

Address to the NSW Farmers Association Group 11 Conference

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'Climate change — A Return to the Stone Age?'

by Don Aitkin

I am pleased to be here to add my twopence worth to the great debate about the extent to which we have left the Stone Age. My way in is through a consideration of the current debate about climate change. Actually, the debate is not about climate change. As nearly everyone knows, our climate undergoes many changes in the course of a century or so. There have been, for example, three great droughts in the past hundred years, and a rather smaller set of great wets. I have seen land that looked almost completely desolate respond to rain in the most powerful way. Australian history is replete with stories of the effect that current weather conditions had on the perceptions of newcomers, and of the errors they made in assuming that the conditions they experienced were somehow the norm. Climate does change, and sensible people adapt to that change. Even more sensible people record what happens in weather, so that they have some kind of record to assist them in making decisions. Some of you, I am sure, have such records going well back into the 19th century.

The current issue in the climate debate is not about climate change, but about our role as human beings in affecting that change. The short title for the belief that

we are responsible for it is 'Anthropogenic Global Warming', or AGW, and I'll use the initials from now on. I guess all of you could summarise what I call the central AGW proposition. It goes like this: human beings, though their heavy and growing use of fossil fuels, are adding large amounts of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere, where it combines with other 'greenhouse gases' to retain in the air a greater amount of the sun's energy, which effectively increases the temperature of the planet. In the long run, which may not be very long at all, the increasing temperature will melt the ice, raise sea levels, turn farming land into deserts, and make life impossible for us. We therefore need to stop burning fossil fuels, and find alternative sources of energy — or perhaps just lead a simpler life.

This account of climate change has been about now for nearly twenty years, and is regarded as the orthodox view by our government, and indeed by most of the governments of the world, the United Nations and its many agencies, and a large number of non-government organisations. The principal proponent of the orthodox view is a body called the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, or IPCC, which was set up twenty years ago by the international body that represents national bureaux of meteorology and the United Nations Environmental Program. The IPCC has produced a lot of reports of various kinds. All are based on scientific papers. All emphasise how important this issue is, and the reports have grown in confidence and in urgency, especially the digest that is called the Summary for Policy Makers. You will know about the Kyoto Protocol and that the Rudd Government has signed us up to it. You will know that Professor Ross Garnaut is conducting an inquiry into how best to deal

with this issue, and that he has foreshadowed a kind of tax on carbon use, a tax that would affect all of us.

At the beginning of April I gave a paper to the Australian Planning Institute, of which I am an Honorary Fellow, to the effect that the AGW proposition didn't seem to me to be very well supported by argument or evidence. Since I was not a scientist I was given the rounds of the kitchen by supporters of the IPCC position, though neither Ross Garnaut nor Al Gore, whose film 'An Inconvenient Truth' helped to win him a Nobel prize, are scientists either. Apparently it is OK to agree with the IPCC, if you are not a scientist, but it is not OK to disagree. In my address I said that I was an agnostic about AGW, and that I was prepared to change my mind if there were better argument and/or evidence.

What did I mean? Let me summarise my own position. I said that there were three central issues. The first was whether or not the world was warming. The IPCC says that it has warmed over the 20th century by about 0.6 of a degree Celsius, plus or minus about 0.2 per cent. While I have a lot of doubts about the way we measure temperature, I'll accept that warming estimate.

The second issue, for me, is whether or not such a warming is historically unprecedented. The IPCC says it is, on arguments that don't seem well founded historically to me. Human history provides plenty of evidence of earlier warm and earlier cool periods. What causes these large climate changes is not wholly clear, but they have to do with the earth's movement around the sun, with the prevalence of sunspots, and with natural events like large volcanic eruptions

(which darken the sky and reduce temperature). The issue here is whether we are simply in a new warming period that will be replaced in due course by a further cooling period, or we have somehow created a new climate — an Anthropogenic Global Warming. It could be a bit of both.

That leads straight to the third central issue: the extent to which we are responsible for the current warming. Here the IPCC argument is to my mind shaky. Physics proposes a straightforward link between increasing carbon dioxide concentrations and increasing temperature, but the relationship is logarithmic and diminishing, which means that each doubling of the carbon dioxide proportion produces the same increase in air temperature. Carbon dioxide is a rare gas in the atmosphere, currently at the level of 385 ppm. Estimates of its concentration two centuries ago, at the beginning of the industrial revolution, suggest 280 ppm. Doubling that level give us 560 ppm, and we are long way off that. In any case, there is no agreement about the consequent increase in temperature, with the IPCC arguing for 3 degrees for each doubling but not on what seem to me very strong grounds. A one-degree increase seems more likely, and that does not seem a scary possibility to me, and would fit with what we know of the last century. The next one-degree increase would occur when carbon dioxide reached 1120 ppm. CO₂ is increasing at about 1 to 2 ppm each year. There is a way to go. On the whole, warming is better for us humans than cooling.

