

## Ockham's Razor 2

**Don Aitkin**

In last week's broadcast I put forward the view that, despite the alarm about greenhouse gas emissions, Kyoto targets and the rest, there is evidence that suggests that if the earth is warming it is doing so slowly after a long cool period, and that human activity is unlikely to be a major cause of any warming. This is not the conventional wisdom, of course, so there is at once a puzzle.

Let me enter it with a story. I gave a public address on this subject a couple of weeks ago, which was picked up in the daily newspapers; the text of the address was put on one newspaper's website, and a vigorous correspondence developed. In all, I received 200 or so communications. The majority were positive. The negative ones fell mostly into one or other of two groups: either I was trespassing on someone else's patch — that is, only scientists can talk about these issues, and I was not a scientist — or I was a 'denier', someone who, in spite of the authority of the IPCC and the weight of scientific opinion, was persisting in error. Some of these critiques had a religious tone to them, as though I was challenging central spiritual beliefs. But none of the critics took issue with my three central issues or provided their own evidence that in each case I was wrong. A number provided me with their own papers or pointed to other work that they felt to be decisive, but my three central issues remained there, virtually unchallenged.

The question of trespass is easily answered. The current Garnaut enquiry is proposing forms of taxation intended to induce us to use less fossil fuel. Everyone is entitled to know why such taxation is necessary, and my three central issues were my way in to that question. We might need to ask help if we do not understand something, but in my opinion the three central issues are within the competence of any educated Australian. As for 'authority', in my view it has little place either in science or in a democracy. The fact that the IPCC has pronounced on climate change does not mean that it is infallible, and indeed its reports frequently use adverbs like 'likely' or 'highly likely'. The fact that the Royal Society agrees with the IPCC does not mean that all the Fellows of the Royal Society agree, or even that they were asked what they thought about it. In any case, to adapt Einstein, it doesn't matter how many people agree, since one controverting experiment will demolish the hypothesis. And if you look hard at the reality of the 'two and a half thousand scientists' who are supposed to have done all the work and agree, it turns out that the IPCC reports are the work of a very much smaller number.

In a democracy like ours governments make decisions after taking advice and weighing up the consequences. Since ministers are constantly lobbied by groups and individuals who want particular decisions made, governments are wary of those who claim some 'authority' for what they want done. The problem for the Australian Government, and for all the governments of the developed countries, is that the IPCC in a sense is something they have helped to create. For the IPCC was set up in 1988 by the World Meteorological Organization and the United Nations Environment Program. Its members are appointed by national governments, and of course they have some status both in the scientific areas on which the IPCC depends and in their own countries. But it is not, to put it simply, a disinterested body. When the IPCC was

set up scientists had noted that a sharp increase in temperature had occurred since 1975 and that there was a growth in carbon dioxide concentrations. The IPCC's charter makes it clear that it is there to advise governments on how to counter human-induced global warming. At that time, too, satellite measurement of climate, super computers and climate science itself were all in their infancy. In response to the early warnings from the IPCC national governments have spent a lot of money on both the IPCC and their own climate studies, increasingly from the perspective that the IPCC must be right.

In the twenty years that have followed, of course, the issue of climate change or global warming has become highly public. The environmental movement has taken it up, and it gets some of its passion, I think, from what I would call a quasi-religious fervour. If it is true that human societies always need a religion, then in secular Australia one of the new ones is environmentalism. Green politics have become important too, and there is little doubt that Green support and Green preferences helped the ALP to victory last year. The media like global warming too: it produces almost daily scare stories, as another scientist or group produces a new paper warning of another possible catastrophe. In short, global warming is orthodoxy.

The orthodoxy, however, is increasingly challenged, the principal challenge coming not from people but from climate itself. After a peak in 1998, the result apparently of an El Nino episode, temperature has not increased, though carbon dioxide has gone on doing so. A new sunspot cycle is predicted to keep temperatures down over the next decade or so. And scientists who were reluctant to speak up against orthodoxy are now finding reason to do so. It is unlikely that the world's governments would create an IPCC today if it were not in existence.

