

Climate Change – a measured approach

A letter to the Herald, February 2010

Sir,

In his letter in the Herald of 12 February, Simon Joslin of Oakhanger raises important points about the debate on global warming, points which cannot simply be ignored.

There have been three key errors made by some (not all) of the leading proponents of action against global warming.

The first error was to re-define 'belief' in global warming as some sort of article of faith, which should no longer be open to question. This is misguided; nothing in science should be immune to challenge. Calling those who do raise questions 'flat-earthers' is only likely to wind them up, and understandably so.

The second error was to over-simplify the subject, to suggest that the world is just getting hotter, and that all studies confirm the same thing. In truth something as complex as world climate will always throw up anomalies, and trends will be more jumpy than straight-line. To pretend otherwise was asking for trouble. No wonder gainsayers now so enjoy citing conflicting evidence.

The third error was the failure to isolate a relatively small number of things that can make the most corrective difference most palatably; instead we were told (with apparent glee, at times) that everything about our lives would have to change – that being warm at home was bad, foreign holidays were selfish, even going to work was a bit irresponsible. Hardly the way to win hearts and minds.

The combined effect of the first and second errors created what looked at times like an all-too-cosy consensus, and at other times like a rather profitable self-serving industry. Meanwhile, the third error has caused many people to be turned off the subject altogether.

Yes, errors have been made. But that does not mean there is no global warming. And it does not make it any less urgent to address.

The truth is we're dealing here mainly in probabilities, not certainties.

One thing IS certain: the mean world temperature has risen over time – though not every year in a straight line. There is a theoretical possibility that the rise is just data noise, but given what can be observed statistically it seems reasonable to work on a 90% chance it's a real trend.

Now, the world has warmed (and cooled) before, and again there is a theoretical possibility that the recent warming is "just one of those things", and will eventually turn back. But the evidence suggests something like an 80% probability it's a result of human action, and won't.

An 80% probability times a 90% probability. That doesn't mean no one may question the science, but it does mean we need to start acting on it.

Politicians, as well as scientists and others, have a key role to play in promoting the realistic things that can make the biggest difference.

Technology development is key – especially in cleaner coal, and (better) electric vehicles.

Nuclear power has its drawbacks, but is a key part of reducing carbon emissions from energy generation. Alas the power stations take a long time to build, so in the shorter term wind power is important too (and, sadly, onshore wind power is more cost-effective than offshore).

Governments have a role in other areas, too: promoting rail travel over domestic flights, for example, and working with emerging economies to help make their growth cleaner.

But there are also things that are more directly in our own control, as individual families and householders. At the top of that list is domestic energy efficiency. The single most important thing most of us can do is make sure our homes are well insulated. Happily, this can help save money as well as save the planet. Even if the world wasn't warming it would make sense to save on bills and lift people out of fuel poverty.

The key is to focus on the practical. Groups like East Hampshire's own Greening Campaign have been very effective in highlighting this, and showing people how they can take control and make a difference.

I do not blame Mr Joslin for reacting as he does to Al Gore, and certain members of the IPCC and the University of East Anglia. But I do hope he will give the science a second chance. And I hope the scientists, in turn, will rein in their more excitable colleagues. We are all in this together, and need to take effective action, urgently.

Yours

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