

26th Gordon Arthur Ransome Oration: Has the West Lost Its Rationality?

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It is truly an honour to be asked to deliver the 26th Gordon Arthur Ransome Oration. Professor Ransome was instrumental to the development of the field of medicine in Singapore. Besides being a legendary physician himself, he laid the groundwork for Singapore's excellent post-graduate medical education and was a revered mentor to many of our senior medical practitioners. He was a paragon of compassion, excellence, and public service. The present excellence of our medical community is part of his legacy, and we all owe him a debt of gratitude. I am glad that his memory lives on through this oration and am humbled to be selected to deliver it this year.

Yet, the success of Prof Ransome in his field was not just the result of one outstanding individual working hard. He was an intellectual child of the great Western school of medicine, which was also part of a larger edifice of Western intellectual traditions of rationality and the scientific method. The Wikipedia description of "Western culture" states that "A cornerstone of Western thought, beginning in ancient Greece and continuing through the Middle Ages and Renaissance, is the idea of rationalism in various spheres of life developed by Hellenistic philosophy, scholasticism and humanism. Empiricism later gave rise to the scientific method, the scientific revolution, and the Age of Enlightenment."² Notice the emphasis on rationalism and empiricism, two dimensions of Western civilization which I will speak about a great deal in this lecture.

Indeed, rationalism and empiricism are two key pillars of Western civilisation which helped the West develop great advances in technology during the Industrial Revolution and

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² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_culture

shoot ahead of the other great civilisations in the world to dominate the world for over two hundred years. And a key reason why the other civilisations are catching up with the West in the 21st century is that we have also embraced the great Western tradition of empiricism and rationalism. This also explains why Singapore is now becoming one of the best places in the world in the field of Western medicine.

All this would suggest that humanity at large is converging on using the great Western methods of rationalism and empiricism in solving the great global challenges of our times. Intellectually, there's some degree of convergence. Politically, there isn't. Indeed, in the face of one of the greatest existential challenges faced by humanity, especially climate change, humanity is doing the opposite. We are abandoning rationalism and empiricism and going back to irrational pre-modern tribal instincts. This is a very strong statement to make. Please let me use a simple boat analogy to explain the gravity of the situation faced by humanity.

In my book, *The Great Convergence*, I explain that the forces of globalisation over the past few centuries have shrunk planet Earth and transformed the human condition. In the past, when we lived in 193 separate countries, as we do, it was like living in 193 separate boats. But the world has shrunk. We now live in 193 separate cabins on the same boat. This explains why when one cabin on our boat caught COVID, all of humanity in all 193 cabins caught COVID. The evidence is clear. Humanity now lives on one boat.

The best name to give to this boat would be the Titanic. Why Titanic? We now know that our boat is heading towards an iceberg called climate change. The scientific evidence is clear. According to the UN's Emissions Gap Report, unless humanity comes together and changes course, we will be heading towards a global environmental disaster. Based on current trends, the global temperature is likely to rise nearly three degrees over the pre-industrial average this century, far above the Paris Agreement's goal of limiting the global

temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. According to the UN³, the resulting impact of a 3-degree rise in global temperatures will be a world in which 3.25 billion people will be exposed to lethal levels of heat and humidity; there will be severe drought and water shortages; food production will fall rapidly; 50% of marine life and a third of terrestrial life would go extinct, causing ecosystems to collapse; there is a high risk of irreversible changes to fragile natural systems like the Arctic and Amazon; and there could be catastrophic sea level rise, causing many areas to be permanently flooded and displacing millions of people. Extreme weather events such as heatwaves, cyclones, bushfires, storms, and floods could all become increasingly common and severe⁴.

