

The REAL inconvenient truth: Zealotry over global warming could damage our Earth far more than climate change

by

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By NIGEL LAWSON

Over the past half-century, we have become used to planetary scares. In the late Sixties, we were told of a population explosion that would lead to global starvation. Then, a little later, we were warned the world was running out of natural resources. By the Seventies, when global temperatures began to dip, many eminent scientists warned us that we faced a new Ice Age.

But the latest scare, global warming, has engaged the political and opinion-forming classes to a greater extent than any of these.



The readiness to embrace this fashionable belief has led the present Labour Government, enthusiastically supported by the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, to commit itself to a policy of drastically cutting back carbon dioxide emissions - at huge cost to the British economy and to the living standards not merely of this generation, but of our children's generation, too.

That is why I have written a book about the subject.

Now, I readily admit that I am not a scientist; but then neither are the vast majority of those who espouse the currently fashionable madness. Moreover, most of those scientists who speak with such certainty about global warming and climate change are not climate scientists, or Earth scientists of any kind, and thus have no special knowledge to contribute.

Those who have to take the key decisions aren't scientists either. They are politicians who, having listened to the opinions of relevant scientists and having studied the evidence, must reach the best decisions they can - just as I did when I was Energy Secretary in Margaret Thatcher's first government in the early Eighties.

But science is only part of the story. Even if the climate scientists can tell us what is happening, and *why* they think it is happening, they cannot tell us what governments should be doing about it. For this, we also need an understanding of the economics: of what the economic consequences of any warming might be, and, if there is a problem, the best way of dealing with it.

First, then, what *is* happening? Given that nowadays pretty well every adverse development in the natural world is automatically attributed to global warming, perhaps the most surprising fact about it is that it is not, in fact, happening at all. The truth is that *there has so far been no recorded global warming at all this century.*

The world's temperature rose about half a degree centigrade during the last quarter of the 20th century; but even the Hadley Centre for Climate Prediction and Research - part of Britain's Met Office and a citadel of the current global warming orthodoxy - has now conceded that recorded temperature figures for the first seven years of the 21st century reveal there has been a standstill.

The centre now officially expects global warming to resume at some point between 2009 and 2014.

Maybe it will. But the fact that the present lull was not predicted by any of the complex computer models upon which the global warming orthodoxy relies is clear evidence that the science of what determines the world's temperature is distinctly uncertain and far from "settled".



Cast adrift below, but does global warming propaganda such as Al Gore's film An Inconvenient Truth paint a false picture of the Earth's future

Genuine climate scientists admit that Earth's climate is determined by hugely complex systems, and reliable prediction is impossible.

That does not mean, of course, that we know nothing. We know that the planet is made habitable only thanks to the warmth we receive from the rays of the sun. Most of this heat bounces back into space; but some of it is trapped by the so-called greenhouse gases which exist in the Earth's atmosphere. If it were not for that, our planet would be far too cold for man to survive.

The most important greenhouse gas is water vapour, including water suspended in clouds. Rather a long way behind, the second most important is carbon dioxide.

The vast bulk of the carbon dioxide in the Earth's atmosphere is natural - that is, nothing to do with man. But there is no doubt that ever since the Industrial Revolution in the latter part of the 19th century, man has added greatly to atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide by burning carbon - first in the form of coal, and subsequently in the form of oil and gas, too.



So it is reasonable to suppose that, other things being equal, this will have warmed the planet, and that further man-made carbon dioxide emissions will warm it still further.

But in the first place, other things are very far from equal. And in the second place, even if they were, there is no agreement among reputable climate scientists over *how much* this contributed to the modest late-20th century warming of the planet, and thus may be expected to do so in future.

It is striking that during the 21st century, carbon dioxide emissions have been growing faster than ever - thanks in particular to the rapid growth of the Chinese economy - yet there has been no further global warming at all.

Carbon dioxide, like water vapour and oxygen, is not only completely harmless but is an essential element in our life support system.

Not only do we exhale carbon dioxide every time we breathe (indeed, an important cause of the increased amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is simply the huge increase in the world's population), but plants need to absorb carbon dioxide in order to survive. Without carbon dioxide, there would be no plant life on the planet. And without plant life, there would be no human life either.

While climate scientists disagree about how much further warming continued carbon dioxide emissions might cause, there is an established majority view.

