

Climate Change: The Changing role of the Scientists.

For some decades now people have become increasingly concerned about man's tenure of the planet: the number of people living on it and their living standards are both rising inexorably such that the demands man makes upon the planet's resources is being challenged. Perhaps it was ever so, but now those demands are being felt, not least, in the effect our occupancy of the planet is having on the world's atmosphere. We are putting into the air more gases than it can absorb so changing it: we call it Climate Change.

On that much has been, and will be, written. The science of climate change is secure: the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in its 4th Assessment Report of 2007 makes it clear that:

'Warming of the climate system is unequivocal, as is now evident from observations of increases in global average air and ocean temperatures, widespread melting of snow and ice, and rising global average sea level'

The report makes it quite clear that the changes in the concentrations of Greenhouse gases are man-made. For more than two decades now many scientists from many disciplines have been involved in exploring, describing and forecasting the effects of those concentrations of greenhouse gases. They have sought out and filleted sundry 'red herrings', they have teased out the complex relationships between causes and effects and drawn clear distinctions between long-term trends and periodic events. They will, without doubt, continue that work. But it is necessary to move forward.

The Stern Report of November 2006 on the Economics of Climate Change noted that:

There is still time to avoid the worst impacts of climate change ... and that the costs of stabilising the climate are significant but manageable. The report recognises that international responses are necessary.

Scientists have unravelled the science of climate change but it is to others that the task of solving the problem now falls. Lord Nicholas Stern's book 'A Blueprint for a Safer Planet' of 2009 charts his way forward and moves the debate on from the causes and effects of climate change to the problems and costs of dealing with it. It is to economics and politics that the responses will now be found. Engineers and technologists will play their parts.

The scientists may advise but it will be the economists, lawyers and the politicians who decide how society will respond. In Copenhagen in December 2009 the United Nations Climate Change Conference which meets at the end of the first phase of the Kyoto Protocol will establish a new deal to come into force in 2012. The scientists, like the economists, will be there to advise but it will be up to the politicians to seek the agreements and to make the progress that is so necessary.

This change of emphasis will not downgrade the role of the scientists for they, the ones who understand what is happening, will have a continuing duty to explain the changes to society.

Living on this planet is not a free right: we all have to pay and since we are all abusing its hospitality the price for continuing to stay here will increase – and fall upon all of us.