A STRONG DOSE OF CLIMATE SKEPTICISM: SEEING COPENHAGEN AS AN OPPORTUNITY

Michael Hart and Bill Dymond

In this decidedly skeptical article challenging received scientific wisdom on climate change, the authors assert that the failure to reach an agreement at Copenhagen signals an opportunity to begin a more reasoned conversation on global warming, free of the alarmism spread by the UN, activists, scientists and the media. While they're at it, the authors also denounce "the stifling impact of Official Science" and other forms of conventional wisdom. In calling for a new debate, Michael Hart and Bill Dymond may be starting one.

Dans cet article, Michael Hart et Bill Dymond se montrent résolument sceptiques en ce qui concerne les changements climatiques et remettent en cause le consensus scientifique sur cette question. Ils soutiennent qu'il faut profiter de l'échec de Copenhague pour amorcer un débat plus rationnel sur le réchauffement planétaire, exempt de l'alarmisme entretenu par les Nations unies, les militants écologistes, les scientifiques et les médias. Sur cette même lancée, ils dénoncent « l'effet d'étouffement » produit par la « science officielle » et les opinions toutes faites. Or cette simple idée de relancer le débat sur de nouvelles bases risque d'être vivement débattue.

We can all breathe a sigh of relief. Disaster was averted at Copenhagen. The prospect of an overreaching new climate change treaty appears to be fading. Leaders wiggled out of the mess of expectations they had created with an anodyne political statement and a promise of cash for developing countries. The question now is whether the Copenhagen results mark a delay on the road to more turmoil or a return to sanity. Time will tell, but for a start, it would be a nice change if the public policy implications of climate change received a thorough and open discussion unhindered by the hype and alarmism that have marked this file to date. It would be even nicer if the issue could be discussed on its own merits rather than as a proxy for the many other issues that opportunists have attached to this file.

The hype fuelling climate alarmism is based on four interrelated assertions: global temperatures are climbing to levels never seen before; human activity is largely responsible for this increase; climate change of this order will have catastrophic impacts on the earth's biosphere; and policy-induced changes in human behaviour can stabilize the climate and ward off calamity. Contrary to popularly held views, the science underpinning each of these assertions is far from settled, and many researchers are not convinced that the cost of implementing even a modest version of the preferred policy prescriptions is justified by any benefits that could reasonably be attained. Indeed, many are convinced that most of the solutions offered either would have catastrophic effects of their own or remain technologically impossible. Nevertheless, through the work of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and Framework Convention on Climate Change, many of the world's governments have committed — at least rhetorically — to pursuing costly national and international mitigation strategies with the goal of fundamentally altering global climate patterns.

At Copenhagen, governments provided themselves with the political breathing room to stand back and take a fresh look at the issues. Rather than allowing themselves to be stampeded by the Al Gores and IPCCs of this world, they now need to ask the kind of probing questions that should have been pursued at the outset. They need to do this on their own and should not outsource the analysis and assessment to a United Nations hopelessly compromised by other agendas. And, given the problems that secrecy has wrought, they need to do this openly.

Public policy is a matter of identifying problems and opportunities that would benefit from government attention and action, of developing appropriate policies and programs, and of weighing their costs and benefits. As MIT climate scientist Richard Lindzen points out, the fact that something has been identified as an issue does not necessarily lead to a need for public action. Nevertheless, we have become so accustomed to activist governments that few stop to think whether climate change is a problem that governments can or should address. In order to warrant action, therefore, governments need to consider such questions as:

- Do we know enough about climate change to warrant decisive action? To what extent is climate change natural? Are current patterns outside the bounds of previous experience?
- What are the real problems that need to be addressed? Are there any offsetting benefits associated with these problems?
- What are the long-term effects of climate change and to what extent will adaptation and voluntary changes in behaviour reduce negative effects?
- What tools are available to control climate change? How effective are they likely to be?
- What instruments are available to mitigate the negative effects of climate change or to facilitate adaptation?
- What are the costs and benefits of deploying such tools and instruments? How do the costs of mitigation and adaptation strategies compare?
- How do these costs and benefits stack up against the costs and benefits of addressing other global and national problems?

