



## MAN OF THE YEAR 2015

# Li Keqiang's Task: Changing "Nature's Red Light to Green"

China's tough talking premier has his work cut out for him particularly where it comes to the nation's fight against pollution. Our choice for Man of the Year, Li Keqiang's accomplishments are notable but it is his attitude to change and his will to steer China forward that makes for another chapter in China's history.

By AMANDA LI

**A**s a reformer with a reputation for toughness while maintaining an outgoing personality, Li Keqiang assumed office as China's Premier during the crucial stages of China's transition into the world's second largest economy. Li's appointment was greeted by enthusiasm by lawmakers, many of who saw him as inventive and determined. Based on his belief that reform is "China's biggest dividend", Li has often suggested different and innovative approaches and ways of working.

### Path to Power

Li Keqiang's path to power was rooted in years of loyal party service, since as early as his years in the Communist Youth League, he began climbing the party ranks. When Li graduated from high school in 1974 during the Cultural Revolution, he was sent for rural labour in Fengyang County Anhui. During his time there, he eventually joined the Communist Party of China (CCP), and proceeded to becoming the party head of the local production team, and was even awarded the honour of *Outstanding Individual in the Study of Mao Zedong Thought*.

Despite early successes in the local party leadership, Li rejected his father's aspirations of grooming him for the local county's party leadership. Instead, Li chose to attend the School of Law at



**Li Keqiang: "We will resolutely declare war against pollution as we declared war against poverty".**

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Peking University; he then continued to pursue his academic goals, and eventually obtained a PhD in economics.

In 1980, Li assumed the role of the Communist Youth League (CYL) secretary at Peking University. He then began rising through the party ranks, starting from his entrance into the top leadership of the CYL in 1982 as a member of its Secretariat.

Li moved onto becoming the CYL's First Secretary in 1993, thus representing the first generation of CCP leaders that rose from the CYL leadership. It was in the CYL where Li also began working closely with former Party General Secretary Hu Jintao.

**Declaration of War on Pollution**

Indeed, pollution is China's number one enemy, and is conceivably the most

daunting and pressing task for China's new premier.

To put the enormity and complexity of China's pollution in perspective, it is important to note that the situation has become so severe that the Chinese government has finally been ready to admit it.

In January 2014, China's Ministry of Environmental Protection published statistics that were then reported on by China's state-run Xinhua News Agency. The statistics essentially showed that 74 of China's major cities failed to meet the nation's environmental standards (which are already quite lenient) for more than 70% of the days. In addition, a World Bank study found that a mere 1% of China's 560 million city dwellers breath air that European Union standards would consider safe.

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Another major source of China's pollution problems is its reliance on coal, which accounts for 70% of China's total energy supply, making China the world's largest consumer and producer of coal.

In early 2013, Deutsche Bank released an analysts' note, pointing out that a surge in coal consumption and automobile sales over the next decade will result from China's current economic policies, which will push China's air pollution levels past its already unbearable state.

China's pollution problem has moved beyond mere statistics, and is now creating considerable and troubling implications on its people. For example, according to the 2010 Global Burden of Disease study, outdoor air pollution contributed to 1.2 million premature deaths. This meant that China contributed to nearly 40% of the global total deaths linked to air pollution. Research has also found that 25 million healthy years of life from the population was lost due to pollution.

China's pollution dilemma is not constrained to air pollution, with the country's water crisis providing another source of distress.

In 2010, The Economist reported that according to data from China's Ministry of Environmental Protection, 43.2% of China's state-monitored reviews were categorized as grade 4 or worse. This meant that their water was unsuitable for human contact.

In addition, about 90% of China's urban groundwater is contaminated, while approximately 300 million Chinese citizens in rural areas have to rely on unsafe drinking water.

Official Chinese government projections have also estimated that by 2030, all of China's available water supplies will be fully exploited.

## The Cost of Growth

"We should be acutely aware that in the post-financial crisis time, we should readjust the economic growth model, and we should not sacrifice our environment and sustainable development for economic growth".

Li's reform-minded and innovative approach has been embodied in the nation's efforts to upgrade the economy by curbing pollution. He has crafted a philosophical framework of "ecological civilization", which strives to "bring everything back to the relationship between man and nature".

Li has also taken a resolute stance against the pollution problem, describing smog as "nature's red-light warning against inefficient and blind development". It should be noted that though China has put forth several policies and plans designed to address such environmental issues, Li's main challenge will lie in constraining major polluting industries and local governments obsessed with economic growth.

Therefore, according to Li, efforts to address the problem of pollution will first concentrate on reducing hazardous particulate matters PM 2.5 (matters small enough to penetrate the lungs and even enter the bloodstream) and PM 10. The focus will also be placed upon eradicating outdated energy producers and industrial plants, since they constitute a substantial source of air pollution.

Li also stated that in 2014, China would reduce steel production capacity by 27 million tonnes, while simultaneously cutting cement production by 42 million tons and shutting down 50,000 coal-fire furnaces.

## A survey conducted by the American Chamber of Commerce determined that out of 365 foreign companies, approximately 48% claimed that concerns regarding air quality were turning senior executives away from China.

In addition, according to Li, "the way energy is consumed and produced" will be altered. Li's promise is based on plans for reforms in energy pricing aimed at boosting non-fossil fuel energy. Reforms will also be undertaken through the development of nuclear and renewable energy, deploying smart power transmission grids, and promoting green and low-carbon technology.

## Not Just Air!

Of course, China's pollution problem extends beyond the issue of air pollution. Severe soil and water pollution constitute pressing problems that require attention. In response, Li has stated that the government will continue its efforts in fighting desertification and recover wetlands, as well as aiming to convert 333,300 hectares of marginal farmland to forest and grassland. The National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) has also placed agricultural pollution on its agenda, mainly aiming to tackle the 3.33 million hectares of farmland believed to be too contaminated by heavy metals to grow crops. The problem of water pollution has also been recognized by the Chinese government, which has stated that 2 trillion yuan will be utilized to address the issue of pollution of scarce

water resources.

Another aspect of efforts to overcome pollution is the use of fines and punishment. For example, polluters will be forced to pay the price through the establishment of a new mechanism.

The mechanism will hold local officials accountable as victims of environmental damage are compensated. The Chinese Parliament is also considering amendments to environmental protection legislation, which will grant new power to constrain offenders through fines and punishments.

In total, the Ministry of Finance claimed that in 2014, 21.1 billion yuan would be allocated for energy conservation and environmental protection, which shows an increase of 7.1% when compared to 2013. At the same time, an increase of 8.6% is observed, as 64.9 billion yuan will be spent on agriculture, forestry and water conservation.

When placing the complexity of China's pollution problem in perspective, Fergus Green of the London School of Economics commented, "China is already doing a lot, they are probably making the most progress of any country, given that they are starting from a position that is far more challenging". ■

## Fact File

On March 15th, 2013, at the fifth plenary meeting of the first session of the 12th National People's Congress, Li Keqiang was endorsed as the premier of China's State Council.

**Date of Birth:** 1 July 1955

**Place of Birth:** Dingyuan, Anhui Province

**Brief Timeline:**

1974: Joined the work force

1976: Joined the CCP

1998-2004: Served as the Governor and Party Secretary of Henan

2008-2013: Served as the First Vice-Premier under Wen Jiabao, the Premier at the time.

**Education:** Peking University's School of Economics & a degree of Doctor of Economics

**Positions Held:** Premier of the State Council, member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee, secretary of the State Council's Leading Party Members' Group