

March 22, 2008

theaustralian.news.com.au

Interview: Climate Change?

Christopher Pearson

Catastrophic predictions of global warming usually conjure with the notion of a tipping point, a point of no return.

Last Monday – on ABC Radio National, of all places – there was a tipping point of a different kind in the debate on climate change. It was a remarkable interview involving the co-host of Counterpoint, Michael Duffy and Jennifer Marohasy, a biologist and senior fellow of Melbourne-based think tank the Institute of Public Affairs. Anyone in public life who takes a position on the greenhouse gas hypothesis will ignore it at their peril.

Duffy asked Marohasy: "Is the Earth still warming?"

She replied: "No, actually, there has been cooling, if you take 1998 as your point of reference. If you take 2002 as your point of reference, then temperatures have plateaued. This is certainly not what you'd expect if carbon dioxide is driving temperature because carbon dioxide levels have been increasing but temperatures have actually been coming down over the last 10 years."

Duffy: "Is this a matter of any controversy?"

Marohasy: "Actually, no. The head of the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) has actually acknowledged it. He talks about the apparent plateau in temperatures so far this century. So he recognises that in this century, over the past eight years, temperatures have plateaued ... This is not what you'd expect, as I said, because if carbon dioxide is driving temperature then you'd expect that, given carbon dioxide levels have been continuing to increase, temperatures should be going up ... So (it's) very unexpected, not something that's being discussed. It should be being discussed, though, because it's very significant."

Duffy: "It's not only that it's not discussed. We never hear it, do we? Whenever there's any sort of weather event that can be linked into the global warming orthodoxy, it's put on the front page. But a fact like that, which is that global warming stopped a decade ago, is virtually never reported, which is extraordinary."

Duffy then turned to the question of how the proponents of the greenhouse gas hypothesis deal with data that doesn't support their case. "People like Kevin Rudd and Ross Garnaut are speaking as though the Earth is still warming at an alarming rate, but what is the argument from the other side? What would people associated with the IPCC say to explain the (temperature) dip?"

Marohasy: "Well, the head of the IPCC has suggested natural factors are compensating for the increasing carbon dioxide levels and I guess, to some extent, that's what sceptics have been saying for some time: that, yes, carbon dioxide will give you some warming but there are a whole lot of other factors that may compensate or that may augment the warming from elevated levels of carbon dioxide."

"There's been a lot of talk about the impact of the sun and that maybe we're going to go through or are entering a period of less intense solar activity and this could be contributing to the current cooling."

Duffy: "Can you tell us about NASA's Aqua satellite, because I understand some of the data we're now getting is quite important in our understanding of how climate works?"

Marohasy: "That's right. The satellite was only launched in 2002 and it enabled the collection of data, not just on temperature but also on cloud formation and water vapour. What all the climate models suggest is that, when you've got warming from additional carbon dioxide, this will result in increased water vapour, so you're going to get a positive feedback. That's what the models have been indicating. What this great data from the NASA Aqua satellite ... (is) actually showing is just the opposite, that with a little bit of warming, weather processes are compensating, so they're actually limiting the greenhouse effect and you're getting a negative rather than a positive feedback."

Duffy: "The climate is actually, in one way anyway, more robust than was assumed in the climate models?"

Marohasy: "That's right ... These findings actually aren't being disputed by the meteorological community. They're having trouble digesting the findings, they're acknowledging the findings, they're acknowledging that the data from NASA's Aqua satellite is not how the models predict, and I think they're about to recognise that the models really do need to be overhauled and that when they are overhauled they will probably show greatly reduced future warming projected as a consequence of carbon dioxide."

Duffy: "From what you're saying, it sounds like the implications of this could be considerable ..."

Marohasy: "That's right, very much so. The policy implications are enormous. The meteorological community at the moment is really just coming to terms with the output from this NASA Aqua satellite and (climate scientist) Roy Spencer's interpretation of them. **His work is published, his work is accepted, but I think people are still in shock at this point.**"

If Marohasy is anywhere near right about the impending collapse of the global warming paradigm, life will suddenly become a whole lot more interesting.

A great many founts of authority, from the Royal Society to the UN, most heads of government along with countless captains of industry, learned professors, commentators and journalists will be profoundly embarrassed. Let us hope it is a prolonged and chastening experience.

With catastrophe off the agenda, for most people the fog of millennial gloom will lift, at least until attention turns to the prospect of the next ice age. Among the better educated, the sceptical cast of mind that is the basis of empiricism will once again be back in fashion. The delusion that by recycling and catching public transport we can help save the planet will quickly come to be seen for the childish nonsense it was all along.

The poorest Indians and Chinese will be left in peace to work their way towards prosperity, without being badgered about the size of their carbon footprint, a concept that for most of us will soon be one

with Nineveh and Tyre, clean forgotten in six months.

The scores of town planners in Australia building empires out of regulating what can and can't be built on low-lying shorelines will have to come to terms with the fact inundation no longer impends and find something more plausible to do. The same is true of the bureaucrats planning to accommodate "climate refugees".

Penny Wong's climate mega-portfolio will suddenly be as ephemeral as the ministries for the year 2000 that state governments used to entrust to junior ministers. Malcolm Turnbull will have to reinvent himself at vast speed as a climate change sceptic and the Prime Minister will have to kiss goodbye what he likes to call the great moral issue and policy challenge of our times.

It will all be vastly entertaining to watch.

THE Age published an essay with an environmental theme by Ian McEwan on March 8 and its stablemate, The Sydney Morning Herald, also carried a slightly longer version of the same piece.

The Australian's Cut & Paste column two days later reproduced a telling paragraph from the Herald's version, which suggested that McEwan was a climate change sceptic and which The Age had excised. He was expanding on the proposition that "we need not only reliable data but their expression in the rigorous use of statistics".

What The Age decided to spare its readers was the following: "Well-meaning intellectual movements, from communism to post-structuralism, have a poor history of absorbing inconvenient fact or challenges to fundamental precepts. We should not ignore or suppress good indicators on the environment, though they have become extremely rare now. It is tempting to the layman to embrace with enthusiasm the latest bleak scenario because it fits the darkness of our soul, the prevailing cultural pessimism. The imagination, as Wallace Stevens once said, is always at the end of an era. But we should be asking, or expecting others to ask, for the provenance of the data, the assumptions fed into the computer model, the response of the peer review community, and so on. Pessimism is intellectually delicious, even thrilling, but the matter before us is too serious for mere self-pleasuring. It would be self-defeating if the environmental movement degenerated into a religion of gloomy faith. (Faith, ungrounded certainty, is no virtue.)"

The missing sentences do not appear anywhere else in The Age's version of the essay. The attribution reads: "Copyright Ian McEwan 2008" and there is no acknowledgment of editing by The Age.

Why did the paper decide to offer its readers McEwan lite? Was he, I wonder, consulted on the matter? And isn't there a nice irony that The Age chose to delete the line about ideologues not being very good at "absorbing inconvenient fact"?