Fortunately, humanity has embraced the great Western tradition of rationalism and empiricism. We can all come together and agree on what is coming. We can all intellectually agree on what should be done to save planet Earth and humanity. The UN report found that the predicted 2030 greenhouse gas emissions must fall by 42% to achieve the 1.5°C warming threshold. This will require “immediate, accelerated and relentless” actions to reduce emissions, such as preventing the use of fossil fuels; switching to renewable energy; and finding ways to reduce energy consumption and waste, including by improving the energy efficiency of our infrastructure (e.g. buildings and transport systems), supply chains, and manufacturing processes. We must also actively remove greenhouse gases from the atmosphere, such as by protecting and restoring existing carbon sinks such as the oceans and forests; planting new forests; and developing carbon capture technologies. It is also important to adapt to the effects of climate change, such as by reinforcing coastlines, growing crops that

³ <https://unclimatesummit.org/comparing-climate-impacts-at-1-5c-2c-3c-and-4c/>

⁴ <https://www.science.org.au/supporting-science/science-policy-and-analysis/reports-and-publications/risks-australia-three-degrees-c-warmer-world>

will fare better in the changing climate, protecting infrastructure against extreme weather events, and planning for the shifts in water and food supplies⁵.

Since all the great scientific minds agree on what should be done, humanity at large, which has also embraced rationalism and empiricism, should heed their advice and start working together to implement the solution. If humanity was truly an intelligent species, we should immediately implement their recommendations. Sadly, I can make a very confident prediction: humanity will not come together to deal with climate change. In short, I predict that humanity will abandon rationalism in dealing with climate change.

Future historians will marvel that our current generation of human beings, which are, by and large, better educated than previous generations, have not come together to cooperate to deal with an obvious existential challenge. They will ask: why did we not do so? The simple, honest answer is that even though humanity has advanced in the realm of rationalism and empiricism, we are also influenced by pre-modern tribal instincts that continue to influence human behaviour, even in advanced Western societies.

There are at least three pre-modern forces (which have been part of the human condition for thousands of years) that are pulling humanity back. The first is geopolitics. The second is a concept of tribal solidarity called “sovereignty”. The third is the desire of the leading civilisation to preserve its dominance, like a dominant tribe of apes in the jungle unwilling to cede territory. Sadly, I am not exaggerating. Please let me explain briefly each of these forces.

The easiest to explain is geopolitics. Simple common sense tells us that humanity can only come together to cooperate to deal with climate change if the two greatest powers (who

⁵ <https://climate.mit.edu/what-can-be-done-about-climate-change>

have, by far, the two largest economies in the world), the US and China, come together to cooperate. Indeed, the last time humanity came together to effectively cooperate on climate change was in 2015, when the US and China were led by Obama and Xi Jinping. A close colleague of Obama's told me recently that Obama was delighted that China had chosen a strong leader like Xi Jinping. Obama was shrewd enough to realise that only a strong counterpart leader in China could make major political compromises to reach a deal. This is what happened. Both the US and China made major compromises. Humanity came together to agree to the Paris Climate Accords.

Almost ten years have passed. Essentially, the Paris Agreement has not been implemented. The 2023 global stocktake, which you can find on the [UN Climate Change website](#), concluded that “the current trajectory of global emissions is not consistent with limiting the global temperature rise to 1.5°C, including when all climate action plans are considered. Adaptation to climate change is also not at the levels needed, and the world is experiencing increased losses from extreme climate events. The growing needs for climate action do not match current support available and mobilised, and the gap is widening.”

Why has it not been implemented? The reasons are complex. But some stand out. Obama was succeeded by Donald Trump, who has repeatedly said that climate change is a “hoax”, and whose administration scaled back many measures to fight climate change⁶. More importantly, the US decided that keeping China back and preventing it from overtaking the US as the pre-eminent economic power was more important than cooperating with China to save planet Earth and humanity. This is a strong claim to make. This is why I wrote an entire book, *Has China Won?*, to explain why the US-China geopolitical contest will accelerate over the next decade or two. To make matters worse, the US may well re-elect Donald Trump

⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-51213003>

as President in November this year. If that happens, we can say goodbye to global cooperation against climate change for another four years.

