

## CHRIS VARNEY

### STATEMENT BY MR CHRISTOPHER VARNEY TO THE 64TH SESSION OF THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY

#### AUSTRALIAN YOUTH REPRESENTATIVE TO THE UNITED NATIONS

*"On February 7, 2009 I tried to resuscitate a man but could not. It was another day in the summer that would see days of record-breaking sweltering 45 plus temperatures. Everything was so dry. I spent that night hopelessly trying to defend my Flowerdale home and the homes of many friends and family from the merciless flames of the Black Saturday bushfires. Our homes and everything we had worked for were destroyed. We need to increase action against climate change so that our summers are not as hot, fierce and murderous."*

Mr Chair, ladies and gentlemen

These are the words of a 17-year-old girl who was one of the many victims of this year's Victorian bushfires.

Today I come before you on behalf of my generation of young Australians, feeling *inspired* by the courage of the young people who overcame the worst natural disaster in Australia's history earlier this year, *humbled* to represent the youth opinion gained from my nation-wide consultation tour with our UN Youth Association, *aware* that it is our hopes for children and young people that is one of the strongest bonds of unity we have as a United Nations and *proud* to commend young Australians to you all as leaders of my country, *voicing* today the sum of the stories and perspectives of more than 10, 000 diverse young people I have engaged as Youth Delegate to the UN.

Mr Chair,

Inaction on climate change and global poverty *angers* young Australians.

From Brisbane to Bunbury, Darwin to Dubbo, Adelaide to Alice Springs, and Hobart to Healesville, the message was the same – climate change is having a detrimental effect on the lives of young people right now.

During my tour I met young people from the fire-affected areas such as Alexandra, Kinglake and Whittlesea who were amongst the 7, 500 people that were displaced, or worse, lost loved ones included in the 173 people who died.

In our discussions, these young people cited the science that says that a 50-year warming trend, the enhanced greenhouse effect, and prolonged drought, are strong considerations for explaining the increased severity of the fires and the intense heat wave that preceded them reaching 45 plus degrees Celsius. They feared more regular and extreme fire days as a result of rising temperatures. Around the country the feeling was that the *extreme* weather events of our *today* are likely to become the *normal* weather events of our *tomorrow*, and that in our future the label *extreme* will describe whole new unimaginable weather phenomena.

I encountered many other pictures of how climate change was impacting young people. In regional areas like Mildura, Victoria I saw the anxiety in the eyes of young people whose families and futures are victims of our sustained drought and the impact it is having on farming and water industries. In Queensland I was told of floods and of rising sea levels around the Torres Strait Islands. In New South Wales, I listened to young people from coal communities like the Hunter Valley encourage investment in green technologies and their new economic opportunities.

Across schools I heard young people's passion for a global education, one that arms them with a thorough understanding of how to tackle the unsafe climate futures we are to inherit. From student Social Justice Groups I heard youth concern for how climate change will impact the world's poor – and how the Millennium Development Goals and poverty reduction must be at the centre of both warming-mitigation efforts and also in addressing the Global Financial Crisis.

Throughout my travels, one thing was constant; the inspiration I felt from seeing the leadership young people were giving to the movements behind climate justice, poverty elimination, and to their local communities.

In the week before the Climate Summit, an incredible 37, 400 young people united in an Australian youth vote on climate change called 'Youth Decide,' making it the world's biggest per capita youth climate action. This vote, inspired by our Youth Climate Coalition and World Vision Youth, saw young Australians give a clear message – that we deserve a sustainable climate, secured by all member states at December's Copenhagen Conference through an ambitious, fair and binding global agreement. The youth of Australia called for this agreement to adopt a 40%+ emissions reduction target by 2020.

We *voted* with the knowledge that we stand to lose the most from the climate crisis and are ready to make the sacrifices to overcome it

We *voted* in an effort to show our solidarity with the world's poor who will be severely affected by climate change, *and* who lack the resources to cope.

We *voted* not just with words, but with actions – through 330 mobilisation events across our country – to prove that whilst the climate challenge was brought about by human design, it will be reduced by today's human action.

Ladies and gentlemen, history will define us in 2009 by the measure of our actions at Copenhagen to protect the future of our young people. Let the agreement forged be bold enough to respond to tragedies like the Victorian fires by cooling our climate.

Mr. Chair,

On my tour, I *also* met young people who despite wanting to make a positive contribution to their communities and to causes like climate justice lacked the right platform and support to do so.

