

On Piers Maclaren, climate change and faith

Peter Brown

Page 48 of the Journal for November, 2007 says at the bottom "Piers Maclaren is a Registered Forestry Consultant and a former forest research scientist. His column appears regularly in the Journal". It certainly does and it is usually the first thing that I read. But the November column was clearly written by an impostor. Piers, the objective scientist who is interested in facts and proof, seems to be absent and he had obviously been replaced by somebody who considers that science is about what people believe. The real Piers would never take such an unscientific stance.

I thought it best to set out this response in somewhat of a parallel of the November column so that everyone can see how easy it is to say things without having to really back them up. But to be different, I will include one reference.

The arguments presented, while interesting, contain four basic misconceptions and these seem to lead to some psychological insights. The first is to assume that measurements by a specialist are always correct. Even worse - but I will include that in the same misconception - is to assume that predictions made by specialists using their computers are necessarily correct. Just 30 years ago, scientists believed that rapid global cooling was upon us for heaven sake!

The second is to assume that computer models, as evidenced by global circulation models are accurate predictors of the future. National Institute of Water and Atmospheric Research (NIWA) predictions of future climate are on record as being a little less than 50% accurate and while acknowledging this, NIWA points out that they are at or above the norm for organisations of their type! So you could do better, tossing a coin.

The third is a confusion of scale. It is very easy to understand why the IPCC has focused on 100 years as being an appropriate human timeframe. This is simply the order of magnitude of the time for which actual measurements of temperature and carbon dioxide have been made. It may be a coincidence but if you are a good cynical scientist who requires evidence-based hypotheses that can be tested, you would have to wonder about the convenience of it all. The choice of 100 years allows IPCC to essentially ignore the temperature increases in the early twentieth century - when carbon dioxide was not increasing at the same rate. It also conveniently allows the 30 year cooling period from the nineteen forties to the nineteen seventies to also be ignored.

Fourthly, a popular but erroneous opinion is that information put out by government-funded and government-backed scientists must be correct simply because there are so many of them. The public as a whole tends to believe what it reads in the newspapers. The newspaper reporters write their interpretation of what is put out by the IPCC and never look anywhere else. They regularly misreport the actual facts but everybody believes them any way.

I am aware of at least six members of the Institute of Forestry who are "Climate Believers" - my word for those who believe that climate change is human induced - and who will probably read this opinion piece. These are intelligent knowledgeable people and on most subjects I have the deepest respect for their wisdom. That any of them, and particularly Piers, feel at liberty to go public with scientifically questionable opinions based on carefully selected and carefully omitted facts relating to a matter of such prominence, makes me wonder. Is it possible that in this instance like so many others that depend only on popular appeal, facts are not critical to the formation and testing of scientific hypotheses?

Real scientists start their journey with a hypothesis and then gather facts relevant to the question that they have posed themselves to test that hypothesis. If they contend that the facts support their hypothesis, they propose a theory and then encourage it to be rigorously tested by others. The more sceptical the person testing it, the more the theory is challenged and the more likely it is to be considered a scientifically acceptable theory if it stands up fully to scrutiny.

But when it comes to human induced climate change, for some reason those who believe in such a doctrine forget about the need to test their hypothesis with facts, or to encourage it to be rigorously tested by others. Their reaction to anyone who has the temerity to express any doubts or to point out, with examples, that the existing data does not support their human induced climate change hypothesis, is to vilify and decry them as being equivalent to Flat Earth Society members (does such a thing exist still?) or worse. I seem to recall from high school history lessons, that the Spanish Inquisition had a similar but somewhat harsher attitude to those who did not accept their doctrines and beliefs. And of course everyone "knows" that every climate change sceptic is in the pay of the oil companies (I wish!).

Like Piers, I too could make up irrational and factually incorrect quotes from Climate Change Believers to support my argument that no notice should be taken of them. But that's right! I don't have to make them up! I just need to tell people to watch "An Inconvenient Truth" and they will hear the irrational and factually incorrect quotes, direct from the guru's mouth.

So what motivates all these contrarians who believe that human activity is significantly affecting the world's climate? Well they are clearly not motivated by Alan McDiarmid's credo which was "Question everything!" The one common factor could be ordinary conservatism and the herd instinct. People think that what they read in the newspaper, hear on TV and hear their politicians saying over and over and over and over again must surely be true. They do not want to stand out from the crowd. With almost any subject, that is a perfectly understandable attitude, but it does not make their belief factually correct.

