

CLIMATE CHANGE THREAT HAS BEEN OVERSTATED

The case against a far flung global response to climate change is at its core, conservative. As such, critics, whether of the science related to global warming, or its purported impact, or of the proposed solutions to it, are issuing calls of reflection and restraint to what they see as a movement rather than a thoughtful policy discussion. Taken together, these cautions should moderate the momentum towards misguided and precipitous international action.

The debate over what our collective response to climate change should be, revolves around three central questions: what is the actual extent of the problem; what are the economic and human costs, not just of inaction, but also of action; and, what are alternative policy options.

First is climate change really *the* definitive policy challenge of human affairs? This may seem the case to those that have already benefited from industrial growth- the cause of increased human induced CO₂ emissions- but the billions living in poverty, without access to sufficient water and food, and at risk of communicable disease, may have other policy priorities. What's more, the case for climate action is riddled with hyperbole, often in direct contradiction to the IPCC projections. On issues such as food and water shortages, as well as projected sea-level rise, the IPCC forecasts are nothing like many of the fear mongering predictions often levied by activists: a 23 inch maximum sea-level rise in 100 years is something quite different than the 20ft rise depicted by Al Gore.

Finally, those who place climate change above all other human concerns rarely take into consideration either the adaptive capacity of humans (people have managed after all to live in a wide range of climates around the world), or the potential benefits of higher average temperatures. For example, rising average temperatures will reduce the number of cold spells, which are a far greater cause of death than heat. Estimates made in the journal *Ecological Economics* put the number of saved lives at 1.8 million a year, and argues that the number of lives saved surpasses the increase in heat-related deaths for the next two hundred years.

Second, before embarking on a global shift in economic and development policy, we need to consider both the economic and human costs. First, the direct economic costs of meeting Kyoto carbon reduction obligations (which few signatories will actually do), is upwards of \$150 billion per year. The costs of potential new commitments from Copenhagen, will surely be substantially higher. There are several concerns which stem from this sum. The direct economic costs to individuals in the UK, Germany, Italy and Spain have already been seen in the form of increased energy bills, job losses and damage to national GDP. And for what? The level of reductions called for- let alone implemented- by the Kyoto protocol are a virtually insignificant compared to what would

be needed to halt and reverse warming. Surely political leaders should be honest about the actual economic impact of these costly measures.

As a consequence, money that we could be spending on addressing the truly pressing concerns of those in need around the world, are instead spent on disingenuous political promises. For example, the Copenhagen Consensus found that for \$27 billion we could prevent 28 million people from getting HIV, for \$12 billion we could cut malaria cases by more than a billion a year, and \$10 billion spent annually on food aid and agricultural production could feed the 229 million people who go hungry. Surely saving these lives now should take precedence over partial and largely superficial attempts to prevent potential harms a hundred years from now?

Third, even if we assume that climate change is mankind's greatest challenge, then current measures come nowhere close to actually reducing the carbon needed to reverse warming. It is time we looked at a range of new options aside from thus-far ineffective global regulation of emissions. There is an emerging shift in the scientific community towards support for developing geoengineering solutions to global warming. Often dismissed as fringe science fiction by climate change activists, technological countermeasures to reduce the amount of heat that gets reflected off the earth surface, could become our best option for stemming rising temperatures while we transition towards lower carbon emissions. Two proposals in particular, injecting sulfates into the stratosphere, and seeding clouds with seawater in the lower atmosphere, could provide a quick short term solution using current technology.

Finally, underlying many of these concerns are persistent questions about the science. The former arguments remain relevant whether or not one takes the entirety of the scientific consensus on climate change and its impacts as fact. However, there is certainly also room to challenge elements of what is an unprecedented, and some would argue peculiar, universal consensus amongst tens of thousands of independent thinkers, on all aspects of a very complex problem, with a infinitely diverse potential impact. Given this, should the IPCC, for example, be seen as a scientific or a political body?

Certainly we should be able to question the extent to which the predictive capacity of our current climate models are able to guide our policy decisions. Can we really say with certainty what the impact of climate trends will be? Do we have enough certainty to embark on an unprecedented global economic and social shift? Surely a degree of critical reflection is warranted before we do so.

It is time we looked critically at the issue of climate change, and stepped back from the policy precipice activists have led us to.