



**Is it warm in here, or is it just me?**

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**Topic:**

by Paul Richard Harris

Long before scientists learned to harness the power of atoms and build nuclear bombs, mankind had perfectly adequate weaponry for killing. Regular explosives were quite capable of blowing a building to small pieces and killing large numbers of people. Fear of those weapons was real, and everyone understood their awesome destructive power. Yet when even more powerful and brutish nuclear weaponry was finally born, and an arms race ensued, scientists and governments told North American parents that their children would be safe underneath their school desks if ever we were attacked. They told us to hide under kindling.

Early in the twentieth century, a movement that had been born some fifty years earlier really came into its own. It was the 'science' of eugenics. Most otherwise sane scientists, politicians, writers, social critics – just about everyone 'intelligent' – supported eugenics and loudly shouted down those few who argued against it. Eugenics flourished in the United States, where social and political activity was channeled into preventing the 'inferior races' and the 'feeble-minded' from reproducing. The movement was predicated on the idea that these inferior humans were out-breeding the intelligentsia and would eventually water down the human gene pool and turn us all into imbeciles. On that score, you must sometimes wonder if they were right.

While the eugenic movement predates the era when anyone really understood what a gene is, it was a scientific movement fully supported by government, industry, and educational authorities. With absolute certainty, universities taught the science of eugenics and governments made social policy based on a need to cull the herd. The movement reached its zenith in the 1930s when its focus was relocated to Germany. You know the rest.

In the seventeenth century, Galileo Galilei was forced by the scientists of his day, which happened to be the Roman Catholic Church, who also acted as the seat of government power, to publicly deny what his telescope clearly showed him. This was despite the fact that the church would have been well acquainted with ancient Greek and other Middle Eastern literature which predicted exactly what Galileo believed he had proved.

In the late 1990s, government and science teamed up yet again to convince the world that Microsoft's failure to understand that the century would eventually end was going to wreak planet-wide havoc. The so-called Y2K bug was going to cause nuclear weapons to launch, water purification systems to fail, worldwide communications to collapse, and the destruction of on-line dating services. They managed to create huge inconvenience and cost for business, for taxpayers, for almost anyone foolish enough to care.

When Erin Brockovich helped to force Pacific Gas & Electric to open its purse to compensate a large number of people allegedly poisoned by chromium 6 which had leached into ground water from their facilities, politics and science once again may have got it wrong. An investigative reporter named Michael Fumento dug into the case after the fuss created by the Julia Roberts movie died down, and found the whole settlement may have no basis in scientific fact. It appears that the citizens around Hinkley, the California town at the centre of the controversy, don't actually experience cancers in any higher numbers than the average Californian. Further, while it is confirmed that inhaled chromium 6 can lead to cancer if breathed in large quantities, no scientific evidence supports that swallowing the stuff, as was the case here, causes any ill effects. In other words, it is likely PG&E settled to avoid the publicity rather than because the science supported Brockovich's claims.

Does it surprise you that the smallpox inoculations we got as kids, and that were supposed to last a lifetime, have worn off?

And aren't we all, by now, supposed to be dead from avian influenza?

Government and science have a long history of sponsoring popular movements that turn out be bad ideas. Will the climate change 'industry' be the next big blunder?

I am not, even momentarily, suggesting that we don't need to do something to control whatever damage we can; among the animal kingdom, we are the worst befoulers of our own nests. But remember our certainty about eugenics.

There is massive evidence to indicate that the world is warming, and that it might be happening rapidly. There is much supposition, and belief, that the warming is the result of human activity. Scientists, particularly many who belong to a United Nations group known as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), state with absolutely certainty that the earth is facing a drastic climatic change and that humans are to blame. Curiously, at the release of their most recent report, several members of the Panel walked out in protest over bullying by the majority on the Panel.

What we don't have, at this point, is solid facts. Some scientists point out that the measurements being used to flog the notion that the world is getting warmer are inherently flawed because they start from the wrong place. We do know that the world went through a cooler period that ended in the late 1800s, right about the time we started keeping weather records. So the current trend is being measured against the low

point and any increase looks to be startlingly rapid.

