Kenneth R. Weiss

It’s rare to find the leader of a country who speaks as passionately about climate change as Anote Tong. Then again, it’s rare to find the leader of a country that so often makes the short list of places most vulnerable to climate change. Tong, the president of Kiribati, has become best known for using his time at international meetings to admonish wealthy countries for burning through fossil fuels at the expense of his nation of 110,000 people living on low-lying atolls scattered across the equatorial Pacific.

Tong is not one to shy from the limelight, nor vivid anecdotes to call attention to the plight of his people. After years of lamenting that polar bears engendered more sympathy than the Kiribati people, he boarded a Greenpeace ship in the Arctic last fall to get a close look at a melting glacier and happened upon one of the big white bears. “As I gazed into his eyes,” he [wrote](http://www.greenpeace.org/international/en/news/Blogs/makingwaves/Anote-Tong-President-of-Kiribati/blog/50769/), “I felt a connection, as if we shared something in common – that our future survival on this planet would depend on our ability to arrest the escalating pace of climate change.”

Tong’s climate change campaign has won him fans, including Fiji’s prime minister and a former Australian prime minister who have joined a [committee](http://www.tongnpp.info) promoting Tong’s candidacy for the Nobel Peace Prize. It has also earned him critics, mostly the usual kind: local opposition party leaders and some religious leaders in his Christian nation. More surprisingly, a few scientists cringe at some of his pronouncements about erosion and flooding, saying Tong has, on occasion, overstated the role that sea level rise has played so far.

With the average rise of a few inches in recent decades, these scientists say, Kiribati’s 33 islands haven’t lost any appreciable ground. Troubles with flooding often have more to do with El Nino-La Nina climate cycles, with the fast-growing population settling in exceptionally vulnerable areas or from residents eroding their coastline’s natural defenses by mining beach sand and coral rubble for building materials.

Tong, who wraps up his third and final term in July, explained his views and commented on his critics in an interview in October in his presidential office on Tarawa Atoll, the capital island of Kiribati. He shared his perspective on leadership and climate change from a vantage point just a few feet above a fringing coral reef, including why he purchased 8½-square miles of land in Fiji, and continues to look overseas to buy more land.

The globetrotting president has brought considerable attention to Kiribati (Pronounced Keer-ree-bahs), a poor, isolated nation tucked so close to the international dateline that it often falls into the fold of the world map. After obtaining high school and university degrees in New Zealand, Tong went on to earn a master’s degree from the London School of Economics. Now 62, his close-trimmed hair and mustache have turned salt-and-pepper gray. His brown expressive eyes reveal his mixed Chinese-Micronesian heritage. Tong wore a long collared shirt, a “lava-lava” skirt favored by men in the tropical heat. Before the interview began, he eased onto a coach in his office, kicked off his sandals and with the wave of a hand the barefoot president gestured he was ready to begin.

Question: Would you please explain your vision for the future of Kiribati, given projected rise in sea levels, and what are the options for the Kiribati people and their government?

Tong: We have to listen to the science. The science is telling us we really have a problem ahead of us. The projected scenarios of sea level rise are not good for us. The question is: Do we deny it, do we ignore it, or do we respond? Have you seen the causeway? You would have seen what happened since the last high tide. This was not the highest tide. It didn’t come with strong winds. It’s falling apart. It’s happening everywhere else. If you go outside of Tarawa you will see. I asked one of my ministers to visit one of the communities over the weekend. I’ve been worried about them because the freshwater pond had been breached. It used to be a few hundred meters away the sea. Now it’s not. So it’s affecting the fresh water. It’s affecting food crops. It’s affecting the wells, the fresh water lens. And it’s really making life very difficult for them. I project that within 5 to 10 years they will have to leave.

Q: Which island?

Tong: Abaiang. This is just one, OK? It’s happening everywhere. I see communities on islets having to leave their villages. There is already a village in Abaiang, which they have had to leave. There is a church sitting there and a meetinghouse. The only reason they have stayed is that I asked them to build a sea wall so we can demonstrate what’s happened to them during the high tide: Just these two buildings sitting out there in the middle of the sea. The rest of the village has gone.

Q: What do you expect to happen to these atolls in the long term?

TONG: I think it’s going to get worse**.** It’s certainly going to get worse, if what the scientists are saying is true.

Q: How long does Kiribati have? A few decades? Until the end of the century?

TONG: You are talking about the D-day. There is no D-day. It’s already happening now. All that will happen is that it will get worse. We may be talking one or two communities today. In five years, we may be talking about a half dozen communities. In 10 years time, we may be talking about many more communities. And maybe in 50 years, we are talking about the entire nation.

You have to plan well ahead. At the moment, I am still trying to get people to think like I’m thinking, because I’m looking ahead, beyond the four-year term. I do have grandchildren. I have to ask myself, what’s to become of them?

Q: Do you expect most Kiribati people will have to migrate overseas to higher ground?

TONG: Absolutely, that would be the case. You’ve seen some of the communities here in Tarawa. Go visit them today because the tide is very high today, in the afternoon.

Q: Ok. Do you see the Kiribati people will have to move off the islands en masse, or will rising seas displace just a few?

