

Recanting Greenhouse?

BRIAN J. O'BRIEN

THE scientist credited (or blamed) with alarming the world in 1988 about greenhouse warming is now arguing that it is 'more practical to slow global warming than is sometimes assumed'.

In 1988, Dr Jim Hansen of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies testified to a US Congressional committee that 'the Greenhouse Effect is here'. His calls for urgent actions were widely publicized, assisted by a heatwave and dust storms in the Midwest. The Toronto Conference ranked global warming as a threat second only to a global nuclear war. *Time* magazine made an overheated, doomed planet Earth its 'Man of the Year'. Greenhouse hysteria and talk of imminent catastrophes were warmly embraced by the United Nations.

On 15 August 2000, Hansen and his colleagues published 'an alternative scenario' to the politically-correct versions of global warming. Their 15-page article in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences USA*, is available for US\$5 at <www.pnas.org>. It should be compulsory reading for decision-makers.

The article describes effects which 'could lead to a decline in the rate of global warming, reducing the danger of dramatic climate change'.

First, when fossil fuels such as coal and oil are burned, they produce both warming effects from the greenhouse gas carbon dioxide, and cooling effects from aerosols, especially sulphates and organic aerosols. Aerosols can reflect sunlight and also affect cloud formations.

Hansen claims that the warming and cooling effects offset each other. Reducing carbon dioxide

emissions is an easier and less urgent task than previously thought. He states 'there are opportunities to achieve reduced emissions consistent with strong economic growth'.

Second, the authors consequently claim that most of any global warming over the past few decades is due to methane and other 'non-carbon dioxide' greenhouse gases. And the good news is that 'the growth rate [of these gases] has declined in the past decade.'

Hansen and his colleagues have not quite recanted in the manner of Galileo.

They now state that the global surface temperature has increased by about 0.5°C since 1975 in 'a burst of warming'. They claim this warming 'is at least in part a consequence of increasing anthropogenic greenhouse gases'.

One can validly argue with them about such an alleged 'burst of warming' since 1975.

The total set of data, in reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), shows little change in global temperature between 1940 and 1976. Were no methane-producing rice paddies planted in this period? Was there no industrial development after the Second World War?

Their very own arguments question their conclusion. The annual growth rate of methane concentrations shows a dramatic decline that began about 1980, at the start of their 'burst of warming'.

The purpose of this article, however, is not to argue such scientific detail, but strategy and policy. After all, greenhouse policies were decoupled from science in 1990.

First, the new Hansen conclusions must put an end to the popu-

lar urban myth that global warming policies are based on 'consensus' views of 'most scientists'.

Second, the cloak of urgency and impending doom has now been lifted by the doom-maker himself. In 1988, Hansen argued that 'the time for waffling is over' and demanded urgent action. Now he wants 'equal emphasis on an alternative, more optimistic scenario'. The climate scenarios of 1988 are now out-of-date with the IPCC internationally and CSIRO in Australia, yet they still drive frantic government schedules.¹

Australian greenhouse governance remains frenetic.² The Hansen paper should cause an audit of such governance. Perhaps climate science will become more relevant to climate policy.

But I doubt it. The forces of bureaucratic determinism and political timidity will simply continue to ignore any good news. And besides, it might all be a plot to elect Al Gore!

NOTES

- 1 O'Brien, Brian J., 'Kyoto—Marching to the Drumbeat of Toronto', *IPA Review*, **50**, pages 18–19, October 1997.
- 2 O'Brien, Brian J., 'Australian Greenhouse Governance: The Twilight Zone', in *Focus*, Australian Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering, December 1998.

Dr Brian J. O'Brien, FTSE, is a strategic and environmental consultant in Perth. He was the foundation Chairman and Director of the WA Environmental Protection Authority 1971–77, after being Professor of Space Science in Houston, Texas.

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