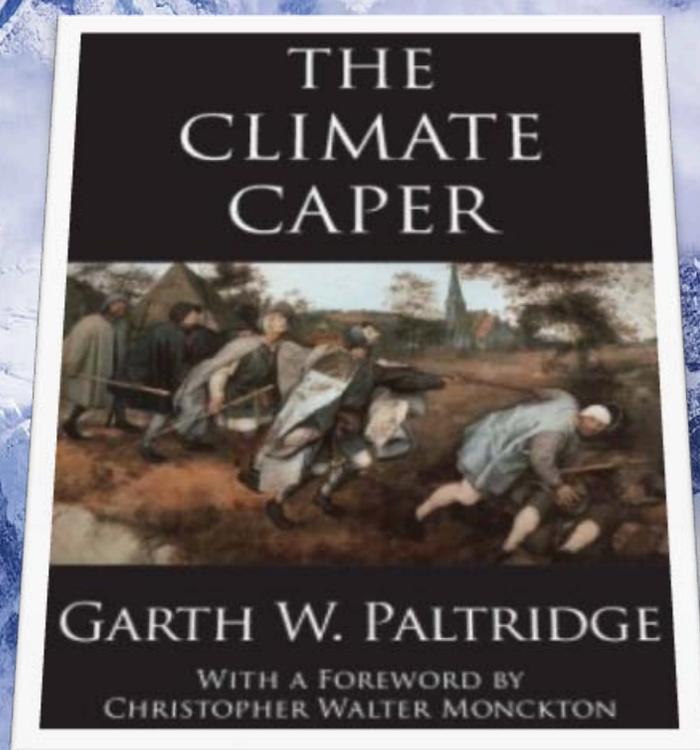


# A REVIEW OF GARTH PALTRIDGE'S BOOK: “THE CLIMATE CAPER”

*by Christopher Essex*



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I write this while seated at a table where a certain shop proprietor is happy to stash the bored husband of an enthusiastic shopper. This may seem an odd way to begin a discussion of global catastrophe perhaps, but the incongruity of this mundane snapshot of real life juxtaposed with apocalypse raises a crucial question. Which is more important, the end of the world or a 25% off sale? Formerly I could answer easily, but the shopkeepers have developed an edge that the purveyors of doom have lost. The shopkeepers keep changing their offerings to retain human interest, while their apocalyptic competitors cut their offerings and oversell what's left well past "best-before" dates. In fact their offerings have been cut to a single doom.

This one doom has gradually swallowed up all the others, offering the prospect of one magnificent monolithic doom for all of us to marvel and tremble before. It was formerly known as "global warming," but that famous brand has been changed to "climate change," for reasons only an advertising agency could understand. Today the horsemen of war, famine, death, the over population of kittens etc., are all united through "climate change." But how could the most terrifying imaginings of the human psyche, offered in a single convenient package, ever become stale? Many have grown tired of ever-escalating authoritarian cosmic hysteria as a sales pitch. Others no longer achieve that strange rush of virtuousness through empty and ineffective gestures to forestall doom; virtue is not turning out as cheap as advertised. And those hyperventilated temperature forecasts of the late 90's haven't been borne out either. Moreover, the contortions of world governments to square economic realities with overheated hyperbole have become a near comedic spectacle. The "proofs" of doom have turned into absurd jokes in a number of cases, and made scandalous by formidable human resistance mounted against getting at the truth about them. While the stories of these unfashionable hard-won struggles are rarely well reported, word does get around. Now, fresh claims of the "most unusual this or that in a gazillion years" are met with suspicion instead of fear. But the jig is surely up when so many knowledgeable and accomplished scientists are saying they've had enough, finally stating publicly what they have been saying all along in private. Garth Paltridge is such a knowledgeable and accomplished scientist, and his new book, *The Climate Caper*, is his public statement: Paltridge has finally come out. His book is uniquely brief and written in a distinctive style. Its tone is of a conversation that might ensue at a party or over a garden fence after the senior professor is found out as an unbeliever. Concise explanations for people slowly marinating over decades in fashionable climate wisdom are challenging. Garth is up to the task and wastes little space mincing words:

There is a fair amount of reasonable science behind the global warming debate, but in general, and given a religion or two, never has quite so much rubbish been espoused by so many on so little evidence. (page 17)

However there is subtlety in his position too. He does not claim to know what the answers are; he claims that no one knows what the answers are. It is not a contest between opposite forecasts of what a thermometer will do, but one between certainty and not knowing. A key message is that the scientific enterprise in this field is dysfunctional and damaged. How can that be? It's better funded than most, and plenty of influential scientists and organizations are its enthusiastic supporters. They would undoubtedly claim that there is nothing wrong at all. Answering that question, illustrated by the direct personal experiences of a field insider, makes this small volume compelling.

I doubt that Garth would be too comfortable being described as an “insider,” even though the public would surely view him as one. Garth is first and foremost a scientist and scientific thinking requires one to step outside convention, conformity, and consensus in order to discover things that have been missed previously. Why would he want to be party to any insider's party line? Treading only well-worn paths is not the way to discovery and new learning. Although scientists do have their orthodoxies, those bucking orthodoxy are normally given some grudging respect, even if sometimes too little too late. The greatest, most revered figures in the history of science often faced enormous odds against the very orthodoxy they overturned to become famous.