By framing the issue in apocalyptic terms, alarmists have sought to avoid consideration of these questions and to stampede governments into considering radical approaches to what may well prove a non-problem or one easily addressed through gradual adaptation and supportive policy measures. In Nigel Lawson's words: "In the light of the uncertainty that exists about the science, and the inevitable uncertainty there is about the future in general, it must make more sense to rely on autonomous adaptation, buttressed where necessary with positive policy measures to assist it, than to pay a very heavy price to try and secure a drastic reduction in emissions without even any realistic likelihood of achieving this." Suggesting that the IPCC has answered all questions borders on the risible. Recent events have demonstrated the extent to which the IPCC and the climate scientists associated with it were deeply committed to a single perspective and worked assiduously to freeze out all who questioned that perspective.

The hype fuelling climate alarmism is based on four interrelated assertions: global temperatures are climbing to levels never seen before; human activity is largely responsible for this increase; climate change of this order will have catastrophic impacts on the earth's biosphere; and policy-induced changes in human behaviour can stabilize the climate and ward off calamity.

Policy that is hastily conceived and inadequately discussed is unlikely to succeed in meeting its objectives. The often repeated call for governments to do something just in case the alarmists are right — an incoherent application of the pernicious precautionary principle — betrays a lack of seriousness. "Doing something" is not without cost. Reconstituting modern industrial society on a basis other than fossil fuels will require heroic steps that will disrupt lives and create major societal and individual hardships. The prospect of a substantive decline in living standards in developed countries is real and of a reversal in economic development in poorer countries even more so. No government should entertain policy choices with such momentous negative consequences without a much firmer basis in both science and economics, and only following a thorough cost-benefit analysis and open public debate. The fact that alarmists insist that the "crisis" is too great and urgent to allow time for such analysis and debate speaks volumes about the merits of their case. To date, the public policy response to the issue has suffered from lack of systematic analysis of the available options and from the stifling of open debate. It is not too late to begin.

For a start, governments can accept that there is broad agreement in the scientific community that the global climate has warmed over the past century and a half and that human activity is a contributing factor, but the extent of both and their impacts on the biosphere are hotly debated as is the capacity of humans to control climate change. On one side stand those scientists, the alarmists, who are satisfied that we understand enough about human influences on climate change to warrant urgent action. On the other are those scientists, the skeptics, representing a wide spectrum of views, who accept the fact of climate change but are not convinced that we know enough about the anthropogenic dimension to justify government action. On the public policy front, there is also considerable debate, with some experts convinced that mitigation strategies are feasible and others skeptical either that there is a need for them or that such strategies will have a prophylactic effect. For many skeptics, the costs of mitigation may outstrip any benefits, and, to the extent that there is a problem, adaptive strategies may offer the best prospects. Discussion along these lines, however, has become politically "incorrect."

Leila Mead / IISD

Barack Obama addresses the plenary of COP15 of the final day of the Copenhagen conference: Michael Hart and Bill Dymond write that the failure of the conference is a relief.

Given that we live in an age in which the voice of "experts" is very powerful, the argument from authority has proven one of the most effective instruments available to the alarmist community. Having gained control of the commanding public heights of the issue, from government environment and meteorology departments to some of the leading science journals and two key UN agencies, the "experts" have resorted to demonizing their critics as cranks and shills in the pay of questionable business interests, no matter how false the charges. So-called deniers of the abrupt global warming hypothesis have had to fight an up-hill battle. And yet their numbers have grown and the claims of the alarmist community have become ever more shrill.

Ordinarily, matters of scientific controversy do not attract the kind of ferocious public debate that has characterized the climate file for more than two decades. The reason lies in the call for public action. The stakes are very high, because the policies advocated by many in the alarmist community would require substantial changes in lifestyles and standards of living, leading to fundamental changes in the nature of modern economies and the prosperity they provide. Efforts by the alarmist community to reduce doubt have met with considerable success at official levels, but at the expense of scientific integrity. The increasing shrillness of the campaign, however, has sown doubt in the general public. Commitment to action remains most pronounced in Europe, consistent with broader European preferences for risk aversion and statist solutions. Governments in developing countries, while skeptical about the issue, are prepared to milk it as a new source of financial aid. Governments in North America have largely limited their commitments to politically calculated lip service rather than to action, a situation that changed with the Obama administration's stated preference for a more activist approach. To date, however, neither the Canadian nor the US government has implemented a policy approach that responds to the demands of the alarmist community.