In 2022, 58% of America's 130 million households had two or more cars. There are about 500 million Chinese households now. If each Chinese middle-class household had two or three gasoline driven cars, greenhouse gas emissions would skyrocket. Thankfully, China is instead the largest market for EVs, with 8 million EVs sold in China in 2023 compared to just 1.4 million in the US⁷. By switching to electric vehicles, China has significantly reduced greenhouse gas emissions. Though the US is wealthier than China, US households have not been able to give up their addiction to gasoline cars.

Since it's clear that EVs will be good for climate change, the fact that China has developed a competitive electrical vehicle industry is a global asset. According to an article by the MIT Technology Review⁸, the Chinese government began investing in electrical vehicle-related technologies as early as 2001. After spending a decade on R&D, Chinese companies have now pushed electrical vehicle battery technology forward by improving the energy density of lithium iron phosphate batteries. China has a significant head start as it has most of the world's refinery capacity for critical components, meaning that it already has a stable supply chain for electrical vehicle batteries while other countries don't.

It would be good for American and European companies to work with Chinese companies to strengthen their own EV industry. Instead, they are cutting them off. The US has raised its tariff rate on Chinese electric vehicles under Section 301 from 25% to 100%, claiming that they are "unfairly priced"⁹. The European Commission is also imposing extra

⁷ <https://www.iea.org/reports/global-ev-outlook-2024/trends-in-electric-cars>

⁸ <https://www.technologyreview.com/2023/02/21/1068880/how-did-china-dominate-electric-cars-policy/>

⁹ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/05/14/fact-sheet-president-biden-takes-action-to-protect-american-workers-and-businesses-from-chinas-unfair-trade-practices/>

duties of up to 38.1% on Chinese electric vehicles, starting in July 2024¹⁰. Unfortunately, this will delay the transition to electric vehicles in the US and EU, which are the two largest electric vehicles markets after China. This is a major setback in the battle against climate change. In short, as a result of geopolitics, pushing China down is more important to the West than saving the planet.

The second force preventing global cooperation on climate change is a primitive concept of tribal solidarity called “sovereignty”. Trying to explain how this concept holds back humanity is going to be very difficult, especially in a short lecture like this. Some aspects of this concept of “sovereignty” remain positive. Exhibit A of this is Singapore. Why has Singapore succeeded so spectacularly since we separated from Malaysia on August 9, 1965? Many reasons, including exceptional leaders like Lee Kuan Yew, Goh Keng Swee, and Rajaratnam. Still, one absolutely essential condition was that we went from being a state inside the sovereign country called Malaysia to becoming an independent sovereign Republic of our own, called Singapore. No Singaporean is prepared to surrender or give up the sovereignty of Singapore. What is true of Singapore is true of all 193 member states of the UN.

Yet, if climate change gets out of control, Singapore will effectively lose its sovereignty to a rising ocean. The NEA projects that the mean sea level around Singapore will rise by 0.23 to 1.15 metres by the end of the century, and if emissions remain high, it could rise by around 2 metres by 2150¹¹. In the event of extreme weather events such as high tides and storm surges, sea levels could rise by a further 4 to 5 metres¹². This would be

¹⁰ <https://www.reuters.com/business/autos-transportation/eu-impose-multi-billion-euro-tariffs-chinese-evs-ft-reports-2024-06-12/>

¹¹ <https://www.nea.gov.sg/media/news/news/index/latest-climate-projections-for-singapore-show-intensifying-urban-heat-and-more-wet-dry-extremes>

¹² <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/sea-level-rise-climate-change-singapore-115m-end-century-4021396>

catastrophic for us as about 30 per cent of our island is less than 5 metres above sea level¹³. If there's no physical territory, there won't be a Singapore. It is therefore in Singapore's interest for Singapore to cooperate with the rest of the world to fight climate change. And, there's no doubt that Singapore has been ready to cooperate.

