

Consensus can be wrong

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The idea that scientific consensus should be the final arbiter about scientific truth and that such consensus should be the guide to government policy are ideas that have had great currency of late. Prominent proponents of man-made climate change and of the Kyoto Protocol have long claimed that there is a clear scientific consensus that climate change is man-made and that, therefore, Australia should sign up to the Kyoto pact.

But history is full of examples of existing scientific consensus and orthodoxy eventually being overturned. The history of how existing scientific paradigms and consensus are overturned is perhaps best explained by Thomas Kuhn in his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

A contemporary example of the danger of scientific consensus is that of Robin Warren and Barry Marshall, who recently jointly won the Nobel Prize in medicine. Marshall and Warren made the groundbreaking discovery that gastritis and peptic ulcer disease is very often the result of an infection in the stomach caused by a form of bacteria known as *Helicobacter pylori*.

Scientific consensus at the time Warren and Marshall started their research argued that stomach ulcers were caused by stress and lifestyle which led to excessive acid production in the stomach. The remedy was the creation of some very effective drugs that interfered with this acid production. The cessation of treatment by these drugs, however, would often see the return of these ulcers, meaning that many sufferers would have to remain on these

drugs for the rest of their lives. These drugs became quite a profitable money-earner for the pharmaceutical companies that produced them.

The discovery by Marshall and Warren that ulcers were primarily caused by bacteria and could be effectively and permanently treated by a short course of antibiotics was treated dismissively for a long period of time. But further research proved that antibiotics were all that were required to prevent the ulcers from coming back in the vast majority of cases.

This discovery threatened the profits of the large pharmaceutical companies relying on traditional treatment of ulcers. Pharmaceutical companies would have no interest in promoting a cheaper and more permanent solution to this problem and thus robbing themselves of a major source of profits. The discovery also threatened the existing dogma being taught in medical schools.

Thankfully, ongoing research saw the original conclusions of Marshall and Warren validated, and their Nobel Prize is a vindication of their efforts to promote scientific advancement in the face of concerted opposition from those who stood to lose from their discovery.

Those who don't think that modern day science can be derailed because of vested interests or other reasons should look at the example of Marshall and Warren.

In discussions about climate change and the Kyoto protocol, it is important to understand that vested interests are often present. At the international level, policy-makers in the European Union, in particular, have

played up their environment credentials to domestic constituencies by signing Kyoto. At the same time, the Europeans would reduce the downside impact of signing Kyoto if other nations (such as Australia and the United States) could also be persuaded to become signatories. With this in mind, it is not too cynical to suggest that the European Union strongly promotes research and policies that provide support for the position it has taken on Kyoto.

In Australia, at the domestic level, significant government resources have been invested in the current climate change paradigm. The abandonment of this paradigm would result in losses for large numbers of influential people, with careers and reputations being damaged. Thousands of bureaucrats, scientists and consultants who now have their livelihoods bound up in the maintenance of current orthodoxy stand to lose badly. Any evidence that challenges the 'consensus' will be met with fierce resistance from some quarters.

Analogising from Marshall and Warren does nothing to *disprove* the climate change consensus. But it does illustrate some of the possible motivations and incentives that can underlie those who make these claims. There may be consensus on an issue, but it does not follow that the consensus is correct. If evidence displaces a consensus, then that consensus is useless and should change. Those who engage in advocacy using petitions and polls would do well to remember this.

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