Public discussion of the climate change file provides a particularly compelling example of a more general challenge: making public policy in the face of scientific uncertainty. Management of risks to public health and the environment has, of course, always had to grapple with making decisions under uncertain conditions. Science deals in probabilities; much of science-based public policy seeks to address fears and uncertainties by finding a socially acceptable balance between risks and benefits, a judgment that requires governments to make assessments about both risks and benefits, informed by science, politics and economics.

Social tolerance for risk, however, has declined markedly in recent years, skewing the equation. As *Ottawa Citizen* columnist Dan Gardner explains in his recent bestseller, *Risk,* "The safest and healthiest people in history [are] living in a culture of fear." In response, governments increasingly

rely on the precautionary principle as the basis for making tough decisions, responding to a perception that the public would rather be safe than sorry. The implications of this approach for economic well-being and material progress are profound. In these circumstances, the role of science has become critical. Not surprisingly, interest groups have learned to manipulate the work of scientists in order to press their political and economic agendas, and scientists have learned to manipulate public discussion in order to enhance funding for their research.

Scientific inquiry that feeds into public policy suffers from the political requirement for certainty, particularly when the issues at stake are large and controversial. Governments do not like to take decisions based on speculative reasoning. Even greater than their preference for one-handed economists is politicians' partiality to one-handed scientists. But certainty is not a normal feature of science; the best that scientists can do is discuss probabilities. Governments, however, require certainty and thus we get Official Science, which is often the product of an advisory process that is, in economist David Henderson's words, "marred by chronic and pervasive bias…The [IPCC] advisory process is run today, as it has been from the start, by true believers."

Once governments have pronounced on a matter, often as a result of lobbying by various interests, real science goes out the window and Official Science takes over. As Guelph University economist Ross McKitrick argues, Official Science lacks three critical safeguards: balance, due diligence and full disclosure. One could add a fourth: flexibility, or an ability to adjust to new evidence and insights. In the absence of these safeguards, science can easily be captured by vested interests who can then use the power and resources of government to marginalize critics and advance their preferred perspective. The IPCC took Official Science to a whole new level, corrupting many of the normal safeguards built into the scientific process in order to provide governments with certainty and a basis for action. Its *Summary for Policy Makers,* for example, posits a 95 percent confidence level that global warming in the 20th century was largely anthropogenic, but the underlying scientific reports from the three working groups use the words "uncertain" and "uncertainties" 1,300 times.

Richard Lindzen suggests that "when an issue becomes a vital part of a political agenda, as is the case with climate, then the politically desired position becomes a goal rather than a consequence of scientific research." He notes further: "The temptation to politicize science has always been high, and political organizations have long sought to improve their own credibility by associating their goals with 'science' — even if this involves misrepresenting the science." British climate scientist Mike Hulme, who, unlike Lindzen, is strongly committed to the idea of a significant human influence, nevertheless cautions that "to state that climate change will be 'catastrophic' hides a cascade of value-laden assumptions which do not emerge from empirical or theoretical science."

> By framing the issue in apocalyptic terms, alarmists have sought to avoid consideration of these questions and to stampede governments into considering radical approaches to what may well prove a non-problem or one easily addressed through gradual adaptation and supportive policy measures.

The stifling impact of Official Science is compounded by the tyranny of highly specialized experts prepared to speak with great confidence from a narrow base on a broad subject. Over the past half century, knowledge and research have become ever more narrow and specialized and cross-cutting interdisciplinary work ever rarer. In both research laboratories and academia, money and prestige flow increasingly to the narrowly focused. As a result, many investigators need to accept on faith the conclusions of various other experts in order to push the boundaries of their own areas of specialization. In these circumstances, it becomes possible for an environmental economist like Mark Jaccard, for example, to model how best to use carbon taxes to reduce carbon emissions to more acceptable levels without any need to examine whether the case for reducing carbon has any merits; he relies on others to make that judgment. By this process, questionable ideas are disseminated and fixed in the "paradigm" of the moment.

Much continues to be made of the importance of peer review by credentialed experts. Please! Progress in scientific understanding is based on falsification; whether that falsification derives from the work of credentialed experts or inspired amateurs is irrelevant. A hypothesis remains a hypothesis until it has been verified by real-world observation and can be replicated by other researchers. Any such verification also remains subject to the caveat that any future observations that falsify it bring the whole theory into question. Computer programs do not verify, but they can falsify. In the case of greenhouse-gas- induced global warming, there has to date been a lot of theorizing, a great deal of computer modelling, little verification and much falsification. The leaked e-mails from the Climatic Research Unit (CRU) at the University of East Anglia, the subject of much controversy in the weeks leading up to Copenhagen, have exposed peer review for what it often is: the defence of entrenched interests.