Reputable scientists are generally a cautious lot. It is common, as research into some area is ongoing, to hear them say – often – that ‘we just know enough about this yet.’ As noted in a March 2007 editorial in the Sydney Morning Herald, the science of climate change is vague and uncertain: “We need credible guidance, not least in helping us understand what we do and do not know. Much of what is said publicly on the subject assumes a far greater level of certainty than in fact exists.”

But that is not to say that climate change is not occurring; rapid or not, the evidence is clear that the world is warming. Nor does it imply that we shouldn’t be alarmed. The problem is we don’t really know, any more than we ‘knew’ about the truth of eugenics. Yet the converted are convinced that we can do something about climate change and it has become heretical to suggest that government and scientific ‘experts’ should step back momentarily and check their assumptions.

From work I do personally involving the scientific community, I know that not all ‘scientific’ evidence can be relied upon. Its integrity is sometimes compromised by who is paying for the research and whether continued employment for the scientist depends on reaching certain conclusions.

That is not to suggest scientists will lie deliberately; many of the dissensions among them arise from legitimate disagreements over facts, or what those facts mean. But that is precisely my point: if the science is open to so much debate among the people who allegedly have the skill and knowledge to know, how can the rest of us rely on the advice they might give? A group with louder voices doesn’t imply this is the group who has it right. If anything, the public should have learned by now that if scientific imperatives have the support of government there is solid reason to be suspicious.

Everything we do in our world has an affect. Because our knowledge of natural forces, especially weather and climate, are so rudimentary, only the naïve or foolish will presume that we have all the answers and will dismiss any possibility that actions we take now might, in fact, be the wrong steps. It is not an insignificant fact that a group of scientists attending the most recent IPCC meetings walked out rather than sign their names to the Panel’s reports. At the very least, that should cause enough alarm for us to sit them down and ask why. Instead, these scientists, who were pre-eminent enough to have been invited to participate in this process in the first place, are now dismissed as loonies or pariahs.

There might be tremendous cost to the efforts we make in combating climate change. And in the end, it might all prove to be futile. The science available certainly suggests that we need to do something; but there are also dissenting scientists who suggest there is nothing we can do to stop the phenomenon – because we haven’t caused it, or are not the prime cause of it.

Well, maybe we can’t stop it. But we can surely be making plans for how to cope with it; to deal with the flooding, landslides, drought, crop failure, displaced people, and so on that would follow a major shift in

climate.

All our scientific evidence shows us that the present shape of the world – the alignment of the continents, where we can find heat or cold, where all the potable water is located – is something that has changed innumerable times over the millennia. But we have constructed our civilizations as though they are permanent. It is almost certain that, regardless of cause, our climate is changing and we had better figure out how to keep ourselves alive. Even if the change is all directly linked to human activity, failing to plan for the catastrophic shifts in water levels, rainfall, temperature, and so on will ultimately make all the other steps we take pointless. If water levels do rise substantially, the majority of the world's major cities will be uninhabitable and, even if there is no immediate loss of life, the masses of refugees and total economic meltdown will be devastating.

All the material I have read on the issue of global climate change points to the things we need to do to prevent it. And those are mainly desirable goals, even without the threat of climatic disaster: reduced use of energy, better irrigation and farming techniques, less reliance on fossil fuels, institution of massive renewable energy systems (and that does NOT include nuclear), introduction of more localized economies, massive infrastructure adjustments, redirection of obscene military expenditures into something that will actually keep people alive. But little of the material I have seen deals with the very real possibility that we have no idea what is causing this problem and that we need to be planning for failure.

I remember a phrase from an old routine by comedian George Carlin where he discusses, and dismisses, what he calls the arrogance of the environmentalists who believe they can 'save the planet'. He remarks that the planet has withstood much worse things than humans and that, in the end, "the planet isn't going anywhere; we are. So pack your shit, folks."

I don't think Carlin was right in the short term; there are things we can do to prolong our species. Ultimately, in some unforeseeable future, mankind will have run its course as another biological dead end. But it doesn't have to happen now. There is a lot we can do to protect our future; but it requires much more than just doing things like trading carbon credits. Almost all the adjustments suggested to mend the planet and keep us alive a little longer are programs where someone is going to make money. At the very least, that should make us suspicious enough to be extremely cautious.

And when we speak of long-term climate change, it would be wise for us to keep in mind that we appear to be lining up to take advice about the future of our home from scientists who can't accurately predict the weather for more than a few hours in advance.

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