This is articulated by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), an offshoot of the United Nations, whose view is that 'most' of the modest (0.5 per cent) late-20th century warming was "very likely" caused by man-made carbon dioxide emissions.

And if the growth of such emissions continues unabated, their 'best guess' is that in 100 years' time, the planet will be somewhere between 1.8 and 4 per cent warmer than it is today, with a mid-point of a shade under 3 per cent. (Incidentally, this was published before the early 21st century warming standstill was officially acknowledged, so was not taken into account.)

Alistair Darling told us in his recent Budget speech that this would have "catastrophic economic and social consequences". But that is just alarmist poppycock.

Let's look at just two of the alleged "catastrophic" consequences of global warming: the threat to food production, leading to mass starvation; and the threat to human health, leading to disease and death.

So far as food production is concerned, it is not clear why a warmer climate would be a problem at all. Even the IPCC concedes that for a warming of anything up to 3 per cent, "globally, the potential for food production is projected to increase". Yes: *increase*.

As to health, in its most recent report, the IPCC found only one outcome which they ranked as "virtually certain" to happen - and that was "reduced human mortality from decreased cold exposure".

This echoes a study done by our own Department of Health which predicted that by the 2050s, the UK would suffer an *increase* in heat-related deaths by 2,000 a year, and a *decrease* in cold-related mortality of 20,000 deaths a year - something that ministers have been curiously silent about.

The IPCC systematically exaggerates the likely adverse effects of any warming that might occur because estimates of the likely impact of the global warming it projects for the next 100 years are explicitly based on two assumptions, both of them absurd.

The first is that while the developed world can adapt to warming, the developing world cannot.

The second is that even in the developed world, the capacity to adapt is constrained by the limits of existing technology. In other words, there will be no technological development over the next 100 years.

So far as the first of these two assumptions is concerned, if necessary, the developed world will focus its overseas aid on ensuring that the developing countries acquire the required ability to adapt. The second is, of course, ludicrous - notably in the case of food production, where, with the development of bio-engineering and genetic modification,

the world is currently in the early stages of a genuine revolution in agricultural technology.

All in all, given that global warming produces benefits as well as costs, it is far from clear that the currently projected warming, far from being "catastrophic", will do any net harm at all.

To which it will be replied that while that may be so for the world as a whole, the people in the developing world will indeed suffer.

But the greatest curse of the developing world is mass poverty, and the malnutrition, disease and unnecessary death that poverty brings. To impede their escape from poverty by denying them the benefits of cheap carbon-based energy would damage them far more than global warming ever could.

Nonetheless, on the basis of its deeply flawed assumptions, the IPCC predicts that if the warming is as much as 4 degrees centigrade by the end of this century, then the economic cost would be a cut of between 1 per cent and 5 per cent of what world output (GDP) would otherwise have been - with the developed world suffering much less, and the developing world much more than this.

But supposing the developing world suffers as much as a 10 per cent loss of GDP from what it would have been in 100 years' time.

That means that by the year 2100, people in the developing world, instead of being some 9.5 times better off than they are today, will be 'only' 8.5 times better off (which, incidentally, will still leave them better off than people in the developed world today). And, remember, all this is on the basis of the IPCC's own grotesquely inflated estimate of the likely damage from further warming.

So the fundamental question is: how big a sacrifice should the present generation make now in the hope of avoiding this?

The cost of the drastic reduction in carbon dioxide emissions which we are told is necessary would be huge. The Government has introduced legislation to force us to cut emissions by between 60 per cent and 80 per cent by 2050, and Tony Blair, as self-appointed head of a group of "experts", last month declared that "emissions in the richer countries will have to fall close to zero".

One thing is clear: the "feelgood" measures so popular among some sections of the middle classes, from driving a hybrid car and having a wind turbine on one's roof to not leaving the television set on standby, are trivial to the point of total irrelevance. What would be required is for all transport to be 100 per cent electric, and all electricity to be generated by nuclear power.

To cut back carbon dioxide emissions on the scale the present Labour Government (supported by the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats) is demanding would require a fundamental restructuring of the economy, involving a rise in the cost of energy dwarfing anything we have seen so far.

No doubt we could afford this hardship if it made sense. But does it? The UK accounts for only 2 per cent of global carbon dioxide emissions. Even if the entire European Union adopted this policy, that accounts for only 15 per cent of global emissions.