These young people include those whose communities have a negative image of them; those who yearn for their cultural heritage to be accepted; those who come from a disadvantaged background or are trapped within a cycle of discouragement; those who are homeless or in juvenile detention; and those who battle against the internal prison of mental illness.

These are just some of the barriers young people face, and are not unique to Australia alone. However I am proud to share with this body some of the many examples I have seen where young Australians, our community, and Government are actively breaking these barriers down to develop the voice inside all young people and their capacity to meaningfully participate in society.

When I was in Port Hedland, Western Australia I saw young people shaping a stronger community in partnership with other generations. With community support, Hedland youth had created a charter of youth rights and started a Youth Leadership Coalition. These coalitions are common throughout my country, their purpose being to engage young people on an equal level and promote a positive image of youth.

Recently I met a young Indigenous leader named Jack who at just 22 runs a youth organisation mentoring Indigenous young people to achieve their full potential with their education. Based in New South Wales, Jack's organisation is expanding across Australia and is one of many successful programs developing young Indigenous leaders and achieving equality



## CHRIS VARNEY

Chris Varney was the 2009 Australian Youth Representative to the United Nations. In his role, Chris travelled to every state and territory of Australia and consulted with them to find out what Young Australians wanted for their future. After months of consultation with Young Australians, Chris made the following statement to the 64th Session of the United Nations General Assembly.

between cultures by facilitating cross-cultural relationships.

In Sale, Victoria I met a 17-year-old girl named Krystal. Krystal had been living an unhealthy lifestyle until she got involved with a program called Youth Insearch. Youth Insearch forms communities of at-risk young people who support each other in building up their self-esteem levels. Through her involvement, Krystal has become actively involved in her local community and now empowers other at-risk young people to take control of their lives.

Krystal recently shared her inspiring story at an Australian Youth Forum event. When I attended these events I saw how this Government-initiated Youth Forum is moving young people who may have felt marginalised to feeling included in decisions by translating their opinions on issues such as homelessness into Government policy.

Ladies and gentlemen, these examples provide us with a compelling observation – that encouragement and valuing young people as equal partners help us free young people of their barriers and ensure all youth *can become* influential leaders of their communities.

Mr. Chair,

Today I have shared with you stories that show mine is a generation of hope.

I have heard these stories as part of an initiative called 'Dear Kevin', which brings together a collection of young people's dreams for Australia and our world community that I will be presenting to my Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and Australian Parliament.

We *dream* of a safe climate future for all, because if we can't dream it, we will never achieve it.

We *dream* of a United Nations that facilitates the shared humanity it envisioned 64 years ago, and where every delegation has a Youth Delegate

We *dream* that in all decision-making processes we will be celebrated, not tolerated; mentored, not ridiculed; included, not excluded; inspired, not disappointed.

Mr. Chair, ladies and gentlemen,

The moment has come where you must decide how you will pass the baton onto us, the next generation and future caretakers of our planet. You can slow on climate change because of short-term pain and thus set us behind. Or you can surge forward and take the lead to give our run...*our future*...the strong start it deserves.

We reach out to you.

*In response to his poignant and inspirational speech, UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon wrote to Chris to express his gratitude for the work undertaken by Chris and other young people of Australia. Ban Ki Moon had the following to say to young Australians:*

Dear Mr. Varney and the Young People of Australia,

I write to thank you for your outstanding efforts to support the United Nations.

People around the world are connected as a human family as never before, opening up vast new possibilities. But we also face multiple threats, from poverty, hunger and climate change to the spread of deadly weapons and disease and the biggest economic crisis since the founding of the United Nations. None of these problems can be solved by any single nation acting alone. The youth of the world have a crucial role to play in addressing them all.

I always draw strength from my meetings with young people, and from the passion and insights they bring to our work for peace and progress. Youth delegates to the 2009 session of the General Assembly, including the Australian youth representative, forcefully articulated the perspectives of young people. At the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen, young leaders showed themselves strongly committed to solving climate-related challenges.

With this letter, I hope to encourage young people throughout Australia to take up the mantle of global citizenship. By getting involved in your communities, and by speaking out about your concerns and aspirations, you are showing the world that young people are not only leaders of tomorrow, but also important contributors of today.

Extraordinary times such as these open extraordinary opportunities for change. Thank you for supporting the aims, principles and work of the United Nations. I look forward to what you will do to help us meet the trials of our age and shape the world for good.

Yours sincerely,

BAN KI-MOON