TONG: What do you think, if the height of the islands is just 2 meters and the sea level is rising by about a meter within this century? A meter means gradual rise in sea level. The problems do not begin when it’s gone up a meter. It begins as it starts rising. We are already feeling the impacts. My common sense tells me that if we do not do anything then most of the people will have to go. But if we do try to do some adaptation -- which would be a very costly exercise but we have committed ourselves to doing it -- then we might be able to maintain some level of population, but certainly not most.

Q: Walk me through why you bought land in Fiji for $8 million? Was this opportunistic investment to snag rare freehold land?

Tong: Yes.

Q: Is this to grow food for the Kiribati people?

Tong: Yes

Q: Is it a safety net, an exit strategy for the Kiribati people? Or all of these? I’ve heard you say all different sorts of things.

Tong: I regard it as a very worthwhile investment because the price of land in Fiji will go up. Freehold land is getting short. People in Kiribati need land. But land is very short in Kiribati.

Q: As far as growing food, do you see an initial wave of Kiribati farmers and their families moving to Fiji to work the land?

TONG: Most probably that would be the case. We have some rough ideas, but we need to refine the plan. Food security will become a problem, not only for Kiribati, but globally. So we want to think ahead.

Q: But you’re not talking about a mass movement of tens of thousands of Kiribati people headed to Fiji?

TONG: I wouldn’t see that happening in my time.

Q: Does your time mean your term as president or during your lifetime?

TONG: My term. What I’ve basically said is that I will not be making that decision. But quite frankly, I would look to buying land elsewhere.

Q: Have you gotyour sites on specific places?

TONG: I know Australia and New Zealand are selling off land to the Chinese. So why shouldn’t we be buying land? Land is going to be a premium. With sea level rise, a lot of good land is going to go. There are going to be cities underwater.

Q: What about moving people internally, such as the unrealized plan to relocate 25,000 people to Kiritimati [Pronounced: Christmas], the largest island in Kiribati.

TONG: Kiritimati Island has the same problem as these islands. Kiritimati Island might offer the best solution because you have a large landmass. And maybe we can protect that. But here we’ve got fragments of land. So providing sea defenses, in order to build it up, is going to be a huge task. Virtually impossible, especially those islands which have a hole in the middle. If we had one solid piece of land, it would be easier. We could build a defense around it and fill it in and raise our islands to match sea level rise. Kiritimati has a larger land mass and a small hole.

Q: By a “hole,” you mean it’s an atoll -- a broken ring of land with tidal lagoon in the middle?

TONG: Yes. The point that nobody has really grasped is: If we build up these lands, it’s going to cost billions of dollars. We might as well being buying land for millions of dollars elsewhere. I know I frighten people in the way I speak about this. Nobody wants to believe that this is going to happen. There is a great sense of denial among my people. They don’t want to believe it. As a leader, I have to think about all of these possibilities.

Q: A Japanese engineering firm has proposed building giant artificial floating islands for the Kiribati people. Is this a serious proposal?

TONG: The Japanese have some very detailed drawings. They are serious about it and so am I. They are trying to use me to promote that idea. Personally, I don’t mind. Clearly when your choices are limited, you would consider anything. They were putting that forward as a credible option—a bit of science fiction. But when you are drowning, you will grasp at anything to stay afloat.

Q: You feeling like you are drowning?

TONG: I can tell you, at one time, I felt very depressed. There was a great sense of futility, that there was nothing we can do about it, that we just have to accept our fate as it is. I had to motivate myself to gain confidence to go ahead.

Q: You have expressed concerned about the Kiribati people being stateless. Can you explain?

TONG: My concern is what would happen to our people, our culture. I don’t see our people migrating somewhere en masse, in one bulk. I don’t see that as happening. If we do move somewhere else, what becomes of us? Can we credibly say this is the new country of Kiribati? What country would allow that? This is an unprecedented international issue. There is nothing in international law.

Q: Should there be?

TONG: I don’t think it could have been, because it was never foreseen, things like this happening. There would be a loss of country from annexation, yes, but from disappearing lands? That was never, ever considered, nor was it something that should it be considered. It’s new ground. I have had international legal students coming around discussing it. And I said see what you can come up with, but I can guarantee you that whatever happens, we will not allow our EEZ [Exclusive Economic Zone] go. We will insure we continue to have that.

Q: You mean to maintain your exclusive rights to fish Kiribati waters, which brought in about $85 million from tuna fleets last year?

TONG: Absolutely.

Q: There’s a court case in New Zealand, brought by [a Kiribati man](https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/01/28/the-making-of-a-climate-refugee-kiribati-tarawa-teitiota/) who is pushing the boundaries of international law in another way. He’s seeking asylum as a climate refugee. His case aims to expand the scope of the international Refugee Convention to cover people displaced by flooding or disasters associated with a changing climate. The courts have rebuffed him, so far. What do you think about this case? Do you have any sympathy for what he attempted to do?

TONG: I’ve never promoted or advocated the idea of climate refugees. What I believe in is people who chose to migrate should do so as skilled people with dignity.We are offering our people that opportunity.