By contrast, China - which has already overtaken the U.S. as the biggest single emitter - has said that there is no way it will agree to a cap on its carbon dioxide emissions for the foreseeable future. And India has said precisely the same.

Both of them point out that it was the industrialised West, not they, that caused the increase in atmospheric carbon dioxide concentrations during the last century, and that it is now their turn to catch up.

Also, that their emissions per head of population, although rising fast, are still well below those of the U.S. and Europe; and that their overriding priority is - quite rightly - the fastest possible rate of economic growth, and thus the most rapid emancipation of their people from poverty. One good reason why there will not be any effective global agreement.

So the chief consequence of decarbonising here, and making energy much more expensive, would simply be to accelerate the exodus of industry from the UK and Europe to China and elsewhere in the developing world - with, as a result, little or no reduction in overall global emissions.

And even if there *were* a global agreement to cut drastically carbon dioxide emissions, the economic cost of doing so would far exceed any benefit.

So does all this mean that we should do nothing about global warming? Well, not quite. (Although doing nothing is better than doing something stupid.)

We do need to monitor as accurately as we can what is happening to temperatures across the globe, and we do need to assist the developing countries to adapt to a warmer temperature, should (one day) the need arise.

It makes sense, too, to invest in research in the hoped-for technology of generating electricity using commercial carbon capture (so that carbon dioxide emissions might be "captured" before they can escape into the atmosphere) and also, as the U.S. is already doing, in the technology of geoengineering to cool the planet artificially.

But that is about the size of it. This is not the easiest message to get across - not least because the issues surrounding global warming are so often discussed in terms of belief rather than reason.

There may be a political explanation for this. With the collapse of Marxism and, to all intents and purposes, of other forms of socialism too, those who dislike capitalism and its foremost exemplar, the United States, with equal passion, have been obliged to find a new creed.

For many of them, green is the new red. And those who wish to order us how to run our lives, faced with the uncomfortable evidence that economic prosperity is more likely to be achieved by less government intervention rather than more, naturally welcome the emergence of a new licence to intrude, to interfere, to tax and to regulate: all in the great cause of saving the planet from the alleged horrors of global warming.

But there is something much more fundamental at work. I suspect that it is no accident that it is in Europe that eco-fundamentalism in general and global warming absolutism in particular has found its most fertile soil. For it is Europe that has become the most secular society in the world, where the traditional religions have the weakest hold.

Yet people still feel the need for the comfort and higher values that religion can provide; and it is the quasi-religion of green alarmism, of which the global warming issue is the most striking example, which has filled the vacuum, with reasoned questioning of its mantras regarded as little short of sacrilege.

Does all this matter? Up to a point, no.

Unbelievers should not be dismissive of the comfort that 'religion' can bring. If people feel better when they drive a hybrid car or ride a bicycle to work, and like to parade their virtue in this way, then so be it.

Nonetheless, the new and unattractively intolerant religion of eco-fundamentalism and global warming presents real dangers. The most obvious is that the governments of Europe may get so carried away by their own rhetoric as to impose measures that do serious harm to their economies. That is a particular danger at the present time in the UK.

Another danger is that even if the governments do not go too far and damage their own economies, they may still cause great damage to the developing world by engaging in what might be termed green protectionism. The movement to make us feel guilty about buying overseas produce because of the "food miles" involved is just one example of this.

And France's President Sarkozy is currently urging the European Union to impose trade barriers against those countries that are not prepared to limit their carbon dioxide emissions.

It should not need pointing out that a lurch into protectionism, and a rolling back of globalisation, would do far more damage to the world economy - and in particular to living standards in the developing countries - than could conceivably result from the projected continuation of global warming.

But even if this danger can be averted, it is clear that the would-be saviours of the planet are, in practice, the enemies of poverty reduction in the developing world.

So the new religion of global warming, however convenient it may be to the politicians, is not as harmless as it may appear. Indeed, the more one examines it, the more it resembles a Da Vinci Code of environmentalism. It is a great story, and a phenomenal bestseller. It contains a grain of truth - and a mountain of nonsense.

And that nonsense could be very damaging indeed.

We appear to have entered a new age of unreason, which threatens to be as economically harmful as it is profoundly disquieting. It is from this, above all, that we really do need to save the planet.

• *AN Appeal To Reason: A Cool Look At Global Warming* by Nigel Lawson is published by Duckworth on April 10 at £9.99. To order a copy (p&p free), call 0845 606 4206 .

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