

(Originally posted on the Climate Skeptics discussion list, 11 March 2006.)

## BY WAY OF SELF-INTRODUCTION

Walter Starck

*“In the year of our Lord 1432, there arose a grievous quarrel among the brethren over the number of teeth in the mouth of a horse. For thirteen days the disputation raged without ceasing. All the ancient books and chronicles were fetched out, and wonderful and ponderous erudition such as was never before heard of in this region was made manifest. At the beginning of the fourteenth day, a youthful friar of goodly bearing asked his learned superiors for permission to add a word, and straightway, to the wonderment of the disputants, whose deep wisdom he sore vexed, he beseeched them to unbend in a manner coarse and unheard-of and to look in the open mouth of a horse and find answer to their questionings. At this, their dignity being grievously hurt, they waxed exceeding wroth; and, joining in a mighty uproar, they flew upon him and smote him, hip and thigh, and cast him out forthwith. For, said they, surely Satan hath tempted this bold neophyte to declare unholy and unheard-of ways of finding truth, contrary to all the teachings of the fathers. After many days more of grievous strife, the dove of peace sat on the assembly, and they as one man declaring the problem to be an everlasting mystery because of a grievous dearth of historical and theological evidence thereof, so ordered the same writ down.” - Francis Bacon, 1592.*

The current debate over global warming seems a modern version of the above debate complete with elaborate sophistry (computer models), appeals to authority (a purported scientific consensus) and vilification of any who dare suggest that empirical evidence is other than fully in accord with dogma.

Throughout history prophecies of doom have attracted attention and devout believers. The difference now is that theories take the place of revelations and computer models have replaced pig's entrails. In my own lifetime I have seen *The Silent Spring*, *The Population Bomb*, *The Club of Rome Report*, *The Coming Ice Age*, the Y2K disaster and an ongoing litany of threats to the Great Barrier Reef fail to materialize despite fiercest arguments (and seemingly fondest hopes) of their supporters. In the meantime a goodly number of genuine disasters have occurred, none of which were predicted. Our ability to accurately predict the future is at best poor and beyond about a decade becomes effectively zero. Prophecies of doom afford the delicious appeal of righteousness and superiority combined with the promise of severe retribution for disbelief. Many find this attraction hard to resist, particularly so if one's sense of self-importance is greater than society sees fit to accord. That the emotional commitment is to the existence of the threat rather than genuine concern for its dire consequences is revealed by the anger and rejection provoked by any argument or evidence that does not support it. True concern would surely invoke at least hopeful interest.

I must confess that a few years ago I was beginning to form an impression that unlike the failed doomscreaming of the past for which my skepticism had been vindicated, the evidence for GW was indeed starting to appear convincing. Then I met Professor Bob Carter of the Marine Geophysical Laboratory, James Cook University and he pointed

me to some key studies that raised serious doubts about various important elements of the AGW hypothesis. Like most biologists I was largely unaware of the basic literature in this area but had been informed mostly by news items, reports in *Science*, and *Nature* plus sundry biological studies attributing various changes to GW. However, in view of past experience, I was not entirely surprised to discover that far from the claimed consensus there is an ongoing and extensive literature in peer reviewed primary research journals which conflicts almost every aspect of AGW theory from fundamental physics to atmospheric responses and feedbacks, to actual physical and biological consequences, to past and even current climatic conditions.

Although the proclaimed scientific consensus is clearly a fiction much of its public credibility derives from the fact that a large majority of my colleagues from the populous biological community have signed on wholesale for something about which they are poorly informed but find hard to resist. It seems to be happening. We are observably in a warming period which the climatologists tell us is unprecedented and which they say has no natural explanation. A purported link with AGW lends great import and attention to otherwise unremarkable biological findings. Any expression of doubt or reservation will only have negative personal consequences. It's a lot more comfortable to jump on the bandwagon than to walk along by oneself. In fact fame and fortune await those who, like Tim Flannery, can find a prominent position at the front of the wagon.

When confronted by the many unknowns involved in the theory of global warming true believers always resort to the precautionary principle as their irrefutable defense. This argument goes that even though there may be some uncertainties the possible consequences are so dire we must act now to curb the use of fossil fuel. This reasoning may appear un-assailable to the GW faithful but its dangerous fallacy is that it fails to apply the same standard of caution to the possible consequences of the precautionary measures themselves. Prevention of further growth in atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> would require drastic reduction in the use of fossil fuels, most probably to near pre-industrial levels. To do this quickly starting with current technology would result in extreme economic recession, probably make our major cities unsustainable and render it impossible to produce and distribute sufficient food to prevent widespread famine. In short, we would be trading a highly uncertain possibility of some future catastrophe for the certainty of an immediate one.

On the other hand, if we simply maintain course there is a very real probability for technological advances spurred by increased cost of fossil fuels to provide much improved energy efficiency and development of alternatives. Such advances combined with below replacement birth rates in developed countries may well mean an AGH disaster will never eventuate even if it is physically possible (which it may well not be). Even if it does eventuate, the means to address it will be more advanced and the degree of sacrifice necessary less in the future than they are now.

Indeed there is a risk but risk is inherent in life. No matter what we do the mortality rate remains 100%. So far so good, seems a better strategy than self-destructing now to avoid the possibility of a future problem, especially when in reality the consequences may even be more of net benefit than of detriment.

None of this is to say that humanity should waste enormous quantities of energy, pour pollutants into the atmosphere or not seek to develop other sources of energy (both renewable and nuclear). However there are a number of good reasons to not do these

things. The current GW hysteria is simply unnecessary, poorly founded, and a distraction from many more urgent problems.

Regardless of all the arguments on both sides, there is little hope or danger of massive voluntary fossil fuel reductions simply as a precaution. So, in the end, we will see and reality, as always, will prevail. Experience repeatedly indicates that the problems we face in the future will not be anything we expect and dealing with reality as it comes is far more effective than wasting effort on hypothetical possibilities which rarely ever materialize and even if they do are very different in the full context of reality than anything we imagined.

In any case, it has been a pleasure to look in on Climate Skeptics for the past few days and I look forward to learning much more.

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