

Response to Clive Hamilton

Professor Clive Hamilton published a long essay on the New Matilda website, which was in large part an attack on the paper I had given to the Australian Planning Institute in May 2008. This was my response.

Others who have commented publicly on my address to the Australian Planning institute on Anthropogenic Global Warming (AGW) have generally sent me a copy of their critique in advance. I learned about that of Clive Hamilton through a reference on another website. That circumstance explains this delayed response. Clive tells us that he decided that in the AGW field the important question was ‘not what to believe but whom to believe’. Such a choice has never occurred to me. I think that every one of us has a duty as a citizen to explore major issues and come to a decision about them, based on the argument and evidence that she or he can find. That is what being a citizen means. The notion that we should instead believe others or other points of view seems a cop-out to me, though I recognise that it is a familiar position.

As I have said many times, the issues in the AGW debate are not difficult to understand. Is the earth warming, is the warming unprecedented, and what is the extent to which we are responsible for any warming that has occurred — these are issues that any literate, reasonably educated person can understand. The answers are less straightforward. The earth seems to have been warming for the last 150 years, and continues to do so, in an irregular way. There have been long warm (and cool) periods in the Christian era, and on the face of it the one we are in is another. It may well be true that we are contributing to that warming in divers ways, and that is suggested by the fact that the warming in the northern hemisphere, where most human beings live, is more pronounced than in the southern hemisphere. But the connection between that warming and the increasing concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is not strong statistically, while carbon dioxide is the fuel of plant life, which has flourished in the last thirty years. Plants provide us (and other animals) with food, and produce oxygen, which we breathe. That increased carbon dioxide has been responsible as well for all or the major part of any warming that has occurred has not been demonstrated by anyone, least of all by the IPCC. It is modelled, conjectured, argued, asserted and proclaimed, but it has not been shown to be true.

There is abundant evidence that the ‘consensus’ and ‘peer review’ of the IPCC is flawed, and that it needs something equivalent to the ‘double blind’ systems in medical research. In any case, to repeat, my view is that each of us is entitled to form his or her own judgment on the issues. The IPCC is not some kind of superior court, but an assemblage of government-appointed people from around the world whose official task is to supply information and propose solutions to ‘human-induced climate change’. It is not, that is to say, a completely disinterested body. In response to someone else who has criticised what I have been saying, I remarked that ‘I am increasingly struck by the similarity of the AGW debate to the struggle between the Church of Rome and the Protestant dissenters in the 16th century and afterwards. The Church claimed the right to mediate between the believer and God, while the Protestants argued that each of us could establish a personal

communication with God. Throughout [his] talk I could hear someone talking in the tones of ‘received wisdom’. My sceptical, protestant mind begins to object as soon as I hear anyone talk like this, no matter how many years they have worked in a field, no matter how many peer-reviewed papers they have published, no matter what their title. They are claiming authority. I don’t accept it.’ I want to see the argument and the evidence. That Clive does accept it is his choice, and I have no quarrel with his doing so. But each of us can make our own decision.

In my view we should be able to conduct this debate without ad hominem, guilt by association and smears. It has not been so in this case. Clive refers to my thanks to Ian Castle and Bob Carter at the end of the paper, not as he says, ‘for their guidance in preparing the paper’ but (as I wrote) ‘for pointing me in useful directions’. There is plainly a difference. This kind of intellectual sloppiness runs through Clive’s essay. He writes: ‘As his primary source on climate science, Aitkin directs readers to a **paper** published by the Heartland Institute’. My primary source? I shook my head. The passage he must refer to goes like this: ‘The IPCC’s voluminous papers are available at its website www.ipcc.ch/, while a sceptical scientific response *Nature, Not Human Activity, Rules the Climate*, published by the Nongovernmental International Panel on Climate Change, can be downloaded from <http://sepp.org/publications/NIPCC-Feb%2020.pdf>. The best place to start to come to terms with the debate is a New Zealand website whose organisers come from the University of Canterbury at Christchurch. Their site www.climatedebatedaily.com attempts to give a ‘balanced’ perspective, but it does list all the most active websites on both side of the issue.’ When your critic can’t even quote you accurately, you begin to wonder what he is about.

Back to Castles and Carter, whom Clive pictures at once as ‘associated with the denialists of the Lavosier Group’, which is said to have ‘links to Exxon-funded organizations in the United States’. Wow. Somewhere along the way Clive forgot to mention that Ian Castles was once Australian Statistician, who writes (yes, peer-reviewed) articles about the sloppy use of statistics in the AGW domain, and that Bob Carter was the head of the Earth Sciences panel of the Australian Research Council and the Australian leader of the international Ocean Drilling Program. Perhaps they came to their scepticism all by themselves. After this straight-out example of selective labelling and guilt by association we are given Clive’s tour of the alleged right-wing and industry connections of those who argue against AGW. Perhaps recognising that he was getting into character assassination Clive says, parenthetically, ‘I am not suggesting, and have no reason to believe, that Don Aitkin has taken any money from Exxon or any other company or group’. Great! No one but Clive himself has ever implied it.

I have appreciated some of Clive Hamilton’s work in the past, but this is not a good example of it. For my taste it is too much of a rant, with too little argument and too much that is simply irrelevant. If anyone wants to read what I actually said, rather than what Clive thinks I said, my paper is available from me at donaitkin@grapevine.com.au.