

Climate evangelists reduce debate to a binary farce

The Australian newspaper Editorial, 11 October 2017

The response to former prime minister Tony Abbott's provocative London speech on climate change has exposed the superficial approach to this crucial issue in our national debate. While Australia's climate and energy policy will have clear and unavoidable impacts on our economy, it is arguable whether it will have any environmental effect. We produce only 1.3 per cent of the world's carbon emissions, so can have no discernible influence unless our actions are tied to sufficient efforts by other countries to eclipse larger and growing emissions from nations such as China and India. So far, under the Paris Agreement, this is not the case. Our reductions will be dwarfed by increases elsewhere. At the least this means we should be in no undue haste because our actions are not going to save the planet any time soon; we have time to get the policy right. Our most urgent imperative is to ensure our household and industrial consumers have access to reliable and affordable energy.

The climate debate is a complex collision of facts, forecasts, theories and proposals. On every aspect of this multi-layered puzzle there are myriad records, measurements and options. The variables are so vast that even the simplest question about recorded temperatures in one place on one day is open to conjecture because of debates about measurement practices, external factors and homogenisation efforts. Extrapolate this on to interpretation of the record over more than a century of readings and we build more complexity. Then we delve further to geological samples, ice cores or satellite data, and we add to the database and sum of human knowledge but invite infinitely more areas of contestability. And that is before we get to forecasts and computer modelling, or the estimates of carbon emissions, natural and anthropogenic, and inputs of other greenhouse gases and the role of volcanic activity, land clearing, ocean currents, solar cycles and orbital variations. This is such a fascinating and multifaceted area of human exploration that it is beyond banal to talk about the "science being settled", as if we have learned enough. Scientific consensus tells us human-generated greenhouse gas emissions have increased global warming and will continue to do so. As the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's Fifth Assessment says: "It is extremely likely that more than half of the observed increase in global average surface temperature from 1951 to 2010 was caused by the anthropogenic increase in GHG concentrations and other anthropogenic forcings together." Yet the climate has stubbornly refused to behave according to predictions. We have only just begun to understand, let alone master and manage, the immense and intricate process at play.

As if this complicated research isn't challenging enough, it needs to be considered alongside an equally diverse range of possible responses. Politicians may spruik renewable energy to cut emissions and limit warming, but within this debate will be arguments about emissions trading, carbon taxes, clean energy targets, technology or simple regulation as a means to the end. Other experts argue this is futile and that only a rapid transition to nuclear power can cut emissions deep enough. Still others argue the forces unleashed already are so far beyond control that, rather than mitigation, adaptation is the only sensible path; that we should farm and populate areas rendered more favourable by warming and move away from areas placed under stress. The IPCC says some of what has been done cannot be undone and other factors will play a role: "Future climate will depend on committed warming caused by past anthropogenic emissions, as well as future anthropogenic emissions and natural climate variability."

Despite all this, Mr Abbott's blunt attempt to bring these issues into focus has been seized on by politicians and commentators as a chance to divide the world into believers and deniers — or those in favour of climate action and those against — as if there are only two choices

available rather than an endless array of prescriptions. It demonstrates a debilitating debate that has failed to mature even after dominating a decade of national affairs and playing a pivotal role (three times) in the overturning of party leaders and prime ministers. The volatility is sufficient once more to do the same again on either side.

Labor leader Bill Shorten said Mr Abbott lost “the plot” and his deputy, Tanya Plibersek, said the former prime minister was “loopy”. Former British Labour leader Ed Miliband attacked the speech as “idiocy” while the Greens labelled Mr Abbott a “dangerous fool”. Labor accused Malcolm Turnbull of caving in to his predecessor’s posturing by inching away from a clean energy target. ABC political commentator Paul Bongiorno gave us the unintentional pun of describing the former prime minister as a “weathervane” on climate and declaring he flew “in the face of contemporary science”. For Bongiorno and many at the ABC it is suspiciously simple and clear. “There is catastrophic global warming coming,” he preached on Radio National, “and we have got to do something about it.” Righto, then.

This is the simplistic, partisan and binary inanity to which this crucial debate has descended. All the while our households and industries confront escalating energy prices and reduced security of supply while our economic competitiveness suffers and we export energy around the world. At the same time we subsidise renewable electricity and ponder how to lure investment in back-up or baseload generation, global carbon emissions still rise, oblivious to our costly gestures. Mr Abbott has injected some sorely needed frankness into this debate. He is mocked for talking about climate change “doing good”, yet even the IPCC talks about the “risks and benefits” of global warming, noting we are most likely to experience any upside before a looming downside. By ignoring the manifest complexities in the diagnosis and the treatment, the critics are not, as they claim, adhering to the science but rather eschewing it.