

Stultifying academic groupthink

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We understand why any centrist government might choose to walk away from a fight with academics opposed to Bjorn Lomborg's Australia Consensus Centre. The same sense of priorities explains Malcolm Turnbull's unwillingness to revisit the racial vilification debate. The Prime Minister knows the economy is the main game — and here he has made a more promising start in a month than Tony Abbott managed in two years.

The blame for the Lomborg saga rests with stultifying academic groupthink. The consensus centre — which brings a rational and informed approach to policy questions such as overseas aid, global health and climate change — had been on offer for more than six months. It came with a \$4 million subsidy from the government; universities are famously keen on taxpayers' money.

Crumbled in the face of an academic revolt

The University of Western Australia had agreed to host the centre but crumbled in the face of an academic revolt. Flinders University, the next candidate, also faced a chorus of academic complaint. Then, as this newspaper reported yesterday, Christopher Pyne withdrew the \$4m last month in one of his final acts as education minister.

Topics where groupthink prevails

Academics like to pose as fearless researchers who go where the data and results lead them. But there are topics where groupthink prevails and one of these is climate change. The orthodox view is one of transcendental emergency. Anyone who departs from the orthodoxy is liable to be smeared, as Dr Lomborg has been, as a climate denialist. It's clear that his academic critics have relied on second-hand caricature rather than any honest reading of his work. The Copenhagen Consensus Centre, with Dr Lomborg as president, draws on the research of leading economists, including seven Nobel laureates. The economics of climate change is just one of several lines of inquiry. Dr Lomborg does not deny the reality of man-made climate change but he does insist on a careful cost-benefit analysis of mitigation strategies, measured against other potential uses for limited resources. For example, is public money better spent on safe water or malaria control in the developing world rather than on renewable energy sources with little effect?

Benefits of key renewables slight compared with their considerable cost

Dr Lomborg points out in this newspaper today that the benefits of key renewables — wind and solar power — are slight when compared with their considerable cost. He cites estimates from the International Energy Agency that wind and solar now account for about 0.4 per cent of global energy. "Even in 2040, with all governments implementing all of their green promises, solar and wind will make up just 2.2 per cent of global energy," he writes.

The difference between sloganeering and reality that academics ought to explain

In Australia, for all the hysteria on the Left about putting a price on carbon, the government's "direct action" policy makes perfect sense in a world yet to embrace an emissions trading

scheme. Direct action will easily achieve Australia's target to cut carbon emissions by 26 to 28 per cent, below 2005 levels, by 2030. And for all his climate hyperbole, US President Barack Obama also relies on direct action measures — such as updated standards for energy efficiency and tougher rules for power plants. It's this difference between sloganeering and reality that academics ought to explain — rather than exacerbate.