My other reason for agnosticism here is that the records don't show any simple or linear increase in temperature, though the increase in CO₂ is certainly steady

and upward. We know that the world's glaciers have been melting since the mid 19th century, a century before the great increase in fossil fuel burning. The increase in temperature over the course of the 20th century was irregular, with two periods of warming (1910 to 1945 and 1975 to 1998) with an intermediate period of cooling. It is hard to make that fit the text. There has been no continuation of warming since 1998, though CO₂ concentrations show that same steady rise. That is hard to fit into the text, too. Yes, we human beings may be having an effect on our climate, but I can't see strong evidence that we are the principal source of warming. In short, I am an agnostic about there being an imminent catastrophe, and about the need for swingeing economic policies to deal with it.

Since my paper appeared I have seen about a thousand comments on it. Most were, I am happy to say, positive. Those that were negative were of two kinds. One was that since I was not a climate scientist I had no business poking my nose into the issue. The other was that every argument I put forward had already been dealt with by the IPCC. Neither is a valid argument. Kevin Rudd is not a climate scientist, nor is any of his ministers, nor any of his senior public servants, but they all have to work on this issue, and grapple with it. We are all taxpayers, and if we want to have a point of view about it, we need to grapple with it too. And the three central issues are not difficult ones. They are all about measurement, and at least we can understand them. And the IPCC has not dealt with every issue. It has a point of view, which is that we human beings are responsible for global warming and that global warming is a bad thing. That is a respectable point of view, and the IPCC can produce argument and evidence in support of it.

But it is not difficult to produce argument and evidence against it. The great truth here is that, despite what Al Gore and others have said, the science is by no means settled. Science never is settled.

You may well ask why, if the science is not settled, so many governments appear to believe that it is. I think that the most general reason is that we seem to be caught up in what a pair of social scientists has called an 'availability cascade': we judge whether or not something is true by how many examples of it we see reported. Fires, storms, apparently trapped polar bears, floods, cold, undue heat — if these events are authoritatively linked to a single attributed cause, then almost anything in that domain will seem to be an example of the cause, and we become worried. I should say at once that 'climate change' has become the offered cause of so many diverse incidents that for me at any rate it ceases to be a likely cause of any. Why does this particular availability cascade have its evident force? I offer some reasons.

One is that some of the senior people in and around the IPCC — one might call them 'scientist-activists' — are convinced that unless the world wakes up to itself humanity will not have a future. I would call this a quasi-religious view, and it is the basis of the view that 'the end justifies the means', a doctrine that I think has no place in a democracy. It seems to me that 'environmentalism', broadly defined, has elements of a quasi-religious movement (with 'Gaia', the spirit of the earth, as the goddess), and the religious are rarely interested in argument or evidence. A second is that there are now thousands of people, not the least of

them scientists, whose work depends on the AGW proposition and the large amounts of money that have flowed to institutes and universities because of it. National scientific academies are now in the happy position of being powerful, at least in this domain, and they have become political in an apparent attempt to protect that pleasant power, whatever its impact on science.

A third is that the Greens and environmentalists generally welcome the AGW proposition because it fits in with their own world-view, and they have helped to popularise it. Governments that depend on Green support have found themselves, however willingly or unwillingly, trapped in AGW policies, as is plainly the case with the Rudd Government. The hard heads may not buy the story, but they do want to be elected or re-elected. Democratic governments facing elections are sensitive to popular movements that could have electoral effect. I am sure that it was this electoral perception that caused the Howard Government at the end to move significantly towards Kyoto and indicate a preparedness to go down the Kyoto path, as indeed the Labor Party had done earlier and Kevin Rudd did as soon as he was elected.

A fourth is that even democratically elected governments are prone to use fear as a reason to induce their societies to accept government policies, and I see this occurring around the world. A fifth is that we human beings rather like scary stories, catastrophe films and horror stuff; we may not believe it, but we get some kind of kick from it. A sixth, if you are still counting, is that governments don't like uncertainty: they search for the one-handed economist and adviser, the one who ignores the other possibilities and plumps for action. Put them all together,

and you have a seventh, which takes us back to the availability cascade: I have encountered several people, scientists and policymakers among them, who have made it plain to me that they do not agree with the AGW proposition. But they don't want to get involved: there are other issues at stake; anyway, people need a wake-up call (a mild version of 'the end justifies the means'). An eighth is that, given the temper of the times, business leaders and other notables who might want to enter the debate fear that to do so will be bad for their business or their reputations. So they are silent.