Garth is known and respected, among other things, for his un-orthodoxy on the subject of climate. In the early eighties he was not only saying that something different needed to be done to advance the field, but unlike many others complaining similarly about it then, he actually took a crack at it. Now, it will come as no surprise to Garth if I say here that I believe that his approach was wrong. But it was also brilliantly wrong. And that matters in science. Scientists remember him for the brilliant part, rather than the wrong part, because, frankly, in challenging the unknown, being wrong is the norm. Being brilliantly wrong is the best scientists can hope for when it happens. On the other extreme, the worst is encapsulated by the infamous insult by Wolfgang Pauli: “It's not even wrong.”

Because of these realities of the unknown there is an unspoken, but crucial, code among scientists: tolerate colleagues poking and picking at your sacred cows. So Garth should have been able to depend on the code at a meeting of key climate players in Australia, where he questioned the, now infamous, hockey stick, according to the best scientific traditions. However, to Garth's surprise, scientists there responded fiercely to his innocent questions. In fact, harangues reverberated for days afterward. He writes that it was like “stirring a hornet's nest.” Not only were the hornets enraged, they were attacking him rather than responding to his questions.

Seen through a scientist's eyes, the (now discredited) hockey stick was a big juicy target for picking and poking, because there were so many obvious issues that it was a marvel it could hold together under its own weight, let alone be used to terrify newspaper editorial boards and bludgeon politicians. An experienced scientist like Garth had every reason and right to ask pointed questions about it. Of course the questions might all have had good answers, for all Garth knew at the time. But many scientists were shamefully slow to ask the questions. Why? The hornet stings were rightly dismissed as “petty stuff,” but the incident has deeper meaning. Garth presented it as the moment when he realized that there was

something seriously wrong with the scientific enterprise in this field. The scientists were not simply being rude and irrelevant; they were not living up to their obligation to tolerate Garth having a go at the hockey stick despite their liking the thing. Those scientists surely knew the code, but they knowingly broke it all the same.

They were like outlaws. There is no telling what the large numbers of repeat offenders are capable of. Would they cut off research funding of other scientists who ask too many of the “wrong” questions? Would they reject research papers that should be published? Would they lionize research nonsense? Would they fire those with “wrong” ideas? Who knows what else. Based on the book, and my own experience, the answer is yes to such questions. Moreover, the accumulated impact has significantly hampered the progress of science to the detriment of everyone—scientists and nonscientists alike. There is no limit to human folly, even among highly educated people. There can be no better case for skepticism in science than that.

On the other hand, scientists supporting the conventional wisdom (And supporting it is fine) may be entirely unaware. To them I offer George Orwell’s warning: “Anyone who challenges the prevailing orthodoxy finds himself silenced with surprising effectiveness. A genuinely unfashionable opinion is almost never given a fair hearing, either in the popular press or in the high-brow periodicals.” Clearly this sorry phenomenon is all too human. But climate is extraordinary because of the powerful backflow into science of cultural pollution from the wider society, bringing out the worst in science while suppressing its best. Here the book might be criticized. Outside of a foray into simple economics, Garth tends to stick to his knitting for the most part. He really delivers in discussing what he knows about the unseemly aspects of the culture of science, but tends to give politicians, the press, and activists a relatively easy ride despite their dubious influences on the search for truth.

However any account of their role would make the book much longer, and perhaps less accessible. He is clearly aware of these forces, as he describes incidents impossible without them. Moreover he speaks to it directly through the following:

It is difficult now to question either the policies or the premises on which those strategies are based. Scientists are told quite bluntly that it is completely inappropriate for them to speak—unless of course they support it. Non-scientists are assumed to be technically ignorant and thereby incapable of speaking with authority on this issue. (page 13)

This tight statement implies at least one relatively unaccountable third party (other than experts and the public) is actually running the show. It also explains why the public has not often heard doubts from scientists—they’ve been tied up and gagged in the backroom. In contrast the conventional talking point is that multitudes of powerful, well-funded skeptics relentlessly deploy a cloud of confusion to derail helpless politicians from concrete action. Garth does a fine job of skewering the consumers of this cool aid. He observes that activists within and without science view themselves romantically as a virtuous few, gallantly facing climate criminals everywhere. He writes:

The difficulty for them is to maintain their own minority status while insisting in public that the skeptics ... are very few. (page 68)

Anti-skepticism isn't science. At best it's a kind of para-science, because skepticism is inherent to the scientific process. This para-science is the unprecedented, powerful, well-funded force, not the much-maligned skeptics. Even the oil companies go against the cliché and fund it. It's the skepticism inherent to science that is embattled. Everything else is delusion and lies. That is how the science has been damaged. That is among the main points of Garth's book. Skepticism aims at truth. Para-science is about other agendas. No matter what they are, "moral imperative" notwithstanding, finding the truth trumps them all. Many scientists, including me, are worried humanity has been paying "too high a price" in subordinating science to these agendas.

Years from now, historians will look back on this period as extraordinary. The great social fervor was over something that only seems like science. It's of science but lacks the heart of science. It will take generations to pick through the detritus, but this period will ultimately tell us far more about ourselves than Nature. Soon it will be over. If doom has not ensued, the climate science tourists will leave for other errands. People like Garth and myself will be left to pick up after them. Perhaps then I will have an occasion to congratulate him on his book's concise and effective exposition of relevant physics for laymen.

But scientists pick at things, so I will tell him why Le Chatalier's principle, which he raises there, doesn't justify the notion of global temperature---nice try Garth. I might even mutter something skeptical about his comments on steady states. He will expect this from me, because he lives by the scientist's code. I would love to discuss these with you too, but the great climate change fervor was never really about actual science, was it?

In any case, time is up. Real life intrudes. I am told that shopping in this store is complete. There are fabulous bargains to be had elsewhere, and I should come along because, I'm told, I can ponder doom anywhere. Thus shopping really does trump apocalypse.



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