It is not difficult to conclude that the rise of climate alarmism to the top of the global anxiety agenda has been

a matter of design. The means by which the public has been convinced that dangerous global warming is occurring are not subtle. The three main agents are reports from the United Nations through the IPCC; incessant lobbying by environmental NGOs and allied scientists, political groups and businesses; and the obliging promulgation of selectively alarmist climate information by the media. Indeed, the combined alarmist activities of all three can only be termed a propaganda campaign. However, because all of these many interest groups communicate with the public primarily through the gatekeepers of the press, it is the press that carries the prime responsibility for the unbalanced state of the current public discussion and opinion on global warming. The media is particularly prone to broadcasting correlation studies, omitting the many caveats that accompany these studies as well as the caution that correlation points to issues ripe for further investigation, not to cause and effect.

Global climate change is real, part of the chaotic and unpredictable interaction of various natural cycles, including cycles in the earth's rotation on its axis and around the sun, cycles in the sun's energy output and cycles in ocean surface temperatures and currents. Global climate change is also not new. Over time there have been monumental changes in climate. The current phase of benign climate is of relatively recent origin (less than 12,000 years), and within that period there have been periods of both warming and cooling, wholly unaided by human activity. The current phase of relative warming is part of the reversal of what climate historians refer to as the Little Ice Age (ca. 1350-1800), which in turn succeeded the Medieval Climate Optimum (ca. 800-1200). As best as scientists are able to determine —with the exception of the alarmist cult — current and projected global temperatures remain well within the envelope of earlier experience during the current period of warming, as well as during even earlier periods between ice ages.

Much global warming alarmism forms part of a religious belief system bent on creating a global utopia. People are free to hold such beliefs, but the rest of the population should not be expected to join the stampede and indulge their preferences. The fact that an international agency is engaged in promoting this belief system is of little moment. It is not the first, and will not be the last, cause that has found such internationalism to be a convenient vehicle for gaining attention. For those alarmists not part of the cult, the motivation appears to be more sinister: a hoax used to extract research funds out of gullible government agencies and foundations or to subsidize economic activities that cannot find a place in the market on their own merits.

The idea that human policy measures can alter fundamental natural climate patterns is sheer hubris. Humans can adapt, as they have in the past, but they do not know enough nor can they command the resources to change the impact of forces far beyond their control. Public policy discussion of the projected impacts of global warming has been marred by three factors: the tendencies of alarmists to systematically overestimate negative impacts, to discount natural adaptation and technological developments, and to attribute issues that may arise from population pressures to global warming. The burden of proof lies not with those who believe that adaptation will be sufficient to address gradual warming but with those convinced that the impacts will be catastrophic and unmanageable and require immediate and radical solutions.

Canadian public policy on climate change has, on the whole, been prudent. From the perspective of environmentalists, of course, Canada has been negligent in its duty to the planet. The rest of us, however, prefer that government pay attention to the broader needs of Canadians and do as little as is politically feasible to "save" the planet until such time as more is known and a clearer cost-benefit analysis has been undertaken. There may be good reasons to reduce dependence on fossil fuels and to accelerate development of alternative energy sources, but changing the climate and saving the planet are not among them. There is, therefore, time to pursue these issues in an orderly fashion, without destroying the economy and undercutting standards of living. Nevertheless, it may also be prudent for political leaders and their officials to stand back, take a serious look at the damage being done to science and public policy by the demands of a hysterical but very vocal minority, take steps to tone down the rhetoric, and keep the issue in proper perspective. Copenhagen has provided just such an opportunity.

The stifling impact of Official Science is compounded by the tyranny of highly specialized experts prepared to speak with great confidence from a narrow base on a broad subject. Over the past half century, knowledge and research have become ever more narrow and specialized and cross-cutting interdisciplinary work ever rarer.

Michael Hart is Simon Reisman Chair in Trade Policy at Carleton University's Norman Paterson School of International Affairs and a distinguished fellow of the Centre for Trade Policy and Law. Bill Dymond is senior executive fellow at the centre. Both are former Canadian government officials.