Members encouraged to provide input

This is my first comment in the Journal since being elected as NZIF President for 2008/10. The full Council is Hugh Bigsby (Vice President), Howard Moore (Treasurer), James Barton (Secretary) and Councillors Chris Goulding, Bert Hughes, Euan Mason, Murray Parrish, John Schrider and Geoff Thorp.

I acknowledge the work of those from the previous Council who did not stand for re-election and thank them for their contributions while on Council - Ket Bradshaw who completed two terms as President, Ron O'Reilly as Secretary, and Councillors Peter Brown and Angus McPherson. Peter was also the Council appointee to Chair the Registration Board.

The elections also saw Peter Gorman and Don Hammond reappointed to the Registration Board.

Since the election, the new Council has made two appointments - John Schrider is the Council representative to chair the Registration Board and Sally Haddon has been co-opted as a student representative on the Council, a position she also held in the outgoing Council.

I encourage all members to contact those on Council about issues that you believe are important, suggestions for improving NZIF, or just to keep in touch. While the Council will always act in the way it thinks best for the Institute, it

is up to individual members to make sure that the Council knows what they think.

The AGM and conference in Palmerston North were very successful - good speakers, big attendance at all events, plenty of talk and discussion and great weather for the field trip. During the four days, a number of important NZIF awards and presentations were made: Morgan Williams, formerly Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment was elected an NZIF honorary member; Chris Goulding and I were elected as NZIF Fellows; the Kirk Horn Flask was awarded posthumously to Leith Knowles, the presentation being made at the dinner to Leith's widow Barbara; Kit Richards is the NZIF 2008 Forester of the Year; Stephen Pawson is the recipient of the Balneaves Travel Award; Amanda Farrell and Craig Brown received NZIF undergraduate scholarships and the prize for the best student poster at the conference went to Alwyn Williams.

The AGM approved, with a few alterations, the substantial motion to amend the Institute's Articles of Association. The Council is now implementing the changes, a process that will take some months. I believe that these changes will strengthen the Institute as a professional body and will provide a good basis for the challenges and opportunities of the next few years.

Andrew McEwen

Peter Brown opinion continued...

If you have ever done any work with seismologists or volcanologists, you will know that their whole professional career is centred on studying, assessing, analysing and trying to predict when a disaster will strike. There is nothing they like better than to talk about "When the big one comes" and they can be professional gloom and doom merchants. But at least they have some factual information on which they base their gloomy scenarios. They do not ignore facts and are keen to have their hypotheses challenged and tested by others, the result being of course a better hypothesis to test and perhaps a reasonably sound theory to promulgate.

Not so the Climate Change Believers. They seem unable to accept any data that counteracts their beliefs - as set out by their godhead, the IPCC. If all you closet sceptics - yes I know you are out there - want to have a look at just some of the data that supports and forms the basis of a petition on the subject that has been signed by over nineteen thousand American PhDs and others with tertiary qualifications, go to <http://www.oism.org/pproject/s33p36.htm>. So if my motivation is a desire to buck a trend, so be it. I am in very good - and very crowded - company.

When the mindless rabble chooses one path, I do not just choose the other. But I do instinctively look at both paths and decide which one looks to be the better path to follow based on the available information. I certainly do

not just follow the mindless rabble because of the path that they have chosen, as Piers seems to want us all to do. And is Piers saying that those who are Climate Change Believers are in fact mindless rabble? It certainly sounds like it so at last I may have found something on which, sadly, we may be in agreement!

But because many of these Believers are intelligent knowledgeable people for whom I have great respect, I remain puzzled. What has happened to their enquiring minds? Surely they do not believe the simplistic equation: The herd is always right. To follow Piers' approach I have to think of them as lemmings - with an ingrained desire to follow the mass in spite of the fact that they have been given the evidence that there is a cliff ahead from which they will fall to their deaths into the sea.

It is a pity that this issue is too serious for mankind to indulge such mindless behaviour. The cost in environmental and financial terms of trying to fight climate change has potential to seriously disrupt the world to the detriment of many. Perhaps the names of all the Climate Change Believers should be engraved on a flagstone in Cathedral Square, Christchurch so that future generations can travel there from warmer climes, try to melt or chip the ice away and marvel ...