from all the lands on Earth, and I have come here from the islands of Kiribati, in the mid most heart of the Pacific Ocean. Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the Elders of the Traditional Owners of this land past and present.

Kiribati was once the British colony of the Gilbert Islands, its cultural dances praised by Robert Louis Stevenson, and its people seen by Arthur Grimble in his book, *A Pattern of Islands* as a “people of poetry, romance and love”. Kiribati is the first nation upon which the sun rises in the morning, the first to see the new day, and now among the first Nations (which includes its sister Tuvalu), to be lost to Climate

Change. For the people that have never heard of Kiribati before, it consists of 33 atolls, averaging only two metres above sea level. It has a population of over 112,000 people.

I was born in Kiribati on the island of Tarawa in a village called Betio, which was where the actual battle of Tarawa took place during World War Two, between the United States and Japan. Betio was bombarded with tons of bombs, so many that all the coconut trees and other vegetation were totally destroyed. But replanting took place, the trees grew back, and the people survived. It was a situation brought upon our people by others. It was not our war, but it traumatized our nation.

And again Kiribati faces a new war of a different and more devastating kind. A war that threatens to completely eliminate my homeland from the face of the Earth. Again, a war not of our doing, but brought upon us by others. Because the average height of the islands is only two metres above sea level, the rising oceans have now led to salt water seeping into the ground water, making it undrinkable and poisoning the trees whose roots have depended on it for thousands of years.

I've seen dead coconut trees, their tops completely missing, so that they looked like twisted telegraph poles on a desert landscape, but they weren't just coconut trees. These trees were the framework and walls of our buildings, the mats on our floors, the blinds on our windows, the decorations on our dancing costumes, and a primary source of food. Then there were dead pandanus trees, which not only represented a food source, but the thatch on the roofs of our houses, the mats on our floors, and the costumes of our dancers.

Our President reluctantly plans the closure of our country finding options for people to live as dignified human beings elsewhere in the world. Kiribati people are very worried about their future and what's going to happen to their islands. If and when the time comes for them to be relocated, they want to do so on merit and with dignity. That is why we have 85 student nurses studying at the Logan Campus of Griffith University, so that they might have skills which are in demand all over the world. We thank the Australian government for continuing with this project and also request it to develop more, similar projects covering other skills in demand. Education of children in Kiribati schools is going to need to prepare children for the fact that in their adult life, they might need to work and live overseas.

To quote the President of Kiribati, Anote Tong, "the people of Kiribati will not go to the world as refugees, but as World Citizens". They have a right to live on this Planet which cannot be denied them by climate change. There needs to be special laws passed in all the nations on Earth including Australia, and enforced by the United Nations that automatically allow people from countries wiped off the map by sea levels, to live on dry land somewhere as a right that overrides point systems.

But abandoning the nation of Kiribati is a last resort. There are projects underway to preserve the islands by planting mangroves, developing salt resistant plants, building sea walls and boosting rainwater harvesting.

Fellow Australians and Citizens of the Planet, the world is at war, and the enemy lies not within in the melting ice caps and the rising seas, but within ourselves. The trenches within which this battle must be fought do not lie between the borders of nations, or between the major political parties or their factions, but within the heart of every human being on this planet. During the two devastating wars of the last century, extra taxes were paid, war bonds were purchased, and in too many cases the ultimate sacrifice of lives, and loved ones was made, and made willingly by people the world over to defend their lands from destruction.

We are not being asked to sacrifice as much as our grandparents did during

World War Two, yet the danger we face as millions of people are dislocated around the world and nations lost forever is potentially far more devastating.

And in the final analysis, combating climate change is a moral responsibility, for if we would not want our country to disappear from the face of the earth through the actions of others, so ought we strive, to ensure, that the countries of others do not disappear from the face of the Earth because of our failure to do what is right. To quote President Anote Tong of Kiribati, “this problem requires a New World Order, which is based on compassion, humanity, and a long term vision”. And at the end of the day it really doesn't matter how you believe climate change is occurring, whether by the actions of man or nature, because the fact is, it is really happening and its impact on my homeland and other people around the world must be addressed.

Further, there are long term benefits to Mankind in less reliance on fossil fuel, and reduction of carbon emissions. For Australia to do nothing while we wait for the world to act, is no different to us as individuals, refusing to reduce our own carbon foot prints until every body else does. This is very foolish; it is time for us to lead and set examples. Finally, my fellow Australians, who come from all the lands on Earth, and have cousins in all the nations of the Earth, it is time to acknowledge the reality of the human family, and that the Earth is but One Country and Mankind its citizens.

That is the philosophy; that is the outlook; from which will come, the international political will, to address the issue of climate change. We must accept responsibility ourselves, not wait for our leaders who have let us down, but lead the way ourselves and make it absolutely clear to the members of our parliament, that climate change is a paramount issue in the hearts and minds of our people.

Text from speech presented to 'Walk Against Warming', Brisbane, Queensland 2010.