

## “AVOIDING DANGEROUS CLIMATE CHANGE”: THE MOST DEPRESSING CONFERENCE EVER

By Benny Peiser <[b.j.peiser@livjm.ac.uk](mailto:b.j.peiser@livjm.ac.uk)>

I have just returned from the most depressing conference I have ever attended.

After two days of relentless barrage of doom and gloom predictions at the Met Office conference on “Avoiding Dangerous Climate Change” (<http://www.stabilisation2005.com/programme.html>), I decided that enough is enough.

The unmitigated exposure to prophecies of imminent ice ages, looming hell fire, mass starvation, mega-droughts, global epidemics and mass extinction is an experience I would not recommend to anyone with a thin-skinned disposition (although the news media couldn't get enough of it). But such was the spectacle of pending disaster that anyone who dared or was allowed - to question whether the sky is really about to fall on us (and there were at least half a dozen of moderate anti-alarmists present), was branded a “usual suspect”, a slur hurled against Andrei Illarionov (Putin's economic adviser) by the IPCC's Martin Parry.

As you would have thought of a Government-choreographed summit, some of the results of the meeting were announced a day before its start by Margaret Beckett, the UK's Environment Secretary. When I arrived at my hotel on the eve of the conference, a front page story of the local newspaper (“GLOBAL WARNING”) had already given away much of the outcome of the meeting:

*“Speaking at a regional climate change conference in Exeter this evening (31 Jan), Margaret Beckett, Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, stressed the South West would not be immune from experiencing the impacts of climate change. Rising sea levels coupled with a likely increase in storms will threaten the South West's long coastline if climate change is left unchecked...”*

Thus, the stage was set for a carefully stage-managed conference that provided a forum for one worst-case disaster scenario after another. Any hesitation or incredulity about claims that the effects of a warming world will unavoidably be catastrophic were discarded or ridiculed. Professor Paul Reiter (Pasteur Institute in Paris and Harvard University), was even lucky to be allowed into the conference after four separate applications had been either lost or not processed by the conference organisers.

One of the key questions the conference attempted to address is whether or not the meeting could come to an agreement about the threshold for “dangerous” climate change.

The proposals ranged from a rise in temperatures by 2 degrees C which was promoted by the WWF (oh yes, green campaigners were allowed to present their political views) to more moderate suggestions.

Even more difficulties emerged when the issue of a CO<sub>2</sub> threshold was discussed. Here the proposals ranged from the IPPR's 400 ppmv limit (“point-of-no-return-in-10-years”), a proposal co-authored by the IPCC chairman, to a generous 700 ppmv limit. It soon turned out that **any** such threshold would be completely random and rather meaningless.

One of the most interesting and least alarmist presentations was that by Professor Yuri Israel, the chief climatologist at the Russian Academy of Science. In his talk ([http://www.stabilisation2005.com/16\\_Yu\\_A\\_Izrael.pdf](http://www.stabilisation2005.com/16_Yu_A_Izrael.pdf)), he pointed out the potentially gigantic economic cost of any attempts to “stabilise” the world's climate: “Stabilization is not free for the world community. Economic analysis of stabilization scenarios using, in particular, 1000, 750, 650, 550 and 450 ppmv of CO<sub>2</sub> as stabilization levels show that this may cost up to 18 trillions \$US of 1992.” Applying a cost-benefit analysis to the potential damage as a result of increasing temperatures evaluated against the cost of CO<sub>2</sub> stabilisation, Professor Israel proposed moderate limits for CO<sub>2</sub> concentration and surface temperature for the 21st century:

- a) CO<sub>2</sub> concentration should not exceed 550 - 700 ppmv;
- b) A rise in surface temperature should be less than 2.5°C for the globe and less than 4°C for the Arctic;
- c) Global mitigation costs should not exceed 10 - 20% of the increase in global GDP;
- d) Sea level rise should be less than 1 m.

The Russian scientist was immediately and disrespectfully admonished by the chair and former IPCC chief Sir John Houghton for being far too optimistic. Such a moderate proposal was ridiculous since it was “incompatible with IPCC policy”. Clearly, the Met Office meeting was setting the tone for the next IPCC report.

It was deeply upsetting to witness the ill-mannered and discourteous way in which both Professor Israel and Dr Illarionov were mocked during the debates by many delegates and IPCC officials. There was a time when British scientists were known for their polite and gentlemanly conduct. None of these good old traditions were visible at the Met Office.

Instead, the apocalyptic frenzy and fear-mongering brought the worst out of a large number of the knighted and commoners alike. How Britain's image and self-respect is tumbling as a result of mounting apprehension.

In a rather ironic twist to the UK debates (which brings to mind the words "the pot calling a kettle black"), the contemptible smear campaign against scientists who participated in the recent "Apocalypse No" meeting at the Royal Institution suddenly appears in a radically different light. While Sir David King, the UK Government's chief scientist, accused climate sceptics of being "professional lobbyists" for the oil industry, he announced today that the Government intends to increase subsidies for nuclear power plants and introduce even more tax breaks for the fossil fuel industries that are prepared to sequester their carbon emissions.

*"Sir David disclosed that the Government was considering giving oil companies tax breaks to encourage them to pump carbon dioxide into North Sea oil and gas wells where it would cause no damage to the atmosphere." Although nobody knows "whether carbon sequestration is feasible", it may be "a way of using coal reserves all over the world."*

(<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2005/02/03/ncarb03.xml&sSheet=news/2005/02/03/ixhome.html>).

Far from punishing the fossil fuel industries, as environmentalists are demanding from Tony Blair in the run-up to the General Elections in May this year, the British Government is using the much slated "fear-factor" to win back lost voters and to justify additional state subsidies for the big energy companies. It's a mockery not lost on Greenpeace and other environmental campaigners who no longer trust that the apocalyptically hot air released at the Met Office conference will translate into any significant reduction of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.

Yet in spite of these political shenanigans, the key message emerging from the Met Office conference seems absolutely clear to me: the debate has now been pressed forward from a discussion about the science of climate change to the prediction of global catastrophe.

Evidently, the next IPCC report will be far more alarmist than any of its antecedents.

IPCC chairman, Dr Pachauri, who opened the Met Office conference together with Margaret Beckett, stressed only two weeks ago: "The world has already reached the level of dangerous concentrations of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and immediate and very deep cuts in the pollution are needed if humanity is to survive." The apprehension of looming disaster was the general mood of fretfulness and despair at the Exeter conference.

Most of this anxiety is not lost on the media that is completely unrestrained in the use of doomsday imagery and biblical language: "potential triggers for runaway climate change", "climate Armageddon" "notional doomsdays" and "the apocalyptic side to global warming" are phrases that are now widely used by news outlets when covering global warming (Discovery Channel, 2 February 2005;

<http://dsc.discovery.com/news/afp/20050131/climatetrigger.html>).

I return from this meeting with a determination not to give in to this doom-laden mood but to maintain my confident view of humankind that has been capable of coping with whatever nature has thrown at us for millions of year.

Benny Peiser  
Liverpool John Moores University  
3 February 2005

For the full programme, including abstracts and presentation slides see:  
<http://www.stabilisation2005.com/programme.html>