Q: Your training programs are very small and so far have helped very few people migrate So far the programs to train people and give them skills they can market abroad are very small.

Tong: We have all of the next decades to work on it. But I think it’s formulating the strategy, OK? We have to get it into the minds of our young people. They are beginning to do that. I’ll give you an example. Under the Pacific Access Category [lottery] scheme of migration to New Zealand they give us a quota of 75 every year. When it started off, that quota was never taken up because our people don’t like to go. They don’t like to leave home. But once we started talking about climate change, and what the future holds for the young people, the queue started getting long.

Q: How long?

TONG: Thousands. Mostly young people.

Q: It’s so cold in New Zealand compared to here.

TONG: Better cold than drowned.

Q: What about taking care of those Kiribati people, such as the very young or old, who realistically are not going to enroll in your training programs to become a nurse or an auto mechanic. You say yourself that many of your people are going to be forced to relocate – sooner or later. So should the international community offer protections for displaced people who don’t have other options?

TONG: I’ve never actively advocated that. I must admit it may be out of a sense of pride. Also, I have a sense that the international community should be seeing that for themselves. It’s very obvious what is happening. So basically, I don’t want to go begging. I don’t want our people to lose their homeland and their dignity.

Q:Do you think the wealthier nations, such as the United States or those in Europe that have historically stoked the skies with greenhouse gases, and now China too, have a financial obligation to poor countries, like Kiribati, that are on the front lines of climate change?

TONG: I believe those countries with capacity to do something about it, have the obligation to do something about it. I know the negotiations about legally binding agreements remains unsettled. I believe we should go ahead and conclude an agreement with or without everybody. The international community still is not moving fast enough. Time is running out. For us it has run out. We are beginning to face problems.By the time, anything is mobilized it’s going to be too late for many of our communities. If the international community tomorrow agreed to zero emission levels, countries like Kiribati will still be in trouble.

Q: Ok. Flipping this round, there’s a lot of internal dissention in wealthy countries on climate change. People are reluctant to alter their lifestyles or shortchange economic growth to reduce emissions. Why should we make sacrifice for countries like yours?

TONG: Put it this way. In the United States, if you are building a fire and bothering your next-door neighbor, are there legal instruments to regulate your behavior? I’m sure there are laws and bylaws to not allow you do to things that are detrimental to your next-door neighbor. Likewise, it’s the same. If the United States and if China could keep their emissions to themselves, then fine we have no problem. They cannot. So they are achieving their development at our cost. Look at Japan. They are breathing in the smoke and the smog from China. Is that fair to the Japanese or anybody else? Common sense tells you it’s not. So why don’t we do something about it? Just because it’s inconvenient to our agenda? There’s got to be justice. That’s why I’ve always referred to climate changes as the biggest moral challenge facing humankind. We cannot continue on with business as usual, in an irresponsible manner. Maybe there was a case beforehand because we didn’t know what is happening. But now we know. We should not be allowed to go ahead and freely pollute the commons, the atmosphere because it doesn’t belong to any one country.

Q: One reason climate change seems easy to ignore is the worse is yet to come -- a future and distant threat that can be set aside to focus to more pressing matters. How do you see this?

TONG: Unfortunately, governments cannot think past the next election.

This is why I keep talking about global leadership. It has to go beyond the national level. Climate change is such an issue it demands that kind of leadership. We have to lead people, we’ve got to tell them to come along -- whether they like it or not -- because it’s for their own good.

Q: Of all the environmental threats facing Kiribati, could you rank the most pressing: Is it the lack of water, the lack of land, food security?

TONG: Water is probably the most imminent problem because that is the lifeline. We already have some problems. Population is a problem. You’ve seen here in South Tarawa the very high density of population and that’s a problem. Climate change is making it worse. I can guarantee it will be more difficult to deal with, as the impacts of climate change get more severe and more frequent.

Q: You mentioned that it’s controversial for you to talk about climate change at home. Some church leaders say they don’t believe it. They cite the story in the Bible, God promised Noah no more floods.

TONG: The churches are coming around. They are beginning to realize that this is not God’s doing. It’s humankind that’s doing this, destroying God’s creation. So we are paying a price for it.

Q: How about political opposition?

TONG: I really had hoped it would not be politicized because there’s too much at stake. Initially, they were opposing it for the sake of opposing it. Now, there is overwhelming international opinion to tell them that we have to address this.

Q: A few scientists, especially geologists who study the formation of islands and atolls, say you have sometimes overstated the role of sea level rise on current problems. They have done studies showing little land has been lost, some have gained ground and project that Kiribati atolls will rise with the seas, just as they have since the end of the last ice age.

Tong: I know some other scientists are saying the land will rise with the sea level. I’d rather believe the scientists who say the sea level is rising and that we have a problem, rather than believe those people. There’s too much at risk. There’s too much at stake. The lives of people are at stake. These people are not living here. Their grandchildren will not be living here.

Q: You mean these scientists?

TONG: The scientists who are saying this not a problem: The land will rise.

I refuse to take their word. I cannot afford it, for the sake of our future generations. They are probably talking from the top of the mountain. If they believe that, let them come here. I’d rather plan for the worst and hope for the best.

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