However, other countries are not, including especially some of the richest countries. Many Western countries try to portray themselves as “saints” on the climate change issue, while describing the emerging economies as “sinners”. The Western states state correctly that their current “flows” of greenhouse gas emissions have been diminishing, while those of emerging economies, like China and India, have been increasing. This is true. Yet, climate change isn't happening just because of the current “flows” of greenhouse gas emissions. It is also happening because of the “stock” of greenhouse gas emissions that the world, especially the Western industrialised countries, have put into the atmosphere since the great industrial revolution of the 19th century. Here, it would be good to compare the “stock” that the seven wealthy G7 countries have put in the atmosphere compared to the BRICS emerging economies. The numbers are 43% and 27%¹⁴. 43% from 10% of the world's population and 27% from 41% of the world's population.

A fairer comparison would be to compare contribution on a per capita basis. The UN emissions report noted that “The United States of America account for 4 per cent of current world population, but contributed 17 per cent of global warming from 1850 to 2021... India, by contrast, accounts for 18 per cent of the world population, but to date only contributed 5 per cent of warming.” The average Chinese and average Indian contributed 9.8 and 2.9

¹³ Specifically, the Singapore Height Datum, which is “the reference established based on the mean sea level determined at the tide gauge located at Victoria Dock in Tanjong Pagar between 1935-1937. It is used for height measurement in engineering and mapping activities.” <https://www.nccs.gov.sg/singapores-climate-action/impact-of-climate-change-in-singapore/>

¹⁴ <https://ourworldindata.org/contributed-most-global-co2>

tonnes of greenhouse gases to the atmosphere in 2022. By contrast, to take two of the wealthiest countries in the world (especially in natural resources), the average Australian and Canadian contributed 21.9 and 20.3 tonnes.

To fight climate change, humanity has to collectively sacrifice. But how do we assign what portions to sacrifice? An independent and objective tribunal, if it acted fairly, would recommend that the wealthier Western countries (who have also contributed more to the “stock” of greenhouse gas emissions on a per capita basis) should be asked to make greater sacrifices. That would be fair. Sadly, the logic of democratic selection of leaders in the West makes countries selfish, even if in private, some Western leaders agree that they should do more. As Jean-Claude Juncker, the former President of the European Commission, famously said, "We all know what to do, but we don't know how to get re-elected once we have done it." He was one of the few Western leaders to confess that the short-term interests of their electorate trumped any responsible long-term policies. And what protects countries from any international judgments to be imposed on them is the concept of “sovereignty”.

Having said that, please let me add that I don’t see the concept of sovereignty disappearing any time soon. It will certainly carry on for the rest of my lifetime. Does that mean that we are doomed? Not totally. Without sacrificing all our sovereignty, we can sacrifice some of it and strengthen institutions of global governance that could help to save a planet in distress. Given our common interest in saving planet Earth, and if we used the twin pillars of rationalism and empiricism to look for solutions, humanity should be coming together to strengthen institutions of global governance. Sadly, once again, we are doing the opposite. Why is this happening?

This brings me to the third structural force that is preventing global cooperation: the desire of the West to retain its domination of key international organisations and preserve its

privileges from a bygone era. I know that many of you may be thinking that I am being too harsh on the West. Fortunately, I have explained my case at great length in my book, *The Great Convergence*, why it has been unwise for the West to resist structural changes in the global multilateral order. Here's a brief summary of the argument.

Most major international organisations fall under the umbrella of the UN family. In most UN organisations, decisions are taken on the basis of one country, one vote. Since the Western countries form a minority, they are outvoted. As a result, they cannot control these UN organisations. Since the West cannot control them, it weakens them. It weakens them by depriving them of reliable long-term funding. I am not exaggerating.