The problem for our government, and for those of other western countries, is quite clear. There is substantial electoral interest in the issue, and people want action. There is no action of any substance that will not lower Australian living standards. Governments do not like to impose taxes unnecessarily. Australia's direct contribution to greenhouse gas emissions is, in a global sense, trivial, though its indirect contribution, in selling coal to China and other users, is higher. But if we do not sell the coal, others will, and that would lower Australian living standards even further. On the face of it, there are no immediate alternatives to coal and oil. Wind power is too variable and too small in scale to make much difference, and while Australia used to be the leader in solar power research the last government lacked interest in it. Nuclear power is a possibility for our electricity grid, but it comes with great emotional baggage, to say the least. Globally, China and India will go on using coal and oil, and all the poor countries will want to follow their example. They too would like reliable electricity

So what is our Government to do? In my view it will, like its counterparts elsewhere, go on waiting, talking and not acting. It will be pretty sure that the evidence to support carbon taxing is not strong, and that the proposed measures will be inefficient and lead to rorts. It waits for something to happen that will change the status quo. It will delay acting on the Garnaut reports, unless Garnaut himself proposes delay, with which it will agree. Others have proposed a Royal Commission into the issue, and I would agree with that, if it were properly run and led — by which I mean open-minded. While governments don't like royal commissions unless they are pretty sure

that the outcome they want will also be publicly acceptable, such a commission would at least take more time to inquire and report. I would go on studying climate change, too, but without any assumption that human-induced warming was at the heart of it, because I think that there must be much more to know, and I do not dismiss the possibility that the unchecked production of carbon dioxide might have unexpected consequences for us, and for future generations..

But what would government be waiting for? Another few years of cooler climate, perhaps, or even another, steeper period of global warming. Or another country, one or other in Europe particularly, deciding to look much harder at what the IPCC has been saying. The first would encourage discussion about the weaknesses in the IPCC position, the second would encourage the supporters, and the third would allow us to point to someone else as having shown the way. But until something happens my expectation is that climate change or global warming will remain well in the foreground of public discussion, but that nothing of any consequence will be done about it.

And that is a pity, because to my mind it is the Great Distractor. We have real and immediate problems in finding and managing abundant fresh water supplies for our cities, and enabling inland streams to flow properly. Although we are plentifully supplied with coal, we are highly dependent on cheap oil, and need to find alternatives to it for transport. Public transport can only be part of the answer, for our pattern of settlement is too sparse to make public transport pay for the cost of running trains or trams, let alone for building the infrastructure.

Above all that, we are fixated on growth, both of the economy and of the population, as being an absolute good. It seems to me that we know enough now to bring on the economy of any country to something like our own standard of living within a generation or two, say 35 years. As we do, each such country's people will want their own three-bedroom, three-bathroom houses, their swimming pools and their own cars. India alone is said to have a middle class of 80 million. China is rocketing ahead, and new freeways full of cars are appearing there every few months. They want what we have, and they are not impressed by talk about global warming.

Nonetheless, somehow we have to change the way we do things, if only because we will be unable to afford our present way of life. My strategy is to encourage a shift from what I call materialism — the notion that you can buy whatever you need to make you happy — to creativity, by which I mean that we do our best to unlock the creative impulse in every child and every adult. There are three good reasons for doing so. One is that materialism ultimately doesn't work. The second is that creative people tend to be interested in life, happy in what they do, and productive. The third is that the footprint of the creative, to use that hackneyed expression, is likely to be a lot fainter than those who search for fulfilment through buying things. Musical instruments, paints and paintbrushes and garden aids cost less and use less energy in their production than do huge houses, cars and boats.

'What has that got to do with global warming?' you ask. Well, a thriving, creative society will sit a little more lightly on the planet than an acquisitive, materialist one. I was brought up in a thrifty household where re-cycling went on as a matter of course. It wasn't called 'recycling' then; it was just how we lived. If we went down the path I

have proposed (and I agree that I have barely sketched it) we would produce some of the outcomes that environmentalists yearn for. But we would then be doing it for what I would regard as the right reasons.