

CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN CLIMATE SCIENCE: SOME PRELIMINARY THOUGHTS FROM AN OUTSIDER

By Ross R. McKittrick

Prepared for Workshop on “Reconciliation in the Climate Change Debate”
Institute for the Protection and Security of the Citizen, European Commission

Lisbon, Portugal
January 26—28, 2011

1. Introduction

I am an “outsider” to the field of climatology in two respects: by professional training I am an economist, and as regards my research I am in dispute with proponents of some elements of what is commonly called the “consensus” scientific position.¹ With regards to my economics background, I note that economists routinely undertake scientific research on matters of acute political controversy, yet the field remains generally congenial and productive; whereas the policy controversies connected to climate research have resulted in seriously disrupted and damaged collegiality in climatology. Why the difference between the two fields? I suggest attention be paid to two reasons: the habit on the part of climate and meteorological societies to issue “expert statements” on behalf of members, and the role of the IPCC.

2. The Key to Intellectual Freedom in Economics: No Society Statements

I am a member of the American and Canadian Economic Associations. The AEA Constitution commits it to (emphasis added):

The encouragement of perfect freedom of economic discussion. The Association as such will take no partisan attitude, *nor will it commit its members to any position on practical economic questions.*

Likewise the CEA constitution forbids issuing statements:

The Association has for its object the advancement of economic knowledge through the encouragement of study and research... and the furtherance of free and informed discussion of economic questions. *The Association as such will not assume a partisan position upon any question of practical politics nor commit its members to any position thereupon.*

Economists believe that freedom of discussion requires a prohibition on our major societies issuing position statements. There is wisdom in this! Individual experts can speak for themselves if they desire. Official “society” statements put words in peoples’ mouths, imposing groupthink and conformity and fostering bitterness on the part of those who find themselves with no voice. They silence and marginalize members who disagree with some or all of the statement, demoting them to second-class citizens in their own profession, regardless of their numbers or credibility as scientists.

Official statements replace the slow process of winnowing scientific truth by promoting a political “appeal to authority.” It encourages journalists, policymakers, educators and others to rest their case on

¹ My publications have argued that land climate data are likely contaminated with non-climatic warm biases, that the hockey stick paleoclimatic reconstruction used unreliable methods and overstated its reconstruction significance, and that climate models are significantly over-predicting warming rates in the tropical troposphere.

the “Expert Statement” rather than on the evidence. Consequently, public debate becomes less informative, and more authoritarian.

Climatology will not regain collegiality and freedom of discussion, and will continue to suffer factionalism and alienation, until its scientific societies do as economics societies do and forbid issuing position statements on members’ behalf.

3. The Unintended Consequences of the IPCC

The IPCC is not a neutral observer of climate science. It is a massive star that has pulled the entire field into its orbit. Papers are written or not written based on whether they suit the IPCC process. Projects get funded or not, and accepted at journals or not, based on their IPCC prospects. The IPCC recruits Lead Authors who are prominent advocates of its preferred views, and their status as Lead Authors subsequently elevates their credentials so that their views acquire canonical status, reinforcing the impression of universal consensus.

Suppose the International Monetary Fund (IMF) created an economics version of the IPCC, which proceeded to issue an Assessment Report and Summary for Policymakers every five years that was promoted as the consensus view of what “every mainstream economist believes.” Suppose further that the IMF was committed to one particular school of economic thought, such as New Keynesianism, that they ensured that all the lead authors of the IMF report were dedicated New Keynesians, and that the report inevitably concluded the New Keynesians are right and their critics are wrong (or do not even exist). And finally, suppose that the IMF report was sponsored and endorsed by government departments who benefited by promotion of New Keynesian ideas, and that major funding agencies and university oversight agencies also began to endorse, support and promulgate the views in the IMF report.

It should be obvious that all of this would, over time, degrade the intellectual climate in the economics profession. It would do so *even if New Keynesianism is true*—and moreso otherwise. Members of the research community would be forced to respond to the warped incentives created by such a dominant institution by embracing, or at least paying lip service to, New Keynesianism. Over time it would be costlier and costlier to be publicly identified as a critic of New Keynesianism, and as critics became marginalized by political forces the IMF’s declaration of a “consensus” would become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Those who were disposed to support the IMF view would find it easier to get funding and academic posts, and journals would be more receptive to their papers since they would gain prominence by being cited in the IMF Report. Likewise journals would be increasingly reluctant to publish critics since their papers would be marginalized and subject to official denigration. Over time, people who had serious doubts about New Keynesianism would learn to suppress them and leave the field, or accept marginalization and negative career consequences.

All these things are playing out in climatology as the IPCC exerts its force over the profession. For those who find the IPCC unreceptive or hostile to their research the result is bitterness and alienation. When the Inter-Academy Council was asked to review IPCC procedures they found a “near-universal” demand by those they interviewed was for Reviewers to have more authority, especially in ensuring that alternative or dissenting views receive proper consideration (pp. 22-23). The IPCC appears to have ignored this suggestion and others like it. In light of the distortions the IPCC is creating, and its apparent unwillingness to undertake reform, I do not know how this situation can be resolved without shutting down the IPCC altogether.