Take the WHO as an example. In 1970-71, over 50 years ago, 62 per cent of its budget came from mandatory assessed contributions. In the 2022-23 budget, only 16 per cent came from mandatory assessed contributions¹⁵. Why is this proportion significant? The WHO can recruit long-term health inspectors and scientists only from mandatory funding, not voluntary contributions that vary from year to year. The West wanted the WHO to rely more on voluntary funding as that came primarily from Western countries. The West would then use this voluntary funding to control the agenda of the WHO. As a result, the needs and interests of the affluent Western countries took priority over those of the poorer third world countries. Incidentally, all this is documented in a book on the WHO by Professor Kelley Lee, professor of global health governance at Simon Fraser University.

Let me inject some good news here. The Western countries have now realised that their efforts to control the WHO have been unwise. Hence, in 2022, the World Health

¹⁵ <https://healthpolicy-watch.news/who-member-states-fail-to-reach-agreement-on-key-element-in-who-finance-reform/>

Assembly resolved that by 2030, half of the WHO's budget will be derived from members' fees¹⁶.

This minor improvement in the financing of the WHO does not signal a U-turn from the policies of the West to weaken UN-based multilateral organisations. These policies continue. One key reason why I can speak confidently about the systematic efforts of the West to weaken institutions of global governance is that, when I was the Singapore Ambassador to the UN for over 10 years, I watched at first hand the battles taking place in the trenches as the West used its financial muscle to weaken international organisations. When I was invited to serve on the Commission of Eminent Persons to review the future of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), I was shocked to discover that the West had also tried to weaken the IAEA, even though it was critical to keep the world safe from nuclear proliferation.

Even though I have been critical of the Western efforts to weaken international organisations, especially within the UN family of institutions, I am actually suggesting a new approach which would be in the long-term interests of the West. Many Western intellectuals have read my arguments and agree that the current Western approaches have been unwise. Yet, few Western leaders have spoken out to suggest a more enlightened approach to global multilateral institutions.

One of the few leaders to do so was the former president of the United States, President Bill Clinton. In a speech he gave at Yale in 2003, he said, "If you believe that maintaining power and control and absolute freedom of movement and sovereignty is important to your country's future, there's nothing inconsistent in that. We're the biggest

¹⁶ <https://healthpolicy-watch.news/who-financing-reform-overwhelmingly-backed/>

most powerful country in the world now we've got the juice and we're going to use it [...] But if you believe that we should be trying to create a world with rules and partnerships and habits of behaviour that we would like to live in when we're no longer the military political economic superpower in the world, then you wouldn't do that. It just depends on what you believe." This was very wise advice from Bill Clinton. To prepare for a world where the US becomes number two, the US should strengthen multilateral "rules and partnerships and habits of behaviour".

Curiously, even though this was very wise advice, Bill Clinton never repeated it. More shockingly, no major American leader has dared to publicly agree with him. And in the current American political context, where there's a rock-solid consensus that the US should stop China's rise, any suggestion that the US should accept the inevitable and learn to work with China multilaterally will be killed instantly.

Let me conclude this lecture by asking the obvious question. Against the backdrop of all that I have said, what should we do now? Should we give up and accept the current state of affairs driving us to lose the battle against climate change? Or should we continue to fight on?

Asians make up the bulk of humanity. The total population of Asians is 4.78 billion. We provide 59% of the world's population. Hence, we will also suffer the most from climate change. Since we are going to suffer the most, we should also be the most outspoken. Fortunately, we have a good case to make. We should remind the West of its belief in rationalism and empiricism. These two forces clearly dictate that all of humanity must set aside all their differences, whether they be geopolitical or ideological, and focus on the most important common threat: climate change. At the end of the day, we Asians, who number

4.78 billion people, must speak louder so that the 925 million¹⁷ Westerners can hear our views clearly and loudly. I hope that my remarks today will encourage more Asians to speak more boldly.

Thank you.

¹⁷ EU + UK + US + Canada + Australia + New Zealand = 925.75 million (IMF data)