An ninth is that the media find AGW a wonderfully continual storehouse of visual and 'scientific' horror stories, much better than 'medical breakthroughs'. Let me give you an immediate example. The *Canberra Times* yesterday carried a story about some new scientific research that suggested that the seas were warming faster than the IPCC had estimated. But it did not carry any story, earlier this year, about a much more powerfully researched assay of ocean temperatures that suggested not only that there had been no warming, but in fact there might have been a slight cooling. Scary stories make news; non-scary ones don't.

In short, AGW is now orthodoxy, and orthodoxy always has strong latent support. Because AGW is said to be 'science', even well-educated people think it will be too hard for them. David Henderson, a respected British economist and former Treasury official, has called the orthodoxy in climate change a case of 'heightened milieu consensus', in which prime ministers and other leaders tell us that nothing could be more serious than this issue. These are not statements of

fact; they are no more than conjecture. But they have become, in his phrase 'widely accepted presuppositions of policy'. Intellectually, AGW is what is known in politics as 'a done deal'.

Finally, and in some contrast, I think we are about to see some return to doubt on the part of Western governments, our own included, about the likelihood of the imminent catastrophe. The reason is that few seem to have factored in to their calculations the central role that energy plays in our life. Not only are we keen on being able to use our cars and travel by plane, but we assume that energy prices are more or less stable, and a great deal of what passes for daily life in our country is based on that assumption. The notion that there is an easy path to a reduced dependence on fossil fuels seems to me quite odd. Our agriculture, our cities and their form, our transport systems, the way we educate our young, our forms of recreation — all are based on cheap and easily available energy. If we are to use the pricing mechanism to force an aversion to using oil and coal we will need to change our whole way of life, and quickly.

This, of course, is what many in the environmental movement want us to do. But I strongly doubt that the great majority of the electorate has any wish to do so. And governments that introduce those measures need to be very sure that they have the electorate on side, or they will not be the government for very long. Already we can see that rapid increases in the price of fuel caused mostly by increasing demand outpacing supply are causing strikes and other demonstrations of anger in Europe. Fishermen cannot afford the price of fuel

unless the price of fish increases in sympathy, and they have no control over that. Likewise truck-drivers. Managing perturbations like these is difficult enough at the best of times. To artificially induce such perturbations into any society is a form of electoral madness.

Unless there is no alternative. For some years now governments have been saying that we must do these things or else. And if warming continued, and some of its proposed adverse consequences were already evident, it might be possible for a prime minister to tell us that it was Dunkirk time, we must buckle our belts and get on with saving the world. The problem is that for ten years the upward movement in warming has ceased. It is hard to pick a trend in the movement of global temperature since 1998. Indeed, there has been a precipitate decline in that temperature over the past year, a decline greater than the supposed increase for the whole of the 20th century. Of course, warming may start again tomorrow. Yes, it looks as though the north polar ice is melting, but it also looks as though Antarctica is cooling. Yes, there are reports of various kinds, but they point in different directions, as I have set out before.

My guess is that the Rudd government will not move far down the AGW path, whatever its ministers say. We are already in a difficult economic moment, and fuel costs, if they continue to increase, will put pressure on the government to do something to alleviate the misery that Australian families will experience. This will not be a great time in which to tell people that they need to accept more misery for the sake of mankind. China and India, the two large economies that are in full-speed-ahead mode, have no intention of reducing their dependence on

fossil fuels, and if Australia does not supply them with coal then they will source what they need from Brazil or elsewhere. The environmentalists will tell the government that now is the moment to introduce a carbon tax, which will have the effect both of reducing people's income and pushing further industries offshore to China and India, which will reduce our incomes further still. You could be entitled to see this as the beginning of a return to the Stone Age, and ask, insistently, why our government thinks it is necessary

All in all, the situation of our government in this domain is not an enviable one. In Britain it seems very likely that the Labour Government will go to defeat at the next election, and the villain there will largely have been the rapidly increasing cost of energy, and the Government's commitment to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by making fossil fuel consumption more expensive. Of course, if global temperature had gone on rising, and the link with increasing carbon dioxide could be strongly established, then Western governments might, just might, be able to appeal to the electorate's worries about the fate of our children and grandchildren. But in the absence of such climate indicators it seems to me that all our governments will be slow in bringing about new taxes to deal with climate change.

In any event, the next year or two will be most interesting.