

‘REDNECKS’ AND ‘WEIRD PEOPLE AT THE IEA’: MOVING THE CLIMATE CHANGE DEBATE FORWARD

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Last week Jonathan Porritt, arguably the country's most important Green, talked about the IEA on BBC Radio 4's Today Programme. Porritt, the government's official adviser on 'sustainable development', was discussing climate change, about which, he said, the Green Movement had won the argument. He said the Green case was agreed on all sides except for a few 'rednecks' in the US and 'weird places like the Institute of Economic Affairs'.

Perhaps Porritt had forgotten – or even prayed the fact in aid of his case – that the IEA helped form the thinking of Margaret Thatcher, and hence – it is not too much to say – of Tony Blair and modern Britain in general. Porritt probably shares the widespread misconception that the IEA asserts that unregulated capitalism should be encouraged to rampage through the land, as a wolf amongst gambolling lambs.

On his immediate topic, climate change, the Greens have not in fact won the argument about what to do, if anything, about global warming. They can't have won it, because it hasn't started yet. Let us assume for the time being that the United Nations/Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 'consensus' is very broadly right: that climate change is big, bad and our fault. This is certainly the view of the scientific establishment: Lord May (former government chief scientist and present President of the Royal Society) and Professor Sir David King (present chief scientist) are vociferous in its cause.

It is a popular view, up to a point. Provided someone else – ideally Big Business – has to cough up or be constrained, the public wants the issue addressed. Politicians blithely talk nonsense on the topic: they recommend and even legislate for the recycling of household waste as though it would do much to help (it may do the opposite). But we have some idea of the resistance the electorate will show to any serious measures which will drive up the costs of energy (in the form of travel and heating). After all, we have seen large (if fluctuating) price rises in fuel costs, and note that important sections of the country – especially rural-dwellers of one sort or another – get very exercised. And that's before the annual mass southerly migration of Britons is seriously threatened.

The problem is that no-one has been able to outline a plausible 'pain-for-gain' calculus. Beyond general cries that 'Something Must Be Done', and tentative moves in the Kyoto Protocol toward doing

a very small amount, we have very little idea whether we are likely to – or should – make the kind of rather large changes which would be necessary to significantly reduce greenhouse gases. We may not get much nearer the heart of the problem at the forthcoming UN/IPCC meeting in Montreal (28 November 2005). It will discuss whether the very weak protocol should be tightened up from 2012 on: nothing so far ahead is ever seriously fixed, whatever the rhetoric.

Governments around the world are now seeing the merits of the US's notorious scepticism on the subject. Here, the House of Lords economics committee this summer produced a report which argued that the UN/IPCC 'consensus' is intellectually-flawed. They were largely prompted by the examination by David Henderson, an IEA author and former chief economist of the OECD, of the cost-benefit thinking underlying the UN/IPCC policy proposals. As the novelist Michael Crichton points out, following Galileo, science is not a consensual process. And then there is the core sceptics' position on the UN/IPCC work: looked at with any seriousness, the very evidence which the 'consensus' has adduced is full of the kind of uncertainties one would expect in a first analysis of an unprecedented phenomenon. Only the policy-makers' summary – a necessarily 'political' document – makes it possible for enthusiasts to argue that everything points one way. There is certainly enough doubt to make it reasonable to listen to the views of people like Bjorn Lomborg, the Danish statistician. He suggests that even if climate change is big and bad, it will be more effective – kinder – to combat its effects when we know what they are and where they fall, rather than to invest in hopeless – because unsuccessful – attempts to avoid it happening.

These arguments are about to be aired properly. Tony Blair, backtracking from his previous climate change messianism (it ran for a couple years, until the July 2005 G8 Gleneagles Summit), says he has changed his thinking on the matter, and now believes no government will risk its economic performance to address it. He has asked Sir Nick Stern, a senior Treasury official, to conduct the kind of policy review recommended by their Lordships.

The perceived and real cost, convenience and effectiveness of policy do matter, especially in democracies. The modern Westerner has a high-energy lifestyle. We have no idea whether he or she is prepared to endure much change in that. But we also

have very little idea how much we can reduce the greenhouse gas implications of modern mass affluence whilst leaving its essential convenience in place. The Greens don't care what the answers to these questions are: they are Puritans. But everyone else does.

My rough assumption is that the public will accept any climate change policy which produces very little cost or inconvenience and maximises the potential for self-congratulation. I am sceptical that such policies will make much difference to greenhouse emissions, but I am also mildly sceptical that this failure will very much matter to climate change. They will all involve government intervention (that is, taxation or dictat), and the IEA will doubtless be the home of much thoughtful and useful challenge as to their efficacy. That is not, of course, a matter of being rejectionist or refusenik: to have a drift, a tendency, a preference, even a bias is not the same as being a fundamentalist.

I am drawn to the IEA's sort of challenge. I also – a little differently – favour the 'cavalier' in life: I am attracted to the view that humanity achieves more when it takes risks than when it ducks them. When I see an orthodoxy, such as the UN/IPPC consensus, I become mischievous.

But none of that is to say that we should be entirely casual. It may be relatively easy to make large changes in our greenhouse gas emissions, and in those of the rapidly-growing economies of the Third World. If we can make sufficiently large overall reductions, we may also make a substantial dent in the effects of global warming, whatever they turn out to be.

Luckily, one might think, self-interest is pushing us that way. Leave aside whether Hurricane Katrina was caused by global warming, or was a sign of climate change, or a phenomenon which at least looked like climate change. Katrina bent some important metal, and reminded us of an underlying truth: the most versatile of our fossil fuels are in tight and uncertain supply, whilst subject to soaring demand. Ideally, we would not be dependent on the Middle East and the Caucasus for our energy supply. Paradoxically, these circumstances make coal all the more attractive, and we have yet to see whether we can make dependence on it anything other than a greenhouse gas nightmare, though a leading if controversial Green, Tom Burke, of Imperial College, thinks they can.

In the long run, fossil fuels will be superseded. The question is how soon and at what cost we are prepared to wean ourselves off them. At this moment, it looks likely that it will be the threat of energy shortages, not of climate catastrophe, which drives us toward making decisions.

We must hope against hope that we arrive at a happy future through no great exercise of virtue. Much as the Green Movement believes in self-denial, I'd rather bet that quite narrow self-interest will drive policy.

If thinking these thoughts makes me a 'redneck', so be it. I hope they are broadly in the tradition of the highly intelligent and civilised IEA, though I don't suppose they match its standards for intellectual rigour.

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